

My Journey into the Pulse of Ghana



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Foreword

“Readers are attracted to and interested in a wide range and variety of themes. This book has a wide range of awesome theming interlaced with subjects that would intrigue readers. It provides a front row and first hand presentation of cultural dynamics, social constructs, deficiencies and paradoxes in our rural areas that have a telling impact on the lives of people in such areas and at large, the environment.

Ever wondered what life in the countryside is like? Where our food is grown, harvested and how it gets to the markets? What about the lifestyle in such areas, education, culture, challenges? I have had the privilege of working closely with the author in these environments and I must say the experiences notched in this book are explicit without any exaggeration.

From Papase to Jokwa, Tarkwa to Sameraboi, through Manso Amenfi, Ainyinase to New Edubiase, Antoakrom, Tepa and Mankraso. The list is endless and so are the intricate experiences of the people and the environments. You will find on one hand the unity, discipline and respect for the elderly and the very ethics that form society. On the other hand, the havoc of “galamsey” to water bodies, land and other resources, poor road networks, lack of health and educational facilities.

For me as a co-reader like yourself, who is probably just about to begin the journey, I found an impressive connection between the narratives and each page would stir your desire to know what is next.’

Reuben Ebo Fynn

Acknowledgements

It is in place to thank the Ghana Cocobod for the opportunity given us to be on the Cocoa Management Systems (CMS) project between January 2021 and May 2023.

Thanks to Miss Naana Darkoa Ampofo for her role as my very first Supervising Officer under this project.

Dedication

This is to all the women cocoa farmers in Ghana, you brave the odds to make your role in building the Ghanaian economy worth celebrating and to my colleagues during the periods covered under this project.

Content

Acknowledgments

Dedication

Preface

Introduction

Chapter 1- Early birds

Chapter 2- The Strong will continue

Chapter 3- Hard work doesn't kill

Chapter 4- Wading ahead

Chapter 5- Faith

Chapter 6- Travel and see

Chapter 7- Small world

Chapter 8- Chaos

Chapter 9- Slippery Roads

Chapter 10- Comfort zones

Chapter 11- Reflections

Chapter 12- Love is never enough

Chapter 13- Speed and horsepower

Chapter 14- Peace and joy

Chapter 15- Nostalgia

Chapter 16- What goes around

Chapter 17- The immutable

Chapter 18- Great 'unexpectedness'

Chapter 19- The last lands

Chapter 20- "Unsetting" Sun

Gallery of pictures

Glossary

Preface

“Hello, my name is Rita, I am calling from Ghana Cocobod to inform you of your contract appointment, please report for training on Monday at Asankragwa in the Western South Region. I will give you a contact to call on your arrival. Thank you.”

It wasn't a dream. This was the call that set into motion all the activities and experiences I had in many communities across various cocoa growing districts and regions of Ghana, which I intend to represent in these few pages, ones that my memory will permit. I pray my readers will take a stroll with me down memory lane.

It was the afternoon of January 21 2021, Thursday, having returned from a short stay

abroad, I had turned my single room self-contained apartment into an improvised office space from where I worked on my advertising start up business; “Ad wheels Advertising”. My daily routine up till that point was cold calling prospective clients, establishing network with commercial drivers who were key in my advertising model and sometimes taking marketing courses on Hub Spot. That day wasn’t any different or special, the routine as predictable as it was to me and anyone who knew me closely hadn’t changed. I was still in the habit of placing calls to prospective clients and businesses, sending emails though most often I only received failed delivery feedbacks, and of the many that delivered to my targets, only a few ever gave a feedback. Few weeks earlier, the previous year, I had sealed and delivered on my

first advertising deal for a client, hopes were sky higher even to get more deals the following. At that point of my start up, I knew I needed some more capital to expand my clientele and to do more of what I was passionate about; medium scale business advertisement. So badly, I wanted to be an entrepreneur. It was in this posture of mind that I received that call, at last I knew I would be able to raise the needed capital, and I won't have to depend on friends and family for stipends to push my business start-up.

It felt good. Little did I know this experience was going to change and redirect my focus altogether.

I arrived, on the Sunday before the training at Asankragwa, which took off exactly the morning of 25th January 2021.

Teeming, ambitious and ready to work young people assembled to be trained for a week and then deployed to serve the nation in the Cocoa Management Systems, CMS. And that's where my story begins.

Introduction

The Cocoa Management System project sought to collect data on cocoa farmers in Ghana to aid in implementing a pension scheme while developing a database for all cocoa farmers for policy purposes.

At the time of writing of this book, a memoir of my experiences, the team of enumerators have interacted with thousands of cocoa farmers in all cocoa growing regions of Ghana; Western South, Western North, Eastern, Ashanti, Brong, Ahafo, Oti and Central. Anytime we went into a new region, we stopped over at the specific district, after all formalities were done, teams then moved into respective operational areas, and then to individual communities and towns. Our work could not have been done in vacuum. We always worked with some individual

indigenes whose mere presence and roles in their communities helped leverage our work. They included in all cases, Committee Chairpersons, Assemblymen or Women, Chief Farmers (I had never met a chief farmer who was a woman), the CEAs etc. Unless in few cases, we spent two weeks in each district, the exception has been my first operational area where we spent over a month and some cases where we spent just a week. The decider is usually the work load. We travelled in groups always to the regions and hence the districts and sometimes, our journeys haven't been less than eleven hours through the night. Ghana looks small; it actually is small by land size when compared to some of its neighbours like Nigeria and Ivory Coast. So, it often came as a surprise the number of hours we usually spent on a single

trip. The farthest I had been was to Sefwi Adabokrom, a journey which took us over thirteen hours by road. There have been times we traversed over four regions to get to our destination. Tiredness therefore always characterised my arrival in each community aside the fact that, almost always, we arrived between evening to night.

The personalities I mentioned earlier who helped facilitate our work in the communities though not under any obligation, usually helped us with accommodation no matter how humble, food in some cases, and most importantly with organisation of the farmers. Along the way, you will read of Mateen, Kojo Ntow, Ogyiri, Nana Kuo, Abra Kwahu etc. These were all examples of individuals whose roles cannot be exaggerated. We have been the beneficiaries of

countless hospitable families some of whom never even got to know our names until the day of our departure. Talk of departure; it was always an emotional time. Many times, these families who had found a new relative in us, found it difficult seeing us leave. Their children also found brothers and sisters in us, which also made it quite tough many times. . In Bekoase as you will read, our 70 years old woman host was in tears when we left.

They knew that most likely, they won't see us again and that was true, though in some cases we maintained contact with them. In cases where contact could not be kept with them, it was most likely to be due to bad or unavailable network connectivity.

In a lot of cases, I have seen farmers live near impossible habitations; very far away deep in the

forests, few clusters of hamlets in their farms were places they lived, worked, fed, raised families and died. They can't boast of any much amenities though borehole water was often made by load buying companies for them in some cases and rechargeable lamps and solar panels helped light up their homes.

You will read of the challenges, the pain, joyous moments, grief and aspirations of these rural dwellers. However, the life in townships wasn't excluded. It's been a typical roller coaster ride for me and that's what I am inviting you onto.

I invite you to read without prejudice, the lives and cultures of various tribes of Ghanaians and where information seems to border on sensitivity, excuse me, these are the facts as I saw them. Many instances I have had to intertwine their experiences with mine,

It's my honest hope that this book will paint a right picture to help these people come out of their predicaments. Read, but if you can help, it will be a dream come true for me and a host of others.

This attempt to pen down my experiences is in keeping with my philosophy that every individual has in him or her a book to be written, and by that, I don't seek to be technical in my choice of words. All I seek to do is to write down my memories of a project that has changed the lives of many young Ghanaians like me and to share what I believe to be the experience of the typical enumerator on the project.

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The contribution of cocoa as a cash crop to the economy goes without saying that the cocoa value chain employs several thousands of people in various positions of labour and responsibilities for cocoa related activities in and outside Ghana,. Cocoa as a major stakeholder in the Ghanaian economy, contributes about 500 million dollars to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually. Aside the direct capital injection it makes into the economy, it is also indirectly linked with over 190 companies in buying and selling of cocoa and its products.

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Deployment and Operational Areas

The 5-day training ended around 31st January 2021, quite a hectic time, interlaced with very memorable moments we went through with

our training facilitators. We learned many songs, dances and exercises; my favourite being the one in which about five people would be selected at random and made to stand in front of the audience. The challenge was clear and simple but very mentally engaging. They start counting from one, such that, the first person starts with one, the second person continues with two and the third person instead of saying three, must say “bam” since it’s an odd number. Every one of them on whom the odd number falls must say “bam” instead of the number. The fast pace of the exercise was enough to wear an average adult out.

It was fun actually. Bouts of laughter accompanied thunderous handclaps for losing contestants as they took their seats, until the last man standing was crowned winner.

One facilitator in explaining to us the stressful nature of the cocoa industry work said to us that, in the PNDC (military regime) era, cocoa related activities were executed by the military, so it's safe to think and approach our work like soldiers would and this stuck with me when work started the following week.

1

Early Birds

Asankragwa District

Kamaso

That's the name of my first operational area, a very small village of about 300 inhabitants. On the morning of our deployment, we were bussed to our operational areas such that, all the teams working along a particular stretch were dropped off their locations along the way, and since Kamaso was on the Sureso - Samraboï road, we boarded with our colleagues going to Gonukrom, Aggreso, Ataase, Gyaman, Bodiekrom and all villages in the area.

My partner on that first assignment was Kwaku Ohene Djan, aka Lion, a strong young man who was as willing to work as I was.

That morning of our deployment, we alighted on the nearest possible junction to Kamaso, a journey we had to make by foot. In retrospect, I remember it to be about 2km. We trudged on and on, taking one or two stops to rest, admiring the massive and evergreen cocoa and rubber plantations along the forest road. Looking back, I am glad it wasn't in the evening or night; that would have scared the living daylight out of us.

“Good afternoon, madam, how far is Kamaso from here?” that's what we asked her when we passed by the vegetable farm, she had been weeding that midmorning, Abra Kwahu, was her name. Seeing our luggage and our

mats, she was curious to know if we were coming into town to sell some merchandise. We explained our mission to her as brief as a pair of exhausted young men, who weren't even sure what to expect, she could possibly do and on the spot, she directed us to her house to lodge.

Abra Kwahu, as it stood, owned the only drinking spot in the village. After they returned from their farms, cocoa farmers would converge in her house to treat themselves to a cocktail of local gins and after that, indulge in fun games and innocuous teasing matches. You would hear fabricated anecdotes farmers make about each other, mostly for sarcasm, and that was going to be our home for upward of a month.

Work started the evening of the day we arrived, after we had met and familiarized with the technical assistants and the (CEA).

We met great guys like Evans, McCarthy, Aikins, Aaron and others whom we would work with closely along the way. Life doesn't pelt us with friends. In the journey of life, people are planted in our lives as networks.

Our target number of farmers was about 400 and we had planned a fortnight to finish with the chunk of the work. We were on top of all that, blessed with a great supervisor, Naana and her colleague Aremeyaw, who facilitated our work greatly.

Kamaso, like most of the small villages, had an indigenously structured system of governance. There was a Chief or a Mankrado who basically

runs the village. There was a Unit Committee Chairman and there was the Chief Farmer who is the leader of the cocoa farmers in the community. There was in almost all the villages we have been to, a public announcement system for getting messages across to inhabitants, a contraption we depended heavily upon to get our messages across to all the farmers, often manned by the Committee Chairman or in some communities, owned by private individuals. In the beginning, our work station was the durbar ground where all official town activities were held, that's where we met with the farmers for their registration.

Kamaso, like all the cocoa growing communities around where we were privileged to have worked subsequently, was a migrant community. Though it's a Wassaland, the inhabitants were mostly of

Akwapim (a tribe in Eastern Ghana) descent, something I found very curious in the beginning. Meaning that, though everyone there could speak “*Twɪ*”, they also spoke “*Larteh*”, their mother tongue. Their ancestors hailed from Larteh Akwapim and migrated to those parts to grow cocoa on what was mostly hired lands; as time went on though, ownership of lands and farms were shared with them, a sort of an indigenous land tenure system.

Near Kamaso, about 2km away, was Nkrankrom. The name in itself suggests they were people of “Ga” descent, I wasn’t surprised therefore to find names like Klottey, Nii, Naa, Oblittey, Kommey, names you would typically hear among Ga’s there.

“Ga” was a second language as “Larteh” was second for people in Kamaso. The people of Meteameba 1 and 2 were also Akwapims, they were located about 3km north of Kamaso, while the people of Donkorkrom about 2km north of Kamaso were also of Fante descent. This interesting mix of anthropological uniqueness never ceased to be amazing. Kamaso was central to them all, including Betemeso, Ataase and the small communities around. Some of these communities though very small, were practically very self-sufficient; amenities came handy, water, especially, was from wells and mechanized boreholes. In Meteameba for instance, they told me when I inquired, that the water was provided by one of the LBCs operating there and where power wasn’t available, they found solace in Kamaso

especially for the purpose of charging their phones and others. Retail shops were also dotted around enough for anyone to get the most pressing provisions. Life was as simple as it could get, and that's what they got.

There was a basic school in Kamaso, a primary and junior high which serves most of the communities north of Kamaso.

It's on this backdrop that we started work, different tribes of Ghanaians coming together to grow the nation's most important cash crop. These villages, communities, towns and their inhabitants are the pulse of our economy as a nation, and it's into this pulse that our journeys took us.

In Kamaso, we would normally sit at the durbar ground early enough so farmers can meet with

us before they leave to farm. I experienced for the first time how punctuality is a hallmark of cocoa farmers. They wake up very early and return late usually. You would not need to be told of how cocoa farming is tedious, although they don't mind telling you as many times as you will care to listen. The brawn of the men is manifest and you aren't likely to meet a fat full-time cocoa farmer. The women also as they involve in it over the periods, begin to actually compete with the men in stature.

Nkrankrom

As I had mentioned earlier, these people were of "Ga" descent, south of Kamaso on the Sureso to Samraboï road. Our contact person, Bismark, a middle-aged young man was very helpful in organizing the farmers to the chief's house

where we met them. In two days, we had finished with this community. On each occasion after our work, we were treated to very palatable dishes consisting of “*cocoa ase bayr3*” (yam that grows in cocoa farms), some plantains and “*kontomire*” stew. I admit that in a long while, I had not eaten food as naturally tasting as those I had in these parts.

I remember eating a snail; the biggest I had seen. It was so huge that, it had to be sliced in to the soup of bush meat. It was a wonderful feeling and a good way to call it a day on Nkrankrom. Mostly, supper was “*fufu*”, a staple which I don't eat, and Abra Kwahu would normally boil rice for me as a substitute. We normally ended the day with a cold shower from the borehole. Yaw, son of our landlady was responsible for providing the household with water, Gifty, his junior sister

cleaned the dishes, Ohene yaw who happened to be the youngest, idled about the village, occasionally picking fights with kids older than him, returning home in tears.

Donkorkrom

This small community was about 2km upward of Kamaso. The inhabitants of this small community were of “Fante” (a Ghanaian tribe) descent, a community of few families, one shop, a public announcement system, a basic school and others. I also observed that they also have a mechanized borehole for their water needs. We met a very instrumental family man, about middle age, who helped us a lot in getting the attendance of farmers. I would use a few lines in this book to tell my readers about him and

how he got his alias, as I was told from his own account. His name was “*ma me ngyewo*” to wit, “let me help you”. According to him, he was a very good footballer during his basic school days and during matches. His catch phrase was what he’s called by, during matches. He being an attacking midfielder, he would do all he could to draw the attention of defenders to get a pass of the football, but due to his small size, it was occasionally difficult. This made him resort to saying aloud to teammates during play to pass him the ball, which he would say in “twi” as “ma me ngye wo”, in essence telling the holder of the ball to pass to him so he could be relieved by scoring a goal, which he often times did. This narration he gave me was confirmed by those natives who happened to be around then.

One of the days during a break from work in Donkorkrom, I noticed that the basic five class was unoccupied by a teacher, they had resorted to playing around so I visited their class to interact with them. This was the first captivating experience I have had with rural education. I interacted with these 10 to 13year olds, numbering about 25, for close to an hour while their teacher was away. Teacher absenteeism was a normal event in the rural areas; they lived far off because there aren't any good accommodations in these villages for them, while some also can't stay because of bad network connectivity.

I introduced myself to them as I should, spotted an English language reading assignment on the writing board and invited them to take turns in

reading it aloud, so as to test their reading skills. I was disappointed but could not blame them. I decided to test their knowledge in cocoa farming and that's where the class lit up, I was overwhelmed with how much kids of that age knew about cocoa farming. They explained in details how pollination was done, alongside pruning, mass spraying and other productivity enhancement programmes. One girl spoke about the whole process of growing, harvesting, fermentation and drying of cocoa beans until bagging and selling. It's one thing for kids to engage in their parent's trade during weekends and holidays and another thing for them to be deprived of education, and hired as farm hands on cocoa farms as a form of child labour.

Without exempting cocoa, child labour is prevalent in all sectors of agriculture and even in the fisheries sector. This is a present threat to their lives and future prospects.

Metameba

This community was about 3km north of Kamaso, an equally small community, without power. It lingers on my mind till now as I write this memoir, how they were able to cope. This introduced me to the innate power of man to adjust to seemingly adverse conditions, something that would be experienced many times along the way.

Also, places like Metameba opened my eyes to the blessings of basic necessities we take for granted.

As I mentioned earlier, this community was likewise an Akwapim community, fewer farmers lived here, so we did not need more than one day in there. We stationed at the Pentecost church building while farmers poured in to be registered, smoothly. An incident I remember was that during the process, the chief farmer came around to do his registration; a slender and soft-spoken man. After he was done, he told me about his wife who was also a farmer, but unfortunately, was unable to come to the venue due to ill health. She had stroke, too bad! I agreed to go with his son to register the woman at home. I could remember that from Meteameba to their farm house was more than 2km; the path to the house being the hardest yet I had plied on motorcycle. It was both scary and dangerous riding on the side of a hill seeing the depression

below, under cocoa trees, while almost slipping on cocoa leaves. Meeting and registering her opened my eyes to so many aspects of our work and the industry in general. She had suffered a stroke and was convalescent yet she was so nice to me, obviously in appreciation of my efforts and aside registering her, I had a little chat with her about her condition, and I realised the painful effort it would have taken to take her for check up at the hospital in faraway Kumasi.

Many questions passed through my mind as I left her, never to see her again. When I gave her a card, I knew in my heart that one day she will look back and smile, and say a word of prayer for the young man from Cocobod who came around to see to it that she gets what's due her of the contribution she had made before she took ill.

