

## Sustaining the legacy of Michael Bernard Kwesi Darkoh 1940-2016



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“He came; he lived and left a legacy!” (*Zadok Abel Ogutu, 11 August 2016*)

### INTRODUCTION

Professor Michael Bernard Kwesi Darkoh, fondly known as “Mike” among close friends and colleagues, died on 22 July 2016 in a hospital in Gaborone, Botswana, after fighting hard from post-surgery complications. He was buried on 10 September 2016 in the village of Akaa, in the Volta region of Ghana, where he was born on 22 May 1940.

Mike was an Economic Geographer with specialisation and research interests in industrial location and regional development (Khayesi and Musyoki 2012). His BA was in geography with a minor in economics. His Masters degree was in human and historical geography. While doing his Ph.D in Economic Geography, he also minored in agricultural economics. His Ph.D thesis was on industrial location policy in Ghana. His research and teaching went beyond Economic Geography to include desertification, sustainable development and the political map of Africa. Mike loved and enjoyed studying geography.

Mike has been described by Khayesi and Musyoki (2012) as belonging to the outstanding and towering generation of scholars of African descent who have had an extremely admirable mission to scholarship. This generation includes but is not limited to people such as Akinlawon Ladipo Mabogunje, Ali Mazrui, Amin Samir, Archie Mafeje, Bernard M. Magubane, Chinua Achebe, Claude Ake, Eshetu Chole, Gideon Saulo Were, Haroub

Othman, Issa Shivji, John Samuel Mbiti, John Yoh, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Kwasi Wiredu, Mahmood Mamdani, Michael Chege, Milton Santos, Mohamed Salih, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okelo Oculi, Okot p'Bitek, Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, Peter Wanyande, Simeon Ominde, Taban Lo Liyong, Wangari Maathai and Wole Soyinka (Khayesi and Musyoki 2012) [1].

## EARLY LIFE

Mike was born in the village of Akaa, Ghana. He was the first-born son of Nana Ampem Yaw Darkoh and Victoria Akosua Onobie. Both parents hailed from Akaa in the Buem District of the Volta Region of Ghana and are now deceased. Neither of his parents went to a formal school. The parents made sure that Mike attended school. They enrolled him for primary education at the then primary school at the Roman Catholic School in Akaa and then transferred to the Roman Catholic School in Bodada (Buem District, near Jasikan and not far from Akaa) to continue with his primary education. He then proceeded to Asatu Middle School in Asatu also in the Buem District. He later switched to the Jasikan Middle School in Jasikan where he sat for the Common Entrance Examination. He passed his Common Entrance Examination and enrolled at Kpando Secondary School in Kpando where he did his GSCE O-Level examinations. After passing his GCSEs, he proceeded to Adisadel College in Cape Coast for his GSCE - A Levels. Mike was the first member of his family to attend college. From Adisadel College he enrolled at the University of Ghana, Legon, where he received his first degree (BA Hons) in Geography.

## CAREER

Soon after graduating from the University of Ghana, Legon, Mike was posted to teach Geography at the prestigious Achimota College in Accra, Ghana. He excelled at his work - perhaps, the most enthusiastic geography teacher to set foot in classrooms at the college. His students could not get enough of him. They enjoyed him, and affectionately often addressed him as "Mr. Geography." It was during this time that he met the lady who would be his wife, Cecilia Adwoa Adae Mesre. They married and had four children: Dennis, Ernest, Michelle, and Michael.

In an interview for a book chapter tracing his career, Mike provided a detailed explanation of what attracted him to Geography:

"First of all, I will tell you about how I got into Geography as my area of academic training and then I will go on to the career aspect. I must say I got into Geography by chance. Geography was one of my naturally best subjects in both secondary school and sixth form, but I never during my school days ever thought I would end up as a geographer, as I always preferred English Language and Literature. One day, in 1959, while I was in Upper Sixth at St Augustine's College, Cape Coast, Ghana, our Senior Geography Master, Mr. Patrick Keilthy, an Irishman, invited me to accompany him to a meeting at Mfantsipim, another secondary school in town where they were expecting the first Ghanaian Professor of Geography, Professor E.A. Boateng, from the University of Ghana to address the Geography Club of that school on the theme 'Geography and Development.' This was my first encounter with or hearing a professor speak. I was so much

