Ghanaian nurses at a crossroads: Managing expectations on a medical ward
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Respect and balance
Ghana’s society and culture

We Ghanaians are brought up not to ask too many questions. In the olden days, we were asked to be silent and obey. Still today, children who ask a lot are seen as troublesome. (Retired nurse)

In 2007, Ghana celebrated its Golden Jubilee remembering independence from Britain on March 6, 1957. After political unrest and several military regimes in the first decades, the political system stabilised in the Fourth Republic after 1992. At this moment, the economy is stable on six per cent growth, and the support from the Millennium Challenge Account in 2005 allows an optimistic view in the economic future. The influence of Western life-styles and trends through globalisation can be found in every aspect of public and family life, while also traditional values like respect and the cohesion of the extended family are still omnipresent and cherished.

Traditional society

Traditional Ghanaian society adheres to the principle that what was right in the past indicates action for today (Assimeng 1999). People form and sustain groups out of personal loyalty and respect to a leader whose authority is taken from an inherited status. Status and roles are derived from the position within the kinship group. Members of the family shape the individual who is socialised through a post figurative lifestyle (Nukunya 2003: 7). The territory of Ghana is inhabited by numerous ethnic groups and clans, each following its own traditions and organisational rules. The capital Accra is a melting pot of many groups, religions and clans; English is often the lingua franca. The Akan group is the most dominant one and its language Twi spoken throughout the country. The Ga are the original inhabitants of the Accra area, they speak their own language Ga and follow principles contrary to the Akan patrilineal ones.
All have in common that older members are honoured and listened to when decisions have to be made. Communities, villages as well as quarters in cities, are headed by chiefs whose influence enters manifold aspects of public life and who lead celebrations and festivals. Through the colonial era and since independence, the political, economic and legal systems altered their forms and some changes lead to significant redefinitions of the societal norms and values.

Soon after the Second World War, political parties were formed and ideas developed to end British rule. In March 1957, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah declared independence and was chosen the first Prime Minister of Ghana. Hereby, Ghana became the first colonial territory in sub-Saharan Africa to regain independence from colonial domination. In the next ten years, its economy grew, new towns developed and steps towards modernity were taken in all aspects of the society. The opening of the hydro-electric project at Akosombo in 1966 was and is till today a symbol of the technological and industrial improvements made. But the political system proved less stable. The years after Nkrumah’s overthrow in 1966 can be characterised by political unrest and changing military regimes and, after a two-year democratic interlude under President Limann by the end of the 1970s, J.J. Rawlings and his PNDC gained power and ruled with his military regime over Ghana till the return to democracy in 1992. Especially in the 1980s, Ghana experienced a period of economic crisis leading to individual hardship and privation. Political enemies were repressed, a culture of silence emerged and many people tried to leave the country as refugee. This time can be seen as the beginning of the brain drain of young intellectuals and trained personal in all sectors of the labour market, leading to serious shortages in the various branches, a further decline in the country’s economy and a pessimistic atmosphere in the society.

In 1992, Rawlings changed his political vision and led the county into its Fourth Republic. Serving two periods as elected president, he gave up his power and in 2000, John Kufuor of the opposing party NPP took over. Under his government, Ghana experienced political and economic stability. A process of reconciliation was started to end the period of oppression and silence. Creating a sentiment of unity and belonging, ethnic and religious differences could be held at a minimum. International organisation, global players and financial agencies supported the reconstruction and urbanisation of Ghana (Songsore 1999; 2003). Despite all efforts and economic successes, Ghana still faces serious problems. The departure of the educated middle class is still taking place and creates sensitive gaps in the social structure (Hagopian 2005). The new phenomenon of families receiving financial support (remittances) from migrated members abroad and the rising social mobility within the country is influencing the traditional family setting. Modernisation and globalisation, the introduction of mobile phones and internet, are catapulting the society into a new way of life, having implications for the traditional values and the role of the individual. A nursing student phrases the problem in regard to the health sector:

I think that as a nation in transition, our problems are so complex; it’s difficult to predict whether things will return to normalcy. But to a very large extent, that will
take a lot of political will power to redirect the way we go now. I don’t think that within the next five or ten years, the health sector will be well resourced with regards to nurses. I don’t, unless there’s that strong political will power to be able to train people and retain them.

