



The Early Poetry of Kwesi Brew: An Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Kwesi Brew (1928-2007) had an illustrious career as a poet, diplomat, and businessman that spanned key periods of Ghana's history, from its colonial era as the Gold Coast to its maturity as a successful West African democracy. And yet when he died, none of his four published volumes of poetry were in print, and he existed mainly in a few anthologized poems. Though some of those are well-known, the breadth of his work has almost disappeared from sight. This essay examines Brew's early development and growth as a poet, including the specifically African influences on his themes and metaphors, and situates him in the politics and culture of his time. This essay is drawn from a larger project that is in process, namely, the creation of an edition of the Selected Poems of Kwesi Brew, to bring more of his work before the public.

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Introduction

The name and poetry of Kwesi Brew are practically unknown to Westerners. Even academics in African Studies are likely to know only a few poems found in anthologies. His four volumes of poetry have long been out of print, as are many of the anthologies he once appeared in. But he deserves more recognition, and more readers. This essay is an attempt to introduce him and his work to all those who are not aware of his achievements.

Brew's life and career span one of the most significant periods in the history of his homeland. He was born in 1928 in what was then the Gold Coast, a British colony in West Africa. He came of age on the cusp of independence, and lived through the exhilaration of Nkrumah's first years in office, successive military coups, and the disappointment of those early hopes. His country, the nation of Ghana, was the first in sub-Saharan Africa to emerge from colonial rule and led the succession of African countries who gained their independence in the space of a few short years. Brew was one of the first graduates of his country's first university. Recruited into the administrative service before independence, he was one of the first Africans to serve in roles previously filled by white British civil servants. After independence, he became a diplomat and travelled widely representing his country. Later, he became a businessman and died in 2007 at the age of 79, a respected elder in a stable nation which has seen peace for several decades and the orderly transfer of political power.

Brew learned to love books from K. J. Dickens, the British Education Officer who became his guardian after the death of his parents. Dickens was his mentor in early youth and is recognized in the dedication of Brew's second book of poetry, *African Panorama*. Brew read English at the University College of the Gold Coast (now the University of Ghana, Legon) and experimented with various forms of writing. He was also active in the University's dramatic society and acted in several films made by the Gold Coast (later Ghana) Film Unit. Brew's contemporaries among sub-Saharan African writers are Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967), and Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) of Nigeria; David Diop (1927-1960) of Senegal; Ngugi wa Thiong'o (b. 1938) of Kenya; and Joe DeGraft (1924-1978), Efua Sutherland (1924-1996), and Kofi Awoonor (1935-2021) of his native Ghana. That many of these writers were also either activists, politicians, or diplomats can be attributed to the overwhelming swell of the move toward independence after World War II and the fact that many of them had been educated in colonial or missionary schools. These were the educated elite who would take positions of leadership in the struggle and negotiate independence with the colonial powers.

Issues of language and politics in African literatures

In the years after independence, a desire to shed the languages of colonization and return to a literature written in African languages provoked discussion and conflict as to whether literature

written by Africans in European languages could be considered legitimate at all. The leading proponent of the anti-colonialist position was Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, elaborated in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). Ngugi, a survivor of the Mau Mau war, reverted to the language of his tribe, the Kikuyu, as an act of protest against the British. His novel, *Devil on the Cross*, was written in Gikuyu while he was detained in prison. The author later translated the novel into English. Chinua Achebe was the first to claim, in the 1975 essay "The African Writer and the English Language" that the colonial language had, in fact, become his own, through education and long usage. This view was expanded upon by Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Ghanaian philosopher and critic, who proposed a posture of "cosmopolitanism" in which the many languages, faiths, traditions, and genres making up contemporary African culture could co-exist. Instead of repudiating the colonial experience, Appiah sought to acknowledge it as a formative element in the identity of African artists. The book in which he set forth his theory, *In My Father's House* (1992), opens with the statement that none of his father's multiple identities—Asante, Ghanaian, African, Methodist, Christian—ever seemed to come into conflict with the others. He dismisses an insistence on cultural authenticity as artificial and contrary to the experience of present-day Africans who find themselves using several languages and managing modern and traditional responsibilities simultaneously. It is this model which seems to lend itself to an attempt to appreciate the poetry of Kwesi Brew, by seeking to understand his many identities and their influences on his art.

