

Debating the Authentic: An Outsider's View of West African Culture in Ghana

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Introduction

A visitor from a technologically advanced Western culture travels to a distant land seeking something that is missing in his own culture. Perhaps he feels it is an entirely new culture that he is seeking, or simply an escape from the rigid, mechanized reality of his Western existence.

How old is this quest? The desire for the simple life, some kind of Eden or a return to the beauty of nature and a natural lifestyle, has ancient roots. Some two millennia ago, the Pliny the Younger wrote with fondness of country living (his ancestral home was the rural area of Lake Como, Italy), away from the duties and politics of the city of Rome. In a letter to Caninius Rufus, he stated:

Are you reading, fishing, or hunting or doing all three? You can do all together on the shores of Como... I can't say I begrudge you your pleasures; I am only vexed at being denied them myself, for I hanker after them as a sick man does for wine, baths, and cool springs. I wonder if I shall ever be able to shake off these constricting fetters if I am not allowed to undo them, and I doubt if I ever shall. New business piles up on the old before the old is finished, and, as more and more links are added to the chain, I see my work stretching out farther and farther every day.¹

Even in ancient times, there was the desire to escape, to return to a more natural, pure existence.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was *de rigeur* for young writers and painters from the British Isles to spend time in Italy, the land of bright Tuscan sun, ancient ruins, and rural charm. Traveling and living abroad meant a return to the roots of human existence and experience, unadulterated by formal rules and technology.

Westerner travellers, then, have long sought a certain kind of unique experience through life in a foreign land. That experience can be defined as a quest for the “authentic”, some kind of emotional quality that Westerners feel is missing in their own society. That society they may see as too removed from nature, or as suffering from the coldness and dystopic miasma of excessive technological sophistication. Western travellers seek the *real*: real food, real buildings, real people. The critic George Steiner has discussed how societies become detached from the past, and by extension, from the authentic:

At some point in more or less remote times things were better, almost golden. A deep concordance lay between man and the natural setting... Somewhere a wrong turn was taken in that “dark and sacred wood,” after which man has had to labor, socially, psychologically, against the natural grain of being.²

According to Steiner, in modern societies this sense of detachment leads to feelings of detachment, “moral obtuseness”, and violence.³ Indeed, he says, we live in a “post-culture”, a society without the authentic: “the mechanized, often antiseptic landscape of contemporary Europe... new facades... a curious emptiness”.⁴

But such a quest for the “authentic” is bound to fail – or at least bound to encounter paradoxes and contradictions. For what is authentic? And why do we feel that we need to travel somewhere else to find it? To illustrate this problematic journey, we can look at the experience of a Western traveler in contemporary Ghana. Africa has long been a source (real or imagined) for the authentic. First, Western European cultures were entranced by Far Eastern cultures, bringing in the apparently pure exoticism of Chinese aesthetics in the form of *chinoiserie*. Then it was onto the “dark continent”, where the colonial masters in the western and southern reaches of Africa brought back visual arts and musical rhythms that were “primitive”, with that term at the same time indicating both lack of sophistication and purity. The authentic had been found in its roughest, most real form. Again, Steiner:

The charismatic appeal of “barbaric forms” on the plastic and musical imagination, as occurs in jazz, in *Fauve* art, in dance, in the new theatre of masque and ritual, drew on several complex strains... The African masks which grimace out of post-Cubic art are borrowings of and for despair.⁵

In other words, Europeans were utilizing the purity of expression of African art to give voice to their own emotions, finding that their own sanitized rituals were no longer able to do so. For the modern generation, Steiner adds, there has been a kind of “hysteria”, a

rejection of all that is Western, with a belief that the authentic can only be found in these other cultures:

We are told... that our culture is doomed... that it can be resuscitated only through a violent transfusion of those energies, of those styles of feeling, most representative of “third-world” peoples. Theirs is the true “soul,” theirs the beauty of blackness and of eros.⁶

Steiner goes on to say that this kind of “neoprimitivism... has roots in the core of the Western crisis and needs to be understood both psychologically and sociologically”.