Today’s Ghana: Urbanisation and migration

A conference organised by the British Council in 2006 discussed the role and influence of tradition on the modern Ghanaian society. The speakers stated the problems of introducing modern ideas of management as it often conflicted with traditional norms and family obligations. One aspect discussed was the changing process when it comes to the influence of the extended family. It used to be the elders in the family who were consulted and stated which decisions to take or profession to learn, and marriages were often the outcome of family negotiations. The same was true for a case of illness, in terms of deciding when and where to consult a healer, pharmacist or health post. The individual was part of a bigger kinship group and its interests and was not expected to plan independently and take decisions by him/herself. Although society is changing and becoming more individualised and this traditional concept still has influence up to today. Professionals in all branches are found to have difficulties and face reprimands when it comes to taking decisions alone and adopting to a ‘work outlook’ and individualised work schedule (Twumasi 2005:85). It can be expected that with the further segmentation of the family, the degree of influence of the traditional system will fade. But the success of any business or educational programme still depends on the community framework, and the engagement and co-operation of key groups like traditional leaders, churches and teachers.

Africa as a whole is undergoing a period of rapid urbanisation. As colonial policies and restrictions kept the growth of cities low, the worldwide urbanisation started later in Africa than in other continents. The number of cities with more than one million inhabitants and megacities with more than four million inhabitants tripled just in the last twenty years. Projection suggests that the percentage of the population living in urban areas grew from fifteen in 1950 to 40 in 2000 (Songsore 2003). Although the process is rapid, Africa is still the continent with the least urban population. In Europe, urbanisation went along with social, health and economic benefits, stimulating general growth and development. The reasons for the growth of cities and the rural-urban migration are different in Africa. In Ghana, we can speak of a forced migration, or a “destabilisation-driven urbanisation” (Songsore 2003: 3). Up to the middle of the 20th century the main occupation was to work on the ancestral land or participate in fishing and other activities within the community. Ethnic conflicts, wars, draughts and famine were reasons to migrate to cities. These did not go with sustainable development of the cities leading to “urban

11 This following section is mainly based on unpublished notes and memory records of the attending researcher.
settlements threatened by the poor quality of their environment with the associated negative impacts on human health and well-being” (Songsore 2004: 4). The WHO statistics indicate a rising level of urbanisation from 32% of Ghanaians in 1984 to 46% in 2006, of which half live in Accra, Kumasi and Sekondi (WHO statistics 2006), and up to 2.5 million Ghanaians are estimated to be homeless living, mainly in the cities.

In the booming urban centres the rapid general economic development created a demand for skilled and unskilled labour force (see for example Assimeng 1999). Working in the mining, timber or cocoa business or in industry became an option leading to rural-urban migration as well as the new professions in teaching, secretarial and administration work. Young people wanting to escape the influence of the family headed towards the towns and returned eventually uprooted from their families. While the formal education had been started under the colonial regime as a mean of control, it also formed the basis for a “rebellion against traditionalism” (Twumasi 2005: 52). After a first post-colonial economic boom, the economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s stopped that development. Changing lifestyles and the economic crisis led to additional changes. The man’s salary alone was often insufficient to cater for a family, all family members needed to contribute to the family’s income (Dolphyne 1991: 58). Mazzucato adds to this the influence of labour migration on the traditional family setting:

It’s not a problem in the Ghanaian culture to temporarily accommodate children with other relatives. It’s even normal in rural areas, where child fostering is an age-old tradition. Children help out at home and work the land. It’s perfectly normal for a grandmother to take part in the upbringing, or for a brother without children of his own to be sent a niece or nephew. But times are changing. The majority of the population lives in the big cities, where such childcare is hard to come by. If one parent leaves for Europe to find a job, the intention is for the family to join them as soon as possible (Mazzuccato 2009).

By the turn of the millennium, Ghana had about 22 million inhabitants, of which almost two-thirds live in rural areas, but that is changing rapidly. With a population growth of 2.5%, almost half of the Ghanaian population is under 18 years old (WHO 2004)\textsuperscript{12}. The per capita income fluctuates around $350 and the adult literacy rate is 54%. The Greater Accra Region (GAR), including Accra and its harbour town Tema, is the most urbanised area in Ghana and the industrial centre and administrative and financial capital. A recent study carried out by the organisation UN Habitat put the population of Accra above 4 million people, including both inhabitants and daily commuters (Daily Graphic 1.11.2005). Low incomes and growing unemployment resulted in a group of urban poor whose condition is hardly better than that of the rural population. 10% to 20% of the population is poor as compared to 35-50% in the rural areas\textsuperscript{13}. 46% of the population are linked to water supply and 12% to sewerage

\textsuperscript{12} For more details, see the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{13} Poverty is defined here as an economic condition of €700.000- 900.000 ($70-90) per adult per year (Songsore 2003:14).
facilities. Dumping sites are breeding places of insects transporting malaria and other diseases. Direct risks like poor water supply and sanitation, crowded housing and insufficient drainage as well as indirect risks through air and water pollution constitute additional dangers of the health of the poor majority in the cities.

