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Brilla boy!: Educated masculinity, hope and future-making in a Ghanaian senior high school

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of Ghana's National Science and Maths Quiz (the NSMQ) drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a secondary school in Ghana (known as Brilliant Academy) conducted between 2021–2022. Using the concepts of hope and aspiration this paper seeks to explore how the NSMQ serves as a vehicle for hope. It begins with a historical lens, examining how the pedagogical practices laid down by missionaries now in place at Brilliant Academy serve to cultivate the type of educated person promoted by the quiz show, that of the 'brilla boy'. This figure is widely respected within the school and as such students eagerly aspire to take part in the quiz. I also suggest that the celebration of maths and science in the quiz makes the NSMQ bridge together 'old' and 'new' hopes attached to education, and science and maths in particular, evident in Kwame Nkrumah's vision for postcolonial Ghana.

KEYWORDS

National Science and Maths Quiz; schooling; Ghana; aspiration; hope; masculinity

I am a science student, I am supposed to be a brilla boy, I am supposed to learn. (Kwadwo, form one science)

It comes with some prestige. I mean you walk in the school, they call it 'brilla' at Brilliant Academy. Brilla!' ... So to be called a 'Brilla Boy' at Brilliant Academy, it comes with good feeling, (A science teacher)

Introduction

Annually, students and teachers literally go bonkers for the popular Ghanaian Primetime TV quiz show, the National Science and Maths Quiz (NSMQ). The competition is one of the longest running TV shows in Ghana and yields hundreds of thousands of Ghanaian cedis in sponsorship. Yet why all the fanfare? I argue that the NSMQ embodies a message of hope and aspiration, particularly in relation to the subjects of maths and science, implicitly calling for greater investment in these subjects to aid the economic development and forward movement of Ghana. Education is tied to notions of hope, aspiration and future-making (Stambach and Hall 2017), and in this paper I examine the

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phenomenon of the popular Ghanaian quiz show. In particular, I examine the type of educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996) the school in which I did my fieldwork, Brilliant Academy, seeks to create, that of the dazzling ‘brilla boy’. Later, I analyse a screening of the quiz at the school in order to demonstrate how it illustrates the intersection of the concepts of education, aspiration, and hope.

It could be argued that the concept of aspiration forms a means through which young people orient themselves towards the future (Ansell, Froerer, and Huijsmans 2022). Aspiration, like hope, can be viewed as a motivational force that is future-oriented (Bryant and Knight 2019). The idea of hope through transforming the self can be seen as something which anchors participation and association with the NSMQ towards something deeper and more momentous than simply winning a quiz. In this paper I aim to draw these reflections together to analyse the ways in which the NSMQ upholds a message of hope in science and maths as liberating disciplines for Ghana’s future development, and more generally a hope in education for securing a better future. I argue that the candidates for the National Science and Maths Quiz serve as emblems of success and aspiration for Ghanaian students to emulate. This foregrounds past and present hopes in education and celebrates science and maths as important disciplines for the future development of Ghana. There are few studies of the NSMQ in relation to the topics of aspiration and gender in the social sciences (but see Agyepong and Diabah 2020). So, in analysing the quiz, I also consider the added element of gender when examining the type of educated person promoted by the NSMQ, suggesting that the quiz is also marked as a profoundly masculine space. Data for this paper was collected via participant observation in a senior high school (known as Brilliant Academy) for nine months (between 2021 and 2022).¹ This was supplemented with interviews with students and staff, as well as the study and analysis of news media and *YouTube* broadcasts of the NSMQ.

The layout of this paper is as follows. Firstly, I provide a background to Brilliant Academy in order to situate my subsequent analysis of a screening of an NSMQ broadcast at the school. Secondly, I provide a historical background to the NSMQ, demonstrating its values and how it is connected to ideas of hope and aspiration. Thirdly, I will analyse a specific event in which the NSMQ was broadcast at Brilliant Academy. I suggest that the NSMQ, as a programme intended to incite aspiration to pursue the study of science and maths, is connected to hope and ties together ‘old’ ideas of hope – evocative of Nkrumah’s hopes and aspirations for independent Ghana, and how this would be realised through education – with ‘new’ ideas surrounding the value of maths and science for Ghana’s future development. I will examine the ways in which a screening of the NSMQ at the school reflects the masculine orientation of the quiz as well as the influence of neoliberal values upon the type of educated person promoted within the quiz. I then explore how such ideas are deeply intertwined with notions of hope. I argue that the NSMQ, like the ethos of Brilliant Academy itself, embodies the values of aspiration, hope and the desire for upward mobility as part of its inculcation of projects of future-making among secondary school students.