We will come back to that analysis at the end of this paper; for now, we shall examine how this quest for those “energies” and “soul” manifests itself in the Westerner’s experience in Ghana.

Definitions

On the face of it, the most obvious categorization that a Western traveler makes upon arrival in Ghana is the rural/urban division. The capital city of Accra, especially, like other major cities all over the world, has become “Westernized”. That word, in this case, means that the city has modern shops and franchises, highways filled with cars, football stadiums, and all the other commercial and architectural paraphernalia and that one would find anywhere in the industrialized West. The visitor knows that he is in Africa because the streets are filled with Africans, and the monuments, although modern and Western in style, depict Kwame Nkrumah. But other than that, the city has become as interchangeable in many respects with Lisbon, Lima, or San Francisco. This is an oversimplification, but no visitor will deny that he is in a modern city, plain and simple.

But when the Western traveler goes out of the city, he feels that finally he is experiencing the *real* Ghana: There! Look! The mud-brick building with thatched roofs! People getting water out of a well. Children playing in the river. Goats roaming in a field. A man playing a drum. Now we feel that we are in the realm of the authentic.

Yet this view proves too facile on two accounts. The first problem is that we view urbanization and “technologization” as Western and therefore inauthentic in a Ghanaian context. The second difficulty is that Ghanaian society itself is unsure of what is authentic or not. This more complex issue is the one we will focus on in this paper. The first problem is relatively easy to address: urban centers have their origins in both Asia and the Middle East, and Africa boasted thriving metropolitan civilizations even in an ancient times. It is true that Africa now has cities that are, in many ways, imitations (or rather colonial artifacts) of European and American cities: Lagos, Abidjan, and Luanda

all boast concrete and steel. But they are still “African” in the sense that they host the old traditions of the busy markets and thriving commercial and social life that the ancient cities had.

But Western visitors to Ghana do indeed see that there are more profound challenges to finding the “authentic” in their West African experience in Ghana. What is the *real* Ghana? How can we tell if we have had an “authentic” experience? And on its side, what should Ghana promote as the *real* Ghanaian culture? Should it protect that culture, and if so, how?

The Basics: Food and Clothing

When in Rome, do as the Romans do... And so the Western visitor to Ghana longs to try Ghanaian food: “red-red” (plantains and beans), groundnut soup, “jollof” rice, and other classics. The first surprise, however, is that many of the restaurants and hotels have menus filled with what is labeled “continental” cuisine: grilled fish, steaks, British “chips”, sandwiches, and so on. Often, there will be a separate section of the menu entitled “Ghanaian Dishes”, along with the note that these must be ordered specially, in advance. Thus that bit of Ghanaian culture already has become hard to experience in Ghana itself — one of the first ironies the traveler encounters. The everyday has become special, rare. Of course, on the roadside stands, one can find all the traditional Ghanaian foods, but the hotels and restaurants insulate the visitor from this experience. Why? Is there the conception that the Westerner would not like these foods?

So, what is authentically Ghanaian? The visitors sees Ghanaians eating these local foods, but they also see the locals eating bread (a habit inherited from the colonizing British), and other non-traditional foods. The visitor laments this — another bit of indigenous culture fading, just as contemporary Chinese cities are now replete with fattening, flavorless, Western fast food restaurants. So, at the same time, Ghanaians are relinquishing (be it ever so gradually) something that defines them, even as Westerners hunger (literally) for what is truly Ghanaian. It is impossible for the Western traveler simply to arrive in Ghana and experience the authentic – they must actively seek it, and that is the problem. The authentic should be all around us, we should feel immersed in it; but instead, it becomes a rare object, a treasure to be sought out and savored.

Clothing, another fundamental value in a culture, also presents the foreigner with an interesting paradox in Ghana. One’s first impression in the capital, Accra, is that Western style clothing has been adopted completely. But after a few days, one sees that even in this modern metropolis there are traditional styles of clothing being worn. In fact, there is a full spectrum of outfits: completely traditional *agbada* gowns on men and the wrap-around *lapas* on women; mixed configurations of traditional tops and Western-style pants

and skirts; and finally completely Western suits and dresses. Even there, however, there is some variation. For the men, there is the choice between a basic suit-and-tie assemblage, or what are called in Ghana “political suits”, the latter being a kind of tropical business outfit. For women, there are tight-fitting Western dresses but even these may display traditional woven *kente*-style patterns or batik applied Ghanaian symbols.

