Ghanaian nurses at a crossroads: Managing expectations on a medical ward

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In March 1992, I travelled to Ghana for the first time to work in the Maternal and Child Care Unit in Cape Coast Hospital. Thinking my job was to weigh babies and give vaccinations in a health centre, I found myself in a different setting. After registering at the Ministry of Health, I was expected to greet the local chief and explain my mission. At the work site, clinical consultations were embedded in social gathering, praying and singing. While I taught young mothers about breast feeding and family planning, children would run though the gathering playing with a ball while old women sold minerals. On a rainy morning, I packed my bike and cycled the three kilometres to the health post, arriving in time but soaked. I was alone there. The community nurses would arrive hours later, after the rain had stopped and their children had gone to school. What was nursing about? My study of medical anthropology provided me with some answers and even more questions. More than ten years later, I arrived again in Accra to start my research on nurses in a hospital. The country had changed; its political system had stabilised, new roads now connected towns and villages and mobile phones and internet cafes had entered the daily life of the people. Before I settled in my room that would accommodate me during the fieldwork period, I greeted the local elderly and I was introduced to the community and encouraged to attend regular church services. And the nurses? As I would soon find out, caring and nursing is still embedded in singing and praying, in cultural events and the weather has an influence on the day’s activities. But along side the colourful, noisy and adventurously fragrant scenery, I saw patients facing untimely death, families being overwhelmed by fear and financial burdens and outdated health facilities that could undermine appropriate health care delivery. And I observed nurses in white dresses trying to cope with the situation, caring for the sick and encouraging the dying.

When asked for a number between 1 and 6, a friend of mine said: 7! Is this a joke or deep wisdom? During this research, I had to learn that not everything can be planned; the unthinkable happens, new ideas appear and this opens new perspectives. The last few years have been an adventurous and exciting time. Since I started this research in January 2004, my path has taken several unforeseen turns. It has brought me to crossroads and it was not always easy to decide which direction to take. Sometimes, researching and writing seemed a lonely business. It was good to know I was not alone and I shared many joyful moments with family and friends in Ghana, the Netherlands and Germany. When the road was rough and dark, I was grateful for their help and support. Below, I want to acknowledge some people whose guidance, cooperation and support have made this book a reality.

In Ghana, my deepest gratitude goes to all the nurses, nursing students and health care assistants on the ward where I worked. Thank you for allowing me into your midst, sharing your experiences with me and working together on the ward. Mrs. Barnes, Mrs. Hammond and Matron Elizabeth Menyah, it was a privilege working with you. You told me your stories and I took them with me; I am grateful for your trust. I also thank the patients for their patience and friendship. El isabeth, Ethel, Martina and Rose, may you rest in peace - you are not forgotten. Thank you, Mrs.
Owusu and Mrs. Richter–Addo for telling me about the beginnings of nursing in Ghana, the members of the GRNA and NMC who explained to me the principles and guidelines of their work, and the many nurses in the health posts and clinics in Accra and throughout the country where I visited and conducted interviewees. I want to thank the members of the Institutional Review Board of the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research of the University of Ghana for approving my research, and the administration of Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital for their support. Special thanks go to the staff and students of the College of Nursing at the University of Ghana, Legon, and the former dean, Ms. Mary Opare who helped me in the formal application of the research and with whom I share interest in the history of nursing, Mr. Al Hassan for his never-ending friendliness and patience and last but not least Mr. Osei Tutu for transcribing my interviews so accurately and well.

Research is one thing, but living in Ghana, away from my own family and culture is another thing all together. I am grateful to Rev. Abbey and his whole family in Madina and La for their support, patience and guidance during all those months that I stayed with them. Discussing and praying together and sharing food and thoughts nourished me in various aspects. Jonathan and Lisbeth, Auntie Joyce and Mrs. Regina Abbey, you helped me to manage on daily basis. May God bless you in abundance. The friendship with Derek and Vincentia Nikoi, Mr and Mrs. Aryee, Mrs. Joyce Duah, Rev. Lawson and his wife and the students of Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, formed a solid factor during my Ghanaian months.