Brilliant Academy

Initially, having decided to investigate students’ aspirations in the context of education reform I emailed various secondary schools in Ghana to find a site in which to

conduct fieldwork just as lockdown was announced in the UK (2020–2021). Over the course of time I became acquainted with staff at Brilliant Academy via email, and they eventually permitted me to conduct fieldwork in their school once lockdown had ended. After a period of waiting some months before the UK was given the all-clear for international travel, I embarked on fieldwork at Brilliant Academy. During my time at the school I conducted in-depth interviews with over sixty students, alongside interviews with teachers, parents and school management. I also conducted six focus groups with students across all form groups and various subject areas, alongside many lesson observations. NVivo was used to organise and compare data, as well as to help identify thematic strands across different types of data.

Each morning I set out on campus I was met with a vast, open space, clear blue skies, yellow and magenta flowers sprawled around the grounds between large grey buildings enfolded in the greenery of moringa and mango trees. When the school bell rang, marking the transition to the next lesson of the eight-period school day, students would dart across the campus donning crisply starch-ironed uniforms in the school's emblematic colours. This is Brilliant Academy, a boy's school known for its long-standing reputation for academic excellence, professional accomplishment, and renowned genius in science and mathematics. Founded in the interwar years, Brilliant Academy was established for the purposes of providing an education rooted in Presbyterian values. Furnished by the support of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Brilliant Academy began running some months later with a small number of students and teachers. The school was established as a thoroughly Christian institution intended to equip students with a challenging education that trained not only their intellect, but their character as well.

The school's core values include hard work, integrity and discipline, and these are intertwined with the Pietist doctrine that inspired the progenitors of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Pietism was a reformist movement that began in the late seventeenth century, the German variant of which profoundly impacted the Basel Mission. As a movement against scholasticism, Pietist doctrine among other things emphasised personal conversion and a deep devotion to God, including personal Bible study and mission work. Incumbent upon believers was the duty to spread the gospel and to alleviate human suffering in the world (Herppich 2016; Sanneh 1983). Pietists, including those who filled the ranks of the Basel Mission, perceived education as key to enlightening non-Europeans about the gospel, and to this end the Basel Mission worked tirelessly to expand the provision of schools within the interior of the Gold Coast.² What is more, Brilliant Academy forms part of the educational trajectory of former mission-founded schools that became known as 'elite' schools in Ghana. As Gifford (1998) notes, 'Ghana's history cannot be understood apart from the elite they created' (1998, 57) as education played a central role in the formation of the 'Westernized and wealthy urban elite' (Coe 2005, 145). Protestant missions are thus highly significant to Ghana's educational history, especially to the creation of elites. Elite mission schools in Ghana have gained a reputation for high standards of discipline and competitive academic results. Such schools are also known for attracting and reproducing society's elite (Aziabah 2018; Gifford 1998; Simpson 2001). Mission schools, including Brilliant Academy, therefore form part of a system of elite reproduction and the consolidation of privilege in Ghana (Addae-Mensah 2000; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; see Ministry of Education 2019b).³

Today, boys at Brilliant Academy are groomed to become highly ambitious, self-disciplined, and hard working gentlemen. This stems from the Pietist values of the founding Basel Mission, yet I suggest that this also reflects the influence of neoliberal principles as students are trained to develop a disciplined, ambitious character, driven by the desire for self-improvement in the face of scarce employment opportunities (Scharff 2015 and Urciuoli 2012).⁴ 'It's not only about training the child with the skill, but training the heart as well', one of the chaplains of the school, Reverend Lawrence, relayed as we sat outside of a science classroom. 'So, they need discipline to perform'. Reverend Lawrence perceived discipline as a hallmark of the school and emphasised its necessity in training boys at Brilliant Academy both morally and academically. Moral training and self-discipline were key aims of Presbyterian pedagogy and the emphasis on being a disciplined, hard-working Christian Gentleman were core aspects of life at Brilliant Academy (cf. Miescher 2005a and Simpson 2001). The daily routines and disciplinary practices at the school reinforced such goals and aimed to steer students towards morally upright behaviour. These everyday acts of moral becoming (Dilger 2021) included daily Morning Devotionals and Sunday church services.

