

Observations of Ghana

A cruel juxtaposition of wealth and poverty

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Last month Simon Wheelan, a correspondent for the World Socialist Web Site, visited Ghana while on holiday. Below we publish reflections on what he observed there.

Ghana, formerly known as "The Gold Coast", is located on the West Coast of Africa in the Gulf of Guinea. It was the first British African colony to gain independence in 1957. Its immediate neighbours are Togo, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. The capital is Accra, the industrial and commercial fulcrum of the nation.

A sprawling, noisy and largely dilapidated city, Accra does not grant the first time visitor a gentle baptism. One is immediately struck by the intense noise and bustle of a city that is home to a rapidly increasing number of Ghanaians and large numbers of other nationals.

Possibly the most important fixture of any road-bound vehicle on Ghanaian roads is its horn. The perennial "Accra orchestra" is a constant companion. The ubiquitous minibuses, known as trotros, beep to let prospective passengers know their proximity and boys riding shotgun shout out destinations to avoid confusion. Taxis in various states of disrepair beep their horns at pedestrians just to tout for business. And this is on top of a taken-for-granted uniform horn usage as a way of capturing defensible space between cars.

Accra's seemingly unplanned and chaotic layout is possibly a result of its Anglophile history. Its Francophone neighbours such as Lome, the capital of Togo, are by comparison methodical and logical in their plan. Accra seems thrown together and this lends itself to an air of confusion and not a little navigational frustration. This may be all about to change, at the time of my visit the central districts resembled a giant construction site with numerous projects in varying states of completion.

Large amounts of building work on a number of prestige projects are going on, ranging from office blocks to house transnational corporations, extensive improvements to the national stadium and new highway construction funded by the European Union. This makes for some symbolic contrasts, such as the Chinese funded and recently completed National Theatre situated in all its splendour slap bang in the middle of the desperate street markets and ramshackle trotro stops.

The yawning chasm that separates the Ghanaian ruling class from the vast majority of the population is painfully evident at every turn. Like elites the world over, the Ghanaian bourgeoisie is not averse to conspicuous displays of wealth. Mobile phones are *de rigueur* in a country where most people lack access to even the most basic necessities.

Mercedes and Lexus abound--chauffeur driven to boot--with designer label clad passengers who show a marked disdain for their fellow Ghanaians. Their very presence as islands of wealth in a sea of despair and poverty is distasteful to the onlooker. The district around

the embassies and consulates is awash with the totems of success--giant satellite dishes, gated driveways that stretch into the distance. On the city periphery there is a newly completed luxury housing estate that would not be incongruous were it situated in Beverly Hills.

In the district of Osu, the social elites and ex-patriots can find all their home comforts and Western goods at prices far in excess of the average Ghanaian's pocket. Supermarkets and restaurants cater to their every need in air-conditioned comfort. There, they are free from the jealous gaze of those Ghanaians forced to accost them in the car parks in vain attempts to sell fish and bananas.

Whilst the elite can purchase imported food from the supermarkets, there is increasing poverty and malnutrition amongst the population at large, due to an near-total absence of reasonably priced basic foodstuffs. This has led to a growth of urban agriculture in the form of small plots of land on the city periphery, or wherever possible between buildings or next to railway tracks. Here workers grow plots of vegetables in order to survive. Such is ingenuity under the pressure to make ends meet.

In sharp contrast to the opulence of the elite's residence and lifestyles, downtown Accra has displays of inequality that are legion--limbless beggars, child polio victims and the homeless do their best to scratch a living amongst the numerous employees of the informal economy.

Vast sections of Ghanaian society can find no gainful employment in the official economy. The exponential growth of the informal sector reflects increasing poverty and recession. Multiple job holding is the only way to survive for some.

Accra street life and culture is extremely robust, yet friendly. Eager vendors hawk everything from pots and pans to food and drink. Armies of women sit on the pavement with their spartan displays of fruit and vegetables, in various states of freshness and edibility, laid out at their feet. Frequently produce is headloaded, not just for convenience but also because of the sheer size and weight of the load.

Some vendors risk life and limb dodging between the traffic, attempting to sell to drivers before the traffic lights change. Coca-Cola cooler boxes every few yards used by street vendors testify to the penetration of the transnationals, even in relatively underdeveloped economies like Ghana's. Their aggressive marketing and franchise operations even extend to establishing ice factories to further the cause of the soft drink--a cold coke is a sold coke.

Child workers can be seen everywhere, only those too young to help or earn a crust are unoccupied. Securing the livelihood of the family requires the input of all household members. Children are often withdrawn from school to help out.

Children take on domestic responsibilities from an early age. Street

vending, errand running or fetching water are routine jobs. Frequently these children suffer malnutrition-swelled stomachs and their umbilical cords are so poorly severed after birth that they protrude like male genitalia from their midriffs.

In cities like Accra, which suffer a woefully inadequate state provided sanitary infrastructure, children frequently do the work of refuse or excrement disposal. Open drains dominate in most areas and assault the nostrils.

