Solidarity manifest in Urban Ghana

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'We believe in sharing, and we want what our God has put in us to be seen'. The entire group nods in agreement with the words of William Mensah, founder of the Pace Setters youth group. Arriving late he is the last member to take a seat in the dimly lit schoolroom that is the group's regular Sunday afternoon meeting place. His audience comprises around twenty inhabitants, all in their early twenties, of Sukura, an impoverished suburb of the Ghanaian capital Accra. Set up last year to combat a perceived growth of social problems in the area, the group has already become renowned locally for its zeal and effectiveness.

Today however, the death of one of their members, a young woman of 22 struck down by a combination of jaundice and the ever prevalent malaria, has cast a shadow over their meeting. Sat on a low stool at the front of the room, the group's chairman Mauli Makoli reminds the group of their duty to 'Do everything possible to glorify the memory of our beloved sister', after which it is decided that every member will contribute 20,000 cedis towards the funeral costs; a sum equivalent to two days earnings for the average Ghanaian. A visit to the residence of the deceased and an offer of their combined services to the grieving family is also deemed appropriate. Funerals are hugely significant in Ghana, and even for the poorest families a failure to give fitting tribute to the dead is an unimaginable disgrace.

This is an all too common activity for the Pace Setters, who originally earned their reputation by removing the mountain of plastic waste that clogs the open sewers lining the streets of Sukura. The wheelbarrows and spades used for this unpleasant task were purchased with funds raised from a local community that lives an almost hand to mouth existence. Populated to a large extent by migrants from the poorer North of Ghana looking for seasonal work following after the harvest, Sukura typifies much of the multiculturism and extreme poverty of modern urban Africa. An attempt however to instil a sense of civic pride in this bleak landscape can be seen in the work of Pace Setters, who count Muslims, Christians and adherents of traditional religions among their members, and the numerous other 'youth' groups and associations whose notice boards are a common sight in the expanding slums surrounding Accra. Whilst some share Pace Setters' preoccupation with fundraising and community work, others such as the neighbouring 'Concerned Citizens Association' focus on combating the spread of HIV, which affects between 3 and 4 percent of Ghanaians, by distributing leaflets and giving public talks promoting abstinence, fidelity, and safe sex. Optimism is hard to come by amongst those working in this field, especially in Southern towns like Accra where infection rates are higher thanks to a more mobile population. Recent UN reports have however tentatively suggested that the national adult infection rate may have fallen last year, and now lies at less than half the level of the neighbouring Côte D'Ivoire. In a region racked with poverty and political instability, Ghana would seem to be a relative success story. Whilst to express this thought to a Ghanaian earning a dollar a day might come across as insulting in the extreme, there does appear to be a genuine pride in the quiet development of democratic culture that has taken place here. The government's attempts to promote a national identity alongside separate ethnic identity are altogether more credible than those of their counterparts in surrounding Togo, Burkina Faso, and Côte D'Ivoire, where recent decades of limited press freedom and restricted rights of political association have resulted in a deeply sceptical populace. In an not uncommon incident, an unkempt man of around thirty who has spent the hot and sweaty hours of the early afternoon leaning against the door of the garage that backs on to the schoolroom, declaims loudly the words that appear underneath the national coat of arms 'Freedom and Justice!', he then adds 'In this … Africa!'. Mauli Makoli is similarly enthusiastic when discussing Sukura's youth, 'They are very patriotic and they want the community to improve, as soon as I sold the idea [of the foundation of the youth club] to my members they brought it'.

Though few question the ruling New Patriotic Party's commitment to fair elections and freedom of expression – libel is now a civil rather than a criminal affair, and the presidential elections of December 2004 were highly praised by international observers– the apparent failure for these great advances to be matched with a significant improvement in the standard of living has led to some discontent. Whilst all six bye – elections of the NPP's first term of office resulted in victories for the government, the last six months has seen the loss of two marginal urban constituencies, one in Accra and a second in Kumasi, the second city. Perhaps it is encouraging however that the patriotism of young Ghanaians seems to have roots deeper than the recent emergence of democracy. When in 1957 Ghana became the first independent nation in sub – Saharan Africa, Kwame Nkrumah outlined a vision of a rising 'lodestar' in a continent. Ghana would act as a beacon for an African renewal. Although the bright hopes of Nkrumah's early years ultimately faded as the economy groaned under the weight of hugely ambitious prestige projects, many young Ghanaians look back at the period today with great pride. When V.I.P, a group whose fusion of traditional highlife music and American – style hip hop is currently hugely popular, swept the board at last years Ghana Music Awards, they dedicated their victory to the memory of their idols, Bob Marley and President Nkrumah. Such a dedication, to Winston Churchill for example, might stand out as odd at a Brits Awards ceremony or Smash Hits Poll Winners Party. Fatawu Watara, a twenty –five year old journalist at the newly formed Zuria FM radio station in Kumasi, echoes V.I.P's sentiments, 'Nkrumah is like a hero to us, we hope his dreams can rise up and be materialised'.

'The development of the nation' is impossible to avoid in urban Ghana. Phone-in programmes on the radio, usually discussing the merits of recent legislation or government proposals, have become phenomenally popular in recent years. Journeys to and from work, in shared taxis or rickety 'tro-tro' buses, are often spent with discussions between complete strangers about the merits of the latest irrigation project or lifted trade embargo. Equally as common however, in fact often in the same conversation, is to hear the dream of a life 'outside', usually in Britain or the United States. Adverts for money transfer services are starting to expand beyond the exclusive suburbs of Accra, and the charity of a cousin or uncle in the UK is becoming crucial to the finances and hopes of an increasing number of families. Patriotic as Ghanaians may be, the desire to improve the life of themselves and their children always comes first. Many more years of peace in Ghana will be needed before this desire will not be better satisfied in London or New York. As Mauli confides, ducking under the doorframe to leave the schoolroom on his way to the grieving family, 'We love the country, but scarce resources is our problem. Outside everything is there for you, more is possible'.

About the author:

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