

MY CITY ACCRA – Amma Darko

As the capital city of Ghana and the seat of government, most dealings with the various Ministries and most public and private departments, take place in Accra.

As the twin of the main harbor and industrial city – Tema, most imports into the country and goods heading to the landlocked neighboring countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, also passes through Accra.

These two factors among others have rendered Accra very fertile in the demand for cheap labor. A lot of construction and reconstruction works have also been going on in Accra especially this past decade. Migrants from the rural areas, driven by poverty and the quest for improved economic situations, flood the city. They willingly offer the much needed cheap labor in the production and construction industries and also as loaders and carriers at the port and commercial centers. They work for far below the government approved minimum daily wage which now stands at Two Ghana Cedis and Twenty Ghana Pesewas (about Two U.S. dollars). For them, it is better than staying on in their respective villages with little or no chance at all for employment of any sort. The female migrants work mostly as porters in the urban areas, especially the capital cities of Accra and Kumasi, where they carry shoppers' loads for a fee. Others, both male and female, end up as street hawkers.

Street hawking is believed to have been imported from neighboring Nigeria where many Ghanaians migrated in the eighties following the oil boom there. And the hawkers on Accra's streets sell everything from fruits and bread to table lamps and dog chains.

Accra's street hawkers have rendered the ceremonial route a paradox. This begins from the Kotoka International Airport traffic light just down the airport lane and adjacent to the rather inconspicuous Spanish Embassy, through the renovated 37 Military Hospital road, past the opulent Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints temple, to the African Liberation Circle and to the left, right up to the Parliament House. And speaking of the Spanish Embassy, I want to digress briefly.

On a recent trip to Greece via Frankfurt with Lufthansa, I was delayed a while by the immigration officer who did not understand and became suspicious about why my Schengen visa for Greece was issued by the Spanish Embassy and not the Greek Embassy in Accra. He was very skeptical of my response that there were no Greek and Portuguese Embassies in Ghana and that the Spanish Embassy issued visas for Greece and Portugal. He had to do some consultations before finally I was handed back my passport and allowed through. Could someone pass on the word please?

But let me return to the paradox of the ceremonial route.

The airport is the only international entry point to Ghana by air. It is therefore where every visiting dignitary lands to be driven through the ceremonial route. And the first welcoming sight from the airport traffic light is the mostly rural migrant street hawkers. They weave their way to and fro and in between the cars with acrobatic dexterity. It must leave some dignitaries wondering and others too probably entertained.

Now to football; the big news of course this year being the hosting of the 26th African Cup of Nations Football Tournament. Ghana hosted it for the first time and our chosen theme was: Host and Win. We were certain the cup would remain in Ghana. Accra like other parts of the country was awash in the national colors of red, yellow, green and the significant black star, after which our national football team was named.

To be honest, I am not crazy about football. In fact, I still don't get it with what exactly an 'off-side' is. My youngest son has decided to give up trying to make me get it. And when it comes to our local teams, the only time that I am interested in football is when the two hottest teams are playing: Kumasi Asante Kotoko and Accra Hearts of Oak.

This occasional interest of mine in local football has absolutely nothing to do with football and everything to do with my dear hubby. He is a die-hard Hearts supporter. So when I am in a good marital mood, I faithfully pay homage to my vows and join him to cheer on Hearts. But when I am in a stinky mood, I swing a full three hundred and sixty degrees round without shame or guilt, right into the support camp of Kotoko. But for the three week period of the tournament from 20th January to 10th February 2008, even I too became a true football addict.

Our team, the Black Stars, made it to the semi finals till the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon roared us out and shattered our dream of making it to the finals. They made nonsense of our theme; but we earned for ourselves four stadiums of international standards. Two new stadiums were constructed in Tamale in the north and Sekondi in the western region. The two old ones in Kumasi and Accra were renovated and refurbished like newly built. The construction companies undoubtedly hired many rural migrant hands.

Rural migrants also contributed to the construction of the new overpasses at Alajo and the Nkrumah Circle which were commissioned in 2007. The overpasses have resulted in a dramatic change on the Achimota to Kwame Nkrumah Circle route. Once upon a time, one felt like a sweating snail in a marathon race on that route on a hot afternoon in a car with no air condition. Now one is left with a feeling like one flew. The traffic jams have disappeared like the Statue of Liberty once did in a Copperfield magic act. Yet not everyone is pleased. The Kwame Nkrumah fountain at the circle begs for reconstruction and the traffic jams beyond the Achimota to Circle route are still causes of stress and headaches.

Shops are also springing up everywhere in Accra. With an ever increasing scarcity of jobs in the formal sector, trading has become the option for many. Wooden kiosks are placed wherever space can be found, especially by roadsides. Landlords lucky to have their houses situated by roadsides are fast converting original residential rooms into shops. The situation has been so over exploited by landlords that, a common sight nowadays in Accra are empty shop spaces displaying 'to let' signs. The craze has even brought in a new trend in architectural designs for homes on plots by roadsides. Where once ground buildings were the norm, now three storey buildings are. The ground floors are a line of shop spaces; the middle floor office accommodations and the top floor becomes the residential apartments.