The language dilemma for African poets writing in European languages is additionally deepened by the roles played by readership, criticism, and access to publishing. African writers initially were largely published in the West, necessitating their acceptance of the literary criticism and standards set by those whose oppression they were protesting. African writing also at this point found more readers in the West than in Africa itself (although that has changed dramatically), a fact that led to a fear that only literature which provided Western readers with stereotypical images of Africa (i.e., mud huts and elephants) and threw in African words for color would gain the approval of publishers and critics. This was termed "neo-tarzanism" by Wole Soyinka. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie makes a similar observation, that an American professor commented to her that her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), was not African enough.

Kwesi Brew's poetry is written in English, the language in which he received his early education and, later, the language of the literature which he chose to study at university. It is the official language of present-day Ghana. It was the language of the colonial government which gave shape to the modern state and the language of the wider world into which Brew traveled as a diplomat. The language of his own people, the Fante (Akan), is threaded through his poetry and is a reminder to us that English is indeed a second language for almost all Ghanaians. It must be emphasized that Ghanaian English has become a language distinct from other forms of English, legitimate in its particular pronunciation, idioms, and usage. Although Ghanaian English is very

like the British English of colonial times, it has evolved to suit the culture which it serves. Writer Gabriel Okara has compared this evolution of English in his own country, Nigeria, to the way jazz music in the United States has evolved.

Ngugi, in that same influential essay from 1986, posited three stages of development for African writers: The African writer who emerged after the Second World War has gone through three decisive decades which also mark three modal stages in his growth. He has gone, as it were, through three ages within only the last thirty years or so: the age of the anti-colonial struggle; the age of independence; and the age of neo-colonialism.

Ngugi reminds us of the importance of Ghana to all Africans, citing Kwame Nkrumah as the most important thinker and spokesman of the 1950s: “His Ghana became the revolutionary Mecca of the entire anti-colonial movement in Africa.” Nkrumah in his vision was, in fact, a Pan-Africanist, as were the many writers and intellectuals attracted to Ghana in this period, including W.E.B. Dubois from America. They shared a belief that African peoples, both on the continent and in the Diaspora, share a common history and a common destiny. This was also the ideology of Brew and his younger contemporaries, the writers and academics Ayi Kwei Armah (b. 1939) and Kofi Anyidoho (b.1947).

Brew’s early development

Ngugi is describing political realities in his taxonomy of “three ages” that have a relation to Brew’s career as a writer and a public figure, but Brew’s artistic development followed a different path. Brew was schooled at university in the tradition favored by Western critics and encouraged to emulate English poets in his own poetry. Like most writers, he initially imitated the forms and themes of works he was taught or admired. Brew’s earliest, British-influenced verse is evident in his first book, *The Shadows of Laughter* (1968), not coincidentally published in London by Longmans. An example is the beautiful lyric “Hot Day,” whose ten lines are quoted in full:

The sheep lie spread in mid-day slumbers
And drizzling heat encumbers
The motion of the clouds:
No cloud moves, no wind shouts
In the mumbling noon.
Molten heat shivers on the space,
The white egrets make pace,
The purple starlings sing:
Their shoulders roll, their cries ring
In the mumbling noon.

The poem skillfully uses the rhyme scheme and rhythms of a nature poem in the tradition of Wordsworth. In fact, except for the mention of white egrets, the poem could easily be describing an English summer day, and be received as such by a casual British reader (for whom the line “molten heat” would simply be interpreted as a welcome blast of summer warmth). It is only when one realizes that it is an African day being described that “molten heat” or “mumbling noon” have their full effect.

Brew’s published works—four books between 1968-1996—seem to show a move from Western-style verse to a much more relaxed and natural style and an increasing emphasis on Ghanaian events, issues, symbols, and traditions. Contrast the lyricism of “Hot Day” with the darkly humorous proverb, “Change of Diet,” from his last book, *The Clan of the Leopard and Other Poems* (1996):

The palate is a naughty thing
Teach it tea in the morning
And it will secretly, quietly
Teach the stomach to turn away
From green plantain and kontomire
The tender cocoyam leaves we love.