The role of religion

Ghana’s population has to adjust to new developments while handed down ideas persist. Conflicting norms and the lack of a firm base can lead to anxiety and religion often takes the role of a socially controlling and reaffirming actor.

Religion plays an important role in the life of every Ghanaian. “Africans are notoriously religious. Religion permeates into all departments of life; it is not easy or possible to isolate it” (Mbiti 1975:1). Traditional Ghana knows various forms of religion and worship. They include worshipping to a supernatural god, smaller gods, honouring the ancestors and the belief in forms of witchcraft, magic and sorcery (Nukunya 2003). Missionaries introduced Christianity almost 200 years ago in West Africa and Ghana has become a deeply religious (mainly Christian) country. Figures state that today officially 16% are Muslim (mainly in the north of the country) and 60 to 80% attend Christian churches, while only 10 to 20% follow traditional religions. Christian-Moslem frictions are limited to smaller conflicts in the Northern Region. The government, headed by a Christian President and Moslem Vice-President constantly appeals to the population to live together peacefully. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches can look back on a long history in Ghana, but both Islam and Christianity have become “more and more indigenised” (Senah 2004: 61). In addition, countless Pentecostal and charismatic churches have started in the last twenty years. Their influence cannot be underestimated and reaches all aspects of life. Religion plays a role in all aspects of life, including perceptions of health and healing and the organisation of social relations. It is difficult to tell “where religion ends and politics begins” (Senah 2004: 62).

In regard to health education, Christian teaching calls on sexual abstinence as protection from HIV/ AIDS and patronises scientific medicine as ‘the right thing to do’ (see for example Mill 2003, Takyi 2003). On the other hand, prayer camps offer guidance in a psychological crisis and promise healing for infertile women or those suffering from serious diseases like cancer or hypertension. Men and women from all ranks of life turn to these healing alternatives in difficult times or financial problems. This shows a parallel set of orientation and man’s pragmatism to accept different systems and choose and take what each system has to offer in terms of help with daily problems.
Balance and respect: Being a mature person

One prominent feature of the Ghanaian cultures is the aim to achieve and maintain balance. Geurts (2002: 5) writes that

…[P]eople grow up being encouraged to be in balance; they learn to balance their bodies as infants… and they grow into adult orientation in which balance is considered a defining characteristic of mature persons and the human species in general (hence an important dimension of their ethos).

This has implications for many aspects of private and public life. Normally, emotions should not be shown in public and regulated. Only in clearly defined situations such as funerals emotions are uttered and accepted if not expected. Signs of sexual attraction or affection between adults are not displayed in public. Parents are expected to reprimand their children, teachers severely punish disobedient pupils, but while shouting and punishing, parents or teachers have to control their anger and the child must accept the punishment.\(^\text{14}\) Conflicts between adults are solved less by arguments than through mediation or consultation of older person. An ‘even-tempered stance’ and the ‘aesthetic of the cool’ are key characteristics for a life in social and physical well-being and stability (Geurts 2002: 202). This also applies to the researcher entering this field and aiming at understanding and recognizing main elements relevant for the research. The researcher’s presence and own personal and professional background influences the setting (Müller 2005: 35) and can trigger unexpected reactions and might even challenge traditional cultural norms. In the Ghanaian context, balancing one’s emotions, respecting senior generations and acting within the existing social hierarchies were crucial for me to be accepted as a person and succeeding in my ethnographic fieldwork (see also next chapter).

Van der Geest (1998) argues that respect is the basic moral value in both past and present Ghanaian (Akan) culture. Ghana’s society is organised along lineages and clans forming ethnic groups. Different generations are living together in one household and the hierarchy is defined by the young obeying in respect and following the old. Giving respect and receiving respect are crucial elements that define and maintain the relationships between young and old, children and parents, workers and employers, poor and rich (Van der Geest 1997: 535). The elder is acknowledged for his/her traditional knowledge, experiences, life performance and wisdom; respecting old people strengthens and reconfirms the relationship, showing affection and reward for all the work and care old people gave to their families. It also compels reciprocity. Social developments and the introduction of money linked financial richness to respect and a good old age. Money regulates social relations and is a mean to show respect. The flow of migrating Ghanaians to Europe, America and lately

\(^{14}\) Informal talks with several parents in Accra indicated, that beating and punishing are perceived as normal and seem to be routine in raising children. One mother said, her child was too disobedient and she had to “beat the devil out of him.” The idea of children’s rights were laughed at and ridiculed as “one of your European ideas.”