impressed with the eloquence of this Professor that on our way back, I did ask my Senior Geography Master what it takes to be a Professor with so much erudition. The answer he gave me was hard work, and that I could easily become one if I continued to study hard in the subject. Although this kindled my interest, I never took his words seriously as I still preferred English to Geography. However, after I had sat for my Cambridge Higher School Certificate in 1959 and was awaiting results, I received a telegram from the Headmaster of my school (St Augustine's College) offering me a job to teach Geography there for nine months, from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1960. I had not applied for any position at the school and was at first reluctant to accept the offer. I had already received an offer from another secondary school where I had applied. But my parents persuaded me to accept the offer from my school. So I ended up going back to St Augustine, this time as a secondary school Tutor in Geography. This teaching influenced me in the choice of subject for university entry. Although I took entry examination papers for both Hons Geography and Hons English and was called for interview for the latter, I did end up with geography since it was claimed that my first choice was geography.

Career-wise, when I finished my first degree in 1963, I had wanted to work in the civil service. While awaiting results of my Bachelor's degree examination, I went to work temporarily with the Volta River Authority and was posted to the headquarters at Accra. My experience there was not a pleasant one. There was too much authoritarian bureaucracy which I found difficult to cope with and decided that civil service was not the place for me. When the examination results were released and I passed, I decided to go into teaching and took up an appointment as a Geography Teacher at Achimota, an elite secondary school at Accra. This was how my career in geography started. I taught at Achimota for 3 years (1963-65)" [1].

While teaching at Achimota College, Mike enrolled in a Masters' programme at the University of Ghana. After obtaining his Masters, he became an Assistant Lecturer at Cape Coast University, Cape Coast, Ghana. When a study leave opportunity came up, Mike moved his young family to Madison, Wisconsin where he worked intensely, to obtain his Ph.D. in Economic Geography and Agricultural Economics.

Mike was in the first wave of Africans to leave the continent to study abroad after colonialism. African students endured severe racial discrimination in an America that was right in the middle of its civil rights struggle. His son, Ernest Darkoh, recalled in his eulogy:

"It was only decades later when I went to the same university for my undergraduate studies that I gained a real understanding of how profound the challenges our parents faced as the first pioneers to leave their homes and land on shores that were often ignorant, unwelcoming and often outright hostile. With all these challenges he completed his PhD in a two-year period- a record at the time. And this epitomises two of the most enduring characteristics that I will always associate with my dad: hard work and uncompromising excellence."

After graduating from Madison, he was obliged to return to Ghana and continue with his academic career. But after several attempts to resume his position at Cape Coast University, it turned out that it was not meant to be [1]. With much persuasion from his major professor, Mike accepted Professorial assignment as Assistant Professor, at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, Nebraska. A year later, when all attempts to return to Cape Coast failed, he accepted an Associate Professor position at California State University, San Bernardino – all the while continuing to pursue opportunities to provide service in Africa.

This burning desire to provide service in Africa took him and his family to the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1974; and eventually to Kenyatta University in Nairobi Kenya in 1981. While in Kenya, he took a year's leave of absence to teach at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. He provided extensive service in teaching, research, administration and graduate student supervision at Kenyatta University before moving to provide service at the Department of Geography at Papua New Guinea and was there for three years before moving to the University of Botswana, Gaborone, where he worked in the Department of Environmental Science from August 1996 until his death.

A librarian who observed Mike recalled:

“I know he was a committed scholar from what I saw of him when he taught on part-time assignment at the then Laikipia Campus of Egerton University when it was first housed in National Youth Service College, Naivasha. I had just taken up my job in the university library in the early 1990s. He made sure the information sources he wanted for his students were placed in short loan before he sent the students to the library. He brought to the library copies of articles he wanted his students to read whenever he realised that the library did not have such materials in its collection” (Mary Khanyanji Khayesi, 11 November 2016).

While at the University of Botswana, Mike served as the Head of Department and later as Founding Chairman and Director of the International Tourism Research Centre for the University; he also served as an External Examiner at several universities in sub-Sub-Saharan Africa including the University of Malawi, University of Zimbabwe, University of Venda (South Africa), University of Nairobi (Kenya), University of Pretoria (South Africa), University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), University of Cape Town (South Africa), University of Swaziland, and his beloved, Ghana. He was also an external examiner at Adelaide University (Australia) and Griffith University (Australia).

