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‘This place becomes a place’: Artists and placemaking on the margins

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ABSTRACT

Culture and creativity are active but often overlooked processes in contemporary urbanisation. This paper contributes to scholarship on the cultural and creative industries, as well as urban placemaking on the margins, by adopting a placemaking approach in which artists are positioned at the centre of the analysis. The focus is on why artists choose to be located away from national cultural hubs, how this shapes their work, and how their work in turn shapes the city. Qualitative research was conducted in the northern Ghanaian city of Tamale with artists based in three creative and cultural industries: film, music and visual arts. The paper makes three important contributions to the literature: first, sense of place, attachment to place and feeling at home are shown to be key to artists’ decisions to be based in peripheral locations; second, the material and cultural attributes of place and associated access to resources influence the work artists produce when located far from cultural urban hubs; and third, artists are changing the perceived marginality of their home cities by shaping urban infrastructure and projecting new geographical imaginaries.

1. Introduction

The cultural and creative industries have been increasingly recognised globally, not only for their social and cultural value but also as engines of economic growth and development. In an African context, optimism suffuses the development agenda with claims that the cultural and creative industries will ‘leapfrog’ the continent into high-growth economies and deliver ‘self-awareness, well-being and prosperity’ (African Union Commission, 2015). Beyond the celebratory discourses, however, relatively little is known about the cultural and creative industries in Africa, since the literature overwhelmingly concentrates on creative urban hubs in the global North, such as London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, and Amsterdam (Gill, 2002; Neff, 2012; McRobbie, 2016; Scott, 2000). The little there is on artists in the global South portrays them as being based in the cultural, economic, and political urban hubs due to ease of access to key infrastructure, extensive social networks between artists and other key actors, proximity to audiences, and access to finance and other economic means of supporting their careers (Coll-Martinez and Mendez-Ortega, 2020). So why do some artists deliberately choose to be based away from such hubs? How does this impact their work? And how do artists shape cities on the margins?

This paper addresses these questions through adopting a creative placemaking approach in which artists[1] are placed at the centre of the analysis. Responding to calls for the ‘de-Westernisation’ of cultural and creative industries studies (Alacovska and Gill, 2019; Mbaye and Pratt, 2020), and for scholarship that challenges Western epistemologies by building on empirical data from the global South (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012), we focus on artists based in the city of Tamale, 400 miles north of the Ghanaian capital city and cultural hub of Accra. Scholarship on the cultural and creative industries in Ghana has recently blossomed (see Alacovska et al., 2021; Bobie et al., 2023; Darkwah et al., 2024; Langevang et al., 2022a, 2022b; Resario et al., 2023; Steedman et al., 2022) but has not focused on the role of place nor adopted an urban perspective. Moreover, these studies focus primarily on Accra, hence little is known about how artists are faring in locations that are physically and/or metaphorically remote (Gibson, 2010). As Mbaye and Pratt (2020: 782) have highlighted in a sub-Saharan African context, there is a need to understand ‘the role of culture and creativity as active and present processes in contemporary urbanization’. This oversight, they argue, is linked to urban scholars overlooking the ways in which creative economies are transforming cities.

In this paper, we draw on qualitative fieldwork conducted with key

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[1] The definition of an artist has been widely debated (Karttunen 1998). The artists we present here are all practising arts as an occupation.

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actors in the music, film, and visual arts industries based in Tamale. We contribute to cultural and creative industries scholarship and urban placemaking on the margins in three key ways. First, by highlighting the importance of sense of place, attachment to place, and feeling at home in artists' decisions to be based in peripheral locations. Second, by demonstrating how the material and cultural attributes of place and associated access to resources influence the work artists produce when located far from cultural urban hubs. And third, by revealing how artists attempt to change the perceived marginality of their home cities by shaping urban infrastructure and projecting new geographical imaginaries.

The rest of the paper is divided into six sections. First, the literature on the cultural and creative industries in an urban context is discussed, highlighting the link between place and creative work. Following a presentation of the research setting and methodology, the findings and discussion are divided into three sections: artists (re)locating to Tamale, the influence of Tamale on artists' work, and how artists are shaping Tamale. The conclusions highlight how through creative placemaking, artists are putting cities in the margins on the map.

2. Cities and the cultural and creative industries

Cities have long been viewed as important hubs for the cultural and creative industries. Inner-city areas with their vibrant street life, clusters of museums and art galleries, many music venues, cinemas, theatres and festivals have been especially highlighted as key locations for artists to be based. A substantial body of literature has investigated the important role played by cultural and creative industries in urban development and regeneration processes, particularly in inner-city areas (Evans, 2009; Gregory, 2016; Mathews, 2014; Oyekunle, 2017). Links between cities and the creative economy have been explored through a series of concepts including: the creative city, creative class, and creative placemaking, which are briefly discussed in turn here.

The promotion of 'creative cities' stems from the 'urbanization of cultural policy' (Grodach, 2017: 82), which became prominent from the 1980s onwards in response to urban decline and the need for economic restructuring. State and local governments adopted policies based on the belief that creative activity can be used as an economic resource in urban areas. Charles Landry in particular is accredited with driving the creative city approach (see Landry and Bianchini, 1995; Landry, 2008). Landry argued that culture should be considered central to urban development, rather than as an optional extra. Creative city strategies have been developed as a way of engaging in urban restructuring through drawing on cultural resources and attracting a highly skilled and flexible labour force (Landry, 2008). There has been considerable critique, however, of creative city policies, which have been accused of tending to 'serve as neoliberal urban growth strategies rather than policy geared towards supporting artistic and creative activity' (Grodach, 2017: 86).

