



‘These KMA People are also our Customers’: Coconut Sellers Making Space in Downtown Kumasi

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Abstract

Street vendors are some of the most put-upon actors in urban Africa and elsewhere, vulnerable to harassment by government, commercial businesses, and residents. We look at a group of vendors occupying a sidewalk next to the offices of the Kumasi Metropolitan Authority (KMA) in Ghana’s second city. We demonstrate how the sidewalk functions as a family-like space for the coconut sellers. They not only work there, but also use the sidewalk as a space to sleep and bathe. The coconut sellers are migrants from the central region of Ghana and spoke of their relationship to one another, as they lived and worked on the sidewalk, as that of a ‘family’. We build on recent scholarship that focuses on sidewalks as places where economic activities are shaped by social relationships. We also show how the location of the sidewalk – near local government offices, next to an urban park – made the coconut sellers less vulnerable to harassment and being moved along.

Introduction

On any given day, on the northern pavement of Jackson Park, a casual observer would find a group of young men, gathered around a line of wheelbarrows, busy arranging coconuts to go out and sell. These young men work in Kumasi, Ghana’s second city, and are between the ages of sixteen and forty-five. They are all from the central region of Ghana, from a cluster of neighbouring settlements, and have come to the city to make an income through coconut selling. The pavement serves not only

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as an economic space, but also as a living room for them. Some of the young men use wheelbarrows and tarpaulins as temporary shelters on the pavement, where they keep their belongings. They rest, sleep, and prepare for the day's work, and use public restrooms in the park behind them to bathe. For these young men, the space they have made for themselves on the sidewalk is public and private, commercial and social, formal and informal.

Coconut sellers, such as these, occupy a particular position in the life of Ghana's cities. With low start-up costs, and a simple business model, coconut selling is attractive to poorer migrants from rural areas (Codjoe et al., 2021). The physical nature of the work – not only preparing the coconut for the customer, but also moving wheelbarrows stacked with coconuts around the city – makes it a popular entry occupation for young men (Abankwah et al., 2010). This mixing of migrant and youth identities also means coconut sellers are often a focus for the distaste of urban residents and a particular target for government officials during sidewalk and market 'clean up' campaigns (Asiedu & Agyei-Mensah, 2008; Rheinlander et al., 2008). As Gracia Clark documents in her account of Kumasi's marketplaces, there have been regular 'wars' between the authorities and street vendors, with those in more marginal trades particularly vulnerable to being swept up and moved along (2013). Other trades, dominated by indigenes and long-term residents of the city, are typically seen as more legitimate and better able to negotiate with officials.

But what was striking about the coconut sellers in our study site was the fact that, despite their use of the sidewalk as a place to sleep and bathe, they were not moved on – they had occupied the site continuously for more than a decade. They were rarely subject to fines and had good relations with the authorities whose offices were inside Jackson Park (cf. Clark, 2013; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2016; Quayson, 2010). To understand this, we look at how this sidewalk generated a particular spatial configuration, similar to but distinct from other accounts of sidewalks in the urban studies literature (Goldstein, 2016). These have tended to see street vendors of the sort we describe as semi-legal, untidy, migrant-dominated where their status, outside the urban planning visions and regulatory regimes of those in authority, makes them subject to harassment (cf. Harvey, 2006; Lefebvre, 1992; Schindler, 2014). As Goldstein observes, the efforts of hawkers and street vendors in the global south are regularly interrupted by authorities, business owners or residents calling on the police, and are part of the 'manufacture of organized disorder', where rules are applied arbitrarily, to the disadvantage of those at the bottom, and accompanied by violence (Goldstein, 2016: 237).

