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# *Kayayei*: the women head porters of southern Ghana

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## **ABSTRACT**

*For over a decade now, southern Ghana has witnessed a growing influx of young women and teenage girls whose sole business is to engage in the head portering of goods. This paper offers information on who these women and girls are, why they migrate from their places of origin, why they engage in that business and the plans they have for the future. A non-random sample of 700 subjects were selected for the study. Unstructured interviews and personal observation were used as the tools for data collection. It was found that most of the woman porters hail from the savanna zones of northern Ghana and adjoining areas of Burkina Faso and Togo. They move down south to work and save money for various forms of investment. The paper attributes the push factor, poverty, to the interplay of natural phenomena and human agency. Suggestions for policy measures are offered.*

## **KEYWORDS**

exploitation, head portering, migration, poverty, women

## **Introduction**

It is an undeniable fact that, given sufficient opportunities for employment, income, personal fulfilment, a more equitable distribution of resources, wealth and so on, most people would choose to stay close to their loved ones and their culture. In the absence of such an

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ideal world, people have to move (Klein 2000). In the face of population growth, competition for land and decreasing farm productivity, for example, migration either for a short term or a long term is usually considered a worthwhile alternative to poverty and deprivation at home (Netting 1993). The situation recounted above may explain the recent trends in the short term southward migration of women within the West African sub-region.

For over a decade now there has been an high rate of migration of teenage girls and young women who have never been to school, as well as those who have some limited schooling, into leading market centres in southern Ghana. Those teenage girls and young women come principally from the savanna regions of northern Ghana and contiguous areas in Burkina Faso and Togo. A small number of them come from other parts of southern Ghana. While in the south these teenage girls and young women engage almost exclusively in the carrying of luggage on their heads for a fee. A woman who engages in such a business is referred to as a *kayayoo*.

*Kaya* in the Hausa language means luggage, load or goods. *Yoo* means woman in Ga, the language of the indigenes of Accra, the Ghanaian capital. A *kayayoo* is thus a young woman or a teenage girl who carries other people's loads on the head for a fee. The plural form of *yoo* is *yei*, hence *kayayei* are women head porters. Because such women are ubiquitous in the towns and cities of southern Ghana, the terms *kayayoo* and *kayayei* have become part of the Ghanaian commercial vocabulary.

### **Conceptual framework**

Merton (1968) postulated that social systems have structures of opportunity that enable individuals and groups to pursue and achieve their individual and collective goals and aspirations. This suggests that, wherever and whenever opportunity structures are absent or are limited in a social system, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, for individuals and groups to achieve their goals and aspirations. Whenever opportunity structures are viable and fully functioning, individuals and groups feel a sense of security in the environment.

The frustrations resulting from their inability to achieve their aspirations in a given social system can cause strains and stresses among some social actors. In this event, ambition and frustration can impel the adventurous to seek ways of achieving their goals and aspirations. One way is to move out of the environment to seek their fortunes.

The phenomenal rise in the rate at which teenage girls and young women these days move down south from the northern savanna zone of Ghana and adjoining areas of Burkina Faso and Togo could be explained within the context of Merton's opportunity structure postulate.

### **Review of the literature**

Until recently in Africa, the tendency of women to move away from home has been due principally to marriage and marriage-related factors. On marriage, a woman has to leave her natal home to go and live with her husband in another town or village. With the advent of waged employment, men have had to migrate from economically lethargic areas into economically vibrant areas, taking their wives with them.

In some cases, however, the men do not take their wives along with them when they embark on their travels. In cases when remittances are spasmodic and inadequate the women, who have long been economically dependent on their husbands, usually face untold hardships. The hardships compel some of these women to seek divorce. Owing to their long economic dependence on their husbands, women who divorce tend to become destitute. Such women sometimes tend to flee to the towns and cities as an escape from poverty (Adepoju 1986).

Another marriage-related cause of women's migration, according to Nukunya (1969), is polygamy. According to this view, women in polygamous marriages often have to compete among themselves to win the favour and attention of their husbands. Such competition usually breeds jealousy, frustration and even hatred. Moving out to make money and come back to outshine one's rivals thus becomes a plan of action for some of such women. Interestingly, however, these marriage-related migrations of women have not attracted attention and critical comment. (Warren 1981).

