Historical Overview of the Development of Communal Labor from Pre-colonial to Post Independent Ghana

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Abstract: Literature on communal work is very limited in Ghana, although the practice is found among many diverse cultures across the ten (10) regions of Ghana. This study takes up the challenge of presenting a short overview of the concept of communal labor from pre-colonial to post independent Ghana. The study is set to reveal indigenous institutions of communal labor and address the factors that have influenced the practice in each phase of Ghana´s development. Overall, the study is designed to enhance knowledge and understanding of the practice of communal labor in Ghana.

Index Terms: Communal, labor, culture, indigenous, institutions, pre-colonial, post-independent

Review of Relevant Literature on the concept of communal labor

Theoretically, communal labor is placed within the wider concept of community development. Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya (2004) has provided very useful theoretical insights into the theory of community development that will be useful in this study. According to him, community development is purposed to *"building solidarity and agency through adherence to the principles of self-help, felt needs, and participation,* (Bhattacharyya 2004: 5). Drawing inferences from (Fried, 1971), he argued further that **self help** *rests on a concept of human beings that when healthy they are willing and able to take care of themselves, to reciprocate, to be productive, more predisposed to give than receive, are active rather than passive, and creative rather than consuming*, (Bhattacharyya 2004: 22). *Felt needs in his view involve the development projects that respond to people's needs as they see them; they should be demand-based,* (Bhattacharyya 2004: 22). *The principle of* **participation** *means inclusion, not merely in the electoral process or endorsing decisions but in deciding the agenda for debate and decision; it means inclusion in the processes of defining the problems to be solved and how to solve them,* (Bhattacharyya 2004: 23). A similar view is expressed by Lee (2006) when he argued that "an understanding of and a commitment to empowerment and participation are at the core of community development," (Lee 2006: 7). In applying this theory, Allison (2009) has observed that "the theory of Community Development is the most practical framework for social workers seeking lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live," (Allison 2009).

Current study on community development fully recognizes the role of communities in addressing local challenges, ensuring efficiency in community projects and promoting meaningful local participation. (Tibabo and Nyaupane 2014; Winter 2006; Mannarini and Talò 2013). However, the key gap in research has been the need to recognize the different historical and contextual factors of communities, towns and villages in the promotion of community development.

In the case of Ghana, literature on communal labor and communal work in general is very limited, although the practice is widely recognized across different communities in Ghana. With the exception of (Lauren, 2010) who made quick reference to the practice when he addressed issues pertaining to colonial legacies in Africa, no comprehensive literature on communal labor exists in Ghana. On the entire African continent, references to communal labor can only be traced to Okia (2012) when he addressed the legitimization of coercion through communal labor in colonial Kenya. A quick review of literature reveals no comprehensive

account on communal labor in Ghana. This study is designed to address this academic gap by tracing the history of the practice in each phase of Ghana´s development.

Historical overview of the concept of communal labor in Ghana

The practice where community members come together to accomplish a particular task in the general interest of the community is an age-old phenomenon across many cultures around the world. In Ghana, communal work has been very instrumental to the country´s developmental process. The practice is traced to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independent period.

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the Gold-Coast, the various ethnic groups and tribes in various towns and villages were governed under the authority of traditional chiefs popularly called *Omanhene* or *Odikro.* (Amoatia 2010). In the 1870s for instance, the political geography of Ghana was divided into local Kingdoms through dependent and independent chiefdoms. (Gareth 2007). The local chiefs during this era played significant roles in the governance of the communities. Inclusive of the legislative, executive and judicial powers possessed by the traditional chiefs, they were equally responsible for the total development of the communities. As a result, they mobilized their entire communities to perform communal duties for the common good of all.

The day set aside for communal work usually began with a dawn broadcast by a traditional public announcer, "*gong gong beater*" who under the authority of the chief summons all community members to communal duty. (Yankah 2016). Upon hearing the sound of traditional instruments such as double bell, "*gong gong/dawuro*" or "*talking drums*", the entire community was obliged by custom and tradition to assemble at the chief´s palace, "*Ahenfie*" or the main village centre to carry out communal duties. The entire community freely and willingly cleared community fields, cleaned the environment, built bridges, weeded foot-paths, constructed public toilets, bore-holes and dealt with socio-cultural and economic issues that affected the general welfare of the community.