Medical delivery drones

Towards the end of 10days, we had very little to do, close to 90% of our work had been finished and the few left were trickling in sparsely. At this point, where we lodged was known to everyone around and so on occasions, some farmers who for various reasons were not available when we had gone to their communities, would come to where we stayed to be sorted out.

One day, I started having symptoms of cold and fever. I tried managing it with a couple of antihistamine tablets and then some lime and warm water but to no avail. I visited the CHPS compound to see the nurse and she advised I see a doctor. Around this CHPS compound, one

day while I was taking a stroll, I noticed a group of kids and teens rush towards the school field in a sort of a frenzy over what until later I realized was a drone that had delivered some medication for use at the health facility. The children obviously not knowing what the drone could be or even if they did, were so fascinated by it, took to their heels to satisfy their curiosity.

I am unable to end this chapter without throwing a bit of a light on the beautiful scenery of forests and landscape that communities like Kamaso and their environs had. Oftentimes during my evening jogging through the forests, I never ceased to admire the aesthetic glory of the green, red, yellow and brown resplendence of the cocoa, rubber and teak farms dotted around the mountainsides. This was in stark contrast with some communities which have permitted the

destruction of their environments through illegal mining. This beautiful vegetation inspire hope in me that, all is not lost in the fight for preserving our natural forest covers.

Then also, back in Kamaso, I had seen an improvisation for the first time, the use of solar powered mobile telecommunication masts, for mobile network. This meant that network was occasionally unavailable during rainy times and always during the night till early or sometimes midmornings. I experienced the same in Kumaho in Goaso district and Antwiagyeikrom in the Nyinahin district. One day it rained, according to the electricity company, one of the community's transformers had developed a fault, and this led to an outage lasting well over seven days. I had never experienced anything close to that in my adult life, something which in the

beginning was a bit hard to take. We relied on our power banks for charging our tablets. During that period, I walked with a student while on his way back home from school. Our conversation ended up on the issue of the power outage. He told me how in the past the power outage lasted over a month on various occasions. *“You are even lucky it’s just few days this time.”* *“Well, it could have been worse”* was his response.

Many times, we take things for granted because we insist on the most favourable, that’s ok, but while we aspire, it’s healthy to also appreciate what little we have now. Little is better than none, much is better than little, but if all we have is little, it is much if only we appreciate it and aspire for more.

2

The Strong will continue

Anyinase Distric

We got to Anyinase by afternoon, about 2hours from Asankragwa and settled town for the night in the offices of Cocoa Health and Extension Division (CHED), while we awaited our instructions the following morning.

You could feel the suspense in the atmosphere since no one had an idea what laid in store for them the following day with regards the sort of community they would go next.

Early the next morning, the IT teams set up our new working platforms while the supervision teams placed us in our operational areas.

I was placed in an operational area called New Adeambra. I didn't know what to expect. We

were four deployed there, and so it was necessary that we were split among the various communities in that catchment area, hence, I was allocated Anloga and Dokyekrom; two small villages. These two communities were close to each other so I settled in Anloga to start work, but before then, let me tell you about the journey from Anyinase to Anloga.

What started as a day with showers of rain struggled to see a clear sunny sky by noon when my host, Kojo Ntow, arrived to pick me up, from Anyinase. We took off on his motorbike soon after we bought some bottled water since according to him, there wasn't pipe borne water where I was going. Few moments earlier, my heart had skipped a bit when he told me that aside pipe borne water, electricity was also

unavailable. Truth hurts; I was disappointed at what was to befall me. The journey started normally, until after about 20 minutes into it, we branched from the asphalted road onto the newly graded untarred road under construction. Aside from the untarred nature, the laterite coated road had been wet due to the recent rain. Also, the undulating landscape made it very difficult to traverse more so on a bike carrying two heavy adult males.

Many times, I had to alight for my rider to descend or ascend a hill while I walked behind, boot muddy, bag pack behind me. Back at Kamaso, I had brought much more personal items than I needed to the field so before coming to Anyinase, I had gone home to drop some off; most of the items, leaving just enough to fit into a backpack., it was far better to travel light.

Soon, my colleague, Sam whom we had left behind, also caught up with us along the way. We helped our riders remove clogs of mud in the chains of their motorcycles since it threatened to topple the bikes, called "okada", if we insisted on riding that way. I tried to resist the temptation of asking the rider, "are we there yet?" each time we get to any small community along the way. Little by little we trudged on, until we got to Anloga.

Anloga

When I arrived here, I knew I didn't need a soothsayer or anything close, to tell me what I had signed up for;, the huts spoke to me, the cottages whispered, the solar contraptions that give power also screamed at me, and the message was clear; "it won't be a walk in the

park for you here” while my mind also whispered to me, “hurry up and get out”. “The more time you spend here, the more depressed you are likely to be.”

Anloga and its attached community, Dokyekrom, which I was responsible for, was full of farmers, predominantly, cocoa farmers. I can estimate that about 200 people lived in those communities, counting the adults only.

The same evening, I met with the elders of the community to introduce myself and vice versa. Characteristically, work doesn’t wait till the day after we arrive, we hit the ground rolling. As a sign of respect for the leadership of the communities where we go to, it’s usually advised to fall on the elders and the chief if any, to announce your presence and intentions even

though they are often times already aware and expecting. This is an important security measure. It was a restless first night in Anloga, I felt like the count of Monte Cristo in the dungeons, only that he developed a night vision from his prolonged incarceration in the dark but I hadn't, though I needed that badly in the pitch-black room I had been sharing with my host. The solar contraptions managed to charge my phones, so I could at least call a couple of people to tell them about my safe arrival, I managed some sleep that night; a dreamless one at that.

The Boy Called "Bush"

The following morning, my work started. My strategy was to visit the farmers in their hamlets and homes instead of waiting for them to gather at a specific place, that's because of the very

dispersed nature of the settlement. My work would be delayed unnecessarily if I did not change my strategy. On the first day, I got the indication that it worked.

That morning, my host called a 7year old boy who lived around, by the name "Bush". I inquired as it's my nature to do, and he explained to me how the boy came by that name; his mom delivered him in the forest while traveling to the district hospital miles away on motorcycle. She succumbed to the exigencies of unavailable health facility in Anloga.

This is the story of a lot of rural Ghanaian people as I was about to discover subsequently. Often, I see in the news, how women in labour have to be carried through the forests, and over rivers to access a good labour ward. Maternal mortality is

still unpardonably rife in our country at this time and it's rather unfortunate. While it is so, we can only hope for a bright future ahead for the victims which we all are, one way or the other.

The Art of The Terrain

Terrains and their skilful manoeuvres are key in every tactical activity, that's what Sun Tsu teaches in his book, the Art of war. I mentioned earlier that, realising the nature of the environment in which I found myself, and the dispersed nature of hamlets of farmers, I soon changed my strategy from waiting on farmers to moving to farmers, this meant that my terrain was about to change.

Most of the farmers lived in cottages on their farms on hilly areas, connected by paths quite

difficult to traverse by motorcycle, yet impossible by foot due to their distance.

Speed and precision were key to our safe movement while being able to attain daily targets.

Most of the paths which passed under cocoa trees meant that, we had to ride almost bent in half to avoid hitting our heads into branches. Many times, we traversed hillsides, looking into the steep depths beside us, too late to entertain fear. I had to soldier on and that's what I did.

By the second day of my stay, I had finished almost half of my task. This helped me to relax a bit more and also pay a visit to my colleagues who had stationed at nearby New Adeambra and Abasskrom few kilometres away. We shared and deliberated on our common

challenges and achievements, considering the way forward.

Later that evening, a Wednesday, myself and my 3 colleagues, including the CEA, Mike, sat for a heavy meal of “banku” and grass cutter soup. It’s easy to discount the impact of such gatherings if you haven't had the need for one, but for us at that time, It meant heaven. It was a glimpse of light in the literal darkness we found ourselves. There is security in company. We knew that, we were not groping in the dark alone, we had the company of each other and that felt great.

Thirsty For Accident.

The following day was a beautiful Thursday, as usual, quite too sunny at 8:00am. In other parts of the Ghana, I remember that the sun rises quite later than it does in the west, that's just the earth

doing business with the sun, depending on where you are. I had little to do that day so I woke up quite late still bearing the body aches of the busy day before. I paid a visit to a farmer who for his own political interpretation of our project, obviously erroneous, refused to show up for the interview. Illiteracy is a disease and knowing fully well how it incapacitates the cognitive abilities of its victims to make sound decisions at times, mischievous politicians depend on it to drive their propaganda through. Because it was very bright and hot that day, I felt the need for a chilled drink, a luxury in that village, in fact there wasn't any there. It could only be found in a village nearby so I asked a young man, about 16 years of age to get me a can of coca cola.

After about an hour, he curiously hadn't returned and that was very abnormal so I went to check at his home to find out the probable reason for the undesirable delay only to find him sitting, head bowed, bleeding in various portions of his face. His upper lip and nostril being most affected; he crashed.

In fact, motor accidents were not a rare sight in these villages where they are the chief mode of transport, young men have had their limbs amputated and some have lost their lives through motorcycle accidents.

Care could be taken more to avoid some of these incidents while the young people who act under the influence of drugs must learn to value their lives and future.

My alarm was palpable when I witnessed the sight before me, and I felt very guilty as he would not have had the accident had I not sent him.

Immediately, my instinct took hold of me, and I remembered that I had brought with me a first aid kit from home, I rushed for it and ministered some methylated spirits and some gentian violet as well to his wounds while we decided what to do next.

While I was alone in advocating for him to be sent to the health facility several miles away, everyone who looked on was of a contrary opinion. *"Oh, don't worry he will be fine"*

"He only needs warm water and a Shea butter massage."

"We will take him to the town herbalist". The naysayers, who by experience and practice knew

and trusted their options, had their way and I succumbed grudgingly to them.

Later that evening I checked on the boy and to my surprise he was far better. Some of these villages have as long as their history permits, adopted and adapted to the hardships around them. They don't wait for the unavailable paramedics to nurse them. They have learned to nurse and cure themselves and it works for them. They are able to manage snake and scorpion bites, fractures, cuts, and other health emergencies.

After all that, when we gathered together, the young man's kin teased about how he had taken a fall while others recounted vivid stories about how they had their share of accidents, with an unimaginable glee.

That's how my thirst for a drink led to an accident that taught me another aspect of the livelihood of the people among whom I dwelled.

The day after the incidents mentioned above was a cold one. It seemed to me that it had rained somewhere close to Anloga and that made the humidity lower on our side. I had gone to the next village to help two of my colleagues complete their work among other things. On returning from there, I went to a friend's place to charge my phone and have a chit chat as we often did. This time it was around the subject of football and who was better, Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi, since we both agreed it was the former, we didn't spend time arguing.

When I left his place, I saw a group of young men grilling some meat on fire, what attracted

my attention wasn't the act of grilling but the nature of what was grilled, it didn't look like a mammal or a bird, but it had a rope like nature; a reptile!

My subconscious mind caused my steps to be redirected to them only to confirm what I had suspected already to be a snake.

The young men were grilling a snake for lunch! For my exotic mind, that singular act should pass for news headlines but to them their joy was obvious and I was the only stranger in their paradise, but I didn't fall for what according to them was the best meat anyone could eat.

The Village Teachers

The guys who cooked the snake became my friends either out of my curiosity for their unique appetite or something else; their profession.

I think it's because they have been able to stay and work in the community for close to 4 years when I first met them. They were teachers.

The following afternoon I strolled to their "quarters", a makeshift clay structure that pretends to house them, and we had a lengthy chat, which started around the farming activities in the community, general issues of life and sports, religion among others.

We touched on various themes and landed on their expertise; education. They spoke at length, naturally, about the challenges facing them and how that they never expected to find themselves there in the first place.

Education as a matter of fact, is lagging in these parts of the country, faced with many challenges, part of which is financial. Most kids were unable to enrol in school. They preferred farming

activities and sometimes, parents preferred using them on farms even though stakeholders strongly insist against that practice, its child labour. Since communities were widely dispersed, the kids have to walk miles to get to school, and that's very demotivating, saying the least. I must also add that, these two young men were the only staff teaching over 100kids in the primary school, one of them being the headmaster.

They told me how difficult it was for majority of the kids to write the alphabets when they first got posted there and how it took them their first two months to teach them the basics before they could even start dealing with the syllabus.

Another challenge they shared with me was the use of vernacular in school. Aside their local dialects, majority of the kids were handicapped in

the use of the official English language and that made teaching very hard for them. How on earth can a teacher teach English language in a local dialect?

How prepared are these disadvantaged kids to compete with their colleagues on the global or national level? Not all questions have answers, I agree.

Soon it was time for us to leave as we have finished with a substantial amount of our work, say ninety eight percent. We decided on Monday 29th March to move to Anyinase, back to our district to await our next move. Easter was close. Since we were about 5, including Mike, the technical officer, we hired 4 motorcycles since my host had one as well. We took off around 9:30am for a journey of close to two hours. Me

and Kojo Ntow, my host, had been leading the entourage of motorcycles for majority of the journey. Normally, we stopped and waited at various points when we realised that our colleagues are too far behind, we kept doing that anytime we couldn't see them behind us at all; we waited for them to catch up.

After waiting for almost 15mins, they still didn't show up. Luckily for us, we were in a good network connectivity area so I called Mike and he told me they had an accident.

They had crashed with their motorcycle, sustaining various degrees of bruises to various parts of their bodies, arms and legs.

Such an anticlimactic moment for us all at the district office where we had arrived. Samuel took charge and administered first aid to them, Nana being the most hurt among them. Thanks to God,

the first aid sufficed the bruises and cuts they sustained.

That afternoon, became the end of our first phase of work at Anyinase for me, the experience was great and toughening and I could only look forward to the next challenge with full assurance that I am up to the task.

3

Hard work doesn't kill

New Edubiase district

I am not too sure about the paraphrasing but I am aware of a proverb in Ewe (a local Ghanaian dialect) which can be translated to the effect that, “*Hard work doesn't kill anyone*”, maxims as this teaches you in few words what experience will teach you in a long time. We had been on break from the end of April back to Accra to a daily routine of sleeping, eating and my regular lucubration.

I had just finished with the novel I was reading, “*for whom the bell tolls*” by Ernest Hemingway. The Villain of the story, Jordan had been killed, creating such an anticlimactic ending to the hitherto upbeat narrative.

Prior to 5th June, 2021 which was the date for our redeployment, I had gone to get some books at EPP books; one was the “*Mayor of Casterbridge*”, Henchard had in stupor, sold his wife and baby at a parlour. Eighteen years down the lane, his rise to gubernatorial office had plummeted right after he reunited with his estranged wife, Susan and daughter. He was bizarrely awakened to the fact that some lives mistakes cannot be undone. Try as he may, he couldn't redeem his lost image neither could he gain back his family because his baby had died months into his notorious sales transaction and the young lady who he thought was his eighteen years later was not actually his. He died.

Finally, deployments were made and I found out that I was going alone to Kwaoso in the New Edubiase district of Ashanti Region.

The Social Structure

Remarkably, it could be observed closely, that a generally formed stratum of our social make up as project colleagues was becoming evident. Strangers had become colleagues under the project, colleagues were fast becoming close friends and, in some cases, lovers, that's a predictable nuance of the life of young people whose financial positions have been improved.

This became clear when we arrived in New Edubiase as colleagues who had not met in the past months had brief reunions in the recesses between finding their gadgets, waiting on instructions and packing their luggage into buses waiting to tow us away to our various operational areas.

By now, I had gained notoriety for my dress style; I dressed for comfort and for ease of movement. I dressed with one thing in mind; flight. I jokingly told my colleagues each time they asked what my reasons were, that I dressed that way so that in case I had to run from any danger, I could easily do that. I was always seen in shorts, sneakers and a vest.

I, with about seven other colleagues were moved to the Subin operational area, where I was attached to a community named Kwaoso to work with close to hundred farmers. I arrived late that showering evening to an already arranged room in the home of the chief farmer of that community.

Tiredness and hunger have a way of throwing me into fits of sub consciousness such as I experienced that evening of my arrival. I mumbled some words of acceptance to their hearty reception, I can't be blamed. I took a bath. Did I? I chose to call my host "Papa" because that is how I heard him being referred to.

Kwaoso

By now, I knew, by experience, that most cocoa growing communities were migrants from other regions of the country and this place was no exception. From initial interaction with my hosts, I knew that this village was predominantly made of families from the Ekuapem Bosomase in the Eastern region of Ghana. Some too had roots from the Gomoa area of the Central region.

Two likely situations serve to disperse families this way; hardship and a promise of greener pastures. I suspect that in the early twentieth century, the equivalent of migrating to seek greener pastures abroad, played out similarly in the non-cocoa growing areas to the cocoa growing areas of Ghana.

A grandparent, who in his youth several decades earlier, on hearing of good work prospects in another area of the country, moves from his home and makes a new home accompanied by his equally young wife and children and nephews, to the new-found land to work as labourers in a cocoa farm part of which he later owns as payment for his years of service. He cultivates it till he was too old to continue, then he passes it unto his children and they unto their children. This trend goes on until in response to

“how long have you been into cocoa farming?”

we get a response of 45 years and above from them. Life is a chain of successively interlinked events. Children don't only look like parents; they also work like parents in a lot of cases.

Conversations with “Cece”

On the day following, I decided to start working. I had done it for Papa and one of his wives; he had two. The first one was fondly referred to as “Cece”. I have a soft spot for geriatrics so I had great conversations with her in my two weeks stay in their home. She had no children of her own yet she was such a sweet personality and I always fell for the temptation of calling her by her name each time I passed by to or from my room. Some people are shamed for ordeals they didn't invite on themselves; one such is childlessness

in couples, another is late marriage. Not so in the rural settings of the country, at least not in the cases I experienced, which I am relating to my readers. She looked so content, in her late seventies, maybe in obvious resignation to her fate or maybe she found hope in her faith as a Christian.

No one invites hardship knowingly to themselves, so when you see someone going through a difficulty, it's not the right of humanity to play the role of a judge. In the past few days, I have learned to tell myself that "*God is the judge*".

Ogyiri

He was a 33year old family man I met in Kwaoso the first night I went there. Duly, I should say he's my God given help in the locality; his care,

altruism, sacrifices of time and culinary services of his wife and his Christian conviction often expressed verbally. There was something strange about his instincts or maybe his presentiments, that is, twice during my stay there, he told the farmers in the village who had been expecting rain that it was about to rain. It did rain on both occasions; first at night and second on a hot afternoon. I think his wife may have seen this and many more reasons to call him "*Onyankopon ba*" to wit "*son of God*".

Ogyiri had three sons at his age, a feat which was in fact very common placed in these parts. It was quite easier to raise a family in the villages and by the way, there was more motivation to do that. In these parts, marriage rites are not as expensive to perform as in the big towns, also

housing is not too stressful to come by. Life is simple in the villages. It takes far less to construct the kind of building they live in; laterite bricks, no painting was needed, a simple plan, often two bedrooms and detached kitchen and washroom. That was all an average indigene required.

