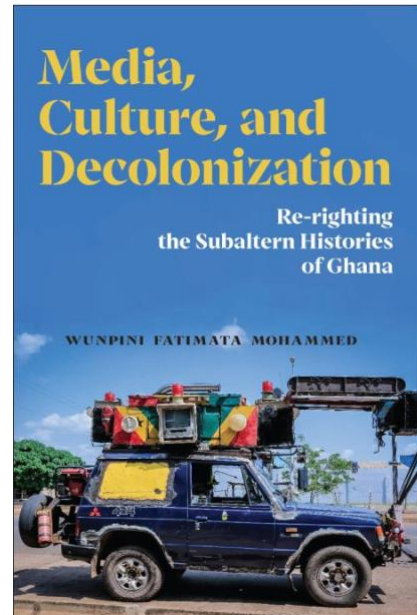


Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed, **Media, Culture, and Decolonization: Re-righting the Subaltern Histories of Ghana**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2025, 184 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Ignatius G. D. Suglo  
University of Richmond

In ***Media, Culture, and Decolonization: Re-righting the Subaltern Histories of Ghana***, Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed sets out not only to offer a grounded examination of how colonial encounters and legacies still shape media cultures in Ghana but also to demonstrate how we can re-right these subaltern histories. The author plays on *re-righting* subaltern histories by *re-writing* histories that not only center the past and present work of indigenous communities but more importantly the conceptual grounding of this kind of work. Key here is how Mohammed centers indigenous communities in our thinking of decolonization, which stands starkly against mapping transatlantic experiences onto the nation-state by asking what those transatlantic experiences did to and mean for African communities. Most importantly, Mohammed begins her theorization from indigenous communities in Northern Ghana, drawing on indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing, she asks how can we reexamine our understanding of media cultures in a postcolonial moment and what can these theorizations do that existing Global North centering ones do not? While critiquing historical and structural encounters that produce inequity, the book offers a path forward through the embrace of indigenous epistemologies not as alternative ways of knowing but as the way of knowing.

Mohammed does not take a proselytizing approach to discussing what decolonization should and could look like; she instead demonstrates this in her research, engagement, and writing. From grounding the book's conceptual framework in Bilchinsi philosophy, through employing the use of Dagbanli from the get-go in the book's description, to the framing of each chapter around Dagbanli proverbs, Mohammed shows what decolonial scholarly engagement looks like: when she talks about the need for theorizing from the Global South, she does that through her engagement with Bilchinsi philosophy as conceptual grounding for the book; when she talks about the need to veer away from extractive practices of knowledge production in the academy to a more inclusive one, she does that through self-reflexive methodological innovations that privilege co-creation with communities. The various chapters start with a Dagbanli proverb; their translations only appear at the end of the book. As a Dagbanli speaker, this is as intriguing as it is central to the core argument of the book. By not putting translations next to the proverbs but at the end of the book, the author makes indigenous languages central and not the subtext, and practices what she advocates in this work. This book can therefore be viewed as an examination of decolonial media cultures in eight Dagbanli proverbs.



Chapter 1 maps out the methodological and theoretical frameworks and interventions of the book. Mohammed opens with a proverb that highlights the need for following tradition as a way of gaining favor of the elders (*Bia ηun nuu viela ηuni n samdi kpiem dori*). This encapsulates how she goes about her fieldwork. Being from the communities she researches, Mohammed adopts an African feminist autoethnography as framework for emphasizing that the “process of producing (auto)ethnographic knowledge is not a personal but a social one” (p. 23). Guided by Bilchinsi philosophy—an indigenous Dagbanli philosophy that emphasizes “the importance of valuing humanity and holding human dignity sacred” (p. 26)—she rethinks the position of the researched to the researcher. Participants become cocreators of knowledge as opposed to objects of knowledge. The chapter highlights how knowledge produced even in the Global South tends to be rooted in colonial systems, enforcing the “everydayness of colonization” (p. 20) and offers indigenous epistemologies as a way out of this conundrum. She demonstrates the value of reworking research methods that do not fit communities’ practices, whether that is through “sensorial listening” in place of assumed researcher expertise, or “communal conversation circles” (p. 12) in place of focus groups.

