

# EXPERIENCING GHANA AT DIFFERENT POINTS AND TIMES

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*The following narrative describes the author's personal and professional experiences as the Director of Educational Study Tours to Ghana, West Africa. This reflection captures the collective experiences of various groups in diverse contexts as they toured the country, and discusses the importance of cultural competence.*

## Introduction

I am a native of South Carolina. However, most of my adult life was spent in the north where I pursued graduate education, and the midwest where I was employed as a university professor for fifteen years. I returned to South Carolina in 1999 to assume a chaired professorship at the University of South Carolina College of Social Work (USC COSW). I grew up in South Carolina as a Gullah or Geeche speaking Sea Islander. This language, like the island culture, has undergone significant transformation. The geographical isolation of the island, its social and economic independence, and its marginal contact with speakers outside the Sea Island communities contributed to the creation and sustainment of this unique language. Gullah or Geeche is defined as Creole or "pidgin;" a language that has no native speakers but comes into existence as the product of communication among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds. This pidgin language then takes over as the only language of the community (Jones-Jackson, 1989). My home was situated on John's Island, the second-largest island in U.S. waters. The island, with its pastoral and mysterious landscape, looked very much like Ghana's countryside and the Gulf of Guinea where Accra, the capital of Ghana, is situated. Until the 1980s and early 1990s, the island was inhabited predominately by African Americans. In earlier periods of life on the island, men spent their days fishing, shrimping, crabbing, and farming. The Sea Island women spent their days quilting, sewing, weeding, planting, reaping and preserving the harvest. The visible reflections of Africa in our speech, hair styles,

in our arts, and in some of our everyday habits were rapidly disappearing.

It was my connection with John's Island that motivated my greatest interest in West Africa. Although no one could say specifically where our ancestral home was located in the western part of Africa, we were often reminded that this was where our ancestors came from. It is reported that over 40%, approximately 200,000 Africans disembarked on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, in Charleston County, making it one of the largest slave ports in North America (Northrup, 2002). It is estimated that nearly half of all African Americans had ancestors that passed through Sullivan's Island (Northrup, 2002). We were also reminded that our families lived as enslaved Africans on this island for over two centuries. I am a sixth-generation Sea Islander.

As indicated above, I left South Carolina in the late 1960s to pursue employment and graduate studies. I returned to my home state in 1999 on a permanent basis when I accepted a chaired professorship at USC COSW. The professorship was named to honor the life and legacy of I. DeQuincey Newman, a renowned civil rights activist and first Black state senator since Reconstruction. When I arrived at USC COSW with a charge to develop the chair to which I had recently been appointed, I moved toward planning and implementing the I. DeQuincey Newman Institute for Peace and Social Change. It was intended that the Newman Institute reflect the spirit and vision of its namesake. One of the goals of the Newman Institute was to establish and strengthen connections between African Americans in South Carolina and the African continent so as to broaden the global, cultural,

and educational experience of the South Carolina Black community, the University of South Carolina community, and the COSW. Although the COSW had an ongoing study tour to Europe and a MSW program in Korea, it had not established any contact with the African continent.

After an extraordinary amount of planning and organizing our first educational study tour took place in the spring semester of 2001.

### **Reminders of our Ancient Connection to the African Continent:**

#### **A Group Visit to Ghana**

Ghana was chosen as the site of our study tour for a variety of reasons. Many think of Ghana as being the true heart of Africa. It has a reputation for a sincere and welcoming hospitality; for many African-Americans, it offers a warm and familiar "*akwaaba*" (or welcome) that made us feel at home. Ghana is a country rich in cultural heritage and natural resources. In 1957, it was the first African nation to win its independence from colonial rule. When our first group traveled to Ghana, the country was in the midst of an amazing transformation as it moved into a new government after more than 20 years under military rule. The lessons were extraordinary as we observed the young democracy working to stabilize the economy, strengthen the educational system, embrace technology, and build a stronger infrastructure.

Although we felt a deep connection to the motherland, it was important to be mindful that we were still visitors. The group was cautioned that, as visitors to another country and strangers to Ghana's many diverse cultures, our aim was to observe, listen, and learn, while remaining open and non-judgmental. The tendency was to compare and judge by our personal—and often limited—frame of reference, which generally resulted in biased outcomes. For some, it became apparent that we were recoiling from the very thing that we came to learn more about: the people and their culture.