I have discussed the ethos and routines at Brilliant Academy in order to provide a context in which to situate the school's engagement with the NSMQ. Staff and students at Brilliant Academy approach the NSMQ with the same level of discipline and devotion with which they approach academic work and faith, viewing the wider purpose of students' academic engagement as that of character building. For Miescher (2005a), schooling was the main instrument through which a Presbyterian masculinity was instilled in colonial Ghana. We see this in the rigorous boarding school regime at Brilliant Academy, including daily rising at 4.00am, which ensured that students had no room for idleness. The disciplined schedule at Brilliant Academy was intended to instil character within pupils. The qualities associated with Protestant Christianity, including the ascetic principles of hard work, productive living, and deferred gratification, formed part of the environment Brilliant Academy created for its students (Weber 1930; cf. Kannan 2022). This emphasised exceptionally high academic standards and fostered the aspiration to become a 'brilla boy'.

Furthermore, like other schools founded by missionaries in Ghana between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, Brilliant Academy has enjoyed its reputation as a long-standing, successful school and demonstrates the prestigious status that many former mission schools have in Ghana. 'The mission schools in Ghana are the best', Reverend Lawrence declared matter-of-factly. He went on to relay how many of the runners up to the 2021 NSMQ competition were mission schools. Mission schools are often dubbed locally as 'elite' schools, which, rather than simply denoting class distinction, convey their status for yielding some of the highest West African Secondary School Examination (WASSCE) results in the country. Many of these schools also appear as winners in previous years of the NSMQ (see Figure 1).

It is also important to note that many of the winners of the NSMQ to date, along with being mission schools have also been boys' schools. This could suggest, like Agyepong and Diabah (2020), that the NSMQ, whilst open to all schools, is demarcated as a profoundly masculine space. The interconnection between masculinity, education, aspiration and hope will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent sections where I provide a brief history of the NSMQ and discuss its significance for understanding the importance of hope in education in Ghana.

Former winners of the NSMQ		
Year	School	Type of school
2023	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2022	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2021	Prempeh College	Mission
2020	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2019	St. Augustine's College	Mission
2018	St. Peter's High School	Mission
2017	Prempeh College	Mission
2016	Adisadel College	Mission
2015	Prempeh College	Mission
2014	Mfantsipim School	Mission
2013	St. Thomas Aquinas School	Mission
2012	Ghana Secondary Technical School	Colonial
2009	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2008	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2007	St Augustine's College	Mission
2006	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2005	St. Peter's High School	Mission
2004	Achimota School	Colonial
2003	PRESEC Legon	Mission
2002	Opoku Ware Senior High School	Mission
2001	Pope John Senior School	Mission
2000	St. Peter's Senior High School	Mission
1999	Mfantsipim School	Mission
1998	Achimota School	Colonial
1997	Opoku Ware High School	Mission
1996	Prempeh College	Mission
1995	PRESEC Legon	Mission
1994	Prempeh College	Mission

Figure 1. List of schools that have won the NSMQ to date.

The National Science and Maths Quiz

The National Science and Maths Quiz (NSMQ) is a nationally broadcast television programme in Ghana intended to showcase senior high school students' intellectual brilliance in the subjects of chemistry, biology, physics and maths. Like a sport, schools from each region put forward a team of representatives as contestants for the NSMQ

show to compete with other schools across the country, all with the hope of winning the annual, national championships. Each year regional competitions result in semi-finals and then finals in which three teams of two students representing their schools compete over five rounds to win the trophy for the year. To highlight its popularity, the NSMQ is the longest running television programme in Ghana, with an extensive social media coverage and over 723,000 followers on *Facebook* and almost 500,000 followers on *Twitter*. National competitions are also livestreamed and consumed vociferously on *YouTube*.⁵

Started in 1993, the NSMQ was established to champion the disciplines of maths and science. Since then, the Primetime Limited programme has grown in popularity, with the number of participating schools expanding from thirty-two in 1993 to well over one hundred, and in 2012 the government began sponsoring the programme, and later a number of prominent businesses, including Absa Bank. Subsequently, winning the renowned 'brilla' competition yields a lot of prestige, and winning schools receive a host of rewards including money and scholarships to universities specialising in science, technology, engineering and maths. Understandably then, for schools, reaching the finals and winning the trophy carries a significant amount of prestige. Below I suggest that the values and disciplinary routines at Brilliant Academy cultivate within students the aspiration to become a brilla boy, and that this reflects a merging of Protestant values and the concept of the 'neoliberal entrepreneur of the self' (Foucault 2010). The title 'Brilla' was used around the school by students to denote a student who showed special talent or giftedness in their academics. In addition, students who were being trained as potential contestants for the NSMQ were also called 'Brilla'.

