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# Entangled governance practices and the illusion of producing compliant inmates in correctional centres for juvenile and young offenders in Ghana

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## Introduction

**Dominant domestic and international discourses have in the past standardised African prisons and correctional centres as characterized by poor conditions requiring criminal justice and human rights reforms.<sup>1</sup> While it is important to draw attention to such conditions, these perspectives are usually over-rehearsed and the continual calls for reform and change have yielded only modest improvement over the years.<sup>2</sup> When penal institutions in the South are approached from without as though they are uniform entities conceptualized by default as monolithic and resistant to change, such reforms make little difference.<sup>3</sup>**

I depart from such dominant discourses to discuss everyday perspectives on detention as well as the social aspects of correctional centres. These perspectives which have received less attention from researchers given that they are invisible and difficult to research, challenge commonsensical notions of prison life and demythologize notions of imprisonment in Africa.

Discussions are on the basis of two years of ethnographic research in Ghana from 2009 to 2011 in two confinement sites for children in conflict with the law.<sup>4</sup>

By employing various methods such as collection of life-story narratives, participant observation,

unstructured, open and conversational interviews as well as focus group discussions, I unearth common forms of everyday governance of correctional institutions.

The main contention of this paper is that whereas institutional procedures, rituals and routines seek to render inmates compliant and hence governable<sup>5</sup>, in actual fact youngsters are not easily trimmed or programmed by institutional procedures. Nonetheless, in order that correctional institutions keep up the appearance of producing disciplined and compliant inmates, certain negotiations and informal arrangements are embarked upon by staff and youngsters. Officers sometimes enlist the support of inmates to undertake supervision roles, resulting in a sort of shared governance, where the governors enlist the cooperation of the governed. At other times inmates' internal social life which is partly shared by staff, is relied upon for the maintenance of order and discipline.

I open discussions in this paper with the narrative of Kwesi, a sixteen year old boy who like the majority of youngsters in conflict with the law, described growing up with family as the beginning of a difficult life that culminated in committal to a correctional institution.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on entry procedures, I draw on an institutional ceremony that is aimed at initiating Kwesi and other youngsters into sameness thereby enforcing compliance with an inmate role. Enforcing this inmate

1. Sarkin, J. (2008). *Human rights in African Prisons* Capetown, South Africa: HCRC press.
2. Ayete-Nyampong, L. (2013). *Entangled realities and underlife of a total institution*. PhD thesis, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, Wageningen.
3. Jefferson, A. (2007). Prison Officer Training and Practice in Nigeria: Contention, Contradiction and re-imagining Reform Strategies. *Punishment and Society*, 9(3), 253-269.
4. Ayete-Nyampong, L. (2011). Situating CRC Implementation Processes in the Local Context of Correctional Institutions for Children in Conflict with the Law in Ghana. In R. Ame, A. DeBrenna & N. Apt (Eds.), *Children's Rights in Ghana: Reality or Rhetoric?* Lanham MD: Lexington Books; Ayete-Nyampong, L. (2013). *Entangled realities and underlife of a total institution*. PhD thesis, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, Wageningen. I researched two confinement sites, the Junior Correctional Centre (JCC) and the Senior Correctional Centre (SCC). These two institutions share commonalities, yet are different in terms of architectural layout besides being manned by different oversight authorities. The quotes shared in this article are taken from this thesis.
5. Goffman, E. (1968). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates*. Hammondsworth: Penguin.
6. The majority of these youngsters have from childhood until arrest and subsequent detentions, suffered various forms of neglect, rejection and deprivations. Mark Halsey (Halsey, M. (2007). On confinement: Resident and inmate perspectives of secure care and imprisonment. *Probation Journal* 54:338-67. } writes about how prison is often not a new deprivation but simply an exacerbation of already existing deprivations for inmates. While some youngsters in correctional centres in Ghana admit to better material conditions relative to living conditions that characterize their pre-custodial lives (Ayete-Nyampong 2011, see footnote 4), they detest the deprivation of liberty.

role however presents a challenge to the governors who sometimes are obliged to rely on youngsters' own means of social control, for example, through the practice of dorm rituals. I also briefly document certain aspects of social relations characterized by hierarchy, intimacy and interdependence. I conclude with some conceptual considerations as well as recommendations for policy.