Supervising my research, my foremost gratitude goes to my supervisor, Prof. Sjaak Van der Geest. I still remember standing in front of your door in the autumn of 2003, knocking to start one of my biggest adventures so far. Writing e-mails and travelling to Amsterdam to discuss texts with you, exchanging ideas and trying to explain my thoughts have been valuable and important to me. I enjoyed your sharpness and support and your questions and critique encouraged me to work consciously, sort out my ideas and to discover themes. It is a privilege to share your love for Ghana and life in hospitals. Spending a day with you in Accra’s overcrowded streets, walking over ‘my ward’, visiting the mortuary together and finally sharing kenkey, dried fish and shito (pepper) was just one highlight. Thank you for believing in me. My gratitude also goes to Prof. Kodjo Senah, my supervisor and advisor in Accra. Being overwhelmed by work, you always had a smile for me and found time to meet, to discuss my findings and add your perspective. You helped me to look closely and understand the observed.

I want to express my thanks to AMIDSt, especially Prof. Isa Baud and Mr. Gert van der Meer for the financial and organisational support that enabled me to be a PhD candidate at the UvA. Benson, we started and finished together: Because both of us worked in hospitals, we experienced similar moments of excitement, doubts and perseverance, exchanged ideas and read each other’s chapters. Thank you for your friendship and collegiality. I also thank the members of the PhD and hospital reading clubs, especially Fuusje, Joan and Diana, for sharing texts and exposing our research to critique and support. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Cate Newsom who carefully read and edited the manuscript. I am also grateful to Ellen van der Kemp and Gregor Bergdolt who supported me in translating the summary into Dutch and German.
This research could have not been carried out without the support and understanding of my employer. At University College Utrecht, I want to thank Paul Hermans and Dr. Hans van Himbergen for making the fieldwork period possible; Dr. Rob van der Vaart and Dr. Aafke Komter for their encouragement in the last years; and my tutorial colleagues for taking over some of my work and encouraging me to carry on.

Many friends lived along with me, listenend to my stories and knew when to ask for progress and when it was better not to ask. I thank you for your encouragement and for reminding me that life is more than just work. I am looking forward to enjoying life and friendship with you; we will return to laughter. Lucia en Maxim, bedankt voor jullie medeleven en vriendschap. Lieke, thanks for your suggestion that I should ask for a sabbatical; Lonia, indeed, sometimes 7 falls within 1 to 6! Ellen, without our adventures in Accra and Kumasi, this book wouldn’t be here. Gregor, es ist gut.

No person lives by herself, but is part of a family. My whole family has been extremely supportive and agreed to carry the burden of this research with me. My parents followed me all along, when travelling the first time to Ghana, discovering my academic curiosity and returning to Accra 15 years later, wondering about my enthusiasm. Being hospitalised in September 2007 herself, my mother discussed with me the role of religion and cultural forms of dying peacefully, not knowing this would be our last encounter. Danke für alles, ich trage unsere Gespräche in mir. Frank, thank you for your interest and help during all those years. You and your family’s friendship and patience are special for me. From the very beginning, Ghana was my passion, not yours, but you supported me in my plans and their realisation. Our path was long and finally rough, but it wouldn’t have worked without you. Bedankt voor alle hulp en steun. Liebe Juliane and Leonie, die letzten Jahre waren nicht einfach. Es war für euch und mich schwierig, immer wieder getrennt zu sein und wieder zusammen zu finden. Ihr habt meine Arbeit mitgetragen. Danke für eure Liebe und Unterstützung. Ich bin stolz auf euch und staune, wie ihr das Leben entdeckt und euren Weg geht. Dieses Buch ist für euch.

Christine Böhmig,
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