

University of Dayton

eCommons

Myth and Reality: Reflections on Our Travels
through West Africa

Center for International Programs


8-19-2019

Chapter 7: Perspectives on West Africa: Reminiscences of the Global Education Seminar in Ghana and Togo

Sharon Davis Gratto

University of Dayton, sgratto1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip_ges_2019

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gratto, Sharon Davis, "Chapter 7: Perspectives on West Africa: Reminiscences of the Global Education Seminar in Ghana and Togo" (2019). *Myth and Reality: Reflections on Our Travels through West Africa*. 11. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip_ges_2019/11

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Programs at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Myth and Reality: Reflections on Our Travels through West Africa* by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

CHAPTER 7

Perspectives on West Africa: Reminiscences of the Global Education Seminar in Ghana and Togo

*Sharon Davis Gratto
Professor, Department of Music
Graul Chair in Arts and Languages*

Abstract

As I began my participation in this year's University of Dayton Global Education Seminar (GES), culminating in three weeks of travel to Ghana and Togo in West Africa, I understood that my goal was to experience life in another culture, to make connections with colleagues in my disciplinary areas of music and music teacher education, and to share what I learned when I returned to Dayton and the University community. I knew that while I brought to the seminar table unique personal African experiences compared to those of my faculty colleagues, I also understood that I had much to learn, both from them and in Ghana, a country I would be visiting for the first time. These observations are influenced by the opportunities I have had living and traveling in Africa and reflect my personal thoughts and perspective on what I saw and experienced.

Historical Context

My African experience began more than thirty years ago as a member of a foreign service family living for two and a half years in Lagos, Nigeria. This was before Nigeria's capital moved to Abuja in the central part of the country. My husband was a diplomat at the American Embassy, and I taught music, grades K-8, at the American International School of Lagos. I was also a member of the Founding Board of the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON), a group that sponsored concerts to raise money to establish and build a two-year music school in Lagos. The school was built and is doing well today. In fact, five MUSON graduates came to U.D. during the time I was Department of Music Chair to complete their undergraduate degrees in music. While we were living in Nigeria, we had opportunities to travel to Egypt, Israel, Kenya, Togo, Benin, and the Ivory Coast either for weekend visits or longer vacations. Eighteen years after we left Lagos, I returned to the continent for a conference of the International Society for Music Education in South Africa, traveling with professional colleagues and some of their students from the Indiana University School of Music. In addition to the conference sessions and events, we toured the country and went briefly into Zimbabwe to see Victoria Falls. We also shared African choral music in a church in the Soweto Township and celebrated with a shared meal in another township on the occasion of the BMW automobile company's gift of a BMW vehicle for the police to use to be better equipped to apprehend criminals. My final African experience of significance was a faculty study trip from Gettysburg College to Egypt in a program similar to the GES at the University of Dayton. The specific goal of this nine-



day study trip was to enrich curricular development in our individual disciplines and courses. The seminar classes leading up to the trip were demanding and challenging, with extensive required reading and attendance at presentations about the Middle East by noted guest speakers.

World Music Choir

Soon after I joined the University of Dayton faculty, I founded and have continued to direct a World Music Choir (WMC), a non-auditioned student ensemble that meets once each week. Membership in WMC includes students majoring in varied disciplines; not every singer is a music major. WMC at U.D. was an outgrowth of a similar choir I organized and directed for many years at Gettysburg College. My African experiences informed my work with and repertoire selection for these groups at both institutions, as well as my curricular development of courses to prepare Music Education majors to teach general/vocal music in the elementary classroom. Working extensively with world choral music repertoire also resulted in an invitation to edit a new Global Music choral series for Pavane Publishing here in the United States. During the GES trip, I hoped to find the necessary contacts for permission to publish two Ghanaian choral works in this series.

Connecting to Colleagues

This personal background directly influenced my approach to the GES meetings and the three weeks of travel in Ghana and Togo. One of the most valuable things for my participation in the program was connecting with University of Dayton colleagues in other disciplines for a year of monthly seminars and three weeks of travel. There are never enough opportunities on campus to get to know well colleagues in other units and departments. Conversations with these faculty members in History, Teacher Education, Physical Therapy, Engineering, and Criminal Justice helped me gather valuable information about their programs, their individual teaching and research work, and their students and to relate that new knowledge to my own academic areas, Music and Music Teacher Education. For example, shared information in one case actually helped me

understand better why tenure track position approvals in my department may not always be forthcoming due to much greater needs in other academic areas, needs of which we may not be aware. Furthermore, we shared information about unit and department organization, faculty workloads, promotion and tenure processes, instructional techniques, student advising, curriculum development, study abroad programs, personal international professional travel, and community engaged learning programs. Communicating with these colleagues individually and in small groups during the three-weeks of travel proved to be invaluable to my own understanding of their disciplines and their units' organizations. This opportunity for interaction also led to an arrangement for me to review the tenure and promotion file of a junior faculty member in the cohort.

