

CULTURAL IMMERSION FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: REFLECTIONS ON STUDYING ABROAD IN GHANA

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This narrative focuses on the Ghana Study Abroad program at the University of Georgia from 2002- 2006. The real reward of this international journey can be heard in the voices of the students, who continued to gain from such a rich educational and culturally enriched experience. This narrative is organized along the following themes: experiential, emotional, educational, empowerment and the Sankofa connection.

Introduction

As a social work faculty member who taught a Cultural Diversity course for many years, I know that it takes more than a semester for most students to grasp and internalize the concept of "true diversity." However, being together with other faculty and students for three short weeks 24/7 and becoming immersed in the culture, the people, and each other made the transformation amazing. There were so many teachable moments as I watched the students adjust to being in an underdeveloped country and wrestle with their understanding of diversity, their privileged status, and their "just being American." The real reward about this international journey can be heard in the voices of the students, who continued to gain from such a rich educational and culturally enriched experience. This article is organized along the following themes:

- Experiential—cultural and historical aspects of the experience
- Emotional—conflicts, both painful and joyful
- Educational—service learning, faculty interactions, and social work experiences
- Empowerment—issues in Ghana particular to women and children.

- The *Sankofa*—the "roots" connection to one's ancestral past.

As an African-American, I have always yearned to connect to my African roots, so traveling to the Motherland (the continent of Africa) began to fulfill that mystery of connecting to my ancestral roots and to unlock centuries of "lost years" to my family's and "my people's" past. This journey has been transformative, emotional, and very enlightening. Even though I have traveled to West Africa nine times and have visited four countries—Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, and Ghana—I continue to be moved by the history, culture, and topography each year I return. Eight of my visits to the continent have included Ghana, which I now claim as my African home.

I continue to teach and direct this study abroad in Ghana even though I am now a part of senior administration at a Research I university. It fulfills that drive, that passion, and reminds me why I became a social worker – an agent of change. In 2001-2002, I joined the African Studies Institute where a study abroad program to Ghana was being developed. I was able to recruit social work students and incorporate visits to social service agencies in our itinerary. In 2002, I traveled to Ghana with the U.G.A. study abroad with seven social work students as part of a larger group composed of five faculty members and a total of twenty-

one students. Traveling with such a diverse group added a new dimension not just to my experience but to the trip as a whole. Race and nationality became central in how we viewed and interpreted almost everything, even though we rarely discussed this overarching element that at times caused major tensions among the students and faculty. It was frustrating and challenging to experience the many different lenses through which we viewed "difference." For this reason, we have added more discussions and readings that focus on race, class, ethnicity, and gender in the pre-departure orientations and the class discussions while abroad.

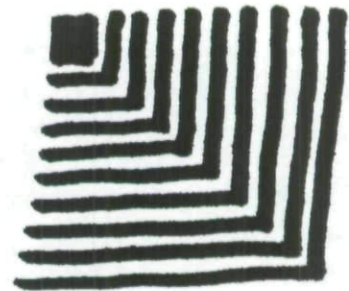
This dynamic and exciting program offers classroom time along with travel to different regions and cultures in the country. It includes interaction with Ghanaian university students, cultural immersion, and, perhaps most importantly, direct involvement. This program provides accredited course instruction in the required areas of West African History, Society and Culture, and the social work course Social Service Delivery Systems. It also seeks to involve Ghanaians and U.S. students in a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and practical projects.

This study-abroad program is very dependent on the partnerships that have been developed and that are critical to the success of the program. Two of the faculty members who participated were African, one from Ghana and the other from Benin, and their presence and global perspective also enhanced the students' experiences. Forming collaborations at host universities, government and non-government agencies, and schools was a long tedious process that I would not have been able to accomplish without the relationships I formed with Ghanaian students like Rabbiatou, Alice, and other social workers in Ghana. As Cornelius and Greif (2005) observed, it takes time and effort on an individual level to sustain collaborations between schools of social work in the United States and host countries. Nevertheless, the benefits of international partnership, including the acquisition of social work knowledge and life-transforming experiences, outweigh the costs.

Rabbiatou Halidou and Alice Boateng (co-authors) are from different regions (Northern and Ashanti, respectively) in Ghana. Both came to the United States as students and participated in the Ghana study abroad program initially as students and later as student workers and graduate assistants. Their roles were invaluable as they knew a lot about the country, spoke various languages, and understood the cultural nuances as well as the political and social issues that surfaced while we were on this journey. Their voices will be shared and infused throughout this article.

This narrative shares some of the students' reflections of these experiences from their papers and journal entries over the past five years. Race and majors are identified to highlight some of the perceptive differences based on that person's "lense." It by no means makes one reflection better or worse or right or wrong, just a different perspective. The students' voices are in italics, while those by the co-authors are dispersed narrative.

