

Ghana Special



Akwaaba (Welcome) to this special issue of the 'The Navig8or' newsletter. This issue contains my reflections on my recent family trip to Ghana, the Black Star nation. I travelled to Ghana with my wife and two children on 25th August 2008 and we left Ghana to return back to the UK on 9th September, therefore this newsletter represents my initial reflections on Ghana, the country, its people and their culture.

Our family trip to Ghana was primarily motivated by a desire to investigate Ghana as a possible destination for repatriation to Afrika. Given that it was also our children's first trip to Afrika it was a doubly important journey.

I can recall the Chair of the ABDF Ltd, Adisa Djan (formerly Robert Green) telling me that on his first trip to Ghana he commented that Ghana reminded him of Jamaica, only to be told by his colleague, "no Jamaica is like Ghana"!

Certainly, in terms of the natural environment I was also struck by the similarities between Ghana and Jamaica and there were some cultural similarities as well.

Ghana is 238,537 sq. km (92,100 sq. mi.) with a population of 18,800,000

(2000 Census) 21,029,853 (2005 est.). In terms of the major ethnic groups the breakdown is as follows: Ghanaian by Birth/parenthood 92.1% *Akan* 49.1% *Mole-Dagomba* 16.5% *Ewe* 12.7% *Ga-Dangme* 8% (2000 Census) non-Ghanaians 3.9%. With regard to religious affiliation the breakdown is: Christian 69%, Traditionalists 8.5%, Muslim 15.6%, others 6.9%. (2000 census)

Source: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/general/>

We arrived towards the end of the rainy season and for the duration of our stay the weather was warm, but cooler than we had anticipated, however we only experienced one day of prolonged torrential rain.

We were based in the capital Accra and hence many of my comments relate to our experiences in and around the capital. The first thing that strikes the visitor to Accra is the incredible volume of traffic and consequent enormous traffic jams. Add in terrible roads with huge potholes and the craziest driving I have ever experienced (Ghanaians make Jamaican drivers seem circumspect) and you have a memorable (if that is the right word) transportation experience. The final ingredient is the street vendors. The roads of Accra are teeming with men and women, girls and boys selling every conceivable product that can be carried by hand or on head to drivers and passengers in the lines of slow moving traffic. It sometimes seems that half of Accra is stuck in a traffic jam whilst the other half is selling to them. Of course this street selling is symptomatic of widespread poverty, the related scarcity of formal jobs and the still generally poorly developed condition of the Ghanaian economy. Many of the children selling on the streets are not able to attend school due to school fees.

Poverty

There is widespread poverty in the capital and whilst there were large areas of ramshackle, decrepit housing without running water or electricity, juxtaposed with small enclaves of large luxurious housing, the frequency of the intermingling of run down accommodation with large properties was different to anywhere else I have ever been to.

Several people I know who have travelled often to Ghana had mentioned about the rubbish in Accra and they were not kidding. As in most poor countries there is a virtually non-existent waste management infrastructure. Rubbish is just thrown out on the sides of the street and seemingly raw sewage pumped out into the sea and consequently the sea and beaches along the Accra coast are littered with rubbish and detritus. After our first trip to the Accra beach we did not bother to bring our swimming trunks for future trips!

One point worth noting about Ghana is the tremendous role of women. Ghana has a higher percentage of female owned businesses (44%) of any country in Africa (New African magazine July 2008, Issue No 475 pgs 50-51). Women work incredibly hard. It is not unusual to see a woman with a baby tied to her back, a vessel on her head and bags in her hand. In the countryside I saw women carrying huge loads of firewood on their head. It's a shame that Ghanaian men have; to date, not created the political and economic infrastructure in their leadership roles to allow the women of Ghana to obtain proper value from their incredible toil.

That blue-eyed bwi!

