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Career geographies in the Ghanaian fashion industry: from brain drain to brain gain and brain circulation

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ABSTRACT

Brain drain has long been argued to be one of Africa's key development challenges. This paper provides a more nuanced analysis of African career mobility through a focus on professionals in the creative industries, specifically Ghanaian fashion designers. Drawing on interviews with 31 fashion designers but focussing on the career geography of internationally renowned Kofi Ansah, we show how 'brain drain' turned into 'brain gain' and consequently 'brain circulation', fundamentally transforming Ghana's fashion industry. The paper thus demonstrates how the knowledge and expertise return migrants gather through international career mobility can be converted into assets at an individual, national, and international level.

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Introduction

Transnational career mobility is the movement of highly skilled individuals from one part of the globe to another, typically described using concepts such as 'brain drain', 'brain gain' and 'brain circulation' (Friesen and Collins 2017). Early literature on brain drain has focused on professionals from the United Kingdom migrating to North America in the 1950s to pursue an education, who then stayed on afterwards. By the 1960s, the focus had shifted to migrants from the Global South who were migrating to the Global North in pursuit of an education and jobs, and returning afterwards (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016; Sako 2002). Over the years, the demography of such migrants has evolved to include professionals who are trained in their country of origin but migrate for employment and stay permanently. Source countries are considered to lose significantly in terms of economic and social development when their highly skilled professionals leave (Barrientos 2007; Johnson 2009; Lien and Wang 2005; Thomas 2016).

Africa has been portrayed as the continent most affected by brain drain (Ana, Makasa, and Twisselmann 2005; Capuano and Marfouk 2013; El Ouassif 2021; Oberoi and Lin 2006). While the adverse effects of brain drain have been widely documented (Chibango 2013; Dovlo 2004; El-Khawas 2004; Ntene 2011), much less is known about the extent to which brain gain, through the return migration of professionals, and brain circulation, as the temporary migration of professionals between countries, is taking place in an African context and the benefits thereof (Teferra 2005). This is despite recent evidence suggesting that around 25% of international flows globally are return migrants (Chen et al. 2022). This paper seeks to offer a more nuanced analysis of African career mobility through a focus on professionals in the creative industries, specifically Ghanaian fashion

designers. Creative artists face challenges due to the precarious nature of the profession (Gill and Pratt 2008) and struggle to penetrate the industry at international levels due to structural and social inequalities (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). Engaging in geographical mobility is a key means through which creative artists attempt to create opportunities for learning and advancing their careers.

A combination of primary and secondary data is drawn upon in the paper. A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were held with fashion designers, 15 of whom are based in Ghana's capital city Accra and 16 in the second largest city Kumasi. Of those interviewed, 14 were females and 17 males. These data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020–March 2021), using a combination of face-to-face interviews and zoom/phone interviews. Participants' career journeys were explored, highlighting their opportunities, challenges and networks. The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo software. The theme of career mobility and its impact on the creative industries emerged from participants' narrations of their creative journeys. In particular, the significant impact of Kofi Ansah, the late pioneering Ghanaian fashion designer, on the fashion industry surfaced. Alongside the primary data, we draw on secondary data including social media and fashion websites that speak to the works of Kofi Ansah and contemporary fashion designers.

The rest of this paper is structured around the concepts of brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation. The next section discusses the conceptualisation of the concepts in an African context. The subsequent section homes in on Kofi Ansah, who returned to Ghana from the UK, bringing with him knowledge, expertise, and transnational networks. The paper then turns to discuss how contemporary fashion designers in Ghana, who have been shaped by Kofi Ansah's transformation of the fashion industry in Ghana, are further engaging in brain circulation to shape both their creativity and production. The conclusion argues that it is important in contemporary discussions of the impacts of career mobility (Di Giovanni, Levchenko, and Ortega 2015; Djajić, Docquier, and Michael 2019) to recognise the nuanced ways in which what starts out as brain drain can transform into brain gain and eventually brain circulation, with benefits to both individuals and source countries.