Another reason for the many empty shops and residential spaces are the high rent costs. Many rural migrants, unable to afford the rent payments, give up on regular and decent accommodation and encroach in uncompleted structures. Others also wait patiently in the evening after they have mingled with the crowd in the day, for the traders to vacate their business premises for their respective homes; then they turn the vacated premises into their sleeping places.

'Oxford Street' at Osu, a suburb of Accra, is a very popular stretch of road with Ghanaians in general and in particular, foreign visitors, tourists and the well to do. Decades ago, both sides of this stretch were bordered mainly by family compound houses

interspersed with some middle class residential homes. The road was popular for its night food market. Chiefly sold was 'kenkey' and fried fish with hot ground red and black pepper. Also 'kelewele' which is fried chunks of ripe plantain seasoned with a ground mixture of pepper, onions, ginger and salt. Today, Oxford Street is lined with shops, offices, hotels and restaurants.

About five to six years ago, communication centers were the hottest business on Oxford Street, offering mainly telephone services. Those were the days that mobile phones were a luxury for a privileged few. Then came the internet cafes as the mobile phones gradually became affordable and a necessity for all. Communication centers have faded out due to the mobile phones. Improved internet connectivity has also compelled some internet cafes to relocate. Today, the hottest business on Oxford Street which is also a reflection of what is happening in Accra generally, are the mobile phone shops.

The Osu branch of the Internal Revenue Service used to be where Ecobank now stands on Oxford Street. But the IRS is still nearby in the new high rise building: The Revenue Towers. Oxford Street businesses are not amused at all.

Standing out a little ahead of Ecobank, in its gaudy yellow and red colors is the leader in the fast food joints: Papaye.

Papaye started modestly over a decade ago, competing with the many chop bars and restaurants on and around Oxford Street. 'Frankies' joined with its additional hotel and restaurant facilities and its popular ice cream parlor. Southern Fried Chicken which is adjacent to the Danquah Circle and opposite where the Goethe Institute was formerly housed joined the fast food race. Then came the South African fast food chain: Steers. Papaye, owned by a Lebanese-Ghanaian family, has expanded with two more branches at Tesano and on the Spintex road. Frankies' survived and improved in spite of the other lodges and hotels around. Southern Fried Chicken also expanded. But Steers folded up. Where Steers once was on Oxford Street is a bright blue and glass building housing the phone service company: TIGO.

Opposite in their bright yellow and glass building is another phone service company: MTN. They were the main sponsors of the CAF tournament.

Away from Oxford Street, multiple star hotels have also sprung up in Accra this past decade. Foremost among them is the five stars 'La Palm Hotel' where the American President George Bush and his wife Laura lodged during their recent visit to the country. The same venue hosted the American based African Literature Association (ALA) gathering two years ago. I had the honor of being the main speaker at the luncheon of the association's powerful women caucus.

Another hotel stands out for a different reason. Officially named: 'the African Regent', Ghanaians have renamed it 'Hotel Waawaa'; (waawaa is a vernacular parlance for easy and fast money); all because the President's son has an interest in the hotel.

The President laughs about it. Thank God for Ghana's democracy.

Where Hotel 'Waawaa' stands, is also very interesting. It is right at the junction to the President's private residence. And Ghanaians, not satisfied with renaming just the hotel, have also renamed the junction to commemorate the President's declaration of Ghana as a 'Highly Indebted Poor Country'.

HIPC was a G-8 creation whereby African countries that buried their pride and boldly declared to the rest of the world (who already knew anyway) that they were highly indebted and very poor, were rewarded with a financial package. But Ghanaians found

the 'shame' too much of a bitter pill to swallow and took out the anger at the President by renaming the junction to his private residence: HIPC Junction.

HIPC or not, Accra boasts of her first American style shopping mall at the Tetteh Quarshie interchange and opposite the HIPC junction: GAME and SHOPRITE.

Before then we had our own Ghanaian style mall at Makola, opposite the Ghana Law School: the Makola Mall. And really, what is Ghana without her Makola?

Makola has been through many phases and changes. What hasn't changed is the ceaseless flow of humans, seen and unseen if the ghosts are counted, of all sizes, ages and colors.

The streets are still choked with vehicles. The occasional posh fully air conditioned car driving past leaves one wondering how we could have deemed ourselves HIPC; then one is quickly reminded of why we did by a jingling, jangling rickety 'tro-tro' or mini-bus, whose trail of thick black smoke compels all in its way to reach for their handkerchiefs to cover their noses to save their lungs.

Again, HIPC or not, a Presidential palace is under construction at where the Accra zoo once was. The animals have been relocated to the Kumasi zoo pending the completion of the new Accra zoo under construction at the Achimota forest.

The hawkers on the pavements in the city center who were evicted before the football tournament have filtered back in grand style. Being an election year, their prospect of remaining there is bright. What if they were evicted by the metropolitan authorities who are identified with the government of the day and the hawkers decided to revenge at the polls? After all, the judge, the pilot, the doctor and the hawker all have one vote.

Yet, in spite of the sanity and convenience that the absence of the hawkers from the pavements brought to pedestrians and even motorists too in Accra central, somehow, they were missed. After all, what is Accra without Makola and what is Makola without its hawkers and the hustle on the pavements?