Now I have been a little forgetful; because one of the most strikingly recurrent images you will see in Ghana is that of Michelangelo's cousin, otherwise known as the White Jesus. I must admit to being shocked by the sheer number of these images on display in Ghana. Almost every other taxi has his pale face gazing serenely at the gridlocked traffic from the back window. He also looks down benevolently from the hoardings, awnings and signage of many businesses. To cap it all I saw a few roadside stalls that specialised in exclusively selling varying versions of the Caucasian messiah. One signmaker had a six foot portrait outside his business.

Ghana is a very religious place. Not only do the taxis have our melanin challenged friend prominently on display they are also often decorated with some religious slogan or Biblical quote. Many of the businesses also have religious names, be it 'Is God's Wig Salon', 'God's Will Bakery' or 'Jesus never fails beauty salon'. I kid you not, just in case you think I am joking.

I have been present at presentations by Dr Ashra Kwesi where he displayed photographs he took in Ghana, one of which was of a group of small sculptures depicting a Caucasian Adam and Eve surrounded by Afrikan servant type figures, therefore I had some psychological preparation for what I encountered. This White idolatry is also more subtly present and pervasive in the advertising hoardings in the capital. It is highly noticeable that the people presented in these adverts (and particularly where they are young and female) are almost uniformly several shades lighter than the average Ghanaian skin pigmentation. This is the case for large photographic bill boards as well as hand painted business signs. Of course this is just another manifestation of the Afrikan self-hate we find endemic across the globe.

There is a significant Muslim population in Ghana (around 16% of the population) although it tends to increase as one travels to the North of the

country and Christianity predominates in Accra.

Reggae – A fuel for consciousness

The counterbalance to the more damaging aspects of this extreme religiosity is the widespread popularity of conscious Reggae music. As in Gambia, reggae is very popular, particularly amongst the young, and is planting the seed of Afrikan consciousness and Pan-Afrikanism. Thankfully during our two week trip I did not hear any of the 'slackness music' that emanates from some Jamaican artists and have to say that I was very impressed with the Ghanaian reggae DJs' Jamaican accents, although less sure that their vocal mimicry was necessary or actually a good idea. On a broader front these DJs were some of the most sensible and forward thinking voices to be heard on Ghanaian radio.

Politricks

As you may have gathered, Ghana has its strange contradictions and contrasts like any other place. To go with White Jesus and conscious reggae you have a seeming love affair with the USA. I saw countless little US flags decorating the front of taxis and buses. Most were standing in little holders secured on the front dashboard, often placed alongside the Ghanaian flag. I have been told that there is a highway in Ghana named after George W. Bush and the Ghanaian electoral system seems to have been imported wholesale from the US, with primaries and all the rest.

During my visit there was news that the outgoing President Kuffour had been presented with Germany's highest award by Angela Merkel, the German Prime Minister, in recognition of his work for democracy, peace and economic development! When one looks at Germany's record in Afrika and their support of US imperialism it tells you that the Germans smell opportunities in Ghana as well as the nature of the Kuffour government.

As in the US the electoral process drags on interminably and consequently there is a daily struggle by the leading parties to grab the news headlines. The long drawn out process also tends to lead to the political debate degenerating into more divisive areas such as personality oriented arguments and ethnic divisions. With the prospect of oil production coming on line in 2010 these current elections are being fiercely fought, with cynics suggesting that the prospect of all that oil revenue with its attendant opportunities for 'skimming' has whetted the

appetites of politicians and their party apparatchiks.

Corruption is still a problem in Ghana as in many countries around the world. At the top one has the type of corruption oiled by the machinations of transnational corporations which work hand in hand with their political partners to gain access to contracts and markets. It is important to recognize that in corruption 'it takes two to tango' and whilst I have no problem with shining the spotlight on 'the corrupted' or 'recipients' we should equally recognize the role of 'the corrupters' or 'givers'. At the other end of the scale one has the petty corruption of the working poor. The police in Ghana use road traffic checks as a means of supplementing their meager incomes. Using both real and contrived road traffic offences, 'offenders' are offered the option of parting with a few cedis or being processed through the formal justice system. It was therefore quite ironic to see a sign on a bridge at Akosombo which stated that it is an offence to attempt to bribe police officers. The irony was compounded by the fact that as my wife began to take photos of the attractive bridge and surrounds two police officers stationed by the bridge interrupted her and then attempted, none too subtly, to extract a bribe from her. My wife feigned ignorance of the game being played out and proceeded to cross the bridge.