'In Brilliant Academy, the NSMQ is big. It is very big. If you like, it is one of our biggest products, so students aspire to be part of the team', one of the physics teachers at the school, Mr Okyere, explained. 'So the selection process is quite competitive'. Students at Brilliant Academy undertook tests and training to be selected to be part of a pool of candidates from which representatives would be chosen to participate in the NSMQ programme. Those who are finally selected acquired a significant degree of prestige: 'It comes with some prestige; I mean you walk in the school; they call it "Brilla" at Brilliant Academy. Brilla! So to be called a brilla boy at Brilliant Academy, it comes with good feeling', Mr Okyere explained enthusiastically.

I argue that the NSMQ carries with it a message of hope and aspiration tied to academic achievement, which I argue is suffused with neoliberal values. Neoliberalism is characterised by an emphasis on free market capitalism (Fine and Saad Filho 2014; Steger and Roy 2021). With regards to education, neoliberalism is marked by the encroachment of market principles into the educational sphere (Ball 2013). For example, Urciuoli (2012) discusses how in the context of higher education in America, neoliberal values are evident in the emphasis on skills development and the commodification of knowledge as a means of enhancing one's self-presentation as a marketable commodity. Foucault's notion of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Foucault 2010), is present in the emphasis on the pursuit of self-enhancement as a means of profit generation as the core goal of education. For Foucault, the emergence of the neoliberal state was accompanied by an emphasis on the transformation of humans into responsible, flexible, and productive citizens who engaged in 'disciplined self-management' to enhance their adaptability to the needs and risks of capitalism (Ball 2013, 130). In

Ghana, this can be seen in the pursuit of competitive upskilling and increasing self-reliance to become ‘economically competitive, enterprising subjects’ as a buffer against widespread youth unemployment (Amo-Agyemang 2017, 10; Yeboah et al. 2017; Sasu 2024; cf. Mathew and Lukose 2020 and Honeyman 2016).

Furthermore, in Ghana, Coe (2020) suggests that neoliberalism promotes an ‘educational enchantment’ whereby education is imagined as a tool for the realisation of one’s fantasies and desires amidst widespread risk and uncertainty, evident in private tertiary educational programmes (2020, 602). What we can extract from Coe’s argument is the importance of paying attention to the neoliberal undercurrent present in the promise of social mobility through education. We see this in the promotion surrounding the NSMQ which seeks to inspire children and young people to pursue science and maths as a way to actualise their hopes as well as national aspirations. This ties together education, neoliberalism, aspiration, and hope. Within the context of neoliberalism, the educated person envisioned as successful is one who is responsible, enterprising and flexible enough to cope with the uncertainties of the market economy (Ball 2013; Foucault 2010). Likewise, Brilliant Academicians are trained to be ambitious, self-disciplined, and hard working gentlemen who demonstrate ‘all-round excellence’ in academics, conduct and spirituality.⁶ I suggest that these attributes, originating in the Pietist values of the Basel Mission, find new significance in contemporary Ghana, where neoliberal values suffuse the mission and ethos of Brilliant Academy and the NSMQ. I take an interest in the ways in which the NSMQ seeks to raise aspiration (cf. Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018) and mould young peoples’ capacities, values and decision-making towards the pursuit of self-improvement and expertise in science and maths that aids both personal success and national development.

The NSMQ, as a Primetime television broadcast endorsed by the Ghana Education Service, a host of private companies, and universities – is intended to incite interest in and motivation to study science and maths. The host, currently Professor Elsie Kaufmann (a professor of biomedical engineering), and participants serve as role models of excellence and enterprise intended to inspire aspiration to succeed in these subjects. Through showcasing some of Ghana’s brightest young talent in science and maths, the NSMQ broadcast serves to motivate students to aspire to become their own entrepreneurs of self through pursuing academic achievement. The winning candidates of the NSMQ championships are treated with special honour and prestige and upheld as examples of success. The use of the personal success story on social media platforms forms part of the process of entrepreneurial self-making, providing an example from which others can gain inspiration (Fumanti 2015). We see this in the NSMQ where ordinary students are transformed into icons of success evident in posters such as the one above (Figure 2), where the contestants for the finals are displayed, faces illuminated and arm in arm, like a team of action heroes as role models of academic excellence. Likewise, the winner of the 2020 NSMQ, Daniel Kekeli Gagkpetor, who won Best Contestant award (given to students who demonstrate academic excellence), was bestowed with a scholarship amounting to \$40, 000, and his story was retold across social media platforms, demonstrating a message that intertwines academic achievement, social mobility and wealth acquisition, or an educational enchantment (Coe 2020).⁷ In the next section I demonstrate the ways in which the NSMQ embodies a message of aspiration and hope, before focussing on an event in which the NSMQ was broadcast at Brilliant Academy.