Contextualising brain drain, gain and circulation in Africa

Brain drain has been argued to be one of Africa's key development challenges since the independence era of the 1960s. After the Second World War, Western countries opened up to developing countries (Flahaux and De Haas 2016) due to desires to form alliances with newly independent states, resulting in opportunities to travel abroad. The newly independent countries were keen to develop their economies by building quality human capital, hence sponsored some citizens to study abroad, while others were self-sponsored. Individuals with state scholarships were obligated to return to their country of origin and work for a specified number of years as a recompense for state investment, whereas self-sponsored migrants were under no obligation to return (Giannoccolo 2009).

In the 1970s and 1980s, a growing number of intellectual and technical elites migrated from Ghana due to the economic crisis and political persecutions (Manuh 1999). Migration thus became a 'tried and tested strategy' (Manuh 2001, 19) for Ghanaians working in all sectors of the economy, including the creative industries. Musicians, for example, migrated to Western countries to continue their career after a curfew was imposed by military rulers in Ghana that shut down night life (Collins 2009). This period heightened Africa's developmental plight as it lost many of its highly skilled professionals to the Global North (Darkwa 2018).

The contemporary brain drain phenomenon has been fuelled by globalisation, with new communication tools, including internet links, cellular phones and multi-media, facilitating the search for employment beyond national boundaries (Docquier and Rapoport 2012; El-Khawas 2004). African countries are thus losing their human capital just when the continent desperately needs it (Darkwa 2018). As Ite (2002, 76) claims, 'common wisdom suggests that the migration of high-level human capital is detrimental for the country of emigration'. The concept of brain drain is

highly disputed, however, with scholars arguing that the idea of migration as a zero-sum game is simplistic and ignores the many ways in which migration can benefit source countries. There are claims that the impulse to migrate can lead to higher numbers of skilled professionals in source countries (Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport 2001; Mountford 1997), and that migrants contribute significantly to the development of their home countries through remittances (Darkwa 2018; Johnson 2009; Niimi, Ozden, and Schiff 2010; Sako 2002).

Brain drain can turn into brain gain upon the physical return of highly skilled migrants to their home countries (Gianetti, Liao, and Yu 2015; Meyr and Peri 2008). Ghana has implemented strategies to attract migrants home, such as the 2019 'Year of Return' to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first recorded enslaved Africans in the state of Virginia in the United States. While it was primarily a celebratory programme of remembrance, it had the latent function of welcoming migrants back to Ghana, enabling them to become aware of the economic opportunities with the hope that they would subsequently invest in the country.

The term 'brain circulation' has emerged to represent the temporary transnational movement of highly skilled professionals and its impacts on the countries involved (Ackers 2005; Saxenian 2002; 2005; 2006; Teferra 2005). Contemporary labor structures, particularly for the well-educated, operate in a transnational globalised society where knowledge and labor movement are swift and increasingly temporary (Appadurai 2005; Higgins and Kram 2001; Jöns 2009; Wagner 2015). Professionals thus circulate between countries, industries, and knowledge centres. Brain circulation as a concept captures the idea of migration in terms of 'ongoing processes rather than single permanent moves' and encourages us to 'distinguish the issue of knowledge transfer from the physical presence of the individual migrant' (Ackers 2005, 100). According to Teferra (2005), in the process of moving it is the mobilisation of knowledge and expertise that leads to circulation. Importantly, the concept of brain circulation recognises that forms of knowledge transfer can occur in multiple ways.

The concept 'brain circulation' has changed the brain drain/gain cause and effect discourse, illustrating how it is a channel through which source countries can benefit from the movement of highly skilled professionals. International mobility clearly increases exposure to new ideas, skills, and job experiences (Ackers 2005). If brain circulation is well managed, migrants with added knowledge and skills can contribute significantly to development in source countries (Breinbauer 2007). Career mobility creates transnational networks that aid career development and contributes to reintegration and international cooperation through contacts developed, knowledge transferred, and international experience (Breinbauer 2007; Jöns 2009; Langa 2018). In the rest of this paper, we explore in detail the return migration to Ghana of the renowned and highly skilled Kofi Ansah, and how through brain gain and brain circulation he impacted the fashion industry, sparking creativity and innovation in the entire nation and wider region.

