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**Everyday Prison Governance
in Africa**

Governance through power sharing in Ghanaian prisons:

a symbiotic relationship between officers and inmates

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There are many insightful studies of the sociology of prison life. They have focused on a variety of issues such as staff-inmate relations, friendships among prisoners, prisoner sub-cultures, and experiences of imprisonment. Despite this burgeoning corpus of work on prisons elsewhere, there is a dearth of scientific knowledge about prisons and prison guards in Africa, where prisons are often a colonial legacy. These sites remain understudied and poorly understood.

Prisons in Ghana are heavily overcrowded, and according to both officers and inmates, overcrowding is the main source of dangerousness and risk. During the course of the fieldwork on which this article is based, Ghana's prisons (consisting of 43 penal establishments: 1 juvenile correctional centre; 7 female and 35 male prisons) were found to be operating at 72.1 per cent above full capacity. Some prisons were operating far above their certified normal accommodation (CNA). For example, Nsawam male and Kumasi central prisons were more than 300 per cent and 250 per cent respectively above CNA. The reported overcrowding rate has declined, however, to 37.2 per cent following the inauguration of the 2,000-capacity Ankafu maximum-security prisons on 4 March 2012. Staffing levels have not kept pace with prisoner numbers. Although the official staff-inmate ratio is 1:3, the actual ratio is estimated to be 1:9 if the four-shift system operated by the Ghana Prison Service (hereafter, GPS) is taken into consideration. Overcrowding has led to a breakdown in the inmate classification system, rendering it difficult for officers to distinguish between high-risk and low-risk prisoners. Low staffing levels have not only engendered job stress among officers but have also reduced surveillance capacity and created power vacuums. Given that prison officers are key to maintaining order and thus to securing a stable and survivable prison regime, the question arises as to how governance, law and order is maintained under such conditions in Ghanaian prisons.^{1,2}

This article examines everyday governance in 23 adult male (1 medium security; 6 central; 8 local and 8

open-camp) prisons in Ghana. These establishments are typical of British colonial prisons, in that high walls and barbed wire characterize them — unless they are open camp prisons, which are without walls and mostly feature extensive agriculture in rural farming communities. The article seeks to understand prison governance by focusing on everyday social functioning. It elucidates the characteristics of the prison that give rise to inmate leadership, the role of prisoner leadership in maintaining law and order, the characteristics of prisoner leaders, and how mutual co-existence is fostered among prisoners and officers due to their mutual interests.

The article is based on data collected via ethnography, which generated understandings of social structure and local cultures. The fieldwork mainly involved participant observation of prisoners and officers, informal discussions with prisoners, and formal interviews with officers. The study spanned six months of research in selected prisons located in all ten administrative regions between October 2011 and March 2012. It is part of my doctoral study of Ghanaian prison officers, their work, stress and wellbeing.

The prisoner leadership structure, responsibilities and characteristics

To redress the power vacuum created by low staffing levels, and for prison officers to cope with the stress created by fear, pressure of work, frustration and physical exhaustion, the officers resort to prisoners' leadership. This is an equivalent of the abolished building tenders (BT) system in the USA, where trustees were given responsibilities such as keeping records and turning keys in order to ensure the running of the prisons.³ In some cases BTs were granted authority to 'break up inmate fights, give orders to other inmates [and] perform headcounts'. The prisoner leadership in Ghana is entrusted with similar and additional functions. It is a product of the colonial system where 'good conduct' prisoners were given positions of trust to assist in prison administration. All male prisons have

1. Liebling, A. (2000) 'Prison Officers, Policing and the Use of Discretion'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 4, 333–357.

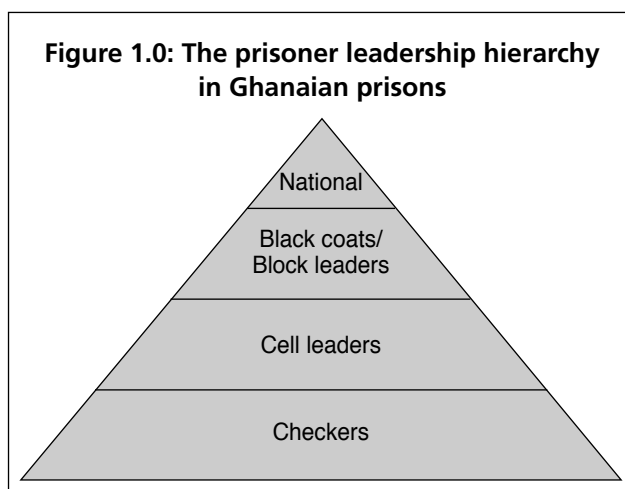
2. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., and Hay, W. (1996) *Prisons and the problem of order*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

3. Crouch, B. and Marquart, J. (1989) *An Appeal to Justice: Litigated Reform of Texas Prisons*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

an elaborate prisoner leadership system, a hierarchy with roles and responsibilities that augment the work of mainstream prison officers (See figure 1.0 below).