Figure 2. A poster from the 2019 NSMQ Finals.¹⁶

The NSMQ, aspiration and hope

So far we have seen how the NSMQ has gained incredible popularity in Ghana. I suggest that the NSMQ embodies messages of aspiration in academic achievement, but also more broadly a message of hope in relation to what excellence in science and maths can do for the nation of Ghana. I argue that the NSMQ competitions embody hope because participants in the NSMQ serve as role models of educational achievement in science and maths to which students are encouraged to aspire. The handsome rewards that winning contestants receive as a result of participation in the quiz points to the awe and prestige attributed to intellectual brilliance in science and maths in Ghana, and implicitly suggests that this is an ideal to which all students should aspire. The prizes for winning the competitions suggest that achievement in these subjects, and within school more generally, will be rewarded with scholastic opportunities and entrance into the good life, characterised by exotic holidays and large sums of money. I suggest that the NSMQ conveys a message of hope because it implicitly maintains the assumption that science and maths are important disciplines for national development, a longstanding idea within modernist development, and an old hope (Coe 2005, 144). Despite high youth unemployment and the significant economic challenges facing the country, including skyrocketing inflation since 2022, hope in the future of Ghana remains an ever-present constant (Adeoye 2023). I suggest that the NSMQ, in conveying a message of hope and opportunity borne of applying oneself through hard work and discipline, embodies a message of hope. In addition, I also suggest that the subject choices of the NSMQ – maths and science – reflects old hopes that invigorated the modernist approach to development advocated by the country's first president, Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), which I discuss next.

Hopes, past and present

In his work on hope in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Jansen (2016) argued that in order to understand shared contemporary hopes we must look back historically

at how these hopes were configured. Jansen begins his article with a vignette detailing the excitement and furor surrounding Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in the World Cup in 2014. Jansen argues that BiH's participation in the matches gave rise to a collective sense of hope. He suggests that it is important to situate contexts of hoping historically, in order to know what has gone before and how this gives meaning to newer instances of hope. Jansen suggests that we should understand the hope felt collectively in BiH during the 2014 World Cup in light of a shared history of the devastation of war and the possibilities of resettlement; a sense of anticipation for something good or better happening. What is of value to me is Jansen's argument that hope is rooted in social and historical relations. What I want to draw from Jansen's work is less the similarities in context and more the argument that collective hopes should be conceived of as historically rooted. In relation to the NSMQ in Ghana I argue that the quiz makes salient the connection between 'old' and 'new' hopes in relation to education, but also, more specifically to the important role of science and maths to the future of Ghana. In the next section I draw a comparison between the hopes which I suggest are conveyed via the NSMQ and Nkrumah's vision for independent Ghana.

Nkrumah's vision

On March 6th 1957, Ghana was declared independent of colonial rule. It's first president, Kwame Nkrumah's, vision for the newly independent nation was that of a modern, industrialised and urbanised society, and he perceived education as crucial to achieving this (Biney 2011). Nkrumah's administration emphasised the need to increase access to education, as well as to increase exposure to science education in order to meet the manpower needs of the country and to foster innovation (Armah 1974).⁸ Nkrumah's vision of a modern, self-governing Ghana relied upon the nation's hard work and skills, and the establishment of free compulsory basic education. This was followed by the introduction of science centres within middle schools. The policy of introducing science centres into middle schools was part of the seven-year development plan under Nkrumah whereby science was seen as of 'economic and educative importance' to the future of the nation (see Figures 3 and 4).⁹ It was believed that exposing students to the 'scientific method' would enable them to learn about the application of science to the everyday world, and would train their minds to become observant, inquisitive, and logical.¹⁰ It was hoped that science education would yield science orientated workers and the technically skilled personnel that the country needed.¹¹ Science was also seen as enabling students to live a 'full and useful life' in an environment that would increasingly be influenced by science and technology (Figure 5).¹²

In his own words, Kwame Nkrumah stated, 'education should seek the welfare of the people and recognise our attempts to solve our economic, cultural, technological and scientific problems'.¹³ Policy plans under Nkrumah thus emphasised the need to increase training in science and maths, as well as vocational training centres in order to expand the labour force in the industrial and agricultural sectors (Government of Ghana [GoG] 1964). According to Osseo-Asare (2013), expanding science education formed part of Nkrumah's wider goals of social equity, as he sought to increase access to scientific knowledge and equipment, and build Ghana's industrial capacities so as to put African nations on a par with her industrialised counterparts in Europe and North America. This

