

**I'm a subsistence farmer...
get me out of here!**



**A film by Chew on it productions
in partnership with WORLDwrite**

Press Release: Film damns romantic vision of rural poverty

Chew on it productions in partnership with WORLDwrite are delighted to announce the completion and premiere of *I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here!*, a must-see documentary on Sunday 16th December 2007 at the Rich Mix Cultural Foundation in London.

I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here! is the final documentary in the *Pricking the Missionary Position* series. The film challenges the Western notion that subsistence life is a cultural preference or choice made by people in the developing world. In fact, the Ghanaians who feature in the film yearn for the comforts of urban modernity, and would rather live in a shanty town than stay stuck in subsistence life in rural areas. Christian wants to build with bricks and cement, not dirt mixed with his feet. Cephus wants mechanisation and a Jacuzzi, not mud and thatch. Comfort wants her kids off the farm and into education. De Roy explains that at least in a shanty town people can have access to a clinic, menial work, electricity, drinkable water, paved roads and TVs.

Director Ceri Dingle says:

“This film reveals the reality of rural subsistence life for many in the developing world, a starkly different one to the romantically imagined vision of a simple, tranquil, close-to-nature existence that Westerners and NGOs often wax lyrical about. Subsistence life means mud huts and mind-numbing toil, growing just enough to feed your family. Farms are often no larger than a Westerner’s back garden and farm machinery is nowhere to be seen; hand labour with cutlass and hoe is the rule. To those disillusioned with modernity and industrialisation in the West, subsistence life may look sweet, laidback and simple, but the reality is that it’s just survival, with no prospects.”

Producer Viv Regan adds:

“So often on the TV I see personalities - from celebrity chefs to anti-poverty campaigners - drooling over the simple life, looking from afar at the life of subsistence farmers in countries like Ghana and wishing we could all go back to those “organic” times. In the film, those who are still living the so-called simple life show us what nonsense this really is. Packed with hard-hitting truths which will disturb Western romantic notions of rural subsistence living, *I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here!* captures the aspirations of subsistence farmers who yearn for modernity and a better life.”

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Synopses

Short Synopsis (68 words)

As Westerners celebrate nature and the so-called simple life, many in the developing world yearn for the comforts of urban modernity. Shot in Ghana, the film is packed with hard-hitting truths which may disturb Western romantic notions of rural life. We learn that many would rather live in an urban shanty town than stay stuck in subsistence life in rural areas, which means mud huts and mind-numbing toil.

Medium Synopsis (142 words)

As Westerners celebrate nature and the so-called simple life, many in the developing world yearn for the comforts of urban modernity. Shot in Ghana, we learn that many would rather live in an urban shanty town than stay stuck in subsistence life in rural areas. Subsistence life means mud huts and mind-numbing toil. Helen wants a proper job. Cephus wants a commercial farm and a Jacuzzi, not mud walls and thatch. Comfort wants her kids off the farm and into education. De Roy explains that at least in a shanty town people can have access to a clinic, menial work, electricity, drinkable water, paved roads and TVs. *I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here!* is the final documentary in the *Pricking the Missionary Position* series. It is packed with hard-hitting truths which may disturb Western romantic notions of rural life.

Long Synopsis (250 words)

As Westerners celebrate nature and the so-called simple life, many in the developing world yearn for the comforts of urban modernity. Shot in Ghana, we learn that many would rather live in an urban shanty town than stay stuck in subsistence life in rural areas. Subsistence life means mud huts and mind-numbing toil, growing just enough to feed your family. Farms are often no larger than a Westerner's back garden and farm machinery is nowhere to be seen; hand labour with cutlass and hoe is the rule. Life looks sweet, laidback and simple, but the reality is that it's just survival, with no prospects.

