

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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AKWAABA (Ah KWAA BA)! Welcome to Ghana! This is the country where professional helpers and advocates, especially westerners like myself, return again and again and again! Why? We feel safe, welcomed and, conveniently, English is the official language. Ghana is a fertile place for volunteerism, social development, and exchanges. Also, the generosity and kindness of Ghanaians is almost unmatched by any other country in Africa. Ghanaians proudly tell the world that they represent a country of good governance, conflict-free, economically stable, with a strong commitment to universal human rights and justice through a democratically elected government. Colonized by the British during the Presidency of Kwame Nkrumah, it was the first independent African nation in the 20th century, represented by a single black star on its flag, based on the principles of freedom and justice.

Ghanaians have a close kinship to Americans. Thousands of Americans travel to Ghana yearly, and many African Americans claim Ghana as their ancestral home, making it ripe for indigenous collaborative development. President Kennedy provided most of the funding for the construction of the Volta River Dam. Launching the Peace Corps 50 years ago at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he encouraged young people to go to Ghana. Three sitting Presidents and their families have visited the country: Clinton, Bush, and Obama. Ghana's favorite son, Chancellor of the University of Ghana Kofi Annan, served as the Secretary General to the United Nations for ten years.

Given this background, I hope you will agree that the papers in this special issue will increase the cultural awareness of the challenges and accomplishments that

professional helpers and advocates endeavor to reduce disparity and make a difference in the lives of Ghanaians. The narratives are organized to support four themes beginning with *Lessons Learned: Cross-Cultural Sensitivities and Relationship-Building*. Rose Walls' anchor paper, **In Ghana here...** is laced with humor and candid story-telling, and offers a sincere reflection of and insights to her adjustment and development of cultural awareness regarding life in Ghana, from the perspective of an African American female social worker and lawyer. Through her unique and realistic take on life, those who have visited Ghana might find themselves laughing out loud, slapping their knees or nodding their heads as they remember having similar experiences. For other readers, Walls' narrative can be a strategic guide of what to do and not do, providing perhaps sufficient cultural awareness to start off on the right foot as a professional helper and advocate.

Two of my Ghana students, George Domfe, and Kwasi Boakye Akosah, joined me in **Reflections of an American professor and Ghanaian social work students: Implementation of collaborative teaching/learning methods to assess indigenous social problems**. The authors demonstrate the ability of a class of 134 students and the professor to act as cultural guides, teaching and learning from each other while developing ethical problem-solving strategies and interventions for 14 indigenous social problems. The students' account and evaluation of the "prof's" teaching style is unedited. Their description of the collaborative development of course content includes an unabashed and honest assessment of themselves, their peers, and social problems in their homeland.

In **Ghana: A great place to be**, the narrator, Montrella Cowan, shares her experience visiting the Motherland for the first time as a Study Abroad student. Cowan shares strategies of how, as a single mother, she learned to serve the global community. She is clear that a social worker's success in working cross-culturally and internationally must stem from active engagement. This narrative, a self-esteem builder for non-traditional students, includes vivid descriptions of lessons learned and how experiential field trips and advocacy research experiences increased her cultural awareness of social issues, especially human rights and development projects for the poor.

The next two papers that offer additional awareness on cross-cultural lessons learned were written by social work academicians who have extensive experience facilitating exchange, internships and study/tour programs in Ghana. Both papers address issues related to prejudice, racism, privilege, structural disadvantages, or oppression and resistance. The authors propose a paradigm shift to help stakeholders understand our relationship in the global marketplace and need to expand our conceptualization of cultural competence as we become more involved in international education and practice. Edith Lewis narrates **Cultural differences and neo-colonialism in social work: Negotiating exchanges between Ghana and the United States**, a frank critical challenge to institutions - especially social work schools - and colleagues regarding mutually sustainable professional practicum exchanges. Lewis insists that effective exchanges are possible if there is willingness by representatives from the African Diaspora and non-Africans to work affirmatively to shift their world views. Readers are then informed that this can be done while upholding the values and ethics of social work practice through an understanding of self and willingness to distribute resources. As Director of Educational Study Tours and Internships, Sadye Logan authored **Experiencing Ghana at different points and times**. The narrator expands cross-cultural awareness by sharing personal experiences, perceptions, and interest in Ghana from her perspective as a sixth generation

Gullah or Gheeche-speaking Sea Islander in South Carolina. In addition to her narration about the impact of the tours and internships on the participants, readers should find fascinating similarities between her life on John's Island and that of the daily activities of Ghanaians, such as speech, hair styles, fishing, quilting, and other everyday habits.

Relative to the second theme of *Social and Economic Justice*, Ghanaian doctoral students in the U.S. and Ghana share their reflections on arresting disenfranchisement of women and children in the workplace. Elizabeth Nana Mbrah Koomson authored **Mining communities in Ghana: Reflections on the nature and type of work for female miners and non-miners**. This is an extraordinary paper as the lifestyles and working conditions of female miners have rarely been documented. The author describes these women's experiences in small-scale mining, and discriminatory practices relative to culturally determined positions of women in Ghanaian society, including the nature and type of work and compensation, and overall impact of their livelihood on family stability and vulnerability in the mines. **Child labor: The silent thief of children's rights in Ghana**, narrated by Kwadwo Ofori-Dua, is filled with dynamic first-person narratives of exploited children, mostly in fishing communities, even though the government has policies that prohibit such labor practices. He concludes that this negative practice is endemic, especially in the informal sector, and offers lessons learned and recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to restore healthy child development.