In our case we show a more intimate, cooperative relationship between local government officials and street traders. The forms of 'fictive kinship' developed among coconut sellers was produced in conversation with, rather than opposition to, officials working for the Kumasi Metropolitan Authority (KMA) and those regulating the space of Jackson Park – parking inspectors, mosque officials, restaurant owners (Monteith, 2018). While nearby residents often grumbled to us about their unsightly or unhygienic presence, coconut sellers were not moved along. For these young men, coming to work on the sidewalk meant joining an already established group of brothers who not only helped them learn about the city, and offered a place to work and sleep, but also trained them in how to keep on good terms with those working in the

nearby government offices. They offered free drinks on occasion and provided an 'at desk' service. Their leader, an older man, occupied a nearby site outside a police station. All of the men worked hard at what Hayden describes as the 'disambiguating' work of being a street vendor: making the highly provisional legal status of street vending less threatening to those in authority (Hayden, 2017).¹

We also demonstrate that the coconut sellers benefited from their proximity to Jackson Park, an orderly, regulated space immediately to the back of their coconut stand. The public nature of the park, helped to create a sidewalk that was both more open and less dominated by commercial activities than the crowded streets, underpasses, and alleys of nearby "Roman" Hill or the neighbouring Yarewa Zongo (the Muslim commercial and residential quarter). The park was a place where Muslims came to pray, where funerals and public celebrations were held and where, in the cooling sun of a late afternoon, couples would come and sit in the relative privacy of the park. Employees subcontracted to a private company on behalf of the KMA collected parking fees, moving around the park in white shirts, making regulation an everyday occurrence, less violent and confrontational than in other parts of the city (cf. Clark, 2008). These activities, in different ways, shaped the character of the sidewalk.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. After continuing our discussion of the familial nature of the sidewalk, and how this was shaped by relations with regulatory authorities and the public nature of Jackson Park, we describe our methods, building on Kim's work on 'sidewalk cartography' (Kim, 2012, 2015). We give a description of the history of Jackson Park and document its present-day structure and the spaces surrounding the park. We then discuss further how the familial depended on good relations with institutional actors, and the public nature of Jackson Park. The article concludes by showing how these related observations make a wider contribution to scholarship on sidewalks in urban Africa and elsewhere.

Familial Sidewalks

Sidewalks are a key feature of urban space providing a range of benefits for city dwellers. They act as a site for social activities, economic engagement, political activity, and an illustration of urban culture. Their function goes beyond their use as pedestrian walkways (Han et al., 2019). Over the years, there has been a growing awareness of the social and political role sidewalks play in urban Africa and elsewhere (cf. Benit-Gbaffou, 2016; Brown, 2001). Whereas previously sidewalks were understood as a space for economic engagement, that understanding has evolved to include social activities, and the significance of sidewalks as political sites where different urban actors compete over ideas of the city and what it should be (Brown, 2015; Gillespie, 2017). These activities are not easily separated from one another and

¹ Hayden writes about street vendors in Mexico City who have to live with a tangle of laws. Some of which allow their presence, other do not. They deal with their ambiguous legal status by working hard at being good citizens – keeping their sites clean, dressing in a n inconspicuous way, avoiding situations that might bring confrontations with those in authority, cultivating a respectable 'law abiding' clientele.

Fig. 1 Coconut sellers resting in the afternoon, with Jackson Park in the background. It is possible to pick out the tricolour colours of Ghana's flag – red, gold and green – in the painted metalwork. The restroom facilities over the fence, inside the park, offer a place for coconut sellers to bathe



are also part of a conversation with the wider urban environment (Han et al., 2019). Langevang, for example, documents the street corner ‘bases’ that young men occupy on the outskirts of Accra (2008). She shows the dynamic nature of such spaces, where what might appear as something ephemeral or improvised at one moment can turn

into something institutional soon after; some of these bases became youth clubs (2008: 237-9). According to Mehta and Bosson (2010), the physical characteristics of sidewalks make them a particularly dynamic feature of city life (cf. Kim, 2012). They are public spaces, open to personalisation where new urban actors can mark out territory. Their semi-open nature also means they serve as a site for seating, shelter and conversation. These are all characteristics of the sidewalk occupied by the coconut sellers.