Richard Florida's (2002) concept of the 'creative class', which is portrayed as a motor of urban regeneration, has also been highly influential in focusing attention on the cultural and creative industries. In particular, Florida has contributed to refocusing discussion of the cultural and creative industries on cities and their need to attract the creative class, seen as artists, designers, media, and ICT workers, through prioritising attractive amenities and consumption opportunities. This approach, however, has been highly critiqued; for example, Jamie Peck (2005) and Andy Pratt (2008: 114) find the idea behind the approach that 'cities must adapt themselves to the values and mores of the creative class' to be fundamentally problematic.[2]

The 'creative placemaking' approach aims to shift attention away from city planning to attract a creative class, towards a focus on arts-led processes that lead to place-based community development (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). The creative placemaking literature emphasises arts foundations and programmes, which is not surprising as the concept emerged out of the US National Endowment for the Arts approach to programming (Grodach, 2017). At the core of creative placemaking studies in the global North is 'artists as key agents in policy processes', since within 'urban neoliberalism, artists and grassroots arts organizations are valorized by policy makers' as they bring creativity and urban development (Bain and Landau, 2019: 408).

In this paper, we take seriously Bajestani et al.'s (2022) call for context-specific research that investigates the roles different actors in creative cities play in their construction. This is paramount in a sub-Saharan African context where much of the urban creative economy operates outside of state regulatory control (Mbaye and Pratt, 2020) and the bulk of city building is 'attributed to actors outside of the state and formal business sector' (Pieterse, 2011: 6). Consequently, urban residents play key roles in shaping African cities through building their homes and workplaces, and participating in service provision (Gough and Yankson, 2005). In relation to the cultural and creative industries, Gibson (2010: 8) notes that it is 'ultimately people that together and through their individual and shared activities constitute what we call the creative economy'. Hence, in this paper we focus on the overlooked role of individual artists, rather than states or art foundations, in placemaking.

Although creative industries are seen 'to have a predilection towards sizeable cities – ex-industrial powerhouses or cities of global stature – and towards particular northern hemisphere cities in the industrialised West' (Gibson, 2010: 3), more recent research has shown that it cannot be assumed that creativity is 'territorially articulated in large cities' (Watson, 2020: 1577). In a UK context, Watson (2020) shows how there is a vibrant music economy in the northwest of the country far from the London hub, whereas for the centre-north of Italy, a 'diffused and polycentric pattern' of creative industries has been reported (Boix et al., 2016: 937). The claim that creatives need the 'buzz' of inner cities has also been challenged, since suburban areas of some major cities have been found to be a key location for creative industries (Bain, 2013; Gregory and Rogerson, 2018). In a Latin American context, Moya-Latorre (2023: 127) has highlighted how youth in self-built urban peripheries have 'propagated self-managed cultural spaces and practices in their neighbourhoods that differ significantly from what can be conventionally found in consolidated settlements'. Consequently, it is essential that research on the cultural and creative industries is not restricted to national cultural hubs.

Through our focus on artists in a location that is seen as being peripheral – both in terms of the country (Ghana) and city (Tamale) – this paper makes an important contribution to an emerging stream of literature that seeks to understand 'how cultural and creative industries emerge from small, suburban, rural and remote places and are implicated in a range of social, economic and technical transformations peculiar to those localities' (Gibson, 2010: 3). We explore why a place that is assumed to be 'marginal in an imaginary geography of creativity' (Gibson, 2010: 3), nevertheless is home to artists who have decided to work in Tamale and are putting their mark on the city. Despite a focus in the literature on cities as being *the* place for creativity, there is a surprising lack of studies that foreground the link between artists and place (Thomas, 2023). As Thomas (2023: 2) recently argued in relation to the creative class literature, place is typically 'confined to describing the landscape at the street, neighbourhood, or city scale'. Consequently, there is limited knowledge of how creative workers give meaning to place through their subjective experiences, how places shape them, and how their work in turn shapes places.

In theorising the link between creative workers and placemaking, we seek inspiration from Cresswell's (2014) conceptualisation of place as spaces that people have made meaningful or are attached to in some way. Drawing on Agnew (1987), Cresswell posits that places include three aspects: location, locale, and sense of place. Location is the actual location of the place on the Earth's surface; locale refers to the physical

[2] See Florida (2014) for a summary of and response to his critics.

setting for social relations and the actual shape of the place in which people conduct their lives; and sense of place is the attachment, meanings, and emotions that people have to space. According to Cresswell (2014), sense of place is the most important of the three because it gives people a way of understanding the world. The meanings of places, however, change as they do not have fixed identities or attributes (Clare, 2013). Places are made, imagined, contested, and enforced. As Doreen Massey claimed over three decades ago, rather than thinking of places as areas with boundaries, they can be imagined as 'articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey, 1999: 5). Thus, places have become 'increasingly understood as relationally constituted, polyvalent processes embedded in broader sets of social relations' (Jessop et al., 2008: 390).

Focussing on studies of geography and art, Hawkins (2012) highlights the need to examine relations between art and the material, and how these make and shape places and people. Thus, she claims, it is important to explore "place 'as process and in process' rather than as a distanced abstraction" (Hawkins, 2012: 59). Artists play a role in placemaking at multiple scales in the city. For example, at the scale of studios, the role of affordable studio spaces for facilitating artists' work in London has been highlighted (Scott et al., 2023; Sjoholm, 2014). At the neighbourhood/district scale, through their study of cultural quarters in a German context, Bain and Landau (2022: 1615) have revealed how 'practices of generationing' are key to understanding relational theorizations of place. Drawing on Vanderbeck (2007), they argue that both 'Inter- and intragenerational social relations are constructed conditions of relationality'. Drawing on the various conceptualisations of place highlighted here, this paper explores how people and places are co-constructed in the context of the cultural and creative industries in Tamale.