Brain gain: Ghanaian fashion designer Kofi Ansah

Kofi Ansah was a celebrated Ghanaian fashion icon and pioneer of modern fashion in Ghana, who passed away in 2014. Born into a creative family in the early 1950s, his elder sister, Felicia Abban, was the official photographer of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, and his elder brother, Kwaw Ansah, is an acclaimed film writer, director and producer (Bowles 2016). After completing his secondary education in Ghana, Ansah enrolled in the Chelsea School of Art in the United Kingdom (UK) to study fashion design. He made his first fashion headline with a beaded dress made for Princess Anne on his graduation. Subsequently, he worked for several successful British fashion brands, including Gerald Austin, Cecil Gee and Guy Laroche, before establishing his own studio in Holborn, central London, in 1980. Kofi Ansah's works were sold in top international boutiques and department stores across the UK, USA, Canada, and some Arab countries, and were worn by renowned personalities. Despite his early success on the UK fashion scene, Kofi Ansah returned home to Ghana in 1992.

What makes Kofi Ansah's impact on Ghanaian fashion immense is the timing of his return. The physical place Kofi Ansah returned to was undergoing profound political and economic transformation, linked to Ghana transitioning from military rule to a civilian government (Fobih 1998; Jeong 1998). Political tension was high, linked to an economic downturn following Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) adopted in the 1980s. Consequently, many middle- and upper-class Ghanaians, Kofi Ansah's target market, emigrated during the 1980s (Manuh 1999). The clothes making profession at the time was struggling following an emphasis on formal education to promote industrialisation (Anokye and Afrane 2014). Becoming a seamstress or tailor came to be seen as an occupation for school drop-outs or weak students (Langevang and Gough 2012). Considering Kofi Ansah's international success and the challenges Ghana was facing, his decision to return home countered the classic view of the African diaspora only returning under favourable political, economic and social conditions (Sako 2002). Moreover, as Haarman and Langevang (2021, 704) have argued, 'returnee entrepreneurs' transfer of resources is not straightforward', as they can have limited networks back home and lack local knowledge after prolonged stays abroad.

Aesthetically, and in terms of entrepreneurship, Ansah appreciated the significant difference between the European context he was used to and the Ghanaian society he was seeking to change. In an interview with Ruth Evans of the BBC in 1993, Ansah spoke about his decision to leave the UK for Ghana, indicating his awareness of the influence of location and space on style and creativity:

Kofi: You get to the top of your trade and either you go commercial and merchandise your name or do different products ... that is when you get big money behind you ... but really what made me come down here is, I have done the European design, I was getting a bit sterile ...

Ruth: You came back here to get fresh inspiration?

Kofi: Yes, definitely. It is maddening, it is frustrating, it is annoying, but it is very interesting ...

Ruth: Have you found fresh inspiration?

Kofi: I have because the collection I am doing now I am using totally African fabrics.

(Instagram @Kofiansahfoundation)

Arts and the production of cloth from Africa have long served as a source of inspiration for Western designers, both as reproductive or as mimetic inspiration (Rovine 2009). Kofi Ansah, however, produced works that *were* African rather than African inspired. Despite the challenges Ansah faced in relation to production, he was confident about his decision to use cloth and arts from Africa in his designs. As he explained, 'I always try to show people that we can use our fabrics for other things, so it was an interpretation of it. ... It has always been easy for me ... [as] I have always had ultimate and unshakeable belief in them. We just have to work on it and make it commercial' (Source: Instagram Kofiansahfoundation).

Ansah's personal conviction about Africa's ability to impact global fashion motivated him to build a successful fashion industry in Ghana. He is an apt example of Svejenova et al.'s (2007) description of an institutional entrepreneur as an actor who seeks to replace existing logic through creativity, theorisation, reputation, and dissemination. Ansah transformed the production of fashion in Ghana in four areas: fabrics and design, accessories, production, and human capital. Regarding fabrics and design, Ansah changed the fashion scene with his modern designs using African traditional cloth, such as kente and bogolanfini.¹ Linked to these style changes was the introduction of the sale of fabric in single yards instead of the standard six yards (referred to as a half piece) by the company Woodin, which Ansah collaborated with. Half pieces were used for the conventional three-piece style of a blouse, skirt and extra fabric that could be worn as a wrap for women, whilst eight to ten yards of cloth were used by men in a toga form. Ansah introduced the sale of cloth by the yard to make local cloth more accessible and functional, leading him to produce casual clothes, such as long and short skirts, blouses, shirts, shorts and trousers for both men and women, and to introduce the Woodin ready-to-wear clothing. He also worked closely with the Ghana Textiles Printing Company (GTP) on designs and the production of national cloth, in particular Ghana@50 (celebrating 50 years since Independence) national cloth in 2007 and on designing the opening costumes for the 2008 African Cup of Nations hosted by Ghana. Kofi Ansah's