- Dr. Cheryl Dozier



The Experiential - Reflections of Ghana the Country and the Overall Experience

"Studying abroad in Ghana has impacted me in so many ways, many of which I have yet to fully comprehend," said a White M.S.W. student. *"One of the most important things I learned has to do with the different value systems that exist and how happiness and contentment is always relative to the value that one places on certain things.... Traveling in Ghana, however, made me realize that the world does not revolve around the United States. The people I witnessed in Ghana were productive and content relative to their own*

value system, which, I am certain, is a universal phenomenon.”

“For so long, I have been influenced by the media and printed illustrations on how undeveloped Ghana and other surrounding countries are reflected,” an African-American M.S.W. student said. “This is not what I observed at all. I saw a country filled with talented and skillful people. These people were hardworking and kind-spirited. They treated everyone with respect and as if they were family. I saw a country striving to maintain, to regain strength. Ghana has so much potential. Granted, if they are given back what was taken from them, things may be better.”

“I did not fully understand how privileged I am on a global scale. As an African-American woman from a working income family, I thought I knew a lot about poverty and being marginalized. However, this trip exposed me to levels of poverty and types of discrimination that I have overlooked in the past,” an African-American M.S.W. student reflected.

“One highlight from Accra was a visit to Ashesi University,” states a White graduate student in education. “We heard the president and founder of the university talk for a while, and then we got to speak to some students. The president’s name is Patrick. He told us about his background and how and why he founded Ashesi. It was so uplifting to hear him talk about it. He wants to develop the best leaders in Ghana to run the country and change the problems that occur there. Ashesi is the first liberal arts institution in Ghana, which is an amazing stride for the educational system in the nation. They are developing great leaders, and currently have the brightest and most amazing students in Ghana attending the university. One of the students that we got to speak to was named J-; he was a second year student from Kumasi. He had a lot of great questions and answers for us. I get such a wonderful feeling from having conversations like this one with

people from all different cultures and parts of the world. J- talked to us about how he wants to work to wipe malaria and AIDS out of Ghana and then eventually Africa, and he wants to make Africa as big a superpower as the United States and China. He was such an idealist, as most of the students at Ashesi seem to be. They are full of hope and potential. Spending time on the Ashesi campus gives me a feeling of hope as well.”

“I believe that I found passion in Ghana that seems to be disappearing here in the states,” reflected a White B.S.W. student. “In Ghana, I saw people really caring about what they do and devoting their lives to it. I find so much inspiration in that, and I find the people of Ghana to be so giving and unselfish. Before traveling to Africa I felt that I had some idea of what it was like, how the people lived, and a grasp on the poverty issues. During the trip to Ghana I began to focus more on the people, their lives, and how they live. I kept thinking how poverty stricken the whole continent was and how these people do without the things that I take so easily for granted....

“In my head I am still digesting my thoughts but I do feel that I have an idea of how to deal with the differences between the African culture and my own. Although there was poverty in Ghana, I began to realize that this is the way of life for the people of Ghana. What seemed to be poverty to me was home to them and their family and their food. They were some of the happiest people I have ever seen, and they, the people of Ghana, were without a tenth of what I have. Personally I have come to terms that the world of Africa is very different from my own. What I consider to be horrible conditions do not seem so horrible to the people of Ghana. There are a million things that I believe that I learned from this trip to Ghana; however, realizing that culture is everything and where you are from no matter poor or wealthy is what really matters has helped me come to terms with the true beauty of the world.”

One of the misconceptions that we often find when people refer to Africa or a country within the continent is the assumption that Ghana, for example, is Africa. The media and most educators refer to Africa as the place the person is from versus referring generically to Africa. There is much generalization when referring to the continent as we can see in some of the students' reflections. Africa the continent is made up of fifty-two countries, most of which gained independence in the 1950s to the 1970s. It is one of the most ethnically diverse continents, composed of hundreds of different ethnic groups speaking many different languages even within the same country and throughout the continent. One should say that the person is Nigerian or Egyptian, not just African.

For most African-American students, other than vacationing in the Caribbean, this was their first international experience. However, many of the White students have traveled internationally, primarily to Europe. Few of the students had traveled to the African continent. Most students, Black and White, have been influenced by media portrayals of the ongoing hunger, civil wars, violence, and poverty. Additionally, grouping together all of Africa as third world countries automatically gives it a "less than" or uncivilized identity. Charlayne Hunter-Gault (2006), in her new book *New News out of Africa*, references an article that she wrote in 1972: "One criticism I encounter from Africans is that Americans present themselves to Africans as all-knowing, when, in fact, their perspectives are influenced by the oft-distorted views of Africa in textbooks and the media" (p.111). Ghana is a very independent, civilized, and safe redeveloping nation that has not received much press—positive or negative—over the past couple of decades.

