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De-Valera NYM Botchway. *Boxing is no Cakewalk!: Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the Social History of Ghanaian Boxing*. Publisher: African Humanities Program Press. 265 pp. Year: 2019. ISBN: 978-1-920033-56-9.

Reviewed by Karl E. Johnson, Ramapo College of New Jersey.

De-Valera NYM Botchway, a chair and associate professor of the history department at the University of Cape Coast, provides a unique internal view of the Ghanaian boxing legend Azumah “Zoom Zoom” Nelson aka “The Professor,” using an academic approach highlighting the important *social* history of boxing inside a developing independent Ghana. Botchway’s book adds to the growing number of biographies on the boxing legend Azumah Nelson, most notably the 2014 biography by Ashely Morrison titled *The Professor: The Life Story of Azumah Nelson*. However Botchway clearly takes a more theoretical and social scientific approach than Morrison, who covers a more blow-by-blow account of each of his boxing matches and only touches the surface of what Azumah Nelson meant as a national symbol for Ghana and his Ga-Mashie ethnic group. Botchway’s internal knowledge of Ghanaian society is quite striking and his knowledge of the social and political implications of Azumah Nelson’s victories on the world stage for Ghana and Africa politically is notable in this study and serves as an academic approach for such a popular combat sport. However, his audience of readers will also be different than the broader popular culture readership and boxing and combat sports enthusiast.

Botchway’s chapter one “Sports and Modern Boxing” sets the stage with a theoretical and historiographical interpretation of boxing itself. This is meant to educate his academic audience that might not be familiar with boxing and to place the sport as a serious topic of study for the humanities and social sciences for those who might have just viewed it as a barbaric relic of popular culture. According to Botchway, in regards to the more controversial sport of boxing, his biography centers on sports in general: “The institution of sports, which is an indispensable part of human social life, may be seen to encapsulate play(ful) actions and games, but it has tremendous powers which, harnessed and used, could positively or negatively shape society” (p. 1). Moreover, he goes on to point out that sports have a tremendous influence on our societies beyond that just mere games and entertainment. Thus, throughout the book he uses Ghana and the legend of Azumah Nelson to support his argument that boxing served as a metaphor and had enormous positive political, cultural, economic and social power during Ghana’s development in its Post-Independence years.

Interestingly, Botchway goes to discuss boxing traditions as early as ancient Greece and the Roman Olympics, distinguishing his biography from others covering Azumah Nelson. Botchway asserts that during the glorious days of ancient Greece, “professional and amateur male boxers received from their trade and Olympic persuasions and pursuits social recognition and

rewards like crowns of the leaves of olive, laurel, pine, or wild celery and money” (p. 9) He then goes on to point out that in Greece “professional boxing assisted many talented young men of low station to amass wealth that catapulted them upward in the ancient Greek world” (p. 9). When Rome took over Greece in 146 BCE, Botchway uses historiographical based arguments to point out that combat sports in the past were also controversial but popular among the masses: “During the decadent Roman times of bloody and violent sports like the gladiatorial spectacles, boxers fought with caestus, which were heavy thongs bound around spiked pieces of metal. The Olympics thrived for some time under the power of the Romans. Eventually the Roman Emperor Flavius Theodosius I, who was a Christian, considered the Olympics and boxing as pagan and unchristian. He consequently proscribed the Olympics in CE 393” (p.9). This approach by Botchway does help to establish his book as a legitimate social historical study on boxing, Ghana, and Azumah Nelson.