3. Researching cultural and creative industries in Tamale

Ghana was selected as the focus of this research due to its rich and diverse cultural heritage. Tamale is the capital of the Northern Region and the most important city for commerce, education, and administration in northern Ghana. The city is located in the Guinea savanna zone, although there are few surviving trees in the surrounding areas due to regular burning, cultivation and livestock grazing (Dickson and Benneh, 1988). Tamale is reportedly one of the fastest growing cities in Ghana (Fuseini et al., 2017; Kpienbaareh and Luginaah, 2020), with a population of almost 375,000 according to the 2021 Population and Housing Census. Over half of all dwelling units in Tamale are the compound house type, which is one of the oldest architectural building typologies in West Africa, offering less well-endowed households accommodation in residential cohabitation (Addo, 2023). Recent research has indicated that the urban population is increasingly subject to both extreme heat and flooding events (Gough et al., 2019a).

Tamale falls within the traditional state of Dagban, which covers an area of around 8,000 square miles (Oppong, 1973); the people are referred to as Dagbamba and their language is Dagbanli.[3] Due to its position in the north of the country, however, Tamale is often overlooked by researchers and policy makers. This marginalization stems from colonial times when Accra, located on the coast in the south, was designated as the capital of the then Gold Coast. Although Tamale became the capital for the British Northern Territories in 1907, northern Ghana had few natural resources that were of interest to the colonisers, hence the region became a source of labour for the cocoa plantations and mines located further south (Dickson and Benneh, 1988). Despite early post-independence attempts to achieve spatial equity in investment (Fuseini et al., 2017), the north has experienced persistent lower economic development and greater poverty, which has played into perceptions of Tamale as being peripheral (Awanyo and Attua, 2018; Bagson and Owusu, 2016; Songsore, 2003). Tamale has become the base for many NGOs (Kwao and Amoak, 2022), resulting in it being referred to as the 'NGO capital' of Ghana.

Northern Ghana is predominantly Muslim, and around 90 percent of Tamale residents belong to the two dominant Muslim sects of Alsuna and Tijani (Bagson and Owusu, 2016). Tamale is thus a majority Muslim city in a country that is primarily Christian. Consequently, Young (2021: 517) describes the cultural milieu of Tamale as being broadly conservative, a 'mixture of tenets of Islam (widely practised in the region beginning the late nineteenth century) within an already largely conservative traditional Dagbamba culture, upheld through the chieftaincy system'. The Dagamba people have preserved a rich historical narrative, interwoven with myth, through their drum histories (Oppong, 1973). Yamusah and Mohammed (2022: 62), however, claim that northern ethnic groups, including the Dagamba, have been 'pushed to the periphery [by] the systematic exclusion of Northern cultures from mainstream society and media mostly based in Accra'. Although in the past the state-run Centre for National Culture in Tamale hosted major cultural events, the building, including a theatre, has not been maintained hence it can no longer fulfil its role in promoting the cultural and creative industries. In this context, there is an informal creative arts scene of musicians, artists and filmmakers etc. in Tamale who work without the support of formal structures.

For each industry studied, i.e., music, film, and visual arts, we interviewed the leading practitioners based in Tamale, selected according to their national and international reputations. Methodologically, a life history approach was adopted where we encouraged participants to highlight the key points in their lives and how these have influenced their careers. In addition, and of particular relevance for this paper, we asked artists why they chose to work in Tamale, how living in Tamale influences their careers, and how they think they impact on Tamale by being based there. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews, each lasting two to three hours, were conducted. Moreover, by holding the interviews in the artists' workshops, we gained insight into their places and modes of work. All of the interviews were conducted in English and then subsequently transcribed. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was adopted, which involved numerous careful readings and coding of the transcripts to identify key themes emerging from the interview data. In addition, secondary sources, including online webpages and interviews with some of the respondents were similarly analysed.

In some instances, follow-up interviews were conducted where we introduced an innovative 'River of Life approach', which has been little used in research to date but is being pioneered by Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev), a global community of practice consisting of mainly international development practitioners. This approach allows participants to reflect on their personal experiences, highlighting the factors that have motivated them in their personal and professional lives and those that have hindered them (Denov and Shevell, 2021). The river is used as a symbol to reflect on key stages in their lives, with bridges and rocks of different sizes depicting opportunities and challenges respectively. Participants draw the river of their lives individually and, depending on individual preferences, either discuss their journeys whilst drawing or after they have completed. In undertaking this exercise, a key focus was on the obstacles and opportunities the creative artists have faced during their careers. As Denov and Shevell (2021: 33) highlight, using the River of Life tool enables 'greater agency among participants to decide how to portray themselves, convey their experiences and illustrate their life histories', resulting in 'a wide range of visual representations'. Moreover, the approach not only provides a useful catalyst for discussions but also helps to mitigate power imbalances between researchers and participants (Denov and Shevell, 2021).

Although all the data collected are drawn on in this paper, we focus primarily on the experiences of three key artists, one from each sector.

[3] In line with recent moves to decolonize language, we use Dagban rather than Dagbon, Dagbamba rather than Dagomba, and Dagbanli rather than Dagbani (Yamusah and Mohammed, 2022).

Ibrahim Mahama is a world-renowned visual artist who is particularly known for his installation sculpture, which has been exhibited around the world. Sheriff Ghale is a singer whose music is renowned throughout Ghana. OBL is a film producer whose films are widely known in Ghana and beyond. All three artists are well educated men in their 30s and 40s who come from families with above average resources.[4] In the rest of the paper, we turn to explore the experiences of these three artists and the interlinkages between their work and the city through placemaking.

