

Leisure in Ghana: Whence and Whither?

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This chapter sheds light on the lived leisure experiences of Ghanaians and contributes to the sparse and limited literature on lifestyles in the country. I demonstrate how Ghanaians give meaning to the phenomenon of leisure and how these meanings differ and change in space and time. I argue that although lifestyles have been affected by the forces of globalization through advances in telecommunications and technology, many implications and applications of the leisure phenomenon remain almost incognita. First, the Ghanaian context is highlighted to enable an appreciation of some of the issues.

Ghana (5°33'N 0°12'W) is an Anglophone country in West of Africa sandwiched between three Francophone countries: Burkina Faso to the north, Cote d'Ivoire to the west, and Togo to the east. The Gulf of Guinea forms Ghana's southern border. The country was the first African country south of the Sahara to gain independence from Great Britain in 1957. At the time of independence, Ghana's economy was purported to be in relatively good shape with gross domestic product (GDP) similar to that of Malaysia and South Korea (Werlin, 1994). The Gold Coast, as Ghana was known prior to independence, had the highest per capita income in West Africa and was described as the *Model Colony* (Buah, 1998). However, like most of sub-Saharan Africa, by the 1980s as a result of coups and counter-coups, the country plunged into political turmoil and economic malaise in what became known throughout Africa as the *lost decades*. Ghana's bright prospects at independence were derailed. Of significance is the inherently volatile and unpredictable prices of the country's major export commodities: gold and cocoa. When export revenues decline as a result of declining exports, successive governments

succumb to neo-liberal economic policies dictated by the Bretton Woods Institutions (i.e. the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; IMF) with disastrous consequences for the living standards of nationals.

Ghana shares many similarities with most countries in the sub-region regarding social, economic, and environmental conditions. Incomes are low while unemployment and under-employment levels are high. Rural dwellers wielding basic education certificates drift daily to the cities in search of non-existent jobs, which further exacerbates urban poverty. According to the 2010 population census data, 50.9% of Ghanaians live in urban areas (Ghana Statistical Service; GSS, 2013). The majority of the population lives in the major urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, Tamale, Sekondi-Takoradi, Cape Coast, and Ho. Nearly half of city dwellers live in Accra and Kumasi, the national capital and second largest city, respectively. These two cities along with several other metropolises have the lion's share of social amenities such as portable water, electricity, high education, and health care-delivery. The availability of facilities in the urban areas (particularly in Accra and Kumasi) has led to the growth of peri-urban areas putting tremendous pressure on basic services and infrastructure, with the major concern being the physical expansion of the countryside into peri-urban areas (Yeboah, 2003; Simon, McGregor & Nsiah-Gyabaah, 2004).

Despite the chaos and depressive realities in the cities, living conditions are far better than the countryside. Few rural folks have access to electricity and safe drinking water. The predominately agrarian nature of the rural economy means seasonal unemployment is rife and wages low. Their combined effect of the one-way traffic termed as rural-urban migration has led to uncontrollable levels of urbanization.

More pronounced is the spatial imbalance in socio-economic development between country's north and the south, often attributed to colonial policy (Langer, 2009). However, despite the best intentions of successive post-colonial governments to industrialize the country by modernizing agriculture, the regional (i.e., north-south divide) inequalities remained largely unchanged to this day (Songsore, 2003). The south continues to attract manufacturing investments because of available transportation infrastructure while the north remains predominantly agrarian, deprived, and marginalized. To the extent that rural areas in the south are more likely to experience economic growth than those in the north.

The wide disparity in socio-economic development between the north and south has brought social restructuring, especially in the rural south where proportion of households headed by females keeps growing at an alarming rate (GSS, 2014). This, in turn, has disrupted traditional pathways making it increasingly difficult for children and young people to achieve social adulthood (Langevang, 2007). Even though adults from time immemorial have dictated children's in-house and out-of-house activities such as washing dishes and tasks on the farm, the locale of upbringing also plays a significant role in how children experience social life in their later years (Esiya-Donkoh & Mariwah, 2011).