The poem is distinctly Ghanaian, in form (the proverb), diction (“plantain,” “kontomire,” “cocoyam”), and content (the losses brought by the adoption of colonial ways). In the foreword to his last book of poetry, Brew speaks of the arc of his development as an artist, citing the initial encouragement of his guardian while still a youth, and acknowledging next a line of English poets—Milton, Tennyson, Hopkins, and Eliot, as well as the Bible—as influential:

I knew what I wanted to say but did not know how and how best to say it. I was about fourteen. I later discovered that to establish a line of communication between myself and those outside the scope of my thought, I had to go through a rigorous stewardship by studying and imitating the great masters in the field.

He read Tagore and Gibran and finally found a collection of poems by an African author, Michel Die-Anang, while at school in Tamale in northern Ghana. He then mentions the warm and inspiring companionship of fellow poets—Awoonor, Mortty, Ademola, Angelou, Sutherland, and de Graft—whose ideas were so interrelated and interwoven that “the question of influence was mainly osmotic.” His publishing history follows a similar arc, moving from Western to African houses. Brew’s first book of poetry was published in London in 1968 while he was ambassador to Senegal and his second in America in 1971. His last two books were published in Ghana in 1995 and 1996.

Orality in African poetry

The oral tradition that is the legacy of his African heritage is not formally acknowledged by Brew in the foreword to *The Clan of the Leopard and Other Poems*. Perhaps, this is because the intuitive rhythms of one's own culture are taken for granted and shape expression apart from conscious awareness. In any case, it is important to consider literary influences on Brew's work that are distinctively Ghanaian and African. Oral literature has often been seen as an earlier stage in cultural development, one that precedes written literature and is therefore more primitive. This bias has been countered by African critics who posit orality as an alternative and equally legitimate mode of thought and existence. Oral literature continues to be a dynamic and contemporary cultural tradition in Africa today, equaling and often superseding written forms. Oral literature is communal rather than individual and is expressed in a rhetorical style. It finds its fulfillment in performance with the participation of the audience, music (drums), and dance. That, Kwesi Brew was also an actor is in keeping with this tradition. For the Western reader who is accustomed to poetry which expresses a solitary individual's point of view and often focuses on an emotion as its sole content, certain of Brew's poems may not immediately resonate. It is helpful to imagine these poems as spoken to an audience, and even to read them aloud.

Oral poetry also relies on a love of wordplay, the most iconic form being the proverb. Proverbs are particularly loved in much of Africa and are incorporated into everyday conversation as well as formal speeches and are embedded in novels and stories. Used in its traditional sense, the proverb makes an appearance in 'The Swollen River.' But the form also seems to be inhabited by Brew's shortest poems, many of which offer pithy nuggets of sarcasm or wisdom in a rhythm that is suggestive of the genre (e.g. "Two Stages" and "Halo"). Other genres include the dilemma tale, praise songs ("Childbirth"), animal tales ("Snail and Tortoise," "The Thirsty Crocodile"), dirges, and prayers to the ancestors. In "A Libation of a Barren Woman," a female voice pleads with the ancestors to send her a child:

Oh my ancestors, you who sit in the world
That sees all; the mockery of fellow women,
Who think themselves women and worthy...
Send me, send me, my great ancestors,
Through my dead mother – a child,
A child, a beautiful child!

The challenge for African writers has been to adapt the forms of a written European language and poetic tradition while remaining true to their own instincts as African artists. Many of Kwesi Brew's longer poems, such as "Grave Looters" and "Change and Religion Wealth," seem to fit the description of oral poems meant to be spoken rather than read as text on a page. One can imagine the poet performing them before an audience and in this context they gain power and life.