For the Ghanaians, this broad range of styles of dress comes from a complex history of what we might call sartorial assimilation and re-invention. We find this same process of “re-discovery” in other cultures with strong textile traditions. In their massive push to modernism, especially in places like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, the Chinese abandoned their traditional form of dress and adopted Western-style clothing. Traditional men’s robes and women’s long dresses were considered not just representative of the old, “backwards” ways, but were even considered as actual physical impediments themselves. Now that Chinese culture has matched (if not beat) the Western capitalist model at its own game, it feels free to bring back traditional forms of Chinese dress, although in a modernized form:

Fashion designers today in... Taiwan are finding new ways to freely combine modern fashion aesthetics and trends with traditional Chinese [styles]... In modern Taiwan society, men are frequently seen at social occasions wearing the dignified and refined traditional Chinese long gown. Women often wear the *ch’i-p’ao*, a modified form of traditional Ch’ing Dynasty fashion... [Chinese] can enjoy beautiful fashions with traditional features and modern chic.⁷

The Ghanaians, now also enjoy this similar revival of traditional forms of clothing.

Their path to that revival came through a colonial history, as was the case with the Chinese. The Chinese had suffered at the hands of the Western powers, particularly the British. They had resented and then adopted Western technology and, as sort of a superficial acknowledgement of defeat, adopted Western styles and fashions. For the Ghanaians, the instrument of change was again the British.

Dress and identity are intimately related... The wearing of Western dress has a long history in Ghana and also played a part in the projection of individual and group identities during the colonial era.⁸

The first Westerners who encountered the Ghanaians certainly were not seeking the authentic “African” experience. Rather, they were there to impose their own values on the local culture.

Christian missionaries expected Ghanaian converts to put on European-style clothing, disparaging African dress and seeing it as “native” and “uncultured.” Western dress was associated with high civilization. Some elite Ghanaians chose to don Western clothes to separate themselves from other Africans and give them entrance into European society. Africans and Europeans alike could be seen wearing clothes, such as heavy woolen suits, corsets, and plumed hats, unsuited to the tropical heat.⁹

The irony is that now Westerners eagerly seek to purchase Ghanaian traditional outfits, embracing the colorful patterns, the symbolism, and the history. The Ghanaians are fully aware of this, and there are many shops and other venues (such as craft centers) where Westerners can learn about traditional batiks, weaving, etc., and purchase both textiles and finished clothing. That clothing includes fully traditional outfits, and Westernized versions of the same, e.g., a contemporary shirt utilizing a *kente* pattern.

Ghanaians also can be seen wearing these Westernized styles — part of their own process of re-absorbing of the “authentic”. Westerners have gone from overweening pride in their own values — what Steiner calls the “confident pivot of classic geography” — to a desperate search for what he terms a “penitential masochism”, that is, the belief that whatever is exotic and foreign must be more genuine and *real*.¹⁰

For the Ghanaians, the revival of traditional clothing was done on a very conscious level as a way of re-asserting a genuine “African” identity:

When the nationalist movement gathered steam in the 1950s, leaders began to wear traditional clothing as a symbol of their independence from the colonial elite and their desire for self-government. Kwame Nkrumah instructed others to wear traditional smocks and donned one himself at Ghana’s independence celebrations in 1957. Throughout his rule, Nkrumah promoted the wearing of traditional clothes, frequently sporting smocks and *kente* cloth, as a symbol of Ghanaian cultural pride and a tool to foster national identity.¹¹

This behavior continues, although it is no longer done in such an overt political framework. Ghanaians wear traditional clothing as a simple assertion of their identity. Through this, they too can feel an attachment to an “authentic” cultural heritage, and they can be amused as Westerners try to do the same.