The Village Drunkard

There are some characters that run through every fabric of society; the talkative, slothful, the hardworking, the busy bodies, the drug addicts and often, the drunkards. In Kwaoso, on my first day of work there, I readily noticed one such character. “*Kontonkyi*” was there to register as a cocoa farmer just as everyone who was present. His countenance making the first impression on

me of his spirituous escapades that morning or the night before. Some of the farmers present bid him to use a nose mask since if you know, he did "*blow fuse*" as people conversant with such things are fond of saying. We had become friends to the amazement of the people in Kwaoso who often chanced on me and Kontonkyi having little chit chats here and there subsequently. He was of the habit of giving me gifts of avocados.

Saturdays were for farming and orange hunting with Ogyiri. That morning on Saturday, a week after I first went to the village, the chief farmer's son, Charles, had the night before, told me he was going to the farm the next day to plant maize. All along, for reasons best known to them, the people I associated with in the village, falsely assumed that I was of a bourgeois class,

when on the Saturday morning I asked to join them to farm, they were amazed. I went with them. We had a good time planting the maize on a small piece of land bordering their Cocoa farm. My time on the farm was interrupted by a call from Reuben Fynn, my then Zonal leader which saw that I had to return home to produce a report on some farmers necessary for progress of our work, but that wasn't until after I had done my part of the work well enough.

That evening, Ogyiri and I had gone orange hunting after eating a good portion of “*brodze ampesie*” (boiled plantain), my favourite actually. He loved oranges as much as I did but what seemed like luck had eluded us so we returned home sullenly with the resolve to try another place on the next day.

The Vicious Cycle

Poverty results in lack of access to education and lack of education results in poverty. Poverty results in social vices like teenage pregnancy and these in turn lead to more poverty.

Life in the rural areas as I had seen so far was replete with some of these phenomena, a sort of a reinforced feedback loop. Condition 'A' of lack of education due to poverty causes 'B' of poverty and 'B' reinforces 'A', and it continues as a vicious cycle of unending poverty. The rich stand a higher chance of becoming richer while poverty causes more poverty. The generation of the rich are more likely to be rich than the generation of the poor are likely to become rich. Some say poverty is a mind-set and riches is a mind game, that's a school of thought I am not averse to necessarily.

Kids in the rural communities mostly go to school in nearby communities by foot sometimes spanning two miles or more on some occasions.

Adversely, this means that while their colleagues in cities go to school as early as three years, these kids since they are unable to go to school under the prevailing circumstances, wait till sometimes around seven years to begin if at all.

Aside the problem of the remote nature of educational facilities, another problem I have observed is that, the rate of dropping out from school indicates that most of them don't go past junior high school thereby creating a demotivating factor for the young ones.

There is simply little or no motivation to further one's education in these parts.

Time flies very fast and fly it did this time around so much so that, I tried to figure out if it's because days have become shorter and nights longer as I have some time ago learned in what used to be called environmental studies back in basic school.

Friday 18th June and I had to say bye to a place I had so far been very much at home, parting ways with the nice fruits Ogyiri and I hunted together amidst his reference to me as Master each time and my disapproval of it,; my reminder to him every time that my name is Nelson, my daytime strolls and relaxation under the beautiful shades of cocoa while I had completed the *Pilgrims Progress* by John Bunyan, the guilt ridden good mornings of my village drunkard friend each time he made an

unavoidable encounter with me in his drunk state, the sound of Cece calling me out each time "*krakye*" (officer) and our homely conversations about life. One day she had asked me about my family, in response to which I showed her pictures of them, her admiration clearly showed on her beautiful face.

She was very hard on the little girls; her grandkids, that lived with them, when it was time to do their homework. It was her time to make sure there was no tomfoolery and rightly so.

As time went on, I was hopeful to meet many more such, much more "Ogyiris", some more "Kontonkyis", as there was more to our work than we had done so far.

4

Wading ahead

Obuasi District

The journey from New Edubiase to Obuasi was uneventful as expected. However, since we went in batches some of us being the last to arrive, did so close to 7:30pm to be welcomed by a wet weather, a large group of colleagues hassling to sort out what next, some already embarking or having embarked for their operational areas, while some beginning to sort out where to lay their heads so they can move the following morning. If there is something of the nature of a planned

Pandemonium, the environment that evening doesn't fall short. Planned not in the sense of intentionality.

On the 19th of June, the day after we arrived at Obuasi, at around 3pm, I had arrived at Mile 18, my new community. We had hired a bus from the district office in Obuasi so that we would drop off our colleagues as we went along. I was with Christine, Doreen, Ekua, Gladys and KK, while KK was the first to alight, I was the second. The welcome reception was no light and no network, but by now as my readers will be familiar, Mile 18 won't be my first community with same condition. I had been there before and unfazed this time. This occupation had the tendency of altering your conventional idea of comfort and further leaving you bereft of any defences from your natural instincts to rebel against anything that contrives to move you out of your comfort zone. Usually, anytime we were deployed to a new operational area, the first inquiry we made from

our resident colleagues before we even went there was if there was network and power, to which some, not willing to hurt our feeling tell us half-truths. They went like *“oh, yes, there is network at vantage points” “the network is not very good, but if you stand on the school park, you will get good connection”*

In many communities, the last statement was true, no matter how bad the network in a community was, as long as there is a school and a playing field, one was likely to get some there at least to make calls and respond to texts. This worked for me many times.

I had since ceased asking that, knowing of course that my foreknowledge won't change the fact of the prevailing conditions, secondly, people

were born, bred and live there. So, what's the point?

Often, the gentlemen among us secretly and sometimes openly to each other during our conversations extolled our female colleagues for their sheer strength in taking on these challenges and overcoming them, it takes a special kind of lady to endure what they did, they soldiered on when others gave up and quit. Characteristically, they could not possibly travel light like us the males, they moved often with more luggage, some cooking items and others while I had met guys who travelled with just a hand-held luggage.

Adaptation and Survival

Imagine having spent all your life in the cities of Ghana; average to good road network, 4G internet connectivity, easy access to transport to whichever corner of the city and at whatever time of the day, fast food, assorted dishes if you will. And then imagine also that, within a very unpredictably short time, you have to switch to conditions exactly opposite those you were used to; no light, no power to charge your phone batteries, and by extension no online activities, no Facebook, no WhatsApp and no Twitter or YouTube. Imagine it, try hard enough. Imagine not being able to reach your family not because you don't want to, but because you just can't. Imagine that to be able to access even the weakest of signals, you need to hold your phone up high and roam around or tie it to a tree

somewhere. Imagine drinking water only to risk having diarrhoea, or typhoid. You may only imagine it, but to my colleagues and I, this was our reality and the ability to adapt fast enough came very handy.

In the beginning it wasn't so, it took months of repetition to get used to it, or something close to that. We learned to adapt to life in the most unlikely and unfriendly places.

Sometimes, we are sent to communities singly, not in pairs or trios. That meant you had only yourself to depend on. You had to face your insecurities alone, you had to stay strong for yourself and you had yourself to defend if need be. You had to survive by all means. This experience taught some to survive accidents, near physical attacks on their person, nightmares

and many incidents they may not have shared with me.

Teamwork and Coordination

Another skill this experience was likely to imbibe in us was the ability to work closely in teams. If one is situated in a community where there were a lot of prospective farmers, they went in pairs or trios, if not, they went singly. In any case, no one was deployed to an operational area alone as that covered a number of communities. The community I was deployed to, Mile 18, in the Obuasi cocoa District, belonged under an operational area called Abuakwa number 2 and we had been 10 posted there to enumerate over 600 farmers. Normally, one person was chosen to be an operational leader whose work was to collate daily reports and send them as one to the

zonal supervisor. We often times were also divided into zones depending on the size of the district.

These classifications and segmentations meant that each one knew exactly what role fell to them and who exactly to submit what to. There must be tact in doing these things because as I have related to my readers, conditions of network made communication often difficult. That took closely knit teams albeit dispersed.

Speed and Accuracy

Time was greatly of the essence. Daily targets were known to us all, in-fact, before one is deployed to a new community, one already has an estimated number of farmers to work with. Each data uploaded must be sure to be

containing few errors as each error is counted in the final appraisal of work.

I am not the kind who loves to be served. I like it to be the other way round because that's how I was nurtured. I am also an independent minded person who believes in *minimalism*; I want just what I need and no excesses. These attributes have given me a tough time adjusting to the hospitality of the rural folk. Their way of showing hospitality to people like myself who come into their communities to serve them is exceptional. They liked to wait on you with food, wash the dishes, wash your clothes, and even fetch water for bath. I found some of these very difficult to adjust to and the more I tried to be myself I realised the more insistent they got. I capitulated often. A preacher once said, "*if God gives you a golden shoe, wear it*". In places of this nature

where hospitality is in sharp contrast to the ones found in the cities where we were used to, resisting them was tantamount to rejection and they won't take it kindly or appreciate that you were only being yourself; simple and minimalistic.

I had by now been into about four communities; Kamaso, Anloga, then Kwaoso and now Mile 18.

In these places I found that the virtue of work was very much held in high esteem. Anyone who idled around was ridiculed and few actually idled about. I don't think as of writing this memoir, that there is much unemployment in these parts of the country. My reasons are based on these following factors; firstly, there were few persons with a secondary to tertiary education in these places, as often, the best of them drops out in

basic school. Due to that, they resort to farming and artisanship and if you are conversant with the world of work, it's hardly possible to be idle if you are an artisan or a farmer.

Also, as they grow up in the rural areas, they understand the value of work from childhood, as they always went to farm with their parents. I have met children who were able to weed and do other menial works as much as an adult could and better than their counterparts in the cities.

There was nothing like, "*I can't find a job*" in the villages, unless in reference to white colour ones; there are farms, there are game to hunt, food to sell at the markets, labourer work to do on farms for a fee (somewhere around 25-35gh for every 4hoursof work), and more. I have met young people who through farming in their rural communities, acquired cars for taxi and

employing other people on their farms and as drivers for their cars. I am not in any way suggesting that unemployment is not rife or real, my experience teaches me however, that, it's mostly an urban problem caused by rural-urban migration resulting in high population concentration.

Galamsey

The road to mile 18 was unexpectedly bad and bumpy. We had been about 6 in the bus we hired to take us there because the others had either already taken their lead or were lagging behind. While I was scheduled for Mile 18, the others were also going to communities like Aduntia, Asuade, Nteben, Odumto and others.

I must state that, my experience at that point had showed me the real meaning of uniqueness of

individuals and hence human societies. Each community is very different from the other though often they speak common languages.

In this community as in others I have been to so far; the most talked of social and environmentally hazardous illegality as of this writing. “Galamsey” (illegal mining) was rife and all I write concerning this menace is solely my opinion, and based on my experience traveling around the endemic regions and communities. I don't know your experience with “galamsey”, maybe the closest you have come is hearing about it and seeing pictures on television. Depending on your motivations, you might decry it, call it out to those involved in it and then go to sleep with the hope that we shall overcome some day.

The stark difference in attitude I saw between those quite detached physically from the menace

and those close to the crime scene and involved in it was that, while the latter were very emotional and hateful of the crime and its impact, the former group were at best indifferent.

When you go into communities where it is rife, where in fact water bodies have been polluted, farm lands have been destroyed and forested areas have been reduced to pits of sand and polluted water, you would notice that the young people involved don't see their activity as a crime against nature or the state. They feel entitled.

They feel about it as a hustle they are engaged in to make ends meet barring the consequences. They feel they deserve the right to plunder their portion of the environment they live in and in line with human selfishness, they are mentally detached from the cascading effect their work has on others several kilometres away from

them. The first time I saw the youth engaged in it was around the river Ankobra, in the Western region of Ghana. I had been on a bus going to Asankragwa for the first time in January 2021 when I saw a group of young men and women coming out of bushes looking muddy. Imagine a person painted with the colour of mud, that's how they looked, and they had been returning from their hustle. I was first confused between road construction and building as being the reason for their appearance, but when I inquired, I was bizarrely awakened to the reality of where I was heading to.

In communities where there is galamsey, there is vigorous activity and high flow of income. In the evenings back in Asankragwa for example, town was very chaotic, muddy four-wheel drives,

tricycles and motorcycles paraded the street, honking loudly in the traffic they themselves had caused, as they return with their share of the gold.

I also noticed the socially downtrodden nature of these communities, as from what I learnt, drugs and prostitution was at a crescendo. The general attitude of the young men in these communities is that, they have so much money and they can only be profligate with it. I once inquired from someone who had had the experience of Galamsey first hand and he told me they make about five thousand cedis in a week more or less. While some of the older generation decry the destructive activity of the younger generation, some urge them on. Who has customary custody

of the land? Not the young people. The chiefs and traditional leaders do.

On the evening of Thursday 24th June when I was rounding up my work at Mile 18, a farmer who owns a farm in the community but lives in Watreso, a big town close by, about 10miles away, came for his registration. Since he didn't come with the necessary documents as he was on his way from far and only heard it while he came to Mile 18, we decided that since he brought

a car, we go together to Watreso where he lives, for his registration and then he drops me off back home after. It was dusk and we had a deal. We passed the communities along the way, Odaso being the closest to our destination. Few minutes

to enter Watreso, we got stuck in mud alongside other cars that had preceded us.

It was a hopeless situation so we took to trekking, by which time it was around 7pm and rain showers beginning to threaten, after I had finished with him I paid closer attention to the nature of the town, many reading this may never witness the level of chaos I witnessed.

The rains had started and all initial attempts to get an Okada were futile until one with a passenger agreed to add me to it, making two passengers. I had no choice. I got home in Mile 18 through a very precarious ride back with the bad roads and rains endangering us further with one lesson in mind; sometimes your willingness to do or make a sacrifice can be your undoing.

Local Aphrodisiacs

When I returned from Mahamakrom near Mile 18; where I went to look for some farmers, another farmer who I had been expecting came around to wait in my absence. He was an elderly man, somewhere in his 70s. He told me he was a herbalist and so after doing what I had to do, he volunteered to propose some herbal concoctions to me. I must state that I am not a fan of herbal medicine though I listened to him propound his various combinations and for what illness they were useful for curing.

Two of these stayed in my mind somehow, the one for waist pain and the other for "*strong erection*" in men.

He spoke about the latter with much more glee. For the waist pain he said, "*boil acacia alata leaves and ginger, a portion of which would be*

drunk and some of which would be applied through the rectum with an enema", something I often find disgusting and medically unsafe, though I listened on. He also said that for strong erection, "boil '*kakapenpen*' and "*nyantren*" (indigenous herbs) and ginger for drinking and insertion also works magic."

Have you listened to radio adverts about medicines lately? Or watched TV adverts about medicines? What about those who hawk herbal medicines around the cities? You would notice that

over the period, our societies are gaining a certain inclination to sex enhancing medications; those which purport to be aphrodisiac in nature, male sexual organ enlargement agents, the ones which when applied in women, makes them "tighter" and so on.

Even on social media, this trade is rife and it speaks volumes about our priority as people; sex.

Sex has become the best and biggest motivation of society aside money. They say sex sells, in marketing. No wonder that on our high rise billboards, even commodities which have little or no connection with sex and sexuality are often given a sexual connotation, albeit clandestinely. What does a semi-nude woman have to do with a car renting business?

Sex sells, but who pays? People pay in cash and with their health and lives. It should not therefore be a wonder that many sexually related crimes are being recorded these days, incidences of teenage pregnancy has soared as well.

Just when June ended, we proceeded on a break which saw me out of Mile 18.

5

Faith

Antoakrom District

We had taken a break since the last chapter ended to resume later. For close to a month we had stayed home with mixed feelings with regards to the probability of getting a renewed contract. I don't know what others might have done, but I prayed and left it to God.

Faith is what makes you know that what you asked God for can materialize. It takes faith to get the humanly impossible to materialise in one's life. But when our deployments came and I found out that we were going to Antoakrom in the Ashanti region, I took the lead a day before my colleagues.

Our journeys had always been a leap into the dark where much wasn't known about the life in the communities we were going to encounter. Were they nice people? Were they hostile? What's the nature of their economy? Are items and food sold there expensive? How is the network situation? How far is the place? Many times, we don't get answers to these until it's too late or at best we get half answers. Other times we resort to google and google map.

It was in that spirit that I decided on the 29th of July, a day after my mom's birthday, that I will take the lead to Antoakrom while my other colleagues did same on the 31st.

An Old Friend

I had decided to take the lead to Antoakrom simply because I had a friend there, Prince, my

mate from KNUST, and since 2012, I had not laid eyes on him. That's what life is often like; you become friends with some people and you will hardly ever see them again. Life has a way of segregating and categorising us such that if today you are close to someone, it doesn't mean you will be tomorrow.

Manso Abodom

Have you seen or heard of a 14year old mother? What about a father of eight who just turned 40? I thought I had heard and seen enough until I got to my new operational community, Manso Abodom. It was a nice place; lively community, enhanced by the activities of “galamsey”, What I saw in Mile 18 with regards to “galamsey” was only about to be experienced on a bigger scale.

A town of mainly Cocoa farmers interlaced with an open "cult" of illegal miners. Abodom is located in the valley between Manso Akropong and Brofoyedru on the Odaho stretch.

In every poverty endemic society, vices are replete, as everyone does his or her best to exploit nature or neighbour, and in these cases, women, girls and children are the victims sadly. All the factors that characterize a booming "galamsey" community were expected in Abodom and its surrounding communities; loud noise from motorbikes and cars moving to and from the sites, many muddy bodies, Wellington boot wearing, well-built young men abounded there as well.

Soon enough, I got a realisation that "galamsey" is not merely a struggle for survival, it's an insatiable avarice for money, neither is it only as

a result of economic privations but more so a lack of foresight for posterity. Not only the environment is degraded, but a close look at every community that hosts the wanton destruction of its lands and water resources in the manner that characterizes the one I have seen here, reveals strongly that the values of the communities are degraded as well.

The enormity of the “galamsey” industry is organised so much so that, I am convinced that only a politically well-situated cartel can run it sufficiently.

I mentioned a 14year old pregnant girl, not only there in Abodom but in other communities, I saw a number of them. Coincidentally, these were all in galamsey endemic areas. One phenomenon I

had observed was the sudden increase in local population in response to the prospects of gold. Most of these small towns with hitherto relatively small population witness a sudden surge in the number of strangers taking solace in their communities; Ghanaians from other tribes and foreigners, including Asians and West African nationals.

Vices multiply immediately. In Manso Keniago for instance, there were the activities of brothels and sex workers. Usually, population increase means increased demand for housing and as such, it wasn't hard to hear of rent prices so abnormally high in these places. Drugs trade was not also an exception.