Religion as a source of imagery

Despite their long history with Christianity, African religious fervor is not well understood by Westerners. Christianity and traditional religion are practiced simultaneously by many in Ghana. Brought initially from Europe by traders, colonists, and missionaries, Christianity has acquired a Ghanaian identity over time and its practice is distinct and heartfelt. In general, African traditional religion has one great God (Nyame) over all, who is distant from human affairs, and a panoply of smaller gods and ancestors who are more accessible and intervene in human affairs. It is easy to see how Christianity, which is both monotheistic but also has a panoply of saints and angels, was easily mapped onto traditional beliefs. Such Brew poems as “Prayer,” which is a heartfelt appeal to the ancestral gods, or “Out of the Fetish Grove,” which is evocative of the mystery and beauty the poet finds in the power of forest shrines kept by fetish priests, are built from a knowledge of traditional practices. Another aspect of traditional religion is witchcraft (which in Western ears has negative connotations)—commonly referred to as the source of calamities, for which curses placed by other humans may be suspected. Pervading daily life is a sense of the continuity of life and the presence and participation of the ancestors, including their approval or disapproval of decisions and actions taken by their descendants. “Ancestral Faces” has remained a favorite poem for Ghanaians, as is “Executioner’s Dream,” another poem about past times. At events great and small, it is the custom to pour a small amount of drink on the ground before imbibing as a libation for the ancestors who are present though unseen. There is certainly occasional conflict between these two traditions, but as a rule both are acknowledged in the common arena.

Islam, the other great religion of Ghana, is mentioned in only a few of Brew’s poems. This is probably owing to the fact that Islam is most prevalent in the north of Ghana, bordering the Sahel. Christianity is most prevalent along the Atlantic Coast, which had the most contact with Europeans. Brew’s birthplace, Cape Coast, is along that Atlantic Coast, and indeed along with the town of Elmina saw some of the earliest European contact, in the 15th century. By all accounts, Brew was a sincere and enthusiastic Christian. Christian imagery and quotations appear often, enlarging and deepening his vision. “There is no firmer believer in God/ A more willing, but weak follower of Christ/ Than I am,” declares Brew in his short poem titled “Disciple.” His “Conversion Of A Meal Into Blessing” contains essentially the same sentiment expressed in “The Prayer,” and a recurring theme in his work and life—that of commitment beyond self.

“Three ages” of African writing: 1950s, 1960s, 1970s

It is not just religion that is the source of commitment beyond the self. The particular continent-wide struggle of Africa for independence from colonial domination involved every citizen and every writer. It could be said that all African writers of Brew’s generation (and perhaps writers from any country in the throes of change) were focused beyond their individual lives, and it can

be said that their poetry and their patriotism are inextricably linked. Ngugi's "three ages" of African writing is here particularly apt.

In the first age, "the age of anti-colonial struggle," beginning in the 1950s, writers rejected colonial images of Africa and asserted their own vision of a future free from Western domination. During this period, "the writer and his work were part of the African revolution" which shook the continent and began the unraveling of colonial rule. Optimism and self-confidence reflected the expectation that all Africans felt as Kwame Nkrumah assumed the presidency of Ghana, the first sub-Saharan African nation to gain independence, in 1957. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an example of works from this time. Brew's poems "The Shadow of Laughter" and "Childbirth" might also fit this description. Another of his poems, "Our Palm-Tree Strength," reaffirms this optimism in spite of obstacles encountered:

The song we sing shall be
Of our faith in humanity
And the upward surge of our hopes.
Like the waves we surge forward
Spraying the faces of the gods
With cool refreshing breakers of our spirits.

The second age, in the 1960s, Ngugi called "the decade of African independence." The focus shifted as liberation came to country after country and the realities and difficulties of self-rule began to assert themselves. The hope that home rule would be better and fairer than colonial rule began to fade in the face of corruption and successive coups d'états which brought violence to the countryside and disruption in the life of the nation. Fatigue and discouragement haunt Brew's words in a poem describing this time, "The Middle of the River":

I am now too old to look back.
The urgent future faces me
And cuts from my sight the end
That should inevitably come.
The task that has been assigned to me
Remains unfinished and almost insurmountable.
Is it fear of the wasteland at my back
That keeps me looking ahead,
Or the lame struggling will to do the work?
Am I past the middle of the river
And therefore must go on?