But there is a trap here, as there is with many of these attempts to define and attach oneself to the “real” in a culture. First, there must be the realization that in some ways, clothing and styles of dress are superficial forms of identity. True, African clothing

(particularly textiles with *adinkra* symbols, and the symbolic *kente* weaves) carries deep tradition and meaning, just as Chinese embroidery with its dragons and other symbols does. But if the clothing is worn while the meanings are forgotten, or if the *kente* patterns cease to be woven and are just turned out as prints (something that is already happening), then cultural preservation is threatened. The clothing simply becomes a decoration, a parody of itself — something “African” for the Westerners to purchase and take home as a souvenir. The clothing has to be worn as an integral part of the Ghanaian traditions, traditions of both making the textiles and wearing them in a certain context.

As soon as we see that “special craft centers” are being set up for traditional textile production, we know that the culture is in trouble. The setting of these craft centers means that the process is no longer a regular part of community life. What was integral to the culture now becomes peripheral, preserved like a museum specimen.

The National Park: Elephants in the Morning

National parks in Ghana beautifully illustrate this process where core elements of the culture become peripheral. To see wild animals, the Western visitor must go to a special park, and go with an armed guide into the savannah. Early in the morning, just before sunrise, the elephants go down to the small lake to bathe. An alert and stealthy visitor can see this, if they hike down into the plain with sufficient caution.

The only animals the Western visitor will encounter otherwise are the many goats that roam village streets. True, monkeys can be viewed at the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, but the very name, “sanctuary”, indicates the precarious state of these animals. Elephants, antelope, and other creatures can be found at Mole National Park and a few other sites — sites *especially designated* as places where humans may encounter wildlife.

Urban Ghanaians encounter animals only in the marketplace, where the creatures are caged or already prepared for consumption. In the villages, it is true, hunters still go out and derive protein for their families first-hand, seeking out such animals as the tasty grasscutter (*Thryonomys swinderianus*). But the relationship with the natural world is becoming more and more estranged and distant as the country becomes increasingly urbanized and animals are hunted to extinction.

With domesticated animals, the Westerner can still have an “authentic” experience. For an urbanite visitor, it is fascinating to see a traditional village house with the goat pen right outside. Animals in this context are still integrated into daily life. All rural houses in Ghana have such provisions for keeping animals nearby. This kind of setup is found in virtually all traditional, rural cultures; it is interesting to note that the word still used for house in Chinese, *jia*, is written with a character representing a pig under shelter. For the

Chinese, the pig was the domesticated animal of choice, and that relationship became fully embodied in the language.

But the Westerner who comes to Ghana is advised that wild animals will not be readily encountered. Again, what was once an integral part of the local culture — a daily co-existence with animals — has become something special, to be preserved in a park. This process happened a long time ago in the West, as the art critic John Berger has pointed out. For “zoos” in the passage below, we can substitute the national parks and preserves of modern Ghana:

Public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. Modern zoos are an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as man.¹²

The Western visitor has imagined an exotic Africa, filled with wild animals, an “authentic” return to nature, but ends up with something less. In the national park, the actual encounter with the elephant, which takes place directly without any intervening cage or other barrier, still fascinates. A human being faces nature directly, if only for a brief moment when the tour guide walks away. At that wonderful, pure moment, we feel that somehow we have gone back in time to when our human ancestors of us all roamed these same savannahs.

A Musical Experience: The Beat of a Drum

Music — another defining element of a culture — draws us again into the complexities of the quest for the “authentic”. West African music can claim so much as a powerful cultural icon: an ancient tradition reaching back into the distant past, a rich and varied present, and a deep influence in the popular music of the Americas. Jazz, blues, rock, salsa, samba and many other kinds of Western music were constructed directly from imported West African rhythms and instrumentation.

The Western visitor to Ghana seeks both the origins of his own musical experience and the original “primitive” rhythmic experience of unamplified African music. Usually, there are drum and dance performances at cultural centers for tour groups. Again, one is forced to ask whether these are authentic experiences. The fact, once more, that the performances take place in a specially designated “cultural center” makes the experience one step removed from its traditional setting and roots. These musicians are performers now, not simply members of a village community. Perhaps they are being paid for the performance.