## DEATH

One of the secrets of life is that we cannot tell exactly when someone will die. Even if we know someone is in a chronic state or in a comma, we cannot tell exactly which date or time he or she will die. For Mike, there was nothing to give a clue that 2016 would be his final year on earth. In any case, he ended 2015, and started and continued into 2016 with his usual vigour and networking: writing and wishing us good end of 2015 and a happy 2016, teaching, writing, supervising and going about his life as usual. Among the few final assignments of Mike that we can now recall were arranging for PhD thesis defence of his student, Bashir Gambo, on 17 June 2016 on the topic: “Impact and control of desertification in the front-line states of Nigeria: A case study of Katsina State,

Nigeria”; urging us in personal e-mails or conversations as his students or colleagues to pursue excellence; planning for the next paper to write; and visiting Ghana.

He updated us about his visit to and return from Ghana and settling down to regular life. However, on 21 July 2016, we (Joseph Mbaiwa, Mary Kinyanjui, D. Kgathi, Agnes Musyoki and Meleckidzedek Khayesi) received an e-mail from Raban Chanda:

“Prof. Darkoh has consistently kept you in the loop of his personal communications. Thus, I thought I should let you know that he is currently admitted in the Gaborone Private Hospital where he was operated on to correct an abdominal health problem last Thursday. He is not yet in a position to receive calls and is under close medical observation. His son, Dr. Ernest Darkoh, has been to see him from Johannesburg two times. Let’s keep him in our prayers. Please keep this information within this network for the moment.”

We all responded to his message:

Mbaiwa (22 July 2016)

“Dear Prof Chanda,  
Thanks a lot Prof Chanda for the information. I am currently in Gaborone and leaving tomorrow. I will definitely pass by GPH to check on him this evening or tomorrow. Thanks for letting us know. I wish him a speedy recovery. He called me two weeks ago but I was in Harare and we could not speak to each other.  
Cheers.  
Joe”

Khayesi (22 July 2016)

“Dear Prof. Chanda,  
Thank you very much for informing us about the health of Prof. Darkoh. Praying.  
Kind regards,  
Melecki.”

Raban Chanda followed with another response in the afternoon of 22 July 2016

“Dear Melecki and Colleagues,  
I am the bearer of even sadder news: Ernest just informed me that Prof. Darkoh passed away this afternoon.  
May his soul rest in peace.  
Raban”

On 24 July 2016, Raban provided details of what had happened:

“Prof. Darkoh had suffered from severe constipation for one week before he sought medical attention, by which time his stomach was severely distended. A CT scan revealed an obstruction in the intestines which could only be corrected through surgery on an emergency basis. The diagnosis was done on Wednesday, July 13 and the operation the following morning. He remained in ICU for six

days, transferred to a general ward on the 8th day (July 20th) and rushed back to ICU on Friday morning (July 22) and died that afternoon”.

On hearing about Mike’s death, many of his former students and colleagues responded with sadness, appreciation and admiration:

“He was an outstanding teacher and mentor. He inspired me during my undergraduate days!” (Wycliffe Njororai)

“I join the family and the entire Academic Geography fraternity in celebrating the life of the late Prof Darkoh, a life well lived and fulfilled. He was exceptional in his focus, concentration, and dexterity. He was articulate, indeed, an orator and excellent writer. He has left an indelible mark on geography's intellectual tapestry through his unending desire in training, writing and publications. He leaves behind a trail of able geographers - his products, who if they strive as he did, will carry his mantle into posterity” (Francis N. Wegulo)

“I'm deeply saddened by the passing away of Professor Darkoh, a fine colleague and trusted friend for the past 30 years. My family and I extend our condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. May his soul return in eternity. In grief.” (Mohamed Salih)

“Our community of educators, and all those working to make this world a better place, has lost a well-regarded soul. My deepest condolences and gratitude for sharing in this moving tribute. Indeed, may he rest in peace!” (Andrea Garfinkel-Castro)

“It is indeed always devastating when we lose a beloved one that has contributed in our formation and the construction of our intellect and motivations. However, I truly believe that by leaving this legacy behind he has contributed to a better humankind and to the sustainability of our world. Rest in peace! My most sincere condolences for his family, friends and colleagues, who had the honour to meet him in person” (Marisela Ponce de Leon)

