

A01



A04



A03



A05



# The Car Doctors of Maamobi

MANU HERBSTEIN

## Meet the car doctors of Maamobi.

Maamobi (A01) and the adjacent Accra suburb of Nima are slums: the standard of construction is poor, sanitation is poor and water supply is at best intermittent. Yet these areas serve a useful purpose, offering migrants from Ghana's rural areas and elsewhere in West Africa relatively low rent accommodation (typically 'chamber and hall') not far from places of work.

In 1976, JK Mensah, a master panel beater, rented a plot of land at the top end of the Nima highway and put up a signboard reading JK Mensah Auto Engineering Works. The population of Accra was then about 750,000. Mensah invited several car maintenance specialists to join him. Each of these masters employed apprentices. Mensah married one of his, Sister Esi, who in the course of time became a Master Panel Beater in her own right. The Mensahs subsequently emigrated to Germany, where they still live. The landlord later reclaimed the front strip of the plot and constructed a row of stores, which he let to dealers in electrical goods, cement and yoghurt (A03). A narrow passage provides the only access to the yard behind (A04). JK Mensah's sign is no more, but the successors of the original masters continue to operate in the tiny, congested, ungated yard behind the stores (A02 p.32, seen from the unfinished three-storey building to the west (A03 and A05).

There are eleven masters, three auto mechanics, an auto electrician, a panel beater and gas welder, a blacksmith and electric arc welder, an upholsterer, a sprayer, and brake band and car air conditioning specialists. Their ramshackle offices and stores line one side of the yard, offering the only shelter when it rains. The ground is unpaved, its surface irregular. They have a washroom but have to use a public toilet down the street. Each of the eleven co-tenants pays rent of about USD35 per month. When business is good, there isn't enough space in the yard for all the cars. Late arrivals wait their turn in the street outside. The landlord forbids this, but in between rent collection days he is an infrequent visitor.

Once a year the tax collectors of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly and the Internal Revenue Service visit the yard and, having given a week's notice, demand payment of tax totalling USD70-100. The masters used to pay their taxes individually but they have recently negotiated a single collective payment. The masters also pay membership dues to the Garage Owners Association.

The stories of the masters and their apprentices convey something of Accra's big-city magnetism; of ambitions realised and frustrated; of interacting ethnicities, languages and religious affiliations; and of families that stretch beyond the borders of Ghana and Africa.

The most senior of the masters, **Samuel ('Coach') Yeboah (B01)**, car refrigeration master, was born in 1942 at Amanase, near Suhum, 60km from Accra. His mother tongue is Akwapim Twi, but he speaks English as if it were his first language. He also speaks a little Ga.



Coach's father, the first Christian in his family, headed a succession of Presbyterian primary schools, most of them not far from Suhum. His mother was a seamstress. He has one sister, in Kumasi, as well as a half sister.

After leaving Middle School in the early 1960s, Coach worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, cutting down cocoa trees infected with capsid and replacing them with a quick-yielding resistant variety. Today he owns cocoa farms covering eight hectares and these are managed by members of his extended family.

In 1962 he was one of the pioneer students of the Agricultural Training College, which the State Farms Corporation established at Adidome in the Volta Region. There he received broad training in the use, maintenance and repair of agricultural machinery and specialised as an auto electrician.

In 1965 he moved to Accra where he drove a taxi, without a license, for six months. Then RT Briscoe, the Mercedes Benz and Volkswagen agents, employed him as an auto electrician grade 2. He took advantage of their training schemes to acquire a broad range of skills, including battery assembly, diesel pump repair and car refrigeration.

Later, he registered a company, New Ideas Engineering Agency Ltd., with the intention of importing spare parts. When the Ministry of Trade red tape confounded his efforts, he started his career as an independent master in car refrigeration.

Coach has been married for 41 years. He preaches every Sunday at The Touch of Faith Ministry, a Pentecostal church at Adenta, a suburb of Accra.