"So far Ghana is far more civilized than I expected," said a graduate education major. *"The upper class houses are beautiful, like something you'd see in California and there are some really nice cars and the Ghana International School is very nice. But the most striking thing is that right next to these really nice areas is complete poverty."*

"Ghana, the country of hospitality, received the study abroad group with a smile and open arms," stated Alice. *"Ghanaians saw African-American students as their 'prodigal sons' and treated them as such. On the other hand, the African colonial experience, coupled with the perception that every American is rich, made the students (especially Whites) very vulnerable, as Ghanaian children and youth in tour towns and villages pestered them for money and requests to write to them or take them abroad to the United States."*

Rabbiatou Reflects on her Experience as an Assistant in the Study Abroad Program

I was invited to be one of the assistants of the program in 2002. The group was large composed of African-American, White-American, and African students. My expectation of the program was to assist with the interpretation of some Ghanaian languages as well as some cultural aspects of the Ghanaian society. Ghanaians are very friendly. Once Ghanaians recognize a foreign visitor, they accord to the foreigner the warmth and friendship that would support them during the course of the visit. During our study visits, Ghanaians interacted with African-American and White students very well and cordially. In most cases African American students were sometimes mistaken as Ghanaians if they happened to move around individually/independently. I remember V-, an African American student who fitted well with the Ashanti people. She had physical features of an Ashanti and people would speak Twi to her only to realize she could not communicate in Twi. This is to explain how very similar we are as Africans irrespective of the country of domicile.

The history of slavery makes us a people to welcome our brothers and sisters who have strived to make this holy pilgrimage to the motherland. My first encounter with an African American was with an American Peace Corps worker who had come to my high school to teach mathematics. This was very overwhelming. As a Ghanaian social work student studying in the States, I thought it was an opportunity for me to take

advantage of our visits to the Department of Social Welfare, Children's Homes, and the Osu School of Social Work and learn from both students and social workers some of the issues facing them, i.e., their achievements and hindrances. My interaction with street children led to my interest in a master's research on Child Trafficking in West Africa. My visit to the slave castle in 2002 was my second time to the castle, and I can say it has always been very emotional. I think the idea of debriefing after visits to the slave castles helps in the emotional and psychological healing of both White and Black students on the program.



The Emotional – Historical Realities of the Slave Trade

"Seeing the slave castles probably affected me the most during my stay in Ghana," stated an African-American M.S.W. student reflecting on her visit to the slave castle. "Walking through the castle was one thing, but hearing the history was the most painful. When the history was explained, I could not imagine that he was talking about human beings. The way the tour guide described the way the Africans were treated sounded like he was talking about animals. I could not believe the things he said about the beatings, disciplinary actions, and raping that took place.... It was so weird because walking through the slave castles, I could hear the mothers screaming for their children, and could feel the heat of the bodies. I felt so many emotions at one time that I could not describe the way I felt."

"I had been anticipating visiting the slave castles since the start of the trip," said a graduate African-American student. "This morning, I woke feeling anxious, like something big was going to happen. It was similar to the feeling that you get (intuition) when something is wrong. Cape Coast is such a beautiful place, and to think about the travesty that is connected with this place is just astounding. I did not know what to expect upon visiting the slave castles, but the overwhelming feelings that came about were unexplainable. I remembered walking into the museum and observing the shackles on the walls and going up to touch them and assess the weight. I could not imagine having a metal object of this caliber around my neck and ankles. This is what started the feelings of anger and frustration.... I experienced grief just thinking about my close relatives being in those dungeons, going through those experiences. The tears seemed endless; I could not control the wave of emotions stirring deep within me. I was angry and saddened by this travesty. All that these people, my people, went through, and yet they still are being enslaved in other ways. How can humans be so cruel? In that moment I thought of my great-grandmother, and the stories that she told of her struggle and parents' and grandparents' struggles. Then I thought about what I have done to tell their story and this story. I thought about how African-American history is only emphasized during Black History Month and how much of it is available to us; I thought of my lack of making time to learn and appreciate what my ancestors have conquered for me.

"The tears were overwhelming; in that moment, it was like a light bulb went off. I got it; I understood what my purpose is and why I was in Ghana. I realized that I had a great responsibility to educate others and to empower others to continue to pass the history on. After leaving the slave castles, I was emotionally drained, but I felt like I had transformed into this new person, one who appreciated life more and learned from the errors of my ways. I realized that I had taken much for granted, something that I

would now work at not doing. I contemplated what it would be like to have my freedom taken away from me and being separated from my family. This experience inspired me to tie up loose ends and embark on a journey of forgiveness of those who have wronged me. Life is too short, and we have to make the most of it."