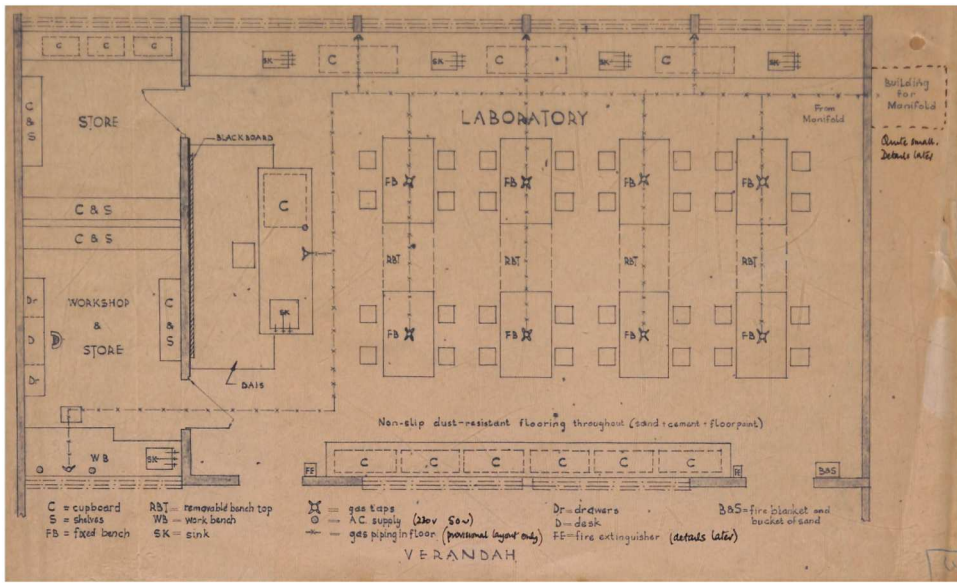


Figure 3. A map of a proposed science centre in Accra.¹⁷

was to be realised through the expansion of architecture and infrastructural development in urban areas, including Accra (see [Figure 6](#)).

For Nkrumah, science and technology came to embody progress and expertise, a forward march of ‘hope’, required to aid in the country’s economic development and industrialisation (Rooney 1988) and this was foundational to his wider vision of

PRIMARY TECHNICAL SCHOOL TIME-TABLE

TIME	GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO	GROUP THREE	GROUP FOUR
8 - 9.30	SCIENCE	METALWORK	BRICKWORK	DRAWING
9.30 - 9.35		BREAK		
9.35 - 11.05	WOODWORK	SCIENCE	BRICKWORK	DRAWING
11.05 - 11.55	BREAK	FOR MID-DAY MEAL		
11.55 - 1.25	BRICKWORK	DRAWING	SCIENCE	METALWORK
1.25 - 1.30		BREAK		
1.30 - 3	BRICKWORK	DRAWING	WOODWORK	SCIENCE

Figure 4. Proposed teaching hours for science in a timetable for a primary school.¹⁸



Figure 5. A science laboratory at Achimota College.¹⁹

African self-reliance and emancipation (Ahlman 2021; Osseo-Asare 2013). What is more, Nkrumah also sought to promote science education through various means, including television, radio and film ‘to carry science to the whole population’, (Osseo-Asare 2013, 739). I suggest that this represents a ‘hope’ in the potential of education more generally, and science and maths in particular, for building the new nation of Ghana. These represent old hopes tied to the independence era. I argue that the energy, excitement and pride with which the NSMQ is celebrated represents a newer form of hope in the disciplines of science and maths that are best understood in the context of the former hopes embodied in the educational plans and original vision of Kwame Nkrumah.

In an opening speech to the NSMQ Finals in 2022, Dr Oheneba Boachie-Adjei, an orthopaedic surgeon symbolising a successful, scientifically-oriented career, stated: ‘Well, there is no doubt that the study and application of science and mathematics



Figure 6. 'Marching with the times', *The Evening News*, 6th March 1957 (from Ahlman (2017, 59)).

play a pivotal role in the development and transformation of every country, of which Ghana is no exception'.¹⁴ Here, within the words of the surgeon, we see a hope in the power of science and maths in continuity with the industrial-led developmental vision of Kwame Nkrumah. I propose that situating the NSMQ within this historical context helps to explain its popularity and appeal at both a school and a national level, as I argue that the NSMQ is intended to shape students' aspirations towards becoming productive citizens who contribute towards national development. Through examining reactions to a livestream broadcast of the NSMQ semi-finals at Brilliant Academy, in the next section I seek to illustrate how the NSMQ serves as a vehicle for the formulation of hope. I suggest that the hope in education encapsulated by the NSMQ ties new hopes to older, historical hopes imbued within education evident in the postcolonial vision of education articulated by Kwame Nkrumah, and newer hopes or an educational enchantment that education can unleash one into the future they have always wanted.