4. Artists (re)locating to Tamale

This section explores why artists decide to locate in peripheral locations, discussing in turn the experiences of Sheriff Ghale[5] (singer), Ibrahim Mahama (artist and sculptor) and OBL[6] (film producer and director). For all three artists, we show how their decision to be based in Tamale is linked to being 'from Tamale' in differing ways, resulting in a strong sense of place and attachment to Tamale.

Sheriff Ghale was born in 1978 and grew up in Tamale, where he did his primary and secondary schooling. Despite studying for a Bachelor of Education in music at Winneba (southern Ghana) and an MPhil at the University of Ghana, Accra, he claims to have never remained outside of Tamale for more than two consecutive months; even while studying at university, he kept returning to Tamale to perform and record music. Hence, Ghale has never really moved away from Tamale and it is clearly where he feels at home. As he declared, 'I love Tamale. Tamale is a cool place and for me that is where my spirit is relaxed. It is home.'.

Despite being from and feeling at home in Tamale, this does not mean that being based there is easy for Ghale. He spoke about the challenges that artists face, not only those in Tamale but based anywhere outside of Accra:

> So, Ghana seems so centralised, like Accra is the roof and the rest of us are on the ground. You are trying to sell your music and if you really want to be recognised in Ghana as a national star you have to migrate to Accra. Even after migrating, you really need to adapt to sing in certain languages in order to make that real impact.

In Ghale's experience, the capital city is constructed as the superior place for creativity and success. He is committed to staying in Tamale, however, partly to contest this geographical imaginary. Although Ghale finds working from Tamale challenging at times, he has no desire to move to Accra declaring that 'This is a challenge I want to face'. Even after 20 years of being a nationally recognised performing artist, when Ghale is in Accra he feels that people look at him as someone who is 'trying to break out'. For Ghale, it is the sense of 'being at home' in Tamale that overrides the benefits of being based elsewhere.

Ibrahim Mahama also considers Tamale to be his hometown, despite moving to Accra at the age of two in 1989. This is because, in a Ghanaian context, a person's hometown is the place they trace their ancestry to and where they have greater access to land. Hometowns thus have a significant influence on Ghanaians' identities, sense of belonging, and investment (Pellow, 2011). After growing up in Accra, Mahama moved to Kumasi (central Ghana) where he studied for a Bachelor and then Masters in Fine Arts at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), graduating in 2013. Mahama rose rapidly to international fame for his installation art and has been invited to show his work globally, including featuring in the Ghana Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale and his work 'Purple Hibiscus' that swathed the Barbican Centre in London in 2024.

Mahama decided to relocate to Tamale in 2014. As he explained, although there were many artists in Tamale engaged in local handicrafts and painting, they were not working at what he described as 'a contemporary level'. Consequently, as he clarified:

> I realised that it was important to somehow come back to this point [Tamale]. After all, what does it mean when you spend all your life traveling around the world, doing exhibitions in big museums, going to schools, giving lectures, and back home where you come from, the children who are there will grow up and never have that same sense of experience? I think you fail when that happens.

Mahama went on to explain how: 'When you are thinking about art it is either Accra or Kumasi, so I thought why not an art centre in Tamale too and create an institution that can become a model that could maybe spread to other regions?' Through his father, Mahama gained access to land on which he built a large structure that he intended to be his art studio but he subsequently turned it into the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Arts (SCCA). Having moved back to Tamale, however, does not mean that Mahama is immobile. As he funds his work and galleries himself, he sustains this through giving lectures abroad and selling his works to art galleries and museums. Mahama's desire to bring art to Tamale, bound up with his strong attachment to his hometown, are his main reasons for being based there, despite its peripheral location.

Turning to the film maker OBL, although he was born (in 1984) and raised in Tamale, according to Ghanaian tradition he is not 'from Tamale' in the same way as Ghale and Mahama, since it is neither of his parents' hometowns. They originate from Paga, which is located further north, hence OBL grew up speaking their language (Kasem) at home. Consequently, OBL only learnt to speak Dagbanli as an adult. Despite this, he has become a nationally recognised film producer with a reputation for producing quality films that deal with topics related to northern Ghana. Like many artists in the creative industries, however, OBL is not able to survive solely from his film making (Alacovska et al., 2021; Langevang et al., 2022b); he teaches at a nursing training college during the week, then focusses on filmmaking at weekends and during holidays. Although both Accra and Kumasi have recognised film industries, referred to as Ghallywood and Kumawood respectively (Steedman et al., 2022), OBL has decided to be based in Tamale.

As OBL's father built a compound house close to the centre of Tamale, OBL has been able to establish an editing studio there without charge.[7] Hence, like Mahama, intergenerational relations within the family have been key to gaining access to workspaces. OBL uses one room as an editing studio and another as a sound studio. He explained how the idea to set up a studio in the family home stemmed from social media. 'When I discovered Youtube, I realised a lot of people had similar small studios. They do movies and they edit from home. I said to myself, I have a similar set up so why don't I use my personal room for a start, so that is how it started'. As has been found elsewhere, 'the studio is an important instrument and base of contemporary artistic performance, production, and practice' (Sjoholm, 2014: 507).

OBL also explained that:

> My decision to stay up north here, it is because I feel the youth need some sort of knowledge, they need education, they need someone to look up to and even though you are here with less resources available, you can at least motivate them.

Thus all three artists profiled here hope to show young people that it is possible, like themselves, to work as artists located in Tamale. They are contesting the perceived marginality of their geographical position (Yamusah and Mohammed, 2022), while revealing the role a sense of place with a strong attachment to home plays. It is important to

[4] The focus on three male artists reflects the dominance of men in the cultural and creative industries in Ghana, however, this means we are inevitably promoting a male perspective.