Their talent, however, is unmistakable. There is no question that they have inherited a genuine musical tradition, and are just as skilled as their predecessors going back hundreds or even thousands of years. But their role is different. In the village itself, the Westerner perhaps can have a more genuine experience, in the sense that the people doing the drumming and dancing are simply members of the village who do this as part of their everyday activities, at least in times of festivals and celebrations.

Yet even then the experience is mediated. As in the cultural center, in the village chairs are set out on the dirt grounds for the Westerners to sit, watch, and listen — not participate. Sometimes, the visitor is invited to join in the dancing, and inevitably does so in an awkward and embarrassing way, since this kind of public involvement is something that no longer takes place in Western society. Dancing in Western society is no longer an “authentic” activity — it only occurs in particular venues (clubs, discotheques, etc.), where there is darkness to keep the activity rather anonymous. This open, loud drumming, and lithe dancing of Ghana is wonderful for the visitor, but at the same time alien and remote. “Authentic” musical experiences are found only where music still functions as an integral part of daily life:

Many types of traditional music and dance [in Ghana] are functional and their performance is limited to a particular context. Music and dance have social roles and functions through which Ghanaian societies express their culture. Different types are performed for funerals, weddings, harvest festivals, or work activities. The meaning of the music in these contexts is closely related to the ideas and feels associated with the occasion.¹³

There is a clear difference, then, between music that is “performed” and music that “occurs” as part of daily life. A performance indicates a removal, a separate subject (the performer) and object (the audience). Again, the foreigner is removed a step from an authentic experience.

Despite the difficulty for the foreigner in accessing the “authentic”, it is clear that Ghanaians have done an excellent job of preserving their musical heritage. The fact that these drum-and-dance troupes comprise very young (and very talented) performers reveals that the old musical traditions have reached across to the next generation. However, there has also been the inevitable homogenization of music as well, the globalization of styles and genres. A visitor may lament this, because he has come for a genuine “African” musical experience. But this is the way of music — cross-influences, transmissions, and so on.

With Ghanaian music, there are some particular ironies in terms of cultural identity and the question of the authentic. Much of the new music one hears is American “hip-hop”, pop, and reggae. In terms of musical history, of course, these are really “re-imports”. All three genres developed in the United States, England, and the Caribbean from deep, West African roots. Now they are being brought back to West Africa, and are undergoing transformation yet again. One hears “hip-hop” sung in Twi and other Ghanaian languages, and the local reggae songs discuss local issues concerning society and politics in Ghana.

Even looking at traditional Ghanaian music, the visitor should beware of trying to define some kind of purely “Ghanaian” genre. Instruments, rhythms, and dances have been influenced for hundreds of years in Ghana from the outside — northern trade brought drum types from Mali and elsewhere that are now considered “Ghanaian”. Colonialism brought brass instruments, which are used even in a setting as traditional as the installation of a village chief.¹⁴

But commercial forces will break apart Ghanaian musical traditions, just as they have disrupted the natural creative process in music in Western societies. Even the casual visitor will notice that the majority of music sold on the street in Ghana is either Western-style pop or Christian gospel. Market forces have shaped music tastes; no one can blame Ghanaians for wanting this music, but it saddens the Western visitor that traditional drumming, or even the hybrid Ghanaian music known as “highlife”, in many ways has become marginalized.

The Religious Dimension: God or Gods?

Most visitors to Ghana are surprised by the pervasiveness and depth of Christian belief in the country. There are churches everywhere, and of every variety. For a critical outside observer, this fervent Christianity seems odd, because in the same breath a Ghanaian will tell you of the corrosive effects of colonialism while practicing what is, really, the religion of the colonizer.

Of course, Christianity can be seen as a theology of liberation — Martin Luther King utilized both his role as a religious figure and the Bible itself as tools for the fight for civil rights in the United States. Furthermore, the Christianity one finds in Ghana is frequently “Africanized”. But it is an alien religion nonetheless — one only has to see the white Jesus in so many churches in Ghana to realize this.