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Asia has to be understood as a possibility to enlarge the income of a family and raise its status. Returning migrants show their success in the financial means, building houses for the family and supporting younger siblings in their education and the old members in providing them goods, clothes and food. Disrespectful behaviour in private and public life brings shame to the whole family and will call the leaders for counselling and helping the individual to return to balance.

Women’s life

Worldwide, children and women form the most vulnerable part of a society, and while the problems are the same everywhere and commonly known, it is a question of degree in how far they affect decision-making processes in the daily life. The International Women’s Year (1975) and the following UN Decade for Women shed light on the customs that subjugate women and started educational programme and political discussions to bring this imbalance into the spotlights.

In Ghana, the life of women and men differ when looking at the distribution of tasks and behaviour in public and private places. In general, men dominate the public sphere and its discourse, taking decisions and determining interactions. Women can be seen as the dominating part when it comes to the private sphere, like the education of children and household duties. In many marriages, this distribution of influence and power is based on mutual respect. Traditional norms and values, religious conviction and duties and expectations from kinship form and determine women’s activities and possibilities. It must be noted that there are differences between matrilineal (like the Akan) and patrilineal groups (like the Ga), especially when it comes to decisions concerning marriage, child education and lines of family solidarity (for details see Assimeng 1999: 75-79). “In many Ghanaian societies, the traditional position is that women are never wholly independent. A woman must always be under the guardianship of a man” (Nukunya 2003: 46). Modernisation and globalisation as well as the influence of the Christian religion introduced new concepts, also concerning the influence of parents and the role of women. This has led to more individual freedom, for example in choosing partners and initiating inter-ethnic marriages. Polygyny and extra marital affairs of man are not as seriously opposed and publicly disapproved of as when a woman engages in plural sexual relations. Dolphyne (1991) points at various aspects in the Ghanaian culture that influence women’s life styles. Each woman is supposed to be married and bear several children.\footnote{In my conversations with women of several age groups, having children seemed to be most important. A common reason was “who will bury you if you don’t have children?” Unmarried women were encouraged to find a partner and, if this search proved unsuccessful, bear and raise children as single mothers.} While in modern times the choice of partner is no longer up to the family but to the individual, the agreement of both families is still necessary to have a successful married life.
and couples count on extended family support in case of marital problems and arguments. Both for the patrilineal Ga and matrilineal Akan, the continuation of the lineage is important. The status of motherhood is high and makes a woman a full member of the society. In childless marriages, often the woman is blamed and divorced for that reason. The love for children is a female virtue and children are seen as a blessing and insurance against poverty in old age. Given the health risks and high mortality in early infancy, family planning programmes are important and promoted by the government. So far, smaller families are still an exception, but research still has to be done to produce explanatory models. From early childhood girls and boys are expected to help the mother in the household but it is clear that in married life the household chores are exclusively the wife’s affair. She will have to make sure the house is clean, there is water supply and food is cooked. Women do have influence on the family life and their husbands but those pursuing a career are faced with fulfilling social, cultural and professional expectations.

Violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon and also observed in Ghana. Violence is hereby understood as any form of physical, psychological, socio-economic or sexual behaviour and injuries next to traditional practices deeming to degrading women. Domestic violence is the most common form as research indicates that one in three Ghanaian women experiences physical violence from her direct partner. Growing numbers of police reported cases indicate that this problem undergoes an increasing awareness in the Ghanaian society (Amoakohene 2004). In searching for explanations, two reasons become apparent: social control over women and the avoidance to talk in public about domestic violence. Women often downplay their experiences or try to justify violence by looking for mistakes in their own behaviour as caring and hard working wife and mother. Women seem to have problems of defining and fulfilling their role that includes traditional and modern expectations. As one woman in Accra mentions: “We all go to work, work full-time, come home tired and yet while he relaxes, I have to prepare the meal, tidy up the place, bathe the children … and after performing all these functions, he expects you to meet his sexual desires” (Amoakohene 2004: 2378).