The sidewalk under study created an opportunity for coconut sellers to strengthen family-like relations to one another. The young men were migrants from a set of communities in the central region of Ghana. Their connections home brought new migrants in, and they cultivated the sidewalk in ways that allowed not only for trading and socialising, but also as a place to spend the night, bathe and sleep. This helped foster a feeling of family among the coconut sellers, who also spoke of the way they regulated each other's behaviours, drawing on repertoires of respect and social order that connected back to their home area. That they all came from a group of towns in central Ghana helped the coconut sellers recreate a sort of communal life on the sidewalk, which was then regulated through their kin-like relations to each other. (We should add that coconut sellers did not make it obvious that some of them slept on the sidewalk and used the restrooms to bathe).

In making this first point we align with work from Ghana and Africa more generally on the importance of kinship, both real and fictive, and gendered, infrastructural practices help to shape space in the urban economy (Adeboye, 2012; Clark, 2013; Darkwah & Arthur, 2006; Hart, 2013; Pellow, 2001; Simone, 2004). Malefakis (2019) shows how street vendors depend on kinship ties to a common home area in his work from Dar es Salaam (2019). These ties provide the connections you need when they arrive in the city. It is through shared relations to a home area that you sort out your accommodation, and get a start in the business of, selling second-hand shoes. Geenen documents homeless youth in Kinshasa imagining housing for themselves in the underpasses and railway tracks where they seek shelter (Geenen, 2009). Sowatey et al's (2018) study from Accra shows gender ties binding traders together in family-like networks, with women making strategic alliances supporting each other as 'sisters' and 'mothers'. We similarly show how sidewalks function as spaces where kin-like relationships are developed and sustained, where a sense of home can be imagined, and where infrastructural practices are gendered.

Our second point is that sidewalks, like other public spaces, are modified by the regulatory and institutional structures that frame them. As Charman and Govender observe, sidewalks are sites of negotiation with the urban infrastructure around them (2016). In their account of street trading in Ivory Park, South Africa, stall-holders on the pavement have to negotiate with the businesses behind, where claims to permanence and respectability is determined by a complex alchemy involving commuter, vehicles, and residents. They argue that 'the street environment... constitutes nuanced interdependencies and relationships between social, economic and physical (infrastructural) processes' (2016: 325).

On the sidewalk we show how the presence of city authorities inside the park created a surprising set of nuanced interdependencies with the sidewalk outside. The fact that the coconut sellers' pitch was near the offices of the Kumasi Metropoli-

tan Authority afforded cooperative, convivial relations with government employees. Paradoxical though it may seem, proximity to workers for the city administration made life easier for the coconut sellers we spent time with (when compared with peers occupying more commercial spots in the city in and around street markets). There were daily interactions with government workers, security guards and those using the park for leisure that made in the coconut sellers largely invulnerable to the sweeps and ‘clean-ups’ affecting other sidewalk vendors in the city (cf. Musoni, 2010; Resnick, 2019). They worked hard at maintaining good relations with workers in the KMA offices, and this connected back to their sense of being a ‘family’ capable of self-government and good discipline. This relationship to government officials also gave them a way of stepping around the criticism of nearby residents, who were unhappy about the fact they slept and bathed there.

As well as the regulatory space of the KMA offices, there was also the public space of Jackson Park itself. Proximity to Jackson Park somehow softened the sidewalk that the coconut sellers occupied.

As we shall later see, the park was a space that had, in recent years taken on the character of an urban plaza (Low, 1997, 2010). Alongside government officials, Jackson Park was a site where Muslims came to pray, where public and political events were held, where young people hung around for a bit of privacy. It has been observed that parks as part of the urban built environment, tend toward the ‘dialogic rather than the dialectic’ in how they generate space, with tolerance for practices that might generate conflict in other urban sites (Low, 1997), capable of ‘civil inattention’ where seemingly disparate groups are able to turn a blind eye to one another (Lofland, 1989). Parks, it has been noted, are good at generating ‘co-presence’ where very different, and potentially opposed activities, somehow rub along (Low, 2010). An observation that we find helpful in understanding practices of sidewalk sleeping and bathing, that might otherwise provoke action in downtown Kumasi, were possible.

