

Orientation to West Africa

Although this information refers primarily to Ghana, it is also good advice for those visiting other West African countries.

Akwaaba! You will often hear this word or other words of welcome when you are in Ghana. Ghanaians are among the world's friendliest people, and they value politeness and friendship very highly. Urbanization and westernization are breaking down many ancient beliefs and practices, but Ghana still maintains a particularly traditional African culture with great pride in the heritage of past generations. You will do well to acquaint yourself with some basic "do's" and "don'ts" so that your stay in Ghana will be beneficial to those with whom you work and to yourself.

Basic Cross-Cultural Principles:

You will be embarking on a typical cross-cultural experience in which you will be exposed to different ways of thinking, speaking, and interacting. There are certain principles that will help you to enjoy a positive experience and avoid some of the possible misunderstandings that can occur in cross-cultural settings.

1. Ask, listen, observe and learn – Do not assume that what is normal to you will be the normal way of doing things or looking at things. You are a stranger, a visitor; therefore, the responsibility is on you to accept the role of being a learner and showing the greatest respect for the local way of thinking and approaching whatever situation you are in with an open mind and submissive spirit. It is your obligation to submit to the advice and leadership of Ghanaians in situations where decisions have to be made, especially where those decisions will have effect on the work of the churches. To be quite honest, this is a problem for many Westerners, especially those who have never been exposed to foreign cultures. Be humble and respectful. You are entering a society that had its shaping foundations laid over 1000 years ago, thus it is an ancient and noble culture.
2. Patience, tolerance and understanding-Cross-cultural situations are often filled with stress. This stress comes from being in a different setting than what you are used to. The climate, languages, the living styles and standards, and just about everything you experience will be different. Your obligation is to be patient, tolerating the differences and possible discomfort. Ghanaians will go to great lengths to make you comfortable and cater to your needs; however, the responsibility is still yours to adapt to and accept the situations in which you find yourself.
3. Ethnocentrism – This is a problem of people from a culture thinking that theirs is the best of all cultures, or being close-minded to learning and adapting to new situations. Judgmental attitudes and insensitive comments are very damaging and hurtful. You are in Ghana purely on a partnership basis, that is to work with Ghanaian brethren and friends

as co-workers; therefore, it is your duty to watch your attitudes and speech. Do not criticize, mock or ridicule anything or anyone. Be mindful of how many sentences you begin with the expression, "In America," or "In my country,..." Your status as an outsider visiting the country means in all likelihood that you do not have the inside knowledge nor the cultural experience that would enable you to pass informed judgment on culture and custom.

4. Language – There are 52 major languages and hundreds of dialects in Ghana. Each language is very complex and adequate in its particular setting. Many Ghanaians speak many different languages, demonstrating a linguistic skill that is totally unknown to most Westerners. You will do well to attempt to learn as much of the local languages as you can. Ghanaians are very encouraging of this and feel honored when you show this level of respect and concern. Language is the primary tool of constructing meaning in any culture, so you will benefit greatly from paying close attention to the beauty and wealth of expression in the various languages. You will find that the English spoken in Ghana is quite different in tone, pronunciation and vocabulary from English in other countries like America, Australia and England. Take time to learn the local ways of speaking English. This will prevent much misunderstanding.

5. Communal values – Every society sets its standards of acceptable behavior and what it values in interpersonal relationships. Africa in general and Ghana in particular place much emphasis on communal values like extended family, nuclear family, respect for the elderly, honoring traditional rulers like chiefs and elders, and the importance of dignity and proper social conduct. What one person does is seen as having impact on his entire family, social group and community; therefore, everyone is expected to be careful, respectful, dignified and observant in every public setting and in every aspect of life. There is not much appreciation and acceptance of the extreme sense of personal independence that Westerners hold so dear. An attitude of "I don't care what others think. I will do it my way" is judged as selfish, socially deficient and destructive. Everything is to be done by consensus-agreement after much discussion.

