

IN GHANA HERE...

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In the following narrative, the author draws upon her experiences (good, bad, and embarrassing) and sharp sense of humor to provide insights and shortcuts to understanding Ghanaian customs and culture. The purpose of this narrative is to encourage professional helpers to have fun while being effective.

Introduction

After working and/or volunteering in the countries of Liberia, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Brazil, and Ghana since 1978, I moved to Ghana permanently in 2000. Although I have worked in many capacities with law and graduate degrees in Social Work in Ghana, the longer I live here, the more I hear the phrase "In Ghana here..." I admit I often cringe when I hear it, and at other times I smile. For even if I am speaking in a local language, my accent, name, dress, walk, identification or something else portrays me as an outsider, non-Ghanaian or *Obruni* (foreigner).

People usually want me to understand or to conform. It is often hard to do, as I know I have a bit of an anarchist/non-conformist streak in my personality. Also, I was raised to critically think, challenge, and struggle against injustice. This personality trait does not cause me to be rude or disrespectful; rather it has encouraged me to listen and learn more and question. How? Why? Does this help us as a people? I often frustrate people with this, and they simply respond, "Look Auntie Rose, this is how it is done in Ghana here!"

I have recorded a few of my favorite *I wish I had known* "In Ghana here..." incidents, which I believe will be enlightening to newcomers to Ghana so as not to impede their effectiveness as they embark on their role as professional helpers. I have had thousands, but time and living limits my recordings for this narrative. I share them out of love and pray my offbeat humor offends no one. My life has always been interesting and unusual to me. I laugh a lot and make the most

of it. I hope you enjoy this small journey into it.

I truly believe culture evolves or dies. Or will it? I keep learning – right here in Ghana, and I must admit, it has been great fun! Thus the purpose of this narrative is to provide the grounding from my sometimes embarrassing real-life experiences, which may help foreigners put aside their arrogance and/or eagerness to help as professional helpers and do so effectively while having fun. It may also help to minimize the egg on their face and promote mutual exchanges. Learning from the locals or indigenous members of the community can be one of the most wondrous experiences a person can have.

Somebody Should Have Told Me

Before I moved to Ghana, I wish somebody would have told me some of the common cultural rules, interactions, and customs that would cause me frustration, annoyance or confusion. Maybe then I would have taken time to prepare myself mentally and even come up with some advance solutions on how I could handle some of these things better and be a more effective social work clinician, lawyer, community organizer, researcher, and educator while offering my services (paid and unpaid) to international K-12 schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, Operation Cross Roads Africa, U.S. Peace Corps, tourists, refugees, and the American Embassy.

Well, there was nobody to tell me, so I did what I usually do, forged on in faith. Besides, I had traveled through many African countries, including Ghana, for weeks and months at a

time before I decided to move and live here. However, visiting and living in Africa are truly very different matters. When I moved to Ghana in November 2000, I came with a husband, a 13-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. I now had to work, set up a home, integrate into a community, build new friends and a circle of support, deal with schools and activities for the children, continue to learn the culture, and build a balanced life. We had lived in Ghana as a family from September 1996 to September 1997, so we did have friends and quite a bit of experience and knowledge. But life is different when you are transitory versus settling. I wish I had known so many simple things.

First, I wish I had known about the traditional welcome. You have to always start from your right when you enter a room. Go around and shake everyone's hand. Remember to clasp hands, so when you pull out of the handshake you snap fingers. I have scratched, pinched, and stumbled through this traditional handshake many times. After you sit, you will be served water. Drink it slowly because sometimes the drink is *akpeteshie* (the traditional gin or alcohol often made in a homemade still). Once, I gulped mine down when I was thirsty and couldn't finish the next step, which is responding to the following question: "What is your mission?"

You must tell why you are there. Even if you were invited, phoned ahead, or wrote a letter requesting the visit, tradition demands that the question be asked of you. Most often, the question will be posed to the senior member or male in the visiting unit. It is not acceptable to say, "I am here because you invited me for dinner and I am hungry as hell, I didn't eat all day waiting on this!" You will come off better by being formal, even with friends. For example, I have often said, "Our family has always wanted to live and experience Africa. We know we have a history that extended thousands of years before our last 500 years in the USA. We have come to Ghana to learn and experience some of this unique culture and history. It is our privilege to share part of this journey and experience it with you."

That's right; I just channeled myself back to Easter speeches, church programs, and

various African American community functions. I used formal, emotional, and warm sentiments and informally became our family's spokesperson. Although after chugging *akpeteshie* I was not capable of saying anything, so I smiled and looked around until someone else spoke and my throat stopped burning.