Methods

The research was conducted by a sociologist based at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Forkuor) and a social anthropologist based in the UK (Jones). Most of the fieldwork was undertaken by Forkuor who visited the study site on different days of the week and at different times of day. Fieldwork took place over a period of eight months. Drawing on his background in social anthropology Jones took responsibility for designing the fieldwork methods and for relating the data to ethnographic work on sidewalks, parks and market life in Ghana and elsewhere. Our approach follows Whyte’s observation that studying the city requires first and foremost a ‘pen and paper and a place to sit’ (Whyte, 1979). Forkuor and Jones adopted a strategy of sitting on the sidewalk and in different parts of the park, and spending time observing and engaging with coconut sellers and other sidewalk and park users. In this we borrow from Kim’s (2012) approach to sidewalk cartography as a ‘method that combines participant observation and interviewing with physical surveying and mapping’ (Kim, 2012, p. 232; see also Sherouse, 2018). These varied methods, in

particular the use of observational work and participatory photography, helped us get a better understanding of the intimate, familial world of coconut sellers.

1. **Observing sidewalk uses.** Forkuor engaged in sit-in observations, where he sat alongside and had conversations with the coconut sellers, mostly around 4 pm when they returned from their daily activities. At other times, he used walk-by observations (Han et al., 2019) to observe sidewalk use at different times of the day. Both authors observed and had conversations about the nature and forms of relationships among coconut sellers, their interactions with consumers and other actors on the sidewalk, the way they organised themselves, and how they use the sidewalk at different points in the day. To ensure that the people being observed did not alter their behaviour too much, observational work was written down after leaving the study site. Voice notes became a way of recalling key information (it turns out the use of a smartphone is less intimidating than Whyte's pen and paper). We engaged in several informal conversations with community members and other users of the park to help us think through what we were observing. These conversations form a key part of the findings and contribute significantly to our analysis of the relationship between Jackson Park and the lives of coconut sellers.
2. **Semi-structured interviews.** In addition to the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight coconut sellers, and with other users of the park. These interviews, some of which took place over repeated visits, explored in detail the processes that led coconut sellers to the sidewalk, their lives on the sidewalk and where they saw themselves in the future. Questions about the use of the sidewalk, interactions with the management of Jackson Park as well as other community actors were also explored in the interviews. The participants who were interviewed included one of the first people to sell coconuts who went by the name of "pastor". His pitch near to the police station on the far side of Jackson Park predated its renovation, and he helped settle young men on the sidewalk site after. He provided information on how coconut selling established itself on the sidewalk to the north of the park after the 2007 renovations. The other participants were two male adults and one female adult (above 30 years); two young adults (between the ages of 25 and 30), and two teenagers.
3. **Sidewalk cartography.** As part of our approach, we used what Kim (2012) describes as 'sidewalk cartography'. Sitting on the sidewalk Forkuor used colouring pencils, as well as a pen and drawing book to develop visual impressions of both the sociology and the physicality of the sidewalk space. An approach that has been found relevant, especially among researchers who focus on documenting the changing uses of urban space (Ojeda & Pino, 2019; Jones, 2021).
4. **Participatory photography.** Many of the photos in the article are the product of participatory photography, taken by the coconut sellers themselves. This helped us get closer to aspects of the coconut sellers lives that were otherwise difficult to access. Instead of imposing our presence on the familiar or private lives of coconut sellers, the sellers themselves were invited to take photographs that meant something to them – personal possessions, a checkers board, a friend asleep – which they could then share with the researchers along with an account of what

they felt the photo showed. The photographer of Fig. 1, for example, told us: “we usually take pictures like these in order to document how our life is here so that in the future, we can look back and have something to say”.