"I have been thinking long and hard about the perfect way to describe the ambiance of Elmina Castle, and I think the word sorrow does it best," said an African-American doctoral student in history. "As we toured the castle, the guide painted vivid pictures of the history of the place. We saw the female slave yard where there sat a cannon ball that used to be connected to a chain. Guards chained women who resisted the advances of the Governor to that ball. Day and night, rain or shine, the resistor stood until her spirit broke. What is even worse is the ladder that led from the female slave dungeons to a trap door within the Governor's quarters. He would come out to the veranda, search for the woman of his desires, point her (or them) out to the guards, and then wait for them to present her to him. The guards would bathe her, dress her up, and send her up to be raped. Yes, sorrow.

"Just imagining how humiliating it must have been for those women hurts me deeply. Then, as we walked into the dungeon, I grew angrier as I observed the contrast between the bright, airy castle's exterior and the dark, damp dungeons reserved for black cargo. Now a greenish film covers some walls, and an unrecognizable stench hangs in the air. According to [the tour guide], the dungeons were still filled with four feet of human waste when excavations began in the late 1980s. In this room, the sorrow became so real that I could not hold in the tears that had threatened to fall the moment the castle came into view. It hit hard, and was a feeling of utter disbelief. How on earth could men and women justify their horrid actions? How do you treat men and women worse than animals?"

"One of the most emotional and life changing experiences on this trip has been the visit to the slave castles," reflected a White graduate education student. "This was a part of the trip that I was anticipating the most, mainly because I knew that it would be difficult to see, but I didn't know how I would react to it.... Our guide was amazing; he was very intelligent and did a great job of explaining the castle to us. First we saw the female dungeons which were big stone rooms around a central courtyard where they fit hundreds of women. Then we walked through some other areas at the castle. I was fine until we got into this room called the Room of No Return. It was tiny, and we had to duck our heads to get in. We all stood there, and the guide told us that this was the last room the slaves were in before being shipped to America. There was just a little opening to the ocean from the room that they had to go through to get to the boats. We had a minute of silence for all of the men and women who died there and then said 'Never again' all together to pledge not to let something that terrible happen again. I found myself getting teary eyed and upset but then feeling like I did not have a right to be upset. I felt ashamed of my ancestors who were possibly the ones doing these terrible things to the Africans, and I wished there was something I could do to make it better. I also felt like I needed to not show my feelings because it was the African Americans' time to connect to their roots, and I didn't feel justified to have those feelings. I wanted to be able to relate to something there because I was experiencing such strong emotions, but I couldn't relate to the African experience, and I couldn't relate to the European experience. I couldn't understand what made the Europeans do all of the things that they did. Along with all of these remorseful and terrible feelings, the "Never Again" uplifted me because I felt like having seen this will give me a chance to make a difference and not let something like that happen again.

"When we left the castle we went to a ceremony called a libation. We all stood in a

circle holding hands on the land over the ocean on a hill. A man dressed in traditional African dress said a prayer and poured Schnapps on the ground to remember the people who died there and symbolize forgiveness for others. It was a very poignant ceremony for me. We were a racially mixed group having just been through the slave dungeons, and we were all holding hands making the same promise to not let something like that happen again. We were also in one of the most beautiful places I have ever been with the sunset on one side of us, and the ocean and the slave castle with such a dark history on the other side. It was a moment that I feel might change my life forever.

“After we got back to the hotel, the entire group joined together to discuss our experiences. It was interesting to hear everyone’s reactions to the slave castles. Some people cried, and others didn’t. It was hard to know exactly what to say or what to feel. I had a hard time articulating my feelings about the castles. It was such a mix of emotions of sadness and shame coupled with hope and a feeling that I should try to make a difference. I feel like changing people’s attitudes back home will be so hard. I don’t know exactly how I can make a difference. I don’t know what the next step is. I hope that by sharing my experience here with people at home, people at home will understand what I experienced in Ghana.”

The visits to the slave castles are probably the most difficult, emotionally painful and challenging part of the trip. As faculty we try to prepare the students by showing the video “*Sankofa*” to them before they travel and by discussing the slave trade through selected readings. After the visits to both slave castles, I had invited a linguist from a local village to pour libations in a closing ceremony circle that in some way is like a memorial service in front of the Atlantic Ocean—the same waters where the slave ships were awaiting the captured Ghanaians centuries ago. This ceremony is symbolic of the “never again” concept that the students participated in while touring the Elmina castle. The drive back from the slave dungeons is usually the most somber

ride of the entire trip while students reflect on the horrendous experiences that they heard about and witnessed that day.

Alice Boateng Reflects on her Experience

The summer 2003 Ghana Study Abroad was an exciting and educational experience. Both program professors and students developed a more global awareness of the social needs of Ghanaian children and their families. Issues of poverty, child labor, homelessness, and unemployment stared us in the face as we moved along the country. Though I am a Ghanaian from the Ashanti region, lived in Ghana the first thirty-five years of my life, and was aware that the country had many problems, this trip exposed me to the reality of problems in Africa, especially the plight of children.