The commitment to involve prisoners in the prison regime has legal backing from the Standing Orders (1960) of the GPS, which permit privileged prisoners to supervise the work of other prisoners but not to enforce discipline. The regulation requires officers not to treat such leaders as additional prison officers.⁴ However, it appears that the Standing Order has emboldened prison administrators, and prison officers in general, to augment staff roles in maintaining law, order and discipline beyond what is permitted by law. The prisoner hierarchy has become intrinsic to the culture of male prisons.

At the bottom of the prisoner hierarchy is the 'checker'. The checker's main responsibility is to assist prison officers with the head-count in the various cells or dormitories, which are often dark and poorly-ventilated and accommodate between ten-sixty prisoners depending on their size. Above the checker in every cell or dormitory is the 'cell leader'. Some cell leaders are also checkers but that is not a prerequisite for being elected cell leader. The cell leader is the custodian of the cell or dormitory and ensures that all the cell rules are obeyed. A typical rule is that in prisons where there are toilets in the dormitories, the toilets are only to be used during nightly lock-ups.



When new prisoners are assigned to their cells, the cell leaders explain the inmate codes of behaviour to them and assign sleeping quarters. They have responsibility for monitoring all activities in the cell. They ensure that the cells are tidy, especially when inspections are due to take place. Cell leaders ensure that disputes and conflicts are settled. If a cell leader fails to settle a dispute, then the higher-ranking inmate leaders, called the 'black-coats' or 'block leaders', are

invited to intervene. This group of leaders is easily distinguishable from all the other prisoners, as they wear uniform blue shorts and shirts with their position: 'Black-coats' [or 'Star Class' or 'Special Class' — their official designated titles] emblazoned on their breast pockets. The Standing Orders recognize this category of privileged prisoners and set out criteria for their selection, privileges, duties and responsibilities. Black-coats have general responsibilities for the welfare of their blocks or communities and for ensuring that instructions from prison officers are implemented or obeyed. For instance, when the bell rings for headcounts, black-coats ensure that prisoners stop whatever activity they are engaged on and hurry into their cells to be counted. Prisoners deemed recalcitrant and uncooperative are likely to face the wrath of the black-coats and risk being pushed, heckled and caned. This means that potential assaults on prison officers in such circumstances are minimized. This is noteworthy since in the US for example, a significant proportion of prisoner-on-staff assaults were found to occur during such routines.⁵ Black-coats are given responsibility for the supervision of communal activities such as cleaning or transporting firewood from various locations to the prison kitchen. They are further allowed to accompany outside working parties once or twice a week.

During visits, black-coats are usually tasked with the onerous task of locating prisoners who have visitors in these overcrowded prisons. Black-coats walk or run around the prison, shouting the names of prisoners required for family or legal visits. They are the first point of call for officers when information is to be disseminated to all prisoners. The black-coats then transmit the information at meetings with all the cell leaders, who in turn educate their peers or cellmates on new policies for (or information about) filing complaints, health, food, visits, and so on. Black-coats also distribute food to other prisoners on the blocks and landings. The architecture of the prison may determine the titles of block leaders. For instance, at Sekondi central prison, which resembles a British prison in having landings and wings, leaders bear the titles of 'landing' or 'wing' commanders to depict their area of jurisdiction.