A particularly bitter disappointment was the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966. Nkrumah was not only the first president of Ghana, but the leader of a much wider pan-African movement with aspirations for the liberation and cooperation of other African states. A sequence of poems in Brew's first book of poems, *The Shadows of Laughter*, captures the mood of disillusionment characteristic of this period and culminates with the sad poem "A Sandal on the Head," which refers to Nkrumah's downfall:

It is only the gods who know
Why the bones were broken;
It's only the old who know why
The goats skip homeward at evening
And the Master of the House
Now Master of Rags
Stays behind on the rocks
To rummage in the rubbish heap
For cast-away morsels of power!

The third age, in the 1970's, brought a realization of the extent to which Western powers continued to intervene in the politics and economics of newly formed African nations. Writers turned their disappointment in the failings of African leaders to a critique of a neo-colonialism symbolized by the dominance of the IMF and the World Bank. The overthrow of Salvador Allende as president of Chile by the American CIA stood as a powerful example of the direct intervention Western nations could exercise. The anti-imperialist stance taken by African writers also focused on a pandering to Western interests by the African ruling class in return for personal gain. Brew's "Adam And Eve and The New Paradise" is a humorous allegory about this situation, but an earlier poem, "The Cut and the Rain," strikes a sardonic note, describing the rain beating against a building while

Inside with storm-blown eyes, sat
thirty-year old party activist
Counting his crisp ten per cent cut
With an electronic computer.

Ghana during this period suffered a series of military coups. Brew himself left government in 1975 in sympathy with politicians of the time and entered business, serving as the director of a flour mill, and he later opened a business of his own, the Golden Spoon Flour Mills. Many poems lament the fate of his country, exhort and criticize. "Miracles and the Message" describes a devastating famine that occurred in 1983 due to drought and other factors. An uncharacteristically bitter poem is "Let Us Sin Together," a lament for the passing of old ways and traditions. Love of country continues as a theme throughout his later work, the poet in some respects inseparable from his place in history.

Ghanaian metaphors of self-identification

Preceding the period of colonial rule in Ghana, life in West Africa was dominated by the slave trade, which lasted from the late fifteenth to the early nineteenth century. European forts and castles once lined Ghana's Atlantic Coast and those that remain haunt the present with the memory of this time. Cape Coast Castle, one of the largest, is now a UN Heritage Site and the destination of members of the African diaspora who visit in search of their past. Kwesi Brew's third book of poetry is titled *Return of No Return* and is dedicated to his friend, the African-American poet and celebrity, Maya Angelou. "No Return" is a nickname given to Angelou by Brew and refers to the Door of No Return, the gate of Cape Coast Castle through which slaves were taken from the dungeons to ships waiting offshore. Three long narrative poems, "Don Diego at Edina," "Don Diego at Edina—The Great Rebuff," and "The Return of the Native" approach the topic of slavery, describing the first arrival of the Portuguese at Elmina in 1482 and events thereafter. Elmina is the site of another very large castle only several miles from Cape Coast, the first European construction on West African soil. Brew's most succinct and scathing comment appears in the short poem "Four Million More," an indictment of Western interference both past and present. Ironically, the Brew family name originated with a famous slave ship captain named Richard Brew, an Irishman who left descendants in Africa, as did many other Europeans of the time. Dutch, British, and Danish surnames are common along the coastal regions of West Africa. Complexity characterizes the Ghanaian position when it comes to its slave trade history, the tangled ends buried in colonialism and family histories. Indeed, Christianborg Castle, built by the Danes and third of the surviving large castles, for a long time housed the national government at Accra, a physical monument to the past at the heart of a modern state. Ghana has been a destination for the African diaspora since the days of independence, many of whom are African-Americans like Maya Angelou, who lived in Accra from 1962-1965. Some return to stay, but most are searching for clues to their African origins. "Prisoner of the Mind" muses on their situation from an African perspective:

A happy time for the prisoner
Whose prison holds no restrictions
Of his freedom;
A sad moment for him to come to mind
At last that the trappings of freedom
Are the shackles, the chains, the loss of home and mother
And the fresh air of freedom
But the dark stench of a dungeon;
The mind, bound to a narrow space, a slave
Under a castle on the sea in Cape Coast.
Prison, and the dark reality is loss of freedom.

