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On the Value of Faculty Development Abroad: Reflections on the 2000 Ghana Seminar Experience

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Introduction

In the summer of 2000, we were part of a three-week faculty development seminar that travelled to the West African nation of Ghana. The seminar was sponsored and organized by the University System of Georgia African Council. The theme of the seminar was “Tradition and Modernity in Ghana.”

Ghana is a geographically small nation, about the size of Georgia and South Carolina combined. It is located in the equatorial portion of West Africa, bordered on the west, north, and east, respectively, by the former French colonies of Côte D’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Burkina Faso, and Togo, and on the south by the Gulf of Guinea. In an attempt to blunt French domination of the area, Ghana (then known as Gold Coast) came under British domination in the late 1800s after a long-running series of colonial wars. Led by national hero Kwame Nkrumah, the Republic of Ghana gained its independence in 1957 (*New Standard Dictionary* 1981; *Wikipedia* 2011).

At the time of the seminar, Ghana had a population of about 18,000,000¹ (Nkrumah 2000). While relatively small in terms of geographic area and population, nonetheless it is an extremely diverse nation. There are over 100 different ethnic groups, the members of which speak a variety of native languages (*Wikipedia* 2011). The *lingua franca* of the nation is English, and many Ghanaians (given the surrounding nations’ colonial history) also speak French.²

According to Bishop Sarpong (2000), a social anthropologist as well as chief prelate of Kumasi, about two-thirds of Ghanaians are Christians, divided principally among Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Methodists. North Ghana, rural and pastoral, has a concentration of Moslems, with Islam comprising better than 15% of the population. Very small minorities follow Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. The remaining portion of the population follows traditional African religion (i.e., animism, magic, and totemism).

Following the seminar’s theme, the participants received lectures on Ghanaian history, political system, economy, social system, religious system, art, literature, and women’s affairs from professors associated with Kumasi University of Natural Science and Technology (KUNST). Lectures and workshops on African music and dance were given at the University of Ghana in Legon (near Accra), and a visit was made to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast. In addition, numerous excursions and side trips were made to

¹ The current (2010) population of Ghana is approximately 24,000,000. The Ghanaian government estimates annual population growth at 2.4% (Ghana Government Official Portal 2011), which is an extraordinarily high rate, but typical of third world nations. Population explosion is but one of a multitude of problems Ghana faces.

² Ghana’s FCUBE program (Free and Compulsory Universal Basic Education), begun in 1996, mandates that all school children receive language instruction in their native ethnic tongue, English, and French (Weweso L.A. School headmistress 2000).

museums and cultural events; trade, craft, and market centers; parks and botanical gardens; historical locales and shrines; and a gold mine processing plant. Two highlights were a personal interview with the *Omanehene* (district chief) of Ejisu and a half-hour audience with the *Asantehene* (chief, or king, of the Asante).

Our Ghana experience has immeasurably benefited us academically, professionally, and personally. Specifically, our first-hand exposure to Ghanaian culture provided innumerable examples of social structural elements, concrete illustrations of broader sociological and anthropological concepts, and perhaps most importantly, a deeper understanding, or the Weberian *verstehen*, of social structure and how it operates. The remainder of this article will address each of these, in turn.

Social Structure

Amongst the courses we taught subsequent to our Ghana seminar experience were, collectively, introductory sociology, social problems, introductory anthropology, deviance, and criminal law. Of these courses, anthropology was the most obvious beneficiary of Ghanaian-centered illustrations. The traditional Asante culture is a classic example of an advanced horticultural estate-system chiefdom. Family organization is matrilineal, with the Crow system of kinship terminology. Estate endogamy and clan exogamy are practiced, with cross-cousin marriage preferred. Examples of animism and other accouterments of a traditional religious system abound. Given a strong colonial history, the diffusion and adoption of European-based cultural traits and cultural complexes gives a wealth of information on culture change and global problems as they apply in Ghana.

We witnessed any number of incidents and situations that authenticated “what the textbooks say.” For example, we visited a home under construction for a soon-to-retire professor from Kumasi. He had been away for a while, and when he went to look for this house, it was not where he expected it to be. For some reason, the *Asantehene* did not want the house in its original location, so the location was moved without consulting this professor. In a chiefdom, the king controls everything, especially land.