Botchway’s handling of the Ga-Mashie (aka Ga-Mashi) ethnic group in Ghana that birthed Azumah Nelson and had its own culture and history of combat sports is exceptional. The Ga-Mashie interestingly has a direct connection to the African Diaspora returning back to Africa as they trace their history to Brazilian repatriates. Botchway astutely points out that in the 1930s under British colonial rule, the Ga-Mashie had its own traditional combat sport and bare-knuckle fisticuffs called *asafo atwele*:

It (Boxing) was introduced in the 1930s by the British colonial administration. One of the reasons for its formalization into mainstream popular culture in the colonial territory was the administration’s attempts to stem the violence associated with an ancient indigenous type of organized fisticuff sport called *asafo atwele*. Originally created and initiated in Accra, the colonial capital town and the region of the Ga ethnic group, *asafo atwele* was the brainchild of, and popular among, the respected Ga-Mashie division/community in the colony of Gold Coast. Ga-Mashie resorted to the European style when their free-for-all bare-knuckle fight – *asafo atwele* – was banned. In terms of participation and excellence, the Ga, especially those from the ‘slum’ Bukom division of the Ga-Mashie locality, dominated the sport and became a factory of many and great boxers in Ghana. (pp. 17-18)

This traditional Ga-Mashie *asafo atwele* fills a lacuna of why this particular Ghanaian ethnic group and location seemed to produce prominent boxers of national and international attention.

Boxing was used by such slum-dwelling participants, especially in Accra and other urban centers in Ghana, as a tool for social mobility. This popular culture was not simply a continuation of the *asafo atwele* ancient martial art but expanded during both the colonial and postcolonial eras. According to Botchway, “it provided a platform for the negotiation of personal and social advancement and identity, and positive transformation, as strength and skills were exhibited to gain social recognition, wealth and respect. It also served as, and has continued to be, an avenue for making quick money and/or travel abroad, particularly to England, which came with some social prestige, especially during the colonial era” (p.18). Furthermore, these African boxers would get the opportunity to challenge European boxers on the international stage and challenge notions of colonial and European administrative authority and racial superiority pervading the colonial period. Finally, it was used by some postcolonial governments to achieve political goals (p.18).

The history of boxing in Ghana is adorned with the accomplishments of notable world-class champions as Botchway points out. The list includes Roy ‘Black Flash’ Ankrah, British Empire featherweight champion, 1950s; Floyd ‘Klutei the Real’ Robertson, Commonwealth featherweight champion, 1960s; Ike Quartey, Sr., Olympics silver medalist, 1960s; and David Kotei, (hereafter D.K. Poison or D.K.), the first Ghanaian to win the WBC featherweight title in 1975. Azumah ‘Zoom Zoom’, ‘The Professor’ Nelson won the WBC featherweight title in 1984 and added the super-featherweight title in 1988. Nana Yaw Konadu became the African Boxing Union (ABU)15 flyweight titlist in 1986 and later captured major titles such as the Commonwealth flyweight, African bantamweight, WBC International super-flyweight, IBC super-flyweight and WBA World bantamweight (p. 18). Botchway astutely points out that they also helped, whenever they undertook sporting tasks in the name of the country, to stimulate social cohesion by bringing people together as a nation in the spirit of patriotism and support. These boxing fighting spectacles helped to release people from the stress and tension caused by the routine of work, familial responsibility, and various social issues. Some of the Ghanaian boxing legends became philanthropists, built social infrastructure, and set up businesses to provide employment, security, and economic mobility. The social, economic, and political contributions that these boxing legends have made in Ghana are obvious and historical. Yet, as Botchway mentioned, historians have not paid much attention to these elements in the historiography of Ghana (p. 19).

The heart of the biography on Azumah Nelson begins with Chapter 4 “The Rise of the Azumah Legend: The Early Years.” Botchway begins to lay out Azumah’s rise to national and then international acclaim due to his boxing prowess with his seminal win as featherweight champion, and how politicians, in particular President J.J. Rawlings, used his stardom for political means and Ghanaian national pride. In 1984 Azumah Nelson defeated Wilfredo Gomez to claim the WBC featherweight title. Botchway astutely points out after Azumah’s seminal win:

He (Azumah) returned to Ghana, receiving a hero’s welcome at the national airport from government dignitaries and the public, including members of the Adedemkpo Azumah Nelson Boxing Fan Club of Timber Market. He paid a courtesy call on Chairman Rawlings, who registered the nation’s appreciation for his feat. The Ga mantse and his elders received him at the royal court as an esteemed dignitary and hero of the Ga-Mashie nation. He appeared in several television and radio shows and sports programs as a national idol and was the guest of honor at various private and national functions. True to his expectations, his social image and identity were quickly transformed through boxing and a world title. He incarnated an international celebrity. (p. 127)

Azumah’s win over a tough boxing champion like Wilfredo Gomez was made even more spectacular in that he won on Gomez’s home field turf.