### Youngsters' entry into correctional centers<sup>7</sup>

At the time Kwesi was born, his parents had already divorced. He stayed with his father, though for a relatively short period.

*My father never liked me and anytime I came late from playing football, I was beaten severely. He never took care of me. He beat me often and I never wanted to set eyes on him. Anytime I see his face my heart beats...*

As a result of the beatings and rejection, Kwesi moved on to stay with his grandma. According to Kwesi, his stay with his grandma was equally unpleasant. He was beaten often and not cared for. However, he did manage to survive

*I started collecting pieces of metal scraps and from the purchases I earned a minimum of 2.50 Ghc (1.0 USD at the current exchange rate).<sup>8</sup> Children like me would go and collect these scraps and sell. One day, I went as usual to find some scraps..., I was hungry and so I decided to make some money...*

The owner of the house caused Kwesi's arrest and this landed him in the police station and finally in the correctional institution for young male offenders, the Senior Correctional Centre.

Whereas these two centres are bounded only by low walls so as to emphasize the correctional policy of these institutions, in everyday talk they sound more like prisons.

The Senior Correctional Centre (SCC) — which mostly engages the attention of this paper — and the Junior Correctional Centre (JCC) for female offenders as well as other correctional centres for juvenile offenders were established in the mid twentieth century. This is the same period within which social work in Ghana acquired official status under the British colonial government. There was no formal provision<sup>9</sup> for juvenile delinquents prior to this period and juvenile delinquency had been addressed informally through non-custodial processes such as restitution, compensation, fines, mediation, apologies and, occasionally, punishment.<sup>10</sup>

In accordance with the Juvenile Justice Act 653 of 2003, a juvenile offender is a child under age 18 who is in conflict with the law and has been convicted of an offence whereas a young offender is one who is 18 years or above (but less than 21 years) who has been convicted of an offence. Juvenile and young offenders are held in junior and senior correctional institutions respectively. The latter additionally holds juvenile offenders who are below 15 years but have committed serious offenses.<sup>11</sup>

### Correctional institutions or prisons?

The SCC and the JCC assumed their present names since the passage of the Juvenile Justice Act in 2003. Whereas these two centres are bounded only by low walls so as to emphasize the correctional policy of these institutions, in everyday talk they sound more like prisons. For example, staff and youngsters still make reference to the former names of the institutions. There are more frequent references to the former name 'Borstal' than the Senior Correctional Centre though SCC does tend to feature in official conversations and documents. At a meeting with senior staff they complained that the institution was run by prison

7. Official records at the boys' institution were consulted in March 2010 based on available data covering 146 boys from January 2006 to March 2009. Youngsters were aged between 12 and 21 years. Offences for which youngsters are committed to correctional centers include robbery, defilement, assault, unlawful entry, threat of death etc. An average of eight girls were in committal during the period of field work; offences committed run the gamut from stealing, abetting, through loitering to prostitution. The majority of girls (50%) were committed on charges of stealing.

8. <http://ghs.fxexchangerate.com/> Accessed 13th February 2014.

9. Prisons had been in existence prior to this period and the British colonial administration had oversight of Ghana's prisons until the period after World War II.

10. DSW. (2005). A report on the State of Juvenile Justice Administration in Ghana. Accra, Ghana: Department of Social Welfare and UNICEF.

11. Serious offences according to the section 42 (8) of the Juvenile Justice Act include murder, rape, defilement, indecent assault involving unlawful harm, robbery with aggravated circumstances, drug offences and offences related to firearms.

officers who virtually had no training in handling children and youngsters, implying that the centre was still run as a prison. Similarly, an assistant officer in charge of one of the centres lamented,

*This institution was governed by rules formulated by the Ghana Prisons Service and yet these inmates are children. Almost all of us are transferred from adult prisons and so we do not have any particular training to equip us to work with them.*