Defining Leisure in Ghana

This context about Ghana provides a foundation for discussing major social and economic changes that have affected leisure behavior in Ghana. Etymologically, leisure exists in the Ghanaian parlance. The Akan word *afoufi* seems to be derived from *afoum*, meaning farm. From this idea came the expression *ofiri afoum* (originally meaning a

return from farm). These words are related – implying the dialectic link of work and the start of leisure time (Akyeampomg & Ambler, 2002). Ghanaians hardly mention leisure-time unless the demands of work, eating, and sleep have been satisfied. As a result, any period not spent meeting the basic necessities of life is considered frivolous to a morally and religiously-conscious population. Thus, given the prevailing socio-economic circumstances in Ghana, work is regarded as the highest value of life, and leisure the lowest.

The increasing recourse to this classical view of leisure among Ghanaians has survived despite changes and political transformations brought about by colonialism, post-colonialism, and the development of capitalism. First, the colonial policy of developing the southern half of the country brought cosmopolitan lifestyles and consumption patterns. Most coastal settlements with significant colonial settlers such as Cape Coast, Sekondi, and Accra were influenced by European lifestyles and behaviors. Thus, nearly 60 years into independence, the disparities in living conditions between the south, which had predominant colonial presence and the north, which did not, is evident. The differential experiences with Western European cultures resulted in educated *middle men* comprising lawyers, clerks, merchants, and semi-skilled laborers domiciled in the south who possessed material goods and could, therefore, afford to take vacations and indulge in recreational activities. The few educated Northerners, on the other hand, found the newly acquired lifestyles of the southern worthy of emulation. The colonial administrators and merchants, however, encouraged leisure pursuits after work and on national holidays and did not countenance types of local music, dance, and alcoholic beverages since they led to debauchery (Plageman, 2013).

Notwithstanding the prohibition, indigenous working-class people thronged the assortment of bars, clubs, and concert and dance halls, reinforcing the northern image of the south as leisurely and carefree. From the perspective of leisure, the north offered a welcome utopian retreat from the frenetic work pace of the south and subsequent social stratification based on education, class, lineage, and associations. During the colonial times especially, northern societies were predominantly farming households living in compound homesteads whose social life were organized in a local setting and defined by local culture. In that respect, the north mirrored the ideal Ghanaian lifestyle that seemed absent in south Ghana.

When independence came in 1957, many people hoped and aspired to a lifestyle that embraced both work and leisure in the right proportions, but it has never come to fruition. The strong disparities in leisure opportunities (i.e., leisure-related facilities and activities) among urban and rural areas reflect on how individuals spend their free time and their attitudes towards to leisure. Urban areas generally have relatively better leisure facilities than rural areas. The simple existence of leisure facilities –even in its rudimentary form– is important in distinguishing the *leisure haves* from the *leisure have nots*. Although Ghana always has been predominately rural until the last census of 2010, leisure as time free from work-related responsibilities is mainly an urban phenomenon. Indeed, Ghanaian traditional culture always has been linked to rurality. Story-telling, poetry, and folk music were set in rural locales. However, since colonial times, urban lifestyles are seen as superior to those in the rural areas. Urban dwellers are the first to acquire new material possessions such as automobiles as well as radio and television sets and experiment with new *modern* lifestyles. This explains, perhaps deservedly so, why

urban folks do not only gain social prestige for being able to afford such leisure facilities, but also mere possession of associated leisure facilities are evidence of a life of leisure.

Several accounts of different aspects of urban lifestyles exist (Plageman, 2013). Although I cannot cover all of them, I provide a general overview of how the meaning of leisure has evolved. As previously mentioned, structural inequalities in Ghanaian society often dictate how people discover the meaning of leisure, their leisure potential and the importance of leisure in their lives. Therefore, socio-economic status, particularly income and education levels, are the overriding determinants of defining leisure. For people who struggle to make ends meet, leisure is an arena for social marginalization in sharp contrast to lower-middle and working class Ghanaians who feel leisure travel is a luxury in their free time. In addition to non-holiday taking, an established trend has developed where public servants including senior officials and blue-collar workers in urban areas forego annual leave in exchange for *payment*.

For Ghanaians without a middle-class home (i.e., homes with flat screen TVs, DVD home players and lavish furnishings), outdoor drinking with friends and family has become the national pastime, especially in the cities and towns. This habit has spread in the past decade as part of the increasing popularity of European football matches. Both football enthusiasts and ardent supporters of European football clubs huddle around giant television screens outside bars as well as cramped rural ones supporting or arguing about the game.

