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Love in Action: Active Benevolence and Communal Support in Ghanaian Culture

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While Western cultures often view love as internal feelings, West African cultural traditions view love as an active practice of physical care. Drawing on cultural models of social interdependence, the “materiality of care,” and *agape*, this article explores how Ghanaian communities put love into practice. From sharing daily resources to supporting neighbors, love is demonstrated through concrete action and shared responsibility. Discover how moving from “feeling” love to “enacting” love expands our understanding of human connection and offers a vital blueprint for active care in modern life.

Cultural Frameworks of Love Across Societies

Although psychological research demonstrates fundamental cross-cultural similarities in the ways people love, cultural conceptions of love vary significantly across societies (Karandashev, 2017). Cultural models shape how individuals experience, interpret, and express love, as well as the prevailing social norms governing interpersonal obligations (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Kaufmann, 2011).

In Western, industrialized, and individualistic contexts, models of love prioritize internal affective states, psychological intimacy, and individual self-expansion (Aron et al., 2006; Sternberg, 1986). These frameworks place high value on passionate love (*eros*), focusing primarily on subjective emotional feelings and personal fulfillment (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989). Conversely, collectivist societies emphasize companionate love, relational harmony, and active care, situating the individual within a broader matrix of social responsibilities (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Love in the Collectivist Context of Sub-Saharan Africa

In the interdependent communities of Sub-Saharan Africa, cultural models associate love with expressions of affect toward others, interdependent kin relationships, and concrete material provisioning (Coe, 2011; Cornwall, 2002). Within these cultural settings, love is rarely conceptualized as a mere internal sentiment or abstract emotion. Instead, it entails a deep commitment to social reciprocity, mutual responsibility, and the pragmatic allocation of material resources across social networks (Keefe, 2016).

Scholars examining West African relationship paradigms refer to this orientation as “real love” (van Eerdewijk, 2006) or the “materiality of care”

(Coe, 2011). In societies characterized by maintenance-oriented relationality, relational security and social harmony are maintained through active, continuous obligations (Adams & Kurtiş, 2015; Salter & Adams, 2012). Love is thus demonstrated and verified through tangible action rather than verbal or affective declarations alone.

Interdependent Life and Material Care in Ghanaian Communities

Ghana—a West African nation situated along the Gulf of Guinea, known for its communal traditions and culturally diverse population—provides a compelling illustration of this active, communal conceptualization of love. A Ghanaian understanding of love centers on identifying and fulfilling the needs of family members, neighbors, and community members (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018).

The origins of these cultural understandings rest in historical, structural, and ecological conditions. Most Ghanaians construct their self-concept through an interdependent lens, where identity is intrinsically tied to duty-based interpersonal interactions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals are socialized within extended family systems (*abusua*) that emphasize structural responsibilities toward both younger generations and aging elders.

Within this framework, resource allocation serves as the primary mechanism for sustaining social security and familial well-being. Historical extended family networks rely on reciprocal transfers of assistance: elders care for children, and adult children fulfill moral obligations to support aging parents (Esiaka, 2019). Consequently, material expressions of love—providing food, clothing, shelter, school fees, or medical care—are valued as direct manifestations of care, often carrying greater weight than pure verbal or emotional affection (Coe, 2011; Osei-Tutu et al., 2018).

This feature of relationships is equally evident in Ghanaian transnational families, where migrant parents residing abroad express deep parental love through financial remittances. Far from commodifying relationships, sending regular economic support across borders functions as the definitive “materiality of care,” validating parental love and maintaining familial cohesion across distance (Coe, 2011).

The Influence of Christian Beliefs on Ghanaian Conceptualizations of Love

Religious frameworks further reinforce and transform local cultural constructions of love. In societies with strong religious participation, faith traditions provide a normative moral blueprint for human conduct based on ethos of care, honesty, and fellowship (Prince et al., 2009).

With over 70% of the population self-identifying as Christian (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012), Christian theology plays a central role in everyday Ghanaian life. Ghanaian Christian churches actively shape cultural models of love by framing familial obligations and community assistance within Biblical teachings.

