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**There is no Word for Cousin:
Understanding Ghanaian Homelessness from an American Context**

**Submitted by:
Kenneth Hutchinson**

**Independent Research Project
SIT Ghana, West Africa
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The Derbens

Fiance and Research Assistant:
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Savior and Friend:
Jesus Christ

Medase!

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Abstract

This paper serves as an investigation into the Ghanaian society and culture in efforts to understand and explain notions of homelessness. Using my previous research on family homelessness in San Francisco, California as a general frame work and example of American homelessness, this paper juxtaposes the American concept of homelessness with the Ghanaian concept. Information gathered from institutions, people and professionals is used to extract and explain some important themes that help us to better understanding the problem of homelessness in Ghana: Its meanings forms and treatment.

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Introduction

In the recently past summer of 2003 I was a research intern at Compass community services in San Francisco, California. Compass community services is an umbrella organization that operated a shelter, transitional housing unit and a childcare facility for the homeless families of the San Francisco Bay area. In San Francisco, there is an extremely large population of homeless people. To better address the issue of homelessness the Government separated the fund into two systems. Homeless families and homeless single adults. The government of San Francisco helps to fund various non-profit organizations that operate shelters and transitional housing units in efforts to get the families back to self-sufficiency.

Throughout the summer my internship assignment was to find out who does what for homeless families. There were so many organizations that worked with homeless families, thus there was an overlap in services. A lack of communication among the network prohibited the network to best serve the homeless family community. I was able to visit and tour most of the organizations that worked with homeless families and gather enough information to understand each institution's role in helping the families. At the conclusion of the internship I was able to give a presentation that reported on the general problem of homelessness in San Francisco, the organizations that worked with homeless families and their function. My presentation highlighted unpopular organizations that were doing exceptional work, gave suggestions for collaborations and policy recommendations.

While in Ghana I noticed that I had not seen a great deal of homeless people (single adults or families) that were begging or sleeping on the streets. I knew that the problem of homelessness existed and assumed that there were some institutions in place to deal with the problem. When the opportunity arose to study any area of Ghanaian life, society and culture I thought that it would be interesting to make a comparison of the institutions that dealt with homelessness in Ghana to those of America, such as Compass community services. As I began brainstorming for the research I began to ask some of the Ghanaians about homelessness in Ghana. I found that the very term seemed foreign to them. In some instances I had to explain the concept of homelessness. Others who knew what the term meant explain to me that it meant something very different for their culture. It was at this point that I decided that I would launch a research investigation to find out more about what the term "homelessness" means for Ghanaian culture and society.

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In addition, I wanted to learn more about the institutions that dealt with the issue, as it existed and their function. However, as I ventured into the field I noticed that there were certain themes that explained the difference between the American concept of homelessness and the Ghanaian concept. These themes were far more interesting to me than the actual institutions themselves and their function. At the conclusion of the research I decided that a discussion of these occurring themes would be more beneficial than a case-by-case report on the function of each existing institution.

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Methodology

Interviews:

The main method that was used in gathering information was the interview.

Through brainstorming sessions with my research advisor, Ekua O. Britwum of the University of Cape Coast, Development Studies I was able to identify a few key organizations that served the population of people one would consider homeless. Upon visiting these places they were able to help me to identify other key people and organizations that would help me in my research. At the conclusion of my research I had conducted in depth interviews with the following organizations:

Commission on children in Accra, Ghana
Ministry for women and children in Accra, Ghana
Ahotokrom, Ankafu in Cape Coast, Ghana
Social welfare Cape Coast, Ghana

For all of these organizations my focus was to ask questions that centered around 3 major questions: 1.) What does the term “homeless” mean for Ghanaian society and what are its forms and nature? 2.) What are some of the institutions in place to deal with the issue? 3.) What system or approach is used by these institutions to get individuals back to self-sufficiency?

Informal Conversation:

While at the commission on children in Accra, one of the most important informal conversations I had was with a young man named Nicholas. Nicholas had traveled to Accra, the capital city, from a northern village of Brong-Ahafo.