It is often a culture shock for most African Americans when they encounter their African relatives on the continent. In my conversations with the tour participants, it appeared that many

had imagined Ghana being primarily filled with lush tropical rainforest, rolling green landscapes, delicious fruits and vegetables; a place without much poverty, a free educational system, adequate housing, and strong infrastructures. In other words, they were expecting much of what they experienced at home in their local communities. Many complained about the poverty, or what was sometimes viewed as an "improvised lifestyle." However, as a part of our daily discussions and reflections we were better able to bring a broader perspective to our daily experiences. Some were able to step back in time and remember the conditions of slavery, or the poverty and human degradation of life in the ghettos where many African-Americans live today in some of our major U.S. cities. It also became clear that if one focused only on the external, one would overlook the caring, nurturing, support and camaraderie in the interaction between Ghanaian children and their families. There was a life rhythm there that is not evident at first glance. What many do not realize is that the perceived differences exist primarily in the external context. Therefore, it is from this perspective that I reflect on the experiences of our first study tour of Ghana.

Despite the initial and sometimes lingering dissonance between the Ghana of our imaginations and the Ghana of our experience, members of the group were realizing a long held dream of returning to the continent. We spent 14 exciting, adventure-packed days learning about ourselves and the rich Ghanaian culture.

Our social work educational tours are student-centered, with a specific focus on social work students. However our study tours were opened to the entire community, to students across disciplines and at all levels of education. Our first group consisted of two junior high school students (one was accompanied by a parent, the other by an adopted grandmother; both were social work professors), two family members, one master of social work student, a Ghanaian social worker who was employed in the U.S., four professors (one from Women's Studies and English; the other three, including the study

tour director, from social work.) In organizing the tour, the intent was to create a diverse, interdisciplinary experience within the group, as well as participate in a one-day international symposium entitled "Families and Children in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Diaspora: Expanding Paradigms for Practice, Policy and Research."

In addition to exploring Ghana's social, cultural, and educational sites, the symposium, organized by the study tour director, was an extraordinary event. A rich exchange took place between members of the study group and the presenters, which included The Honorable Mrs. Mary Amadu, Director of Ghana's Ministry of Social Welfare; Mrs. Comfort Aryee, a retired social worker; Ms. Anna Antwi from Women Vision International and the University of Cape Coast, Gershon Gamor, a Ghanaian social worker employed in the U.S.; and Alice Amook-Ansah-Koii, a second year Ghanaian MSW student studying in the U.S.; and Professor Rose Wells, an African-American social work professor and lawyer, who lives in Accra with her family. The youngest presenter at the symposium was Adya Beasley, a thirteen year old junior high school student. Her presentation was entitled "A New Light on My Life: Exploring My Ancestral Roots." Adya shared her perspective about why she came on the study tour:

*"I came to Africa because of what I believe about being a child and about learning. Children must be challenged to go, inspired to create, nourished to grow, taught to learn, guided to achieve, influenced to dream, loved to care, given chances to live. We are leaders, writers, teachers, and learners—friends, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers and more. What we are helps us to see what we can be. We have no weaknesses, only aspects of ourselves. We are artists, musicians, critics, and dreamers. There are no limits because we should not believe in*

*boundaries that limit what we can do. We are the past, the present, and the future. We are the foundation upon which our world is built.*

*"I believe those who have experienced what they speak are the best teachers. I believe that those who can taste, gasp, and relate to what they see and hear have the deepest understanding. I believe a person is always building on their past, learning more about it, making more of it. And that this is the way to proceed into the future. And so, I crossed the ocean. I stand on this soil this soil because I want to be here. This is more important than any other continent because it is where my ancestors came from. This is the missing piece of the African American puzzle. I am here not because I owe Africa anything or because she owes me, but because we should meet. In meeting we discover all that has changed and all we've missed. We learn each other's names and how we've come to live. We grow into more complete people. We are whole again. It is interesting how things in my family history have come full circle.*

*"I am the great-great granddaughter of Mississippi slaves who owned land in Shuqualak, Mississippi after emancipation. I am the great granddaughter of the son of slaves who left Mississippi and built a life for his family in Chicago. Generations lived in that house, and when it was finally sold by the last remaining heir, my grandfather, part of the proceeds bought a ticket for me to be here."*