Looking at daily life in one of the metropolises of Ghana, the struggle to manage family and professional duties forms a challenge to the well-being of women. Limited access to resources like sanitation and a clean water supply and the unpredictable and time-consuming transport system demand constant attention. Women themselves mention health problems caused by the pressure to be a good mother, wife and worker (Avotri & Walters 1999). Headaches, general bodily pains and psycho-social distress are mentioned problems when they say “I am so tired”, “I think too much”, “lose weight” or “am unable to sleep well in the night.” Continuous financial problems and little support from

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16 It must be noted, that also women can and do divorce men in case of childlessness. Bleek (1975) states that also men can and are made responsible for childlessness.
17 The report shows an increase from 360 cases in 1999 to 3622 cases in 2002.
the husband complicate the living situation of many women in the under and middle class of Ghana.

In the last twenty years many programmes have been started to improve women’s situation and create legal protection measures. Education is seen as the key to an economically more independent and healthier life. Primary education is free, while junior and senior secondary school request varying fees. The governments started campaigns to have each girl finish at least Junior Secondary School (at the age of about fifteen years) and complete a vocational or professional training to avoid early marriage and pregnancies. Typical female occupations are catering, hair-dressing, dressmaking, secretarial and administrative work, nursing and teaching. As the straightforward family planning goals could not be achieved, the spacing of children that was already practised in the traditional system is promoted to ensure the health of the mother. In 1985, the law to register all marriages and the Intestate Succession Law were passed regulating inheritance and offering a minimum economic standard security of the women. Before then the widow often inherited nothing due to the patriarchal or matrilineal order and was condemned to a life in poverty or be remarried to a sibling. Till today, this divided property system discourages marital ‘joint ventures’ or commonly financed houses. With this legislation the situation improved but it is only as effective as the culture in the society is willing to support it (Oppong et al. 1975, Dolphyne 1991).

Having mentioned above that in many groups men dominate public life, a certain differentiation must be made. Today, three types of women are particularly respected in public life: traditional rulers, professional workers and hard working market and businesswomen. Queens and queen mothers receive all due respect and status in the community and are approached for consultation (Müller 2005). In almost all professions, from lawyers and doctors to teachers and bankers, women are found and generally speaking given the same promotion and salary opportunities as men. They are admired for the work done and referred to as ‘woman-man’ (Dolphyne 1991:43). Hardworking women in the market places or small businesses, who manage also without formal education to achieve a satisfactory standard of living, are equally accorded status. This indicates that education and professional training are key to increasing self-confidence and can create equality and social security in the long run. To achieve this, the support of the extended family will be needed as women try to combine modern and traditional life styles. Women find themselves in the dilemma of fulfilling the image of the perfect mother and wife, learning and working in a respected profession and participating in the modern society of Ghana. Successful role models are crucial for young women to show a way forward, gain self-esteem and voice their needs and wishes. This can and does lead to frictions and problems. Female successes challenge the male position. Support comes from the public discourse in form of printed and visual media. Programmes on television discuss family and educational issues, and weekly pages in newspapers (like the “Women’s World” in the Daily Graphic) try to inform a broad public on women’s affairs and start discussions. While these discussions take place in urban settings mostly, Dolphyne observes
that girls and young women in rural areas seem doubly disadvantaged as they often have limited access to formal education, their labour is needed on the farm from young age on and they encounter few role models in their immediate surroundings (1991: 84-102).

Despite increased effort in the last decades, the general participation of women in political policy-making bodies is still below the desired level. Under Nkrumah, the first woman was nominated for a post but it was not until 1969 that the first two women took seats in parliament. By the end of the 1970s, five women had been elected but none was given a ministerial appointment. In the previous parliament that was elected in December 2004 there were 205 men and 25 women (20 members of the NPP, five of the NDC), the women parliamentarians constituting about 10% of parliamentarians. There were just three female ministers (Women and Children’s Affairs, Environment & Science and Fisheries), one Minister of State in charge of the Tertiary Education and four Deputy Ministers out of more than 50 posts.

In conclusion, it is shown that the life of Ghanaian women is multifaceted. Fulfilling the different demands put before them by tradition, family, social relationships and professional work places them in a particular position. Being responsible and acknowledged for child raising and the organisation of the home constitute one side of their activities next to manifold duties and positions in the family, neighbourhood and church. More and more women are entering professional life, finishing university and working in their profession despite their home duties. Nurses, who form the focus in this research, experience these manifold responsibilities and try to find their way as wives, mothers, nurses among nurses and professional colleagues and the male-dominated doctors in the medical setting. More women in public office will be needed to create awareness and raise consciousness of their changing situation in modern society and lead to adjusted perspectives in society and policy-making. Ghanaians – and women in particular – face conflicting demands from tradition and modernity. Relating back to conference of managers in 2006, and also among young (male) managers, a search for change and thinking over social rules have been started.