When he arrived in Accra, he was directed to the commission on children.

Informal conversations with him allowed me to better understand the life and circumstances of streetism and the work that the commission on children carried out.

Participant observation:

Throughout my three (3) month stay in Ghana, West Africa I have been a part of a Ghanaian home stay family, The Derbens. Living with them throughout classes, participating in family events “mommy and Dad” has giving me a tremendous insight on the Ghanaian extended family system.

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I was able to ask questions and observe while different extended family members lived in our household for various lengths of time. My participation in the family allowed me to better understand the intricacies of the extended family system, its benefits and the no monetary exchange among family members

Other:

Lastly, a combination of oral sources, news paper articles, books, reports and lectures from the Africa Diaspora studies portion of the SIT program provided me a great deal of information.

Everybody Has A Home

Oral sources reveal that in the early 1980's 1 million Ghanaian were exiled from Nigeria back to Ghana. Because of the massive number of people, the Ghanaian government was concerned about accommodating such a large number of people in the country at one time. There were tents and cots that were set up at the border town so that none of the people would be forced to sleep on the street. Nevertheless, of the 1 million people that were exiled Nigeria back to Ghana 100% was able to find shelter. The materials that the Ghanaian government has set out were not utilized because the returnees were able to find their own shelter. This is an important illustration that illuminates a very important theme necessary to understand the concept of Ghanaian homelessness: everybody has a home.

When thinking about the institutions that deal with homelessness one usually thinks of a homeless shelter. Nevertheless, the search for such institutions in the Cape Coast area of Ghana was fruitless. My attention was then turned to any non-conventional places of shelter. Where do the people who do not have homes go? I was interested in who the people within the community considered as "homeless" in its most basic meaning: without a home. I began my search for these non-conventional places of shelter in the Cape Coast area of Ghana. I soon learned that there was a portion of the city that was dedicated to social welfare related work called Ankafu. Ankafu is an area located about 25 minutes away from downtown Cape Coast. Located in Ankafu are the city prison, leprosy hospital, Psychiatric ward, several small villages and refuge for elderly and leprosy sufferer called Ahotokrom.

I was directed to Ahotokrom as the organisation that caters to the needs of the population that I might be in search of. Ahotokrom is located toward the end of the town of Ankafu.

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I hired a taxi that took me up a long winding dirt path lasting about 30-40 minutes. The road wended through several villages and people and school children were out doing their daily chores while on the road to Ahotokrom, the driver stopped a police officer and asked him for more directions. The police officer told us that we were about 15 minutes away. He explained that, “white missionaries ran the place”. He stated that the founder was a missionary who wanted his people to be far away where no one could bother them. He instructed that we should look for a large white house with beautiful trees planted in a row in the front. The police officer also told us that the trees were not naturally stationed there but the missionaries planted them there in efforts to hide the keep the house in seclusion. We thanked him for his time and continued on until we reached a small sign that read, “Ahotokrom.”

Once inside, I noticed that there were several white 1-story houses that stretched out over a large open area of land. Several trees were planted all throughout the area. I noticed that there were several Ghanaian children all male playing a soccer match they looked as if they were all younger than 15 years of age. Next to them seated under a shade tree were several older to middle aged men. I walked over and told them that I was looking for the missionaries. One of them instructed me to follow him and he took me inside one of the houses where I met Sis. Monica. I introduced myself to Sis. Monica and explained to her my purpose in coming. I began to explain that I was doing research on homelessness. She then apologized saying, “These people aren’t homeless.” She explained to me that Ahotokrom was not a shelter and that at the end of the day that everyone went to his or her respective homes. I then asked Sis. Monica to tell me about the founding of Ahotokrom and the population they served. She went on to tell me that it was originally founded for the elderly who came from all over Ghana and surrounding countries to be treated for leprosy at the Ankaful Leprosy Hospital. She explained that there was a stigma surrounding leprosy and that if you had the disease then you were considered a disgrace to the family, thus rejected from the family and community. Because of the stigma surrounding the disease, travel expenses and scarcity of medicine, leprosy sufferers who were treated at the Ankaful Hospital needed a place to live and recuperate during and after treatment. Sis. Monica explained that one of the nearby villages was set up by a group of cured lepers whose families wouldn’t take them back into the community and households from whence they came. She informed as that because of the advancements in medicine over the years that leprosy could be cured through a multi-drug therapy in a 6 month - 2-year time span.