The few upper and upper-middle class citizens mostly go shopping in huge departmental stores and malls that in recent years has become an integral feature of the cityscape of Accra and Kumasi. They tend to patronize the arts and engage in exclusive,

high-status pastimes, and sometimes decadent proclivities such as patronizing prostitutes, profligate partying, over indulging in alcohol/drugs, extra marital sex and posting pornographic videos on social media. Some use private cars to escape the big cities to go to nearby spas. This group is more likely to engage in active recreation pastimes and holidays overseas. Holidays overseas have little to do with daily leisure and recreation, but it does reflect the economic wellbeing of the travelers and possibilities to gain social prestige.

Free Time and Leisure Participation

Cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues such as social values, religion, personal income, and technology affect leisure behavior. Despite the apparent increasing significance of recreation, sport, and entertainment in the lives of some Ghanaians, little is known empirically about leisure. The lack of data on a wide range of phenomena such as health, housing, education, and economic activity is staggering. Even where data exist, they are often misleading and irrelevant regarding an applied and theoretical understanding of leisure. Perhaps leisure is not sufficiently important to justify the cost of gathering such information by the GSS, which is the statutory body responsible for population census, the computation of monthly and annual inflation figures, living standards, and other official statistics.

For example, the 2010 Population and Housing Census collected data on days and hours worked by formal sector employees. No questions were asked, however, on the willingness or availability to work more hours. Generally, a 40-hour working week is the norm, and specified in collective agreements and other labor regulations. Applying 40 hours a week threshold to the information collected could give an indication of the

probable levels of under-employment among the employed population. The report showed that less than a tenth (9%) of the workforce worked less than 20 hours a week; indeed, only a fifth (21%) worked less than 30 hours.

By far, the most authoritative source of information on the living conditions including leisure pursuits is the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) (GSS, 2014). According to the statistics, travelling to visit friends and family remains the dominant purpose of domestic and outbound travel among Ghanaians, especially in Accra and surrounding areas. Gender differences in the travel behavior were also noted in the GLSS report. A larger proportion of males made one outbound same-day trip than females. More females than males made 1-4 outboard overnight trips. More men travelled for business and professional reasons. Women more than men tended to travel out-of-town to visit family and friends and attend funerals. Given that Ghanaians do not travel to engage in leisure or recreation, there exists anecdotal evidence that seems to suggest that social role expectations influence this type of travel. Traditionally, attendance at funerals or visits to family and friends are customary imperatives (Akyeampong, 1996). Thus, preparations and work required for this type of travel is not really leisure.

Although successive governments have had an interest in aspects of leisure such as sport and physical recreation, entertainment, and tourism, no efforts have been made to collect quantitative macro-level data on leisure lifestyles. For example, in the latest GLSS report, the evaluation of leisure and recreation participation was limited to a few general observations on domestic tourism that took barely 11 pages (GLSS, 2014). Several important questions were left out. For example, priority was not given to home-based leisure. The most popular home-based activities such as watching television/video and

relaxing and doing nothing were not included in the survey. There was no inclusion of *talking on the mobile phone* even though the report noted that four out of every five households in the country owned a mobile phone. Even among the social/cultural activities taking place outside the home, religious activities, visiting bars, and engaging in keep-fit activities were also missing. No data was reported on retail outlets and live arts, sports, and entertainment venues. Among the sporting activities, football-- by far the most popular activity among the youth--was not captured in the report.

Since colonial times, Ghanaians have had a knack for football. Although the country did not qualify for the FIFA World Cup until 2006, it was a powerhouse on the continent and was the first country to win the African Cup of Nations four times. Ghana's football history is also reflected in its strong national league, which has produced players featured in the top international football leagues in Europe (Darby & Solberg, 2010). The country also hosted the African Cup of Nations in 2008, which led to infrastructure improvements and increased tourism (Amenumey & Amuquandoh, 2010).

Nevertheless, data on daily work time, daily non-work time and weekly annual work time for the working class particularly those in the private sector are unavailable. Oral accounts by friends and relatives, casual observation, and anecdotal evidence have provided the basis for many of my views expressed in this chapter.