Our third theme, *Health and Stigma*, offers three reflections related to chronic disease, mental illness, and reproduction. Rebekah Urbonya's narrative, **Reflections on sickle cell disease research: Lessons learned from an American student's collaborative research experience and travel in Ghana**, shares an extraordinary journey and fresh observations of her initial visit to the continent. The author gained valuable experiences learning about barriers to health care access, differential resources, and stigma for those suffering from sickle cell

disease in a hospital setting where, however, she received excellent mentorship from a pediatric physician. Second generation Ghanaian-American Lucinda Acquaye writes about **Mental health issues in Ghanaian communities: From personal experience to professional obligation**. Her work provides profound insights into the struggle between traditional beliefs of spirituality and modern medicine related to understanding “madness” as seen in everyday life and portrayed in “Gollywood” movies. Readers interested in providing culturally competent mental health services globally will gain greater understanding of the role culture plays in beliefs about mental illness and treatment of this vulnerable population. Lastly, **Abortion, possible and impossible: stigma and the narratives of Ghanaian doctors who provide abortions**, authored by Lisa Martin, Michelle Precourt Debbink, Jane Hassinger, and Lisa H. Harris is different from all other narratives. It gives voice to Ghanaian workers on the “front lines” of abortion provision through the lens of abortion stigma as investigated by doctoral-prepared physicians and a social worker. In addition to sharing lessons learned in exploring various aspects of abortion practice, the authors present a compelling story of the ways in which abortion stigma manifests in and is reproduced by Ghanaian law, politics, and culture. Thus, they argue that advocates in the arena of reproductive justice and maternal mortality from unsafe abortions can only be effective if they address abortion stigma head-on, as they do in this narrative.

Three narratives are featured in our fourth theme, *Survival and Resilience* (although we could argue that all the narratives in this special issue have those dynamics as underlying themes). These narratives offer stunning examples of positive images of survival and resilience of women and girls against all odds through an exploration of their faith, and empowerment through capacity-building projects by social workers and missionaries. As a polio survivor, Augustina Naami’s narrative, **Personal reflections of resilience and survival of Ghanaian women with disabilities: A social worker and**

unemployed study subjects, is gripping when she shares her account of the impact of stigma, and support from family, God, and mentors in determining how she overcame a multitude of challenges that led to her becoming a scholar and leader in disability rights. Her interactions with unemployed disabled Ghanaian women provide a clearer picture of what they share in common, and of resilience. Through their stories, we can see authentic advocacy and survival strategies that can be used by practitioners in the global arena to promote self-esteem, empowerment, and sustainable development.






The remaining two papers are authored by women who launched “mission” projects in Ghana with groups from the States of Michigan and Georgia. **The Krisan/Sanzule refugee who inspired a Ghana ministry** narrated by Rev. LaVerne McCain Gill recounts a nine-year ministry with more than 50 members going to Ghana to support several micro-economic projects, including construction of water wells. (I witnessed the development of this ministry as my family and I were members of the church.) Rev. Gill follows the development of the ministry through the travails of a Liberian refugee who lived in the camp from its inception in 1996 through 2006. The bonding between these two women is remarkable, told in true story fashion, is well worth the read. Lastly, author Marian Landrum Childs’ narrative, **Economically empowering Ghanaian communities through patchwork quilting: Intergenerational project between female quilters in the U.S and Ghana**, documents the vision, success, and cross-cultural implications of a CEO developing an income-generating project. What is extraordinary about this endeavor is that Childs, a social worker, engaged elderly female quilters who had never been to the continent of Africa to mentor and facilitate the making of quilts in partnership with young Ghanaian women. This included a visit to Ghana to mutually share strategies of empowerment. The author drew from her faith to complete this paper after the sudden death in May 2011 of her 27-year-old son, a high-school football coach.

In conclusion, it really does take a whole village, thus I want to acknowledge and thank a number of special colleagues and friends. Of course and first, thank you to the authors who have shared their compelling professional and personal experiences so that others may learn from them. Second, thanks to Robert Weiss, MD and his wife, Serena, who gave me sanctuary while I wrote the introduction to this issue. Thanks to colleagues Phyllis Antwi, MD, Rev. Seth Ayettey, MD, Onike Rodrigues, MD, Nana Apt, MSW, PhD, and Edith Lewis, MSW, PhD and nurse Beatrice Addoh, acquisition Librarian Gifty Boarky, and Nii Sarpei Nunoon Cultural Affairs Specialist for Exchanges at the U.S. Embassy in Ghana. A shout out to friend Steven J. Phillips of the Society of African Missions (and please see his blog <http://steveupdate.blogspot.com/> maintained in Ghana since 2005, a heart wrenching and nail-biting set of inspiring narratives of personal challenges and accomplishments aiding in the resettlement of Liberian refugees, a humbling experience that truly exemplifies the intent of this special issue.)

Special thanks to the *Reflections* team for all their diligent behind the scenes work to make the work of all of us authors come alive on each page. Beginning with the cover, thank you to artist *Robin Richesson* for her talent. Not being familiar with Ghana, Robin talked with me to the point that she could create this design. It portrays a few of the nearly 100 ethnic Ghanaian Akan symbols as cutouts of multi-colored, hand-woven, Kente cloth, representing indigenous meanings of spirituality to Ghanaians. This is often one of the longest-lasting memories for visitors, as I hope it will be along with the narratives included in this issue. Special thanks to copy editor Georgette Bradley for reading every single word of this special issue to help make the words come out correctly. Much appreciation to Greg Covey for his assistance in getting our manuscripts into *Reflections* format.

Again, AKWAABA!

Akan Symbols

	Initiative, Dynamism and Versatility		Supremacy of God
	Importance of Learning from the Past		Mercy and Nurturing
	Unity and Human Relations		Defense and Endurance
	Peace and Harmony, Fair Play, and Cordiality		Friendship and Interdependence

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