The Chinese aren't coming, they are there!

We have heard much talk of the dynamic spread of the Chinese across the global economy; and in Afrika in particular, and my trip visually reinforced that the Chinese aren't coming, they are there. We were based on the outskirts of Accra very close to the main highway from Accra to Kumasi. The section of the road from the outskirts of Accra leading into the centre of the capital was being totally rebuilt, with flyover etc. by a Chinese company. The construction has been underway for over two years, with a planned completion date of December 2008, however given the pace of work I witnessed and amount of work completed at the time, December 2009 looks a more likely completion date. The site of Chinese managers/supervisors and Afrikan labourers brought to my mind the possibility of a new colonialism in Afrika, if our people are not careful.

The Chinese are also present as settled residents and are making inroads into various commercial areas including the retail sector. The latter, certainly in terms of large supermarkets in Accra, is dominated by the Lebanese who have proved adept at carving out economic territory for themselves wherever in the world they have settled. I went into one supermarket which was almost wholly staffed by Afrikans with the exception of one Lebanese man checking stock and another sitting in a chair watching the women working on the checkout tills.

In contrast, as I will touch on a little later, Afrikans from the diaspora have generally failed to make any significant visible economic impact and this I believe is connected to the generally individualized nature of the repatriation process and

the failure to establish functional networks that produce significant economic investment.

£11 a tin for Ackee – Rahted!

Speaking of supermarkets I had a bit of a traumatic experience when I came face to face with the prices of goods I often buy in the UK. A tin of ackee in one supermarket was 22.80 cedis which based on the exchange rate at the time of £1=2.08cedis works out at £10.96 for the tin! The irony is that ackee grows abundantly without cultivation in Ghana, however it is not consumed by locals and hence the tins in the supermarket were imported and like all imported goods were very expensive. Similarly, a carton of rice milk was nearly £6 and herbal tea was about £3. I would suggest loading a big barrel with these types of good and sending it over to Ghana before repatriating. Given that in 2005 the average income in Ghana was only \$2,200. (**Benjamin M. Friedman** | Monday, December 05, 2005

<http://www.theglobalist.com/printStoryId.aspx?StoryId=4926>) as you would expect, the average Ghanaian does not shop in these types of retail outlets. Also, remember that average is different to median and most Ghanaians earn far less than the average income.

In contrast, any locally produced produce or items are cheap compared to in the ‘West’. Unfortunately due to the economic policies imposed (and accepted by the Ghanaian government) by the IMF, Ghana has removed food subsidies, become a net importer of basic foodstuffs and a dumping ground for polished rice from the US and other subsidized foreign imports. This is sad and crazy in such a fertile country.

Is my porridge coming soon?

My wife and I met a sister from the UK; who had recently repatriated, whilst shopping in a supermarket. She heard our accents and introduced herself. She had repatriated with her husband and two young children a couple of months previous to our meeting. During a few minutes of conversation she told us that she had obtained a job quite easily – she felt that it was due to her ‘Western’ education and experience which was highly valued in Ghana – and had settled down pretty well, with her children enrolled in a Ghanaian school, as opposed to an International school. She said they were enjoying school greatly. The one thing she said was difficult to get used to in Ghana was how long it took to get simple tasks completed. She said everything seems to take a long time and it was difficult to tie people down to specific times for appointments. I cannot talk about the world of work; however I can reinforce the sister’s view from the

point of view of a consumer.