In many ways Adya's speech captured the sentiments of the entire tour group. It

reflected our longing for connections as a people to the African continent, and as African Americans in the United States of America. We experienced the symposium as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue and partnership, as well as an extraordinary opportunity for learning, exchanging, and sharing, with the hope of ultimately making a difference in our home states and together in partnership on the continent. The symposium reaffirmed that, in the states, we experience many of the same systemic problems and concerns as Ghana. These are especially evident in the different systemic issues impacting women and children. As in the U.S., illiteracy and child trafficking are also major problems in Ghana. According to the United States Department of Education, more than 32 million adults have very low or limited literacy skills (Lasater and Elliott, 2005). Overall, the statistics suggest that low literacy skills affect an unemployed adults' ability to find employment as well as patients' ability to read and understand the instructions or medication side-effects printed on a pill bottle. Two of the biggest contributors to adult literacy in the United States are poverty and high school dropout rates.

Illiteracy rates in West Africa are the highest in the world. Of the ten countries with the world's lowest recorded adult (15 and older) literacy rates, seven are in West Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Ghana ranks second highest in adult literacy rates among the ten West African countries. Cape Verde is first and Cote d'Ivoire is third (UNESCO EF Monitoring Report, 2009). Poverty and lack of funding for education are listed among the major causes of the staggering rates of illiteracy.

Another very disturbing problem in Ghana and the United States is child or human trafficking. Some Ghanaians say that this widespread problem is due to overwhelming poverty, which drives parents to sell their children for pittance. Others attribute it to the abuse of traditional practices, where children are sent to live with a more successful family member to break the cycle of poverty. Whatever the reasons, the bottom line is that

everyone—including the government—appears to turn a blind eye on the situation. It is estimated that thousands of men, women, and children are trafficked to the United States for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitations. An unknown number of U.S. citizens and legal residents are trafficked within the country primarily for sexual servitude and to a lesser extent forced labor (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In the final analysis, it is the social, spiritual, and cultural context in which these devastating problems occur that make these systematic issues appear to be different, but they are not.

As a part of our group's learning process, we came together and debriefed without censure after our visit with different groups, agencies, or a particular site. These exchanges were occasionally emotional, but at all times mind and heart expanding. Our process was also informed by holding the following questions in our awareness throughout the study tour:

1. Whose responsibility is it to know what poverty has done to people?
2. Why is the international debt crisis worst in Africa than any other place in the world?
3. Why are the majority of the least developed countries in the world in Africa?
4. What unique issues does Africa present for global development goals?
5. What can be done to bring about more effective development in Africa?

It was not surprising that the poverty, the hustle and bustle of life in the streets, and noisy, jam-packed, but friendly market places created a dissonance for some on the tour. This, too, was a part of the group's learning process. No one expected to return to the United States the same way we left.

The tour bus became our classroom-on-wheels as we traveled from one site to the next. With great excitement and anticipation, we traveled through four of Ghana's ten regions: Greater Accra (Accra), Ashanti Region (Kumasi), Volta Region (Ho), and the

Central Region (Cape Coast). Our tour guide, along with one of our tour group participants (the native Ghanaian from the Volta Region who was living in the United States) provided invaluable information and insights about the history of the different regions, governance structure, local culture, characteristics of the different ethnic groups living in the regions, the language spoken, the major products, and the various economic activities. In addition to asking many questions and sharing perspectives, we were given the opportunity to practice simple social phrases in "Twi," a language spoken by the Ashanti clan of Akan, one of Ghana's largest ethnic groups from the Ashanti Region. Our tour guide and bus driver were very patient and helpful as we went along. In addition to practicing the language, we stopped along the way to visit with local residents and merchants, and learned more directly about local customs, myths, and legends.

The primary focus of our study tour was on the Greater Accra Region, which included an emphasis on health, education, and welfare of Ghana's families and children. In this regard, our visit not only included cultural sites, but also the medicinal plant and herbal medicine center, the botanical gardens, social service and educational systems, women-focused organizations, and orphanages, as well as Dubois Memorial Center, Kwame Nkrumah Mausalum, and George Padmore Memorial Museum. Our interest also included the towns and castles of Cape Coast and Elmina. These coastal towns played major roles in the trading of African slaves. The Elmina Castles is a monument representing historical links between Africa and the African Americans who are in search of their ancestral roots in Africa.