[5] Sheriff Ghale is the stage name for Mohammed Sherriff Yamusah.

[6] OBL is the name of the studio that Leonard Atawugeh Kubaloe established but he is widely referred to as OBL.

[7] Homes doubling as workplaces is widespread in urban Ghana, occurring in around one third of houses (Gough 2010).

recognise, however, that as centre and periphery are relational (Grabher, 2018), for Dagbamba located elsewhere in Ghana, Tamale may be viewed as the centre of Dagban creativity.

5. Influence of Tamale on creative artists

Artists are influenced collectively and individually by the locations in which they work (Drake 2003). Both the physical setting and attributes of places, such as urban infrastructure, and the social and cultural contexts in which they operate are important. In this section, we analyse how the attributes of Tamale, including the local culture and access to resources, influence the work that artists located in the margins produce.

For OBL, Dagban cultural history is central to his work. As he explained, 'All the films I have shot are deeply rooted in Dagban culture'. The local culture comes to the fore in the stories he tells, the characters he depicts, and the settings in which he films. In part of a film that he showed us, local beliefs in supernatural powers were evident. This supports the claim that 'localities can be a catalyst for individual creativity' (Drake, 2003: 523).

Ghale also closely identifies with Dagban and Tamale in particular, claiming that 'Tamale has always been a part of me'. Even the stage name he chose reflects this: Gale in Dagbanli is something that survives but he decided to spell it 'Ghale' to indicate that he is Ghanaian, while the 'le' represents that he is from Tamale. For Ghale, being Dagbamba is very important for his music. He sings songs in Dagbanli about the north, since this is 'part of my identity, part of what I need to express'. He explained how:

> I enjoy singing in Dagbanli more than any other language … Also not just the language but the whole culture itself … learning all these traditional things helped me in understanding and my perception of music, my identity in music. So, even if I am doing reggae, you feel the traditional elements carried over, so it gives me a peculiar advantage.

Being Muslim can be both an inspiration but also a challenge for artists in Tamale. Ghale spoke passionately about the influence of Islam on his work but also the way in which:

> Islam does not encourage music that much, especially popular music with musical instruments … the industry is not a traditional area for Muslims and there are actually Muslims who believe it is not even permissible to do that. So, if you are in the industry, you face that angle of difficulty that you have to navigate. It is not easy.

Moreover, in his MPhil thesis, Ghale explains how most contemporary artists in Tamale do not play a western musical instrument, since learning to play these in Ghana is largely through the church. Consequently, such skills are out of reach of most Dagbamba Muslims, 'affecting the nature and character of an entire pop music industry in Tamale today' (Yamusah, 2013: 18). Thus, although Ghale feels most at home in Tamale, this is not without its contradictions as he is living and working in a Muslim context.

These findings align with Collins and Cunningham's (2017: 119) claim that 'Place is intricately linked to culture and tradition', hence creative workers' personal, subjective and emotional reactions to place influence 'the manner in which they employ the characteristics of that place for aesthetic inspiration'. Creative workers operating out of a peripheral location have the key advantage of being able to 'exploit place and its link to culture and tradition' (Collins and Cunningham, 2017: 117). As Grabher (2018: 1786) argues, it is important 'to perceive the periphery not as an obstacle to, but as a potential asset for creativity'. For artists based in Tamale, their work is clearly inspired by local resources and Ghanaian artefacts and history more broadly. Mahama explained how for his installations he uses materials he finds in nearby communities, such as objects people have used and discarded or have been used to the point where they no longer have the same values attached to them. In relation to his installation in Accra, when he covered the National Theatre with jute bags, Mahama explained how:

> The jute bags come from the 50 s when Ghana was the highest producer of cocoa in the world … The sacks were brought in from India, Bangladesh and other places to contain the cocoa beans so they could be sold globally … but the sacks were used only once because the value the international market places on cocoa means you cannot use them more than once. So once you used them, the millet and rice farmers who produced locally used it to bag their commodities. Over time, they wrote symbols or part of their names on the bags so they acquired a new character. … So, when I covered the national theatre with the bags it was a dialogue with history.

OBL also draws heavily on local material resources in his filmmaking. As he explained, being based in Tamale means he does not have to spend large sums of money on sets, as they are on 'his doorstep'. He indicated how:

> I don't have a set designer because mostly everything is still intact. You can find locations as you want them. You can find exact locations as you write them in the script. So, it is relatively cheaper to get the appropriate locations to work with here [compared with being down south].

Whilst locally available materials and vernacular settings provide opportunities for artists, being located in the margins can act as a constraint. For OBL, having access to a camera that meets global standards is essential. In his River of Life, not having a camera features early on as one of OBL's key challenges: 'I just didn't have a camera and we couldn't get a camera to buy in Tamale so that was one major challenge' (Fig. 1). He explained how he had to hire a camera in Accra and even this was difficult since 'It depends if the person is even willing to release it to you when the camera is moving all the way to the north. Mostly they want to monitor the camera use, so it becomes very difficult'. Moreover, as the equipment OBL requires has to be bought abroad, being based in Tamale makes this more challenging: 'You have the money but you just don't have anyone to buy it abroad for you, unlike in Accra where a lot of people go and come and you can easily get somebody but it is so difficult here'. This illustrates how remoteness is 'a double-edged sword' (Collins and Cunningham, 2017: 122), which can negatively affect the development of peripheral creative economies due to challenges in accessing certain resources.

