

# A Village, an Intern, Two Professors, and a Chief: Developing a Field Practicum within the Traditional Chieftaincy Structure of a Rural Village in Ghana

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*Increasingly, students are completing field assignments abroad, and thus schools are challenged to establish international placements that will build culturally-grounded skillsets with appropriate structure and supervision. In this paper, the first author reflects on how a rural, village setting and its centuries-old chieftaincy system in Ghana, West Africa, gave new meaning to establishing an international field practicum.*

The field practicum has historically been at the core of social work education, providing an opportunity for the student to build, integrate, and apply knowledge and skills of the profession while serving individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities. Yet, our conception of “neighborhoods” and “communities” is generally from a western perspective. As a seasoned international field liaison, I was recently challenged to think creatively in establishing a field practicum to be structured within a rural village in Ghana, West Africa. Having already developed international field practicums in Ghana and South Africa, working closely with agencies, hospitals, orphanages, and schools, I was excited to explore a new, community-based graduate-level internship in Ghana’s Ashante region.

The village of Patriensa – its people, culture and landscape – had captured my interest since 1998. It’s a relatively large rural village, and one of the 26 villages/towns within the Asante Akim district. The village has an agrarian economy, with about 74% of the population working in the agricultural sector and surviving through subsistence farming. The community struggles with health, sanitation and employment concerns but has much to offer in the way of enthusiastic interest in development. With an established history of community development initiatives, Patriensa may be described as a progressive place with ambitious community leaders.

Initially, I was introduced to this village as part of an international conference on sustainable development in Ghana. The international conference, held in May of 1998, was organized by Dr. Osei Darkwa, a native of Patriensa, then working in the United States as a social work professor. The event included a post-conference site visit to Patriensa, where we broke ground on a multi-purpose community center. The most recent former First Lady of Ghana, Her Excellency, Dr. Ernestina Naadu Mills, wife of the late President John Atta Mills (then Vice President), known for her support of empowerment programs, attended the ribbon cutting. This was a major encouragement for the community to continue on its path of development.

Over the years, I found my way back to the village several times and became committed to its development. In 2011, Tim, the second author, was assigned to the village as his advanced field placement, under our school’s community and administrative leadership (CAL) concentration. Tim was familiar with Patriensa, having worked jointly with a group of engineering students to implement water and sanitation projects in the community as part of an ongoing international academic service-learning project. Tim’s practicum was centered on sustainable community development, organizing, and empowerment, and working closely with the community to solidify the launching of a community-owned social enterprise. As an

innovative practicum focused on community-based development immersed in a rural West African village, this was old-fashioned community development work. This is a practice, some argue, which is rooted in African tradition. As George Bob-Milliar (2009) posits:

The dominant concept of development – based on the idea of human progress, with the broad aim of increasing the standard of living of people as a whole, a notion whose ownership has been claimed and hijacked by the West – has been practised by Ghanaian kings, chiefs, and queens for generations. (p. 544)

In other words, this practicum was taking community development-focused social work practice back to its traditional African roots. We embraced this idea!

In developing this placement, a key question had to be answered: how does the structure of the placement fit within the village and, more specifically, within the indigenous chieftaincy system? Field practicums, whether domestic or abroad, tend to be partnered with a public sector organization or a non-governmental organization (NGO). International field placements sometimes fall outside the agency domain and a rural West African village clearly challenged the typical structure and conceptualization for an international placement in terms of both student characteristics and supervision support. The challenges of developing this placement are captured in Rae's (2004) analysis of arrangement and structure of U.S. international field placements, which centered around 6 questions:

1. What kinds of backgrounds do students interested in overseas placements have?
2. How do students finance and prepare themselves for the experience?
3. What is the opinion of schools regarding language requirements?
4. Where do students reside in the host country?
5. What kind of supervision and support system is available to them in foreign countries?
6. What kind of difficulty do schools experience in relation to international internships?

When examined through these factors, we built a

case for Tim's strong suitability, at least for the first four points related to student characteristics.