Sis Monica explained that because of the advances in medicine the services that Ahotokrom provided also has advanced. She stated that the majority of the elderly leprosy sufferers had died and that the focus was more on the children with leprosy or other crippling diseases or the children of severely disable leprosy sufferers. She said that they tried to provide the care for them that their parents are not able to during the day. They told me that her and a team of 3 other missionaries supervised schooling, taught extra classes and ran a food program for the children. At this point of the interview we were interrupted as a tall Ghanaian male in his early twenties walked in with a painting. I noticed that he was disabled in that he walked with a heavy limp and his fingers were disfigured. He exchanged some words with Sis. Monica and when he left she began to tell us the he lived with them at Ahotokrom. She explained to us that he suffered from a condition that was very similar to leprosy and that his family had abandoned him at the hospital for 3 years. Sis. Monica and her staff were asked by their presiding Archbishop to take care of him. Sis. Monica told me that with the exception of him and the few elderly people that come into Ahotokrom, everyone else who accessed their services had a home. She told me that it was a policy of theirs not to care for anyone who didn't have a family. She said that the missionaries' work was not well funded and that if Ahotokrom ever had to close suddenly everybody would have a family that could care for them.

The work and mission of Ahotokrom gives very valuable insight on the concept of homelessness in Ghana specifically Cape Coast. In a 8/28/03 lecture on Ghanaian life and culture, a University of Cape Coast professor stated, "(In Ghanaian culture) life is meaningful only if it is shared. Death is excommunication." The societal stigmatization and taboo of certain deformities could be a catalyst for excommunication from family, thus thrusting one into homelessness. Because of their disease and the association with diseases such as leprosy, a large portion of the people of Ankaful and Ahotokrom are considered homeless. However, a closer look into the organisation reveals that the severely disable had created a community of shelter and support for themselves: new homes, Ahotokrom serves as a supportive supplemental institution that aids a would-be homeless population in their creation of home and community. Just as Sis. Monica suggested, "These people are not homeless". At first glance there is a surface appearance of homelessness because of the catalyst of excommunication. Nevertheless, through closer study we understand that the principle that everybody has a home has very few exceptions within the Ahotokrom community.

Sis. Monica of Ahotokrom informed me that if wanted to study homelessness and the institutions that deal with it then I should study the topic of Streetism in Accra. She explained that there are a considerable amount of school-aged children in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, who do not have homes and sleep in the street. It is apparent that Streetism is socially associated with homelessness because it entails individuals sleeping and living on the street. A 1997 article produced by Nana Araba Apt and Margret Greico of the University of Ghana, Legon entitled, "Listening to Girls on the Street Tell Their Own Story: What will help them most?" gives us more insight on the issue and concept of Streetism / Street Children. This study reports that the UNICEF (1986) has suggested the following three categories of Street Children:

1. *"Children 'on' the street.* They are largest (75 percent) population. Most are engaged in some kind of economic activity ranging from begging to vending to manufacture of commodities or the food trade. The economic activity is carried out in the streets rather than sweatshops or factories. Most go home at the end of the day, and the majority contributes part of all of their earning for the economic survival of the family unit. They may still be attending school through a grade or two below their expected levels. The children in this group retain a sense of belonging to a family or a household. They are candidates for becoming children of street.
2. *Children of the street.* They constitute a smaller a grip, who live on the street. Family ties may exist, but are tenuous, and are maintained casually or occasionally. Often the children themselves have decided to move away from the family. In many cases the children are on the wrong side of the law and hide in abandoned buildings, under bridges and motorways, or even in underground sewers. Periodic police round-ups are common, and various forms of brutalities have been reported.
3. *Abandoned children.* These are entirely without a home or family. There is very rarely a successful way of rehabilitating them into their original home environment. They also are the targets of periodic round-ups and institutionalization."