legacy with regards to the expansion in African fashion designers' conceptions of the uses to which the African print can be put is now recognised globally (Langevang 2017): witness the July 2022 African Fashion exhibition at the Albert and Victoria Museum in London.

Ansah was also passionate about promoting fashion accessories made with local materials, such as wood, calabash, metal, and raffia. His runway designs always included stunning accessories including beaded and metallic necklaces, earrings, bangles, and headgear. The calabash was another favourite item of his for creating accessories (see Figure 1). The use of prominent accessories has now become an integral element of African fashion shows, with some Ghanaian designers, such as Hermann who was mentored by Ansah, specialising in African accessories. Kofi Ansah's passion



Figure 1. A model for Kofi Ansah adorned in calabash accessories.

Source: Michele Limina.

for African art accessories also informed his choice of clothing label, which is a metal craft mask (see [Figure 2](#)).

Although Ansah's customers were primarily from the middle and upper classes, he was confident that the idea of regularising local cloth wear could trickle down to the less financially well-off classes. The influx of second-hand clothing primarily from Europe and the importation of ready-made clothing from Asia had greatly reduced the wearing of locally produced outfits (Amankwah, Howard, and Sarpong 2012; Axelson 2012; Langevang and Gough 2012). Ansah was instrumental in the introduction of the Friday African wear policy, which aimed to promote the wearing of local custom-made clothing on Fridays, working closely with the then Minister for Trade, Alan John Kyerematen. He leveraged his friendship with the Minister to push his idea to democratise and regularise the use of wax print. In an interview aired on the Ghanaian television station TV3, Ansah indicated that the idea of Friday African wear was 'to start with Friday and then evolve it into the rest of the days²', expanding its use for everyday functional wear. This campaign has been highly successful, breathing life and prestige into all levels of the Ghanaian fashion industry, and resulting in a boom in the trade of seamstresses and tailors (Langevang and Gough 2012).

Kofi Ansah also influenced fashion production by employing international marketing strategies, such as fashion shows and exhibitions, to showcase the artistic works of Ghanaians and other African designers, as well as attract local and foreign buyers. He thus opened Ghanaian fashion to international audiences by using globally accepted techniques and strategies to build the local market. Ansah's vision to grow a successful industry that could outlive him propelled him to mentor many of Ghana's finest contemporary designers. As Ansah's personal assistant noted, 'He never turned away anyone who came to him. Young people kept pouring at his feet for mentorship'. This statement was corroborated by the participants interviewed for this research who had come into contact with him. Ansah welcomed anyone who was ready to learn, though his rigorous and stern approach to work proved challenging for some. Importantly, he was able to leverage his European connections to seek training and opportunities for young designers based in Ghana. One such programme was Web Young Designers Hub (known as Web), a mentorship programme financed by the French Embassy and coordinated by Kofi Ansah and Franca Sozzani, former editor of *Vogue Italia*. The Web trained young designers in internationally accepted fashion techniques and production practices; one participant summed up the training as 'an avenue to help young designers commercialise their creativity'. As another participant recounted, 'Web was



Figure 2. Kofi Ansah's clothing label.

Source: @kofiAnsahfoundation.

a young designers' hub where we were taught how to build collections and were trained in fabric sourcing, designing, and how to put up a show'. After training, participants were given the task of producing items from their individual studios, which they presented at the next meeting. At the end of the year, a fashion show was organised to showcase the works produced. The Web came to an end when the funding ceased after two years.