Two incidents took place, one on the Wednesday that Francis and I went to Abodom Dome, a suburb of Abodom to work on farmers over there. Francis was my colleague I was working together with at Abodom as I didn't go alone as was the case in Obuasi and New Edubiase.

The first of the incidents was one in which a young man sent by his dad to bring some documents for the completion of his registration came to me. He was so poorly dressed that I sent him away after I had taken what he brought, gaining the approval of everyone present, the chief farmer inclusive. He had on a trouser so sagged that one could see his underwear, so torn that it wasn't fit for one who was mentally stable, he left the zip and flap wide open and mustering all the equanimity I could,. I could not be silent on it. Someone must always speak up

when moral standards fall abysmally low. The danger we face in society in this 21st century is a conflict between morality and rights; I stand for both., I agree that people have rights to association, life, identity and so on, but I also see reason in laws criminalising indecent exposure and all that.

My Christian background, which I would not foist on anyone, encourages us to live our lives so others won't fall into sin on our account.

Hoping that I don't turn this narrative into a moral treatise, let me touch on the current issue of LGBTQ and its concomitant inclinations and the bill that has been laid before parliament seeking to criminalise it.

Though I am against such sexual perversions, I am as well of the opinion that, a law is unable to

deter a moral deprivation. I think that, once we don't have laws outlawing other sexually immoral practices like fornication and adultery, we won't succeed in hemming in the LGBTQ with a law.

Any law that is unable to change the heart of men won't be able to change the mind.

The second of the incidents I mentioned, took place the day after we had returned from Dome. While we had done most of the day's work at the community centre where we used to sit, some kids who had hitherto our coming used the venue as a playground, couldn't wait for us to leave so they could continue their games for the day, came around. One is inclined to notice and have a personal attraction to people who they share same name with. It's called namesake. So I had immediately developed keen interest in the 7year

old Godfred who happened to be playing around the place with his friends.

I called him to my desk and asked him to spell his name for a reward. He stood affixed to the ground for the most part of 5mins unable to betray a single letter of the alphabet.

My colleague was as shocked as I was. *“Godfred, spell your name and take the money”* we all said, pointing at the coins on the table before us. He failed to do it. I thought to make his burden lighter by offering to make him do simple arithmetic. I proceeded to say to him to add 4 and 0, he still failed! I. If the foundations are weak, we will be exposed by the products we make. The likes of 7year old Godfred, betrays the quality of our basic education especially as it's in the rural communities of Ghana. I have seen 15year old secondary students who can't

Speak the English language to save their own lives or write it.

These observations are not to shame the victims, far from it, but in my nature, I am hardly able to be mute when I see the level of deterioration we are faced with glaringly while policy makers play the ostrich. Much has been done but much more must be done to help the many 'Godfreds' in the rural communities. For every one of them who can't spell his name or do simple arithmetic, the world is not waiting for each of them, their future prospects are slipping out of their hands. The more young children we have who don't get the full benefits of basic education, the more we pave the way in the future for possible security threats to society.

I was wondering to myself what the very importance of civil society organisations and non governmental organizations are, if they don't pay attention to some of these issues when they have the wherewithal? Some do, but more can be done.

Music has a strong effect on young people and even children, a lesson that was confirmed in my mind when I was in Abodom. It wasn't rare to find groups of children sing along the most popular hiplife music at the time. It was "*second sermon*" a song popularly known as *Kwaku Frimpong*. Every single child I witnessed, could sing all its lyrics perfectly. A beautiful sight to behold and amazing to see how even at a very young age they identified with the villain of the music. Was it the case that they knew the hardships in store for

them when they grew up and were getting themselves prepared mentally to face them all? Whatever it was, they were being shaped by the power of creative and that's how societies develop. Talents must be given the right environments to grow, while those who share in the products also energised by the content they produce.

I made many young friends In Abodom; the ones who sit around when we were free from work, struggling to spell their names, the ones who would come around for their daily 1gh cedi's, and many more. In all these, one thing kept running through my mind and I couldn't assuage the urge to ask my colleague what his opinion was on the future of these kids.

Will they in the next 10 years follow the path of their seniors who dropped out of junior high school by default? Or would they get pregnant at 15 as I witnessed there?

Would the boys also end up in the galmsey pits soon in the future? Sometimes our best bet is hope and luck, and that is what I wished for them.

Why Some Proverbs Are True

I have had enough reason to not depart from the truth most proverbs and wise sayings hold in them, if for nothing, at least because they have seen many years in the wisdom of various cultural backgrounds.

"Leave the stage when the applause is loudest" was one of the many proverbs that subtly played

out in my mind on the day on which I wrote this paragraph.

The sentiment often exuded by our host families in the communities of our work from the beginning to the end, follows in a specific trajectory. Often when we enter the communities almost forlorn and tired from the day's travels, we are met with a very enthusiastic host family.

Their role would be to get you a place of sleep, a mattress to sleep on, all the accompaniments of a lodging, however humble. Food was a plus, but suffices to say that in almost all the areas, it happened to be automatically provided to us though not obligatory.

By the middle of the first week, we enjoyed the very best of culinary services of the wife of our hosts, the benevolent gifts of fruits from farmers and the officious greetings of some indigenes. As

the week drew to a close, we become like one of them, the greetings may be replaced with questioning glances and a drop in the food rationing. The second week of the work is generally and predictably marked with a decrease in the rations that used to come with a certain joyful air.

At this point, if you are bereft of the wisdom to know that what it takes to cater for a fully grown adult or two for two weeks is taking a toll on the host family, you are done for.

Often what I did was, from the beginning I give stipends to the woman of the house, if not to support, at least to save face.

The fact that some people in the community at this point, are emboldened enough to begin to openly question the intention of your continual

stay in their community, cannot be ignored anymore.

In the case where the community had a lot of beautiful young ladies, the young men as well begin to cast furtive glances at you, as they were very protective of their ladies, '*the fewer the merrier*'.

Before the above described tendency of our hosts families and communities gets to a head, we may be about to deploy to another community.

On Friday 13th August, we moved to our next district of work.

6

Travel and see

Asiwa District

The journey from Abodom in the Antoakrom district to our new deployment, Asiwa district of the Ashanti region was on a cool Friday morning, in August. This district located back on the Kumasi stretch meant that we had to move as if we were returning to Kumasi, and then after Bekwai, we took a detour.

The road which was mostly untarred and undulating, describes a mountainous view quite characteristic of the Ashanti region.

The preceding days, I had learned adjustment, I had learned to take the shock of dealing with

new cultures. Often this included the dishes of the communities, some were very much normal while others were substantially different from what I was used to.

The first time I saw anyone ground peanuts in a stew was in Asankragwa, while the first time I saw anyone eat snakes was in Anyinase district. One other stereotype that stood out to me was that of names of people and of towns. I was used to an individual having at least two names; a first and a family name. It was common feature in my last district to meet people who had names which to me were not family names. Someone who was called Akwasi Abraham or Kofi Johnson, feels like one who doesn't have a surname or even a first name. In such cases, it was difficult to guess their tribe if you don't ask.

It goes without saying that things are different or differently practised in different ways by different cultures.

Dansabonso

Asiwa district promised to escalate the culture of peculiar names when I got to see the names of some of the communities in our operational area Ofoase; a serene and simple town within the Konongo, Juaso and Asiwa enclave. One was called Dickson while the other was Policekrom(police town), not too far from where I would be stationed for the next few days.

Those days I wished I had a bird's eye view of my surroundings, towns and features around to prevent getting disoriented easily when I get to a new community. When you move around a lot, it

gets confusing, especially seeing the similarities in all these districts.

I also knew I needed that ability more especially as I got to Dansabonso, a community of not more than 50 buildings including churches and one junior high school and a basic school structure. For the first few days I even struggled to locate by the pointing of my fingers, the nearby towns; Kumasi especially. When my host, Alex Appiah once pointed and told me that Offoase was in that direction, I was incredulous and I almost scoffed thinking he had wasted all his 20years living there if he couldn't simply get his coordinates right. But he was right and I was wrong.

Dansa for short was located an hour from Konongo, Juaso, and few hours from Kumasi,

that's the closest I came to appreciating where I was.

On the first day of my stay, a Saturday, I did close to half of my work if I added the Sunday after.

By now, I must have interviewed an average of 600 farmers, spanning five cocoa districts, Asiwa being the sixth.

On the Friday at dusk when Hakeem my new rider friend brought me to Dansa, there was a cocktail of events and *he* ensured that I had not stayed at where was planned for me to stay. I lodged with the family of Mr Alex Appiah instead. His wife was Ga and he an Ekuapem. I felt at home with these people more. They had twelve kids, a fact he shared with his head bowed, only 6 of which I came to meet; five girls and a boy.

How Hakeem Lost His Motorbike.

On the evening of Monday 16th August, I had sent an errand to Hakeem's village to tell him of my intention to go to Ofoase and his need to take me there and in few minutes he obliged. Soon enough we had taken off on the 20mins trip to the said town. I needed to get some stuff, water inclusive, and then get to the salon to trim.

He dropped me off at the salon and told me he needed to drop off a friend of his we had met and will return soon even before I knew it. I nodded in accent.

A lot of talks happen in the saloons both for men and women, this place was not an exception, myself included. We were about 5 young men in the salon; a client, me and two barbers, plus a guy who seemed to idle about. He was actually

the leader of the small talk which centred on ritual money.

He engaged our attention in a narrative which I found very unusual but to the other listeners it seemed quite normal. He started by explaining how he was willing any day to go for ritual money if there was anything like that. He went ahead to narrate how he had once visited a spiritualist and he was asked to bring three live chickens, one of which will be steamed for him to eat alone. He said that what actually put him off was the fact that the spiritualist suggested he should be willing to lose his dad as the price and that he would give him a pot which will generate about thirty thousand Ghana cedis (three thousand dollars) every two weeks, a sum of which he would be obliged to spend every fortnight. He left and never returned according to him.

I had finished with my haircut and was waiting for Hakeem to show up to no avail, after a number of calls to him were unanswered, and obviously getting frustrated, I called Daniel, the CEA in Offoase. It was past 7 when he sent a guy to drop me off at Dansa.

It was the morning after that I heard the reason why Hakeem failed to show up. His bike had been seized by the police in a swoop on a gambling joint where he had gone to while I waited for him. I laughed when I heard it. I was both happy for myself and sad for him.

The two incidents above send a very potent signal about the strong desire of the teeming unemployed youth which statistically seems to be on the increase annually to get rich quick. The avarice to make money quick is evident in these two forms; rituals or fraud and gambling. Day in

and out we hear of stories in the news of young men caught in the act of kidnaping people for ritual purposes, or that the remains of someone was found with some sensitive body parts removed for suspected ritual purposes. Aside that, gambling for money has taken a toll on the youth in many forms, the latest being the sports bets. In itself this may not be detrimental as some have made fortunes, however, the addictive nature of this endeavour and stories of how some have lost huge sums of money is alarming.

Before my work could come to a close at all, I left Dansa because of the tiny insects that bite in the morning and evenings; so tiny you could hardly see them. It was in Dansa I found the need to get some protective wears against these insects

which I encountered in subsequent other districts.

The hospitality of the wife of our host was too much to describe. She was of the habit of serving me and my colleague so much more than we could eat and this continued to the extent that one day I had to tell her husband to restrain her. It obviously fell on deaf ears.

Small world

Juaso

I had left Dansabonso to Ejisu near Kumasi, a journey of about an hour and half, to while away time while I awaited the next deployment.

By now it became clear to me that we had been making a circuitous tour around the Kumasi city itself. I had moved straight from Ejisu through Konongo, and Juaso district to Adansi my new operational area. We were seven deployed to this place.

On our first night in Adansi, we had been served some boiled local rice by the chief Farmer for Adansi. While at it, his daughter who he had come with to our lodging, whispered to her dad that I looked familiar. Normally, I ignored such claims, more so when I am tired and famished,

but I was taken aback when the young lady, about 19, insisted that she knew me and went ahead to mention that she met me in Kamaso when I went there as my reader will remember, and I also remember having been to her house, her uncle with whom she went to spend her vacation being one of my farmers. It's a small world and aside that, it moves round. I was pleasantly surprised by that incident, I asked myself and my colleagues many questions, what would have happened had I been careless in my stay at Kamaso? It would have haunted me down at Adansi.

The Pressure on First Days

First days of work were very herculean and as time went on it did not lessen in anyway as there were more and more farmers to work on and

with. By now, I must have interviewed over 700 farmers, having repeated myself that many times posing the same sets of questions.

Sometimes you would have to repeat the same questions each day with over 150 farmers, this lets the reality of individual differences dawn so much on you, with respect to their unique responses to same questions, amid various acts of gesticulation unique to these individual farmers.

Some farmers found it hard to remember the names of their kids, some could not remember the birthdays of their kids, this mostly occurred with the men. Whenever they got t stuck they usually called on their wives to help with their children's birthdays, which they do quite easily.

Some knew their phone numbers off head, others would hand their phone over to you to extract the number yourself. You could only oblige.

One trend that stood out to me was the practice of grandparents having to take care of their grandchildren. When I often had to ask the farmers who their dependents were, a lot of them responded with the names of their grandchildren. Many factors contribute to this situation, I know because I remember asking a few times and the answers I got bordered on parental unemployment or unavailability, death of parents, teenage parenting and I think in one case the grandparent took charge of the grandchild because of the parent's mental illness. This experience brought to mind the fact of having children when one is not necessarily ready to

care for them. Admittedly, times are hard and before one brings children into the world, it would be very selfish to have done that without a plan to care for them.

Intercity Transport

I may have mentioned earlier in this chapter that Adansi, was on the main Accra Kumasi highway, between Konongo, Juaso and Nkawkaw and though I had used this road on many occasions, I had not had the opportunity to live close to it where I could sit and watch how many vehicles plied that highway each minute. I love cars, I love to both sit in them and to watch them, that means I predictably like to travel. There were many times I felt bad when the journey ends owing to the beautiful experience of watching the

landscapes, the forests and trees, the majestic settlements, the moon in its night and so on.

Recently I was having a discussion with a friend about how and why there are many passengers that ply the highway between the two major cities of Ghana; Accra and Kumasi. Reason for short is business. When I sat by the highway, I couldn't help but to watch the many SUVs, the Luxury buses, the cargo trucks, the saloon cars, and mini vans that move on this road each minute.

Some beautify the road with their splendour, others with their beautiful colours, and even others with the sounds of their engines.

The country's main sea and airports are located down south and as such goods coming into the country from these entry points are redistributed to the western and northern belt primarily

through this highway, it wasn't difficult to find many trucks hauling items, or many containers of goods either.

People also use this route for private and official purposes; school, family travels, funerals, and even tourism. Among others, these made it a regular sight to see the hundreds of vehicles that plied the highway at any particular time, be it day or night.

One of the days of work, while I was having a conversation with farmers, as it was my habit to do, I brought into the discussion other issues unrelated to my work just to poke a little fun here and there. We had been talking about the main highway in question. They are used to all that I found very curious about the highway, then they told me how someone from the community was

able to ride a tricycle from Accra to Adansi, probably more than 90 kilometres.

It was a funny but jaw dropping revelation, 'why would anyone do that?' I inquired, they gave some very unconvincing reasons which only served to conflate my thoughts the more. .

The Man Called "Yesu"

One of the days while I was interacting with farmers, it got to the turn of a woman, 70years old,; she didn't look it at all., I am sure she was not aware of her age. There were many like her and that was a major problem because it suggested that the ages on their identification cards are incorrect.

Some time when I encountered that, it was very obvious the farmer sitting before me was, say 65

years but his or her ID card says he's 45 years. Normally, correction was made.

While at it, I needed an information from the woman who in turn called her husband who had been sitting nearby to help with the said information. She called out a man by name "Yesu", who happened to be her husband. The man came., Yesu is a name I haven't heard anywhere aside in connection to Jesus Christ., I know of course that it is common among the south Americans and spanish countries and in Israel it's a common first name. Yeshua, Yesous, Yesu etc are varieties, and briefly, to find before me a man called by a name I so revered and belonging to divinity., I decided to know the reasoning behind the name. She offered an explanation in few words; "*he's a good man,*

calm and caring". To say I was impressed would be to understate my feeling at that moment; for a woman, having been married to a man over 40 years to refer to him by such a name, their marriage must be heaven on earth. Plus, observing the man, he looked the part; gentle, soft spoken, equable and very nice.

Rural Infrastructure and Ventilation

When you enter a typical rural community set up you won't have to be any vigilant to see that they have a peculiar architecture. They build not to appease a sense of glamour or style; they build to house themselves solely. Focus, you will observe is the reason; they focus all their time and energy on the farming and so have little need for anything else.

They eat, sleep and farm. That's all they do.

The typical farm cottages have few houses, few amenities and few people. Buildings are often built with mud and roofed with aluminium sheets. I have seen only a handful of thatched houses so far. Poverty is also a factor in determining their building styles.

They have communal toilet facilities in most of the communities I had been to, men and women though, don't share the same toilet facility.

Some of these may vary depending on the nature of people there. One thing so far stood out to me; poor ventilation. If not all, majority of the buildings these farmers sleep in, have very small windows almost always shut, plus, few of them having ceilings at all. This makes sleeping in these places, for strangers like me, excruciatingly hot. For them, I have seen whole families sleep in one room too.

In Adansi, I also realised that, though the windows were the normal size you will see around in towns and cities, majority have been sealed with polythene. Why does one make a window only to seal it? The reasons they often gave when I asked a couple of them include the fact that since they were unable to buy louver blades, each time it rained, their rooms got wet, hence the sealing with polythene.

No matter their idiosyncrasies, I can bet my all on this; rural folk are nice, they respect humanity, they have good cultural values, they love and protect one another and they live long enough.

Work went quite normally in the Adansi Operational area too, unless for a couple of farmer and caretaker issues which were left to us to solve as we best knew how.

Most of my days in Adansi went like this; wake up early, eat early breakfast which my chief farmer's wife; a nice Krobo woman who was apt to prepare the meal each time, start work, visit my colleagues around, collect and send reports, close and end the day.

My chief farmer was over 35 years older than his wife. He told me how that if not for God's sake, he was nowhere near gaining her marital favour. Does age matter? To what extent? What is too much and what is too little? Maybe we limit ourselves by some of our own standards.

8

CHAOS

Nkawie District

Finally, our work in Adansi was completed. It was time to move to our next district, Nkawie, still in the Ashanti region, a journey of close to 3hours from Juaso, but I think we spent more than that long because of a couple of issues here and there with our transportation.

The morning of our departure from Juaso, something that might interest my readers happened as such; while we were boarding the bus at the CHED office I was about the second to last person to board, as I was late.