This information is important not only because it helps us to understand the concept of Streetism but it also helps give us insight into Streetism as a form of “homelessness. According to the information only 2 out of the 3 categories of children have and are associated with homes in some way.

In an interview with Kweku Ahen of the Ministry of Woman and Children explains that the problem of Streetism is oftentimes misunderstood. He told me that many of the individuals labeled as “street children” go home during the Christmas Holiday. He told me that most of the children who live on the streets have home, thus Streetism as a social problem sharply declines during the holiday season because the children travel home to celebrate and enjoy the seasons festivities. The notion that Street Children go home for the holidays compliments the UNICEF categories of streetism in which we learn that over 75% of street kids have homes. In addition, when asked if street children are considered homeless, Esme, of the Ghana Commission on Children in Accra, gives an interesting response. Like Mr. Ahen of the Ministry of Woman and Children stated, Esme highlighted the holiday season as one in which we can see many of the street kids returning home. Esme explained that some street children migrate from poorer Northern villages to engaged in child labour in the capital city in efforts to gain money.

Because of the intermarriage between poverty, migration, child labour it is possible for street children to have homes and still lack shelter. Streetism is a phenomenon that is propelled by poverty. For over 75% of the street kid population, sleeping on the street is an economic decision. It cannot be inferred from this economic choice that the individuals on the street are without homes, unattached to families. Through the investigation of the term we understand that there are conflicting definitions of homeless surrounding streetism. Society says that these street kids are homeless because of the visibility of school-aged children living, sleeping and engaging in economic activity on the street. Nevertheless, the institutions and organizations that work with the street children acknowledge and identify that these individuals indeed have a place to call home. They are associated with a family unit accompanied with a physical structure: even the street child has a home.

One category of Streetism that is identified, as containing children who are not associated with homes is the smaller fraction of abandoned children. So the UNICEF report suggests, “These are entirely without a home or family. There is very rarely a successful way of rehabilitating them into their original home environment.”

Although the problem of Streetism, school-aged children living and working on the streets for economic gain, is heavily concentrated in Accra, it is also a concern of Cape Coast. In looking at the orphan/abandoned category of street children in Cape Coast we can get a better understanding of how institutions and organisations deal with this class of individuals.

In an interview with Peter Awnan, Senior Social Development Officer of the Cape Coast Social Welfare Department, I asked him did his organisation deal with the issue of homelessness in any way. He told me that homelessness was a part of the work that they did there. Mr. Awnan immediately began to talk about abandoned children/orphans. He explained that when a child is identified as abandoned and are brought to their attention; the department then immediately takes the child to the hospital for assessment and checkups. After a medical assessment and if the child is considered, “sickfree” the child is sent to the main orphanage in Accra. Awnan identified that there is a combination of support from NGOs (Non-Government Organisations), the government through the Department of Social Welfare to foster orphanages with staffed mothers that, “treat the kids as their own .” He went on to tell me that the child cared for through the orphanages with the expectation that someone will adopt them into a foster home. Awnan explained that not all abandoned children or orphans are reported to the Department of Social Welfare and taken through the process of finding foster parents. He told me that some of the abandoned children become street children and live and work on the street.

Through knowledge about Streetism we can gather that there is small population of children who live on the street who do not have homes and are abandoned, orphaned and homeless. Through the interaction with the Department of Social Welfare one can conclude that of this population that there is an even smaller fraction of people who are taken in and cared for by collaboration between the local government and NGOs through orphanages. Although this category of individuals is completely separated from their original family and homes, there are efforts to create a sense of home and community through these orphanages. There then is further hope and expectation that these individuals will be placed in the care of a foster home.