Another successful project spearheaded by Ansah was the Ethical Fashion Initiative, which was a partnership between the United Nations and the Presidential Special Initiative (PSI) programme, under the auspices of Ghana's Ministry of Trade. The aim of this project was to educate fashion producers about the need to protect the environment and produce eco-friendly garments that use local organic products and reduce waste. Ansah gathered young designers from all regions of Ghana and across the production value chain, from yarn spinners to weavers to accessory sellers. Out of the Ethical Fashion Initiative, Ansah founded the Fashion Amalgamated Talent (FAT), which was later renamed Pallet. Pallet was a national association of young fashion designers, with regional heads who coordinated local activities. Ansah was keen on bringing designers together to form an association that would build up social networks, as well as provide a unified voice to push for favourable policies. Consequently, Ansah founded an association of designers in Africa called the Federation of African Designers. Although both associations' activities dwindled following Ansah's passing, one participant who had been a member of Pallet drew on its database to form the National Fashion Designers' Union of Ghana, which is recognised by the government.

The majority of fashion designers interviewed attribute the industry's development and international exposure to the work and vision of Kofi Ansah. He aimed to open the fashion market to mass production and provide space for designers to collaborate. Many participants reflected on Ansah's influence on their creative journeys and how it shaped their international exposure and transnational networks. The next section discusses contemporary designers' mobility, not as the brain gain made possible by Kofi Ansah, but as brain circulation as they take advantage of physical and information mobility to develop themselves as creative artists.

Brain circulation: career development of contemporary fashion designers in Ghana

Physical and knowledge mobility influence creative knowledge and transnational networks, which in turn impact on industry success (Lam 2017). Ackers (2005) and Jöns' (2009) argument that international mobility increases exposure to new ideas, skills, and job experiences can be corroborated through the experiences of contemporary designers who directly understudied Kofi Ansah and those who were inspired by his ideas. When Ansah returned to Ghana, he continued to engage in global fashion through fashion events and mentorship programmes. His efforts to integrate the Ghanaian fashion industry and young designers into the global fashion industry can be depicted as brain circulation. One key feature of Kofi Ansah's fashion industry transformation was introducing young designers to global standards of production and international fashion participation. He took young designers with him on trips to fashion shows or asked them to represent him. One research participant narrated how, 'I remember very significantly during a partnership between Ghana and Dubai, he couldn't go, so, I had to represent him in Dubai for the fashion show. So, I went to Dubai with the models and with other designers from Accra'. According to one of our interviewees, who was Ansah's personal assistant for about a decade before his death, Ansah 'was living for the youth in the industry who were around him. So even on his sick bed he was teaching'.

Four top contemporary designers who worked directly under Kofi Ansah attest that it was through him that they had their first international fashion exposure. By participating in various projects, such as Web (2010), Palette (2012), and the Ethical Fashion Initiative (2012), young designers had the opportunity to travel to the Global North and other African countries to learn about fabric production, clothes and accessory making, and fashion event organisation. Such travel was primarily geared towards knowledge acquisition with the hope of impacting the fashion

industry. Kofi Ansah was committed to raising a new generation of designers who understood the mechanisms of clothes production from a broad ecological perspective. Engaging in international events was a means of inserting the local into the global through conscientising designers within the larger community and providing a space for accessing knowledge and marketing their products. Participants spoke highly about such events, especially the 2013 Alta Roma, Alta Moda event, which they attended under the Ethical Fashion Initiative project. This event provided an avenue for enlightening young designers on the endless possibilities of fashion production and integrating them into the international fashion community. They also had opportunities to watch runway shows and mix with renowned international designers at a series of workshops organised for Ghanaian designers on various aspects of production. One participant recalled his experience as follows:

We went for the Alta Roma, Alta Moda show ... the one in Rome was a big thing. We had people that came to mentor us. We even had the chance to watch other designers work from start to end. How they do their casting, how they take individual images and put on their garments. That was not what we were doing here, even when we did shows, that was not what we were doing here. So, we had the chance to watch other designers doing that.

(Nii, a male participant).