At the apex of the prisoner hierarchy is the 'national leader' for the whole of Ghana. Possessing substantial influence and presence, he is based at Nsawam prison. He is usually assigned duties beyond the blocks and ensures that the prison is peaceful by liaising with officers and supervising other leaders. He is well respected by prisoners for his role as arbiter and custodian of the inmates' unwritten code of behaviour. With the exception of the national leader, inmate

4. Ghana Prisons Service (1960) *Prisons Standing Orders*. Accra.

5. Light, S. (1991) Assaults on Prison Officers: Interactional themes. *Justice Quarterly*. 8, 243–261.

leaders are visible in all the male prison establishments and assist with the work of prison officers. Inmate leaders are important for the maintenance of security, good order and discipline within the prisons, and the officers more often than not collaborate with them for this purpose. These prisoner leaders embody considerable power in the eyes of other prisoners as they can influence their lives to a great extent. For example, an ex-prisoner recounts the role of a cell leader when he became ill during the nightly lock-up:

As soon as our cell doors were opened at around 5.30 a.m., Yaw, the cell leader, went out to report my condition to the prison authorities. Soon, a medical assistant came to see me in the cell.⁶

According to the officers, prisoners' leaders are selected and appointed after close observation, to ensure that candidates are of good character and behaviour and that they are capable of controlling their fellow-prisoners:

Before we appoint you as a leader, we look at your sentence to see if you have served for a number of years, if you have exhibited good conduct to the prison authorities and your fellow inmates, and if you have shown remorse for your crime. Let's say you have changed during your incarceration. When you exhibit these things, we then appoint you as a leader. (Male Superintendent)

These criteria are a summary of the requirements for appointing prisoners into 'star' and 'special' classes, as enshrined in sections 459 and 460 of the GPS Standing Orders (1960). The major difference between the two classes is that, while the 'special' class prisoner should have served at least a year of his sentence, the 'star' class prisoner should have served a minimum of 4 years without a record of prison infraction. In reality, however, prisoner leaders assist officers by

recommending other prisoners who they feel are capable of assisting them: favouritism and cronyism then come to the fore to help maintain privileges among a select few.

There are also the 'office boys' and 'kitchen boys' who are appointed to assist officers in the prison administration units and kitchens. Officers report that kitchen boys are made to undergo a medical examination before appointment. Office boys are engaged in cleaning the administrative areas and are often called upon to retrieve other prisoners or summon prison officers who might be required for other administrative business. They shuttle files and folders between offices. Leaders are rewarded with

increased food rations, extra soap, additional bedding, and they also have better sleeping quarters and beds in the overcrowded dormitories, where most prisoners sleep on the floor. Other privileges include unrestricted movement within the prison confines and access to the outside world with working parties. Thus, the competition for the limited rewards and privileges associated with being appointed a prisoner leader as part of the 'institutional game' necessitates good behaviour and hence compliance by other prisoners with the institution's rules and regulations.⁷

The leadership system on display in Ghana, contrasts with that in South America (e.g. Brazil) where gang affiliation is a defining feature of prisoner leadership. Exploitation of prisoners through serious violence and taxation is common, with such activities extending beyond the prison, with leaders openly antagonistic to prison authorities.⁸

In an adult male prison in England, Crewe⁹ observed that some trustees (e.g. wing cleaners) engage in illicit trades (e.g. tobacco and drugs) by exploiting the opportunities and autonomy linked to their positions. Some prisoner leaders in Ghana do the same, although informants in the study were not forthcoming with such information or denied it altogether. But one afternoon during the research period, a stash of

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6. Tsikata, T. (2013, June 22) 'Five years on — His mercies never fail'. *Daily Graphic*. Accra. Retrieved from <http://opinion.myjoyonline.com/pages/feature/201306/108316.php>

7. Stojkovic, S. (1986) Social bases of power and control mechanisms among correctional administrators in a prison organization. *Journal of Criminal Justice*. 14, 157–166.

8. King, R. and Valensia, B. (Forthcoming). Power, control and symbiosis in Brazilian prisons. *Mid-Atlantic Quarterly*.

9. Crewe, B. (2009) *The prisoner society: Power, adaptation, and social life in an English prison*. Oxford: OUP.

marijuana was found on a black-coat during a contraband search. Officers called in the police and handed him over. Other dimensions of exploitation are more apparent. Black-coats particularly employ excessive force in certain situations by, for instance, striking other prisoners with their batons in order to achieve compliance with their instructions or by exploiting vulnerable prisoners and humiliating new arrivals. In one central prison, I observed a black-coat with a baton in his hand shepherd a prisoner whose right hand was tied with a plastic seal to his right foot all the way to the segregation block (Fieldnotes, 16th May 2011). I was surprised by this gross abuse of power. This changed my outlook on prisoner leadership as I witnessed the incorporation of violence and abuse of power into their *modus operandi*. I surmised that despite their clean prison infraction records, their positions facilitate the perpetration of other illegalities that make it possible to outwit short-staffed prison officers. Closed higher-security prisons (i.e. medium security and central) are most at risk of such abuses. Other forms of exploitation reportedly involve sexual activities in similar closed local prisons but not in open-camp prisons.