An NSMQ screening at brilliant academy

One morning I arrived at the school and found the assistant headteacher's aide, Daniel, pouring over a live screening of the NSMQ emanating loudly from his laptop. Whilst his eyes were glued to the screen, startled by my presence he paused the screening and arose excitedly informing me that the NSMQ semi-finals were being screened live that day and that students and staff were off timetable in order to watch it. Daniel explained to me that the margin between the three competing schools was small as all were 'top schools', and staff and students alike were at the edge of their seats to see who would win. As I proceeded to walk across the school grounds I could hear joyous cheers radiating from classrooms. In one of the spacious school cafeterias seats and tables had been cleared as boys crowded into the hall forming concentric circles around a makeshift screen made from a laptop projecting a livestream of the broadcast onto a large, white wall. In the packed hall filled with humid, sticky air that melted perspiration into the burning heat of the imminent, brutal noonday sun, students stood on tables, whilst others gathered, murmuring in

tight clusters on the floor. With tables and seats removed, the hall must have snugly squeezed in approximately one hundred and fifty pupils. When I arrived the NSMQ broadcast was half-way through round one and the atmosphere was tense as students held their breath for every school candidate's answer.

As the first round proceeded students cheered and shouted at the screen much like a football match. At the close of round one a large contingent of students ran out of the room in fanatic excitement. The hall was filled with lively, excited conversation and humour. As round two was about to start students ran back into the hall in unison talking, singing and dancing. As one particular school began to gain a leading position in the quiz, the room went into uproar. Students waved shirts, face towels, leaped skywards, and rose their hands as though worshipping at a church service. Round three was much the same, as students screamed, shouted, and jumped up and down as the leading school scored more points through giving a correct answer. Others hugged their friends and gazed, enraptured by the screen. After the next interval I went to watch round four in the staff room. The staff present were talkative and excited. The teachers joked, shouted and teased one another whilst the adverts during the interlude were on. Whilst the teachers were initially subdued in their reactions to the show, by the final section of the programme, all inhibition had left. The atmosphere was electric as a clear winner began to emerge. As the school's points accumulated staff celebrated by cheering, screaming, and jumping avidly. It is worth noting that whilst there were both men and women in the staff room, most of the bantering and shouting came from the male teachers. Following the end of the broadcast, staff and students proceeded to classrooms to continue the school day.

The energy and enthusiastic consumption of the NSMQ at Brilliant Academy that day was evocative of Geertz' (1973) descriptions of the Balinese Cockfight as an exclusively male activity reinforcing values associated with masculinity. That all three participating schools in the competition were boys' schools and the jocular and furore surrounding the screening of the NSMQ marked it as an exclusively male domain. What is more, the association between masculinity and maths and science was also cited as a reason for the popularity of these subjects at the school (Agepong and Diabah 2020; Opare 2009). For example, commenting on the popularity of the quiz, the Head of English, Mrs Adomako, observed: 'Science and maths is very strong among boys. Boys generally like mathematics over English'.¹⁵

What is more, alongside its associations with masculinity, the NSMQ also ties together old and new hopes in the power of science education for national development. Comparably, Srivastava (1996), in his analysis of the Doon School in Dehradun, Northern India, highlights the centrality of science to reformulations of the post-colonial Indian nation and citizen as rational and scientific (similar to Nkrumah's vision), and this shift was central to the remaking of masculinity. Newer hopes expressed in the NSMQ tie together education with a hope in upward mobility (cf. Simpson 1998). In contrast to other ethnographies of working-class youths in schools where expressions of masculine identity were synonymous with the rejection of academic achievement (e.g. MacLeod 2009 and Willis 1977), at Brilliant Academy we see that pursuing the 'hard' or traditionally masculine subjects of science and maths need not be seen as in contradiction to, but rather working in tandem with an assertion of masculine identity evident in the aggression and competitiveness that accompanies sports (cf. Wacquant 2004).

The jocularity and bravado accompanying the screening of the games, as well as the emphasis on stamina, mental acuity and speed make the NSMQ competitions in many ways comparable to sports, and its winners like hyper-masculine sports stars worthy of reverence, glory, and acclaim (cf. Swain 2014). To be a brilla boy at Brilliant Academy one must be disciplined and academically brilliant. We see how the values laid down in Presbyterian schools, such as discipline, hard work, and devotion to duty, lay a foundation for a 'Protestant work ethic' that demonstrates a continuity with Presbyterian masculinity and the 'brilla boy' as a subject of disciplined academic and moral excellence (Miescher 2005b, 189). This indicates how the missionary project sought to remake African masculinities (Miescher 2005a), and the central role of schools as a means through which meanings of masculinity are mediated (cf. Mac an Ghaill 1994). The concept of hope links Christian beliefs to neoliberal governmentality through a shared sense of working towards a better self as well as a better future (Crapanzano 2003; Dean 1999). Through the mental and physical training required for the NSMQ, the school disciplines and remakes boys' bodies, transforming them into competitive and resilient young men initiated into the demands of this popular brand of masculinity.

