



## **FROM AKWAABA TO ZEBRA THIGHS: MY SUMMER INTERNSHIP IN ACCRA, GHANA**

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The last thing I expected when I applied for a law internship this summer was to be sitting in an open air court with a variety of tribespeople disputing stolen zebra thighs, watching the judge dismiss translator number three for bias. But that was all in a day's work for an intern of S.K Bofo and Co, Accra a law firm in Ghana's capital.

The state of human rights and legal justice is acknowledged as being at a poor level in many developing countries and Ghana is certainly no exception. The obvious lack of resources and financial support often means that legal cases are neglected and issues are overlooked adding to the already significant mistrust of the government, not to mention the feeling of uncertainty and lack of safety in the communities. However, given Ghana's position as a former colony of the British Empire many principles will be familiar to UK residents. Ghana follows the three main elements of governance based on the separation of powers that are apparent in the majority of democratic countries - consisting of the legislature, judiciary and the executive - whilst many of same legal principles and systems are also seen in the court room.

Having read about the Ghanaian legal system before departing I thought I was pretty aware of what to expect. With the similarity in many aspects of the legal system I believed Ghana to be the perfect place for me to build upon my experiences in the legal world and get an insight into the process of law in a developing country. But nothing could have prepared me for the culture shock that happened on my first day in the office.

Entering the run down office with gaping holes in the walls (window panes are not really the thing in Ghana) I was immediately asked for a selfie by Mavis, the young apprentice receptionist. Ghana may be lacking in many of the basics of life but social media has very

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much arrived and a selfie with a Brit turned out to be a sure way to get some likes! On meeting my mentor, David Boafo, we shook hands and said Akwaaba (welcome in Chwee) - as you would expect - but in true Ghanaian style they have a specific handshake featuring a shake and a complex click of your fingers. After about 6 attempts David gave up in despair and sent me back out to Mavis

to teach me to shake hands properly so I did not embarrass him when I met other lawyers. There were two parts to the firm: S.K Boafo and Co solicitors and Gyenyame Chambers but as there is no distinction between barrister and solicitor in Ghana so David did everything for each case

I was slightly concerned to open my first case and discover it was started in 1995, is still ongoing and concerned a land disagreement, not just because land law comes in my second year syllabus but because the case itself had been ongoing for longer than my entire life! But on meeting the Zizer family all became clear – well, less unclear at least. Addo Zizer was the first to enter the office wearing traditional Ghanaian tribal dress and with his staff in hand followed by his son Addo, his grandson Addo, great grandson Addo and several other men of the family including a selection of uncles, cousins and other relatives most of whom it is safe to say were also probably called Addo. This was a family of more than 30 Addos, whose dispute centred on who was legally the head of the family and since the original case was initially brought the situation had changed multiple times because of various deaths and disappearances. You may wonder about the significance of the case until you understand w that being head of this family means being the chief of 3 neighbouring villages and 6,000 acres of farm land. And it all started by someone stealing the village map of who owned what bit of land.

Putting aside my non-legal experiences in the country – hiking, waterfalls, sandy coast, slave castles, jungle walkways, street markets and the wonderful African fabrics being run up into outfits on street corners on original Singer sewing machines - one of my favourite parts of my internship was going to court, despite the many hours you could sit in there just waiting for someone, usually the judge, to turn up. The huge new main court building had recently been built in an attempt to centralise proceedings. I first arrived at court on time but shaken and just

about in one piece after a proper Ghanaian style everyday adventure in a tuk-tuk driven on the wrong side of the road into oncoming traffic. It was 9 am but all the lawyers were standing outside the court, working on their smartphones and I discovered that in Ghana time is an abstract matter so 9 am meant sometimes 1pm, sometimes 11am but rarely any earlier than 10am before the main protagonists arrived. The local shoeshine boys did a good trade.

It surprised me that many of court rooms were presided over by a female judge and that 3 of the Ghana Supreme Court judges are female. Compared to many Western societies women have a surprisingly high place in Ghanaian society, Queen mothers are often the glorified female head for both the male and female members of their tribes or communities and among the Akans she is the female counterpart of the ruler.

Another case that stands out was that of the desperate asthmatic mother of 10 who had been driven out of her home by her bullying husband who constantly sprayed deodorant and perfume all through the house. She wanted custody of all of the children and some kind of settlement from the marriage so that she would not have to move all 10 children into her mother's one room house off Oxford Street, one of the most dangerous areas in Accra with lots of gangs and drugs. She signed her agreement to take on David as her lawyer with an inky fingerprint as though it was completely normal and when David asked her for her date of birth she could only tell us it was on a Tuesday. David asked her to estimate how many years old she was, he then asked me, 'Eleanor, what is your date of birth,' and used the resulting calculations to fill out the divorce forms. There remains a very poor, even non-existent system of birth registration for anyone from the outreach areas of Ghana.

The 'zebra thigh' court case highlighted the unusual fact of being a white person in Ghana. As we sat down in court, the judge immediately asked what I was doing in court and, disconcertingly, whether I would like to bring my case first, simply because I was white. The case itself had been ongoing for a few months, a relatively short time in Ghana, but was no closer to a resolution than when David had first taken it on. The dispute was between two tribes living in close proximity in the Eastern region, one of which had taken the sacred zebra thighs from the house of the other tribe's chief in an argument over traditional hunting grounds. There was a significant language barrier: one tribe spoke their tribal language, the other spoke their own tribal language, most lawyers in Accra speak Chwee and court proceedings are conducted in English. Tribal languages are so localised that most translators are known to the protagonists and so open to bias. In typical Ghanaian fashion, wherever the chief went his followers followed so the court would be packed with traditionally dressed tribespeople who

would stand up and shout every time they believed the translator to be translating incorrectly. Progress was inevitably slow.

Despite the state of development in the Ghanaian legal system I had a fantastic summer and cannot wait to return in the future. I cannot thank the staff at S.K Bofo and Co for the rare opportunity I received this summer to work alongside some of the country's top lawyers, assist with real cases, produce reports, collate evidence and attend court sessions. And for Fidel in the office, I am still sorry for having to break it to you that your purple Sainsbury's shirt is not from a major UK designer label!