The trip and tour from Accra to Tamale opened my eyes to the reality of issues that confront Ghana, including poverty, unequal distribution of resources, and exodus of the youth from remote areas to the cities for jobs and survival. These have resulted into street children, teen pregnancies, and abandoned children. The lucky ones were being housed in children’s homes. As I reflect on the difference between Kumasi Children’s Home (public) and the Tema Children’s Home (private), I wonder why all children in the public orphanages could not be housed in the Tema Children’s Home. It’s a huge disparity, which boils down to the scanty economic resources available to the government of Ghana. The 2003 trip to Ghana was my first time visiting places such as the Larabanga mosque, the Mole game park in the Northern Region, and the slave castles in the Central region of Ghana. These field trips were an important enhancement to the classroom. At the Cape Coast castle, as the linguist poetically recounted the history of slavery and all the activities that took place in the castle, I felt some kind of chill all over my body; it felt bitter and painful; it felt very shocking, as he opened the gate into the Land of No Return. It was a life transforming experience! I am glad it is now history, and we are moving on.

The Educational

Alice introduced the Liberian Refugee Camp in Ghana to the study-abroad program. It became a regular visit for the social work course for several years and was the topic of Alice's dissertation. Here, she describes the group's experience in 2003:

"The U.G.A. 2003 study abroad trip to the Buduburam-Liberian refugee camp really helped us to understand a continent in turmoil. The camp was established in August 1990 in response to the Liberian civil war and housed over 30,000 residents in 2003 with over half being children. The camp is adjacent to a Ghanaian village near the coast on the road from Accra to Cape Coast. Over time, the refugees have spread beyond the camp to live in the village and surrounding areas. While the war in Liberia continued, more refugees traveled from Liberia into the camp. However, in 2006, the numbers decreased drastically, as many Liberians were able to return home as the new President and government brought an end to the years of violence, torture, and destruction from the war.

"Looking back at my journal, we had been in Africa for three days when we were told we were going to visit a Liberian refugee camp, said a white MSW student. It had rained the day before, and I felt that as the rain poured, my emotions were pouring out from inside me. I was already flooded with emotions, and then we went to the camp. In my job as a case manager for the elderly, I have had many refugees as clients, and I have seen how hard it is for them to acclimate to (become comfortable in) a new place with a new culture. At least my clients had a roof over their heads and some type of income. The Liberian refugee camp was very overwhelming for me, especially when I found out that the social worker had been there for two years. She had graduated from a social work school, been placed at this site, and had stayed there day and night for two solid years. I felt bad about complaining in the past of my client to case manager ratio of one to 200, when hers was one to 42,000. I cannot imagine having

no or little down time to regroup and assess."

An African-American M.S.W. student reflected on her experience visiting the Kumasi Children's Home:

"I was amazed to learn about the large number of children who reside within the home and the various reasons as to why the children are there, ranging from mothers being HIV positive or dying from AIDS to mothers serving prison sentences. It was very positive to hear that some of the children were in contact with their families, and some receive some visitation from them. This is very similar to some of the children in foster care in the U.S."

An African-American M.S.W. student described her experience visiting the government-operated and the privately-operated "children's orphanages":

"I was struck by the similarities in the child welfare systems in Ghana and the United States. In both countries the state run facilities are overburdened in comparison to private agencies, and both are reluctant to remove children from their homes if it can be avoided. Lastly, in terms of budgeting, child welfare needs are largely under funded in both countries. When we visited the Kumasi Children's Home, the level of inefficiency I witnessed left me feeling totally dismayed. The smells, filth, and indifference shown to children were unbelievable. The worker to child ratio was unsafe. When we got ready to leave, the toddlers tried to come down the stairs to follow us, and none of the workers attempted to make sure the children were safe. A [professor] had to go up to try to secure the children. The workers did not interact with us, and they did not stop the children from eating paint chippings off the wall. I was also frustrated by the director's barely concealed impatience with our questions. It was one of the saddest things that I have ever seen. Later we had an opportunity to visit a private agency called the Anfaani Children's Home in Tamale. The word Anfaani means blessed, and the



children are fortunate to be living there. The difference between the two agencies was extreme. The Anfaani Children's Home was as clean as the other home was dirty. They asked us to take our shoes off upon entering. The facility was impeccable, and the staff was friendly. The worker-to-children ratios were in line with the highest childcare standards, and they seemed genuinely concerned about the children's welfare. They also had two student volunteers living on site, and when the children soiled themselves, the workers quickly came to clean them up. At the end of each visit, we presented the agencies with donations. At the Kumasi home we wondered if the children would ever see the supplies or if they would go home with the staff. Such thoughts never occurred to us at the Anfaani home. It was apparent that the children living at the private agency had a better chance for a good start. Currently, there are three government run children's homes in Ghana. The burden they face is overwhelming, and children's homes in the United States have similar problems. It is interesting that the same situation is occurring in a developing nation and a world superpower."