“I am deeply saddened by the death of Prof. Darkoh. He was very instrumental in my academic career at the University of Dar es Salaam. He was the person who identified me as a potential Tutorial Assistant in the Department of Geography, following completion of my undergraduate studies, which finally led to my recruitment. He was my mentor, and we managed to publish a paper jointly in the early 1980s. Indeed, it is a great loss. May his soul rest in eternal peace” (Salome B. Misana)

Ernest Darkoh kept us updated on funeral and burial arrangements, including:

- A memorial service that was held for Mike in Gaborone on 19 August 2016
- Transport of his body from Botswana to Ghana
- Funeral and burial service for Mike that was held in his village on 10 September 2016

## LEGACY

His family, students and colleagues attest to the fact that academia was his first love, so much so that he routinely put his educational pursuits before his own personal interests. His son, Ernest Darkoh, while eulogising his father said:

“He literally lived in the office and for his work. Whereas others speak of work life balance, we his children jokingly say that my dad threw that concept in the garbage and invented his own philosophy of ‘work-work balance’. As children this of course was a cause of conflict and at times and feeling like we never got enough of him. But as adults we luckily gained understanding that our dad was really not ordinary- people are put on this earth to fulfil their inner truth and extraordinary people are put on this earth to fulfil extraordinary things.”

Mike was a passionate and committed advocate for education. He is the recipient of numerous academic achievement awards. In 2004 he was awarded the University of Botswana Researcher of the Year Award and in 2010 he received the Pioneer Professor Award in Recognition of Exemplary Contribution to Knowledge, Growth, and Development of Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. With an insatiable appetite for research and writing, he published extensively (several publications and many books). He served on several prominent committees at the University of Botswana, and was a member of numerous academic and professional organizations. Over the years, he became a successful published professor of Geography and Environmental Sciences; and was well respected in his field. In 2012, a book chapter dedicated to his career and entitled “Making a difference: Mapping the contributions of MBK Darkoh to Geography and Environmental Sciences” was published [1]. It was based on a review of his 187 publications, including 21 books, 83 journal articles, 27 chapters in books, and numerous conference proceedings, technical reports and newspaper articles. Between 2012 and 2016, he continued to publish largely with his colleagues and students. Among the last papers he published before he died are indicated in the reference list [2-5].

Mike always sought to bring out the best in his students. This aspect is one part of his greatest legacy: the hundreds of people he taught, mentored and supported in over half a century of teaching. The lives of these people have been enriched, and they have paid forward and enriched the lives of others. Not only did he create professors but rather created professors who went on to create other professors and who went further to create more professors and professionals. By touching the lives of so many others, he left behind a chain of influence and a cycle that will contribute to reproduce. A tribute in a book written in his honour says it all:

“Prof. Michael Bernard Kwesi Darkoh, we your former students and current and former colleagues, dedicate this book to you in gratitude for your great effort to build human capacity in Africa, and in recognition of your exemplary accomplishments as: an eminent scholar in Geography and Environmental Science; an administrator; an educator; and a patriotic son of Africa. You may not be a millionaire financially but you have humbly and firmly contributed to producing millionaire ideas and capacity that, in one way or another, are contributing to the positive transformation of Africa and the world in general. We are very proud of you!” (Khayesi and Musyoki 2012) [1].

One of the professors whose career development Prof Darkoh contributed to observed:

“Prof. Kwesi Darkoh was a hard worker who expected high standards from all who worked with him. He never compromised his beliefs and always wanted success for all who were associated with him. I first met and worked with Professor Darkoh at Kenyatta University, Kenya from 1981 until 1992 when I left for University of Botswana. He assisted me with my PhD research as the local supervisor appointed by Howard University, USA. Prof. Darkoh supported my academic and administrative development. He encouraged me to publish widely after my PhD. He even stepped down as HoD 1988 in support of my appointment as the new HoD. His argument in stepping down was to encourage capacity building of local Kenyan staff. He encouraged and mentored many of us at Kenyatta University who are now professors, researchers and senior staff at many national and international institutions. He continued this support for many of us even after we had left Kenyatta University. We often sent him papers for review before submitting for publication. He would within a very short time send detailed comments some of which meant re-writing whole sections and papers! He was quick to share his own publications and ideas with us.” (Agnes Musyoki, 19 August 2016, Speech at Memorial Service for Mike)