In the study of informal institutions and citizenship in rural Africa, MacLean (2010) recounts how in some Ghanaian villages the chief and local unit committee members organized themselves to aid government rural electrification project and provided labor for the construction of public school building and prepared for funerals in the villages. (MacLean 2010:211). Such gatherings were always climaxed by drumming and dancing, singing of traditional folk songs and people eating from the same bowl after a hard day´s work. The youth in particular, after communal duty will gather music instruments be it in the form of stones, sticks, cutlasses, drums et cetera, and make music to entertain themselves and the entire community. The Akans, for instance, formed their respective groups popularly called "*Asafo*" as a defensive force to repel all internal and external forces of the community. The Asafo group which was compulsory for all young men of the community was also used by the chiefs as important channel for community mobilization and development related activities. Some of the Asafo groups have survived the test of time and continue to play significant roles in traditional festivals among the Akans in Ghana. (Acquah *et al* 2014).

In the subsistence driven economy occupied by settler and peasant farmers (see Gareth 2010), the traditional chiefs in the pre-colonial era possessed enormous authority to summon all subjects to engage in communal work without much difficulty and hesitation. However, with the imposition of colonial rule in British West Africa and the introduction of the "indirect rule" system by the British colonial administration in the Gold-Coast, the legitimacy of the traditional chiefs was weakened. Olaoluwa (2006) in the study of chieftaincy in Ghana succinctly argues that *"in some African societies, chieftaincy- the pre-colonial institution of governance with judicial, legislative and executive powers did not survive colonial and post colonial rule"*. (Olaoluwa 2006:730).

In Ghana´s account, the Bond of 1844 in particular, marked the period in which official power was transferred from the traditional authorities especially the Fante and other local chiefs in the Gold-Coast to the British colonial administration. This treaty in particular legally obliged the local chiefs to transfer serious crimes committed by the local people to the British. (*Miller et al* 2009). Although, some traditional rulers were used to implement colonial policies and sustain British colonial dominance in the

era of indirect rule system, the chiefs had no longer absolute command to mobilize their subjects for communal duties. It is worthy of note that some of the traditional chiefs who became collaborators or intermediaries of the new colonial authority no longer served the interest of their local people. With their new role, the chiefs had to act in the interest of their new colonial masters. (Oquaye 2004).

According to Gareth (2010), colonial rule introduced a new semi-capitalist economy which was driven by settler plantation and peasant colonies. It is argued further that the introduction of this new economic model led to force recruitment of labor to work either for the state or for the newly established enterprises (Gareth 2010: 11-32). This account among other factors influenced the practice of communal labor under the new colonial authority and leadership. Unfortunately, this account of history remains unexplored in the academic discourse. The commitment by which the people of Gold Coast came together to contribute to the development of their communities and addressed emerging challenges was largely affected. New rules and regulations were established in the performance of communal work in the Gold-Coast. Broadly, it is observed that the change of authority changed the governance structure and this had some effects on traditional authority and the way communities were organized and governed. His Majesty Osagyefo Amoatia Ofori Panin (2010) observes that with the imposition of colonial rule, *"the political governance of the nation-state transformed overnight from a familiar customary based one to a strange distant controlled one*." (Amoatia 2010: 3).

In the course of time, the people of Gold-Coast including the traditional chiefs developed general discontent and resistance to the colonial system of administration and asked for self-rule. (Howard 1999). The discontent spread across the country and this later became a nationwide struggle for freedom and independence. (Okyere 2000). The struggle for self rule sometimes led to violent conflicts between the local people on the one hand and the British colonial administrators on the other hand. (Sampson 2016; Konadu 2016; Gocking 2016). During the struggle for freedom and independence, the traditional chiefs and elders of the various ethnic groups and tribes played instrumental roles in the process. The local chiefs supported their political leaders and urged them to continue with the political struggle for self rule. (Howard 1999). A number of several ethnic based groups, some very violent in nature were formed to kick against the British rule. (Oquaye 2004). The ethnic based groups were later transformed into ethnic based political parties which later became a formidable force in the independence struggle. Finally, on the 6th March 1957, Ghana became the first country in Anglophone West Africa to gain independence from the British (Okyere 2000). On the 1st of July 1960, Ghana finally became a republican state which gave the country the right to elect its own head of state (Oquaye 2004). The transfer of political authority from the British to the people of Ghana was well celebrated by Ghanaian nationals and other countries across the world.