Second, I wish somebody would have told me that in Ghana it is a taboo to use the left hand in public for almost anything. In Ghanaian culture the left hand is used for only "unclean" things, so even though you wash it, it is never used to greet, wave, eat, or pass money. If one must use their left hand, it is important to cross it with your right hand and apologize for utilizing your left hand. I have now stopped eating with my left hand and I am still working to stop waving with it. It requires conscious effort. Not long ago, I waved at a small child and he waved back with his left hand. His mother immediately admonished him and pulled his ear; harsh but effective behavioral training. So now when I forget and use my left hand, I pull or tug my left ear. I don't hurt myself, but it is a good reminder.

Third, I wish somebody would have told me that in Ghana the sense of personal space is very different. I know western culture generally requires about ten or more inches between people. In Ghana, people readily touch you. They grab your hand and show you the way when you are lost and ask for help. They may touch you to just ask your name or where you are from. I personally am a hugger and love to feel the warmth of people I care about. I also gladly hug any new person I meet. But I am not used to being crammed in public transit vehicles so tight that I have to crawl over people to get a seat. I am not used to being pushed while standing in line or simply walked over, around or in front of, like I am not there.

Once I was standing in line at a bank. The line was long and slow. The man behind me was so close I could feel him on my back each time he shifted or huffed at the slow speed in which we were being served. I decided to use humor versus the "girl from the hood" approach (which would have entailed yelling "Get out of my space, brotha!"). I turned and

smiled and said, "Any closer and we would be having sex. And I usually require dinner, several dates, and some intense bonding first." His eyes got big. He smiled and stepped back and apologized profusely for crowding me. People in the line laughed and begged him to be patient in line and to respect his auntie. This approach was more fun than my usual: "Could you get up off my butt, please?" request. Well, you have a choice; the narrowed body space can be utilized to your advantage. Take the opportunity to make a new friend, cultivate a date, discuss life, or just complain about slow service, bad traffic, politics, or "what is needed in Ghana."

Fourth, I wish I would have known that being invited to a funeral is just like being invited to a party in the USA. It does not matter that you do not know the deceased or anyone else in the family. Funerals are events that can last for the entire day, weekend, or week.

It is customary to hire a band, traditional dancers, and a deejay and to provide lavish food, beverages, and activities. It is a bit like an Irish wake, a New Orleans funeral march, or the event cleanup and departure of family after a funeral in the USA. After all the mourning, the funeral service, burial and meal, the affair changes. Family and close friends stay and share memories. You laugh, cry, share gossip, and enjoy each other. Then everyone complains that this closeness and celebration should not just happen at funerals. You depart and promise to stay in touch, attend the next upcoming wedding, or help plan the family reunion. And of course nothing happens until the next funeral brings you all together again.

The Ghanaian funeral has some similar sentiments. While living in Ghana, I have rarely seen a dead body, gone to a church service, or to a burial. Instead, I have attended traditional funerals where food and drinks are served, entertainment is provided, and the family is consoled in a beautiful open space. Gifts are presented to the family and guests give monetary donations to help with the expenses. Family members wear special clothes and designated colors that can depend on ethnicity, class/statute, age, and/or gender of the deceased. Guests are invited to learn and perform special dances and songs. You meet

new people, colleagues, old friends, and neighbors. It is the height of social events. Do go to a funeral if you are invited – it is a wonderful glance at Ghanaian culture.

Fifth, I wish someone would have told me how many requests I would get for help with a U.S. visa, a marriage, or for my address or phone number. Many Ghanaians truly believe the story that has been spun. They think if they go to the U.S., they will quickly find a job and work very hard for six months. They will then return to Ghana and use the money to start a business and start building a house. When I try to explain how difficult it is to find a job and the expensive or high cost of living in the U.S., I get mixed reactions. Some people feel I am lying and just do not want to help anyone, or that I am uncertain about their commitment to work. I have no connections at the U.S. Embassy to help people get a visa, and after sponsoring and supporting ten different African students in the U.S., our family and friends there are overly stressed and feel they have helped enough. I will not recall all the episodes of debts, disappearances, and other minor disappointments experienced by me and family. But most importantly, I live in Ghana now, and cannot prove that I can house and feed someone in the U.S. while I am living in Ghana. I often recommend the U.S. lottery as an option. The process is free, and citizens from Ghana and Kenya seem to get more chances to win an American visa than any other Africans.

Since I am already married, I just laugh at marriage proposals now. But they are common for single and married women. Many people will declare their love or ask you to marry them just because they believe it could be economically advantageous for both of you. "Will you marry me?" is a proposal to build a life together. Love may come, but respect and a shared purpose is considered a valuable foundation upon which to build a marriage as well. I now only give my cell phone number or email address out to new people I meet. This allows me the power to cut inappropriate communication when needed.