Modern school education, too, has been a powerful factor contributing to the migration of young women in recent times. The migration of educated women for and waged employment is not a recent development. Since pre-independence times formal education has been linked in people's minds with jobs in the modern sector. On leaving school, both men and women have to flock to towns and cities in search for modern sector jobs (D'Aeth, 1983). With the increased participation of women in formal education, the cityward drift of school leavers has been on the rise. Until the beginning of the 1990s, therefore, the large-scale movement of young women into the cities has been associated principally with those educated at school. The migration of young women and teenage girls with little or no formal education, though noteworthy, has not been as voluminous as that of the school-educated.

A recent trend in women's migration in West Africa is the movement of young women and teenage girls from the northern savanna zones into market centres of southern Ghana. The rising rate of this phenomenon has attracted research interest in Ghana. The most insightful of these works are those of Agarwal, et al. (1994), Apt et al. (1992) and Apt et al. (mimeo).

The gist of all these works is that these women move down south to serve as head load carriers because, as school dropouts as well as unschooled youngsters, they possess hardly any skills besides farming. They engage in the *kaya* business because they see it as the only self-employment that could enable them to acquire minimum assets for either a better marriage or prospects for future investment in more lucrative ventures. These youngsters actually get the blessing of parents and relatives to embark on the southward adventure, because, the opportunities for employment and savings are so limited in their home towns and villages.

As to why these young women do not use any transport technology in their business as their male counterparts do, the explanation offered by researchers is that the *kaya* business, like petty trading, belongs to the informal sector of the economy. It is the most readily available form of informal self employment for young immigrants who possess no

non-human capital (Agarwal et al. 1994, Apt et al. [mineo], Ardayio-Schandorf and Kwafu-Akoto 1990).

### **The wider context in northern Ghana**

There is abject poverty in the places where the *kayaye* come from which tends to push them out to improve their economic position. A brief description of the conditions prevailing in northern Ghana and contiguous areas of Burkina Faso and Togo follows, together with an account for both the natural and human agents responsible for these conditions.

For more than a decade now the rainfall pattern in the geographical area under discussion has been disappointing. This has been causing long periods of drought which lead, in turn, to incessant crop failures with low incomes and poverty. One would have expected that some pragmatic attempts would be made to arrest the crippling situation. Unfortunately, however, hardly anything meaningful has been done. The contribution of humans is even more serious. For decades there has been over-farming and over-grazing in the savanna lands of West Africa. These bad agricultural practices have rendered the soils that are thin and poor in many places. Such soils cannot support crops, resulting in incessant low crop yields, low incomes, famine and poverty. Nothing meaningful has been done to reverse the damage. The states affected have not been able to co-operate and embark on any pragmatic or long-term measures to ameliorate the conditions in that sub-region. Given the harsh ecological conditions, women who depend on rain-fed peasant farming for a living have had to contend with the problem of poor soils, low crop yields, famine and poverty. The young ones find it economically expedient to move out of the area, at least temporarily.

Another human agency dimension is that of inadequate job creation. One measure taken under structural adjustment has been a reduction in government size, leading to labour retrenchment. As a result, hundreds of thousands of workers have been thrown out of work. Since few new jobs are created to absorb those laid-off, unemployment is constantly on the rise. Women whose husbands are out of employment have been

compelled to take up the *kaya* business in order to earn an income to support their families. Such women tend to be southern Ghanaians.

A third human agency factor is that of another government policy. Following structural adjustments in the economies of some West African countries, subsidies on agricultural inputs such as seeds, chemicals, tools and tractor hiring have been removed. The removal of these subsidies has made farming even more expensive for women who invariably have no access to credit. (Krueger et al. 1988).

### **The study**

The purpose of this study is to account for the growing increase in the trend of the southward migration of young women. To this end the following research questions will be used as a guide.

*Who are the kayayei?*

- Why do the *kayayei* engage almost exclusively in the carrying of head loads for a fee?
- Why is it that it is women, not men who carry head loads?
- Why do they not employ any form of transport technology?
- What factors prompt the *kayayei* to move down south?
- What is the nature of the *kaya* business?
- What problems do the *kayayei* face in their business?
- How do the *kayayei* manage their finances?
- What are the future plans of the *kayayei*?

### **Data and measures**

*The sample*

Data for this study were collected from a non-random sample of 700 young women and teenage girls. Selecting a random sample was impossible because in the first place the *kayayei* did not stay long enough in the same place for easy contact. Secondly, because they were so busy many of the *kayayei* were not willing to be engaged in any conversation lasting more than five minutes. In view of this, only those *kayayei* who allowed us to interview them during their break periods were involved in the study. Through this process the sample of 700 could be selected by convenience from all the major markets in the

Accra-Tema metropolitan area. The selected subjects were interviewed in Hausa, Twi or Ga (in most cases through an interpreter).