Through studying non-conventional places of shelter and the people who society considers homeless one can infer and thus conclude that everybody has a home. Homelessness in Ghana takes predominantly form of people in communities with severe disabilities and street children including orphans. Nevertheless we find the people within these communities have either created their own home and have and/or associated with physical structure in which some form of family or kin dwell.

Self Sufficiency- vs. – Family Sufficiency

In the American model of dealing with the issue of homelessness, there is a great emphasis on self-sufficiency. The notion exist that there should be mechanism and systems in place that will empower individuals with the skills, training, and the social networks that will lead them to a place where they can support themselves financially in society with no outside help. There are extensive shelter systems in place and transitional housing units in which homeless individuals can live, receive care and the appropriate resources needed to guide into the ultimate dream of self-sufficiency. Although the system in place is flawed, because of lack of efficiency and limited resources, the focus is still broadly on the individual. In learning about the unconventional places of shelter, institutions and organizations that deal with homelessness in Ghana, I was interested in the system in place that leads homeless individuals into sufficiency.

After completing the interviews with the institutions and people who play major roles in Ghana in dealing with Ghanaian forms of homelessness there were two major parallels that stood out in all of the research. The first one was that each organisation sought to provide its clients with some sort of beneficial package of resources. For example, in Ahotokrom I was able to ask Sis. Monica what were some of the benefits that the children and elderly adults receive from accessing their services. She informed me that the staff of Ahotokrom tried to educate the children on how to take care of the severely disabled or ill parents and grandparents. She also mentioned that they supervised the children's schooling, provided extra classes and hosted a food program. Through providing the children with these beneficial skills and resources Ahotokrom can better serve as a supplemental support organisation that furthers and fosters the family growth and community success.

Another interesting example is surrounding the issue of Streetism. Both the Ministry for Woman and Children and the Ghana Commission on Children both highlighted organizations that they partnered within providing the children with a beneficial package or resources for their well-being. One of the main organizations that both, the Mr. Ahen and Esme recognized as doing exceptional work in helping the street kids in resources in Catholic Action for Street Children CASC. Esme from the Ghana Commission on Children describes CASC as a day shelter for street children. She told me that they provided services to the children such as skills training classes. She told me that if a child was interested in learning some type of skill or trade that CASC made held instructional classes on such skills as dressmaking, carpentry, bead making, wood carving etc.

In addition there are cots where the children are able to come in and take naps during the day and take care of personal hygiene. She told me that CASC also had a branch that operated a shelter for pregnant street girls called Street Girls. Esme informed that there are portion of the population of street children who would engaged in sexual activity and become pregnant. CASC provided a short-term shelter for them in which they are allowed to stay until after the baby is born. Esme also informed me that the major goal of the Street Girl program along with the other institutions that deal with Streetism is reunification. Reunification is the second major thing that the organizations that dealt with this form of homelessness offered.

One shining example of reunification took place while I was doing research at the Commission on Children in Accra. I was waiting to speak with the director of the program when I became engaged in conversation with a young man who was also waiting to see the director. He told me that his name was Nicholas and that he was from Brong-Ahafo, a village in Northern Ghana. He explained to me that his parents had recently gotten a divorce and both got remarried to other people. With both of his parents moving to different regions of Ghana with their new spouses him and his younger brother were left along with their grandmother. Nicholas told me that his grandmother was very poor and that although she could provide food for him and his younger brother she could provide money for school fees. He went on to tell me that his younger brother was going to try to acquire some money so that he could got to the Ivory Coast and live with his father, while he was traveling to Accra so that he could work, and earn money to pay school fees. In November 15, 2003 edition of Spectator Newspaper, Chief Inspector Jordan Quaye writes in his article, “Kids, Parents and Divorce”:

“The Welafare of children must be taken as paramount but this is not, and it is alarming. Go to the shelters and children’s homes, and you will find out the number of abandoned, lost, rejected and divorce cases affecting the welfare of children there.”