Accessing finance is a hurdle many creative artists face (Cunningham et al., 2008), which can be exacerbated when located far from cultural hubs. OBL indicated how investors 'Don't have trust in the film industry. They are afraid to invest their money into it, especially in the north'. He went on to explain that people 'are willing to help [financially] when the person is into politics' but that as an artist he cannot get anyone in Tamale to support him. This is due to the perception of risk in the cultural and creative industries, and the expectation of reciprocity when support is lent by politicians. OBL lamented that such people 'want to see films that portray their culture but they don't want to invest'.

Similarly, Ghale claimed that 'the commercial investment aspect does not bring returns for private people who have ventured into investing in the music industry'. In his case, financial support from working with NGOs and aid agencies has been key. Ghale explained how, following conflict between ethnic groups in northern Ghana when he was a teenager, he wrote a peace song for UNICEF, which helped kickstart his career as a singer. Subsequently, together with some other northern-based artists, Ghale formed a band that toured rural communities to promote the dangers of guinea worm as part of a programme spearheaded by the Ministry of Health (Yamusah and Mohammed, 2022). This exposure contributed to his songs becoming well known in the region and increased his sales. Ghale also worked with the Danish development agency DANIDA, following which he explained how he 'put together an NGO with some Danish friends called the Sababas and through that we did a couple of projects with artists to help them secure royalties'. Being based in Tamale and having contacts with NGOs thus

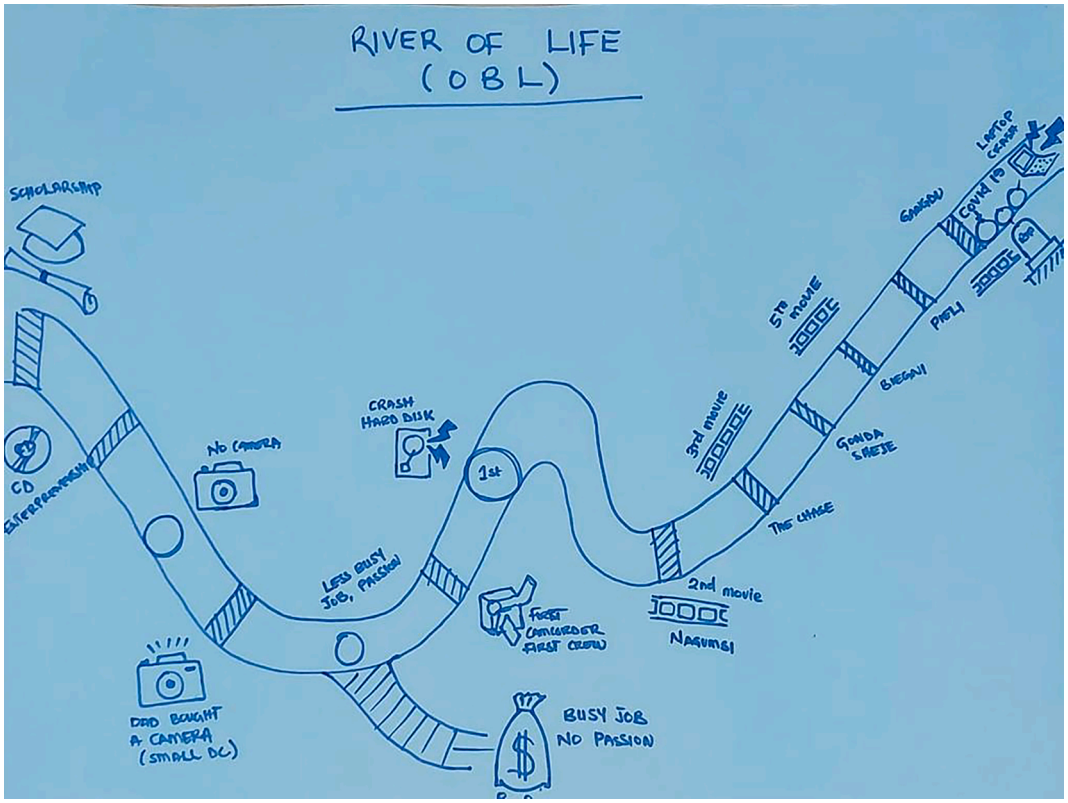

Fig. 1. OBL's River of Life.

not only facilitated Ghale's career but also provided him with the inspiration to set up his own NGO. This illustrates how artists in the margins are not just performing for NGOs but also creating NGOs that support the industry.

In Ghale's eyes, 'Most of the successful things we have done here as an artist have come from NGOs' due to their financial support. Not all artists agree, however, that NGOs are beneficial for the region. Mahama in particular was vocal in his scepticism regarding NGOs, claiming that:

> You really have to set the boundaries clear – you don't want to be mixed up in this kind of NGO thing. They come here, they drive big cars, and they do some little projects … The NGO mentality around the world, I think to a large extent in places in the periphery, has really crippled the indigenes in those places.

Despite their at times important work, NGOs have been widely criticised for promoting dependency on outsiders and reducing self-sufficiency in Ghana (Mohan 2002). Nevertheless, in recent years there has been an increase in NGOs and international organisations promoting creative work in 'marginal spaces' (Steedman, 2023), which has been depicted as creating an 'NGO-isation' of creative work (Alacovska, 2020).