It appears that the security category of the prison, the characteristics of the prisoners in custody, and the criminal history of the inmate leadership are important determinants of leadership style in Ghana. The high-security prisons house all categories of prisoners (low, medium and high risk, as well as remands and convicts) while open-camp prisons house only low-risk convicted prisoners who have served at least a fifth of their sentence in closed prisons. High-risk prisoners like armed robbers, murderers and sexual offenders are barred from serving in open-camp conditions as a policy of the GPS. My fieldwork suggests that high-risk prisoners, mostly with a violent criminal background, emerge as prisoner leaders in the high-security estate and typically adopt an authoritarian leadership style as a result of the difficulties they encounter in dealing with prisoners like themselves. By contrast, low-risk prisoners emerge as leaders in open-camp prisons and often adopt quasi-democratic styles of leadership. One distinguishing feature is that, while black-coats in closed prisons often wear their uniforms and hold their canes or batons as symbols of office, their open-camp counterparts only

wear uniforms but do not carry batons. Prisoner leaders are seen to resemble the prisoner population but with slight differences. Leaders in high-security prisons are found to be mostly violent and repeat offenders, more experienced, and with more years left to serve compared with the general prison population. A typical black-coat is Abbey, in the Nsawam medium-security prison. He is serving a long sentence of 120 years for a series of armed robberies. At the time of the study, he had served eight years of this sentence, and obviously had charisma and a reputation that made him capable of controlling other prisoners.

Leaders are also at risk and consider themselves vulnerable to transfer. This is because they are, after all, still prisoners subject to prison rules. Since they are not guaranteed leadership positions and will forfeit the privileges associated with their rank in the new prison, resistance to transfer can be high. Indeed, one black-coat climbed a telecommunications mast at Kumasi Central Prison to avoid being transferred.¹⁰

It is important to note that the inmate leaders occasionally prove better than prison officers at handling inmates' welfare problems.

Impact of prisoner leadership on mainstream inmates

The prisoner leadership's involvement in the prison regime also benefits other prisoners who are able to procure goods from outside the prison. One notable

observation was the daily purchase of cooked food. Owing to the poor quality and limited quantity of prison food, prisoners either cook their own food with supplies from visitors or give money to prisoner leaders with access to the outside world, who can then purchase those items on their behalf.

It is important to note that the inmate leaders occasionally prove better than prison officers at handling inmates' welfare problems. Although they themselves may not be in a position to solve the problem, they offer sound advice and direct prisoners to appropriate quarters while recommending an approach that guarantees success. They also provide counselling and emotional support to inmates in distress. In that, too, they can be more successful than prison staff, as this fieldnote excerpt shows:

A senior prison officer enters the main courtyard of the prison and returns with two prisoners into his office. One was distraught

10. Daily Guide (2011) Inmate climbs internet mast to protest against transfer. Available at: <http://www.ghanatoghana.com/inmate-climbs-internet-mast-protest-transfer/>

and angry, bare-chested with badly crafted tattoos of Jesus Christ and other inscriptions on his back and arms. The tattoos were obviously designed with poor tools inside prison. He has been wrongly accused of smuggling a cell phone into the cell and got himself in a scuffle in defence of his innocence. Investigation of the mobile phone incident was still ongoing and the senior officer agrees that he is not even a suspect. Crying, the prisoner told the officer that he was fed up with life in his cell and the prison and thought he would be better off in another prison. Being sympathetic and unable to convince the prisoner to change his mind, the officer agrees to lobby for his name to be included in the next transfer list. A black-coat listening into the conversation then intervenes. He told the prisoner that; 'You know your mum is old and fragile. I know her very well. In spite of that, the little that she acquires or has, she comes to this prison and shares it with you. If you pursue this transfer and you are transferred to a prison in the Northern Region, do you expect this old woman to endure all of these harsh road conditions to bring you foodstuff? I will personally take care of this situation and you will be fine'. Trust me. [Translated from the Twi language] The prisoner sobs further and louder and after some reflection, repudiates his previous request to be put on transfer. [Fieldnotes, 26th December, 2011]