The bus was completely filled and all I was afforded was a leg room to stand. I was about to enter into the bus when suddenly thick smoke started oozing out of the bus. Obvious, chaos was the immediate reaction inside the bus as the passengers impulsively started rushing out of all possible exit points. It was a difficult sight to behold for me standing outside then. Ladies and gentlemen fleeing through the windows, the doors, stepping over each other, amidst screams of “*fire*”. To them, the bus was about combust and they were about to die. In a few minutes when everyone was safely outside we all began to investigate what could be the cause of the thick smoke coming out from under the seats of the bus, only to find out that the bus was not about to burn after all, but something else was burning and had started smouldering the seat. It

was a mobile phone. For reasons I am unable to explain, the phone which had been in the bag of one of the unidentified passengers had started to burn. The situation was salvaged by the guy close to the phone at that time. It was difficult to appreciate how a simple mobile phone would cause such a situation. The reaction of the people on board was well suited as there could have been a dangerous aftermath. What made us wonder more was the fact that no one owned up to own the bag in which the burning phone was. Self-preservation; flight or fight is a basic human tendency in the face of danger.

Looking back as I wrote, I asked myself why none of us thought to find the fire extinguisher which had been in the Coaster bus, and could it be the case that none of the over 30 young

people in the bus was able to operate the extinguisher?

Luckily, we were able to arrive safely in Nkawie, another very vibrant and beautiful town not far from Kumasi, actually, one of the last Ashanti towns on the highway to the Western North region nearby. A few of us continued our journey through Mpasatia along the Bibiani highway. I stationed at Anyinamso number 2.

Social Apathy

There is a propensity to not care about what goes on around in one's society and environment at a certain stage in any community's development,. Tthe result of which is crime, accidents, wanton destruction of the environment and even corruption. I have in the previous

pages explored the ills of galamsey and my observations in few of the places I had been to; Mile 18 in Obuasi, Manso Abodom in Antoakrom and Asankragwa being chief amongst them.

Though Anyinamso was also a galamsey endemic area as was televised months later when I had left. My approach will be different this time. I will consider tackling it from the social point of view.

What is the effect on the psyche and attitude of the people who live there? I will try to answer from my observations.

Firstly, the chiefs and opinion leaders in each and every galamsey endemic community were likely to be complicit in the activities. They are often enticed financially by the kingpins and having sold their consciences, are unable to

control the excesses they may not have signed up to directly. The chief is not able to stop teenage pregnancy, he's unable to control the resulting insanitary conditions, he's not able to control the impact on cocoa farms and other agricultural activities, he is not able to curb the sudden increase in the population of his community. His hands are tied. In Anyinamso, there was so much dirt and insanitary conditions partly owing to the galamsey activities or plain apathy to cleanliness.

The settlement was littered with plastics, and gutters were not spared. The only public toilet facility was in so much squalor and dirt that almost no one went there any longer. They resort to open defecation.

For two days, at dawn, I heard the public announcement system announce a warning from

someone saying that people who had turned her cocoa farm into a toilet facility are going to be dealt with, and I asked myself, till when? No one cares.

If only we could have overlooked such a community as Anyinamso as an outlier, that would have been ok, but we can't. They represent what the situation is in most parts of the country -varied forms of social Apathy.

My first two days spent there, I slept on the top floor of the chief farmers shop situated right at the side of the Bibiani highway. Sleep failed me on both occasions. The noise from the buses and trucks hauling food from the Western North to other parts did not help matters. To make this worse, the drivers of the Benz buses were of the habit of tweaking their engines with what they

themselves referred to as “*turbo chargers*” which according to them, makes their buses move faster; a gadget that made so much noise. The following morning, I pleaded with the owner to get me a different place. I was saved by the bell.

-9-

Slippery Roads

Mankraso District

The road to Atamso operational area was long, rough and very wet as it rained the day before and we had to wait for the flooded roads to dry up a bit before we could commute. We luckily had at our disposal a Toyota pick-up truck

belonging to a staff at the district office at Adugyama, near Mankraso, into whose bucket we stacked ourselves and our luggage for the journey that lasted close to an hour. We had not expected that.

We passed through Yaw Boadi operational area where the other guys were supposed to be while the rest of us went to lodge at Wurapong; a central location from which we could access the other communities. Wurapong had no light. It is located between Offinso on the Ashanti side and Bekyem on the Brong and Ahafo sides. They said it's a very old settlement and it looked the part; the level of erosion over the years of this hilly settlement clearly proved it. A school and a rural health centre were the only amenities they had.

It was on the afternoon of a Monday when we arrived at Wurapong, though my community of work was “*Sika Ye na*”, to wit, “money is scarce”, a very small farming settlement on the way to Wurapong. My colleague, Elvis, and I decided to start our work that day. While he attended to a couple of farmers who had presented themselves, I saw the need to escort one farmer to his hamlet to work on his. That meant walking few kilometres into the cocoa farms where he and his family alongside other farmers lived. I have learned through all this wonderful experience to not pity someone for what seemed to you a plight which they have gotten used to over time. You will look weird if you do.

Congenital Birth Defects

The first night of our stay and the second day of the stay cumulatively played out a certain picture to me; childhood birth defects. I had seen a small boy called Kofi hanging around the rice seller around whom we had sat for our supper. Kofi was very squalid, he still wore what looked like a school uniform though I doubt if he had what it took to sit in class due to the hyperactivity his congenital malformations have predisposed him to. He was autistic. That's not enough, the people around, I realised were harsh to him. They chased him away anytime he approached the seller, they used abusive words against him and I remember I also saw someone hit him. He kept coming back anyway until I left off sleeping. In the villages, you might realise the need for

birth control legislation in our country. The less privileged are very fertile; children are born by teenagers who at best are still children under the care of parents. Children becoming parents, and as a result the children of the children bear the brunt.

On the second day I met another kid, a boy, who from his demeanour and the look of his head, which actually earned him a nickname among the locals, was obviously sick. We were told that he was 6 years old though he looked only 3. We were also told that he had delayed in walking and speech. Children like these two abound in poverty endemic rural areas of Ghana and this requires policy makers to ensure that the appropriate health care facilities are empowered to care for them. Also, it's important that people

are educated about health issues like this, else these innocent children will always be victimised by ignorant adults who should be caring for them in the first place.

I can guess your idea of fun and childhood entertainment if you grew up in the 90s in a township or a city. You had a “*case five*” football to play with if you are a boy growing up in Ghana, you had the chance to watch all the early TV series like “*by the fire side*” or “*things we do for love*”, you played hide and seek around the neighbourhood with your friends and maybe “*Tsaskele*” was your favourite pastime and so on. The kids in the remote villages look like they were experiencing a very boring childhood if you look at it from the point view of a kid born in the city.

School is very far so they miss many days, they don't have the access to power and hence television in most cases. In most instances, I have seen that their idea of fun was hunting of birds, idling around the farms, chasing lizards and killing them, doing miniature farms in their backyards and actually going to farm with parents. This predisposes them to bad habits like learning and using insulting words early in life since they easily influence each other though they also get an early inculcation of virtues like hard work and grit.

Motherhood Witchcraft

We spent our few days working in the Wurapong area in a small compound house of about seven rooms. On our day of arrival, our community lead

took us into what looked at that time like a deserted place until in the evening when a lady of about 45 years came home. I greeted and exchanged the normal pleasantries and introduced myself and my colleagues. She passed as a cool person until in the evening when I heard some ladies exchanging invectives and realised that she was one of them.

The following day the old lady who happened to be her mother was also seen in the house, they were two at home but easily enough, I could detect bad blood between mother and daughter. My colleague who had had a conversation with the old lady told me of how her daughter had visited a prophet who accused her mother of being a witch and being behind her woes in life.

Many families have been destroyed, many marriages have collapsed, societies have suffered the evil of tagging elderly people as being witches and wizards. A few times in parts of Ghana, some old people have been lynched because they were suspected as witches or wizards. There even is a “witches camp” in the Northern part of Ghana. Little can be said of the lack of tact, if not wisdom, displayed by the charlatans who go out of their way to accuse people of witchcraft.

Sexuality of Rural Ladies

We can go on this trajectory of discussing my observations on the sexuality of girls in the rural areas. I want to by my experience, explain the psychology of their sexuality and try to answer

some questions that have ran through my mind for long since my exposure to this project.

I have witnessed how easy it was for a rural lady to be sexually exploited. Reference here is made to girls within the teenage to early adulthood stages.

Their lack of exposure was my first observation, thus, they easily get attracted to strangers, especially seen to be from bigger towns and cities and immediately presumed to be rich. Rural ladies easily get swayed by these males who seem to have more flair and exposure. This is to the extent that, the evident sophistication of these guys in phones and other gadgets easily wins their favour. Also, rural ladies have very little economic skill and value. They hardly have any skill which they can depend on to grow

financially, and this makes them very vulnerable to the allures of money. Many of them fall into transactional sexual relations to make ends meet. Their lack of value also in itself makes them develop a low self-image on which the males are able to capitalise. Finally, I had seen that children in rural areas become sexually active quite earlier in life compared to their counterparts in the cities, so by the time they enter adulthood, they have long been experimenting sexually and so have developed a loose view of sex. This can be blamed on the lack of parental supervision prevalent in rural areas.

The antecedents are varied and space won't allow exploring all. What's important is knowing what will help them; they need to be empowered with skills, access to education is also

key. Governments and their counterparts must be willing to introduce policies that would massively reshape the rural economies of our country and there must be free skill training centres for these ladies most of whom drop out school.

On the day I set out to leave Wurapong, I told the old lady in whose house we lived about my intention to depart later that day, I thanked her for her support and kindness and she smiled and responded "*that's ok, I also have children living elsewhere*" that struck me. Kindness can be a seed sown to be reaped afterwards.

10

Comfort Zones

Tepa District

In a “tiktok” video I was watching the other time, a man made a statement to the effect that we must aspire to be happy, not comfortable in life. Comfort zones account often for the demise of many talents, gifts, aspirations and life plans of many individuals. In solving life’s major challenges, much cannot be achieved with the same state of mind with which the problem was created. Lots of challenges of life in my opinion are as a result of staying too long within one’s comfort zone.

Our work was one of great adjustment, at least in the beginning until we started getting used to it. Natural instincts to adjust to adversity began to

set in motion, the tendency to protect oneself from harm and danger, the reason why men gravitate towards comfort also began to take a toll on me. While from the beginning I would not think of a sabbatical, I started nursing the habit this time. Ejisu was close to most of the areas I worked while in the Ashanti region; Juaso, Asiwa, Nkawie and even Mankraso so I started forming a habit of visiting my family friend who had her home there, it was comfortable there and a good place for a respite from the normally tedious first week of work. I started getting used to it, to the extent that often, leaving to my areas of work became quite hard.

Tettehkrom

My work station this time was called Mensahkrom though we all stationed at

Tettehkrom for convenience. I remember clearly that in the very beginning of the project, by necessity, we were made to live in the specific community where the farmers live, not a community nearby like I just stated, things had changed a bit so we could afford like in this case to live and commute daily to and from the bigger community to where the farmers lived. In any case it was a more comfortable approach.

Names of towns and villages got confusing at this stage for me. On the way to Tepa from Kumasi, I was told to alight at Anyinaso, I was slightly confused by that since just about 3 weeks before then I was in another town called Anyinamso, while I had also been in another one called Anyinase also in a different region altogether. These were totally unrelated towns in

very distant parts of the region and across regions with very similar names. Much can't be remembered of how in almost every district one is likely to find a village whose name began with "Mile" or "camp" or an "Appiahkrom", or any other village named after an individual; usually one who founded the settlement. I had been to a number of villages in which the one it's named after still lived there. Far apart, but inclusive in nature, that's how the Ghanaian fabric is, people shared a lot and no matter how dispersed they settled away, simple things like this always revealed their roots.

The Undertaker

Jennifer was a young lady perhaps about 23 years of age. She lived in the self-contained building where close to 15 of us crammed in. It

was very obvious from the first few minutes observation of her that she was very free spirited and carefree, maybe these were traits she developed from having been exposed to so much cadavers; she was an Undertaker. She dressed, laid in state and prepared corpses for burial, yet she was just a young lady. What happens to the human mind when the eyes and hands were always exposed to dead people? I observed that the experience of her work had given her a deep understanding of the futility of human life, that is, people come and go, here today, away the next day. She was fun loving and she lived in the now and she loved people as it was evident in her relationship with us. She understood her role in her family and as an aunty or whatever she was to the two kids who lived with her, - she played it well. Nature is always in

a cycle of birth and death and that's the lesson it whispers to us all, we could learn from the young undertaker this lesson; life is short and we all will need an Undertaker one day.

Solitude

I developed a habit along the way, one that the serenity of the cocoa farms guaranteed to me; meditative solitude. Often when I didn't have any work to do, I would bath and dress up take my writing materials and find a place under the cocoa trees which were always close by. I usually did this unannounced to my colleagues since it will solicit too many questions. I continued this practice well over the period. I disappeared and reappeared at will and it helped to organise my thoughts as I wanted.

Our work routine exposed us to many disease conditions, malaria was chief. When I left Tettekrom to work on my traveling passport in Sunyani, I took ill and tested positive for Malaria. The point is this, often, many are deceived by what is called the iceberg effect, to consider the visible aspects or dimensions of success, to the neglect of the undertones of hard work, sacrifice, pain, discipline, rejection, failure and so on, which actually guaranteed success. This was the third time that year I have had to treat malaria.

Our next district was Mampong, Ashanti. I did join the bus against my will from Tepa to Mampong district office through all the stressful luggage handling, luggage falling off the buses, onlookers staring in bewilderment asking themselves who we were, till we got to Mampong

only to as if by default make our journey back towards where we came from, to Tetrem, our operational area.

A sad event occurred to me in Tettehkrom while we were there, while I may not have mentioned it by now. One of my favourite dishes in these villages was beans and fried ripe plantain as you would discover later. If there is a seller of this food in these parts as we travelled around, I was likely to frequent her place in the mornings.

In Tettehkrom, obviously named after a certain Tetteh, I found one as well, one rainy morning when I was waiting in line for my turn, I slipped and fell in my attempt to walk over the improvised wooden bridge to hand her the money. I landed on my right elbow which until recently was still sore. The onlookers were quick

to intervene and that day, I didn't pay for the food-*so hilarious and sad too, right?*

The next chapter introduces the end of our stay in Tettehkrom. Rita became a good friend in the last days of our stay there, we had lots of conversations, we came together to cook often and funny enough, on the day of our departure, when our colleague Randolph came with two huge cocks as a gift from farmers, we didn't have a choice but to make a hurried jollof rice with it.

11

Reflections

Mampong District

I think I am just a few inches short of a broken person, or so I thought until after the few days of conversation with Rita my colleague back at Tettehkrom. Rita was a mid-20s young lady I was living in the same building with among many other colleagues and as nature would have it for a lady at her age, single. She liked to talk about relationships while I liked to listen to her. Her depth of knowledge and experience was what earned her a place in this memoire, according to her also, her training in HR and Psychology also was handy. Rita had a way of turning a simple

friendly conversation into what would seem like a session with a counsellor.

It was very difficult to assume any form of falsity with her as her line of questioning was sharp and straight forward yet very open ended enough to warrant a good discussion.

Her conversations made me reflect soberly on my personality, my social make up as a function of my nurture, childhood and experiences in life. I come from a broken home, and I have not in my best of opinion, made any effort to address the impact that upbringing might have etched on my sub consciousness. One day during our routine discussions, she told me "*You will not have a broken home*", soothing as it was to hear, I knew work must still be done. So, I opened up to Rita.

Opening up about any personal issues was like putting a surgical blade on my own self, but it was a necessity.

Our discussions made me understand largely to what extent my upbringing and the conditions surrounding my childhood and the breakdown of my parents' marriage had affected me. It was violent as faintly as I can remember. I was 10 years then.

I had unknowingly and unintentionally built a wall around myself emotionally and pocketed the keys to the door so that whenever I wished, I could open and peep outside and shut myself in back. I barely allowed anyone in. I easily made a lady feel at home around me until she gets too close, I then shut off. I realised that, it took more emotional energy to receive love than to give it, in my case. My eccentricity was shrouded in my

own distorted reality in words like “I *don't like attention*”. The conversations with Rita opened the eyes of my mind to these things and to many others I won't bore my reader with.

Consider yourself, this is an opportunity, think of the toxins you might have picked up while growing up, it may be the reason you are the way you are. These discussions with Rita and my reflections helped me to understand myself and my world view, and the narratives in this memoir being some of them.

Tetrem

Whiles my community was Yataa, my lead person advised me and my colleague Berchie to stay in Tetrem where we all lodged while the

farmers come around instead. Yataa, I found out later, was just a small settlement of farms and farmers very close to Tetrem and so there was no need living there when I could live in tetrem and walk to and from there every day of work.

The Ex-Serviceman

On our second day or so, a certain farmer came around, a good looking 76 years old man, looking quite like a 60-year-old person; bright eyes, arms still firm, upright in gait and clear in speech. After we did what we had to do for him, I engaged him in a little conversation about himself and about life. He revealed that he had been in the navy for a while. He told us about the secret of his 48years old marriage, he mentioned commitment and honesty as qualities needed for a good marriage. “*Don't lie to your partner*”, he

said to us. He also advised against promiscuity and alcoholism in the course of our youth.

In the house where we had lodged in Tetrem, there lived a man who until after an incident, we thought was the owner of the big compound family house. He was probably about 80 years, still looking strong enough for his age. He lived in one room in the house, which he used as his hall, and as his bedroom, a TV on the wall was probably all he had, and as such, he disturbed the whole household with it day and night. Literally, no jokes, he could be seen and heard watching TV all night. His life reminded me of something I had always known, life is short and fleeting. It can be wasted under the deception that there is more time ahead. In the same house lived his about 45yr old son, and very curiously, I

only saw him speak with his dad once in my two weeks stay in that house. Sometimes parents pass down their bitter past to their children inadvertently through their upbringing. That was probably the case. Agya Duku hardly had any relationship with his son, and most importantly, I had seen that similarly. His son seemed to be passing on his broken relationship with his dad to his beautiful teenage daughter, Maame Yaa. The lesson is that, the upbringing of children and nurturing them doesn't depend on only parents, and when left unattended, undesirable family traits can be passed down from parents to children. Anger, selfishness, unproductivity, bitterness are negative traits that parents can pass on, however, that saying, good traits of a peaceable nature, kindness, gentleness and all

others can be equally cultivated and passed onto children.

My time in Tetrem was short and uneventful since a few of us were redeployed after a week. I moved to Manso Keniago one Sunday morning.

12

Love is never enough

Nyinahin

I admit that the description I am about to make may might confuse my readers a little, let me try. I left Mampong area, specifically Tetrem, and it was impromptu, because, a few of us had been redeployed to proceed to Nyinahin District, when I wrote this.