Leisure Education

Data on free-time and leisure participation has been limited as has leisure scholarship. Generally, Ghanaian social scientists including scholars with a particular interest in leisure/tourism studies have not had access to resources to conduct large-scale empirical research. Against the backdrop of increased budget deficit and increased cost of

higher education, government support for public universities, particularly for basic research, has stalled in recent years. In the 1970s, the government commissioned three groundbreaking study reports that explored the country's touristic offerings and opportunities in the international marketplace. The impetus was the challenge presented to the government over the country's large deficit in balance of payments. At that time, the economy had been battered by a sharp drop in the value of the national currency. To rescue the ailing economy the military government at the time felt the provision of accommodation, sports, and entertainment facilities could attract inbound visitors from Western Europe, North America, and Japan.

Academic research on leisure participation among Ghanaians is a fairly recent phenomenon. One reason is the negative connotation of leisure in the Ghanaian society. Another reason could be the level of sensitivity and nature of information; issues relating to access and availability of leisure facilities were deemed politically inappropriate to study or openly discuss, especially when every socio-economic issue was viewed through partisan political lens. Depending on what political parties they support or sympathize with which is often based on ethnicity, Ghanaians do not admit facing economic hardship when their political party is in power (Fridy, 2007). Despite the pioneering work of Adu-Febiri (1988), it took 12 years for another seminal work by Akyeampong (1996) to emerge on issues relating to domestic holidaying. Over the past decade, studies have identified patterns of leisure behavior (e.g., Adam, 2014; Zeleza & Veney, 2003), but these studies have been too few.

One characteristic of the studies that have been undertaken is that they were mostly Master's or doctoral dissertations, which tended to be mostly descriptive.

However, these studies provide a snapshot of the proportion of the population engaged in leisure and cultural activities and variations of participation among different groups. Another characteristic is that few graduate projects have covered the wider general population's attitudes and preferences (Abugbire, 2013). University student leisure patterns are epitomized as more active because they benefit from the diverse leisure pursuits offered on campuses (Yankholmes & Lin, 2012; Adam, Hiamey & Afenyo, 2015). A third important characteristic is that these studies focused on the literate and professional segments of society. By focusing on the literate and middle-class populations, the authors perhaps hoped to reduce instances in which *lack of discretionary income* could be mentioned as a reason for non-involvement in leisure activities. Finally, these studies used questionnaire to gather information on people's recalled participation in leisure activities over a specified period of time. An emergent postmodern trend especially in Europe is to eschew the survey method and use a more comprehensive qualitative approach to study the leisure phenomenon. In the case of Ghana, surveys are a vehicle for empirical data collection in the absence of a large national data collection effort. Further, an investigation of the role of disability in leisure participation has been missing, but Adam (2015) filled this need with his doctoral research conducted at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana.

As a field of study, leisure and tourism allied courses^f in Ghana are treated as disparate spheres of activity, and integration of the two fields is rare. In reality, however, leisure and tourism are inextricably linked (Smith & Godbey, 1991). Tourism first appeared as subject at the undergraduate level in 1996 at UCC. The government earlier had established a Hotel, Catering, and Tourism Institute (HOTCATT) to provide

vocational training in basic skills aimed at “developing and enhancing qualified human resource in the tourism industry” (Akyeampong, 2007,192). HOTCATT was joined initially by three polytechnic institutions in the 1990s and currently all the ten polytechnic institutions in Ghana offer tourism or hospitality at the undergraduate level. As tourism became popular and was declared a *priority sector* for development by successive governments, private and public higher education institutions offering tourism or allied areas such as hotel administration, tour operations, and travel agency saw a commensurate increase in popularity.

Most higher education institutions offering tourism programs, however, do not place much emphasis on leisure, recreation, and allied areas in their curricula despite several new influences and trends. As a former tourism student at UCC, I took only three leisure-related courses in my entire undergraduate and postgraduate programs: leisure and disability, social and psychological aspects of leisure behavior, and tourism and recreation. Because of the priority of tourism education, few leisure textbooks and journal articles from the Ghanaian perspective were available. Even where they existed, these were by Western authors and offered no empirical analysis of leisure participation patterns among Ghanaians.

Noteworthy further is that sport-based physical education (PE) curricula are not integrated in tourism programs. Traditionally, PE provision was compulsory in primary and secondary schools and incorporated several sports and physical activities such as football, athletics, basketball, netball, hockey, table tennis, and health related fitness. A good deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that many school children take formal schooling serious because of the opportunity to participate in sports and team games. For

several decades, the sporting men and women who donned the national colors at international competitions were recruited from secondary schools. Perhaps the lack of diversification in tourism curriculum to incorporate leisure and allied fields has led to more passive use of leisure time among young people after completing their full-time education.