Many vote with their feet, moving to towns whenever they can to find work and social amenities. In the film we visit Tsibu Bethel in Ghana's Volta region for a taste of subsistence life. We meet Christian, who wants to build with bricks and cement, not dirt mixed with his feet. Cephus wants mechanisation and a Jacuzzi, not mud and thatch. Comfort wants her kids off the farm and into education. De Roy explains that at least in a shanty town people can have access to a clinic, menial work, electricity, drinkable water, paved roads and TVs. Packed with hard-hitting truths which may disturb Western romantic notions of rural life, the film captures the aspirations of subsistence farmers who yearn for modernity and a better life. *I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here!* is the final documentary in the *Pricking the Missionary Position* series.

Escaping Nature: The Reality of Subsistence Life

by De Roy Kwesi Andrew

As my mother's mud home is washed away in floods in West Ghana, exposing the nation's infrastructural inadequacies, many in the West continue to romanticise about rural poverty, despite the advanced urban development aspirations of most Ghanaians.

During the summer I visited my family home, Achimfo and Yiwabra, in the western region of Ghana. My trip was the result of three days of torrential rainfall and flooding in the Aowin-Suaman district in the western region of Ghana, which affected 8,000 people in ten communities, including the district capital, Enchi. The flood occurred in the last week of July, and didn't subside until early August. Within 24 hours of the rain falling most communities along the river Disue and its tributaries were submerged in water. Consequently, about 600 houses mainly made of mud were washed away, leaving their residents homeless.

One of the communities most severely hit by the flood disaster, Achimfo, is where my 76-year-old mother lives. My mother's hut was one of about 110 houses condemned to rubble by the flood in this community of about 1,200 people. She told me she felt helpless as she sat by the roadside all night watching her home being gradually washed away by the approaching water. Victims of the flood, including my mother, had nowhere to lay their heads as the water kept approaching and were forced to sleep on the streets, and the few available places in the churches and cocoa sheds.

The lucky ones could stay with friends and relatives whose huts were still intact. However this was by no means a luxurious arrangement; the predominantly mud-walled, thatch-roofed houses usually contain just one small bedroom and accommodate everything from foodstuffs and stinking fish to rats and human beings. The houses are also poorly lit and lack good ventilation, let alone any other modern facilities. And yet, after the floods hit, up to ten people were forced to sleep together in single huts in these dire conditions.

Of course, after the water started receding, the flood victims had no choice but to erect the same old style of primitive huts all over again - as if they were living in medieval times! I very much doubt if anyone could afford to be protected by insurance, let alone housing that could withstand flooding. Indeed, out I went as well to chop down lumber and rebuild my mother's home from scratch with only an axe for resources. Yet this only led to my arrest by forest guards! My crime: to have felled a tree on our own farm without first obtaining a special license - the result of some of the green nonsense that is now rearing its ugly head in Ghana. It makes me wonder what a subsistence farmer is expected to do if he can't even subsist off his own land?

It was this naked exposure to nature's brute power that I had turned my back on when I first moved out of the countryside and into the capital Accra.

Born in the neighbouring Yiwabra, hope for a better future has been my dream since childhood. I wanted to escape my family's life in the countryside for the promise of the city, because rural life in Ghana does not pay. Subsistence farming, the mainstay of the rural economy, is a wretched way of life filled with toil. Backbreaking tools are what our farmers use to till the land (although western NGOs such as Oxfam patronisingly describe

this as the application of "appropriate technology"). Over-reliance on such crude farming methods has resulted in low yields, low productivity and paltry incomes that can barely take care of a family in a rural setting.

My parents farmed for the past 70 years and yet my mother has little to show for this labour. Like most other rural-dwellers she still sleeps in a mud house, drinks from polluted streams and walks for long distances carrying heavy loads of cocoa and foodstuffs. This is not because it is idyllic to do so, and neither is it because it is part of our culture; it is because she has no choice! Farmers don't have the means to acquire modern tools and equipment for commercial agriculture. Education, telecommunications, health, water sewage, market and road infrastructures are either poor or nonexistent. It's against this background that swathes of people - especially the energetic youth - flee the rural areas to urban centres in search of a brighter future. This is why people in rural Ghana send their children to the cities to go and stay with friends and relatives; that way they can have a more meaningful and enjoyable life.