In chapter 2, *Bisla bisla ndaa nam wɔbgu* encapsulates the slow and gradual development of media in Northern Ghana. It argues that we cannot understand media development independent of power politics that shape how media is accessed (both in terms of technology and literacy) and how this creates disparities between the North and South of Ghana—disparities that have implications for how media developed and what the media landscape looks like today. Colonial encounters saw the South as colony and the North as protectorate, leading to a lag in infrastructure such as electricity and educational institutions. These disparities contributed to the belated arrival of media technologies. This belatedness, however, fostered innovations that centered and involved the local communities in media development in ways that did not happen elsewhere. The chapter maps out the interventions of communities and institutions into these disparities, such as the incredible work of GILLBT (Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy & Bible Translation) in preserving, documenting, and promoting literacy in Northern Ghanaian languages beyond its mandate of biblical texts.

Chapter 3 examines the role of griots as mass communicators in societies and how that intersects with contemporary media. Drawing on how griot culture or lumsi intersects with contemporary media production, Mohammed highlights the blurring of distinctions between traditional and contemporary media. Content and how it is produced is relevant to communities and mirror daily lived experiences of media consumption. Media practitioners adopt indigenous practices to not only mitigate lack of funding, training, and systems that do not quite fit into audience experiences of media, thus creating “journalistic griots”—a reworking of lumsi practices for contemporary news production, filmmaking, and media production more broadly.

Chapter 4 examines the history and political economy of the film industry in Northern Ghana from Dagbanli movies produced in the late 1980s to radio dramas in the late 1990s. It traces the history of Dagbanli filmmaking, cinema-going, and their entanglements with global circulations such as Bollywood while highlighting the challenges—fiscal and infrastructural—the industry faces. Mohammed makes an important point here that while marginalized in media representations on the national level, Dagbanli still remains dominant on the regional level in radio, music, and satellite TV. This weaves into earlier discussions

on the replication of marginality within postcolonial subaltern communities and the place of other ethnic groups, such as the Konkomba, Gonja, Builsa, Dagaaba, and so on, in Northern Ghanaian media. While the author discusses this reality, it could have benefited from an in-depth engagement of the intersections of these multiple marginalities that traces the historical and material conditions that enable these multiple levels of marginality.

Chapter 5 asks, what is the relationship between movies and news, and how does that shape our understanding of the relationship between different media forms? Dagbanli movies draw on storylines from contemporary news stories. This is what Mohammed calls the *newsification of movies* that on the one hand, sees film as social commentary, and on the other hand serves to promote marketing of these visible issues of concern. Mohammed traces the relationship between different media forms by unpacking how digital posters built on hand-drawn posters of the 1990s to TV ads' affinity to radio jingles and the reimagination of the mobile cinema van in the marketing strategy of Radio 10,000.

Nkrumah had a socialist vision of media as a tool for social change. Chapter 6 argues that while mainstream English language media in Ghana today has failed that mandate, indigenous language media's work aligns with Nkrumah's vision of TV for social change. Although with non-existent support and external sponsorships, these stations serve the needs of their immediate communities. These communities ultimately hold local stations responsible for holding people in authority and institutions accountable while "big" national English language broadcasters' funding and sponsorship relations tend to undermine their ability to speak truth to power. Community-relevant content is tailored for preserving the histories, cultures, and gastronomies of Dagbon. The thriving of indigenous language film industry in itself resists linguistic marginalization. At the same time, these stations remain "prone to reproducing colonial logics in the way they represent gender and religion" (p. 125) in these shows.

The conclusion draws on a proverb (*3iri yirigi pum, ka yelimaŋli diee wali*) that highlights the inevitability of the truth, and the truth advanced here is that despite marginalization of indigenous language media, especially in Northern Ghana, Dagbanli media offers a roadmap for resisting cultural imperialism. We encounter media made for and by indigenous cultures away from the colonial gaze. The audience is not an imagined West or its representatives, which still centers the West even in its "speaking back" but instead draws on indigenous practices and strategies to excel in many areas of serving their communities through co-creation of knowledge in spite of scarcity of resources—all the while cognizant of how these marginalized spaces can also reproduce marginalization of other ethnic, gender, and religious communities.

This book is essential reading for scholars of decolonization who will find in it a grounded demonstration of how to do decolonial work. Students and scholars of the Global South will find in it methodological innovations and reflections for doing fieldwork in spaces that do not quite fit the canon, and to develop a deeply reflexive, sensitive, and practical way to do research in these communities. Scholars of media will find in it how different media forms intersect with each other through time in ways that destabilize neat categorizations.