Broadcast Media

My perspectives on West Africa were refreshed and updated during this trip. Many of my observations took place on our daily van rides, while viewing television, during meals, and in conversations with our Ghanaian driver. Technology, for example, was far different on this trip than it was when I lived in Nigeria thirty years ago. Communication technology was more widely available and used everywhere by most of the people we saw, even those selling goods by the side of the road. Television offerings were not as limited as I had experienced in Africa in the past. In Nigeria, for example, I performed a live flute, piano, and cello chamber music concert that was recorded for broadcast by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), which at that time was government owned and partially commercial. The network had such a shortage of broadcast material that my performance was re-broadcast many, many times. On the televisions in our hotel rooms, I was curious about the available programs. After all, my first Master of Arts degree from American University was in Radio and Television Broadcasting. In addition to CNN and the BBC, I was introduced to the UK's Sky News Channel, which tended to have more commentary and news analysis discussions than the BBC. What I found absolutely amazing was the number of channels dedicated to sports and religious

broadcasts, channels not really balanced out by other program offerings as they are with our large cable services in the United States. While the typical minimum of four channels of simultaneous football (soccer) matches could have been anticipated, there were also many other sports contests on additional stations at the same time, including cricket, cliff diving, wrestling, car racing, dressage, boxing, and tennis. In Togo, I found more American television program series than in Ghana. Programs such as ‘Law and Order’ were voiced over in French. This reminded me of seeing the series “Roots” voiced over in German when we were posted to Germany in the late 1970’s. At that time, it seemed strange to see slaves engaged in conversation in German. Furthermore, the increased number of German words required for each English sentence meant that the dialogue moved at such a rapid pace that it was often difficult for a native English speaker to follow. One highlight of the limited time I had to surf the television channels in Ghana and Togo was being able to see the 75-year D-Day anniversary observance broadcast live on June 6th from Normandy, France, including the visit by President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump. Fortunately, President Trump appeared to be on his best behavior for this momentous and moving occasion rather than a distraction, as he had been in a news interview prior to the ceremony. As a radio buff, I also explored radio in the hotels where we stayed and primarily found stations broadcasting West African popular music, including highlife, and religious programs.

Van Ride Observations

I observed many things during our van rides, including the proliferation of Muslim Mosques, especially in the Northern parts of both countries. Every small town and village had Mosques, some located in close proximity to Christian Churches. The largest Mosque we saw was the impressive one in the Ghanaian capital, Accra. The main Christian denominations that I saw represented by signs and buildings included Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, and Pentecostal. Our driver explained that Muslim and Christian people in the towns generally function amicably together, with few

problems due to their religious differences. Along the road we observed funeral and wedding processions, people in Sunday dress returning home after spending the entire day in church, and groups of Muslim families all dressed in white for worship or special events.

Truck Transport

While on the road we passed some of the largest and tallest truckloads of goods I have ever seen. Our driver explained that the vehicles were loaded by hand at the docks before the trucks drove to inner countries to deliver their goods. He said that the trucks were filled skillfully by strong “loaders,” whose job it was to get as many items on a truck as possible; items are lifted up to the loaders, who stack them until the truck is full. Increased automation of this work has undoubtedly jeopardized many loaders’ jobs. We learned about license plate identification information on trucks and were soon able to observe that many of the loaded ones were headed for Burkina Faso. On occasion when we would pass a broken-down truck, we saw the entire load being removed before the repair could be made and reloaded again once the repair was complete. Our driver told us that he no longer drives across the Ghanaian borders to countries deemed unsafe due to political unrest or criminal activity, including Burkina Faso and Nigeria at this time.

Other Sights Along the Way

In addition to places of worship and overloaded trucks, our travels took us past other sights worth noting. Our May arrival in Ghana coincided with the beginning of the West African rainy season. Occasional heavy rain storms yielded standing water, pot holes, and ruts created by rapidly running water, making our secondary road travel slow, bumpy, and often challenging. Adult and baby goats and chickens ventured into the roads almost without incident. Our driver explained that they needed no identification markings of ownership because they knew where they lived and returned there when they were ready to do so. He also kept reassuring us that the animals would get out of the way of our vehicle, which they always did. Other animals that were occasionally visible on the side of the road included small herds of long-horned

cows, probably owned by absentee farmers who came periodically to check on their properties, animals, and workers. Wood was a valuable commodity and could be seen held on people's heads as they walked along the road or stacked in bunches along the roadside waiting to be loaded on a vehicle for delivery elsewhere.