Indeed, now that I live in Ghana's capital Accra I am better off in all facets of life compared to my peers left behind in the village. I earn three pounds sterling a day as a trained teacher in a basic school, and I'm able to pursue further studies at a private university. I enjoy many of the trappings of modernity as an urban dweller: a variety of entertainments, quality education for my son, hi-tech hospitals, good roads, portable water, telecommunication, good housing, modern electronic gadgets (washing machines, kettles, microwaves, refrigerators, etc.,) and so forth. In fact, I'm putting up a five bedroom cement block self-contained house with modern toilet and kitchen facilities for my mother and relatives from my village. Neither this, nor my dreams of travelling to Europe, would ever have happened if I had stayed in my home village, uneducated and working as a subsistence farmer.

It is in response to some of these aspirations that so many people like myself have chosen to live in urban areas no matter what difficulties they may face. The 2007 UN report on urbanisation has said that over half the world's population - or 3.3 billion people - now live in urban areas, with this likely to expand to 5 billion by 2030. While my peers and I - along with the authors of the report - celebrate this trend, many in the West will likely bemoan these developments as an example of overpopulation or the destruction of indigenous culture and nature's beauty.

Whatever these critics may claim, the trappings of modern life and development are anchored in the town and city. Choices and opportunities are commonplace here, and as a result shanty towns are mushrooming at an increasing pace in many urban areas in Ghana. Old Fadama (Sodom & Gomorrah) in Accra is one of many such shanty towns sprouting from our cities. Day in, day out, squatters from all parts of Ghana arrive there in droves, all in search of a brighter future; this is in spite of the insanitary conditions, the mud and the mosquitoes. And yet squatters living in Old Fadama say they have good reasons for settling there. They are able to get portable water, a good education for themselves and their children, jobs in shops, offices and markets. They also get better incomes than they would staying in the rural areas and working on cocoa fields and engaging in subsistence farming.

Modern urban life has become a part of all of us in Ghana. We urbanites try our best to live it while rural dwellers, like those in my mother's village, can only dream it. Nothing could be further from the truth than that of the romantic image painted of rural African

farmers living the idyllic simple lives close to nature and far from the stresses of the modern world. As the flood victims in my mother's village can testify, nature is cruel and destructive, while modernity offers security, comfort and the chance to truly fulfil one's aspirations. We in Ghana, especially in the countryside, live in constant uncertainty because we lack the infrastructure that protects us from the next random act of nature.

It would therefore come as no surprise to learn that rural dwellers are yearning for urban life and industrialization to release them from these shackles of poverty. WORLDwrite's film I'm a subsistence farmer... get me out of here! provides the real picture. Westerners who romanticise subsistence life and nature should think again or swap with Ghana's rural residents.

De Roy Kwesi Andrew
WORLDwrite, Ghana

Production Information

Production Company

A Pricking the Missionary Position film

A documentary by Chew on it productions in partnership with WORLDwrite

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Production notes

Original format: DV CAM

Online edit: Avid Express Pro

Digital cut format: Mini DV, DV CAM, Digibeta & DVD PAL (all regions) & DVD NTSC

Aspect Ratio: 4:3

Length: 27:45

Completion: November 2007

Contributors (in order of appearance)

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Crew

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Terri Badham and Sadhavi Sharma

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Film Logging and Research

Carol Dodsworth & Asmita Damania

Film Logging

Keresha Thomas & Holly Stead

Film Logging

Music

Elikem - Ewe songs

Peacespeakers - In the end

Chaos Cleaner - Everyone

With special thanks to: John, Comfort, Cephus, Christian, Efornam, Elizabeth and all the subsistence farmers in Tsibu Bethel, Volta region, and members and residents of the Old Fadama community in Accra, Ghana.

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