Local artist communities can also form a key resource (Novak-Leonard and Skaggs, 2017). In Tamale, the artists form a relatively small but close-knit, supportive community. OBL not only employs local young men to work at OBL Studios[8] but offers support to young filmmakers trying to set up on their own. When Mahama was making a short documentary as part of his first exhibition at SCCA, he asked a young local film maker Abdul Rafiu (known locally as Fishbone), to produce the film. Fishbone was proud of his association with such a renowned artist and grateful for his support. This highlights the importance of both intergenerational and intragenerational learning as a driver of placemaking (Bain and Landau, 2022). Moreover, Mahama hopes that by showing locally made films at his cinema, he will contribute to generating interest and investment in the local film industry. He recounted how, when he brought in projectors from Europe to hold a 'movie night' on New Year's Eve in an open-air cinema at the Red Clay studio, people came from the surrounding villages. Mahama claimed that this 'proved to us that when you create something people will patronise it, they will use it'. This event is a good example of the way in which 'remoteness is encouraging new forms of networking and interconnectivity' (Collins and Cunnigham, 2017: 121).

6. Cultural and creative artists shaping Tamale

Having shown how artists are influenced by being based in Tamale, in this section we turn to discuss how the creative workers themselves are shaping the city and creating new understandings of place. We discuss how in a context of inadequate city planning, artists are building cultural institutions that are influencing the city physically, socially and culturally, and are contributing to putting Tamale on the map. Creative workers are shown to be attempting to change the perceived marginality of the city by projecting new geographical imaginaries.

For Mahama in particular, building cultural institutions in Tamale is very important. He explained how, despite Tamale being the largest and most important city in the north of Ghana, there are no parks, no theatres, and no cultural institutions. Rather disparagingly, Mahama stated that 'If parents want to treat their children, they take them to KFC.' Although Mahama has achieved international fame, for him 'It is not good enough to just produce art that is shown in museums around the world. You also have to create institutions that can exhibit them locally'. Mahama recognises that there is an informal creative arts scene in Tamale but argues the need for cultural institutions like the ones he experiences elsewhere. His hope is that local children can have cultural experiences and learn from these institutions, resulting in them not being 'like the past two generations [who are] ignorant about the

[8] See https://oblstudios.com/about-us/.

context and boundaries of artistic experiences'. It was this conviction of the need to expose young people in Tamale to the creative arts beyond the local context that led Mahama to establish SCCA. He claimed that 'You will be surprised what happens when you plant a seed. So it is like a seed that we planted [in Tamale]'. SCCA opened its doors in 2019 with a retrospective exhibition of Galle Winston Kofi Dawson, a Ghanaian modernist artist. In addition to providing much needed space to display artists' work and thus bring art to the people of Tamale, SCCA contains a library where the public can access important art publications free of charge. As the Director of SCCA claimed, 'Art is a universal platform … it is not meant for any specific class of people. It is not meant only for those in Accra or Kumasi. Everybody can experience it'.

Not content with just this institution, Mahama has a much larger scale project – the Red Clay Studio – which is physically and culturally shaping Tamale. He acquired a vast area of land on the outskirts of the city, which he described as being 'virgin' due to the lack of infrastructure. Similar to peri-urban development elsewhere in Ghana (Gough and Yankson, 2005), Mahama had to buy electricity poles, wires and transformers in order to bring electricity to the site, and pay Ghana Water Company for water to be transported from a distant pipeline. Unusually, Mahama is building using bricks made on site, rather than the usual sandcrete blocks, in the hope that 'Maybe the institution can become something that would direct people who are yet to settle here on how they can construct their homes in the future using different materials'. The Red Clay Studio, which gets its name from the material used to make the bricks, consists of space for Mahama to create his artworks and a range of buildings with various functions including: an exhibition space, cinema, library, art studios for children, canteen, and swimming pool. Although many of these spaces are still being constructed, the first exhibition opened at the Red Clay Studio in September 2020 featuring Ghanaian artist Agyeman Ossei. Mahama is not limited by his studio space, however, recently using the Aliu Mahama sports stadium in Tamale to create 'Purple Hibiscus', which took more than 1,000 people over seven months to produce the handwoven cloth (Stocco, 2024).

Besides this material and cultural infrastructure, Mahama is shaping Tamale visually by placing artefacts on the landscape. The most concrete example of this is the disused aeroplanes and train, which in major logistical exercises were towed up from Accra and Sekondi respectively and placed at the Red Clay Studio. Mahama's plan is to turn these artefacts into classrooms and resident spaces where artists can stay. Mahama has also purchased additional land with the aim of preserving some as an archaeological museum, creating a park and a botanical garden, and keeping some as farmland to provide local inhabitants with green spaces, which are lacking in Ghanaian cities (Mensah et al., 2018). Typically, when Chiefs, who are usually the traditional landholders, sell land they aim to maximise income generation, resulting in all the land becoming residential plots (Gough and Yankson, 2011). By going against this trend, Mahama has not only contributed to the spatial expansion of cultural institutions in northern Ghana but has the potential to influence the layout of the city and create new understandings of place (Bajestani et al., 2022).

Mahama is justifiably proud of his achievements and enjoys taking people, including the authors, around SCCA and Red Clay Studio to 'show them what we are working on and what we imagine to be the future'. Commenting on being able to do this through drawing on his earnings as an artist, Mahama claimed that 'Money becomes almost like a material which you have to rework. By coming back to the land and using it [money] to build institutions and do trainings and workshops, it begins to change the narrative'. In a similar vein, OBL hopes to establish an education centre where he can run workshops to provide training in both the technical and soft skills required for filmmaking, beyond what he is able to do in his studio space. He indicated that he is not interested in establishing a formal school with accreditation, as being based in Tamale he would be unable to attract qualified staff. The cultural institution he plans to establish would thus form part of the informal educational infrastructure, which is widespread in Ghana (Aryeetey et al., 2013; Gough et al., 2019b; Palmer, 2009) but would bring training in important skills to Tamale.