The young Ghanaian fashion designers' experiences at the Alta Roma, Alta Moda event significantly shaped their career trajectories, opening them up to different skills and techniques lacking in their local industry. Global integration is crucial in fashion production, as fashion follows trends (Azieb-Pool 2016). In a situation where there is an influx of foreign second-hand clothing at cheaper prices, fashion designers' ability to produce quality finished clothing using global standard techniques is key to becoming competitive. Rome has long been one of the major fashion cities in the world. Besides fashion events, it boasts prestigious fashion academies and an impressive fashion eco-system. The decision to travel to Italy for training, therefore, was based on its acclaim as a centre of high fashion and a prestigious venue to introduce designers to quality fashion. The knowledge acquired from the Italian experience was applied upon participants' return and they attest that subsequently their fashion careers took an upward turn. One participant noted significant changes in the clothes he produced regarding finishing, pattern creations, and the use of organic products. Another observed that the works of those who attended the event were 'distinguished from those who could not attend'. The young designers under Kofi Ansah's tutelage also travelled to other countries in the Global North, including the UK and the USA. Those who had the opportunity to also engage in fashion events in Dubai noted differences in global fashion trends. As the Ghanaian population is a mix of Christians and Muslims, exposure to both Eastern and Western fashion sensibilities informed young designers of the fashion dynamics of the varied people who make up their target market.

Individual experiences can in turn be beneficial to others working in an industry. Return migrants impact on sectors through transfer of knowledge acquired (Gianetti, Liao, and Yu 2015). As they utilise their knowledge and share their skills, they make an industrial and even nationwide impact. Le (2008) in his study of 19 members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), found that labor mobility transfers technology across borders and migration is a conduit for knowledge transfer, which can impact national development. While economic, social, and political conditions in home countries need to be conducive for the impact of knowledge to be effective, as Velema (2012) argues, the origin of knowledge is also important for impact. Return migrants' impact is thus 'contingent on the nature and quality of the context in which they acquired their international labor experience. Skills and access to knowledge networks are heterogeneously spread over geographical space, so that the context in which a return migrant acquired his or her international labor experience matters' (Velema 2012, 893).

Given Ansah's preference for using locally produced fabrics, participants under his mentorship were sent to Mali and Burkina Faso to learn about *bogolanfini* and other local cloth production. During these trips, the fashion designers discovered how cotton was harvested, spun into yarn,

woven into cloth, and then dyed in various colours. They also learned how the woven strips are joined together to form cloth and the various inspirations that give rise to a particular colour combination of dyes and weaving patterns. Through these experiences, the young fashion designers came to understand the entire value chain of clothes production. Moreover, they began to appreciate the uniqueness of each fabric and how they could use fabrics to tell different stories through their designs. One participant remarked that before the experience, he did not appreciate the value of local cloth and how it can tell African histories, stating that ‘the experience has helped me to creatively use local themes to produce collections from local fabrics’.

These various forms of international exposure became platforms that launched designers under Kofi Ansah onto the international fashion stage. These designers now engage in fashion workshops and shows in a bid to stay on top of trends and skills. Fashion thrives on change, including in styles and techniques for producing garments. Designers’ ability to stay on top of trends and techniques is crucial to their market share and industry recognition (Langevang 2017). To stay abreast with changes in fashion, designers need to be integrated into the global space of fashion production. Akua, a female participant, noted that fashion seasons in Ghana, which she referred to as Easter and Christmas, are different from western seasons (Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter). To ensure participation at the local and the global scale, fashion designers create seasonal collections that tally with both geographical spaces. Thus, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter collections are purposely for Western shows and exhibitions. In a growing creative industry like the Ghanaian fashion industry, such international exposure equates to industry success. Designers’ ability to integrate into the global market and showcase their designs on international platforms speaks of their competence and creativity. They can gain and also share knowledge, thus, engaging in brain circulation.

Apart from knowledge acquired, the process of brain circulation has helped young fashion designers build transnational networks with designers across the globe. The fashion designers interviewed talked about the contacts they have accrued through the various international events they have participated in. At the time of interviewing, roughly six years after the death of Kofi Ansah, some designers reported that they are still in contact with their foreign colleagues, checking in on one another from time to time. This network gives them a feeling of belonging to a global community with fashion as a shared interest. None of the participants, however, mentioned any concrete collaboration or production benefit from these foreign colleagues.