Sidewalk History

How did this sidewalk come to be? The sidewalk was the late offspring of the creation of Jackson Park in 1937. The park was the product of a series of decisions by the Kumasi Health Board, which mixed an interest in improving the quality of life of the city for its residents, with governance concerns over exerting control over the historic centre of the Asante kingdom, a polity that had been resistant to colonial rule (Bigon, 2016; Talton, 2019). At its inception the park was an open expanse of ground, with a larger footprint than at present, and no sidewalks to speak of. Jackson Park was used for official occasions – including fundraisers for the war effort in 1942 and 1943, and celebrations of Independence Day after 1957 (Manu-Osafo & Bob-Milliar, 2023). By the 1960s the park had become the location for formal buildings including an administrative block which would later serve the local government. Part of the north side of the park was closed off to become the location of Prempeh II Assembly Hall.

Up until 2007, the edges of Jackson Park were blurred. The bare earth on the eastern side of Jackson Park functioned as a recreational site for young men to play football. Clubs such as Majestics, Mighty Dwarfs, Vipers, Eleven Dangers, Young Heroes squared off against each other. Fridays and Mondays were important for the communities around the park in the 1960s and 1970s, with teams from the Yarewa Zongo, Fante New Town and the Asante-dominated quarter of Asem played each other in the late afternoon. These were recalled as spectacular events, with many residents from across the city coming to watch. In the morning hours the park also served as an open space where vehicles could come and offload. One of our respondents told us that, before the enclosure of the park, trucks would come from the coast with coconuts (now coconuts are sourced from other sites in the city).

In the run up to Ghana’s 50 years of Independence celebrations in 2007 the administration of President John Kufuor decided that cities across the country should have a “Jubilee Park”.² In Kumasi this resulted in the wholesale redesign of Jackson Park by the New Patriotic Party administration (this would later lead to disputes over whether the park was available for rallies by the opposition National Democratic Congress). In place of the compacted red laterite soil on which football was played, Jackson Park was paved over with concrete bricks (cf. Narh et al. 2020). It took on the character of an urban plaza reserved for formal occasions such as national or religious festivals, or for public hire for weddings and funerals (Low, 1997). With the loss of football, the most visible use of the park since 2007 has been as a municipal car park. The renovation also resulted in the fencing and walling-off of the park. This meant the construction of sidewalks on three sides of the park, and gave greater visual prominence to the

² John Kufuor (as well as Kofi Annan) was a pupil of Asem Primary School, located about fifty metres from Jackson Park.

presence of the Kumasi Metropolitan Authority from within. The park itself shares a wall to the west with the Prempeh II Assembly Hall; the offices of Fox FM (a radio station); and the Kumasi Sanitation Court. All of these institutions shaped the character of area more generally, including the sidewalks around Jackson Park.

Figure 2 shows what the park looks like on a typical weekday. Alongside the parked cars, there is the brick-paved floor of the park. As dais can be seen to the north, while the municipal building serving as a government immigration office is located on the left of the image. This is Jackson Park during working hours. Figure 3, by contrast, shows Jackson Park in the late evening of the same day, where most of the owners have come for their cars and the park is gradually emptying out.

In the rest of this section, we provide a brief description of what is outside the park, the immediate sidewalks surrounding the park on the east and north. This gives us a sense of the way the street vendors constructed a familial space for themselves on the sidewalk. From the entrance of the park, the northern, eastern and southern perimeters of the park are paved, separating the park's walls from the road. The main road from the "Labour" roundabout to Roman Hill passes in front of the entrance of Jackson Park. The eastern sidewalk separates the park from the road leading to a cluster of schools, while the northern sidewalk separates the park's wall from the road that leads to the Yarewa Zongo.

The sidewalks around the park are informed by the atmosphere generated by the park itself. There is a more measured, managed feel to these sidewalks, than others in the neighbourhood. On a weekday, commercial mini-bus (known locally as *trotro*)



Fig. 2 The park on a weekday, mid-afternoon, with the offices of the KMA on the left-hand side



Fig. 3 Late evening in Jackson Park on a weekday

drivers, park their vehicles along the eastern sidewalk. They use the sidewalk as a waiting area, until called to the main station at Roman Hill to pick up passengers to various destinations. Figure 4 shows the eastern sidewalk on a typical workday with trotros parked. These spaces are marked out, and signage indicates who the different spots belong to. At the southern end of the sidewalk, two spots are reserved for the Asemhene, the traditional ruler of the area whose “palace” – a three floor residential-commercial property – stands opposite.