In focus group discussions with youngsters, they were surprised that the institution was not officially a prison but a correctional establishment. Eight of ten youngsters, prior to committal, had heard that the Borstal, was a prison for bad boys. Whereas correctional centres in Ghana undertake various educational and religious activities in a bid to promote appropriate behavioural changes, the very people called to enforce correction as well as those to be corrected still conceive these institutions as prisons, thereby confining the term 'correction' to a euphemistic usage.<sup>12</sup>

### **Homogenising inmates into compliance**

Following arrest and trial, Kwesi was admitted to the SCC. I describe below extracts of an institutional church service, a sort of initiation ceremony, which constitutes an institutional procedure in the correctional institution in keeping with Goffman.<sup>13</sup> This initiation ceremony welcomes youngsters by inviting them to narrate their diversified experiences and yet at the same time, as I will show below, they are made to conform to the homogenizing demands of the correctional institution. Initiation ceremonies are rites of passage, which according to Goffman<sup>14</sup>, are elaborated forms of admission procedures which he calls 'the welcome' and constitute socializing moments that seek to indicate to the inmate that he is merely an inmate. By obtaining initial cooperativeness from the inmate right from the onset, that which Goffman<sup>15</sup> describes as 'obedience tests', inmates learn not to challenge orders.

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During Kwesi's initiation, he and other new youngsters were accorded a welcome while onlookers seemingly ignore their distinct stories despite their eagerness to narrate these stories. Their inmate role was enforced and their personal, individualising stories were quietly tucked away, possibly never to be told.

Kwesi was introduced during a routine church service which saw the attendance of both staff and youngsters. Following the sermon and the offertory which was accompanied by some dancing, the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) invited Kwesi and other newly admitted inmates to line up in front of the gathering. The OIC asked them to introduce themselves and to state what crimes had brought them to the institution. These new arrivals told their stories amidst various interjections, giggles and mumblings from staff and youngsters who often shouted out: 'stop telling tales and go straight to the point'; 'the story is too long, not necessary, cut it short'. In the course of the narrations, my attention was caught by Kwesi, who was adept at narrating his experience and yet seemed to lack the courage to carry through with his story. He broke down in the process and cried. He said:

*I could not believe that collecting a metal scrap that earned me two Ghana cedis (less than 1.0 USD at the current exchange rate)<sup>16</sup> would contribute to my present demise...*

Kwesi was the only one who shed tears during the service as he tried to relate his story which he never got to tell in full. The interjections of the audience are a seeming indication that youngsters like Kwesi, are intentionally and immediately stripped of their personal and previous attachments in order to become compliant with an inmate role.

### **Institutional routines and shared practices of governance**

In conformity with an inmate role, Kwesi and other youngsters, upon committal are made to put away personal belongings and clothed in identical uniforms

12. According to critics prisons have rarely lived up to their rehabilitative or correctional claims. See, for example, Drake, D. (2012) *Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

13. Goffman, E. (1968). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates*. Hammondsworth: Penguin.

14. Ibid p.27.

15. Ibid p.26.

16. <http://ghs.fxexchangerate.com/> Accessed 13th February 2014.

and shoes and sometimes are accorded the same name.<sup>17</sup> Daily, one observes like-situated young people and children engaging in activities that are repetitive and regimental. A typical day for an inmate is a twelve hour day, well packed with tasks such as fetching water, breakfast, and morning assembly, through classrooms lessons, vocational and technical workshops as well as religious discussions and counselling sessions. These activities continue till six p.m. when youngsters take their supper and then prepare to be locked up until the following morning.

Apart from initiation ceremonies and repetitive daily chores, youngsters also undergo institutional routines such as marching, and counting. Counting is a regular exercise which is undertaken when entering dormitories, classrooms, workshops, the dining hall and church services. In fact counting is done virtually everywhere. Counting is usually paired up with marching. Often marching follows once numbers are checked. Officers manage to do such counting accurately though sometimes there is reliance on leaders of dorms, namely captains and their assistants to undertake this task. On one occasion when youngsters were almost done with their counting and about to leave, one of the warders shouted to the last youngster to say: 'Last fifteen', meaning he is the last person and also the fifteenth. This reduces the burden of the officer having to always remember the total number.