The Yeboahs have five children. Two sons are in Atlanta, Georgia, one a medical student (whose daughter is at boarding school in Ghana) and the other an architect, studying for a second degree. A third son, studying medicine in Freiburg, Germany, is married to a German woman. The youngest son, 28 years old, works as an arc welder in Accra. Their only daughter, a nurse, is married and has two sons and a daughter.



A02

Coach is presently building a five-bedroom house. As soon as this is finished and his single apprentice completes his training, he plans to retire and devote himself to his cocoa farms.

**Klutsey Lagoh (B02)**, car upholstery master, was born in 1950 at Fenyi near the Ghana-Togo border. He was one of the first masters to join JK Mensah, in 1978. He speaks Ewe, English and Twi and understands Ga and Hausa.

Klutsey's parents worshipped African gods. Though his father had no formal education, he was a man of many skills: a farmer (growing cassava and maize), a palm wine tapper, a wood carver and a blacksmith. Klutsey was the last born of 14 children. When his father declined to send him to school he bought a piece of cloth and had a tailor sew him a uniform. This persuaded his mother to have him registered and his father then agreed to pay the fees.

Klutsey was a bright student and a favourite of all but one of his teachers. In 1972 he moved to Accra, joining a senior brother who trained him as an upholsterer. After trying his hand at panel beating and working for R.T. Briscoe for a year, he bought a sewing machine and set up on his own.

Klutsey has ten children, ranging in age from nine to 38. Two of them attended the Fenyi-Dzodze Secondary School, but their final results were a disappointment to their father.

One of these sons, **Justice**, 23, (B02a) was born in Newtown, Accra. His home language is Ewe but by the time he entered primary school he was already speaking some English. He reads and writes both Ewe and Ga.

Klutsey has trained Justice as an upholsterer. Justice's favourite school subject was Visual Arts and he continues to paint. He has a portfolio of pictures but hasn't sold any to date. His ambition is to help his father expand his business and to develop his artistic skills.



B01



B02a



B02





Bo8



Bo3



Bo5



Bo7



Bo4

**Fuseini Abubakar (B08)**, Master Auto Electrician, was born in 1959 in Yendi, about 500km north of Accra. His father, a farmer (millet and yams), had four wives. Fuseini's mother had six children, some who live in Accra, the others in Yendi and nearby Zabzugu and Tatale. Fuseini spoke Dagbani as a child. He attended Balagu Primary School, an English-medium government school and completed Middle Form IV in 1980. His education was curtailed because of problems with the payment of school fees. He came to Accra and served an apprenticeship with a master who stills works in Nima.

Fuseini currently has 11 apprentices. He says that the apprentices he has trained are too many to count. Many of them are today in Spain, Italy and Germany. He charges apprentices a commitment fee of USD550 plus two crates of minerals. The family of a graduating apprentice is expected to pay for refreshments at the graduation ceremony.

Fuseini has one wife but plans to take another. His wife is a Fanti from Cape Coast, a Christian who converted to Islam when she married him. There were already some Muslims in her family so the conversion presented no problems. They speak Hausa, which she learned after moving to Accra. They have six children ranging in age from seven to 28. The eldest is a student at a teacher training college.

**Alfred Kofi Sokpe (B03)**, master auto mechanic, was born in 1956 in Accra. His parents hail from Aklaku in Togo. His father was a house painter.

Kofi was one of eight children, of whom seven survived to adulthood. They all now live in Pokoasi, 20km from Accra.

Kofi attended the Kings Royal Mission School in Nima and the Kotobaabi K2 where he reached Middle Form II before problems with the payment of school fees curtailed his formal education.

After completing his apprenticeship he worked for some time as a driver mechanic. He joined JK Mensah in 1986 and since then has trained six apprentices. His wife, who, like Kofi, is Ewe, sells foodstuffs. They have four children. The eldest, aged 15, is in JSS 2.

Kofi speaks Ewe, English, Ga, Hausa and Twi.

**Eric Kobina Sapeh**, master panel beater and auto gas welder (seen in B04 with his apprentice Godsway Kpasrah and on the right in B07), was born in 1964 in Ho, the capital of Ghana's Volta Region, 150km from Accra.