In the Nyinahin district, I was supposed to work with farmers in Appiahkrakrom and Epimso, both in the Manso area of the Ashanti region, very notorious for illegal mining. These two

settlements were cut off by a flood; flood waters in galamsey sites.

By reason of that, and also because most of the farmers of my target lived in a town in the Antoakrom district, remember Antoakrom? I had been there earlier. Manso Keniago was located between Nyinahin and Antoakrom on one side, Obuasi on the other side.

So, I lived and worked in the Antoakrom district, but I worked technically in the Nyinahin district because they shared borders.

I won't spare any time to explore what galamsey had done to this town as I have already explored the rudiments of the canker in the earlier pages. However, Manso Keniago was about the most terribly affected area by galamsey I had seen up to that point.

Thick as Thieves

The second night of our stay unravelled an occurrence that shocked me and awakened my sense of security. The guy who lived next to our door knocked and asked if we had seen someone enter his room moments ago, to which our reply was negative. His laptop had been stolen and he swore to find it that evening, walking away into town. Few hours into the night, he returned and told us he had found the laptop, and that the landlord's son, had stolen it and had gone to pawn it for some drugs.

That incident took my mind back to the moment we arrived. We had been given a strict advice to always lock our door whenever we stepped out.

To know that the laptop had been pawned for some hard substances shocked me more than the theft in itself.

The Teen Couple

At this point I will delve into the title of this chapter by use of a simple anecdote of an experience I had in the house where we lived. Often at a certain stage in life, choosing a life partner is primarily a function of love and attraction, not until other factors begin to play out which open the eyes of the partners to the realities of life vis a vis love and relationships. It's suicidal to relegate the other factors accompanying love in an attempt to make a relationship fruitful and fulfilling. Often, these factors are fuel to the flames of love, without which love dies.

History has shown that many people who chose mates based solely on love, failed to show up for them when the other factors required their attendance. Romeo loved Juliet until the unresolved issues of family feuds came haunting. Jack loved Rose, but Jack came from a background quiet too insignificant. The argument is often seen on social media about the relevance of money in a relationship and research is said to show that most marital disagreements are money related.

Our landlord in Manso Keniago had nice children, one of which was a pregnant 14 years old Adwubi. At the point where her dad confirmed her pregnancy to me, it was not out of unbelief I had asked if she was pregnant, I knew she had been pregnant and avoiding school at the time. According to her dad, the guy who put

her in a way of a mother was equally a teenager in high school. What I didn't appreciate or expect was when the man told me that, as a way of keeping the guy from absconding, he had given the two teenagers a room to cohabit until she delivered,- by default, they were a couple. I was surprised at his decision. For me, that's license, but to him and to others, it was the best thing to do.

Many weeks after that when I called the man to check on the young girl after I had left, he sadly told me that the baby died after birth.

Self-Awareness

“Meaning”, “Consciousness”, “reality” and “being” are all subjective experiences of humanity. Subjective because we all go through various personal phases of life through which our

understanding and consciousness are moulded. However, it may be realised that by the mere genetic fact that one is female or male, one's mental attitude and or subjective realities may be different. Since I had been there I had taken notice of something about Self Awareness or consciousness.

Take the scenario of the twins who lived in the house where we had lived for two weeks; Atta and Attaa, children of the landlord, the latter being the female and the former being the male, and both being about 12 years old.

Atta often bathed outside but Attaa wouldn't. Atta often walked around naked but Attaa was always careful to cover herself. This stroke a cord in me to appreciate the difference between males and females and then how early self-awareness and vulnerability set in. What makes the boy able to

show his nakedness without any shame and the girl unable to do so? Barring all other external factors of parenting and social factors, the fact remains that there is an inclination to conclude that females gain a good amount of self-consciousness before males of the same age bracket. Could it be in keeping with the story of the Garden of Eden? Eve's eyes opened first, Adam second.

The road from Antoakrom to Manso Keniago was about the worst I had ever used and it took us about four hours to get to Kumasi.

When we finally had a break for few weeks to rest, it was because we had completed with work in the Ashanti Region. At this point, I was not alone in the opinion that morale had really plummeted and we had need for the break.

Things had gone slightly south with me and I had Jon Bellions "*hand of God*" on replay.

Sometimes you have to know and keep reminding yourself of your humanity and frailty and this was the time. I started feeling symptoms more pronounced and regular around this time, pain and tightness in my upper chest region, weakness and headaches for which at times I thought I had malaria, but these were subtle signs of stress and a developing ulcer which was later confirmed through an endoscopy many weeks later.

13

Speed and Horsepower

Sankore

Goaso was our first deployment district in the Ahafo region of Ghana. It was in the middle of November 2021 and lasted for two weeks. That saw the end of that phase of our work until our resumption in February 2022.

There were enough reasons if one wants to find one, to not want to return to field. We had stayed home long enough to have put behind us some of the difficult working environments we have been in, we had respite from so much such that we would have wished we wouldn't go back to the field. These however couldn't overrule the

fact that most of us had become broke from having spent all our savings. We needed money, we needed to return to hard work.

The journey from Accra that faithful midnight took us through the Greater Accra region, Eastern region, Ashanti region, Western North region before our final destination in the Brong and Ahafo regions eight hours later.

Eight hours would not have been enough to make that distance had it not been for the speed at which we drove. I stayed awake almost all-night wondering what it takes to drive that fast and carefully at the same time. Our convoy had four intercity buses. It was a real nicety to behold the horsepower displayed by these vehicles as they queued and bypassed each other at stops, risked sharp curves, safely overtook a number of trucks and so on.

At night on these highways of the country, there is not much traffic of passenger vehicles, but there is a lot of traffic of long vehicles hauling food from the north to the inland cities, and imported materials from the ports to the hinterlands. So many haulage trucks were seen lined up moving at very slow pace, they were not often in a hurry like passenger vehicles. There is no way we could remain in line with them, so we often overtook a number of them at a time. We arrived safely at Sankore around 9:00 am to see to our administrative routine after which we started moving to our areas of deployment where we would be for the next two weeks. Mine was Sampra.

The journey to Sampra saw me and some of my colleagues through Goaso, Asumura and then to

Awereho where I was to stay while I worked in Sampra.

Awereho

This was a small town of a little over 500 inhabitants, mostly settlers from the Volta and Eastern regions of Ghana. It's located along the areas bordering on the western North on one side and the Ivorian border. I am yet to see a land as sandy as this one; full of pebbles., It was quite scary to ride on motorcycle.

On my first night in this town, I couldn't have a good night rest, not because I was insecure or antsy about my new environment, I was as usual very much reposed if not for the noise from the funeral "after party" that lasted deep into the night. The noise coupled with my sustained

fatigue from our long journeys had made me very restless.

The music deafening, the vibrations of the speakers were shaking the very roof of where I slept and the DJ sounding tipsy, the effect was me grumbling and praying they end soon. I managed a sleep. My first impression was bad.

Sampra, a small farming community which was actually my place of work was in the area between Asumura and Awereho. It's probably a population of less than 200 people. In such places, it's not surprising to find the absence of social amenities like schools, hospitals or even health centres as you would not be surprised to find same in the urban areas of Ghana. Children at the age of about 6 or even more don't have the opportunity to begin school because they

can't go on foot to the nearby community- often more than 3miles.

In this area also, there was a lot of logging and harvesting of timber going on. In fact, that was the main preoccupation of the young men there, their parents though were into cocoa farming.

One day when I finished my work for the day, I had been hanging around with my colleagues who were still working. A farmer came around, obviously in stupor, to say that he had misplaced his phone. He wanted to check if he had left it where he had come for his registration, with us. He was so drunk that he had lost memory of the fact that hours earlier, he had given this same phone to his son for keep. When his frantic search brought him to us, we dialled the number only for his son to respond and say his dad had given it to him. You can imagine the look on our

faces and our vain attempt to suppress both laughter and disappointment.

I had met a young man in Awereho, a day or two after I went there. I doubt if he knew his age but he told me he's 30, though I would have guessed he's about 40. Maybe it's his peculiar situation that made him look older. He was hunched back. People like him are all over some of the communities I have been in; people living with disabilities. Some were disabled in other forms and what is common to all was the fact that they are often ostracised. The proof of this was the glances I attracted whenever I was having discussions with Meshack, for that's his name.

To make matters worse for himself, he took to drinking, something I don't blame him for. Mostly,

I met him with reddened eyes and stinking breath.

Bantama

This is a suburb of Ghana's second largest city, Kumasi, but it's also the nickname of a young man I had met in Awereho.

Looking closely, he was around 30 years old- he was the village drunk. In the few days I interacted with him, his exceptionally good look was evident. On the last night before I left Awereho, he came around and we had our last conversation. I told him how it was urgent for him to desist from drinking and make life work for him. I don't know if I poured water on stones or I planted a seed. More pressing now than when I met him is the issue of unemployment and

despondency among young people. The upsurge of crime; ritual murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, internet fraud and money laundering can be linked to the lack of well-paying career opportunities among young Ghanaian people.

Farmers are very simple people. I had met cocoa farmers who were an exception to the seeming rule of the condition of illiteracy; I mean to say that, some of the farmers were very educated and highly placed people in society. Back in Goaso district, in Kumaho, I spoke with one farmer who was a PHD holder and worked in the Bank of Ghana. A colleague also told us about how he interviewed a former president who happens to be a cocoa farmer while others told of their meeting with a Council of State member who owned a farm.

Yet, some did not have these backgrounds. They were quite simple and humble and in Awereho. I met one such farmer. He was the one who took us to our lodging place when we first arrived that day and later when we were told that he owned the only storey building in town, it was actually a surprise.

What makes this work very interesting was the fact that it was a trip around the country; meeting new people, seeing new places, moving from one cultural shock to the next amongst others. All have become normal to each of us. In one community, there was a lot to eat, in other there wasn't enough to even spare. Some had very well tarred roads, others didn't have. Same nation, same people, different conditions arising

from different treatments meted out by successive governments.

14

Peace and Joy

Bekyem District

Around this time, I had been writing these pieces of stories close to a year now. To my reader, they are rightly called stories, but to me, these were valuable personal experiences, some good and some otherwise. I have learnt to suffer in silence, accept the situations that I can't change, look uncertainty and fear in the face, stay calm in all situations. I have learnt to be at peace with myself.

When we arrived in Atwedie near Kenyasi in the Bekyem district, I had seen enough to remain undeterred by the dusty roads, the hot weather and room, and all that came with it and for the

second time, I slept in a lady's room. It was sometimes the result of the impromptu nature of our deployment that people are made to vacate their rooms for us. Sometimes these were ladies.

The first thing I noticed about this small community, likely, about less than 600 people was its well-planned nature, with a good power grid though cellular network was poor.

I had the habit of looking out for schools in each community I found myself in, to assess their conditions. In this community, there was a good looking public basic school downhill of what seems to be a hill top community.

School classrooms environments for me, were a serene resort to read when I am free from work

or during weekends. I am by that, acquainted with what I am about to relate to my readers.

A Public-School Classroom

One would expect or hope that the enclosed environment in which kids and teenagers learn would have an aesthetic interior; colourful, flowery designs, spacious, well ventilated and so on. That's the ideal picture portrayed in movies of foreign nations we see in the media. Also, that's often the environment or at least something close to this, in the private funded schools.

However, the opposite is very glaring in the case of most public-school classrooms I had been in. Broken windows if any, no proper furniture, or if present, quite very badly designed

ergonomically. I suspect that some of these badly designed seats and tables can hurt the spines of the students in the long term. I have also rarely seen any public classroom well-lit for night time study.

That's one side of the coin. The more shocking part is the dirty walls. The numerous nicknames and inscriptions written on them obviously by the same students all served to dirty the learning environment.

Energy drinks

I had only drunk one small bottle that morning. In the past years, my readers would observe the influx of energy drinks into the Ghanaian market at large. The target is usually the youth, males especially, who are into tedious manual labour.

According to them, it gives them the energy and presence of mind they need to be able to do their work and not feel exhausted easily.

The night before that morning, I had slept only a few hours, such that I woke up tired and had to rush for work. It was a Monday; the busiest days of the two weeks we do. Few hours into the work, say around 9am, tiredness and drowsiness began to take a toll on me. I knew I had to do something to save face, and that didn't include leaving to take a nap.

No one suggested or advised me. I did not have any motivation either to know I needed a boost of energy, to have resorted to it. The thought occurred to me and I followed through. I sent for a bottle of energy drink though I was not accustomed to taking them. I noticed the sharp alertness of mind I at once possessed after few

minutes of taking it, and sleep left me after a couple of minutes as well. In fact, I had become so alert that even later that night, I struggled to sleep. In modern times in this country, a lot of youth are falling into the use of these drinks mixed with hard drugs for reasons I have mentioned earlier - sex enhancement.

Rural Economies

Recounting the number of rural communities I have spent a fortnight in, I am able to say without doubt or fear of contradiction that rural communities have a domestic economy which is ironic.

Mostly agrarian, all these communities are self-sufficient with regards to food stuff from their farms. They mostly produce what they consume. An average resident has a vegetable garden

interspersed in the cocoa farm, a form of mixed cropping. Cassava, plantain, cocoyam and sometimes water yams are often like a natural occurrence in the cocoa farms. New farming methods introduced by agricultural agencies, requires that they grow some of these food crops in their farms to sustain their local economy.

That said, there remains a vital aspect of their food basket that must be brought in from the cities; grocery, fish and frozen meat. In some cases, yams, tomato puree, vegetable oils, and others were by necessity bought from dealers who bring them in from the city for the use of the locals as retail businesses.

Owing to the very long distance from the cities where such groceries are produced or imported and the very bad nature of connecting feeder roads, prices end up being significantly higher

than in the cities. An average bar of soap costs more in some villages, where it should conversely be less, than in the cities. Bottled water or even the sachet ones also cost more in some of the villages by sometimes as much as 50%, from my experience. I remember being told by colleagues about how they had bought bags of water about twice the price it was sold in the city, back in the villages. Access to food crops equally in the cities has been hindered greatly by bad roads and increasing cost of transportation, making them also expensive in the cities. Food which is cheap in the village is expensive in the city while items which are a lot cheaper in the towns and cities are also much more expensive in the villages.

Aside these factors, it's important to touch on an aspect of economies which is very pressing in the rural areas. It's the issue of bad or unavailable mobile networks. The availability of mobile networks helps businesses grow through ease in communication and mobile money transactions. Banking facilities are also denied rural economies often because of low population, further deepening the woe of farming rural communities. The effect of this can be felt in many ways, including the avoidable problem of post-harvest losses. Steps must urgently be taken to include rural farming communities in reliable mobile networks, good roads and transport services, more accessible banking facilities and so on, to boost their rural economies.

The Farmer Who Had Autism

In farming communities, there are many wonderful spectacles that await any observer. I met in Atwedie on my first day of work, a middle-aged man called Emma. To my untrained eyes, I could at once see that he presents with a little congenital deformity; he looked autistic. Though there was a queue for first come first served purpose, this man insisted he was the first, obviously not the case, to the extent that in order for peace to prevail, they all asked that I served him first. He, from then on, piqued my curiosity so much that whenever I saw him around, which was on daily basis, I stopped by to have a chat. He was not very audible when he speaks, because of the formation of his teeth, so the little

I strain to hear was often enough. He built his own house in his parents' compound though he once told me he was not married there was good testimony about him in the village.

Women Farmers

It's in place that I end this chapter with a short eulogy to the women, who brave the difficult exigencies of weather, forests, wild animals, distance and other dangers to be major players in the economy of our country through farming. The Cocoa farming industry is much brawn dominated, but they stand strong, clearing large pieces of lands, cutting down trees, planting and sowing; rubbing shoulders with their male counterparts, sometimes beating them to it. Janet of Atwedie, my host, Nana Kuo of Kumaho in Goaso district, Abena Kwahu of Kamaso,

Yaayo of Bekoase in Asamankese district are just a few I can remember on top of my head. These women run homes, take care of school children, farm, serve in their churches and other societies, and in what have become a part of their daily routine. I during the periods I spent with some of these women, always escorted them to their farms, women care for their farms as they would their children, this led me to share an observation with colleagues often that, you can know a farm belonging to a woman easily by what is grown and how the farm is kept. These women need policy advantages which will make their efforts yield better results for them. Farm inputs must be subsidised for women who farm to keep homes, farm tools must be made available to them at a rate almost free, loanfacilities to expand and transport crops must

also be made more stress free for the women in particular. Such is not the case currently.

15

Nostalgia

Berekum District

Years back, I had been in Berekum in the Bono region of Ghana for what was then called "industrial attachment" in my level 400 in the University. I was then majoring in wood science hence I was posted to work for almost 3 months in a Sawmill in Berekum. Going back there almost 11 years after, meant a lot of memories

were to be relived and things had changed to my utter incredulity and rightly so. I don't expect a town to remain the same after a decade or that the way I see things remain unaltered after a decade.

Senase

By now, I had become accustomed to small rural settings to the extent that working in places like Senase wasn't appealing to me, for its size and nature of township. These places were not nearly urban or even big townships; however, they were not rural either. Located about 1.5km from Berekum, this town is a lively place, youthful and noisy as one would expect. I enjoyed working in

small communities and villages because in these places, life was simpler, more cohesive and communal and you are likely to know almost everyone in the village after staying for just few days. There is less noise from vehicular or motor traffic, there is reduced impact of population increase and above all, there is much more fresh food and fruits to eat. I was naturally more biased toward the villages. So, places like Senase put me on edge when I got there.

Increasingly, my worry about the next generation of the youth has increased as I moved around the cities, towns, villages of the country. How would it look like in 20years?

At a simple glance, it's very easy to identify the brewing vices and their offshoots in these youthful communities; alcoholism, drug abuse,

teenage delinquency, fraudulent lifestyles, armed robbery and so on.

Have you ever gone to sleep scared your door could be broken into? Have you ever thought of how unsafe the future of a 14-year-old girl is in her locality? Have you wondered what peer influence your child is under both from school and from her locality? What immunity can be guaranteed to our generation of teens from the vices they are susceptible to?

In their 70s and beyond, senior citizens, the ones I have broached this subject with, have developed a depressing view of the present and the future generations.

The Plight of Those Who Feed Our Country

Though our main target was cocoa farmers, along the way I appreciated the fact that no farmer cultivates only cocoa. They almost always farm other main food crops; cassava, plantain, cocoa yam etc. I mentioned previously how some of these farmers were women who work hard as much as their male counterparts. Increasingly, this experience has enlightened me to the obvious neglect of successive governments of them. Little technological improvement has been experienced in the area of agriculture as compared to other areas, loan facilities remain the major headache of the people who feed our country. They are unable to access loans to improve their work and expand. As you may be aware from this book by now, the

hub of our food basket is located in very poor road networked areas, worsening the plight of these farmers as a good amount of their food produce perish and they lose money, time and energy.