Commercial vehicles are not kept on the sidewalk overnight. Usually, by 6pm most of the vehicles have left. Figure 5 shows the coconut sellers’ stand on the eastern sidewalk, taken around 5:30 pm on a weekday.

The northern sidewalk of the park has more diverse users and the set-up is different from the eastern sidewalk. The northern sidewalk separates the wall of the park from the road, which in turn separates the park from the communities of Asem and Yarewa Zongo. On this sidewalk, in addition to pedestrians, four key users can be identified. There is a corn/plantain seller who roasts her produce (depending on the season) and sells on the sidewalk. Next to her is a cobbler where shoes are repaired as well as sold. From the cobbler’s stall, several taxi-tricycles are parked by owners who live in the community. After this we find the coconut stand, next to which are several wheelbarrows, from which coconut sellers load up and move around the city. Unlike other actors using the sidewalk, many of the coconut sellers remain on the sidewalk throughout the day. Despite the impression this gives of the sidewalk being a less regulated space than its eastern counterpart, what strikes the visitor more



Fig. 4 The eastern sidewalk showing parked minivans

is the contrast with vending sites in elsewhere in the city. The coconut sellers, when compared to others in the same trade in other sites in Kumasi, have established the sidewalk next Jackson Park not only as a commercial pitch, but also as something of a home. Reflecting this domestic function, but also the proximity to the orderly space of Jackson Park, the coconut sellers did their best to keep the workplace tidy (cf. Hayden 2018).

Though Jackson Park has lost some of its vitality with the loss of football matches, it retains recreational and community functions that promote a sense of dialogue. If we compare it to Rattray Park, a commercial “pay per use park” opened in 2015, Jackson Park encourages more conversation between different urban users and between the park and the sidewalks around (Low 2013). Rattray Park is mostly used by middle class residents who have recreational concerns. By contrast, Jackson Park remains a place of ‘vital frictions’ where mosque users, romantic couples, office workers, businesspeople on a break, co-exist with vehicle owners, coconut sellers, or pedestrians taking a shortcut (Lofland, 1989). In Rattray Park (Fig. 6) only paying customers could enter, and hawkers, petty traders and taxis were not allowed to linger outside.

Selling Coconuts on the Sidewalk

In the next section, we show how coconut sellers made a familial space on the sidewalk and how this was informed by their relationship to social practises and institutional actors in the surrounding area. Specifically, we show that the coconut seller



Fig. 5 Coconut sellers relax by playing checkers. Jackson Park is to the right

pitch was organised around (a) what one coconut seller described to us as a ‘family structure’ (b) depending on good relations with those in authority which (c) benefited from the social activities in and around Jackson Park.

a) A familial space.

The sidewalk has become a space for the building of family-like relationships among the coconut sellers we spent time with. For those who came to work on the coconut stand, entry into the community of coconut sellers was facilitated through a man who went by the name of “pastor” and who came from the central region of Ghana. He was in his late fifties at the time of fieldwork. This man had been in the area for many years and had a sort of parental relationship to the younger men we spent time with. Like others in his group, he used the metaphor of “family” to describe the coconut stand, where new members were socialised on appropriate ways of behaving and doing. As the “pastor” told us:

When they arrive from the village, we have a structure, a set of rules that everyone must follow. It is important that all the boys respect that structure. This is because, as their leader, when they come and they misbehave, it is my responsibility. So, I ensure that they live in harmony. However, if anything happens, I will resolve it. Those who refuse to obey and respect our structure will be sent away. Because we cannot allow you to for instance, litter the pavement or do



Fig. 6 Rattray Park

anything illegal. Because when you do, you invite unnecessary attention from the authorities and that affects us all.