### **Preparation, Language and Accommodations**

Rae (2004) found that students who chose field placements overseas had very interesting backgrounds, such as Peace Corps or previous volunteer experience abroad. Tim had familiarity with community practice work in India, Dominican Republic, and Mexico. Financial preparation is difficult for many students, and most schools of social work struggle with being able to assist students in undertaking an often expensive international practicum experience. As a non-traditional student, Tim came into his graduate program from a successful seven-year medical administration career. This provided access to financial resources that made it possible for him to pursue this internship despite its cost. To help offset some expenses, he sold self-designed T-shirts that advertised the clean water project in the village, held small fundraisers, and solicited family and friends for financial support.

Rae's findings also indicated that the overseas experience of faculty was a key factor in encouraging students to choose particular placements. In this case, the student was integrated not only through my own previous connections to the village but also his previous involvement with other student-driven global development projects in the same village.

As part of his academic preparation for the international placement, Tim enrolled in the required international field seminar that occurs the semester just before departure. In this seminar, students study the historical and socio-cultural issues of the country, develop their educational goals and objectives, work on their travel details, and make initial connections with local support and practicum supervisors. In addition, students work on the logistics for in-country lodging, meals, transportation, and strategies for maintaining communication with a faculty liaison throughout their experience utilizing email, phone, Skype, blogs, and a mid-semester liaison visit to the host country. As the faculty liaison for this placement, I worked closely with Tim and the local community leaders and social networks. From the community stakeholders to the common resident, locals saw to

it that Tim was properly welcomed into the community with the necessary supports in place, such as complimentary lodging within a family compound and a host of community members committed to ensuring all his needs were met while in Patriensa.

It helps to understand a few things about Ghana's Ashante region – for starters, the notable hospitality of Ghanaians translates to “no visitor will be without food, shelter and camaraderie.” For this student, the village quickly started to feel like a place where the necessary rapport building could be accomplished with ease and aplomb. As a matter of fact, he was already half Ghanaian, according to some in the community. Tim's initial reflections echoed this connection:

*Everyone has been so welcoming of my arrival. It is very quiet here. Last night a thunderstorm moved through in the evening after dark. I sat with Pastor Kofi and his family and listened to the raindrops fall on the tin roof. As we visited, the electricity went out. The air was cool and there was a breeze blowing. We moved outside and continued conversing under the dark sky. All around us I could hear the sounds of people in Patriensa gathering. From the gates of the courtyard I could see periodic beams of light from flashlights. There was a hum about the place. The noise of life, making it easy to feel at home.*

*As humans we have so many dimensions. The complexity of life allows us to encounter many people much different than ourselves. The moments of human connection are a chance to share and celebrate. The Ghanaian people I have met are so open to that experience. I hope to mirror such warm and welcoming demeanor in my steps as well.*

The official language spoken in Ghana is English but nearly all people speak the indigenous languages, specifically Twi (or Akan) in the Ashante region where Patriensa is located. Once in the village, Tim took to learning Twi right away. He related his experience in a blog entry:

*So I am on the adventure of learning the language of the Ashanti people (Twi). Apparently*

*it must be pretty amusing because as I practice with the people I meet, they all seem to laugh. I don't feel they laugh at me, but with me. The kindest thing most often happens. They let out a shriek – A!, and then say “you speak my language!” This point of connection is proving to be invaluable in building relationships. Most often this conversation turns into a mini Twi-lesson where they will help me understand how to say whatever it is I am attempting to communicate. This is followed by a handshake, finger snap, and “God bless” as we move along.*

*The choice of words in stating “you speak my language,” for me, shows the pride of the tongue. This language is part of me, who I am. It is my heritage and history. It is the words spoken by my ancestors and to be carried on through my children and grandchildren. That is what I hear when they say “my language.” There are some things I understand but most I'm still learning; however I do not feel excluded from their presence. There is a lot of laughter here. Consistent throughout dialogue is the release of energy in this manner. It calms me.*

