

REFLECTIONS ON MY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE TO GHANA, WEST AFRICA

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“When I think of Ghana, I think of the people and how wonderful it is that they value, so highly, family, community, and connecting with people ... “

Introduction

When I read an email from Beverly Sealey, Ph.D. inviting me to write an article for this Newsletter about my experiences living in Ghana, I felt flattered, and challenged (I was taking a break from writing my HBSE final), yet determined to satisfy her request. Dr. Sealey and I met for the first time on Saturday, December 1, for lunch and to talk about our mutual experiences living in Ghana. I had contacted Dr. Sealey after reading her article in a recent newsletter covering her trip to Ghana and her research as a Fulbright Scholar. When reading the article, I thought Dr. Sealey was a student and assumed she might appreciate talking to someone who also had been to Ghana and experienced ‘re-entry’ into U.S. culture; more specifically Boston, MA culture. Little did I know, I would find her to be a professor, having traveled to and lived in Ghana many times, leading trips of her own, and quite familiar with “re-entry” and the ‘culture shock’ that goes along with the re-entry experience. Needless to say I was impressed and pleasantly surprised, for my Ghana experience was a bit more time limited than hers was.

I spent 3 ½ months living and traveling in Ghana on a semester study abroad trip through the School for International Training in 1996, when I was a junior at Bates College. I was an undergraduate student at the time, majoring in psychology. Although I had some prior experience with international travel, when I traveled to Ghana, I was young, naïve and “clueless” about what to expect. I traveled with a group of seven students and a faculty leader.



Me, right, with a classmate and new friends

How I chose Ghana, how Ghana chose me

I feel I was very fortunate to have had this wonderful opportunity to live in another country for a semester. I wanted to take my trip abroad to a place that was extremely different from any place I had ever been. I wanted a life changing experience. I had only basic Spanish speaking skills and no other knowledge of foreign languages, and of course, I spoke English fluently so I was limited to a country where the official language was English. I wanted to travel to somewhere very different from the U.S. so I did not pick Australia or England, for example. Kenya was tempting because I love animals and thought of how exciting it would be to go on a safari. But, I wanted to a place that was unfamiliar, challenging, and transformative. *The Ghana: Life and Culture Seminar with the School for International Training* is what I chose and as a result how I experience life today is truly different and my comfort zone has definitely expanded.

Immersion and the Fante Language and Culture of Cape Coast Region of Ghana

Soon after my arrival to Ghana, I was introduced to my 'host family.' They were a middle class Ghanaian family who lived in Cape Coast, the Central Region of Ghana, and a seaport town and fishing village. I would stay with them for one month as I learned the local language, Fante, at a nearby school. Two of the first phrases we learned in the Fante language were, 'Wo fre wo den?' which means 'what is your name;' and, 'Sin yim, nkwa,' which means 'if you don't know, ask.' I was fortunate to learn the language in a short amount of time, which benefited my immersion in the culture.

During my first month in Cape Coast, I had the experience, before learning the language (and before I met my host family, maybe 3 days after arrival), of walking around, alone, for 2 hours in a quiet residential area. Six Americans in a van in a foreign country and culture they barely knew (maybe they know a little from the recommended reading list) let out one-by-one far enough away from each other so they won't run into each other and avoid the lesson. I



thought I must look lost, as I had no idea what to do with myself besides to keep walking and appear comfortable. Within an hour, I was with some women in their yard, eating Ken-keh (a Ghanaian dish made with cassava and wrapped in leaves), and watching one braid the hair of another. I felt fortunate to have been invited to spend time with these women and I appreciated their acceptance of me though I was not a member of the dominant culture. I felt very insecure when I got off the bus but by the end I felt more comfortable and a lot less lonely. I wonder now how this scenario would have played out were it a Ghanaian girl wandering around a residential area in Boston, happening upon a family in their backyard.

A mobile classroom

One of the nice features of my program was that we did not have stay in one place nor did we were required to attend a local university. Our group of seven students traveled and learned along the way. We first journeyed to a small fishing village (which used to be the site of a government owned sugar factory), Komenda, and lived there for a week. Each of us lived with a different family. The families lived in homes built by the government at the time that the factory existed. I was touched by the friendliness, openness, and generosity (especially with time) of the people and life in the village and I later returned to Komenda to live and do my independent study project. The focus of my project was survival skills and how people managed after the closing of the sugar factory. "Aunty Gladys" was my host mother and Areba was a teacher at the village school who became a close friend. Spending time with them was one of my favorite things to do.



After the week in Komenda, we traveled to Accra, the capital of Ghana. Accra is a vibrant, busy, metropolis. There were tall buildings compared to what I had seen thus far in Ghana. Kumasi and Tamale are two other major cities that we visited. In Kumasi, the Ashanti region located in the middle of Ghana and the northern section, we visited a loom where the traditional Kente cloth is made.

Kente and Adinkra Fabrics

I saw women using large machines powered by their own physical energy, creating beautiful cloth and fabric.



In Kumasi we went to a town where they made Adinkra. We saw men stamping cloth with wax and different African symbols, called Adinkra symbols. Today, I still have a piece of both Kente and Adinkra in my bedroom. My third highlight about Kumasi was we had the opportunity to spend time with, dance, and jam with a popular music group and have a wonderful time.



A classmate learning how to make Adinkra cloth.

A few last thoughts...

Being with the people of Ghana and sharing time together was my favorite part of my experience. Growing up in my family, spending time with others was not valued. I acquired an appreciation of this value which was very much imbedded in the Ghanaian culture. When I returned to the states, I made an effort to be more friendly with people (even strangers), greet people on the street if I caught their eye and chat with the person sitting next to me on the MBTA train or bus if they seemed available. These efforts to me break through the aloneness that colors our culture in the United States.



Along similar lines, from a cultural perspective I also remember that “time” was not treated with the same kind of priority in Ghana as with other societies. People are, what we Europeans would consider, always late. The reason for this is because on their way to where they are going, they stop and talk to people they are familiar with.

Have you ever walked down the hall or down the street and see someone you may not have seen in a while but did not stop to say more than "hi" because you were on your way somewhere? This does not happen in Ghana. Ghanaians are very warm, friendly, loving, and open, caring, and genuinely interested.



Being in Ghana was a wonderful experience that afforded valuable, life-long lessons. I value my time spent there and I cherish my Ghanaian family and the many friendships I developed. I learned so much I think traveling to Ghana has offered me a perspective on how life and culture is here in the United States which I could never have gotten had I not traveled to a country whose culture is so very different from my own, a culture which values people so highly.

As a social work student at Simmons School of Social Work, my international experience will be an asset in my work with diverse populations when as a professional social worker.

During my meeting with Professor Sealey I learned that she would be leading a group to Ghana this coming summer, 2008. The course, titled SW553: International Social Work, a spring course, has a travel component to Ghana. The course begins January 29, 2008, with classes held every two weeks. For more information, you may contact either Beverly Sealey at 617-521-3917 or bsealey@simmons.edu, or Hilary Wilson, Office of Study Abroad at Simmons College, 617-521-2181, or hilary.wilson@simmons.edu.