While some participants benefitted directly from Kofi Ansah’s tutelage, there are others who took inspiration from his creative journey indirectly, especially his international integration and mobility. Steve French Oduro is a typical case in point. Although Oduro met Kofi Ansah for just 37 min, he described the importance of it for his fashion journey:

I remember so well like it all happened seconds ago. It was a hot Sunday afternoon after a late lunch when I chanced on an article in [the] Daily Graphic about Mr. Kofi Ansah, my biggest inspiration and idol. He gave me so much hope and made a 10-year-old feel it was possible to dream! It could be done! He was everything I imagined creativity to be Though I met him only once for just 37 min before he died, the 37 min are by far the best 37 min of my fashion journey. He said to me ‘Steve be inspired! Observe, listen, feel, read, make mistakes, be present, be willing to share, enjoy your journey, creativity is never a competition, do not compete! Create my son. Always, always and always remember to stay true to yourself. Always. Then Steve, above all create beauty’. (Instagram @steviefrenchie, 25.7.21)

Oduro recalled how these words have stayed with him on his career journey. As a young boy aspiring to become a recognised designer, Kofi Ansah’s words have guided his creative path. Oduro took a four-year fashion degree course at Radford University College, Accra, Ghana. He started his fashion brand while in school and despite the workload, he attended international fashion shows and seminars as he wanted to fuse local and international fashion into his designs. Oduro shot into the international limelight after being selected for a Gucci fellowship in 2020. The Gucci Fellowship programme had been launched in 2019 as part of the brand’s all-inclusive approach, giving opportunities to underrepresented fashion designers around the globe to be trained and exposed to

luxury brand production.³ The programme offers twelve months of training and mentorship for participants. The 2020 Gucci Fellowship programme exceptionally had two young Ghanaian designers among the 11 selected. At the time of our interview with Oduro, he was waiting for his fellowship to start, which had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but he was ecstatic about the opportunity to learn and create pieces under the mentorship of renowned designers in Gucci's women's wear department. He was fully expectant that the international exposure he would receive through the highly regarded programme, which had already started to yield a transnational network, would be highly beneficial for his brand. Oduro narrated how his nomination to the Gucci Fellowship resulted in an encounter with the internationally famous fashion model, Naomi Campbell, who expressed an interest in meeting the Ghanaian Gucci finalists. Oduro explained how after showing her his projects, he was asked to make clothes for her:

I was minding my business one Thursday or Wednesday and she texted 'I have a surprise for you'. In my mind I was like 'What could it be?' I woke up and it was a whole Essence Cover! I am like 'What!' ... I still can't explain my emotions.

For Oduro, this was a supreme opportunity as he had long nurtured a dream of international recognition and integration. The Gucci programme training positioned him at the heart of European fashion and, as he documented on his Instagram page, he took advantage of his stay in Italy to explore other notable fashion centres in France and the United Kingdom. Oduro's posts regarding his experiences abroad tell a story of career growth and enlightenment amidst the fun of sightseeing. His travels show how career mobility can enhance an individual's career trajectory, opening up new opportunities that are not available to those who do not have the chance to leave their home countries. Other interviewees who actively engage in brain circulation are also among the top national designers in Ghana. They claimed that their knowledge and skills have been greatly enhanced through mobility. One participant remarked, 'It is true when they say 'travel and see' because it is through travelling to other countries you experience different things'. These experiences can change the fashions designers' perspectives, including on things they regard as mundane and irrelevant. Mobility has influenced their journeys by adding to their knowledge and exposing them to the global fashion market, however, the catalyst for this mobility was being inspired and meeting Kofi Ansah as an international return migrant and member of the transnational creative class in Ghana.