In a matrilineal culture, marital residence is matrilocal. Toward the end of our stay in Kumasi, we were hosted in the home of a female professor who had previously delivered a lecture to us. Her husband dropped by to visit her. Had her mother been there, he would not have visited at all, as mother-in-law avoidance is the rule in matrilineal, matrilocal systems.

In terms of culture change and global problems, Ghana is a dual-economy society. Its formal economy depends principally upon gold, cocoa, and lumber, and Ghana is attempting to enter the global economy. Much of the Ghanaian economy, however, is traditionally based on family-centered cultivation and

entrepreneurship. Resulting annual incomes are consequently low, but the demand for consumer goods, especially imports of commodities Ghana cannot technologically produce, is high. One consequence of this is rampant inflation. In the three weeks we were there, the rate of exchange of the Ghanaian *cedi* for the American dollar rose from 5,800 to one to 6,500 to one, a devaluation of better than 10%.

Our Ghanaian experience provided useful examples of social structure, for the other classes we taught, usually on a comparative/contrast basis. As a third world nation, Ghana affords illustrations of a more *Gemeinschaft* society with a simpler division of labor, more emphasis on status ascription, and more emphasis on primary group associations. However, because it is a society attempting to modernize, there is case after case of diffusion, social and demographic changes, cultural lags, and their concomitant problems. Indeed, one co-author focused on the status of women in Ghana, starting with traditional roles, and then morphing into the economic and social roles Ghanaian women are assuming as modernization occurs. This was an important part of this co-author's lectures on gender stratification.

The traditionally based, yet pluralistic and changing nature of Ghanaian society also lent itself well to illustrate the structural-functional, social-conflict and symbolic interaction approaches to social analyses. For instance, in one of many efforts to stave off the religious turmoil experienced by nearby African nations, we were told that Ghana has deliberately structured its educational system to include familiarization with the beliefs and creeds of all its religious groups (Weweso L.A. School headmistress 2000).

There were even illustrations for what might be termed the sociology of everyday life, which we were readily able to carry back to the classroom. Some knowledge of Ghanaian folkways was paramount for the success of our visit. Beginning with a pre-departure orientation meeting and extending throughout our trip, we received continual instruction on how to greet Ghanaians, the meaning of local English-language idioms, the giving and acceptance of gifts, etc. Case in point, the right hand is *always* used to shake hands, giving or accepting gifts, and even waving a greeting. The use of the left hand is considered very offensive, as it is traditionally used for "personal cleansing."

Concepts

Our visit to Ghana did not just provide a wealth of examples for local cultural traits and complexes. It also provided us with first-hand observation of broader social concepts as they in fact operate. In both introductory sociology and anthropology courses, attention is usually paid to such notions as cultural integration, cultural cohesion, ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, and culture

shock. These are rather abstract notions, unless and until one has actually seen them in action.

Cultural integration, the notion that all parts of social structure are inter-related and are (hopefully) consistent with one another (see *Encyclopedia of Sociology* 1974:116-7; Macionis 2009:56), also means that if one cultural element changes, other elements have to change in order to re-establish consistency. Ghanaian modernization means economic change, which means educational change, which means status and role change, which means change in gender stratification structure.

Cultural cohesion posits that various elements of social structure are intended to create social bonds and mutual social obligations within a society (see *Encyclopedia of Sociology* 1974:116). It is a system of boundary maintenance and systemic linkage mechanisms designed to insure social solidarity and inter-group connectivity. Ghanaian marriage rules of cross-cousin endogamy and clan exogamy are intended to keep two family groups linked to one another generation after generation. The traditional Ghanaian custom of reciprocal gift exchange, and the rules governing it, is not merely an economic transaction. It signifies an ongoing social relationship between two individuals or between two groups, enhancing their ongoing solidarity.