### **Supervision and Support**

Support from the community and so many other sources was clearly not an issue, but the question of practicum supervision in the village relates back to Rae's study (2004) on the process and challenges of making arrangements and setting up the structure for some of these international field placements. Finding a qualified field supervisor was a difficulty experienced by schools of social work Rae surveyed. Initially, I sought out a colleague, Peter Dwumah (third author), who is a professor of sociology and social work at the nearby Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi. With a specialty in development studies, he was certainly qualified to serve as the field instructor. His role as academic and cultural advisor to the student, as well as my own long-distance support, were critical to the student's growth and skill-building. However, to truly engage this community, Peter assisted me with making sure Tim aligned with the chief's council and worked within the chieftaincy system. Indeed, the chief and elders, albeit extremely supportive, would need to approve a temporary position for the intern within the chieftaincy structure.

Similar to traditional structures of other African countries, chieftaincy is an indigenous system of governance including executive, judicial, and legislative powers. The institution has survived British imperialism and post-Independence regimes, and endures through the larger political economy of Ghana. One of its primary roles is socio-economic development. A few years back, the king of the Ashante Region, the Asantehene, His Royal Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, had this to say about today's chieftaincy:

These days, a chief is expected to lead his people in organizing self-help activities and projects, and take the initiative in establishing institutions and programmes to improve the welfare of his people in areas such as health, education, trade, and economic or social development. (Excerpt from the keynote address presented by His Royal Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, Asantehene at the Fourth African Development Forum, Addis Ababa, October 12, 2004).

Recently, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II established a fund to assist in the education of outstanding but financially needy students in the region. Bob-Milliar (2009) shares:

[...] a good number of chiefs are taking up the challenges of the twenty-first century, tackling very modern issues as diverse as children's rights, the environment, women's rights, and HIV/AIDS. These leaders perceive initiating development processes as their primary role today. (p. 544)

But the chief doesn't act alone. In the Ashante region, the paramount chief is the head of the traditional area and is known as the *Omanhene* (*hene* indicating chief status) and his roles include implementation of the laws on customs and maintaining traditional programs and policies for the region. Below the Omanhene are divisional chiefs or sub-chiefs that assist the paramount chief in the performance of his duties. These sub-chiefs are the Kontihene, Akwamuhene, Adontehene, Nifahene, Benkumhene, Kyidomhene, Gyaasehene and Sanaahene – all of whom serve specific functions. It is the Kontihene, the sub-chief for development, however, who is charged with the task of community development. Organizing and implementing development programs falls to the

Kontihene, and he either mobilizes the material and human resources locally or looks outside for resources. Thus, a position as assistant to the Kontihene was a natural fit for the student, and the Kontihene then served as the field instructor for this macro-level community social work student. Inasmuch as the field instructor's primary role, in relation to the student and the school of social work, is as an educator, the Kontihene was the culturally grounded choice. In this village setting, he was the daily on-site primary teacher to facilitate the student's best learning opportunities and engage the student in knowledge, values, and skill development related to social work practice within the Ghanaian rural village context. He provided trusted access to the people of Patriensa, relevant cultural context to situations and valuable insight into the community dynamics that are at the heart of his village.

Community development is no stranger to chiefs. Many are becoming innovative in promoting development for their communities. A community development social work intern working alongside the chief's elders and under the direct supervision of the Kontihene is, no doubt, novel and represents social work and chieftaincy practices, re-inventing themselves together. With additional supervision from Peter, my Ghanaian development studies colleague, as well as guidance from me as his field liaison, Tim was exposed to a number of community development responsibilities, working under the direct supervision of the Kontihene within the centuries-old chieftaincy tradition.

So, in establishing this macro-level practicum placement in a rural, Ghanaian village, social work and the chieftaincy tradition came together in an innovative practicum structure. The village sub-chief for development, the Patriensa Kontihene, Nana Owusu Akyan Agyekumhene II, took on a new role as social work field instructor. And social work was welcomed back to its roots in community development – in Africa.

### References

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**Note:** The authors want to thank Nana Owusu Akyan Agyekumhene II, the Patriensa Kontihene, for his commitment to excellence in international field supervision through exemplary community leadership and congenial imparting of knowledge, wisdom, and mentorship.

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