Ernest Darkoh further captured his father’s dedication to teaching when bidding him farewell in a eulogy he read in Gaborone at the memorial service for MBKD:

“In parting I would like to say we love you dad, it is ok for you to rest now, your life was a life well lived and a remarkable journey that changed the arc of history. Thank you for being our father and for all the sacrifices you made so that we could have an easier path than you had to walk. Do not worry about us- you have given us exactly what we needed to be ok. We will take it over from here. We will carry the pain of losing you and pleasure of your memory every day for the rest of our lives. Remember to smile and not be so serious all the time. And take it easy on whichever students I am sure you are already teaching in heaven.”

Another scholar whose career development Prof Darkoh contributed to said:

“The thought of Prof. Darkoh’s death makes me cry. It also makes me laugh at life. Darkoh was my supervisor and mentor. He was very strict and took his work seriously. He once threw my papers because I could not tell the difference between “resulted to” and “resulted in.” But he is the same one who proudly signed my thesis and wrote very positive supportive letters of recommendation for me. He introduced me to critical geography. I have never forgotten some of his lectures like the one entitled: *Is there a geographical basis for Africa unity?* I remember his statement that Gambia is an earthworm protrusion into Senegal. I remember his story about Nkrumah and how he found himself helpless and unable to meet his budget after cocoa prices fell. I also remember his teaching based on Teresa Hyter words: aid is imperialism as well as his talk on man and desertification. This talk marked his change to studying environment. He became widely sought after by United Nations as an environment expert. He believed in nothing but the best. He was a strong believer and had a strong devotion to Mother Mary. When he last visited Nairobi he gave me a copy of Maria Valtorta’s “The poem of Man-God.” Darkoh lived beyond the constraints of geographical space. He made home wherever he was. He did not let space dictate who he was or what



he did or who he related with. He worked and served where he was. His Volkswagen vehicle with a registration number plate KTJ 312 reminded me of his simplicity and humility. He lived his dream of a united Africa where everyone can live where he chooses. He worked hard to repair the world, preferring to walk away rather than waste time in conflict. He used that energy to repair the broken pieces in the quiet of his writings. He stood for what was right and was never intimidated. May God grant eternal peace to my supervisor.” (Mary Njeri Kinyanjui, 19 August 2016)

In his eulogy, Oagile Dikinya, Head of Environmental Science at the University of Botswana (Mike’s final academic home), observed:

“Prof. Darkoh’s prolific scholarly output in the Department was unrivalled, an attribute that rubbed off onto several of his mentees. The Department will also remember him as an uncompromising defender of academic quality and honesty, whose penetrating insights and interventions during staff and postgraduate student seminar presentations and during examination moderation meetings would be sorely missed”.

The second part of his legacy is his family. He is survived by his children, Dennis, Ernest, Michelle, and Michael, his daughter-in-law, Jami, his grandchildren Xander, Nyla, Zade and Rio, his grandson who is on the way and due this December. He is also survived by his siblings- his brothers Phillip and Nana Ampem, his sisters Yaa [Akyaa], Theresa, Margaret, Peace, and Agnes, and a plethora of friends and colleagues.

The third part of his legacy was that he was deeply religious. He loved God with a deep and passionate fervour. He grew up a christian within the Catholic denomination and his faith and belief in the power of prayer sustained him to the very end. He departed this earth on 22 July 2016 after fighting hard from post-surgery complications. Family members and colleagues who had a chance to see him in the closing moments reported that Prof Darkoh remained very prayerful and reflective up to the end of his life on earth.

## CONCLUSION

Mike has departed, leaving behind a legacy of exemplary scholarship and service to society. In his sojourn, he recognized the much-needed demand for human capital in African development and made commendable efforts developing young staff for their professional careers. His life is an illustration of the need for us to exercise commitment and zeal in effective running of academic programmes, publishing and dissemination of research findings. Mike strove to position geography and environmental science as disciplines critical towards contribution to sustainable development in Africa, and the rest of the world.

We take pride in Mike’s fulfilled scholarly life which we believe is a beacon of hope in the contribution to knowledge-generation and innovation in Africa, and the rest of the world. As his successors and offsprings, we not only admire his remarkable efforts but also declare our intentions to maintain and sustain these tremendous efforts by actively engaging in scholarship.

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