Upon arrival in Accra he did not have any place to stay, therefore, someone directed him to the Commission on Children so that he could receive some assistance. He told me that he had spoken with the director and that she had let him sleep at her home and given him food and shoes. I asked him what was he waiting to talk to her about and he told me that he had given the assistant director some information about his family in Brong-Ahafo and that they were suppose to give him the results.

I spent the rest of the afternoon before my appointment with the director talking to Nicholas about his educational goals and what he wanted to do in life. The following day I returned to the Commission to for another interview and I unexpectedly ran into Nicholas again. He told me that the assistant director had contacted his grandmother and that they were sending him back home. He told me that he would be attending school there. Because he was pressed for time I was not able to ask him how he was going to be able to pay for school fees. I will assume that the Commission financially assisted him in getting back home and possibly provided some assistance for him to pay the school fees in his home town of Brong-Ahafo. This informal conversation was very important to understanding the work and process of reunification. During the interview with the Mr. Ahen of the Ministry of Women and Children he told me that the Ministry partners with a local NGO to try and reunite any street child they could with their family. Mr. Ahen told me that he along with other colleagues started a program in which the street children were screened and question about their background. He told me that the goal was to find out as much information as possible about their parents and /or guardians and then find them for reunification. Knowing that Streetism is fueled by child labour and poor economy the program also aimed to troubleshoot and find out any hindrances to parents adequately providing for their children. He told that this reunification program also tried to link parents with the appropriate resources such as skills training, educational advancement or learning a new trade that would ensure that they would be able to provide financially for their children. In addition, Peter Awnan of the Cape Coast Department of Social Welfare also stated that there were strong efforts by the Department to reunify the abandoned children with their family. However he did mention that it was usually more difficult with this category of children.

The way that these organizations in Ghana conceptualise reunification and providing a package of beneficial resources highlight a significant difference between the American notions of homelessness and the Ghanaian concept. When juxtaposing the goals of the two systems together one can see that there seems to be a struggle between the concept of self-sufficiency and family sufficiency. For example, within the American model thee are shelters and transitional housing units that provide a comprehensive package of benefits, connections and resources. Nevertheless, these benefits target the population in need in efforts to get them to be self sufficient in the particular are and city in which they are now in.

On the other hand, the skills, training and beneficial resources that are provided to people in Ghana through these organizations are often times focused on short-term stay in that community with the intention of traveling back to the home community. The Commission on Children's work with Nicholas resulted in reunification with his grandmother in Brong-Ahafo. He also was assisted in going to school in his home community although he told me his intentions were to enroll in school in Accra. Esme of the Commission on Children highlighted that one of the problems with organizations that provides skill-building components for Street Children is that the skills are not area specific. She told me that the Commission would like to see the skills be taught to the children in compliance with the needs and economic drive of the community so that when they are reunited with the family and community their skills will be applicable. Within the community of Ahotokrom, one of the key skill building programs that were offered to the children and adults there is where they are trained to take care of their severely disabled /ill loved ones. These are examples of beneficial skill building resources are region specific and family / community focused. It became clear that the goal of these organizations was to treat and help their clientele by they did it through empowering the family of the clientele to take responsibility for them. In comparison, the American model has job training, housing location, and skill building for the homeless that encourage migrant homeless people to stay within the community in which there is no shelter. It also seeks to treat and help their clientele through trying to empower the individual for sufficiency so that they can take responsibility for themselves. It is also apparent that the level of attention and focus on reunifying a person with their family is not seen as much in the American model.

The Typical Ghanaian Family

As my research began to unfold I noticed that there was an interesting trend in the concepts and themes that were becoming more and more apparent to me. I notice that there was an intense attention to the family. When learning that 1 million Ghanaians had a home after being exiled from Nigeria and no one was had to live on the street and be homeless I was amazed. Through the organizations and the people that access their services I learned that a vast majority of the people within these institutions or living on the street have and are associated with a home and family that they could and did visit and live with occasionally. In addition, the concept the striking difference between the American model of sufficiency and the Ghanaian model of family-sufficiency. Because these themes all began to point toward the family I decided that I should include some information about the typical Ghanaian family and the family structure.