Public Leisure Provision

The provision of public leisure services and its impact on the citizenry are subjects that are heavily politicized. However, scholars in leisure studies have not remained above the political fray. The relationship between politics, policy, and leisure has received scholarly attention (e.g., Henry, 2001). The focus has usually been either on the availability of leisure services that meet the needs of urban and rural areas or on public sector spending on leisure services. Given that the right to leisure is enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27), governments are obligated to provide leisure opportunities for their citizenry and to ensure that citizens optimize their leisure experiences. The justification given is that leisure contributes significantly to improving the well-being of individuals and communities.

In the circumstances of Ghana, the emphasis on tourism is prevailing as a result of patronage given by successive governments prior to the colonial administration. Given its capitalist orientation, the colonial administration refrained from direct involvement in the provision of tourism infrastructure for the local population. However, chalets in the countryside were built where administrators and middle-class folks sought the benefits of relaxation and recreation. Worth noting is that the intention of building the chalets was more for administrators than tourism-oriented.

The immediate era after Ghana's independence witnessed the expansion of economic nationalism, which set the stage for state involvement in the development of tourism. The government constructed catering rest houses in all the regional capitals in the country. Like their colonial predecessors, the main purpose was to build infrastructure to aid administrative work, which among other things involved the administration of justice, collection of taxes, receiving petitions and supervising indigenous rulers. The first major state investment in the tourism industry was the construction of the Ambassador Hotel in 1956 to accommodate dignitaries expected at the independence celebration.

Public investment in the leisure industry grew until the mid-1980s when state-owned enterprises were put on divestiture following the country's implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programs proposed by the World Bank/IMF (Akyeampong, 2009). The programs were implemented in two phases (1984-6 and 1987-92) by the then military junta under the national Economic Recovery Program (ERP) to attract foreign direct investment and revitalize the economy. Currently, investment in the industry is from both domestic and foreign firms with the national government providing the enabling environment regarding policy formulation and implementation as well as creating regulatory frameworks that ensure fair, transparent, and sustainable development. The national government also joins local authorities in the promotion of tourist products. The latest example is the Paragliding Festival in the mountains of the Kwahu District of the Eastern Region, which has become a huge success attracting large number of domestic tourists. The pilots are flown in from around the world by the government.

These developments spark the question of whether government now has an incentive to renege on its commitment to enhance the quality of life of the general populace through leisure, since it can satisfy political demands for more public-private participation in the economy without meeting the social service needs of the populace. Issues of whether the government should generally become less interventionist has risen over the last three decades. There remains, however, a gross under-provision of leisure and recreation facilities in both urban and rural areas.

In my opinion, it is vital that public institutions established to administer policies on various aspects of leisure and recreation must do more to improve leisure opportunities. Raising housing standards in urban and peri-urban areas and improvements of home and near-home leisure environments are recurrent themes. Initiatives in the area of sports tourism will be needed not for poorer towns, but also for low income populations in the urban areas if greater participation in tourism is to be stimulated. Rural areas also lack outdoor resources for active recreation. Encouraging working class people to take annual leave and affluent people to holiday within the country could add to improving conditions of substandard transport terminals. Given that domestic tourism relates to stays with friends and family, general housing space and quality standards must be linked to tourism to provide better leisure experiences.

Conclusions

The relatively peaceful political climate and modest gains in socio-economic development in Ghana during the last two decades should not conceal the unfulfilled needs or constrained access to leisure pursuits among the majority of Ghanaians. The

challenge of the 21st century is to enhance human dignity through the provision of leisure opportunities for the whole population in our country.

The need for government to base policy development and evaluation on good quantitative data about free time and leisure participation cannot be overemphasized. These data would not only serve the needs of research community but also aid and stimulate public/private sector actions on increasing investments in the provision of leisure facilities that ensure quality experiences. Accordingly, a major goal of future research should be to clarify the role of leisure (i.e., culture, sports, recreation, tourism) among Ghanaians. A second goal should be to pay more attention to the dynamics of leisure practices in particular settings such as boarding schools and university campuses. It is imperative that a better analysis be made on leisure interventions (e.g., public policy and strategies for leisure) particularly regarding how public provisions in the areas of sports and physical education could be used to combat vice-related activities among the youth. Finally, there must be a greater emphasis on examining the nature and development of leisure experiences, choices, and behavior.

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