There is a very deep sense of doing things in a formal, proper way. This means that too much informality, especially in public settings is not appreciated. For example, Americans tend to value informality, relaxed situations and interactions; however, in Ghana, proper, respectful conduct is expected especially from those who are in the presence of people older than themselves. For example, if you approach a group of people with the intention of speaking to only one of the group about something, you must first take time to greet the entire group before asking permission to speak to the one person. To walk up to a group and speak directly to one person only without first greeting the entire group is considered very rude. This sense of formality and concern for public conduct is also seen in the fact that eating and drinking during meetings, church services, prayer times, etc., is not acceptable, neither is chewing gum. The general rule is: "Do not eat or drink in any gathering unless you are offered something by the host."

This sense of formality and respect is also seen in the custom of removing sandals before entering a house (this includes flip flops). Also, when you are entering someone's room

(especially bedroom or private office), you should knock on the door or say "knocking" before entering, even if the person has already told you to come in. This evidences a respectful, careful attitude. Always remember to be cautious, respectful and observant so as not to be offensive. This is especially true when you are in the presence of authorities, elderly persons and in public settings.

6. Spiritual values – Religion is very basic in everyone's life, and the spiritual side of life is regarded as the most important. Everything is seen through a grid of spiritual values and realities. This provides for a very receptive atmosphere and positive climate for spiritual work and interaction; however, as in all cases, take time to listen and learn. Ghanaian Christians generally have a far better understanding and appreciation of the spiritual and communal concepts of our faith than do Westerners. Your role as a visitor is to learn from the brethren here even as you are invited to teach.

7. Culture stress/shock – Normally, one does not experience culture shock unless he is staying in a different culture for an extended time. However, culture stress is felt the moment to enter a strange environment. Changes in routine and context may cause varying levels of stress and discomfort especially if one experiences sickness or other stressful situations. Hearing different languages, being surrounded by customs and settings that are very different as well as being far from your home may cause you to experience this culture stress or shock. At its deepest level, it is a disruption in your emotional and evaluative processes and may lead to illness and depression. The greatest defense against it is to be aware that culture stress is normal, and seek help from experienced people in understanding and coping with stressful situations. Depend upon the Lord, and he will lead you in every situation.

Basic Etiquette:

In every society there are acceptable and unacceptable patterns of behavior. The following are some of the basic rules of social conduct. Pay close attention. Ghanaians are very tolerant and forgiving, especially with foreigners, and will often not even point out our mistakes. However, repeated errors and offenses will create an uncomfortable atmosphere with negative results. Just remember the old adage: When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

1. Learn the uses of the right and left hands. Eat and greet with the right hand only. Do not give or receive anything with the left hand. Above all, do not dip your left hand into a dish of food shared with others or take the Lord's Supper with the left hand. Remember that use of the left hand is considered disrespectful in most settings.

2. When eating and someone comes, always offer them some food or invite them to join you. When you are so invited, you may decline respectfully or join as you wish. When served food, never refuse. Eat at least some. Make no comments except favorable about food. When you are asked what you would like to eat, feel free to make suggestions within limits of availability. Be careful of facial expressions or comments about food.

This is a sensitive area. Always share, and always be appreciative and willing to join in.

3. Greetings are important. Always give and respond to greetings properly. Whenever you pass a group of people, especially elderly ones, always give them a greeting. To fail to greet is considered an insult, and not easily overlooked. When you walk up to a group of people, always speak a greeting and shake hands if possible. Time is always made for greeting and it is not seen as an interference or waste of time. Look and listen and learn.

4. Be careful with humor and teasing. Ghanaians love to laugh and have fun, but humor is usually non bi-cultural, that is, it does not cross cultural boundaries. What is funny in one language, may be insulting to another. Teasing especially can be misunderstood. Observe and learn. Do not attempt jokes unless you catch on to the style of humor. Many feelings have been hurt due to improper humor. Do not compare people to animals ("cute as a monkey," "dirty as a pig," etc.).

5. Private matters may be "not so private". Your physical size, marital status, etc., may prove to be enticing topics of conversation, so do not "wear your feelings on your shoulder." Do not be overly sensitive to personal remarks made about you or to you. For example, to be called "fat" is a compliment. They are probably not meant in an insulting way. However, you should be very careful about making any comments about anyone else.