Single Mothers

I had met a number of farmers, women, who were bread winners of their families; divorcees, wives of absentee fathers and widows in my two year journey around the farming communities of Ghana. A woman I had met in Senase stood out to me when she told me that she was a divorcee and a widow. The burden of taking care of her four children became hers, one of whom was training to be a nurse. Often when interviewing farmers, it was very difficult to ignore their personal indirect appeals for help or at least offer

a listening ear to their difficulties. They pour out their hearts in ways and about issues which don't directly fall in line of our interviews. A typical widow won't normally stop at telling you she's a widow, she would go ahead to tell you how difficult it was, to keep up in her situation. This particular widow told me how her daughter in training to be a nurse needed her fees paid before she could join her colleagues in school and obviously she couldn't raise the amount.

16

What goes around

Dormaa District

It is my observation that only just few events in this life are isolated; everything seems to be connected in a certain inexplicable web of life such that one event leads to another and it in turn gives rise to another event. I have not had the chance to investigate the reality of karma but I appreciate the fact that men reap what they sow and there is nothing new under the sun.

How one treats people they meet might be a seed they are sowing to harvest tomorrow either by themselves or by their progeny.

Nothing just happens, and by the laws of physics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, such that for any event B, there is likely to have been an antecedent, event A, and so on. Physics is real, so is metaphysics. Development of societies doesn't just happen; it takes the sacrifice and hardwork of leadership that was what remained with me when I left Dormaa and its suburbs for Easter in 2022.

Dormaa Aboabo

The first impression one makes, especially when one is used to living in the haphazardly planned places in the urban areas is that this community located few kilometres from Dormaa Ahenkro was well laid out and planned spatially, with very neat streets even though they were not tarred, this did not take away from the beauty of the

small town. Vantage points along the streets and at various corners of the town could be seen with garbage bins and these bins seemed to be provided by the Dormaa traditional council looking at the inscription on them.

There was not to be seen any stray animals as one is likely to see in other places, neither did I see any littering around. Even buildings close to the dusty street, had from my observation, in the mornings, mopped their floors and windows so you would not easily see much dusty surfaces.

Spatial planning in urban areas is becoming increasingly unattainable and notoriously haphazard. Urban suburbs have gained a stereotypical impression in the minds of people with respect to how they are planned properly or not planned at all. In Accra for example, when anyone mentions an area, one can be able to

say how well planned or badly planned it is. Much disregard has been given to this area of our national housing and road planning system. Many times, essential and emergency service providers like the fire service and ambulance service have had their rescue missions scuttled as a result of what I am bringing to the attention of my readers. By comparison, small communities have by far being more well planned out than the cities. It's therefore in place to commend the planners of small towns like Dormaa Aboabo who from foresight have taken their time to lay out their town in a very linear manner. I dare say that an emergency service ambulance or a fire tender would find it easier navigating this town than most of our big cities.

Competing With Cocoa

From the Western South to Ashanti and to the Bono and Ahafo regions of Ghana, I have consistently noticed that Cocoa has over the period gained a sustained competition from other crops; rubber in the Western South area, rice in the Ashanti region and now cashew in the Bono and Ahafo areas.

Cocoa farmers have in this region dualized to become cashew farmers as well, so it's common to see a farmer who owns large acres of both crops. While at Issakrom in the Dormaa Aboabo area, I took time to interact with the then regional best cocoa farmer as to reasons why they were beginning to cultivate cashew as much as cocoa. To them their main motivation was that, cashew was easier converted to cash. This crop grows faster than cocoa, the post-harvest processing

activities involved in cocoa farming far outweighs that of cashew, to the extent that cashew can be harvested and sold same day. Cocoa needs a series of post-harvest quality requirements of moisture content, quality of beans and so on to get beans ready for export. Secondly according to the farmers, and my own observation, cashew is much more able to withstand drought than cocoa.

This short chapter won't be enough to explore reasons the farmers gave into much details, though mostly financial, for their migration to cashew, but it's enough to know that cocoa farmers must increasingly be motivated to continue with a sustainable cocoa cultivation.

Two Interesting People

Almost everyone we meet and interact with, makes impressions on us in many ways, however some leave a lasting impression; their words, their demeanour or even their very nature remain remarkable. In Aboabo I had interacted with two individuals, from whom I had learnt a number of lessons.

Isaaka, was a middle-aged man, mentally challenged, mostly unkempt looking, though dressed in what seemed to be good outfits, just worn out and squalid. Grapevine was that he had lived abroad for a while; such stories abound anywhere so I decided to discard it as untrue until I had an interaction with him. The day he came to where I sit to work, he unbuttoned his shirt to show me some deep scars on his abdomen, explaining how he had survived an

accident in Italy, which led to him returning to Ghana. He also mentioned to me how that he had lived in France and Germany for a decade or more, and how he had immigrated through Libya, as is the practice in that part of the country. He finally threatened to beat me up if in a year's time, he sees me in this country, as it's better to travel out of the country.

Youth migration is like fever; it's not an illness, but a possible symptom of several illnesses; Malaria, typhoid, infections of the urinary or respiratory tract all present symptoms of fever. Similarly, when the youth of a country migrate out to Europe and other places for greener pastures, that act cannot be seen as a problem by itself, but as a sign of the accumulated problem of bad governmental policies,

unemployment, insecurity, lack of development and even lack of proper educational facilities.

Kelvin was a very good looking 10years old autistic boy, always well dressed, not very articulate in speech and movement. Anytime he came around, he asked to be made to recite the alphabets which he does over and over again and that's how he earns the stipends he got from me each time he came around.

In all, I enjoyed my stay in Dormaa aboabo and when it was time to move on, I just knew that I will always remember the town with the best plan I had seen in my journeys by far.

We took a break for Easter from the Brong and Ahafo regions, to resume in the Eastern region; Asamankese district specifically.

17

The Immutable

Asamankese

Things don't really change, at least not to our observation as most changes are very discreet and minute, often so much that we can't notice them. From a big town, through a smaller one to a village or a rural community; from civilization away from it into zones of no power or telecom network, things have always remained this way since we started this project. From a major transport terminal in a big bus, to a mini bus or a trotro, as we call it in Ghana, then a motorcycle or okada and in some cases, by foot until we arrive.

The journey to Asamankese from Accra, through akyem Akroso then to Bekoase went on a similar trajectory.

Bekoase.

I had told a guy jokingly that their village was about four football pitches, this community of Krobos, Fantes and Ewes so small you could walk around it. The most you can estimate for people living there should not exceed a hundred, in about 20 households. It was meanwhile orderly, calm and peaceful with a communal toilet facility. By now I had in a way gotten used to these toilets. From Bekoase to Mangoase in Techiman to Antwiagyeikrom in Nyinahin districts, all these villages and small towns had communal toilets; that's how I called them and

that what they are. These were often shed structures with a roof, covered in some cases halfway with a division between the male and the female sections. There were logs and planks of wood placed over deep pits for squatting. The only good thing about them was that they were usually isolated from the town.

Yaayo

There was a 70 something years old woman who happened to be our landlady for our fortnight stay in Bekoase; she was a cocoa farmer like everyone else, young or old. Farming knows no age barriers, it knows neither young nor old, frail nor strong. It only knows those conscious of survival, especially at this level of poverty. I have recounted before how women who farm are a great inspiration as they brave the odds of the

weather, the terrains, the difficult tasks and commitments it takes to get the cocoa from the nursery to the point where it grows, fruits, harvested and dried to be sold. Do you know how you got your bar of chocolate or the drink of chocolate? There could be an elderly woman old enough to be your mother, in the value chain. She's resigned to her financial fate, takes whatever that falls to her from the sale of her cocoa because she must survive and her bargaining power is limited. There is always a "Yaayo" in the value chain. I don't know too well, but each bite of chocolate or drink of hot cocoa drink, might be a direct product of these labouring women; old and young.

I am not dependent on technology, to the extent that I could be described as addicted to it. No.

That saying, I am not also fit to be described as a luddite. I stick to one smart phone and a laptop and an earpiece. In recent times, we have seen the new Bluetooth technology being utilised in making Bluetooth ear pods.

One of the days, when one of my colleagues who had one while we were in Bekoase, couldn't find it, we found out amid laughter the following morning that, it had been swept away by Yaayo who thought it was rubbish.

Selina

She caught my attention with her very beautiful smile and she kept my attention with her precocity. She was only 10 and in basic 5. Selina lived in Bekoase with her parents. She was born there but hails from another part of the country.

When I struck conversations with her, it was mostly about the community, school and life in general while she enjoyed playing games on my phone. She schooled far away, about 4km away from her home and she went by foot with her peer, that's sad, but true. This means she walks to and from school; close to 8km each day. They had improvised rest stops on the way for kids like her who don't have a choice than to walk this far to enjoy a basic necessity of life; education.

So, on that evening when I realised her smile was waning, I understood from her that she was unwell. The nearest health centre should be more than 10km away in Akroso, though not too far from Bokoase, there was a completed health centre which was not in use. Later in my journeys I was exposed to a lot more of these; completed health centres which were not

operational. It's such a shame that citizens cannot access basic needs, while their leaders look on.

The Old Railroad

Along the road from Akroso to Bekoase laid the remains of a railway that used to be functional many years ago, according to the indigenes. When I asked, they told me it used to be used to transport goods and people from Takoradi to Accra a long time ago. The culture of abandonment is real in my part of the world, a situation where failure to implement a national development agenda, a guiding policy document a nation must follow for a predetermined number of years notwithstanding which government is in power. When government "A" leaves power, government "B" is required by law to complete all

projects began by “A”. In our case, choosing political expediency over national development, these things happen as a result. Factory projects have been abandoned, schools, hospitals, airports and even roads. The average citizen suffers.

The Little Blind Girl

Few days into my stay in Bekoase, I noticed a certain young girl, about 10 years of age, who normally would be playing around during school hours. On certain days I saw her playing with kids very much younger than her. I took keen interest in her so much so that on the day she came passing where we lived I asked her why she didn't go to school, but just when I did, I noticed upon second look that her gait wasn't

quite normal. She walked but not with much certainty; she was blind. I left her to go because I got a clear indication as to why she missed school. Grapevine, it was later revealed to me that her father also suffered from same optical condition and that all attempts to seek medical help for her were not successful. They superstitiously believed that a crime committed by her father was what caused the blindness in both she and her father.

18

Great Unexpectedations

Nankese district

Notice was served at an unexpected hour for our next deployment; 2:30am. We had to move nonetheless to our new district for an unexpected seven days. When I got to the Asamankese district office from Bokoase, I had expected uneasily a difficult situation with my supervisor, but I was unexpectedly left off the hook. The bus that took us to Nankese also took me and a few others to Koforidua where we passed the night for our main journey the day after.

Many events and their outcomes are often unexpected, such is life.

Akumersu Yiti

Koforidua, the capital of the Eastern region looked quite different to me after I had left there many years ago; we needed to get to Kro-Agogo, then to Teguanya where I would be met by some colleagues for onward movement to our communities. Mine was Akumersu Yiti, which is krobo language for a stream that flowed through the village.

I had travelled along many terrains, I had seen quite a lot of roads, highways, bypasses etc, but the road from koforidua to Agogo and then to Teguanya was about the worst experience up to this point. However, that may sound, the mountainous nature of the road made it quite beautiful to behold while being subjected to the torture of bumps and pot holes. From Terguanya,

I was transported on a motorbike on almost an hour's journey on high hills mostly. Generally, this part of the Eastern region of Ghana is full of hills.

Commitment to my self-imposed decision to put this narrative together for my readers was greatly tested when I considered the difficulty I was faced with while attempting to give description of this small village. There was no power and hence very poor telecommunication network, potable water was also unavailable; they drunk from a stream. When I was there, for the first time in my life, I had to depend on rainwater to drink, though I insisted on boiling it at first.

Also, in Akumersu, there were insects that bite, mostly found in cocoa growing areas, they could

be so active that even during the day time, I always kept an insect repellent with me.

Village Home Walls

It's been one of my first observations in most village settings I was privileged to visit during my work, that is, the fact that people in the rural areas use their walls as their "diaries". By that I mean, they write on their walls items they need to remember in the later future, these include phone contacts, dates of important events such as birthdays or dates of death of someone very important, they also write the date of building the houses on the walls at times. What I found amusing and which caused me to include this subject in the writing is some proverbs I saw on walls in Akumersu. In one home I found the saying "*nothing is late when life is long*", it struck

a chord in me as it's a very true statement. Wisdom is not limited to any geographical spot. One also said "*say what you know*", this probably means one must say what he's sure to be the truth. When many months or a year later I found myself sitting in room with a colleague watching a news programme and there was a news report on Akumersu Yiti, I knew I did the right thing by telling about the village in the first place. They are practically disconnected from civilisation; the news item reignited my passion to throw more light on the plights of unfortunate communities like them. I got a confirmation that though the people have resigned themselves to their fate, the facts remain; they need good drinking water, they need to be connected to the national power grid, they need a road and they need a health facility. It was nostalgic watching the journalist

struggling to climb the hills they climbed every day, drink the water they drank every day and ward off the insects that kept biting the inhabitants. I felt fulfilled. The main preoccupation of the women in this village all roast “gari” for a living. I had a superb host in my few days stay there; a young man about 45 years and his beautiful wife. One day he told me he would slaughter a goat in my honour the day before I leave. I took it for a joke until it actually came to pass. The night before I left, I feasted heavily on goat light soup and banku.

There was one primary school in Akumersu, manned by two teachers, one being a young newly posted lady teacher. The first day I met and interacted with her was when we both met at the spot where everyone in the village went for

network. I immediately understood from her how difficult it was to be where she was and she won't miss any chance to leave there if she could.

Among the people of Akumersu and by extension, the krobo people, some names run through males and females. In every household, not exaggerating, one is surely going to meet a Tetteh, Teye, Angmotey or some name of that nature. They name their children mostly by their position of birth. That is, a first born has a special name, second, third fourth till the last. This is the case for a lot of tribes in Ghana as well, in the Akan, Ga and Ewe tribes, you are given a name by default of the day of the week you were born. Sunday borns are Kwasi or Akosua (male or female), Monday is Kwadwo or Adwoa, Tuesday

is Kwabena or Abena, Wednesday is Kwaku or Akua, Thursday is Yaw or Yawa, Friday borns are Kofi and Afua whiles Saturday borns are Kwame or Ama.

Tafo District

Nothing moves faster than time. It's been a year since we first started this project. Clearly, I remember the first day, the first chapter; my first operational area.

When we left Nankese, we had gone on to Suhum district, however circumstances beyond me prevented me from writing down my experiences over there. I was in a very small community called Boafo close to Akorabo, another krobo dominated township.

Food Pricing Inequalities

Over the period, as I have travelled around the various districts and communities, I have observed how prices of similar or same items vary. This is especially true for food items and food crops. I have noted also some reasons for such discrepancies; a major one being the nature of existing road networks to the farming communities. Back in Akumersu, I realised how extra difficult it was for farmers to transport their food to sell in the markets, to some of them their worst nightmare is carrying their perishable items on their own head, climb and descend, so they can access a motorable route to transport their items to Asesewa and Koforidua. In places like this, it's easy to predict that the food items cost more.

In Akyem Bosuso, where I stayed in the Tafo District, the roads were much better, at least per what I had seen and used. Consequently, prices of cooked food items were better. It's interesting to observe that communities that work hard to feed the country have very bad roads as compared to ones they feed.

Bosuso was located between Akyem Osiem and Bregoro, a township made of mostly Ekuapems and Krobos though in itself, it's an Akyem land.

I had gone home for a while from Busoso to attend to myself medically. When I returned, circumstances beyond my control dictated that I had to go to Akyem Hemang to help my colleagues over there who had not completed their work like I did.

The morning of that day, I experienced first-hand how dishonest people can be. I love to give to beggars so it wasn't a surprise or a difficulty for me to give her some money when she came asking through the window of the loading bus as they often did. She was deaf and she handed me an envelope to which I obliged, few seconds after she left me, another hawker signalled me of how the said deaf woman wasn't deaf or dumb, I doubted her but just when I looked around, I saw the same woman speaking.-she lied. But don't we all do?

It got me thinking again how society is corrupted in our days and how our leaders are just our mirror image.

Osino District

Asunafo.

When we left Tafo District, we came to Osino district, located near Bunso on the Accra Kumasi highway, however I was posted to Akyem Asunafo, a township on a branched road from Osino to Akyem Abomosu. This town had in the past before I went there, survived a communal clash between those who were accenting to illegal mining and those against it and from what they told me, one person was even lost in a shootout. It happened that one of the major opponents of the illegal mining activities was my host, he had hosted close to ten of us in his big houses. He told me how he stood his ground on his conviction that the ills of illegal mining outweigh the benefits and though they were few and didn't have their way, nature and posterity

will vindicate them. A simple search of the community on google earth revealed to me how the forests in their area had been destroyed.

Conversations of The Boys

Boys talk a lot about various subjects in a very scattered order. I have observed a couple of things about the trajectory of conversations especially among guys like myself over the period; from school, work, home and even in the streets, opinions that vary, that are similar, arguments on petty and pertinent issues, jokes and teasing matches here and there., A lot goes on when a group of guys converse.

We discuss football, religion, politics, social activities, girls, sex among others. When a conversation begins on a particular subject, it takes a different turn as and when it should and,

in every discussion, the discussants assume various roles unknowingly. I have observed the following kinds of personalities in every discussion I have engaged in and have attempted framing names for them myself.

The dominant

In every discussion, one or two persons always stand out. He leads the discussion with informed opinions, he constructs the minds of the others, if the conversation were a football game, that person stand out as the referee of the day. He determines the flow of the conversation and puts the others in check. All this is done unconsciously.

The listeners

Also, I found out that, some sit through discussions only to listen to the opinions of others, whether they agree or not is not always clear, they avoid attention at all cost, they nod, they smile, but they don't say much.

The noisy

Conversations by their very nature are sporadic; tones can be low or high depending on the issue being discussed. Passions also can get very hot especially when discussing football or politics. In these discussions, some have the highest pitches. They raise their voices so high you would think they are leading the discussion or winning the argument. Most often they are not really contributing to the discussion. All these

personalities exhibit these characters often because of their temperaments and this was the case many times in Asunafo where we had lived. Since we were a lot, we did our own cooking championed by Selase and Victor, great cooks.

Asunafo is located in the Atiwa East area of the Eastern region, in the constituency of the current road minister and as the issue of roads has become a hot potato in Ghana, my mind took me back to the quality of roads I saw in the constituency of the road minister. There is a proverb in the Ghanaian local parlance to the effect that when one washes the cloths of others, even his fingernails get cleaned.