The image of the 'brilla boy' also embodies a neoliberal message connecting education with hope, aspiration, and achievement. Cornwall (2016) suggests that we see the influence of neoliberalism in expressions of masculinities through the emphasis on the production of 'entrepreneurial subjectivities' (2016, 8), compelling one to engage in the task of reforming oneself into an enterprise. That students must diligently study to increase their chances of participating in the competitions and the ways in which winning contestants serve as emblems of success and achievement demonstrates the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivities through the NSMQ. Through students' participation in and the collective celebration of the competitions we see a 'hope' in the fruits of a diligent commitment to working on oneself as an enterprise in order to spearhead the nation's development.

Conclusion

In this paper I have drawn on ethnographic fieldwork in a boys' senior high school to examine the significance of the NSMQ in generating hope and aspiration among school students in Ghana. I have examined how ideas of aspiration and hope play out in the messages of the NSMQ, and how notions of success, prosperity and education are connected to the missionary history of Brilliant Academy and to neoliberal values. The Presbyterian roots of Brilliant Academy profoundly shaped the operation of the school. Boys at Brilliant Academy were being reformed, through a myriad of performances and disciplines, to become men who were academically astute, disciplined and morally upright. Such characteristics reveal the influence of the Pietist values of the Basel Mission *and* the workings of neoliberalism at the school, compelling students to work on themselves to become productive, competitive, and marketable candidates.

Education in the neoliberal age emphasises taking responsibility for making oneself into a profit-yielding enterprise. This is evident in the hopeful message that underlies the NSMQ: Work hard and you too can be a brilla boy, reap a mountain of rewards and help transform the future of Ghana. The expressions of elation in the programme, reflected in the reactions of students and staff at a screening of the show at the school,

reinforce the NSMQ as a masculine space. I have attempted to elaborate on the obsession that surrounds the popular phenomenon of the NSMQ in Ghana as a vehicle to explore the expression of hope and aspiration in education. I have suggested that the hopes attached to science and maths present in the NSMQ echo the hopes expressed in the modernist vision of Kwame Nkrumah for the new nation of Ghana, suggesting that the significance of the NSMQ should be understood within this post-colonial history and connected to the neoliberal present.

Notes

1. All names used within this paper are pseudonyms.
2. Ghana's European name before independence.
3. In Ghana the term 'elite' can be said to refer to those who hold positions of influence in society in terms of 'wealth, power, prestige and privilege' (Nukunya 2003, 181). Based on this definition, 'elite' can therefore include a range of professional statuses including doctors, lawyers, accountants, businessmen, civil servants, and even chiefs. For a more in-depth discussion of the categorisation of elites in Ghana see (Lentz 2016, 2015).
4. Sasu (2024).
5. See the NSMQ Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/nsmqstats/>, the NSMQ Twitter Page: <https://twitter.com/NSMQGhana> and the NSMQ YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@NSMQGhana>.
6. The words of Mr Frimpong, the assistant head of Brilliant Academy.
7. See: Academic City College (2020).
8. To realise this industrial-led development vision, Nkrumah's Convention People's Party government gave out a significant number of scholarships including medicine, engineering, agriculture and economics (Ahlman 2017; Armah, 1974; Osseo-Asare 2013).
9. 'Science Centres Policy' (1964–1966). Source: PRAAD RG3/ 1/ 501. Also see: Ghana Seven Year Development Plan 1963/4–969/70.
10. Ibid.
11. Speech at His installation as first Chancellor of University of Science and Technology, 29th November 1961.
In Tuafo (2016, 204).
12. 'Seven-Year Development Programme of Science', 24th August 1964. Source: PRAAD RG3/ 1/ 501.
13. Nkrumah (1955) cited in (Tuafo 2016, 207).
14. NSMQ Ghana (2022).
15. (Maanyiaza 2023).
16. The Daily Mail Ghana (2019).
17. 'Accra Science Centre'. Source: PRAAD: RG3/ 1/ 497.
18. Ibid.
19. Copyright: Cambridge University Library (Reference: PH-Y-03011-U-000-00070). Source: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PH-Y-03011-U/69>.

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