We gained refreshing perspectives from our visits to the University of Ghana, Legon, and the University of Cape Coast. The University of Ghana, Legon, is the oldest and largest of Ghana universities, and is considered one of the best. The University of Cape Coast is a much younger university, but has expanded its focus to include not only teaching, but education planners and administrators, and health professionals. We met informally with

groups of five female second- and third-year students on both campuses. We were impressed with the openness, intellect, and commitment to learning these young women displayed. They felt privileged to have the opportunity to study at the University. Their chosen majors were in computer technology, engineering, journalism, and the sciences. All expressed interest in further studies in the U.K., Canada, and the U.S. We also had the opportunity to visit a Catholic Junior Secondary School in a small rural village in Somanya. It did not matter to the students or teachers that classes were held under a tree; the students were happy to be learning. Educational resources for the school were almost non-existent.

On the whole, traveling across the different regions was informative, enjoyable, and at times both bittersweet and restorative.

#### **Ghana on the Move**

Our second educational study tour to Ghana occurred in 2003. During this tour we experienced a growing and changing Ghana—a Ghana that is on the move! Throughout our 14-day-stay, the front pages of the *Daily Graphic* (Ghana's "biggest selling newspaper") were replete with stories about Ghana's economic and educational development concerns. In 2002, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) surveyed 35 African countries and placed Ghana in eighth position. However, among the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana took the fourth position. According to Mr. Yaw Boadi-Aye Bonfah, Editor of the *Daily Graphic*, this difference meant that the findings of the United Nation's survey signaled a vote of confidence in the government's effort to breathe life into Ghana's precarious economy. Mr. K.B. Asante, an educationist and social commentator, calls for a return to the Seven Year Development plan that was proposed over forty years ago for the economic development of Ghana. The plan proclaimed the well-being of the individual Ghanaian, however humble, as the "supreme law." According to Mr. Asante, economic development must precede all other considerations of policy as Ghana moves

toward social reconstruction. Mr. Asante and other leading economists, health care providers, and concerned Ghanaians at home and abroad continue to speak out on behalf of making Ghana a stronger, more compassionate nation. Some are standing up for changing the Ghanaian educational system. Despite the call for privatization, Mr. Asante and others support government funded public university education. It is important to note that Ghanaians view education as the key to economic, political, and social development. Ghana's health care system parallels the educational system in terms of importance and need. Unfortunately, even to the untrained eye, it seems obvious that the medical care system was very strained and continues to be so. Health care providers spoke of the need for more trained professionals, a stronger infrastructure system, and more modernized equipment.

Not unlike the study tour participants, Ghanaian's leaders also saw the people of Ghana as the primary catalysts for keeping the country moving towards the reclamation of its glory days. Ghanaians believe that they hold the key to making Ghana a truly free and prosperous country.

We agreed with Mr. Asante and others that with confidence, a spirit of self-reliance, and abundant faith, Ghana will recapture and live the dream of the country's founding mothers and fathers of a prosperous country and a United Africa.

#### **An MSW Student Internship**

As a result of this study tour and our ongoing relationship with the human services community, we were able to put two MSW students in a block summer placement with the Center for Community Studies, Action, and Development (CENCOSAD), where Professor James A. J. Annorbah-Sarpei is the executive director. CENCOSAD was established in 1977 as a people-centered, action-research NGO to promote strategies for empowering and enabling communities of individuals and people to realize their potential through an integrated approach of participating action, research, evaluation, training, networking, and resource development. It is

our hope that we continue to work in our roles as social justice workers to build a viable social and educational exchange program between our social work community and the Ghanaian social work community. During the summer of 2006, two female Caucasian students sought a block placement at CENSOSAD. I accompanied the students to Ghana, and remained the official liaison practicum instructor from their home base in South Carolina.