In other words, the existing community not only taught the 'boys' the routes and business of coconut selling in the city but also made them members of their 'fictive kin', with affective ties, responsibilities, and obligations (Monteith, 2018, p. 12). In the quote above, the pastor places himself as the head of the family, but it is also possible

to read into his response the work younger men did to socialize and discipline each other (most days disputes and misbehaviour were managed without the “pastor’s” involvement – he worked a coconut stand a few hundred meters away from the sidewalk site). Beyond the disciplining of fellow community members, familial bonds were also cemented by the sociality of the sidewalk.

Their family-like relationships also drew upon ongoing ties to their natal area (the young men came from a cluster of villages, and either knew of each other from home, or knew of someone who could make introductions). The shepherding of the “pastor”, and the everyday work young men did to support each other, drew on patterns of homosocial mentoring. Their life selling coconuts also resulted in new obligations and opportunities, shaped by the liminal, uncertain nature of the coconut trade. Many of the young men drew on their connections to each other to pick up work in the construction trade during the months when coconuts were less plentiful. They also gave a heads-up to those sleeping under the wheelbarrows to possible places they could stay should they decide to continue working in Kumasi long-term. In an echo of Malefakis’ work from Dar es Salaam, these kin-like relations offered a gentler apprenticeship into the city than would otherwise have been the case.

b) good relations with government officials.

Maintaining these familial relationships also depended on good relations with the authorities. The “pastor” who helped establish the site next to Jackson Park, for young men from his home area, had been running his own coconut-selling business in front of a police station for more than two decades. This pitch was about one hundred meters from the main entrance, on the opposite side of Jackson Park, and was a five-minute walk from the sidewalk we were studying. After the 2007 renovation, the pastor helped others from his hometown establish the site on the northern sidewalk. As he told us:

Before they renovated the park, we sometimes used to sell on the park, my little brother and me. Some of our customers included officers from the metro education office. So, when the park was renovated, these KMA people are also our customers, and back then allowed us to use the north facing pavement immediately outside the park. My little brother went to sell there (“Pastor”, Coconut Seller).

We can see that the pastor’s relationship to the KMA officers was critical in helping facilitate the new community of coconut sellers. He was sensitive to the role those in the offices of the KMA played in helping establish a spot on a newly created sidewalk.

As noted earlier, his position as “pastor” had to some extent been superseded by younger men who ran the coconut operation from the sidewalk on a day-to-day basis. Their “head”, a man in his early forties who first came to Kumasi in 2008 to work in the construction industry, explained his presence in the following way:

You see for me; I am a popular man around here. You have to have a personality, one that people can enjoy. I have good friends in the KMA office. Some of them have coconuts on order from me.

His characterisation of good, convivial relations with KMA office workers was something the coconut sellers worked at. As one of the coconut sellers told us: 'You cannot just sit looking sad, you have to be friends with people around here and have a smile on your face'. Alongside "customer service", we were told that coconut sellers needed to be vigilant about the criticism that they were making the place untidy. As Hayden observes, street vendors, have to work hard at claiming space in the city (2018). On a typical day, coconut husks were gathered in a large jute bag and sold off to recycling companies, and the pavement was swept of rubbish regularly. The personal belongings of the coconut sellers were organised under well-arranged wheelbarrows and covered with black tarpaulins.

What also struck us, during fieldwork, was the somewhat desultory air that settled on the government offices themselves. The building, like many local government structures in Ghana, was run-down (Chaffin 2010). It had not been renovated for some time, and it was not clear to us what sorts of improvement, if any, the building had experienced since 2007. Offices were in a state of disrepair and the ground floor of the building, rented out to the education ministry, prone to flooding. The KMA had converted the blank expanse of the newly paved park into a car park, where revenues were collected by a contractor (cf. Sherouse, 2018). If there was a regulatory state that could be found in the offices of the KMA, it was capable of convivial relations, perhaps because it was more put upon, and less authoritative than it had once been.

c) the social life of Jackson Park.