Apart from physically moving, the majority of interviewees use information technology and social media for knowledge acquisition and training.⁴ Contemporary digital technology democratises access to information, making it accessible to everyone who has the digital means as opposed to only those with a passport, visa and travel funds. This aspect of brain circulation broadens the conceptualisation of knowledge mobility to capture contemporary knowledge dissemination and transmission without physical movement (Ackers 2005). Engaging in international online courses, seminars and workshops, as well as sharing knowledge through digital platforms, promotes brain circulation. The use of digital applications and social media for networking, advertisements, marketing, and sales has opened artists to information and knowledge across the globe without physical movement. This has become even more widespread in the (post-)Covid era, where there has been an acceleration of online activities (Buldan 2021). The circulation of information on digital platforms can be as important in career development as physical mobility. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, some Ghanaian fashion designers even launched their seasonal collections online.⁵ Discussions among designers across the continent were also held, reaching a digital audience around the globe. Thus, despite restrictive physical mobility in recent times, heightened digital information mobility is making knowledge and visibility accessible to a wider cross-section of fashion designers. The Ghanaian fashion industry is enjoying global acknowledgement of its creativity and innovation, which can largely be attributed to the designers who are putting Ghana on the global fashion map.

Conclusion

Brain drain has been a key developmental challenge in African countries due to highly skilled professionals migrating to the Global North for education or better working conditions. The adverse effect of this mobility on the African continent cannot be overemphasised. This paper, however, provides a more nuanced account of the career mobility discourse in Africa, highlighting outcomes other than the often-one-sided discussion about the negative impact of migration on source countries. An analysis of the career mobility practices of Kofi Ansah, one of Ghana's leading fashion designers, shows that while in the short term the mobility of professionals can cost their source countries, in the long term, this is not necessarily the case. After decades of a successful fashion career in Europe, Ansah returned to Ghana and as an institutional entrepreneur he transformed the traditional fashion industry into a global force. Despite the challenges he faced as a return migrant (Haarman and Langevang 2021), through his knowledge, expertise, and transnational networks, Ansah mentored young designers, who have become globally renowned Ghanaian designers themselves. In so doing, he turned what would have been brain drain – the loss of his skills and talent – into brain gain, serving as an inspiration for a new generation of Ghanaian fashion designers. In addition, by taking some of these designers to international fashion events, Ansah demonstrated the importance of short-term and long-term transnational career mobility to the personal development of young professionals and the fashion industry's competitiveness. His involvement with and mentorship through the Ethical Fashion Initiative arguably laid the foundation for a sustainable fashion industry in Ghana. His enormous contribution to fashion in Africa was recently recognised through the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition (Akai 2022).

This paper has shown how career mobility can contribute significantly to career development and by extension, industry growth. Professionals who have migrated can return and reshape their profession in their source country and then proceed to embark on brain circulation practices, rather than follow a unidirectional mobility path. This return or circulation of highly skilled professionals is thus a powerful developmental tool for national and sectoral growth in source countries. Similarly, fashion designers in New Zealand with diasporic experiences have contributed greatly to their local fashion industries. However, while New Zealand engages fashion designers in the diaspora in local fashion events to advance the state's goal of building the fashion industry and projecting New Zealand beyond its national borders (Lewis, Larner, and Le Haron 2008), Ghanaian fashion designers engage in foreign fashion events to build their business brands and the local industry.

Moreover, due to the advance in digital technology, brain circulation does not necessarily require physical mobility, as it is possible to share and learn from others around the world while being fixed in place. This development, however, is unlikely to result in an end to career related movement, since, as the experiences of the young fashion designers show, the benefits of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) cannot be replaced. This paper has shown how significant national and international fellowship programmes and mentoring initiatives are for identifying and nurturing talents in a specific sector. Publicly and privately funded support networks – from Kofi Ansah's network to the Gucci fellowship – provide examples of best practice for harnessing the benefits that highly skilled international return migrants can bring to developing economies and for keeping mutually beneficially international circulations going.

Notes

1. Kente is a handwoven cloth from Ghana made from cotton and silk. Bogolanfini or mudcloth is a handmade Malian cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYVdOblyAOU>
3. <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/gucci-design-fellowship-program/>
4. In a webinar presentation on 26th November 2021, organized by the Centre for Urban Management Studies, University of Ghana, Brian Harc presented his work on Creative Entrepreneurs in a Digital Age where he

talked about how fashion designers in South Africa are taking advantage of digital spaces to integrate their products into the global market.

- Christiebrowng launched the CB FALL WINTER 2020 SHOW online at christiebrownonline.com on 31st October 2020. There was a live discussion show on Instagram during the launch @christiebrowng.

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