The state of communal labor in post-independent Ghana

Ghana became a constitutional democracy at the time of independence but descended into authoritarianism in the 1960s (Boadi and Brobbey 2012). Ghana´s post-independence account is fully characterized by several coup attempts. In particular, the period of 1957 and 1981 were full of intense political competitions which were marked by several coup de tats interfering with civilian rule, (Ayensu and Darkwa 2006). Finally, in 1992 Ghana was ushered into the fourth republic with the establishment of the 1992 Republican Constitution[1] and has since maintained democratic stability for the past twenty-four years. So far, the country has gone through six (6) successful and relatively peaceful elections. Ghana's democratic rating has gone up among electoral observers across the world and has been touted as an established democratic example worthy of emulation in Africa. However, Ghana´s democratic stability has not come without numerous socio-economic challenges which have broadly been blamed on bad governance.

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[1] The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana

During the pre-colonial and colonial era, communal labor played an integral role in supporting the rural and colonial economies of Ghana. After Ghana gained independence on the 6th of March 1957, very little is said about the practice. Even in the era of sustainable development, not much has been discussed about the relevance of communal work in Ghana. Mobilizing people for communal work has become a challenging exercise. There is general apathy among Ghanaians in the performance of communal duties in both rural and urban communities. Attendance has been generally poor and unfortunately able-bodied young men and women stand aloof, leaving few elderly men to carry out communal duties in the various rural and urban communities. Also, the few community residents who attend communal labor are not well organized and coordinated. In most cases, participants do not know the specific duties they are required to perform during communal exercises. In the post-independence era, very little is known about the institutions that are responsible for mobilizing people for communal work. According to the Local Government Act 1993 (Act 462) and the Local Government Service Act, 2003, Act 656, the district assemblies are required to collaborate with the various associations, organizations and individuals at the local level in planning, coordinating and implementing development programmes at the community level. Further, it is observed that the new Local Governance Act, 2016, Act 936 makes similar assertion by calling on local districts to collaborate closely with community stakeholders to ensure the execution of local development projects. Unfortunately, these calls have not been given the necessary attention it deserves by both district authorities and community members due to growing community apathy. In fact, the legitimacy as well as the capacity of the district assemblies to mobilize people and coordinate communal labor activities in the communities remain unknown and unaddressed.

Additionally, national development policy framework has not adequately recognized the relevance of communal work to the development of Ghana and therefore the practice seems to be gradually dying off in the Ghanaian society. The National Sanitation Day[2] which is an initiative by the Government of Ghana to mobilize community members to clean communities from filth is faced with many challenges especially in the area of community participation. Another prevailing challenge is the lack of clarity in the performance of communal work. In some instances, community residents who attend communal labor are left to decide on their own the specific task they are assigned to perform. Further, there seem to be no ramification for community residents who fail to perform communal duties in Ghana. This study is of the view that lack of scientific approach to find out from community residents themselves on the factors that have accounted for the present state of communal labor remain a challenge and should be addressed.

In this brief account of history, communal labor which has been a long term sustainable development practice in Ghana has no comprehensive written account in academic discourse. The lack of comprehensive literature to explain the relevance of communal labor to national development has equally not contributed to the development of this field and therefore has denied Ghana from obtaining the needed benefits from the practice. The study is set to address these challenges by providing comprehensive literature on communal labor from pre-colonial to post independent period.

Conclusion

The practice of communal labor has been very instrumental to the country´s developmental process. Unfortunately, national development policy framework has not adequately recognized and captured the relevance of communal work to the development of Ghana and therefore the practice seems to gradually dying off in the Ghanaian society. In the era of sustainable development, there is no better way to sustain national development than the practice of communal labor. It is recommended that the Government of Ghana integrates this practice into the country´s national development policy framework to inspire its young population to contribute to national development.

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[2] http://www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/media-center/news/128-ghanaians-should-see-sanitation-day-as-national-duty-lgwu

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