Empowerment - A Focus on Rural Women

Sugashee, a traditional West African village in the northern region, ranked among the students' favorite places. They enjoyed the interactions with the families and children, and they were invited into their homes. One student was overheard saying, "They were so willing to invite us into their homes and proud of their wares." This has to be considered in the context of the visible signs of poverty—no running water, thatched roof homes with dirt floors, limited number of literate persons.

"Today was definitely my favorite day of this trip so far. I don't know if I have the words to describe it but I will try," said a White M.S.W. student. "After breakfast this morning, we went out to Sugashee village, where shea butter is made. The moment the bus pulled into the village, I realized that

this was what I was hoping to see in Ghana. There were the animals, the thatched-roof houses, the babies—everything I had envisioned about Africa—all in one village. The experience in Sugashee was distinctly different from what we have done so far in that there was no pressure to buy anything from the people but was more of a friendly exchange and opportunity to interact with and learn from the villagers. Upon our arrival, we had to meet with the village chief so that we could greet him and be greeted. This was a fascinating custom. The native language of the village is Dagbane, so I didn't understand much of what was said during this greeting process, but I did gather that some of the village's current challenges are lack of water and toilets.

"After our formal introduction, we watched and participated in a demonstration of the shea butter making process and had a chance to communicate (through gesturing and other means!) with the people. For example, one of the women brought me over to see a pot with something simmering in it (it had something to do with the making of shea butter) and kept pointing at it and pushing me towards it, so I thought she wanted me to reach into the pot to touch it. As I reached down, however, she slapped my hand, indicating through some gesturing that the contents were hot. Once I realized this, she started laughing at me and then I started laughing at myself, and it felt like we had just bridged our communication differences. I also got to carry a baby on my back for a while, which was amazing. I couldn't believe how content the baby was on my back, even though I felt totally awkward and afraid I would drop it! There were lots of children around, and it was interesting to witness how childrearing is accomplished by the entire community—for the first time in my life, I totally understood the meaning of the phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child.'"

"The visit to Sugashee Village was one of the highlights of the study abroad trip for me. The villagers were so welcoming," reflected an African-American M.S.W.

student. *"They embraced us and made us feel right at home. Even though we purchased shea butter, the whole experience lacked the consumer element that characterized some of the trip. Instead of having a financial exchange, there was more of a meaningful cultural exchange. Although there were language barriers and unfamiliar cultural protocols to follow, I felt like a part of the community. The villagers seemed to take pleasure in sharing their knowledge and experiences with our group."*

"This visit was an enlightening experience for me in a number of ways. It brought home the fact that different does not mean better or worse. The villagers do not have much material wealth yet there is such richness in their interactions and sense of community. They have an abundance of cultural and human capital in their children and traditional method of making shea butter. More importantly, their willingness to open their lives to us with such warmth and generosity was humbling and endearing. Before coming to Ghana, I heard so much about the welcoming spirit of Ghanaians, and that village exemplifies their hospitality."

Rabbiatou's knowledge of the country, particularly her knowledge of the Northern Region, the social service issues impacting women and children, and her ability to speak most of the major Ghanaian languages made her an invaluable member of this program. She introduced us to a special rural village and the issues facing women in small villages like Sugashee. Sugashee is located six miles north of Tamale, the regional capital of the Northern Region, with a population of a little over 2,000.

Women constitute a little more than half the population of Ghana. Most rural women live on either subsistence farming or petty trading to help supplement their household budgets. There are a few, however, who do not engage in any farming activity or petty trading. These women solely depend on their husbands who are subsistence farmers. Despite the presence of the women's ministry and the National Council on Women and Development, rural women are yet to have their voices heard. Women living in rural

communities face many challenges in their struggle for existence. Though very vulnerable in Ghanaian society, rural women tend to be the backbone of most households. They are the caretakers of their children, husbands, parents, and also extended family members, yet with little or no economic base. Currently, Sugashee Village is benefiting from both faculty and students in the funding of a community shea butter project and sponsoring school children to have access to formal education.

"On June 19, 2003, I [Rabbiatou] got the best working definition of empowerment I could have ever asked for in the form of a visit with the Adugyama Mothers Group in Kumasi, Ghana. I had the wonderful opportunity of seeing empowerment in progress and hearing about the struggles, offsets, victories, and challenges of seeing a vision of empowerment through to fruition. Working with a group of young mothers, Dr. Eva Tagoe-Darko of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) lectured and led a visit to a women's empowerment farm."