In other areas, the leaders also serve as the prisoners' mouthpiece. When confronted with issues such as water shortages, inedible prison food, a recalcitrant prisoner who keeps defying the inmate codes, after consultation with other prisoners they formally petition the prison administration either in writing or orally. This approach carries weight and the prison administration takes these matters seriously. In spite of the benefits that accrue to prisoners, some behaviours that prisoners indulge in (e.g. smoking marijuana or cigarettes) to alleviate the pains of imprisonment are reported (contrary to the 'do not snitch' inmate code) to the prison authorities by leaders

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who have become more or less the eyes and ears of the prison authorities. Sometimes, they take the law into their own hands and punish prisoners. Thus, being a prison leader has its own dilemmas and tensions, involving defending the inmate code and ensuring that it is obeyed, as well as defying it by reporting other prisoners to the authorities.

Officer views and perspectives on prisoner leadership

Officers in Ghana recognize that there are inherent benefits in involving prisoners in the day-to-day governance of prisons. It facilitates communication, secures better understanding of prisoners' welfare issues, and assists in the implementation of new policy directions and strategies from administration or headquarters. As an Assistant Superintendent put it:

When we have directives from headquarters or take decisions at staff meetings that need to be communicated to the prisoners, we only have a meeting with the prisoner leadership especially the black-coats. They then communicate this to the block leaders, and so down to the cell leaders. In no

time, every prisoner is aware of the new directive and understands it.

Another prison officer recognized that involvement in the regime makes prisoners feel an integral part of it, although underneath his assertion may be a wish to maintain control through the prisoners:

The prison is more or less a school or institution and every institution should have leaders, both inmates and officers. Prisoner leaders help officers to manage the prison. At times when you assign roles to prisoners, they also feel happy that they are part of us [regime]. When the prisoner leaders speak in certain jargons, prisoners understand them better than the officers. It is like peer teaching in education. So, we assign them roles to play for us because they [the leaders] live in the cells with them day and night and understand themselves better. (Superintendent)

Assuming a leadership position and being treated as supplementary staff provides the leaders with a range of material benefits and bolsters their self-confidence, self-esteem and feelings of autonomy as they make their own decisions and take responsibility for their actions. These benefits will further put them in a better position for release, when compared to ordinary prisoners who do not take decisions themselves but rely on instructions.

Prison officers appreciate the important support roles played by the prisoner leadership in augmenting staff numbers in their work. As an Assistant Chief Officer explains:

The work is very tedious. In my block, we have over 500 prisoners. You can imagine these prisoners and me alone. ... So, as for the work, we rely mostly on the prisoner leaders because without them we cannot do it on our own.

Conclusion

This study has examined power-sharing between prison officers and inmates in the governance of prisons in Ghana. Because of inmate overcrowding and officer shortages, leading to a sense of powerlessness among officers, the prison administrators have resorted to prisoner leadership to fill the power vacuum. What emerges from this field-based study in male prisons is that the inmate leaders are trusted, and both officers

and inmates appreciate the governance role of the inmate hierarchy. Inmate leaders supplement the work of prison officers in the administration (control, supervision and running) of the prisons on a daily basis. Inmate leaders in closed prisons are found to be more authoritarian and to make more use of violence than those in open prison camps. Sometimes, the inmate leadership is better at relating to prisoners' welfare problems than officers, and occasionally surpasses officers' efforts at alleviating inmate distress. Prison governance is therefore enmeshed in a mutually beneficial power-sharing relationship between officers and prisoner leaders, in circumstances of overcrowding and severe resource constraints. There are, however, costs and vulnerabilities associated with this leadership mechanism involving the use of violence and exploitation of other prisoners, each of which constitutes a violation of prison rules. These findings have implications for the understanding of African prisons and penal practice. The findings demonstrate the importance of understanding the local and cultural dynamics of prisons, using ethnographic techniques. They also indicate a need to revise the typical, Western-inspired African prison reform initiatives, which often assume a top-down command structure that ignores local penal conditions, institutions and their in-house expertise. Such penal reform initiatives will only remain imaginary if not tailored to meet local conditions.¹¹ The findings further highlight the risks associated with running prisons with low staffing levels — a method that is increasingly gaining a foothold elsewhere, including in England.

11. Jefferson, A. (2008) 'Imaginary reform: changing the postcolonial prison'. In *Imaginary Penalties* Pat Carlen (ed.). Cullompton: Willan.