His father was an accountant in the Department of Agriculture, latterly based in Accra, and his mother sold cloth. He still has family in Ho. His mother tongue is Ewe. He reads the Bible in that language and, when visiting Ho, attends church services in Ewe. Kobina also speaks Ga, Twi and English. In Accra he attends the Ebenezer Church of Yahweh Seven Days, where the services are conducted in Twi.

Kobina started school at the age of six in Peki, some 50km from Ho, while living with his grandmother. He was 28 before he completed Middle Form IV. He says that the youngest of his fellow students were then about 20 or 21 years of age.

When his father refused to continue paying his school fees, he moved to Accra to stay with his mother's brother. After a three-month course at a technical school, he signed on as an apprentice. Five years later he joined JK Mensah as an assistant to his wife, Sister Esi. Since the Mensahs' emigration to Germany he has acted as their agent in Accra.

Kobina has two apprentices, Raymond Agyei from Jasikan and Godsway Kpasrah (B04) from Peki, both of them introduced to him by one of his brothers.

His wife hails from Lolobi Kumasi, near Hohoe, also in the Volta Region. They have two daughters, a nine-year old in Primary 5, whose ambition is to be a nurse and a seven-year old in Primary 3, who plans to be an accountant.

Kobina says the masters in the yard all work well together, without friction.

He has never had a bank account but has in the past belonged to a Susu savings club, which charges a fee of one day's contribution per month – effectively 3.33 per cent per month. If he could borrow at a more reasonable rate of interest, he says he might buy accident cars and rebuild them for sale.

**Saddam 'Fahilu' Adam**, master of brake linings (seen in B05 with his apprentice Faisal Atta Hassan in the background), was born in 1979 at Chamba near Bimbilla in the Northern Region of Ghana, about 500km north of Accra. His parents were farmers, who grew yams and cereals.



He was educated in a government school in Togo. Apart from his home language, Chamba, he speaks French, Kotokoli, Hausa, Fanti and some English. He says he had reached class 4 or 5 before he could speak French. In 1994, after the death of his father, he left school and moved to Accra to join family. He was apprenticed the following year. An observant Muslim, he is married with two infant children. He says he doesn't plan to have more. Fahilu dreams of travelling to the United States.

His sole apprentice, **Faisal Atta Hassan**, born in 1988, also traces his origins to Chamba but was born at Anum Apapam, near Suhum, 60km from Accra. His parents now live in 'Agege' (Lagos, Nigeria) with four of their children. One of Faisal's siblings lives in Accra.

He completed JSS (Junior Secondary School) at an Islamic school for boys and girls. The only technical skill he acquired at JSS was construction drawing.

After leaving school he spent two years at home, living with his grandmother, before moving to Accra and taking up this apprenticeship. He expects to qualify at the end of the year and to set up in business on his own.

He last visited Chamba two years ago.

**Felix Kobina Aganyo (B06)**, master auto mechanic, was born in Accra in 1973. His late father's home town was Agbozume, near Aflao on the Togo border. His mother tongue is Ewe.

His father was a Christian but nevertheless had two wives.

Felix has six sisters and four brothers, of whom he is the eldest. His youngest brother is 22 and works as a photographer. His other brothers also do technical jobs. His sisters are married and mainly engaged in petty trade. Felix's mother and his sisters still live in the house that his late father built in Accra.

Felix started to learn English through songs and poetry when he was sent to a kindergarten in nearby Kotobaabi at the age of three. Though he speaks Ewe fluently, he cannot read or write the language well. After primary and junior secondary school he attended the National Vocational Training Institute, where he graduated with an auto mechanic's certificate in 1994. He then served a three-year apprenticeship at the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, before joining his father at JK Mensah, where Aganyo senior was a master auto mechanic.

Felix is married and has one child, a girl of three months. His wife is Ewe and works as a trader. They live in a rented chamber and hall nearby. He has ambitions for his child's education but recognises that these days a secondary school certificate or university degree is no guarantee of a job. Although his father managed to pay his school fees and those of all his siblings, times are harder now. He does not plan to have more than two children.