The Struggles of an Entrepreneur

Talking of conversations, as we always did in the evenings after work and supper, the talk cantered on entrepreneurship in Ghana one day. It began when one of our colleagues asked a question as to what he could do with an amount of money he had. Among many ideas everyone felt was prudent to share, we had various discussions about the nature of the Ghanaian business environment and fabric with regards to starting and growing a small business. We centred on the challenges and how to ready yourself for them as they will surely come.

First and foremost, the undeniable challenge most youth face is capital and loans accessibility to fund the starting of a business. It has become

increasingly difficult to find young people who start businesses and see them through to the growth and profitable stages. In my travels around the communities of cocoa growing Ghana, I have seen young people attempt to start businesses in agriculture; crop and animal farming, transport and domestic products sales. But to what scale and to what extent can these same youth expand if there are intentional policies by policy makers to enable them to succeed? In Akyem Ofoase for example, when we went there in 2022, I met a young man, Denis, he was bent on making it in life though all he had was secondary school education. I witnessed how he started a small pig farm from scratch in his father's cocoa farm, how he hassled his mom for money to buy wood planks for the makeshift structure while looking

elsewhere to find the rest of the capital to purchase the animals to even start the farm. I saw lack of funds, I saw lack of support, but I saw grit and determination.

We also identified one major personal challenge an entrepreneur is likely to face- disloyalty of employees; often, as is seen even in the public sector and in political leadership, a lot of people don't care much for businesses they don't own, as far as they are concerned, it can burn.

Theft, lack of care, destruction of property etc; these can be so severe that, a business owner might spend most of his energy on monitoring employees, either than on various more lucrative activities that will grow the business.

School Children

In Akim Asunafo, there were a number of schools, same as in Akim Hemang where I had previously been, whenever I see towns with many schools, I get excited. It's a good indication of the fact that many children of school going age are actually in school. The future is bright for such communities and towns, where there is education, there is transformation. On many occasions in our stay in Asunafo, I met and responded to greetings from kids as young as 2 years returning from school. One farmer expressed surprise when I found it unbelievable when she told me her one-and-a-half-year-old son has started school.

Walking back from or to school, in their tiny shirts and shorts, mostly checked tops, small

backpacks behind them, some walking singly others in groups, one can't help but to smile on seeing these kids as they take their strides into the future, armed with the knowledge they are beginning to acquire to have a life hopefully better than their parents'. On a particular day I saw a very beautiful spectacle; school kids marking culture day were made to dress in their traditional outfits to school. Some wore "kente", some wore "bakatari", both indigenous dress styles. Others wore finely done local wax designs. The question however remains that, should they be made to wear their own culture only on one day in the year when they can do that every day?

On that note we took a break once again to prepare for another round of work in the Western North region.

19

The last Lands

Essam District

After our two months break from the Eastern region, we resumed work in the Western North of Ghana, 2022. The last time I checked, this region produces the highest volumes of Ghana's cocoa. Our usual tiresome night travels from Accra brought us after about 11 hours to Essam cocoa district, a Sefwi locality close to Sefwi Debiso very close to Ivory Coast.

Sex Work

She called her customers on phone, she dressed suggestively, she engaged in explicit communication on phone, she's neither reserved

nor shy if you found out what she did for a living; she was a sex worker. Men visited her room, room number 11, in the guest house where we had lodged for few days in Akaatiso, a lively town in the Essam district.

The last time I had any interaction with a sex worker was in 2018 in Dubai, this was the second. It's easy to be prejudicial towards people like her, it's easy to be extremely liberal towards people like her also, however everything in life is best understood from a balanced point of view, so I decided to look at it that way. My mind was actually drawn back to the story of Sonya and Raskolnikov; the two main characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *the murderer and the prostitute*. Also, my convictions were made firmer by the story of Jesus and the woman at the well of Jacob who was also

portrayed as a prostitute. I hold that, just like the wanton destruction of our water and land resources, the destruction of one's body in prostitution as it's seen in galamsey are not truly driven by the desperate need for survival but by an insatiable love of money. That which makes a man destroy the environment to enrich himself must surely be the same that causes a woman to destroy her body for money. That said, however, things like this speak to how badly society has failed those it's supposed to help. People don't just end up as sex workers, people don't just end up as armed robbers or murderers. Society always plays a role.

Cote D'ivoire Border

Before going there, I knew the lively town was close to Cote D'ivoire to the west of Ghana, so

when we came to Akaatiso, I knew we must definitely find the borders and if possible enter the other side. Unknown to us, the very rickety wooden fence manned by immigration and excise officials on both the Ghanaian and Ivorian sides which served as a border was just about 5minutes walk from where we lodged. We did enter into Ivorian land on foot. Aside Akaatiso, Nkrankwanta in the Brong and Ahafo regions many months later was another opportunity to enter Cote D'ivoire.

People existed in geographical areas before demarcations of lands for the sole purpose of colonization. They shared same languages, marriage, cultural practices, land and water and a lot more before the colonial masters brought their colonial languages. The obvious

thing I first noticed about the village on the Ivorian side was the fact that it had the same name as the one on the Ghanaian side, just that they add "French" to it. This confirmed whatever I knew and felt about what colonisation did to African tribes,; these two communities used to be one, people on both sides could speak same local language, they shared homes,. I saw them move in and out for personal and business reasons but one became a French colony, the other an English colony.

The French side was less developed, less busy, obviously less populated and shockingly without power. The currency they used, the CFA could be used on the Ghanaian side of the border as on the Ivorian side. Kids from both sides as I was told, attended any of the schools on either sides,

but the power grid from Ghana could not be extended to them.

Also, Akaatiso was a Sefwi locality with very few indigenes, largely replaced by people from Northern Ghana, Ashantis and Bono, youthful, loud and dusty such that I was a bit surprised, however pleasantly when I was told it wasn't a host to Ghana's most discussed national issue at the time of my writing this book; galamsey. The small community where I worked, called "The Point" is actually one of about 5 houses, central to scattered hamlets all around it which serves as a polling station for those nearby. I worked there for 3days. "*Our roads are very bad*" they would say, "*yet boxes are sent here for our votes*", they know they were cheated but they know fully well they are powerless, they know

their children and the ones after them may fail to reach their full potential but their hands may be tied actually.

On the second day when I went to my community to do my work, my lead person, Obour, who helped me with every single thing I needed to facilitate my work, was nowhere to be found. People like him normally were the ones who easily identified the names and location of farmers in the locality. So, when I met his absence, I was helpless. I took to looking out for him only to realise that the other people in the community were also searching for him. They said the last time anyone had seen him was the night before. He was missing. My community lead person was missing. A group of friends and relatives came together and organised

themselves to search nearby communities to no avail. He was still nowhere to be found even the following day.

It was later while I was in Akaatiso that information reached me that he has returned from a drinking expedition in another town quite far away.

Coping Mechanisms

By and large, as we have embarked on this near nationwide tour as I may be permitted to call it, one thing stood out in and among us all; we had to cope very fast. Everything around us in most places we lived for fortnights were so much unlike anything we were used to; surrounding sanitary conditions, environmental pollution, noise pollution, price differentials, unusual

societal norms, a lot changed for us all and for me personally. I have learnt to witness environmentally degrading acts of illegal mining and look the other way. I have learned to cock my ears and sigh in contempt whenever I hear politicians downplay the impact of it on the whole. I have come close to drugs, prostitution, child marriages and child labour, danger on the roads, fear of being attacked at night by strangers and other perils I can't readily say.

Asawinso

It was in great pain that I arrived at Sefwi Asawinso from Sefwi Essam that tiresome, rainy evening. I woke up at around 5am at Akaatiso, reached Sefwi Essam around 8:00am, but it wasn't until after 6:00pm that we finally got

settled in our operational area in Asawinso, that evening of 27th Sept 2022.

We decided to board our own bus to our destination. I had broached the idea that we go by ourselves to Asawinso instead of waiting to travel with buses organised by the district to convey us. To some few colleagues, that will make our journey faster than traveling in a large group.

When we got to the public transport station, mini buses loading to Asawinso were available. We paid and were waiting for the bus to be filled so we could move. In the process of loading my bag onto the top carrier of the Toyota HI ace mini bus, I injured my left hand; a sharp metal rod pierced me between my index finger and my thumb.

Immediately I noticed the severe bleeding, I run around to the drug stores nearby to get first aid. They couldn't be of help, and they were manning an over the counter medicine shop, what irony! Finally, when I was reminded that there was a cocoa clinic around, I got help there. Tetanus shot, a few antibiotics and a pain killer, I had to rush back to join my colleagues.

First aid skills are a must have and I have held the opinion that children must be taught in the school system this skill among others as a survival skill.

Favourite Dishes

I suspect that the origin of the name of this popular Ghanaian dish is Hausa. It's beans and rice cooked together with some leaves and as such has a brown color; waakye. It's eaten with

hot pepper called *shitor*. In my travels around the various districts, I have tasted various flavours of the same dish made by different people in different societies. The culture of a group of people affects their dietary habits and even skills, such that, an Ashanti woman cooks same dish as a Ga woman or an Ewe woman and they taste unique in their own ways. Though there are staples identical with specific tribes, in Ghana, some dishes run across most tribes. Top among such is waakye. Most people in Ghana eat it. And by far, waakye has become a top contender in my list of dishes.

Second on my list of favourite dishes, “*gobe*” as it's called temporarily, has equally gained grounds in my list of staples as I travelled around the clock around the country. Its beans cooked

very well, mixed with palm oil and “gari” (a product of cassava made into powdery form). It's eaten with fried ripe plantains.

Different conditions dictate the kind of foods I mostly eat in some of the localities I found myself. In the big towns where some of these foods are sold, I gladly buy them for myself. In communities where these are not sold, improvisation is the key.

In cases where i had to subsist on the farmers for daily feeding because food isn't sold there, often, the dishes are boiled unripe plantain with kontomire (cocoyam leaves) stew or garden eggs stew, some locally grown rice with soup, yam grown in cocoa farms, called "*cocoa ase bayere*", and in this case, these became my delicacies in often times.

Increasingly, over the period recorded in this write up, I had developed a very strong affinity for “konkonte” or “abetie” as it’s called, a staple among the many Ghanaian tribe made by cooking the powder of dried cassava, it’s said to be healthier since its less starchy. The resulting colour is light brown, eaten with a variety of soups, aside its ubiquitous nature, it’s also said to be far economical and I could attest to that. During our second round of mop up in the Ashanti region, it actually overtook “waakye” to the first spot for me.

Unequal Halves

One evening thought me a very important lesson I would share, after I had settled in Asawinso for some days and began getting used to the life there. I went to buy bread in a shop just behind

where we lived during our stay at Asawinso. I didn't really like the kind of bread which was available for sale, but I had no choice. I settled on it. I asked to be given four Ghana cedis worth of bread. So, she cut a piece of the loaf and was about to hand it to me. I however noticed that it looked too small for my liking so I inquired how much the loaf was, her response was eight cedis, which means what she gave me should be half of the loaf, so what she gave me and what was left should be same size, but I suspected foul play. I knew what to do immediately. I told her to give me the other half since the full loaf was eight cedis. She smiled and did, only to confirm my suspicion, to her embarrassment and the admiration of those who had also come to buy items that the other half was way bigger than what she had wanted to give me.

People's estimation of figures and quantities are often based on their caprices, and the fact that it's called half doesn't mean it is, always cross check and be sure.

My host in Asawinso happened to be a 32 years old family man, his wife Aisha and their 3years old daughter had been very good to me and though work had been slow per se, I enjoyed every bit of work there. There was two weeks break so I returned home to Accra.

Unsetting Sun

Bibiani District

Inflation had hit an all-time high, the cedi became the worst performing currency in Africa and the second weakest against the dollar in the world. Food prices having shot up over 50%, transport fares increasing unabated. This was the state of economy at the time of writing this chapter, and I was on the way to Bibiani, about to bear the brunt in increased transport fares.

Sefwi Aboabo

Off the Sefwi Anwiaso to Sefwi Bekwai road is this small town of say 500 people, where I was to spend the next two weeks of my work.

Responsibilities had increased for me as for the first time, my supervisor asked me to lead the zone. That meant I had to receive and compile reports from operational leaders; 8 of them.

Of the first impression I had of this town, let me speak of fruit trees and food crops. It was obvious that the people in this community had so much to eat. Every home I saw around had food crops growing around it; plantain, orange, coconuts, cassava, pear and some palm.

The sun sets in the west, so I observed that it was quite hot here and then also, days seem to be longer generally in the western part of Ghana.

The Sheep

On my second night of stay, we were rudely awakened by the bleating of hungry sheep whose pen was just behind our windows. I don't

like sheep personally, though the Bible refers to Christians as sheep belonging to the good shepherd, they made so much noise that it was difficult to sleep between 1 am to 5:00am. In villages, a lot of not so usual stuff are normalised; stray animals for examples.

I don't know what caused the severe diarrhoea I had experienced that day; was it the water? Food? The bananas or oranges I had taken? I don't know, but I know that I had terrible diarrhoea that hindered my work for two or three days.

People can get used to anything, anyone or any conditions; good bad or ugly. Think of it, when people get used to good, they drift into their

comfort zone, when people get used to the bad they don't budge at abuse or toxicity, both ways not too good. I have always known this, at least I hear and read of women getting killed in marriage because they didn't take a step out when the abuse portended. It's easy to blame people this way, but there is something about people that makes them adapt to adversity soundly. People live in very high temperatures, very low temperatures, food scarcity, war, danger of all forms, yet they are fine. The danger is in the failure to admit the danger and making a move prior to declining into adaptation.

When I was in Aboabo, I was given a room which can at best be described as dirty. Let me explain, the walls were a dirty green with stains of old age all over, visibly dirty curtains reeling with dust, a mattress which reeks of piss, dust, and possibly,

bugs, so much so that, I knew I couldn't stay for long. However, I did stay for a week when I realised that though my mind may adapt, my body will suffer. So, I made a move to Subri Nkwanta.

A Colleague's Question

One night at Subri Nkwanta, where we had all gone to settle after we finished majority of our work; I, because I had some severe diarrhoea and others because they were sent packing, the next week was to be spent there. It lied between Anwhiaso and Bekwai of Sefwi land.

One day, a colleague asked me a question, answering, which gave me a perspective I had hitherto not touched on verbatim and on which note I think it's fair to end this narrative.

He wanted to know what my best work district had been.

I knew from experience that any rushed answer will be a shot in the foot, so I pondered it well.

Many factors dictated my answer to him; I didn't have a single favourite to offer him, the environment, the social nature of the people, friends I made, the accommodation, their hospitality, my memory of the place, the food and others were important factors in deciding what my choice of a favourite district would be. So, I could not settle on one. That's because all the factors were not equal at one place. Where there is good food, there may not be a good accommodation, where there was an ambient environment, the people may not be very sociable as it should be. Nothing could be taken

for granted in these small matters. I tried to answer this way.

From Mangoase in Techiman district, to Kasapin in the Goaso district, Nkrankwanta, Wassa Akropong and all the subsequent towns and villages I have not mentioned here, my experiences kept mounting as we kept going to and fro pursuing the single agenda, the generality of experiences I had from the beginning, most of which I have tried to relay to my readers haven't really changed.

Roads have been dusty, schools dilapidated, school children studying in extraneous situations, young girls of school going age getting pregnant; much hadn't changed. In a discussion with a friend one day, I told him I am not sure people

living in these deprived communities will see a better Ghana anytime soon.

Conclusions

I have seen and observed a lot in over 25 districts, though I tried to condense these into just 20 chapters of writing. Some districts I took out because experiences there were not ones I would want to remember and I would not want to throw light on them.

In a space of close to 2 years, I recorded the experiences I shared in these few pages; I have seen the way of life of many different people groupings; various tribes, ages, vocations and aspirations. I believe succinctly that the partial recording of their challenges and aspirations as

space and time permitted to do in this short memoir is not enough to if anything at all push for their voices to be heard by those who matter.

I have paid attention to and highlighted the major challenges that run through rural communities in Ghana; poor road network, poverty, disease, lack of educational and health facilities, post-harvest losses, illegal logging and mining, teenage pregnancy, child labour, social vices and crime as my contribution to helping ameliorate the plight of the people. I hope the abandoned hospitals and health centres will be fixed, the roads as well. I hope governments make intentional efforts to subsidise the costs of farming, provide educational facility and materials where they are needed for their children. If the many young people who attempt to build businesses also get help, through

governments creating the enabling environment, my aim would also be achieved.

That aside, I also tried my best as language will permit, to paint the picture of the beautiful village sceneries I saw, the landscape and beauty of the natural environment.

Above all, I have been successful in recording valuable memories that I would cherish for a long time to come.

END



Donkorkrom near the school block, 2021



A group of beautifully dressed school girls on cultural day at Akyem Asunafo.



2022, enjoying the shades of cocoa trees in Tettehkrom, Tapa.



A rural classroom wall.



A section of rubber trees on the road to



A beautiful view of Wurapong in 2022.

Kamaso, 2021.



A classroom block in Donkorkrom also showing the teachers bungalows.



A beautiful view of a plain near Asesewa, Eastern Region.



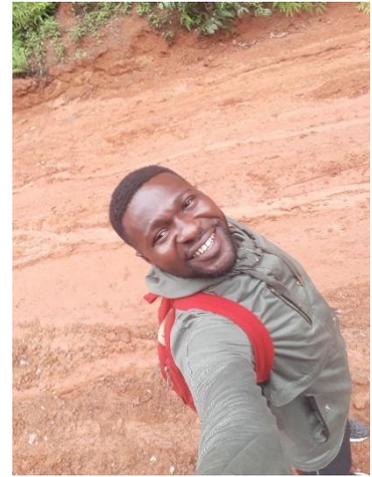
Walking into the cocoa farm hamlets with a farmer.



A regular village home.



In the bucket of a pick-up truck, on our way
district, 2021.



The untarred road to Anloga Ainyinase
to Wurapong, Mankraso District.



An abandoned house in Wurapong.

Glossary of Words

Mankrado- a chief in a rural area

Wassa- a tribe in western Ghana.

Ekuapem- a tribe in eastern Ghana.

Ga- a tribe in southern Ghana.

LBC- licenced buying companies of cocoa

Fufu- a local dish made from pounded tubers eaten with soups

CHPS- rural health centres

CHED- cocoa health and extension division of cocobod.

Cocoa house- head office building of Ghana Cocoa board.

Galamsey- illegal gold mining

C-zone- comfort zone

Krobo- a tribe in Ghana

Fante- a tribe in Ghana

Ewe- a tribe in Ghana

Akim/akyem- a tribe in Ghana

Krakyee- an educated person

Waakye- rice and beans dish

Gobe- beans and fried ripe plantain

PNDC- provisional national defence council.

Abetie- A staple made from cooked dried
cassava

flour