### *Instruments and procedure*

Data were collected using both unstructured interviews and personal observation. On some occasions those *kayayei* who were willing were grouped together in conversation. Such *kayayei* were usually Dagomba girls who could speak Asante Twi fluently.

The markets were visited on several occasions to observe how the *kayayoo* business was conducted. Efforts were made to identify places where the *kayayei* used to group together during their rest hours. Those who were willing were engaged in exclusive interviews. During the discussion any friend around who wanted to chip in an answer or a piece of information was allowed to do so. On some occasions all those gathered were engaged in a discussion and the explanations collectively offered were recorded.

### *Variables*

This is both a quantitative and an ethnographic study. Some of the variables are quantifiable while others are not. The quantifiable variables are the respondent's father's education and the education of the respondent herself. These were measured in terms of level of education attained. These were coded as follows: 1, no schooling; 2 primary; 3, secondary; 4, more than secondary. In the case of the respondents themselves, the categories were 1, no schooling; 2, primary; 3, junior secondary/middle school and 4, secondary. The other variable is the age of the respondent. The first category was under 15 years; the second, 16 to 20 years; the third, 21 to 30 years and the fourth, 31 years and above.

The ethnographic data gathered were recorded at the end of the day's fieldwork. Some key issues were, however, recorded in the course of the discussions and unobtrusive observations.

### **Analysis and results**

Simple frequency and percentage distributions were used to present the data purported to yield answers to the research questions. To answer



Table I: Educational attainment of fathers

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
No schooling	471	67.3
Primary/middle schooling	225	32.1
Secondary schooling	4	0.6
More than secondary	0	0.0
TOTAL	700	100.0

the first research question. "Who are the *kayavei*?", the respondent was asked to indicate the level of education attained by her father. The father's education was used to represent the parents' education because, in the region where the *kayavei* come from more emphasis is put the education of boys and very few mothers have been to school. The data in Table I indicate that most of the *kayavei* came from homes where their fathers had either never been to school or had limited amounts of schooling. This suggests that such fathers were not in high status, high income-yielding occupations. Most of the *kayavei* therefore came from economically disadvantaged homes.

In the second step, the respondent was asked to indicate her age. As indicated in Table II most of the *kayavei* were aged between 16 and 30 years. This shows that they were youthful and economically active members of their communities.

In the third step the distribution of the *kayavei* by level of education was studied alongside their age. Table III presents the various age groups by level of education.

Table II Distribution of *kayavei* by age

Age group	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 15 years	49	7
16-20 years	315	45
21-30 years	260	37
31 years and above	76	11
TOTAL	700	100

Table III: Education and age groups of *kayayei*

Education	under 15		16-20		21-30		31+	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
No schooling	31	63	210	66.7	199	76.5	58	76
Primary	18	37	92	29.2	38	23.5	18	24
Juniorsec/middle	0		13	4.1	0		0	
Secondary	0		0		0		0	

Table IV: Distribution of *kayayei* by place of origin

Origin	Frequency	Percentage
Dagbon	335	47.9
Mamprugu	75	10.7
Gonja	70	10.0
Bimboba	65	9.3
South	56	8.
Kotokoli	50	7.1
Mossi	49	7
TOTAL	700	100

The data indicate that a majority of the *kayayei* had either no schooling or very limited schooling. From observation it was found necessary to put the *kayayei* into three main categories. The first category was made up of young girls under the age of 15 (9-12 years, to be precise). These girls were found to be staying with relatives who were already well established in the city. The second category was made up of those aged between 16 and 30 years. Most of these women were found to live and work under dismal conditions. They spent their nights in booths and market stalls, on verandahs in front of store houses and other such places. They had virtually nowhere to wash themselves except the public baths attached to the markets.

The third category was made up of women aged between 31 and 40 years. Although some of these women were found living in modest accommodation with their children, they were in the minority. They had

been compelled by deteriorating economic conditions to enter into the *kayayoo* business in order to make some money to help run the home.

To learn more about who the *kayayei* were it became necessary to find out where they came from. Table IV shows the distribution of these female head load carriers by place of origin. Grouping together those from Dagbon, Mamprugu, Gonja and Bimboba it is clear that almost 80 per cent of the *kayayei* in this study hailed from the northern region of Ghana. The rest came from southern Ghana and neighbouring countries.