Sub-Saharan Africa is urbanising more rapidly than any other part of the world. Migration in search of work is accelerating in Ghana and the vast majority involves movement from the rural interior to the coastal urban areas. Most people are driven by the necessities of survival. Northern Ghana is increasingly semi-arid, as the creeping Sahara leads to a pernicious desertification of land.

For most people the transformation from peasant to wage worker amounts to nothing more than swapping rural poverty for urban squalor, subject as they are to a dispiriting combination of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, lack of facilities and insecurity of tenure. Others find themselves the victims of forced resettlement, as political refugees or due to military action and ethnic unrest. Ghana is home to people from all over West Africa and even further afield. In my short time there I met labourers from Burkina Faso, handicraft salespeople from Mali and Niger, and refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Added to the large numbers of African migrants are sizeable communities of Lebanese, Indian and Chinese families who tend to dominate the commercial sectors of the economy as shopkeepers, middlemen traders and general entrepreneurs. Encouraged to come to West Africa by the colonial powers to act as an inducement to economic activity, they occupy an uncomfortable position between the elite and the subordinate population.

The ruling class utilises the traders to foster economic development, but is able to conveniently scapegoat them if conditions deteriorate. The ordinary Ghanaians are encouraged to view them as competitors who owe no fealty to their society of settlement.

Ghana was the first African country to adopt economic market reform in the early 1980s under the tutelage of President Jerry Rawlings. The structural adjustment programmes dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund involve the promotion of the market and privatisation of state utilities and industries, public sector cutbacks, removal of subsidies and the general retrenchment of welfare services across the board. This has had a detrimental effect upon society, not least with respect to the impoverishment of public sector workers like teachers and nurses. There is evidence everywhere that the traditional middle classes in Ghana are suffering a wholesale collapse of their social position. There is no middle ground between the very basic provisions aimed at the workers market, compared with the vast cost of those products seeking access to the much deeper pockets of the elite. Restaurant and hotel prices know no intermediate level that would have in the past catered to the middle classes. You can either live to the standards of the poor masses or make the leap into the price range of the elite.

When the visitor leaves Accra they are faced with ample evidence of the routine corruption which bleeds the pockets of the poor workers. The armed forces stop commercial and privately-owned vehicles and expect to receive a "dash" (bribe) every few miles on the roads linking major destinations. Drivers of trotros and taxis are expected to present their insurance papers and licence. If the enclosed papers do not contain a small fiscal gift, the driver is frequently the victim of some

spurious charge. One Ghanaian told me, "They give them uniforms and guns and allow them to earn a wage at the expense of Ghanaians." This constant war of attrition upon the pockets of the public by the state continues at border crossings and in most official dealings with bureaucrats and apparatchiks.

The city of Kumasi in the Ashante region shares with Accra all the visible signs of urban blight--malnutrition, underemployment and unemployment, bad housing. Again I witnessed the cruel juxtaposition of wealth, status and glamour amongst profound poverty and want.

Kumasi is home to possibly the largest market in West Africa. It stretches further than the human eye can see. It consists of thousands of stalls containing counterfeit goods and very basic food produce. But its major commodity is "obruniwaru", literally "dead white persons clothing", because some Africans believe the garments to be rendered from corpses in Europe and America. About one-third of the population can now only afford to wear these Western cast-offs. Initially donated by the international charities, the trade is now a major money-spinner for those involved in import and distribution. Those selling a couple of dozen items on the countless stalls can only hope to make a menial income.

It was in Kumasi that I witnessed the state of welfare services at first hand. The inside of the small hospital on the periphery of the market was a sorry display of bureaucratic ineptitude, ancient equipment, overworked staff, inadequate medicine and filthy surroundings. It had the air of a place of last resort for the public, a place where people come to die.

Gathering statistical information regarding the state of social conditions in Ghana is virtually impossible. All government-produced statistics are top heavy with figures for imports and exports; all publications are overtly concerned with the magical quantity of growth and development. Indeed, to watch the state produced news on national television is to witness a cavalcade of bureaucrats and tribal chiefs opening this or that prestigious project or trumpeting their economic enrichment. Snippets of news slip out, however, which serve to damn the vacuous statements of the government.

- Anloga, a relatively affluent coastal area with a population of 10,000, has only three privately-owned cars.
- Ghana's health expenditure per person in 1993 was onetenth of its 1974 value.
- There are 10 times more doctors in urban areas than in rural areas.

Ghana's seemingly impressive growth figures are some of the highest in Sub Saharan Africa, but they have been achieved at an enormous social cost--entailing immeasurable suffering and poverty. The glittering enrichment of the bourgeois has not been shared with the population at large. Rather it has exaggerated the canyon-like social disparities that exist.

In that sense Ghana is a mirror held up to the world at large, a world of pronounced social and class antagonisms. A world where both the capacity to create wealth and the incidence of unbelievable poverty are unparalleled in human history.



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