Through building cultural institutions, artists are not only bringing the art world to Tamale but the international art world is now visiting Tamale. Given Mahama's international standing, art gallery directors from around the world, including the Director of the Tate Liverpool, have come to Tamale to meet Mahama and visit SCCA. For Mahama this is important as 'It means that the art world has expanded so when they are writing art in history books this place becomes a place'. In addition to international art figures, local and international tourists visit SCCA, which contributes to their image of Tamale. OBL's aspirations are also far from just being local, which sets him apart from most filmmakers in Tamale who in his view '… just churn out movies because they want to get money'. OBL is motivated to produce top quality films with the aim of them being viewed worldwide. He explained how 'I know when I am able to cross borders and I am crossing for my people too. But if I target people here alone then I am not likely to be able to cross so my target is global'. OBL's reference to borders reflects his desire to put Tamale and the Dagbamba on the map and promote their culture globally through his films. Similarly, through singing in the local language, Ghale is promoting the culture of northern Ghana. He claimed that 'Anywhere I have sung my songs in Dagbanli, people like it whether they understand or not, and that is an advantage for me.' Through singing in Dagbanli, Ghale is exposing people throughout Ghana and beyond to a language that they might otherwise rarely hear. For those who understand the lyrics he explained how 'I really hope my music has been able to influence people in a positive way. That is what I hope and I will really be honoured if it is so … because I tried to sing what I believe and I believe what I sing'.

This aim to shape minds as well as physical infrastructure cuts across the three artists highlighted here. OBL explained how his approach was 'similar to my friend Ibrahim Mahama … We wish to see how we can move them [young people]'. The reference here to moving does not refer to physical mobility but rather to motivating young people to appreciate and become engaged in the arts, again highlighting the importance attached to intergenerational learning (Bain and Landau, 2022). For Mahama, if projects (especially by young people, who in a Ghanaian context are aged up to 35) are devoid of the state and associated politics then 'It somehow sends a message to our generation that it is possible to also take our destinies into our own hands and be able to create the things that we want to see in the right context'. Through their songs, films, art installations, studios and institutions, creative artists are contributing to shaping the city of Tamale, the minds of its residents, and its place in the world.

7. Conclusions

Through adopting a lens of placemaking, this paper engages with the question of why artists locate in peripheral places and how they both influence and are influenced by these places. By drawing on artists' life stories, we have revealed how nationally and internationally renowned artists do not necessarily choose to locate in core cultural urban hubs but can thrive in urban locations in the margins. Individual artists thus actively contribute to the process of placemaking 'from the bottom-up' (d'Ovidio, 2021) through their locational decisions, creative work and institution building. Through adopting a placemaking lens, we have shown the importance of feeling at home, attachment to place, and sense of place to artists' decisions to be based in marginal locations. Moreover, we have demonstrated how the physical and cultural attributes of place and associated access to resources influence the work artists produce when located far from cultural urban hubs. Artists attempt to change the perceived marginality of their home cities by projecting new geographical imaginaries and shaping urban infrastructure. As Moya-Latorre (2023: 139) has argued, 'peripheral cultural infrastructure grows out of a balanced remoteness from the state that enables the radical imagination and performance of alternative forms of city-

making'.

A key reason artists choose to be based in Tamale is because, in varying ways, it is their 'home'. This not only involves a sense of place built on strong attachments to Tamale but also gives them preferential access to space, whether it be land, housing or workspaces, often facilitated through intergenerational relations. In addition, the costs of being an artist in northern Ghana are considerably less than if they were located further south in Kumasi or on the coast in Accra. The physical and metaphorical remoteness and perceived marginality of the city, however, also generate challenges, including accessing equipment and gaining respect, hence for creative workers distance 'exerts its considerable restrictive capacity' (Collins and Cunningham, 2017: 122). To counter this, artists and their work 'shuttle between' peripheral and central locations as 'both types of spaces provide different affordances and limitations as contexts for creative processes' (Hautala and Ibert, 2018: 1692).

The work produced by artists based in Tamale is clearly influenced by the attributes of the place. The culture being promoted, the images being shot, the words and language of the songs being written, the vernacular settings and the materials being used are all influenced by Dagbamba traditions and northern landscapes. Contrary to global North contexts where artistic studios are increasingly being delivered through top-down policies (Scott et al., 2023), artists in Tamale draw on their social capital, primarily family relations, in establishing their workspaces. Inter- and intragenerational relations (Bain and Landau, 2022) have thus been shown to be key to promoting learning, as well as accessing workspaces and the technologies of creation. For some artists based in Tamale, the prevalence of NGOs in the city has been central to financing the launch their careers and hence placemaking (Yamusah and Mohammed, 2022), however, the role played by NGOs in the cultural and creative industries is contested and critiqued for generating a culture of dependency.

Artists' work is clearly contributing to putting Tamale 'on the map' through bringing Dagbamba culture to a much wider audience locally, nationally and internationally. Consequently, it can be claimed that artists are contesting the narratives and imaginaries of this 'underdeveloped' and 'peripheral' region of Ghana. Through doing so, they are contributing to illustrating how centre and periphery 'cannot be reduced to a static dualism, but rather are relationally constituted and functionally interconnected' (Grabher, 2018: 1787). Moreover, artists based in Tamale are committed to exposing residents to internationally recognised art in ways that have not been possible previously. In this sense, they are contributing to generating new imaginings of the future of the city (d'Ovidio, 2021). In Tamale, and other places where state involvement in the arts is minimal (Mbaye and Pratt, 2020), the artists' attempts to promote their city and bring opportunities for all generations to experience and engage in the arts is proving key to placemaking.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Katherine V. Gough: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Adwoa Owusuaa Bobie:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Akosua Keseboa Darkwa:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Thilde Langevang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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