Given their youthfulness, limited social work experience, and lack of experience with the African continent, I was hoping that at least one of the students would be of color. Both students described their experiences as life-transforming, but unlike most visitors to the continent of Africa, they evaluated their experience from a western perspective. As a part of their evaluation, they wrote that things are slower in Ghana, and that GMT (Ghana Maybe Time) can result in s frustration around deadlines. They also stated: "It was in the workplace (practicum) where we noticed most of the cultural differences between ourselves and Ghanaians. As social workers, we were thrown for a loop when we discovered that Monday morning meetings begin with a Christian devotion, Bible reading, lesson, discussion, prayers, and singing." They continued: "Finally, be prepared to witness power distribution based on gender and age." There are several lessons to be drawn from these reflections that may be used as teachable moments in cultural responsiveness in general, and in an international context.

First, in indigenous cultures time is not viewed or experienced in western terms. It is important for visitors to be open to alternative ways of viewing and experiencing time. Looking at time through culturally responsive lens would suggest a more expanded interpretation of how native Ghanaians use time. In this sense it is neither bad nor good; it is simply the way it's done in Accra. The same observation holds true about morning devotion in the work place before the work day, as well as the situation concerning age and gender. As an outsider, it is more appropriate and effective to observe, listen, and learn the norm. These experiences and perceptions noted by

the students reflect implications of how schools of social work may prepare students for international encounters that moves them beyond an ethnocentric interpretation of different cultures. It is important for students see people from different cultures in terms other than of what can generally be described as risk factors. These risk factors are: race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender difference, disability, etc. Such a reductionist framework tends to abuse individuals sometimes entrenched in experiences of marginalization and or colonization. Finally, another concern that is often ignored is the students' reluctance or lack of readiness to discuss and deal with uncomfortable discussions about race or other oppressions in the classroom setting. Additionally, as pointed out by Adams and Gibson (2007), a common reaction by students to discussing racism, structural disadvantages, or oppression is resistance to the material and sometimes to the instructor teaching the material, especially if the instructor is of color. This is particularly true when the dialogue turns to issues of privilege, colonization, and white privilege in particular.

Both Caucasian students concluded that, "Ghana was a great experience to be involved in international social work." One student also wrote, "The cultural learning and friendships developed with people in the community and other visitors to Ghana are some of the greatest treasures I took away."

There have been other visits to Ghana, but not in the context of student motivated study tours. As a visitor, I continue to be enriched by my African roots and reminded of my ancient connections to the African continent. I also continue to see a changing, inspiring, hopeful Ghana

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Education**

The global and multi-contextual nature of our existence in the world has required a shifting of paradigms, especially in social work education and practice. As our personal and professional interest in international education and practice expanded, it became more obvious that we also needed to expand our

conceptualization of cultural competence. The Ghanaian member of our first tour group (who presented at the symposium) spoke on the topic of cultural competence. He emphasized that cultural awareness should be the first step toward cultural competence. His perspective, not unlike the evolving dialogue on the subject, is that cultural competence is a process that in some ways represents a dilemma in social work practice and education. The dilemma is inherent in the historical origins of cultural competence, which reflects practice with individuals and groups of color. The problem with this model is that it tends to equalize oppressions under a "multicultural umbrella" and unintentionally promotes a color-blind mentality that eclipses the impact of colonization and the significance of institutionalized racism (Abrams and Molo, 2009). In other words, scholars adopting a critical lens toward the cultural competence model contend that the cultural competence model's focus on individual attitudes leaves social workers unequipped to deal with or even understand the subversive, destructive nature of colonization and instructional racism on all levels where it permeates: individually, structurally, and globally (Yee, 2005). This mindset becomes an even greater problem for U.S.-trained caring professionals who take this perspective into an international setting. This problem seemed very obvious in the student's reflections about Ghana, the agency where they were interning, and about their practice in Ghana.

Overall, this narrative—especially the section on the MSW interns' experience—may be used as teaching examples that target cultural responsiveness at the level of social workers' personal beliefs, and agency practices with a view toward expanding the cultural competence concept to include a critical race theory framework. Critical race theory is an interdisciplinary theory that draws from feminist studies, postcolonial studies, history, economics, sociology, political science, ethnic, and cultural studies. The aim of this theory is to address systemic and institutionalized oppression, with a view toward greater equity and empowerment for people, communities, and organizations.

It seems obvious that this process of drawing on examples from another country may prove to be challenging as a teaching tool for local or international studies; however, it would be invaluable. This teaching example would push students and instructors to examine structural/systemic barriers as well as personal beliefs and practices in local and global contexts.

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