For Ghanaians, perhaps this is not an issue; many of them have been Christians for generations and consider Christianity to be an integral part of their identity. But many Western visitors come to West Africa with their imaginations filled with bits and pieces

of what they imagine to be “tribal” or “animist” religions. In Ghana, there are still followers of traditional religious practices, and such systems are bequeathed a legal status equal to that of Christianity and Islam. In primary school, students are taught — as part of the national curriculum — that all three religions are to be considered equally part of the Ghanaian national identity.

For Westerners, however, there is a difference: they see Christianity as a religion imposed upon the Ghanaians by the white colonialists of the past; Islam is perceived as rather more “indigenous” and exotic, even though it, too, is an import (from North Africa). Only the old religious systems hold deep fascination for Westerners, and are considered by them to be authentically “African”. Those polyvalent faiths have the forbidden characteristics of totemism, idolatry, and fetishism that Western Christianity has only in the most sublimated forms, and thus prove so alluring to the foreign visitor.

In Western Christianity, traces of pre-Christian animist beliefs live on in the form of Easter rabbits and Easter eggs, Christmas trees (from ancient Druidic rites), and the ritual of communion. But Westerners are only vaguely aware of these pagan epiphenomena in their own belief systems. They prefer to embrace the openly alien and non-Christian West African beliefs in all their apparent exoticism.

But to find these traditional religious practices, the Westerner must actively search. Despite its claims of religious plurality, Ghana is often presented to the outsider as a purely Christian country. The older religions and beliefs are seen as part of the “old Ghana” that must be discarded in the march towards modernism. In fact, there is even the belief that the older religious systems were inherently inferior, and allowed Ghana to fall behind and Europe to conquer the African continent. Thus, Ghana itself struggles with what should be labeled as “Ghanaian” and “authentic”, and the foreigner is caught somewhere in the middle.

Relationships: A Question of Money

A traveler interested in learning about a country gains the most insight from talking to the people. The everyday people — shopkeepers, craftsmen, students — are the ones who reveal the inner workings of a society, its hopes and fears, its basic character. In Ghana, the national character seems to be one predisposed towards conversation, so there seem to be ample opportunities for this kind of learning about the culture.

But again, there are obstructions in the foreigner’s quest for the authentic. The foreigner simply wants to establish a friendship or at least a friendly conversation, and through this medium learn about Ghana’s history, culture, and people. But such interactions frequently come “loaded”. In poorer areas, the Western traveler is frequently asked for

money, and in other situations there are requests for assistance — most notably help in emigrating from Ghana. Therefore, a conversation between a Westerner and Ghanaian may have this “potential” in the background, the possible request for a favor being yet another obstruction to the “authentic” experience.

In an education pamphlet distributed in Ghana, one finds this issue addressed in an interesting form. Entitled *Living Through Courtesy* and designed for young readers, the pamphlet includes a section labeled “Harmful Results of Discourtesy”; there we read:

There are some places in our country where children, and even adults, keep pestering visitors by begging “Penny! Penny” or “*ma me sempowa*” (give me threepence). Pestering is a form of discourtesy. The visitors who are pestered in this way cannot help judging the town or village on the whole as a place of beggars.¹⁵

For the casual visitor, such requests are no more than a nuisance, but they do serve to limit the intimacy of the Westerner’s experience in Ghana. First, the requests remind the visitors of the significant difference in economic status between himself and the local people. More fundamentally, it means that the foreigner is not simply viewed as a person, but as a source of wealth, a source of assistance, a source of change. So much for simply being viewed as a fellow human being. Finally, the request from Ghanaians for help in emigrating are especially disturbing to the Western visitor, because to him Ghana is a beautiful country with great potential and lacking in much of the decadence of the West.

A Western visitor being considered purely as a fellow member of the human race is not likely to happen anyway in most circumstances because of the visible physical differences (if they are white or Asian) between the visitor and the local people, or differences in mannerisms and dress (if they are African-American). Ghanaians do not tend to make racial distinctions, but they do articulate a clear differentiation between themselves and all outsiders, be they black, white, or Asian. In the Twi language, a foreigner is an *oburoni*, and in Ewe, the term is *yovo*. Neither term is particularly derogatory, but young Ghanaian children will frequently point at foreigners and utter these terms. This immediately creates a barrier in terms of communication, and again the foreigner is prevented from having an “authentic” interaction with a Ghanaian. Of course, one could argue that this very act of differentiation — the children’s labeling of “us” versus “them” — is, in fact, part of the “authentic” experience in Ghana.