The next research question was concerned with why the *kayayei* were engaged almost exclusively in the *kaya* business. Four main reasons for entering into the business were offered, as shown in Table V. From this table it is clear that the women and teenage girls have good reasons for being in the *kaya* business. The majority wanted to save money to enter into large-scale trading or other sedentary work because, according to them, the opportunities for building up the necessary capital did not exist in their place of origin. Another is that they wanted to save money, not only for investment, but also to buy personal effects in readiness for marriage. They needed items such as clothes, shoes, jewels, kitchenware and other essential items which society expects a newly-wed to take to her matrimonial home.

Other women were in the business because their husbands had lost their jobs. Such women, mainly in their 30s and 40s, had to earn money to survive and to support their children in school. The last group was made up of girls who should have been in school. These girls indicated that they were working to save money to buy tools and enter into

Table V: Reasons for entering the *kaya* business

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Savings for future investment	401	57.3
Save for marriage needs	388	55.4
Support family	76	10.9
Save for apprenticeship	39	5.6
No definite reason	10	1.4

SOME RESPONDENTS OFFERED SEVERAL REASONS

apprenticeships. Dressmaking and hairdressing were the most popular trades cited.

From the reasons offered it can be concluded, as an answer to the research question, that the young women and girls were in the *kaya* business because they needed money for many things, investment being the principal one. They had to move down south because they had very limited opportunities for realizing their goals in their place of origin. They engaged almost exclusively in the *kaya* business because it requires virtually no capital outlay.

The next research question was why it is women, not men, who engage in the *kaya* business and why they did not use any form of transport. From conversations with the *kayayei* and through personal observation it was learned that the *kaya* business is a specialized one because carrying of loads on the head is thought of as women's work, whereas carrying luggage on a cart (called a "truck") is a man's job. They explained that pushing a truck is hard work that is considered masculine. These explanations are consistent with those of Agarwal et al. (1994) and Apt et al. (1992), according to whom petty trading in the informal sector, including head portage, lies primarily in the domain of women. As to why the *kayayei* do not use any form of transport in their business the answer, as inferred by Agarwal et al. (1994) and Apt et al. (1992) is that, as the *kayayei* do not intend to stay long in the south, there is no need to invest in any such technology.

The next research question concerns the nature of the *kaya* business. It was observed that the women operate in major market centres in southern Ghanaian towns and cities and their clients are mainly women. The market women usually engage them to carry their wares from storage points in the morning. At the end of the day's business, they carry the goods back to the storage points. In many cases the *kayayei* have to walk from place to place, looking for clients. Others sit together, waiting to be engaged. At other times they have to follow women shoppers to assist them by carrying their luggage as they shop and as they go to the carpark after shopping. Traders, like shoppers, also engage the *kayayei* to carry their luggage to the transport terminals. In all these

cases the *kayayoo* is paid a fee that has already been agreed upon at the end of the service.

In the course of rendering their services, the *kayayei* could be cheated by their clients, most of whom are themselves women. A case in point was a 19 year-old Burkinabé woman who once carried a woman's luggage from the central business area of Accra to another place some 1.5 km away. The client failed to pay the fee mutually agreed upon. Instead, when she was comfortably seated in a bus, she threw half of the fee down to the *kayayoo*. According to the *kayayoo* some of their bitterest experiences in the course of their business come from their women clients. It is because of abuses such as these that the *kaya* business is perceived in certain quarters as an exploitation of women by women (Amuzu 1999)

The ethnographic study revealed that the *kayayei* are really vulnerable. Some of those without fixed addresses keep their personal effects with relatives in town. Sometimes these trusted relatives cheat them. A case in point was an 18 year-old woman from Kumbungu in the northern region of Ghana, who could not go back home to get married as planned because the uncle who had taken custody of her personal effects could not account for them. Another case was that of a 16 year-old Burkinabé girl who could not go back to her village because her distant relative could not account for almost all the kitchenware, clothes and other non-cash possessions that had been lodged with her.

They also face the problem of sexual harassment and abuse. Occasionally, especially on rainy nights, some men who appear decent offer them shelter but end up taking advantage of the women and sexually abusing them. It is not surprising then that the incidence of unwanted pregnancies is so high among these women. Indeed it has been indicated in newspaper reports that each month about 50 per cent of all children born to *kayayei* at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra are abandoned by their mothers (*Weekly Spectator* 1999, p.6). Such children are always taken up by benevolent institutions.

The next question was whether the *kaya* business served its purpose for the women moved down south. This question must be answered by

those who practice the business, for they experience it and know what they derive from it. Accordingly respondents were asked to give an idea of how much they made on an average day, how they managed their money and whether the business met their social and economic goals.

