

Greetings from Ghana #26

Realizations

It takes me a while to realize things. I used to recoil at the way that workers here are treated by -- I would guess -- the majority of small to medium sized businesses. For example: Security guards (and many companies use one to assist customers being able to pull back into traffic from the parking strip in front of the business) get paid around 600 cedis a month for working a minimum of 40 hours a week. So they get approximately 150 cedis a week. Right now that is about \$12.25. Is that a living wage? Not by a long shot. A single person living in a kiosk, an 8x8 shipping container with no water and no bathroom, perhaps a light bulb in the ceiling and one outlet on a wall, will spend about 75 cedis a month, paid a year in advance (900). Single rooms can start at 150 cedis a month and a studio apartment in a modest neighborhood is about 500.

I have a friend who works from 10:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night in a pizza place at the mall. He walks an hour to get to work and another to get home. He gets 4 Tuesdays off every month. He makes 1200 cedis a month. That is just shy of \$98.

Sounds outrageous. And it is, but. . . (and they have a phrase here that "everything has a 'but' involved") when you consider that the largest demographic in Ghana is 16 - 39 year olds and that the unemployment rate is 28.9%, people take whatever they are offered with little complaint. Some companies offer accommodations as well as a small wage. Many houses (including the new one I moved into at the beginning of March) have a "boy's quarters" with the house. It is a single room with exterior only access and has a full bath with sink, toilet and shower (or a basin with drain and bucket with wall faucet). I know people who would be happy to move in with the responsibility of opening the gate and verifying visitors, washing the car, and maintaining the grounds of the property and take a salary of 1000 cedis (\$81.50) a month.

I have no desire to hire someone like that, but I know better than to tell someone that they should demand better. They would look at me and say, "Yes, it should be more, but I will take what I can get and try to find other ways to make money as well. I need the job."

With almost one out of every three young adults unable to find anything for work I have learned to contain my outrage and just shut up. If I can't do better, imposing my thoughts about what someone else has serves no purpose.

I also have to keep reminding myself to think Ghanaian when it comes to financial matters. I will often be told by a merchant that something (a melon, for example) will cost 50 cedis (\$4.15) and I think, "Wow. Nice melon. Cheap." Wrong. The real price and the one I should haggle for - and easily get - is 30 cedis (\$2.50). If I tip someone at a restaurant 20 cedis for my meal I am looked at with gratitude by the server for being so generous. That's not quite a \$2 tip. I am good at it when you start talking 100ghc and up (\$8.27+) but I am forever forgetting to be modest.

I am learning to become more aware. I really have to because of the differences in life situations. Like I said, I have a friend who makes 1200ghc a month. I spent 900ghc on about two weeks worth of packaged groceries for two people and 450ghc to have the dog groomed so she could handle the heat better yesterday. In American, the groceries ran about \$75.

I also realized the other day that the weather here lulls you into a slower pace. Tomorrow will probably be like today. And the day before. And you start to feel "I have time" invading your perception. So if you don't get around to everything. . . well, there is always tomorrow.

I went to a graduation for a friend of mine on Saturday. At first he was told to be at the university by 9 o'clock. The evening before, that was adjusted by text to be 8:15. I asked my friend, "Is that white people time or Ghana time?" He chuckled, "Ghana time." "Good," I exclaimed, "then we can get there by 9 and be early or on time." We did. And we were.

As I said, we recently moved from the house in Ashaley Botwe (Ash-a-lay Bah-shay) to a much better neighborhood in an area known as Adenta Sekora. You may remember that the original house we found (and what I decided to afford at the time) was on a dirt road across from a cement block plant that also housed their workers.



The house was a one story with water in the concrete walls, ants in the walls, cockroaches in the kitchen cabinets, and bad electrical. It cost \$500 a month. There were heavy trucks using the dirt road and you could clean the house on Saturday and by

Monday find dirt on the horizontal surfaces. It was still considered a nice place by many because it had running water and electricity.

The lease was coming due and I decided to see what else might be able to be found. Almost every real estate and property management office here practices bait and switch. They have current ads for properties that have not been on the market for years. The goal is to get you to call so they can land you as a client and then try to charge you for showing a house or apartment. This makes using the real estate portals (there is no accurate MLS - Multiple Listing Service) about as good as trying to read a four-year-old newspaper to see what is on sale.

After a month of frustration I finally asked a banker friend of mine if he knew of anything. He found a house that was not on the market but the owner was looking for tenants who would take care of and not trash his house. The owner works in the diplomatic corps and is stationed at an embassy outside of the country. He was willing to rent to us at below market value.



As you can see, a much nicer house (this is called a semi-detached house; i.e., duplex), a much nicer neighborhood, just off a paved road, and no heavy trucks. It is also just a four minute walk from a gym and swimming pool and a ten minute walk from a jazz club. While I can appreciate the problems that a currency of diminishing value has for the people of Ghana – when I got here the cedis was six to the dollar, now it is 12 to the dollar– I cannot complain. This house has rent that is double what I was paying in cedis and it still costs me just \$500 a month.

This neighborhood has houses that make this one look small and cheap. So it was quite a surprise to me



when I discovered that my neighbors to the east have a lot that is about four times the size of this one and they are living in a 12 x 12 wooden hut on post foundation with no toilet, no running water, and no electricity. I noticed that they were using the property as a toilet and remarked to



Taouvik, who was visiting yesterday, that they have bricks and sand and gravel and we should offer to help them out with a toilet.

My idea was quickly scrubbed. Yes, they have materials but those materials are left over from when the land owner built his walls. This family of five is living on the land and is welcome to be there so long as no permanent structure is built. While I was thinking they were being denied a toilet because of ignorance or a monetary situation the truth is they are living rent free, grateful for what they have, and had I/we built them a toilet, the landowner would throw them off the land.

Exploring the neighborhood has shown me dozens of similar families.

My eyes get opened to things like this on a fairly regular basis and I am reminded to quit thinking like an American. It is an ongoing effort.