The reliance on inmates to count or to supervise other youngsters is crucial for the maintenance of order and discipline. Ewoame<sup>18</sup> has described in neat detail inmate hierarchy in adult prisons in Ghana and the involvement of such inmates in governance. Inmate participation in governance of detention institutions has also been observed in prisons in India<sup>19</sup> and Latin America.<sup>20</sup> (See also Morelle, this issue, on the distribution of governance tasks in Cameroon, and Jefferson, Feika and Jalloh on the 'fusion of function' in Sierra Leone).

Involving youngsters in the governance of centres however has its own ramification. The officer quoted above raised concerns about trust and cynicism as he further advanced his conversation:

The reliance on  
inmates to count or  
to supervise other  
youngsters is crucial  
for the maintenance  
of order and  
discipline.

*The leaders here can hardly be trusted. There was this assistant captain who upon my recommendation was to be promoted to dormitory six and yet just recently he misbehaved...he influenced other boys to protest and I demoted him as a result.*

Officers generally complain that working with youngsters was difficult compared with working with adult prisoners. According to officers in the yard, youngsters do not yield to discipline; they do not take orders promptly. One officer shared his frustration:

*I find working with these children difficult...Here, young offenders take life easy and sometimes at 7am some are still not out of their dormitories.*

At the SCC, an officer had to virtually beg youngsters for about ten minutes to attend lessons, against lots of excuses by the boys that they were unwell and tired.

The officer lamented:

*They do not seem interested in what we offer them, only about three out of ten do. With all the efforts we put in, the boys show little interest and they have to be*

*forced and sometimes coaxed in order to show some seriousness; this makes our work difficult.*

Officers are frustrated when they are unable to enforce compliance and admit to a limit of official power. This results in reliance on cooperation from inmates to the extent that youngsters are sometimes cajoled or begged to participate in institutional activities. While coaxing and begging is not typical of expected officer conduct, these behaviours come handy in difficult situations, reflecting the distribution of authority in correctional establishments. The power to govern does not rest permanently with detaining authorities, nor does it emanate from the top.<sup>21</sup> Similarly youngsters who are purportedly rendered

17. I observed that many youngsters were referred to by some staff as 'Kweku'.

18. Ewoame, H. H. (2011). *Wedding Behind Bars: The Emic Perspectives of Male Prisoners on Same-Sex Sexual Practices in Ghana*. Degree of Master, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.

19. andyopadhyay, M. (2007). Reform and Everyday Practice: Some Issues of Prison Governance. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41(3), 387-416.

20. Darke, S. (2012). *Self Governance in Brazilian Prisons* Paper presented at an International Symposium on Prison Ethnography: Resisting the Eclipse, Milton Keynes.

21. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage.

governable by means of institutional routines, are not pinned to passive inmate roles.

In the section that follows, I discuss certain ways by which youngsters manoeuvre to meet every day needs in detention and at the same time support the maintenance of order and discipline in their dorms.

### Captains and brannies

Youngsters at the male correctional centre (SCC) are housed in six dormitories (dorms), numbered one to six. Youngsters progress from dorm one through to dorm six based on length of stay and good behavior. Each dorm holds between fifteen and thirty occupants and is manned by captains and assistants who are appointed by staff to supervise the enforcement of rules and safeguard the maintenance of order in the dorms.

Kwesi and other new arrivals were placed upon admission under mandatory observation for between six months and one year and were housed in the first dormitory. New arrivals to the first dorm are referred to as 'brannies'.<sup>22</sup> Whereas a typical day for a young offender from the third to the sixth dorm is a twelve hour well-packed day, beginning at six am, not so for Kwesi and other brannies. Brannies are confined within dormitory walls, and do not participate in technical and vocational training, a key activity that runs through the day. Besides being confined to their dorms, brannies encounter various challenges, such as not receiving visitors regularly and therefore not having the extra food and money that comes with the regular receipt of visitors. Brannies such as Kwesi are also taken through a series of initiation rituals which they term ammamre. Kweku, one of Kwesi's dorm mates relates his experience:

*My stay at dorm one was difficult and I nearly absconded. You do not go out, you are maltreated by other inmates-told to salute the TV, they pomp your cheek<sup>23</sup> ...*

Though staff are not always aware of the minute details entailed in maintaining such a control over the dorm, they nevertheless benefit from it so far as captains manage to enforce order.