There is No Word for cousin

The Ghanaian family structure is operated under what American terms the extended family structure. This is a structure in which members who are not a part of the immediate/nuclear family live in the household. These are family members outside of the standard mother, father and their offspring. I decided that the best way to explain the setup of the extended family system as a cultural aspect of Ghana is to draw from my 3 month living experience with a Ghanaian family.

My home stay family, the Derbens are citizens of Ghana, West Africa currently living in Cape Coast. Upon meeting the family through the School of International Training staff in Ghana, I was introduced to the family and there were 5 members living in the household. My home stay mother, and father and 3 young people ages 20, 9 and 3. I was told that there was a fourth member age 11 who was living at the time in the Western Region of Ghana with my mother's sister. I assumed that all the younger people in the household were brothers and sisters until one day I invited my research assistant to meet my family. They asked my home stay father how many children did he have and he said 3. He highlighted the 11, 9 and 3 year old as being his children. When I asked about the 20 year old he told me that she was not his daughter but that it was his wife's youngest sister. This was a surprise to me because throughout my time living there she called her older sister and her husband "Mommy and Daddy". Weeks later, I came home from classes at the University and the 11 year old came home from the Western Region. After meeting him, later in an informal conversation I asked him what he was doing in the Western Region. He explained that he had moved there for a couple of months to live with his family there. Shortly after I came home from classes and there was another young boy there age 5 who stayed with us for about 2 weeks. When I asked my father who was he. My father informed me that he was his brother's son. About a month later, during the latter part of November, I noticed that there was another young lady who had moved in. She looked like she was about 14 years old. I observed that she too called my home stay father and mother, "Daddy and Mommy."

A University of Cape Coast Prof. Anti in a lecture on the Ghanaian family explains, "Ghana is the typical African family. When an African talks about family he is speaking of his relationship through blood, marriages, affiliation or kinship ties." The majority of the cultural social system concerning family in Ghana operates on the matrilineal system. This is a system in which the inheritance and the lineage ties are traced through the bloodline and ancestry of the mother. Within this type of extended family system, your mother and father's sisters are considered your mothers. However, because it is a matrilineal system only your mother's brothers along with your birth father are considered your father.

Therefore, your cousins are considered your brothers and sisters, thus there is no word for cousin in the Akan local dialect Fante. It is said that the emotional attachment is the same as across kinship.

Through understanding more about the matrilineal extended family system I can now better understand why so many people were moving in and out of my household. It is understood that within this extended family system one's brothers and sisters children are considered your children. This is not only a cultural and emotional tie and attachment but it also extends to attachment and commitment of resources and finances. Therefore, family members may share the same physical structure (home). In addition, there the financial commitment sometimes translates into paying for a niece or nephews school fees, buying clothes, providing food and /or shelter for any length of time. Taking care of ones extended family seen culturally as a responsibility. Esme of the Commission on Children explains that homelessness is seen as an insult to the family. If one has a beggar in one's family then the family is socially ridiculed; therefore, there is a social conviction and shame that is associated with family members who are not doing well.

There is indeed a package of beneficial resources that automatically are associated with being a part of a family within any culture. Family provides not only shelter/physical structure, but it ensures, social networks and a level of financial security. Because of the extended family and the cultural level of responsibility that an individual has for his family the package of beneficial resources becomes more intricate, elaborate and expanded. The bond and sense responsibility is also great and shared among the extended family. In addition, there is an exchanged of service that takes place within the family that adds to each household in which the extended family member belongs. For example, in my home stay household, the 20-year-old female always helps with the cooking, cleaning, washing and babysitting while in terms her room, board and clothing were provided for her. Such exchanges like this create a balance among the family members as they provide and ensure each other's well-being.