Brew's best poems, though, do not try to make a point, but are simply descriptive, sensual or mythically beautiful while remaining impenetrable. "The Slums of Nima," "Dark Girl at Riverside," "Kumasi Market" all provide entrance into an enhanced landscape—the ordinary world interpreted by the poet. Deserving of mention are an intricate set of poems dedicated to totem animals and symbols found in his last book of poetry *The Clan of the Leopard and Other Poems*. Brew has enjoyed a popular reputation as a love poet, and although poems like "The Mesh" are often quoted by young lovers, his later poems are even better. "Bamboo Xylophone," and "Your Smile," are effortless in their graceful simplicity. "Winneba Mountains" marries landscape with love poetry:

Here are the hips and the heaving shoulder;
The head lies calm with dreams of peace,
How like a sleeping woman are these mountains,
Their loveliness, within, covered by the greenery.

Kwesi Brew's poems can be found on websites, blogs and Facebook pages, quoted and discussed by the current generation who find their own thoughts and sentiments captured by the poet's words. Brew inspires their history and encourages their hope of the future. He has truly found his place as a poet of his nation.

The title of his second book of poetry, *African Panorama*, brings to mind travelogues made for the amusement of Westerners interested in foreign customs and exotic wildlife. But taken as it was probably meant by Brew, it implies a wider view, a multi-dimensional picture of his world and his place in it. Embracing a scope of years, momentous events, and the hope and tragedy of national and personal life, Kwesi Brew's poetry is a unique record. Brew received a state funeral upon his death in 2007 and obituaries were printed in the national news as well as the *Manchester Guardian*. One of his later poems, "White Cloud, Blue Mountain," could be offered as a summing up of his life and work—an epigraph of sorts:

The freedom that you sought
Ceaselessly, diligently, without rest
For your country and her kind
In the bloom of your youth
Till your dying days and beyond
Has appeared on the distant
Blue mountains
And your spirit is face to face
With a soul frenzied with ecstasy.

NOTE ON THE MANUSCRIPTS

At present, the Kwesi Brew Archive, housed at the University of Cape Coast Library's Africa Room, consists of the contents of his personal library, with some of the books having been donated to St. Joseph's Seminary. The poetry manuscripts, in the possession of the family, consist of about 350 pages of material, almost none of which can be determined to have been previously published. This number is, furthermore, a rough approximation, as the poetry was not simply written on separate "pages" of paper, but on backs of envelopes, bills of sale, receipts from the family's flour mill business, different-sized leaves of stationary, and so on. Furthermore, Brew often revised his verse by literally taping disparate pieces of paper together into long scrolls, but not in a two-dimensionally readable way. Rather, one lifts "flaps": with the flap down, the covered-up words are in effect "deleted"; when the flap is lifted, those words remain a possible part of the poem. This method of cutting and taping is not possible to accurately capture with a scan or photocopy, and introduces another complexity into the editorial decision-making, which is based on divining the intent of the writer. In addition to the problems just described, there is frequently confusing bleed-through from heavy writing on reverse sides of pages. Many of the manuscripts will need to be manually transcribed and re-examined, and it is our hope that this essay will ignite a future scholar's desire to do so more thoroughly.

Declaration

The authors report no conflict of interest. This paper has not been published anywhere.

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1482 Portuguese build fort at El Mina, the first European foothold in Sub-Saharan Africa, for trading in gold, pepper, ivory, and slaves
- 1637 Dutch capture Elmina Castle and control trade, now mainly in enslaved Africans, with competition from English, Danes, Swedes, Prussians
- 1844 Bond of 1844 transfers judicial authority from African chiefs along the coast to British
- 1874 Dutch withdraw and Britain declares Gold Coast a British Crown Colony; a series of five wars with the Ashanti Kingdom follow
- 1900-02 “War of the Golden Stool”; Ashanti defeated and territories added to British colony of the Gold Coast
- 1920 Joseph E. Casely-Hayford convenes National Congress of British West Africa to demand reforms
- 1928 Osborne Henry “Kwesi” Brew born at Cape Coast, Ghana, May 27 to Richard Henry and Emma Brew; 3rd of 6 children
- 1935 Starts primary education at a Methodist school; maternal uncle comes to take charge of Brew’s upbringing, according to the matrilineal traditions of the Fante; later adopted by K. J. Dickens, an Englishman and Educational Officer
- 1942 Dickens and Brew move to Tamale, in northern Ghana, where Brew writes “The Dry Season” at the age of 14; subsequent moves to Cape Coast and Accra
- 1939-45 Gold Coast African Forces serve in Burma and Ethiopia
- 1948 Ex-servicemen march on Government, fired upon and three killed, six leaders detained—Kwame Nkrumah, Obetsebi Lamptey, Ako Adjei, Ofori-Atta, Dr. Danquah and Akuffo Addo—the “Big Six”
- 1949 At the age of 21 Brew writes the University Entrance Examination, passes and is admitted to University College of the Gold Coast (at Achimota); participates in sports, theatre/film productions, and campus politics; wins poetry competition sponsored by English Department; becomes friends during this period with James Hutton Mensah and Kofi Awoonor