Felix has two apprentices. Relations with his fellow masters are good, in spite of their diverse ethnic identities.

**Ibrahim Morfen**, master auto sprayer (left in B07, holding forth to master auto mechanic Mashoud Mohammed ('Master Awudu') and master panel beater Eric Kobina Sapeh) was born in Kotobaabi, in 1962.

Ibrahim's father was born in Koforidua, 70km from Accra, his mother in Togo. His father's family home was at Aniho, in Togo and Ibrahim still has family there. He started school at Bamboi, on the Black Volta, 450km from Accra, where his father was working as a carpenter in the Public Works Department.

D03



Bo6



D02



His mother tongue is Ewe. After primary schooling in English up to class 6, he was sent to Togo and had to learn French. He also speaks Asante Twi, Ga and Hausa. He learned Hausa in Nima where it is a *lingua franca*.

Ibrahim's grandfather, who was working as a driver in Wenchi, 50km from Bamboi, took him on as his mate and taught him to drive. Then, in 1979, Ibrahim moved to Accra and served a four-year apprenticeship with a master sprayer in Kokomlemle. He paid his master the customary fees and received chop money in return. Though he has had no formal technical training, he has himself trained six apprentices, all of whom had previously attended technical school.

Ibrahim was once a Roman Catholic, as was his first wife. Their only daughter, now 25, married and attending teacher training college.

Living in Nima, all their neighbours were Muslims. After a dream, Ibrahim decided to convert to Islam. His wife's family objected and this led to the break-up of his marriage. He was then 28.

His second wife was born in Ghana, but her family hails from Djougou in northern Benin. Her home language is Dendi. They have three children, a daughter of 8 who was at the Madarassa at the time of our interview, a son Moosa, 5 (D02) and daughter Aisha, 2 (D03). At home they speak Hausa. Because Ibrahim was already an adult when he became a Muslim, he cannot read the Koran in Arabic.

His ambition for his children can be summed up in a single word: education.

Ibrahim would like to build a spraying shed, which he estimates will cost him about USD3500. He doesn't like to be in debt and is reluctant to take a bank loan. He recently guaranteed a moneylender's loan to his wife. Returning from a trading trip to Benin, with just two monthly instalments outstanding on her debt all her goods were stolen from her. Ten days after the following due date, the money lender arrived and seized Ibrahim's property.

He was not aware of the existence of organisations offering micro finance in Accra.



**Mashoud Mohammed ('Master Awudu') (B07, centre)** was born in Nima, Accra in 1961.

His father was a Kotokoli man from Pawa in the northern Volta Region, close to the Togo border, about 400km from Accra. The ancestors of the Kotokoli migrated from Burkina Faso in the 17th century, settling in lands that stretch from Ghana, through Togo to Benin. They could hardly have known that centuries later European foreign ministers, gathered in Berlin, would draw on their maps of Africa the inviolable boundaries which today define our nation states and divide the 400,000 Kotokoli among three of them.

In the 18th century the Kotokoli adopted Islam. In 1820 they built their first mosque. Today almost all of them are Muslims; but they still manage, even in an urban environment, to preserve some of their ancestral customs. And they still treasure their language, Tem.

Awudu's late father had four wives and twelve children of whom only seven survived to adulthood. Awudu's first wife had two daughters, one of whom succumbed to malaria in infancy. His other daughter, Alima Saidya, is now 13 and in her first year of Junior Secondary School. When her mother died, Awudu remarried. His second wife, Maria Alhassan, is a Dagomba who was born and raised in the Asante capital, Kumasi.

As a child, Awudu learned to read and write Arabic and recite long passages from the Koran by heart. A late starter in the state education sector, he stuck it out until he was 22, reaching Middle Form I, when increasing family responsibilities forced him to leave school and to begin to scratch a living as a self-employed casual porter at Accra's International Airport. At school he learned English but he also speaks Tem, Ewe, Hausa, Twi and some Ga.

After two years he had saved enough to pay an auto mechanic the commitment fee for an informal apprenticeship and later to buy his own set of tools. When he had completed his three years' training and a further year working for his master, he set up on his own. I was one of his early customers. He has superb practical skills, often diagnosing a fault merely by listening to the sound of the engine. My guess is that he might struggle with a written examination, but so what?