Theological traditions present a distinct conceptual distinction between *eros* and *agape*:

- ***Eros*** refers to passionate, self-oriented love driven by personal desire, emotional attraction, or individual gratification.
- ***Agape*** refers to self-transcendent, other-oriented love characterized by unconditional respect, compassionate action, and active concern for the well-being of others (Sullivan-Dunbar, 2009).

In Ghanaian society, church teachings elevate *agape* as the highest expression of love, aligning closely with traditional African communal values of mutual assistance and social responsibility (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018).

Empirical Findings: How Ghanaian Christians Experience and Express Love

To examine how these cultural and religious frameworks operate in daily life, researchers conducted an ethnographic study interviewing 61 Ghanaian Christians (39 men, 22 women, aged 20–70) regarding their understandings and experiences of love in family and community contexts (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018).

Thematic analysis of the data revealed that communal, maintenance-oriented action overwhelmingly dominates Ghanaian understandings of love. Rather than defining love as an internal emotional state, participants consistently defined love through concrete behavioral acts.

1. Meeting the Material Needs of Close Kin

An overwhelming 96% of participants defined love primarily as fulfilling concrete responsibilities toward spouses, children, aging parents, and extended family members (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). These acts included providing basic necessities, paying school fees, sending remittances, visiting during illness, and offering financial “chop money” to maintain daily domestic needs. Love was described as an active awareness of others’ circumstances, requiring individuals to anticipate and meet needs without waiting to be asked.

2. Helping Others in Need (Agape in Action)

A striking 70% of participants emphasized that love requires helping individuals in need beyond the immediate family circle, including friends, neighbors, and complete strangers (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). Informants explicitly articulated this through the lens of Christian *agape*:

... if you go out and you see an elderly person who is not even from your own family, if there is anything to assist them with, you help them. If you have the means to support them, you do as much as you can *(51-year-old female)*,

Supposing a friend is having a problem, losing a loved one or in need of some money, you take care of it or give her something *(37-year-old male)*.

If you think somebody needs your help and you have the means, either you know the person or don't know the person, you should show the person love... either in kind, in physical terms *(34-year-old male)*.

As one can see, the Ghanaian Christian participants expressed their beliefs about agape love in their responses. They considered acts of love, such as fulfilling familial and neighborly responsibilities, to be the most important expressions of love. This aligns with Christian principles that prioritize compassion and the well-being of both one's own family and others.

3. Love as Attentive Care and Presence

Additionally, 48% of respondents conceptualized love as “showing concern” through active physical presence and regular inquiry into others' well-being (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). Checking in on friends during school breaks, visiting the sick at home, celebrating personal promotions, and attending community funerals were viewed as primary indicators of genuine affection.

Participants shared the following examples and provided comments:

...in school I've made a lot of friends... sometimes when you're not well, they call.... When you're on holidays, this long vac [vacation], they'll be calling and checking on... So that's love *(21-year-old female)*.

...when you are sick they [people] visit you in the house, when you are promoted they show appreciation they congratulate you; it's a way of showing love (40-year-old female).

4. Expressive and Physical Displays

In contrast, expressive behaviors prominent in Western romantic models were rarely cited. Only 10% of participants mentioned physical gestures such as hugging or kissing (primarily directed toward children or spouses), and only 7% highlighted emotional openness or transparency (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). References to passionate sexual attraction or intense romantic obsession (*eros*) were virtually absent.

Love as Communal Action, Agape, and Moral Character

The empirical literature on Ghanaian cultural dynamics demonstrates that love in West African contexts is fundamentally defined by action, duty, and active benevolence. Rather than existing primarily as a private, feeling-centered emotional state, love functions as a practical social practice that secures social networks, protects vulnerable community members, and fulfills moral duties.

By integrating indigenous traditions of social interdependence with Judeo-Christian understandings of *agape*, Ghanaian culture operationalizes love as tangible, physical care. While references to *eros* (passionate desire) are rare, emphasis is placed on kind, caring actions toward both kin and strangers. Ultimately, to love another person is not merely to feel affection, but to actively sustain their physical, material, and social well-being—extending beyond close personal relationships to define what it means to be a moral individual and a good Christian.

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