Conclusion

The Westerner visitor will be frustrated in his search for the “authentic” in Ghana. Much of what the foreigner considers to be the *real* Ghanaian culture — local food, traditional

music, animist religions — is increasingly difficult to find. Part of the problem comes from the fact that the Ghanaians, in their efforts to be as hospitable as possible, may feel that the foreigner visitor will not like the local cuisine or other aspects of the culture. As for the music, it may be enjoyed by the visitor, but most often only in special venues constructed for that purpose, not in the natural context of daily life. Similarly, Ghanaians fear that their traditional religious practices will be viewed as old-fashioned or even “primitive”.

The Ghanaian, meanwhile, must himself struggle with the question of identity — what is “authentic” and what is not? Should old traditions be preserved? If so, how? Can they be re-integrated into life as part of the normal functioning of the society? There are other questions as well: how many of these traditions are really “Ghanaian”, whatever that term may mean? Some elements of the culture are clearly from northern influences, while others are from the colonizers. Should those elements be purged or preserved? Who decides?

Moreover, the Ghanaian should not make the decision to preserve various elements of the cultures simply as a way of providing the foreigner with an “authentic” experience. Ghana cannot become a “theme park” for all that is West African. At the same time, Ghanaians should recognize that there are outsiders who are genuinely interested in the history and culture of the society, and want to experience that in as direct a form as possible. Ghanaian society is caught in a difficult bind, however, because much of what the outside visitor considers to be the *real* Ghana is the Ghana of the past, and many Ghanaians want the country to “modernize”, in a very technological and capitalistic sense.

These are complex issues, but there is no question that at some basic level it is important for elements of an old culture not only to be preserved but also re-integrated into the society. Only through full re-integration can these traditions be strengthened and continued in a normal pattern of human society. This continuity is more than just preserving the “charm” of a place; it is vital for the very identity of the society. If, one day, Ghanaians will have discarded everything from the past — the traditional religions, music, clothing, and so on — then what will they have become? Will there even be such a thing as a “Ghanaian”?

This homogenization of societies is taking place all over, as economic forces dictate lifestyles around the globe. Bangkok, Thailand and Main Street, U.S.A. are looking increasingly similar, an issue many modern cultural critics have analyzed.¹⁶ The same chain stores and fast food outlets are found from Vancouver to Nairobi, and the traveler

must go farther and farther afield to find the “exotic”, places untouched by Western commercialism.

But why is this important? Why should Ghana, in short, worry about its identity? And why is it so important for the Westerner to find an “authentic” experience? Because without such experiences, there is no meaning, and human experience becomes nothing more than a corporatized day-to-day existence. The human mind, and its predilection for culture, for abstract thought, for challenges, will be for naught. If the traveler views his own society to be so industrialized and subject to corporate banality that nothing there contains genuine tradition, real *feeling*, then he will also view himself as *compelled* to seek in some other land that which can make him human again. The Western traveler goes to Africa — the acclaimed source, after all, of mankind itself — seeking the “real”, the original sources of human experience, in the form of food, music, faith, and friendship.

Again, the Westerner seeks that which he feels no longer exists in his own society. The French social theorist, Jean Baudrillard, carefully describes and analyzes this societal malaise in his book, *Simulation and Simulacra*. He points out how modern, technological societies gradually discard the original elements of their culture, in terms of history, art, religion, and so forth. In place of these authentic aspects of the culture appear representations or copies. Baudrillard describes the process as one where we move from the real, to a simulation of the real (a kind of copy), and finally to what he calls a *simulacrum*; this last is a copy with no original:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

Baudrillard’s point is that we are living in a world of simulacra, where the original — i.e., the authentic — is disappearing, and being replaced by copies. The danger, he notes, is when those copies, those pseudo-histories and fake bits of culture, are taken as *the real*.