In his time Awudu has trained some 20 apprentices, most of whom are now running their own independent businesses, in Accra and elsewhere. Their commitment fees, today about USD200, provide him with some working capital. He gives his junior trainees 'chop money' (a food and soap allowance) of the equivalent of USD1-2 a day; seniors get more. Some of them live with their parents and walk to work; others sleep in the yard, serving as security guards.

Rather than operate a bank account, Awudu puts his spare cash into an informal Susu savings club. He has never applied for a bank loan, but has saved enough to build his own modest home at Amasamang, 15km from Accra.

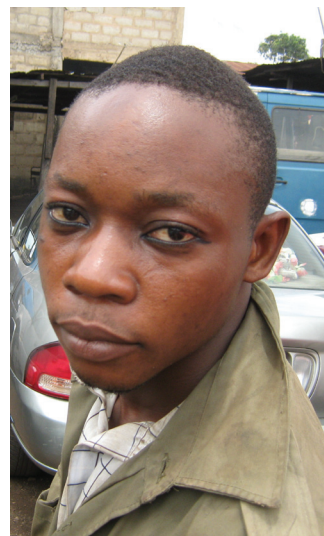
He prays regularly and goes to the Nima Mosque every Friday. His prime ambition is to perform the Haj.

Awudu has eight apprentices, more than any of his fellow masters. Seven of them appear in C01. **Mohammed Amidu**, on the left, is the senior apprentice.

**Abdul Rachid (C02 and 2nd left in C01)** was born in 1990 in Accra. His family is Kotokoli. At the age of five his parents took him to Kano, Nigeria, where they worked as food sellers. When his parents died in 2004, he returned to Accra to join his grandmother. Having attended a Koranic school, he can read Arabic. He speaks Hausa, but his command of other Ghanaian languages and English is poor. He has completed about six months of his three-year apprenticeship.



C01



C02

**Mubarak Amadu** (3rd left, C01) was born in 1989 in Bawku in the Upper East Region, about 750km north of Accra, close to the border of Burkina Faso. He finished JSS 2 and speaks Mossi, Hausa, Twi and English. In Accra, Mubarak lives with his grandparents and sisters. Asked what brought him to the capital, he says that there is no peace in Bawku, only chieftaincy disputes and revenge killing.

**Ibrahim Nuhu Kano** (4th left, front, C01), senior apprentice and due to graduate next year, was born in 1983 at Akyim Akroso, about 80km from Accra, where his parents still live. His father hails originally from Nigeria, coming to Ghana in 1954 from Sokoto.

Ibrahim's mother tongue is Hausa, but he also knows Twi, English, Ga, Kotokoli, Fanti and Arabic. He finished Junior Secondary School with good grades but was unable to proceed to Senior Secondary because his parents couldn't afford to pay the fees. At JSS the only technical skills he learned were pottery and farming.

In Ghana he has travelled widely. He dreams of going overseas, perhaps to Japan, to improve his skills as a mechanic.

**Fuad Ismail** (5th left, behind, C01) was born in Kumasi in 1992. His father is a driver and his mother sells yams. His home language is Hausa, but as a child he soon learned Asante and English. He attended the Nasrudeen Primary School and JSS, which cater for both boys and girls. He was accused of misbehaving and playing truant and was consequently sent to stay with his married sister in Maamobi. His ambition is to become a good mechanic and travel to the United States.

**Bunyami Osman** (6th left, front, C01) was born in 1991 in the Mossi Zongo in Kumasi, where his father deals in cellphones and his mother sells vegetables in the market. He attended the Ahmadiyya JSS and reached Form 3. He speaks Hausa, Asante and English and reads Arabic.

**Kunyima Abubakar Jamal** (right, back, C01). Like Mubarak, Kunyima hails from Bawku, where he was born in 1988 and where his father was a businessman dealing in building materials and his mother a hairdresser. His home language is Mossi and he also speaks Twi and English. He has lived in Accra since 2006. His mother also lives in Accra; his two brothers and two sisters are still in Bawku. At school he completed JSS. He is interested in practising art.