When Family Fails

Understanding that the extended family system is an extremely important aspect of culture and society Ghana helped me to see why this societies homeless population is vastly different from that of the United States. Its very rare that one will see middle aged homeless people on the streets of Cape Coast and Accra. Although there is a visible population there are no institutions in place to accommodate or address the issue. The research revealed that certain people within the society were considered homeless, yet they had homes. Some were considered homeless because of the location of their homes like the people within Anakful Ahotokrom. Oftentimes there were people in the society who considered a certain population of people homeless, yet the people themselves and the institutions that dealt with them did not consider themselves homeless. I decided to look back at the people who were considered homeless by both society and the institutions that serviced them.

The first instance is that Ahotokrom. Although socially the people of Ahotokrom are seen as homeless, they have homes and family and the absence of a homeless shelter (or anything similar) in Ankaful that supports the notion that these people have homes. Although Sis. Monica told me that the people at Ahotokrom were not homeless she did point out a young man with deformities whom she told me that they were asked to take him in by the archbishop because he was left abandoned in the hospital by his family. She told me that she might consider him to be homeless although he lives there. Another example is the abandoned category of the street children. This was the category of street children in which they had no connection to their family, no physical structure to live in and slept on the street and worked during the day for economic survival. The next example is the elderly, although there were residential homes for the elderly in Accra. Some of them have no connection to their family.

In all these examples, of people who the society considers homeless and the institutions that care for them consider them homeless I noticed a trend: family had failed. In each example, there seemed to be a breakdown in the family structure system. Wither the family had abandoned them or the family was broken apart. These institutions seemed to be catching the spillage from a breakdown in the extended family structure.

Hutchinson

Bricks and Mortar –vs– Flesh and Blood

In retrospect, when juxtaposing the American model and concept of homelessness with the Ghanaian model and concept of homelessness there is one basic difference that stands out: defining home. Within the American model homelessness is the result of a housing shortage. Within the Ghanaian model homelessness is the result of a family shortage. Unlike the American model it is very unlikely in Ghana to have a family member and kinship tie with some one who is not willing to share your physical structure/home and financial resources with. The Compass Community Services Connecting Point (centralized intake center for homeless families) data for 2002 – 03 reflects that one of the top causes of homelessness is conflict with family member. This difference in defining home results in a drastic comparison and contrast between the two systems.

There is No Word for cousin

Hutchinson

Conclusion and Reflections

One of the most interesting things to do is to be thrust into an environment in which the concepts and phenomenon, which you study, take on a completely different meaning. There have been indeed drastic differences that I have ran across in studying the American model of homelessness and the Ghanaian model. Nevertheless there are some cross-cultural notions that one cannot get around. For example, although research suggests that the extended family structure provides a greater array of benefits and resources that prove themselves to be anti-homeless it is still a heart wrenching experience meeting and interacting with someone who is homeless. Whether they do not have a family or whether they do not have a physical structure in which to live, homelessness is an issue that reaches everyone. One thing that really struck me about the comparison is that American homelessness is associated with joblessness. While in Ghana the homeless are working and living normal lives (including children) they just happen to be sleeping on the street. In retrospect, researching and trying to understand forms of Ghanaian homelessness was an interesting yet challenging experience. It was a process that allowed me to see further into the culture and re-examine American notions of family and responsibility. I think that American culture can truly benefit socially by expanding its notion and concept of family. Oftentimes people say that a society is a hard thing to change. I offer the ideal that not only do people influence policy but also policy can influence people. By taking some notes from Ghanaian culture I believe that America can devise family focused policy that slowly, gently changes ideals of family, thus placing the responsibility for family members back in the hoes and out of the government offices.

Recommendations

For Ghana

- Enforce child labour laws. Closely monitor child labour practices punishing parents and encouraging alternatives to economic gain.
- Truancy policy. Children should be encouraged to continue school and parents out of compliance should be punished and supported if they are delinquent because of financial factors.
- Shelters. With the problem of Streetism on the rise, Ghana might want to consider some form of alternative housing option for Street Children.
- Image Campaign. There is so much stigmatization surrounding leprosy and other debilitating disease. A media educational campaign could debunk myths while breaking down the stigmatization that leads to excommunication.

For America:

- Redefine notions of family. Easier said than done.

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