Every sociology and anthropology introductory text book discusses ethnocentrism and cultural relativity early on (see, for example, Macionis 2009:57). Cultural differences between Americans and Ghanaians abound, and invite judgmental responses. To illustrate, notions of privacy are quite disparate. In America, urination is usually confined to special rooms designed for that very purpose. Public urination (with the possible exception of fraternity keg parties) is frowned upon. Public urination in Ghana is the rule, not the exception, for both men and women. Whenever and wherever the need occurs, the event takes place. To be sure, there are efforts to regulate the practice, as “Don’t urinate here” signs are common on city walls. Nonetheless, it is a custom difficult for middle-class Americans to accustom themselves to, let alone engage in. However, it is understandable in light that proper public facilities simply do not exist for most Ghanaians. In fact, when our group halted at a Ghanaian gas station for a “comfort stop,” we had to haul water to operate the one commode (no gender distinctions) ourselves.

Sociology and anthropology texts also discuss culture shock, the personal disorganization one experiences when one encounters a different culture or subculture (Macionis 2009:42). We were told in our pre-departure meeting that we would experience some normal disorientation that would produce a bit of stress. Included in the meeting’s information packet was a chart describing a “cultural adjustment curve” that included not only adaptations to the host culture, but also adaptations to our own culture upon our return.

There is no doubt we experienced culture shock, beginning with the moment we disembarked from the plane at the Accra airport. Although warned that the scene would resemble bedlam, we were immediately accosted by seeming hordes of men all clamoring to take care of our luggage. Although, in reality, it was all benign, it was quite an intimidating situation. There were any number of things that took some getting used to, such as the different cuisine, conveniences (commodes, water heaters, showers, etc.) that did not work or only worked sporadically, trying desperately to refrain from using our left hands, public urination, and so on.

One thing we never quite got used to was the combination of constant crowds and invasion of what Americans regard as “personal space.” This was epitomized by the near ubiquitous hordes of street vendors who would hawk their wares in an extraordinarily persistent manner. They would never take *no* for an answer and continued to press (in both exhortation and physical terms) in order to make their sales. On more than one occasion, this type of situation was emotionally overwhelming, and we had to seek some sort of asylum to escape these assaults on our persons and psyches. Yet, seemingly very oddly, when we returned to our home in Georgia, our very first reaction was “where is everybody?” The crowds of humanity we found in Ghana had quickly become a norm, and we had to readjust to its absence.

Understanding

Max Weber posited that sociology should be value-free, guided by objectivity, and undertaken with the purpose of *verstehen*, or understanding why people behave the way they do (see Collins and Makowsky 1978:115; Macionis 2009:20-1; Timasheff 1967:184). As Gardner (1968:165) put it,

“You will never advance far in your understanding of another culture if you devote yourself to exclaiming that some things are wonderful and other things are terrible...What you must try to do is to understand what problems a society faces; why it has developed the way it has; why it has certain characteristics rather than others; why it does some things so well and other things very badly.”

Given a mere three-week stay, we cannot claim a deep and complete understanding of Ghanaian society. We do, however, understand it better. As sociologists, we were able to see structural elements in the light of how they operated in Ghanaian terms, not our own. This applied even to those customs and behaviors we, as Americans, found distasteful or offensive.

We certainly did not care for the persistent overzealousness of street vendors. We came to understand it, though. The typical Ghanaian does not have

a wage- or salary-earning job. The Ghanaian economy, based upon horticulture and cottage industry, is chiefly traditional and family-centered, with personal face-to-face transactions dominating. A typical family's annual income is just a few hundred dollars. Given this, it is little wonder why street vendors behave the way they do. They must compete with their fellows in order to perhaps make a sale worth a very small amount. Most vendors have learned that continued persistence can wear a person down, so that s/he gives up in exasperation and purchases something just to get rid of an individual who is now a pest. That sale, though, might very well be an important part of that vendor's daily take.

Summary

Our participation in the Ghana faculty development seminar was an extraordinarily rewarding experience. We met and interacted with people from all walks of Ghanaian life—from Asante royalty to street vendors. Whether through formal meetings and lectures or informal casual encounters, we profited from each. Certainly, we were able to utilize immediately what we learned in a variety of the courses we taught. We also have disseminated what we came away with in addresses to professional and civic groups. But above all, our Ghanaian venture rounded us out intellectually and personally. Consequently, were we to be given the opportunity of participating in another overseas faculty development program, we would not hesitate in taking it.

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