- 1951 Nkrumah released from prison to become Prime Minister of Gold Coast
- 1953 Brew graduates with B.A. in Philosophy, History, and English Literature as one of the first graduates of the university; selected for Ghana's administrative service and posted to Trans-Volta Togoland, home of the Ewe people, whose traditions, along with those of his native Fante, figure often in his poetry.
- 1954-56 Brew appointed District Commissioner, Kete Krachi; appointed Assistant Secretary, Public Service Commission, Accra; application for Foreign Service accepted
- 1957 Brew becomes member of Diplomatic Corps
March 6 Ghana achieves independence and Brew becomes part of Kwame Nkrumah's government
- 1958 Posted to London as Third Secretary; to France as Second Secretary; to New Delhi, India; back to Ghana as Director of Middle East and Asia; then Director of the Western World; posted to Bonn, West Germany as First Secretary and head of Chancellery at Ghana's embassy there; meets his future wife, Elizabeth
- 1964 Becomes Ghana's first ambassador to Mexico; then ambassador to Senegal (including responsibility for Gambia and Mauritania)
- 1966 Nkrumah overthrown by military (National Liberation Council)
- 1967 Brew publishes poems in *African Writing Today* (Mphahlele, Es'kia, ed)
- 1968 Brew's first book, *Shadows of Laughter*, published in England by Longmans, Green & Co, Ltd.
- 1969-72 Civilian government of Kofi Busia; replaced in coup by National Redemption Council (led by LTC Acheampong)
- 1972 Brew becomes ambassador to Lebanon (including responsibility for Saudi Arabia)
- 1975 Acheampong establishes Supreme Military Council; Brew returns to Ghana; appointed Chief of Protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; invited to join board of directors of Takoradi Flour Mills
- 1979 Coup led by Flight Lt. J. J. Rawlings; Rawlings steps down in favor of civilian government led by Hilla Limann

- 1981-92 The Second Coming of Rawlings; Brew arrested and detained during second Rawlings coup in December 1981; second book of poetry, *African Panorama*, published in America by Greenfield Review Press, with help of Kofi Awoonor
- 1983 Famine year
- 1986 Maya Angelou sends Brew a copy of *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*
- 1989 Brew retires from Takoradi Flour Mills
- 1991 Awarded "Grand Patron of the Arts" by Ghana Association of Writers in February for "contribution to the promotion of literature and the development of the Ghanaian literary world"
- 1992-2000 Third Coming of Rawlings; twice elected to Presidency as head of NDC
- 1994 Brew honored by Entertainment Critics and Reviewers Association of Ghana (ERAG) for "being a pioneering poet...and for successfully combining [literary] activities with a distinguished diplomatic career"
- 1995 Brew's third book, *Return of No Return*, published in Accra by Afram, dedicated to Maya Angelou, as well as his niece Esi Sutherland Addy, and his daughter Baaba Brew
- 1996 Fourth book, *The Clan of the Leopard and Other Poems*, published in Accra by Anansesem
- 1996 Becomes National Treasurer of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), which loses election to Rawlings (NDC)
- 2000-08 Presidency passes peacefully from NDC to NPP upon election of John Kufuor for two terms
- 2007 Death at age 79, at home in Cape Coast