Dr. Tagoe-Darko shared stories of these struggles while working with the Adugyama Mothers' Group. These same helping challenges are evident in the United States. Certain apprehensions and issues can be evident when the helping professionals and clients are from groups distinguished as markedly different within that culture and society. In Ghana, the marked differences are ethnic distinctions. In the United States, the marked difference is often race. Empowering women is the single most effective way to reduce world poverty and encourage child health (Amos, 2000). Women hold the key to poverty eradication and issues of health that are directly linked to poverty. Investing in the empowerment of women is an investment in the future of the world. Encouraging women to be more self-reliant via economic interventions and integrated rural development focuses on the satisfaction of basic needs (Garba, 1999). Among those basic needs is the right of every child to be healthy.

While it is obvious that empowering women has far-reaching benefits, it is at times a difficult issue for which to gather support. This proved to be the case for Dr. Tagoe-Darko. In Ghana, women's empowerment may not generate much interest, but child health does. As such, it can be used as the vehicle to get to women's empowerment. As practitioners we must continue to think of ways to push empowerment for women to the forefront.

"I [Rabbiatou] feel very fortunate to have gotten this lesson in empowerment at such an early point in my professional education and career. The visit to the Women's Empowerment Farm touched my life in both a professional and personal way. My experience on that day allowed me to see empowerment optimized. Being witness to this process initiated the empowerment cycle within me as I took my first step toward awareness. I have begun my life journey and will continue to live each day seeing empowerment for myself and for my Black sisters around the world."

"Dr. Eva Tagoe-Darko's lecture really inspired me," said an African-American M.S.W. student. *"All over the world there are women and children living in poverty, dying from preventable diseases, and lacking basic resources that can drastically improve their quality of life. I want to be able to assist these women in some way. Dr. Eva's lecture discussed traditional rites and skills that are being lost by the younger generation of women in Ghana. She mentioned many of these women are leaving home in pursuit of perceived opportunities in the capitol. However, once they arrive they find that they lack basic skills and do not have an understanding of reproductive health and often end up pregnant. Many of the traditional methods of promoting women's health involve medically sound techniques but the younger women are unaware of them. Because there are many barriers to accessing healthcare in Ghana, especially in the rural areas, it is important that these young women gather reliable*

information from their available resources."

Sankofa Experience...Back to my Roots

Most students of African ancestry travel to Africa somewhat aware of the historical and emotional connection for them. They are uncertain of what to expect or how they will be received, but they know that this continent has the keys to their "locked and mysterious past." For some the reality of this being their "ancestral home" is more than they are ready to handle. The similarities of how people look so much like them, their relatives, and their friends, is sometimes overwhelming. Feeling like a majority in an African country is strange, as is being called *oburoni*—white foreigner—which is also insulting to African-Americans who feel like they are coming home.



"This long awaited journey to the motherland brought much joy, pain, sadness, confusion, indifference, shame, and guilt," shared an African-American non-traditional M.S.W. student. *"It became very difficult to decide whether to interpret this experience as a student or from my personal perspective.... Life for the past fifty years has prepared and taught me to perhaps limit my expectation of my journey home. I wanted to be able to accept any situation that may arise. However, I was too overwhelmed at times by the present state and conditions that my brothers and sisters who were left behind have been faced with, and why? I knew that I had to make peace with the possibility that, although I was returning to the general neighborhood of my family's birth, I may never find the actual location of my home.... After all, home is*

where the heart is, and at the present, my heart is very much with Ghana!"

"Now that I have learned a significant amount about the history of Ghana, I feel compelled to dig a little deeper into my own family history," said an African-American M.S.W. student. "I felt ashamed that I was so eager to learn about the 'motherland,' where it all began, but realized that I had so much more to learn about my own family in the States.... I must tell the story, take advantage of the wealth of wisdom that the elders in my family have, for those who are deceased, keeping them alive by continuously telling their story. I am learning to cherish the simple things in life such as sitting on the porch and shelling peas with my great-grandma, living in the moment. As the symbol of Sankofa represents, going back and taking, I plan to do just that. Not only do I plan to go back and trace my family's roots to Africa, but I plan to trace the roots from where it all began in America as well."

"I have always dreamed of going to Africa, but never imagined it would be so soon," said an African-American fashion student. "Never in my wildest dream could I have created such an amazing place and people. Going to Ghana, West Africa, has been my most spiritually rewarding experience to date. I am still in disbelief sometimes that I ever went, but then I see my beautiful carvings and jewelry. As an artist and designer, I have such a great appreciation for the resourcefulness of our people. I have a heightened understanding of myself. Now I know why I am attracted to the materials I work with, my color sensibility, and sense of style. It's all written with the blood of my ancestors and reaffirmed in everything I create. I feel so blessed to have been a part of this group of awesome women. For me, this trip was even more worthwhile because of the people I met. Although we all were from different places and ages, there was a strong eagerness to evoke change in our own ways. I originally came to Africa expecting

to be making my own textiles alongside the local artisans. I had a good idea of what I wanted to find, and found so much more. The generosity and humility I observed inspired me to walk a little lighter in my own path."