Baudrillard goes on to discuss specifically how local cultures develop a problematic relationship with outside observers. He looks at the example of the Tasaday people in the Philippines, who had lived for some eight hundred years without any contact with other humans. We can read Baudrillard’s comments, and clearly see the parallels with the foreigners’ encounters with Ghana:

Ethnology brushed up against its paradoxical death in 1971, the day when the Philippine government decided to return the few dozen Tasaday who had just been discovered in the depths of the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries without any contact with the rest of the species, to their primitive state, out of the reach of colonizers, tourists, and ethnologists. This at the suggestion of the anthropologists themselves, who were seeing the indigenous people disintegrate immediately upon contact, like mummies in the open air.¹⁷

In the case of Ghana, the indigenous culture was exposed to “colonizers, tourists, and ethnologists” repeatedly over centuries, to the point where the actual cultural identity of Ghana itself is uncertain.

But there are remnants of what we might call real Ghanaian culture in terms of language, music, art, and so on. To preserve this, it must be protected from the outside. Thus we have the paradox: to observe an actual culture, and for the Westerner to experience that which he has lost in his own culture — the *real* — he must invade the traditional culture, pollute it, digest it, and ultimately make it simply a version of his own culture. Thus it may be that the Westerner can never experience the real, that authentic experience which he craves so eagerly. As ethnologists (or, in our case, tourists), our task is impossible:

In order for ethnology to live, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being “discovered” and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it.¹⁸

Baudrillard clearly articulates the several conundrums of the Westerner. First, his own culture has become, in its rush to modernism, somehow “inauthentic”. Then, this Westerner starts to seek the “authentic” in cultures (Africa, Asia) that the West has already corrupted, through colonization and then globalization — so a real culture, pure and authentic, becomes very hard to find. Even cultures that have remained relatively untouched by those corrosive forces of colonization and globalization are polluted immediately, however, upon contact with the Western tourist. Finally, the Western tourist finds that in the traditional culture he is visiting, his interactions can never be authentic, because the “locals” will always regard him as an outsider, and behave differently around him, treating him either too well or too dismissively.

In the meantime, too, the local culture starts to reflect upon itself, and becomes, in a sense, a museum of itself. It becomes aware of its own vanishing. We close with an example. In Wa, the capital city of the Upper West Region of Ghana, there is an old mosque, made of earth with a timber frame. It is a classic example of Sudanic architecture — so already it is something from the “outside”. But this kind of architecture

came to Ghana long ago enough that we can, for the sake of argument, consider it Ghanaian. Nearby, the town is building a tourist center in the style of this same mosque. Why? Pure Islam, pure earth-and-wood architecture, the Ghanaians believe, are too shocking to the Westerner visitor. The mosque is the “old” Ghana, and the Ghanaians want to present a new face. So they have built this new structure of concrete, with fake minarets, pieces of wood sticking out but with no real structural function. This new building is just a *simulation* of African Islamic architecture.

Some day, the original mosque, with its delicate combination of organic materials, will fall into permanent disrepair. Only the concrete “copy” will remain. The townspeople of Wa will forget that this is a copy, however. It will be taken as an original. Ghana will have entered the world of the *simulacrum* — a copy with no original. Then the Ghanaians will begin their treks overseas, in quest of the real. But where will they go? Will there be any *real* cultures left to find?

Endnotes

¹ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 2.8; see p. 65 of Betty Radice, trans., *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1963).

² George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷ Jason C. Hu, ed., *Traditional Chinese Culture in Taiwan (10): Clothing — The Art of Traditional Chinese Dress* (Taipei: Kwang Hwa Publishing Company, 1994) 8-9.

⁸ Steven J. Salm and Toyin Falola, *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 120-121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰ See Steiner, 62-63.

¹¹ Salm and Fayola, 121.

¹² John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 19.

¹³ Salm and Falola, 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹⁵ Sophia Manu, ed., *Living Through Courtesy* (Accra: Adaex Educational Publications, 1998) 40.

¹⁶ See, for example, Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), and David Rothkopf, "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?" in Patrick O'Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain, eds., *Globalization and the*

Challenges of a New Century: A Reader (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

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