One morning we stopped at a restaurant for breakfast. I should note that there were no other customers in the restaurant, however despite ordering a pretty simple breakfast; comprising, porridge, toast, baked beans, juice, tea and cereal we had to wait for an hour and a half for the breakfast to begin to arrive and when it did the water for the tea was barely warm and the beans were stone cold. All in all we left the restaurant about two and a half hours after entering as breakfast became brunch and ended at nearly lunchtime.

Although this was the slowest service we received it was symptomatic of the extremely slow service we encountered across the board. In Cape Coast I saw the longest bank queue I have ever seen in a branch of Barclays bank. There were more than fifty people queuing for one teller. I will never again complain about the three or four person queues I am used to! Although I think that some of these issues relate to a fundamentally different view of time, in a world in which Ghanaians are economically linked to the external world and where the 'time is money' modality dominates, there is a real need for a modification of this axiological (theory of value, good and worth) perspective if Ghana is to develop a more efficient and effective production culture.

Children who are not Imprisoned

You know you have become too accustomed to abnormality when the sight of normality surprises you. One of the most noticeable aspects of life in Ghana is the freedom of children to move around unaccompanied by adults. It is quite normal to see children as young as three or four walking around, going from person to person, place to place – within relatively short distances, unconcerned by the adults around them who in turn are unconcerned about the children's presence. Now; I am not saying that there are no instances of child abuse in Ghana, however what I am saying is that there was a level of freedom and psychological security enjoyed by the children I observed and encountered that I have not seen in the UK. In the UK, as a man; you feel nervous about even smiling at a child that is not biologically related to you. In Ghana that does not even cross your mind once you have rinsed Europe out of your mind. The only downside is that predators from the West have started targeting Afrikan countries with their weak social, political and economic infrastructure and are preying on children in Afrika just as they do in Thailand and other Asian countries. Some of these beasts work for NGOs whilst others are straightforward sex tourists.

In all the push for development, which is too often modeled on 'the West', Afrikan countries need to work hard to ensure that their children can retain the type of freedom that has long since disappeared for most children in the UK and other places.

The Road to Repatriation

As mentioned early on in this newsletter, the primary purpose for our trip to Ghana was to check it out as a possible destination for repatriation. As a part of this process I was fortunate enough to meet several Afrikans from the Caribbean, US and UK who had repatriated to Ghana. These people had been in Ghana for periods ranging from over 20 years to a couple of months, so I felt we got a good insight into some of the issues to be considered. We also had the opportunity to visit the Star Black Foundation and Fihankra repatriation projects.

Some of the key issues that I took note of upon reflecting upon our discussions with Afrikans who have repatriation include:

- Take off those Rose tinted glasses. This was a consistent theme running throughout and our discussions. Pan-Afrikanism is an ideology born in the Diaspora and taken back to Afrika. Although Kwame Nkrumah has been rehabilitated as a national hero I did not get any sense of widespread support for his ideas and the party he helped to found is not a significant player in the current elections. Just as most Afrikans in the Diaspora do not lay out the welcome mat to continental Afrikans migrating to the US, UK, Canada, Jamaica etc. so the reverse is generally true in Ghana and no doubt in many other countries in Afrika. Ghanaians are still trying to ensure that the various ethnic groups remain knitted together under the umbrella of a Ghanaian identity, therefore welcoming and incorporating a relatively small number of people from the Diaspora is both practically and ideologically not a priority, despite the Joseph project initiative. The blunt truth is that if Afrikans in the Diaspora were more organized and could bring serious resources (financial, human etc) to the table, we would be taken seriously and publicly acknowledged. Until then repatriating Afrikans will remain a peripheral issue and constituency.
- The need for a unified Repatriation Association. Although there is the African-American Association of Ghana (AAAG) and a similar Caribbean association I did not get the impression that these groups were sufficiently active or resourced to perform the role of supporting and inducting newcomers from the Diaspora into Ghanaian life. Newcomers need people they can trust to point the way and help them to avoid making the mistakes made by those who came before them. At present it seems that many people are repatriating in relative isolation and getting along by trial and error, repeating the mistakes of earlier emigrants.
- Land. Of all the potential pitfalls awaiting repatriating Afrikans, acquiring land has got to be the most frequently cited issue. It is not hard to come across painful stories of repatriating Afrikans who have 'bought' land only to find out that the same plot has been sold five times previously or that the