Osman Saeed (C03), just 15 years old, was born in 1995 at the Tesano Police Depot in Accra, where his father was a policeman. He is Awudu's most recent and youngest apprentice. He completed Primary class 4 at the Institute of Islamic Studies. When both his parents died, he was informally adopted by a lady called Hajia Asiah. Unfortunately, due to late payment of his fees, he was removed from the school roll. He hopes to resume his schooling.

Osman knows the Nima Children's Library but says he has to register before he can borrow books. He has some books at home. He found a German-language illustrated History of Germany, somewhat the worse for wear, in the boot of a car sent to Awudu for repair. He has been 'reading' it, studying one picture at a time, but finding it difficult to make head or tale of them.

I have tried, in this photo essay, to convey something of the texture of life and work in JK Mensah's yard. Rather than attempt a conclusion, I should like to suggest some of its limitations.

Family is an important element in the life of all these men; family stretching back from grandparents and forward, in some cases, to grandchildren. I have been able to capture no more than a hint of the changes that have taken place through the generations. The photographs of Ibrahim Morfen with his youngest children, Moosa and Aisha (D01-D03), suggest a missing dimension.

I have also failed to capture the changes that have occurred in the businesses of the individual masters since they were established. Photo F01, taken on 9 November 1996, hangs on the wall of Klutsey Lagoh's office. Klutsey sits at the centre, wearing sunglasses, flanked by his two senior apprentices. Five apprentices stand behind them. (The man on the right has since died 'from hernia'.) Klutsey's sons, Justice and Sylvester sit in front. Today Klutsey has no apprentices.



C03



D01

The masters and their apprentices interact with the world beyond JK Mensah's yard in manifold ways. Food vendors, such as Faija (E01), wander in. Near the entrance to the yard Hajara (E02) minds her mother's stall. There are customers requesting diagnosis of their vehicles' ills and quotations for repair. Defective parts are removed and taken for matching to Kokompe, the congested streets where the 1000 members of GASSDA, the Greater Accra Second-hand Spare Parts Dealers Association, offer used parts 'from home', Japan or Germany or wherever the ailing vehicle was manufactured.

There were 1.13 million vehicles on the road in Ghana at the end of 2009. I have not been able to discover how many there were in 1976, when JK Mensah set up shop, but my guess is that there might have been less than 200,000. In 34 years, Accra's human population has grown 3-fold to more than two million. In the same period the vehicle population might have grown to five or six times that number. How are the micro-economic business decisions of the masters affected by these numbers, statistics of which they might have no more than a rough qualitative awareness?

All the masters use mobile phones to keep in touch with customers, suppliers, apprentices and family. However, not one of them has a personal computer and, as far as I have been able to discover, none of them keeps written accounts. Would doing so help them increase their turnover and profits?

The stories I have collected have all been stories of men. Apart from the enigmatic character of Sister Esi, JK Mensah's wife, I came across no female masters or apprentices. What might that tell us about Ghanaian society today?

All the masters and apprentices are multilingual. I conducted the informal interviews recorded here in English. I wonder whether the stories I was told would have been different had the respondents spoken in their mother tongues and, if so, how?

I did not attempt to explore in-depth the multiple identities of these men: identities relating to gender, ethnicity, language, religion, and nationality. I asked one of the masters: 'Do you consider yourself a worker?' He had to give the matter some thought before replying in the affirmative. Although analytical terms derived from a different historical experience might be of limited value in attempting to understand the realities of this society, the underlying human stories remain.

I drive a 1987 Nissan Bluebird. For most of its life its engine has been maintained by my friends Awudu and Fuseini; Kobina has given a new lease of life to rusting bodywork, Klutsey has replaced worn upholstery and, once or twice, Ibrahim has given the Bluebird a fresh coat of autospray. I am grateful to them for having allowed me to photograph them and their place of work, for sharing their stories with me and for persuading their fellow masters and their apprentices to do likewise.



F01



E01



E02