Sixth, I wish I would have known the true meaning of GMT. To most of the world it means Greenwich Mean Time, which refers

to the mean solar time at The Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London. In Ghana, GMT means Ghana Maybe Time. Now, being an African American, I must admit I am familiar with CPT (Colored People's Time). Generally, many things in our community start late and our people just shake their head and say, "You know us. We gotta do better." Well Ghana Maybe Time takes CPT to a whole different level.

One day I went to a Naming Ceremony for a new baby. I was so excited to learn that the affair started at 5:00 a.m. and would be completed by sunrise. I got to the family house promptly at 5:00 a.m., dressed in the required blue and white, with my baby gift in hand. I rang the door bell and after ten minutes someone finally came to the gate. Their gatekeeper found me a chair and asked me to sit on the porch. After about 30 minutes, members of the family came out to greet me and thank me for coming. They were wearing robes or wraps and still had the fresh smell of toothpaste on their breaths. I joined the gatekeeper and used my truck to go pick up the table, chairs, and other equipment needed for the affair.

Back at the house, we set things up and decorated. People started to arrive between 8:30 and 9:00. I asked my friend if I got the wrong time; the response was, "Oh, you have been here long enough to know about Ghana Maybe Time, Auntie Rose. You tell people 5:00 and they will probably remember at 6:00 and by 7:00 they will be on their way and by 8:00 maybe they get here and by 9:00 surely it will have started or people will still be there to receive you and share a drink with you anyway." I was encouraged not to take time so literally, because there is always more time. I have been to very few events that start on time in Ghana. It took me years to learn to pack a bag with a snack, writing pad, and reading materials so that I would not feel like I was wasting too much time in Ghana. I learned I could not schedule three to four events in a day and to be happy if I could accomplish two. There are exceptions, and some things start pretty close to the given time. But, when it comes to social events, it is rare unless you meet other people who are

preoccupied with the false belief that "time is money," or "time is more important than people." Time is just time in Ghana.

Now I truly enjoy the slower pace and you are always welcome, too, disposition or attitude, whenever you arrive in Ghana, but it takes some adjustment. I have watched many professional helpers, consultants, researchers, students, and visitors lose it when their two-week vacation or semester-long project does not yield the desired results because their host postponed things for a funeral, to accommodate another visitor, or to wait for delayed supplies.

My husband would always say to me softly, "Learn more patience or you will stroke out. You are not going to change this time issue in Ghana." He may be right, but I keep trying in the things I can control. I start lectures five minutes after the scheduled time at the University. This is my way of respecting GMT, but forcing some structure you can count on while ending the torture of many people who also come on time even though they expect nothing to happen. About 60% of the students in my classes are present when I start speaking, and that number is growing.

Seventh, I wish I had been more familiar with the traditional systems and ways of doing things and solving problems when I began my work as a social worker/consultant in Ghana. I had a case where I worked with a child that had been abused. Utilizing the way I had been trained in America, I was able to quickly identify which offices I would need to work with in the Ghana system. There was a Department of Social Welfare that sought to protect children, a method to get free medical care for the child, a special unit of police officers to investigate, a court system to prosecute and pursue justice, and homes and foster families to provide emergency care for children. The systems—though often overburdened—paralleled the Western or Global North approach. But operating in tandem to this system is the traditional system which avoids all of these agencies with the exception of medical care. It is proper to go to the head of the child's family and the victim and let them, a minister, or a chief seek to resolve the problem. They will decide how the

abuser will make restitution and be punished, and they will devise how to provide care and support to the child and their family. Once this is done, there is no need to involve government in any form. This system flourishes in rural areas when many services are not easily accessible, and in the urban areas when people want to avoid jail time and embarrassment. It is hard to work between the two systems and assure that your work is ethical and that the human rights of your client are protected; but you cannot ignore traditions that have been utilized for thousands of years. Many social workers use the existence of government systems as leverage. "Treat my client right, or we will go to the police and courts for a better outcome." Social workers in the community, schools, churches, and non governmental agencies are indeed approached by families to improve their bargaining positions in the traditional approaches to problem solving.

Lastly, I wish I would have known that the common saying "You're invited" does not always really mean that. Ghanaians always tell you, "You're invited" as they sit down and start a meal in their home, restaurant, or wherever. They invite you to whatever they have with this phrase. Just greet them, make eye contact or smile, and if they are consuming something, they will usually say, "You're invited." It is a courtesy. You are supposed to graciously say no. It is rude to eat or consume things in front of others and not share. Hence the saying, "You're invited." Well, I forgot to tell a visitor from Ohio this, and smiled as he joined a woman on her front porch eating *fufu* and goat meat. He readily accepted her invitation, entered the gated porch, and dug in. He did not even wait as she sent for water. He did not know you must wash your hands first. He consumed over half of the dish (another no-no). He thanked her and left with a big smile. I was embarrassed, but everything had happened so fast, I did not have time to educate him or explain. I did apologize to the woman, however. She waved her finger at me and was pretty much speechless.