The second seminal win was within Azumah Nelson’s two-part boxing series with another future boxing hall of famer: Jeff Fenech. The first match had ended up in a controversial draw, but in the second match Nelson was able to knock out the challenger Fenech in his home nation of Australia in front of a record-breaking crowd. What made this win all the more spectacular is that Azumah had to overcome a number a serious personal challenges, not to mention being older at 34, such as being falsely accused of having HIV years earlier, and losing his beloved wife Beatrice

Nana Tandoh to cancer. (pp. 141-153) Nevertheless, Azumah Nelson was able to persevere, and Botchway points out that the symbolism and pageantry of Azumah's win was just as important. Botchway mentions about Azumah's super featherweight win: "...the victory against Fenech was undoubtedly a product of long years of sustained self-sacrifice, discipline and devotion to his chosen career. These are what make legends.

The crown he wore was a surprising spectacle. The ornament was a West African derived indigenous symbol of political authority. In Ghana, such adornments were customarily worn by chiefs within some of the indigenous polities. So, what was he signifying? Was he telling the world, Fenech, and Australia that he was the chief or king or mantse or ohene of boxing?" (p. 158). The key factor with Azumah's win was the huge international audience watching. According to Botchway, an estimated 120 million viewers in the USA, Britain, France, Spain, Thailand, South America and the Scandinavian countries watched the fight, as well as thousands in Africa and Oceania. It was fought in an outdoor boxing ring and began while it was raining later aptly named, "Rumble in the Pond" (p.158).

Interestingly, Botchway's biography does not stop with boxing, which makes it clearly a social history that covers the years right after Azumah's retirement and how he used his fame and statue for philanthropic purposes, truly making him a Living Legend and hall of fame boxer. Botchway astutely points out in the last section subtitled "Outside the Ring: A Social Activist and Idol" that Azumah Nelson was a national hero, but he was also a man of the people. His accomplishments in the ring during his active days were sometimes used as lessons of instruction to quicken industriousness and dedication in Ghanaian youth. For example, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon, invited him to the University in November 1985 to congratulate him on his accomplishments in boxing. Using the boxer's personal life as lessons, the university professor implored Ghanaian students and youth to emulate Azumah's humility, dedication, and self-discipline to enable Ghana to achieve good results in all fields of endeavor. The academic counselled that Azumah's feats should serve to motivate students to achieve excellence, for the champion always backed up his words with action (p. 206). Moreover, Botchway points out Azumah's philanthropy towards needy children, especially orphans, and Azumah's ambassadorial role and heroic contribution to Ghanaian sports elicited awards of recognition internationally. He donated to several charitable homes for the aged and the ill because his career had earned financial benefits. Azumah desired to bring socioeconomic transformation to the lives of people and communities in Ghana as well. In the end, Azumah Nelson's exemplary and iconic life is an inspiration to many of the youth in Africa, especially Ghana (p.207).

In conclusion, Botchway has produced a book that is unique because of both its theoretical approach and the internal expertise it provides on the African boxing legend Azumah 'Zoom Zoom', 'The Professor' Nelson.' Stylistically it could be smoothed out a bit to shake off its dissertation-like veneer. Nevertheless, Botchway's social historiographical approach does capture another reading audience beyond those who just like combat sports. Indeed, for someone like myself who is both an academic and boxing enthusiast, De-Valera NYM Botchway's *Boxing is no Cakewalk!: Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the Social History of Ghanaian Boxing* is a must read.

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