It was learned that, compared with the ordinary unskilled and semi-skilled Ghanaian worker, the average *kayayoo* was doing really well. At the time of compiling data for this study the average *kayayoo* was making about twice the national daily minimum wage. Whether this is an overstatement or not is beside the point since it indicates that the average *kayayoo* earns more than the daily minimum wage. The *kayayoo* may be financially better off than the average unskilled or semi-skilled Ghanaian worker. However, considering the hazards they are exposed to, the abuses they have to undergo and the fact that they have no social security, it is clear that the long-term effects of the work on the health and general life of these women are negative. A business like this can have long term private and social costs.

As a way of managing their finances the *kayayei* save some of their earnings through the popular non-banking savings system known as *susu*. An individual contributor pays a fixed amount of money daily to a *susu* collector for a period of 30 days. The collector keeps a day's contribution as his commission. After collecting the month's haul most of the *kayayei* save the bulk with the formal banking system. The very young ones, however, save their money with the relatives they live with. As to whether the head portorage business was serving the purpose for which they moved down south, more than half the *kayayei* were of the view that it served as a better alternative to the life of poverty and deprivation they had to contend with back at home.

The last research question was whether the *kayayei* had plans for the future. The data in Table V on why the *kayayei* move down south answered this question. Rational or non-rational as the *kaya* venture may seem to be, it is an undeniable fact that those in the business have realistic plans for the future: they all want to save money for various things—investment, apprenticeship and the purchase of personal effects as well as to keep body and soul together.

## **Summary and discussion**

The *kayayei* are teenage girls and young women who come mainly from the savanna zones of the northern region of Ghana. Others come from Burkina Faso and Togo. A limited number come from southern Ghana itself. Those from the north move south because of the abject poverty in their home areas. Unskilled as they are they have to engage in the load-carrying business because it entails little or no capital outlay. No transport is used because, in the eyes of the public, the use of trucks is too laborious and masculine for women. Furthermore, their stay in the south was for too short a period for it to be economically viable to invest in expensive technology. This explanation is consistent with inferences drawn by Agarwal et al. (1994). Finally the study has shown that the *kayayei* make some money which they manage well.

## **Conclusion**

Human action is calculated and based on rational choices and goal-directed decisions. It is therefore plausible to contend, on the basis of Merton's opportunity structure postulate, that wherever and whenever opportunity structures are limited, some members of the social system take the goal-directed action of seeking their fortune outside the environment. The southward migration of unschooled and minimally educated teenage girls and young women from the savanna zone of West Africa is thus a realistic adaptation of the young women to the frustrating conditions in which they live.

## **Suggestions for policy measures**

On the macro-economic scale, the problem of drought can be addressed through inter-state collaboration. Contiguous states need to embark on joint irrigation and dry farming projects to boost agricultural production and reduce famine and poverty. New genetic materials, particularly less water-dependent and disease-resistant crops and livestock must be distributed throughout the sub-region. The states involved would reap greater benefits if they were receptive to technologies that have worked under similar conditions elsewhere, rather than to embark on locale-specific basic research. In addition agroforestry needs to address the

agricultural environment problem. Extension service departments in the states concerned need to be strengthened and better resourced to disseminate the innovations found.

The removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs makes farming more expensive, especially for women with limited access to land and credit. It would be beneficial to reintroduce subsidies on agricultural inputs that are frequently used by women. An agricultural tax on luxury goods, for example, could be levied to raise revenue to support women in agriculture. It would be all the more beneficial if women's organizations would organize women farmers into co-operatives to enable them have access to credit. These measures would make agriculture less repulsive to ambitious young women.

As far as the working conditions and life prospects of the women themselves, there is no doubt that the *kayayei* make and for some time to come will continue to make, useful contributions to the economy of (southern) Ghana. It is a pity, however, that they live and work under such deplorable conditions, including being all too frequently the victims of sexual abuse. The plight of these vulnerable women would be improved if non-governmental organizations were invited, encouraged and supported to provide affordable dormitory accommodation for them. They should also be encouraged to provide vocational training and counselling services to the young *kayayei* by extending vocational counselling services in schools to them.

The suggestions by Agarwal et al. (1994) are supported here. The *kayayoo* should be involved in adult literacy programmes. As a part of this programme they could undergo training in business management to enable them better to manage their businesses and finances. The education programme must include health education, especially on the causes, incidence, and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

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