6. Showing your affection in public between men and women is not acceptable, even husband and wives. Men may hold hands (no sexual implications) or even hug, but male/female relationships are much more strictly controlled. Hugging is not commonly done except by very dear friends, especially between men and women. For example, the American insistence on hugging is often very embarrassing to many Ghanaians.

7. Be careful in taking photos. Always ask permission and do not let your zeal for photos become a distraction or disturbance, especially in church services or public gatherings. Never take photos of government or official sites.

8. Always use titles of respect when addressing someone. Anyone older than yourself must be addressed as "brother" or "sister" at the very least. You will hear terms like "senior brother, elder, mother, father, uncle, auntie," etc. Elderly people should be addressed with titles of respect like "father, mother or grandfather", etc.

9. Be very careful of words like "fool, stupid, crazy," etc. Avoid judgmental, strongly worded language, for many words have different meanings here. Do not take offense when certain terms are used that normally are considered profanity in your home country. Sexuality is not a topic treated in public easily unless you are conversant with the culture, so be careful on delicate issues.

10. Do not shout or display loud, boisterous behavior. Shouting is considered of poor taste, especially for women. Whenever you are in public, be cautious and careful, normally exhibiting a quiet, friendly attitude. It is not considered polite to eat while

standing or walking in a public place.

11. Women must be ready to play a submissive role in everything, especially in northern Ghana. They are expected to be quiet, supportive and respectful at all times. If a woman is in a teaching position, she is to be dignified and moderate in how she speaks and conducts herself. A woman should never publicly criticize a man, nor should a wife behave as an equal to her husband. This is difficult for Western women at times, but it is something closely monitored by local people. We are bound to give the best impression and influence we can; therefore, we must accept the social roles as they are defined by the culture. A woman who behaves as a man will not be respected, nor positively regarded.

12. Do not be out in public places late at night. Always stay with brethren or your group. If you like jogging or walking, do it in the daytime.

13. Dress modestly and neatly. Women must not wear tight or revealing clothing, nor should they wear shorts or jeans. Women should wear skirts or dresses of moderate length, nothing above mid-calf length. Even when exercising, women must not dress like men or wear any tank tops, tube tops, halters, or shorts, especially in the Islamic environment of northern Ghana. Men should not wear shorts in public, nor go without a shirt. You should pay attention to grooming and neatness, for that has a strong reflection on your character. Even when in-doors, dress modestly and be concerned about neatness and public appearance.

14. It is not acceptable to wear sandals or flip-flops into someone's house. Remove them at the door. Shoes may be worn inside, but it is not acceptable to put your feet upon furniture or sit in a way that shows the bottoms of your shoes or feet to others in the room. Keep your feet on the floor. You must always remove shoes of all kinds when greeting a chief. You should not sit in a way that would show the bottoms of your feet to a chief or elderly person. Let Ghanaian brethren advise and direct you in such matters.

15. If someone washes your clothing for you, do not include your underwear. That is considered your own responsibility, and washing others' undergarments is not an accepted practice. You must be prepared to wash your own clothing by hand, especially women. Washing machines are not common, usually found only with the missionaries.

16. You may receive requests from people about any number of things. Listen politely, do not commit yourself ("maybe" mean yes!), unless you are seriously going to follow through and provide what has been requested or at least part of it. Seek counsel and advice on such matters from experienced brethren before you commit yourself. If you do agree to help someone in some way, then do it! Do not leave Ghana, and then forget what you promised. If you wish to give something to someone, do so privately, not in the presence of others. Give out compliments to groups, not singling out individuals for compliments in the presence of others. Be gracious in accepting gifts, and generous in helping those who have needs, and those who have helped you.

Work/Service setting:

You will most likely find yourself in teaching situations, observation settings, travel and lodging arrangements; therefore, there are a few points that you need to consider.

