

# Ghana's Invisible Working Class

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*Ghana, known for its stability and economic prosperity in the last 50 years, is praised as a model African state. Despite their rise to a middle income country, Ghana is struggling to deal with the rise of Kayayo's, a destitute working class who go unacknowledged by policy makers. This is the story of an American living in a Kayayo town.*

During his Presidential address on May 1<sup>st</sup> (still known in Ghana as International Workers Day) President John Mahama began his speech by welcoming the Vice President, the Speaker of Parliament, the Chief Justice and seven other dignitaries before acknowledging the “dedicated and selfless worker of Ghana.” It seems odd that on a day of commemoration for workers, the workers themselves only received a footnote at the end of a drawn out introduction. President Mahama went on to praise the occasion and its importance worldwide, quoting the historical roots of May 1<sup>st</sup> as the one day each year dedicated to discuss the role of the Proletariat in the marketplace. His praise for the common man was short lived. Only a few sentences later he would apologize for not reaching consensus on an improved minimum wage and address allegations of widespread corruption within the system. All this while simultaneously praising his party for nurturing the ego of Ghana's working class. Mahama's speech was everything you would expect from a high profile politician; the use of both praise and apology for the workings of his administration which effectively reduced his message to neutral. This should be expected from any good politician but what was actually contemptible of Mahama's workers day speech was the complete lack of acknowledgment for Ghana's emerging working class: the Kayayo.

Kayayo (pronounced Kaa-yay-oh), which literally translates to “people who carry heavy loads,” are Ghana's emerging working class. They emigrate from Ghana's rural northern districts to the bustling southern cities looking for employment. Often fitted with high school degrees in Integrated Science, Economics, or General Arts, these young Ghanaians struggle to find any steady employment in their fields. They soon realize their only qualification is their labor power. They are transformed from degree holders to head porters, weaving in and out of busy streets carrying basins on their head full of goods to sell. Everything from loaves of bread to imitation Gucci glasses are sold for a minimal profit. As the African sun sets, Kayayo's slowly retreat to their living quarters which are notorious for their impoverished housing units. As an American living in Ghana, I am one of the few outsiders to have a firsthand experience of the Kayayo lifestyle.

My first experience in a Kayayo town occurred when I briefly left my host village in rural north Ghana to meet some expatriate friends in Kumasi, a busy city in southern Ghana. We stayed at a guest house in a secluded area of town, known to locals as “where the white people stay.” After two days of checking Facebook, responding to emails and enjoying hot showers I was ready to return to my mud hut in northern Ghana. My bus was set to leave at 5:00 the next morning. Fearful of walking alone during the early morning hours I decided to call my friend Gabriel, a young man whom I knew from my village in the north. He left the village last year to become a head porter in Kumasi. He offered me a place to stay the night before my departure. I happily accepted. That evening, before leaving the guest house, I said goodbye to my friends, packed my laptop and made sure my bedding was thrown into the dirty laundry basket. Nothing irritates traveler's more than dirty bed sheets.

From the busy road side I hailed a taxi and for a small fee was dropped off at a small bus station in Kumasi market town. I exited the cab and was approached by several vendors who pressured me to buy their items. “*Parlez-vous Français?*” That's my market trick; pretend to only speak French so that vendors will stop bothering you. Ghana, unlike all of its neighboring states, is a not a

Francophone country. I continued to the bus station where Gabriel was waiting for me. He immediately hugged me with the same warmth of a close relative who has just stepped off the plane from a long vacation.

He assured me his house was not far and we began to walk. He wasn't lying. No more than 20 steps behind the bus station was a square structure no larger than a hotel elevator and filled with travel bags and pop culture posters and straw mats. One light bulb inside the small structure provided just enough light to navigate my steps over two people sleeping on the floor and the random assortment of plastic bowls and spoons that littered the ground. Gabriel pointed to a Real Madrid poster on the wall and directly below this was a straw mat to sleep on. I set my bag over the straw mat. Gabriel served me dinner: rice and beans with freshly grounded peppers. We returned to the room to meet his friends were awake and eager to meet me. They assured me that they would keep me safe until the morning. They mentioned that everything in their house was also mine. They're not spouting idioms, either. While they spoke one man reached over and handed me the last orange that was laying in his corner of the room. Ghanaian hospitality is a constant reminder that this whole country is my second home.

Before setting off to sleep I was handed a large bucket of water for bathing. I didn't walk far before Gabriel abruptly stopped me. He removed his flip flops and told me to wear them so I wouldn't ruin my new American sandals. I opened the door to an empty stall and realized the space was already polluted by a large puddle of stale urine and occupied by three chickens that refused to be chased away. I picked up a small stone and tossed it right above the chickens. The hard clank of the stone and small splash of liquid convinced them to leave. I entered and began my bath, scooping ladels of water over my head. A few minutes later my bucket was empty yet I somehow felt dirtier than when it had been full.

I dried off, changed clothes, and layed down on my small straw mat with my head against the wall. Next to me was Gabriel, already asleep. Beside him were three of his brothers, sleeping back to back. On the other side of the room lay six other people sleeping back to back with their heads toward the opposite wall and their feet facing me. The two opposite rows of people sleeping back to back created a small walk way banked with dusty feet from a long day of Kayayo work. Throughout the night I was woken up by the sounds of buses starting which rattled the metal ceiling. Crying babies with angry mothers constantly walked by the window. Smoke from burning trash corrupted each breath I took. Daylight was just a few hours away, or so I told myself as I tried to ignore the constant distractions and fall sleep on my straw mat. Early daylight approached unexpectedly and somehow, I slept through my alarm. I scrambled around the room gathering my bag and ran outside to where my bus was loading people. The driver honked the horn impatiently; he was ready to leave. I gave a warm thank you to Gabriel, and hugged him. He assured me we would meet again when he returned home for his sister's graduation in the coming months. Gabriel waited until the bus left before he turned around to get ready for another day of Kayayo work.

The phrase used to describe the impoverished living conditions of Kayayo's is routinely included under an umbrella phrase "the problems of urbanization." These problems include, at the very least, exposure to cramped living spaces, unclean or lack of necessary resources and exposure to disease carrying insects. It's a largely academic term that strips away the human experience of Kayayo life. This exact lack of humanism is supposed to be compensated for each year on May Day. Yet the struggle of the Kayayo in Ghana was absent in President Mahama's May Day speech. This signifies not only willful ignorance by the nation's top officials but a larger strategy of dismissing a reality of Ghana's fragile consumer based economy: that it has only benefited a small segment of wealthy citizens while the average Ghanaian is fighting to find a dignified role in the workplace.

You might be asking yourself an elementary question at this point: why should President Mahama

(or anybody else) care about life of the Kayayo? They provide a cheap source of employment in a society that historically doesn't equate time with labor. It's an ideal scenario for any business owner. And after all, a necessary ideology of free markets is the ideal of individualism. Why then, you might ask, should you care about the plight of the Kayayo if they don't affect you personally? Around 40 BC the Roman poet Horatius Flaccus advised us well about why we should care. *Mutato nomine et de te fabula narrator*: Change only the name and this story is also about you.