seller does not actually own the land. We met three people who had been living and building on their land for several years, only for a stranger to come onto their land the day before we met them and announce that he was the chief and the actual landowner. Apparently the person who had sold them the land was his brother – who had told the buyers that he, was the chief – and whom the chief had left as the custodian of the land (but not to sell it!). Unfortunately it now looks as if these people are going to be locked in a protracted legal battle to secure their homes. In the case of acquiring land in Ghana the saying, ‘less haste, more speed’ definitely applies. We should always remember that these types of problems are not unique to Ghana. Plenty of Caucasian UK citizens have been stung attempting to buy property overseas in places such as Spain, so be on your guard, get a good solicitor and ensure the land is surveyed and proper searches conducted.

- Language. Although many Ghanaians speak excellent English, one of the best ways to settle into a new country is to learn a local language and Ghana is no exception. Children pick up new languages very quickly and those who I met who had learned an indigenous language had integrated well. A friend who is currently in Ghana for a protracted stay is paying for private lessons in Twi as preparation for future repatriation.
- Work. Although it may be possible to secure a job, depending upon your skills and experience, Ghana presents a great opportunity for self-employment/business creation for repatriating Afrikans. With labour costs – which usually constitute the biggest single cost for any business – being much lower than in the rich world there is the chance to create a business and with it much needed jobs for local people.

Repatriation is not for everyone, but should be for many. There are an enormous range of non-Afrikan people in Ghana and other Afrikan countries; however none that I have seen or met seem encumbered by the fear and trepidation that haunts so many Afrikans in the Diaspora at the mere mention of the word ‘Afrika’. For those who plan to repatriate; we need to organize, individually and collectively, develop a realistic plan with timescales, build contacts with people who have already made the journey and then go for it.

During our time in Ghana we had the opportunity to spend a night at the Star Black Foundation repatriation house as well as to visit the repatriation land in Twifo (they have land allocated in other regions of Ghana) and meet the paramount chief of Twifo who has contributed land to the project. The project has great potential. The land in Twifo is very fertile and the scenery beautiful. Star Black has a team of young, eager volunteers whose consciousness has been raised and who are committed to the project. There are a variety of practical, logistical and administrative issues that need to be dealt with in order for the

repatriation initiative to operate effectively and Ras Kwesi, the UK lead for the project, will be submitting a report to and organizing a meeting for UK based investors to discuss the best way forward.

I should mention how well we were treated by the local people in the compound at Twifo Mampong where the Star Black Foundation repatriation house is based. They were very warm and welcoming and when they found out that our food, which was being cooked elsewhere, had been delayed; made us some porridge and went out of their way to make us feel welcome.

During a trip to Akosombo we had a brief opportunity to visit the Fihankra repatriation project. Fihankra which translates as "they left without saying goodbye" has been led and developed by Afrikans from the US. Unfortunately we were not able to meet any of the founders; however we were given a brief tour by one of the project's staff. We saw the well maintained homes built by Afrikans who had repatriated and were living on the land given to the project and were told of some of the future plans to develop schools and hospitals on the site. The site we visited is about 300 acres and apparently represents just a small portion of the total land set aside by Chiefs for Fihankra. Because I was unable to meet any of the people who have repatriated to the Fihankra site I cannot comment on how well it is working out in practice.

Afrika is still calling us. For spiritual cleansing, for investment, for relaxation, for repatriation. All we have to do to hear her is to clean the gunk out of our ears.

Tendai Mwari

Ifayomi

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