1. Do not complain or be demanding when it comes to lodging arrangements. You must be flexible in terms of transportation and lodging. Be prepared to take baths from buckets. When water is provided for bathing, you should do so. Ghanaians are very particular about bathing, especially for women who are expected to bathe twice a day. Most of the time, you will find your arrangements more than adequate, but you will be inconvenienced at other times. This is part of what you must be willing to accept.
2. You must be willing and able to pay your way. You cannot expect local brethren to provide for your needs although at times they may be able to do so and will gladly do it if they can. You must be prepared to cover all expenses related to your stay, and help share costs when in groups. You must be willing for and/or bring with you any special foods that you need. Imported foods are very expensive, so you will eat locally produced foods most of the time. You will be expected to help pay for cooking, transportation, cleaning and other expenses in certain lodging arrangements.
3. If you are on a special diet, have allergies or take special medications, see to it that this is known and be prepared to find that your preferences or needs may not be available. This has caused some problems. Bring your medications with you!!! Inquire about matters such as allergies and special diets before coming, and bring any special foods you will need.
4. It is not advisable to come to Ghana or any other foreign country if you are in the midst of a personal time of emotional, physical or psychological crisis or stress. The cultural stress that you will encounter on such a trip may compound your problems, creating difficulties for those around you as well as yourself.
5. Always ask for and listen to advice from mature Ghanaian brethren. And please accept the advice when it is given, even when you do not agree. If it is a matter of social judgment, let the local people determine the best course of action in any given situation. You are only here a short time, Ghanaian brethren and missionaries live here and will have to deal with these situations and circumstances long after you are gone. Therefore, let them take the lead in solving problems and making decisions.
6. You are expected to attend all services of the local church wherever you may be. Language and worship style differences may make it a little uncomfortable for you, but it is your responsibility to participate.
7. In teaching situations, it is always necessary to exhibit the appropriate attitudes. Let the Ghanaian brethren be your guides. Speak with clarity and respect at all times. Seek guidance in what would be appropriate topics. Allow Ghanaian brethren to answer

delicate questions and those related to topics which are outside your experience. Feel free to express your opinions and participate fully in Biblical discussions; however, be sensitive to differences in opinion and do not allow your opinions to create problems. It is not acceptable for teenagers or young adults to teach people older than themselves. They may share experiences and engage in learning discussions, but to lecture or preach to those older than themselves is not socially accepted. Please do not request arrangements that actually go against social values. It is difficult for Ghanaians to refuse requests from visitors since the culture places a high value on pleasing visitors.

If you are preaching or teaching, make every effort to show the highest respect and regard for this opportunity. You will be accorded respect and deference by Ghanaians, so you must respond by accepting this trust placed in you with full responsibility. Do not assume that you can answer questions or teach on topics here like you would in your home country. Seek to understand the culture and leave delicate issues to those who deal with them on a daily basis. Do not import divisive issues or controversies. Do not assume that your way of looking at a Biblical question is the only way. Even if you are here to teach, you must assume the status of a learner.

8. When you are assigned tasks or asked to help with various projects, you will be expected to do so willingly and consistently. Take it as a learning experience even though some tasks may be tedious. Everyone is expected to help bear the burden of the group needs.

9. Please be aware that many projects and programs are always in progress; so when planning your time in Ghana, be sure you coordinate your schedule well and those with whom you will work. For example, in the northern part of the country, November through April is a very busy time with seminars, training programs, village outreach, mobile clinics, well-drilling, etc.; therefore, visitors need to coordinate their time so as not to interfere with or distract brethren from their duties. Often, it is these busiest times that we need extra hands, but this must be planned well ahead of time. June and July are busy with groups of students, so plan your time in cooperation with those on the field to maximize the benefits of your stay, and be willing to accept dates proposed by brethren here for your visit.

Conclusion:

These guidelines are meant to help you maximize the benefits of your time in Ghana as well as prevent some very common mistakes. There are many other cultural do's and don'ts that you will pick up when you are in the country. Do not be afraid of making mistakes, we all do that, even those who have lived here for years. Just be sensitive and seek to learn. There is no way that we can prepare a list of guidelines that will incorporate all possible scenarios, so these are given as a sampling of certain principles and actions that are both acceptable and unacceptable. When in doubt, ask, ask, ask and ask again. Listen and observe. Read up on African and Ghanaian culture as well as general cross-cultural materials.

The single most important attitude is one of humility that seeks to learn. Christian service has no place for feelings of superiority. Ethnocentrism, cultural arrogance or other such destructive attitudes will ruin a very great learning experience. Our wish is that you grow spiritually and experientially while in Ghana. May the Lord prepare you, bring you and use you to His glory which you are here.