"The opportunity to study abroad allowed me to complete a year long goal and fulfill a life long dream," reflected an African-American doctoral student. "This program meant more to me than merely traveling about 10,000 miles to Africa, using a new currency system, or sampling new foods. My experience in Ghana helped to enhance and complete my identity. As a result, I have an entirely new outlook on my life. 'I am the dream and the hope of the slave.' I am fulfilling the dreams and hope of my grandparents, parents, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Returning to Africa, Ghana [has] helped me get in touch with this aspect of my life. The dreams and the hopes of my ancestors are for me too: be free, love, help others, show honor, respect myself, value family, endure, and remember from whence I came."

"The journey to the mother continent was truly a moving experience," said an African-American M.S.W. student. "This was a trip that I needed to go on at whatever cost because I felt that this was my time to go. I needed to feel connected by returning to the place where my ancestors came from, as the term Sankofa means. I got so much out of this three week trip that will most likely stay with me for the rest of my life. Even if I don't ever return, I am proud of myself for making the commitment to go."

"After finally settling back into my life of relative solitude, a process that proved difficult after the three weeks of interacting with Ghanaians and the other program members, I am convinced that the trip represents only the first of many journeys back to Africa, especially to Ghana," reflects an African-American doctoral student. "When people ask me what I gained most from my participation in the program, I

hesitate because of my inability to articulate the feeling of wholesomeness I equate with the journey. Never have I felt so at home or so welcomed away from my parents' home. In every city we visited, our brothers and sisters greeted us favorably and really made the symbolic experience of traveling back to the "home" of our ancestors real. Hearing my family ask me to find out what they need to do to get to Ghana is one of the most rewarding of my post-study abroad experience.

"A problem I observed is that, in some circumstances, only vestiges of Ghanaian culture exist. I am afraid that globalization will lead to the de-acculturation of the whole world. All I thought about as we toured Accra, and to a lesser extent Kumasi, was all that has been forever lost in Africa because of European encroachment hundreds of years ago. I also consider the role we, as American tourists, have in the globalization of Western culture.

"Of course I will never forget my seeing the slave dungeons for the first time. Knowing these types of horrible things actually happened is one thing; actually viewing and touching these tools of torture provided me with an insight that I could not gain if I read every book written about the slave trade and its victims. And no matter how much I write, words could never capture the emotions that engulfed me as we explored both Elmina and Cape Coast Castle. Nor can they express the deep gratitude I feel for the opportunity to go 'home.'"

Summary

"As a Ghanaian social worker trained in the U.S., I see that studying abroad is very crucial," says Alice. "Living and learning in another culture not only provides the competitive edge that today's employers are looking for but also offers a life-changing experience. It helps faculty and students to explore; grow as individuals; learn about themselves; learn different perspectives; make new friends; and discover what is beyond their borders. Studying in another country, despite the cultural shocks, is a highly entertaining and

enriching experience. It breaks down stereotypes, fosters understanding, and builds tolerance and respect. As a social worker, I am amazed by the places and people of different values, beliefs, cultures and celebrations. I believe strongly that it is more important in our world of interdependence to embrace different cultures.

"The study abroad Ghana trip was a powerful experience. As a Ghanaian, the study abroad trip provided me with the opportunity of knowing my country better. As a social worker, it has heightened my cultural competence. As a teacher, it has equipped me with knowledge into some global policy issues that affect Ghana differently from the United States, as well as going back to fetch my past and passing it onto future generations, including my students."

Schools of social work should continue to include developing countries in Africa as destinations for study abroad programs. Darkwa and Mazibuko (2000) suggest that while we wait on virtual learning communities to be developed in Africa, schools of social work should employ approaches such as study abroad/exchange programs to enhance cultural experiences in Africa. Developing these programs takes time, financial resources, and consistent coordination with persons, usually through personal contacts. However, the hard work results in both students' and faculty members' increased knowledge about diversity, multiculturalism, and tolerance, and this is priceless.

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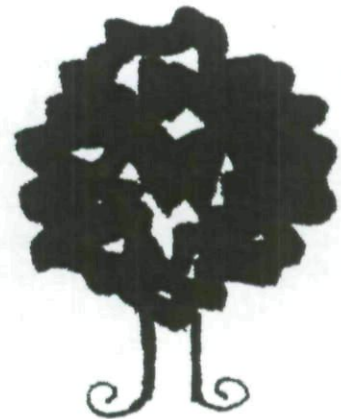
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