Roadside Commerce

Stands along the road contained just about anything and everything a person would want to purchase to use or eat. Carefully balanced stacks of beautiful fruits and vegetables included the largest avocados I have ever seen or tasted. Mangos, coconuts, yams, tomatoes, bananas, and plantains were plentiful. One interesting experience was learning about the rodent known as the grass cutter. This animal's authentic name is the greater cane rat, a rodent that lives by reed-beds and river banks all over sub-Saharan Africa. With the expansion of human habitation into their environment, cane rats have moved inland to farmland locations, especially where sugar cane is grown. The grass cutter, as they are called in Ghana, are hunted as a food delicacy and sold in roadside markets. If too much time passes between when the grass cutters are killed and when they can be sold, the animals are smoked and sold as dried meat. Grass cutters are clearly both field pests and eating delicacies.¹ Some of the people in our group tried grass cutter stew during one of our meals and did not seem too eager to venture further with this dish again. To our driver, grass cutter stew was clearly a favorite dish. The Togolese, like their French colonizers, also enjoy eating rabbit, as we learned during our visit to the Marianist Community and the Chaminade School in the capital, Lome. While we were in the main residential building, we were greeted by a group of large beautiful brown and white rabbits hopping freely around the dining and living room areas. It soon dawned on us that the rabbits were being raised as free-range animals to eat!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_cane_rat - accessed on 7-1-19

Transportation

In Ghana taxi service consisted primarily of passenger vans like ours and small cars. Both forms of taxis were often overloaded with people and goods. In Togo, taxi service was provided primarily by people on motorbikes. While most of the bike drivers wore helmets, their passengers usually did not. Our driver explained that the huge increase in motorbikes for transport in Togo has nearly eliminated car and van taxi service. Unlike cars and vans, the motorbikes are not registered or regulated. Based on personal observations, the Ghanaians and Togolese seem to be skilled at repairing many things, including cars, vans, bicycles, motorbikes and motorcycles, and people appear to come to the rescue of anyone whose vehicle breaks down along the road.

My Disciplines of Music and Music Teacher Education



A number of serendipitous situations led me to make connections related to my academic disciplines during the 3-week trip to Ghana and Togo. These included finding a percussion instrument that was new to me in the W.E.B. Dubois Center gift shop and receiving some informal playing instruction, meeting with and interviewing the elderly Palm Wine Musician who is a faculty member in the African Cultural Center at the

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), connecting with a touring Togolese drumming and dance troop for a two-hour sample performance in their family compound in Lome, and meeting African musicians in the Accra Arts Market. In addition to the W.E.B. Dubois library, I observed the Kwame Nketia music archive collection at the University of Ghana, the KNUST African

Cultural Center, and the music instruments in the National Museum of Togo in Lome. While I was impressed with the valuable archival materials and instruments I saw, I was very concerned in each case about the lack of techniques to preserve the old items and the buildings and cabinets in which they were housed. The museum in Lome, for example, only had air circulation fans and no air conditioning, and the instruments and other items on display were showing serious signs of limited preservation techniques.

Because of my work in music teacher education, I found it very helpful to visit two Marianist schools in Togo, the Chaminade School for boys and the Adele School for girls, and a public primary grade school in Accra. The classes in both types of schools were coed, the children were crowded into the desks they shared, and class sizes were very large compared to most classes in the United States. Despite the large numbers of students in each class, the children were attentive and well-behaved and demonstrated rehearsed routines of courteous welcomes for visitors. They also had great respect for their teachers and administrators. The Marianist children shared songs with our group to model how singing was incorporated into their language lessons. It was apparent that instructional methodology in the three schools that we visited was based on the British and French educational systems, with the focus on memorization of curricular material to reach the goal of being able to pass a series of required level tests along the way. Teaching to the test was foundational in both countries, and instruction in the arts only offered informally or not included at all.

Summary

The year-long GES seminar meetings and the related travel to Ghana and Togo with a faculty cohort was a positive and productive experience for me in multiple ways. The colleagues we met in Africa were welcoming and prepared to host us and to share information in response to our many questions. Connecting with Marianist communities was very special part of our trip. The times the cohort spent together shopping, eating, swimming, exercising, and

sightseeing, among other activities, were special ones that will remain at the core of the full experience.

One last but not the least important observation concerned our van driver, Patrick, who was with us for the entire three weeks and whose invaluable information I shared frequently throughout this reflection. Patrick demonstrated in front of everyone the degree of respect that exists in West Africa for older people. I say this because when Patrick realized that not only was I the oldest member of the group but also that I had just celebrated my 75th birthday, he treated me with even greater respect than I expected and made certain that I was doing well whenever he thought checking on me or assisting me was necessary. He commented with amazement at my appearance and my constant energy, probably due to his experience with individuals my age. Many in the United States could learn from Patrick's example to value senior citizens more, at a time in their lives when respect can be so important.