The coconut sellers worked at having good relations with KMA office workers and other authority figures in the area – parking attendants, security guards, mosque officials – because of the stability of the site. The site was also shaped by its proximity to Jackson Park. When compared to Charman and Govender's account of 'commuter' and 'residential' sidewalks in the suburb of Ivory Park in South Africa, the sidewalk in our study was more of a 'public space' sidewalk. This helps to explain why the coconut sellers could manage complaints from nearby residents, who disliked the way coconut sellers used their wheelbarrows and tarpaulins as shelters, where they kept their belongings, rested, slept, and prepared for the day's work. We came to understand that the surprising permanence of the coconut seller stand was connected to the public space of Jackson Park. As mentioned earlier in the article, parks and plazas are noted for the way they facilitate 'co-presence' (allowing seemingly disparate activities that might otherwise be in conflict in the city) and this co-presence affected the sidewalk next door (Low 2017). Parks are good at producing 'civil inattention' where a blind eye could be turned to spatial practices that otherwise might be seen as troubling or problematic. The coconut sellers did the best they could to not draw attention their sleeping and bathing. They were also helped in this by the way park users tend to look past what others were doing.

Many different types of users frequented the park – Muslims going to pray, young couples sitting in the shade of the stands, shoppers taking a short cut – and many of them patronised the coconut sellers. In this way they brought the park to the sidewalk, just as the coconut sellers maintained good relations with those using the park. This dialogic relationship helped both to maintain the identity of Jackson Park as an ordered, civic space, and shaped the character of the sidewalk running alongside. In this way coconut sellers were affected by their proximity to the park, while also making a recognised contribution to the park itself. This did not always mean that everyone regarded the presence of coconut sellers as welcome, but it did mean there was less of an emphasis on the possible illegality or illegitimacy of their work. When one landlord complained to us that they ‘had only been in the area a couple of years, not like the yam sellers opposite’, this turned out both to be untrue and a measure of his limited ability to change things.

Conclusion

In understanding how young men made a family-like space for themselves on the sidewalk, we have documented the practises of migrant coconut sellers on the edge of an urban park, and reflected on the particular nature of the space they occupied. Our case study upends some of the expectations about urban hierarchies and antagonisms, as the sidewalk space the coconut sellers made for themselves had developed through good relations with authority figures in the area: local government workers, parking attendants, security guards, mosque officials (cf. Schindler, 2014; Goldstein, 2016). When criticism came it tended to be from residents and neighbours who described the coconut sellers as an unsightly, unhygienic presence, less deserving of their pitch than indigenes of Kumasi. In a city where street vendors are often moved along, the coconut sellers had managed to maintain a place of work for more than a decade.

In analysing this case, we have drawn from recent ethnographic work from urban Africa and elsewhere. In particular, the role of kinship practises and the infrastructural uses of urban space (Charman & Govender, 2016; Malefakis, 2018; cf. Simone, 2004). While the coconut sellers made public aspects of their presence on the sidewalk orderly and convivial, they also used the space as a home, a place to sleep and bathe. They described themselves as an urban “family”, led by a “pastor”, with a focus on discipline, self-regulation and repertoires of mentorship and care that drew on a shared connection to a cluster of settlements in central Ghana. It was striking that while the physical apparatus of the coconut sellers was a visually unstable space of wheelbarrows, benches and tarpaulins, it was also something that exerted a fixed home-like presence in their lives.

In making these observations we contribute to scholarship on mixed used sidewalks, and complicate ideas of how street vendors make a place for themselves in urban Africa. Sidewalks are spaces of ‘nuanced interdependence’ shaped not only by those on the sidewalk, but also by the spaces around them (Charman & Govender, 2016: 325). For the coconut sellers it was proximity to Jackson Park that made the difference. The park was an orderly, quiet yet public space, and this gave certain affordances to the sidewalk next to it. Alongside the work the coconut sellers did

themselves to keep their pitch tidy and their behaviour in check there was the structuring presence of Jackson Park. This was instrumental in enabling the familial sidewalk. Young, migrant, male, coconut sellers are meant to belong to that part of the city that is vulnerable to harassment and to being moved along. That this was not the case show the value of an urban studies that is attentive to social practises and open to theorising the surprising ways sidewalks are shaped by the spaces around them.

Declarations

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