These rituals are numerous and vary in severity. According to youngsters, rituals mark the initiation of brannies into dorm life. They are also employed as punishment for defiant inmates who break insider rules, and failure of a brannie to submit to a ritual attracts sanctions in the form of severer rituals. Some youngsters have admitted that these rituals and peer-foisted sanctions are severer than sanctions meted to them at the formal institutional level. Rituals thus represent youngsters' own forms of social control, punishment and maintenance of hierarchy, but also incite a sense of belonging where they carve out a social space for themselves. Though staff are not always aware of the minute details entailed in maintaining such a control over the dorm, they nevertheless benefit from it so far as captains manage to enforce order.

Sometimes youngsters devise their own means of solving disputes. John explained how spiritual practices are employed to solve disputes and settle scores among themselves:

*... we use the Bible to determine wrongdoers and thieves in their dormitory Culprits, who are identified using the Bible<sup>24</sup>, face harsh consequences and are not let to go free.*

Compromises between staff and youngsters are also reached at the JCC. For example youngsters might be obliged to keep watch over the premises of a staff member while the officer undertakes some duty outside the premises. An officer at the female centre lamented about how she would miss the services of a female captain upon her discharge from the institution:

*I am really going to miss Yaa, the girl's captain. She was almost like a daughter to me. She could freely enter my kitchen and never touched anything and would not even ask of anything. I do not worry about the possibility of a theft when I go to town as she watches over the house. There is no replacement for her!*

22. The term stems from brand new. Sometimes new arrivals in other dorms bear the same title but the term is predominantly used in association with the first dorm.

23. This entails literally saluting the television with a greeting; the action is repetitive and can last for two to three minutes. Pumping involves a youngster making a fist and pressing back and forth into the cheek of a brannie, a painful experience which sometimes results in blood oozing from the gums.

24. Youngsters recite some Bible verses after which the Bible purportedly spins, at the end of the spin, it points at the culprit.

While youngsters seek to maintain the support of officers or captains, officers also find themselves in situations where they become dependent on inmates. Thus, institutional authority manifests variedly and does not descend singularly from officer to inmate but is dotted by intimacy, domesticity as well as interdependence.

### Conclusion

Foregoing discussions challenge commonsensical notions of prison life and demythologize notions of imprisonment in Africa. Life in prisons and correctional centres is not all about material deprivation and oppressive officers. On the contrary everyday detention life features social interactions that are mundane and intimate as well as governance practices which do not always exhibit a neat marked boundary between officer and inmate, but are entangled. Entanglement in this regard suggests a loose and episodic mesh of social relations that are mutually supportive and interdependent. Such a mesh of interactions are not akin to a trap or a tangle from which one cannot free oneself; they are characterized by negotiations and connote some degree of symmetry but also hierarchical

differences. Arce and Long<sup>25</sup> make similar reference to complex entanglements of social relationships. They write of the notion of interface as entailing social relations that are always on the move and characterised by negotiations.

The intricacies of entangled and informal interfaces that characterize confinement life transcend a predictable step by step or linear pathway requiring that delinquent or criminal youngsters are admitted to correctional institutions, worked upon and delivered as reformed and corrected into society. Whereas such informality and entanglements are usually exhibited off stage and rarely meet the official and public eye, they nevertheless contribute vitally to keeping up an image. Like a factory, correctional centres must keep the illusion alive that they manufacture, corrected inmates, thereby guaranteeing state safety and security. The everyday dynamics between pretensions and actualities as well between the banal and the institutional yield complex subtleties worth the attention of prison studies in other contexts. Such practical detention intricacies call for analytic reflection by criminal justice and related professionals as well as policy makers who premise correction, reintegration and reformation policies on a linear path.

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25. Arce, A., & Long, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Forging a New Anthropology of Development: Common ground and Contentious Issues* Paris: Karthala.