Oh, well—you get the gist. Cultural adjustment is a lot of work. Many of my learned behaviors, cues, and responses do not work in Ghana. The country has its own set of values,

behaviors, and responses; but knowing this puts one ahead of the game. Be prepared to be out of touch and a bit off until you learn the "correct way in Ghana."

When you work and travel abroad you do miss familiar foods, language, customs, favorite pastimes, the company of family and friends, fast Internet, good roads, medical care you are accustomed to, etc. But you have a chance to gain so much more. You learn a new language, experience new foods, make new friends, adapt to a new environment, enjoy new pastimes, and truly become multicultural in your way of living and thinking. There is a big world to explore and, no matter what somebody tells you—it can be great fun!

You can learn more about my adjustments by visiting www.accrafoundation.us. A short book titled *In Ghana Here* details simple but profound learning via humor.

Other things I wish somebody would have told me include:

- Being called Mom, Auntie (you get the title due to gender, not age)
- That using a hiss to get someone's attention is acceptable
- *Dashes* (a tip or small sum of money or gift to show appreciation for a favor or purchase) are requested for pictures, purchases, requests for copies of photographs, carrying luggage, etc. "I beg you, I beg you, please dash me something!"
- Some people are prohibited from taking photos (belief that it captures part of the soul due to religion/culture)
- That I would get more invitations to attend church than anything else
- To avoid the use of the words "crazy" or "stupid" unless I felt like fighting
- Male preference/gender bias
- The concept of bargaining
- Chop/street food (watch for sanitary practices), avoid if not piping hot, and when people use their hands to serve you
- That belly-out and short skirts are for beach and dancing events, but not formal events (yet tight clothing is common)
- That people take the promises of gifts seriously; do not promise unless you know you can deliver

- That plumbing is fragile and often through septic tanks, so a box or basket near the toilet is usually for the paper you use
- It is not acceptable to talk about sex publicly
- The bias against homosexuality
- Same-sex dances, touching, and holding hands is okay in public but male and females should not show affection toward each other publicly
- People take criticisms about their country personally

Concluding Reflections

So how would this information have helped me be an effective professional helper in Ghana if somebody would have told me about it in advance? Well, I think it is very important to take the time to get to learn as much as you can, especially professional helpers, about a new country and culture well in advance of visiting (as a tourist, volunteer, fellow, teaching, practitioner, researcher, student, etc). When I arrived in Ghana, I could have told you the major ethnic groups, say a few key phrases in several languages, discuss the major religions, geography, politics and economic issues historically and currently. I had maps, an overview of art, literature and education in the country. All of this is helpful, but it does not prepare you for the small cultural nuances that you only truly learn when living among the people.

If I had known the importance of greetings, stating your mission (purpose of your visit) and always inviting people to join in on things I was partaking, I think I would have been more readily accepted in Ghana and had greater success as an educator and professional helper. I would have taken the extra time to invite people to join me and really used the opportunity to network with people of interest. Instead, I mocked the gesture and never understood it as the height of courtesy that it was and still remains. I know that being aware of the issues with close body space would have made me more tolerant and less hyper-vigilant. When you grow up in a large urban city as I did, the constant crowding usually means brace yourself for pick-pocketing, a worse crime, or a really rude and disrespectful pickup of a sexual

nature. Knowing this can prepare one to dress a bit more conservatively in cool cotton clothing and to try to carry less stuff when traveling via public transit and corridors.

I wish I knew about avoiding the use of the left hand. No one wants to unknowingly offend others when they are visiting with them. This is a task I still struggle with. I cannot imagine what the struggle would be for a left-handed person. This is a concept that is unfamiliar to me, but the belief that the left is for unclean things only is prevalent in Ghana. Knowing this detail can save you from being hissed at, passed over by taxis, and offending those you interact with. Knowing about the importance of funerals and what they are like in reality would have been helpful. A visitor can learn more proverbs, dances, songs and meet people ready to mingle, party, and socialize at a funeral. Our western concept of funerals limits our participation in one of Ghana's best socializing and cultural showcases.

Learning about traditional methods of problem solving and conflict helped me to be a social worker that was simply more culturally competent in Ghana. Students were shocked when this American teacher started to discuss it in class and require that our practice in Ghana be based in realism. This reality must be explored and studied. I know our classes became more practical and useful when we all admitted how we had to use, interact, and figure out how to respect this system while using government systems.

Time! I am still learning to be more patient and how to make the best of what is happening in my present despite my goals. No one was there to tell me. I am telling you, so that you may do better than I have.

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