

8-18-2019

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Recommended Citation

Amin, Julius A., "Chapter 8: Africa's Gifts to the World" (2019). *Myth and Reality: Reflections on Our Travels through West Africa*. 12.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cip_ges_2019/12

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CHAPTER 8

Africa's Gifts to the World

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At the University of Dayton, I teach a course on modern African history. The class normally enrolls thirty-five students from different racial, national, gender, and ethnic backgrounds, but most of the enrollees show up with strong perceptions of what Africa is or should be. As a result, on the first day of class I ask the students to pick up a sheet of paper and write down words that come to their minds when they hear the word *Africa*. I ask them not to write their names on the papers. I've observed over the years that the adjectives and nouns haven't changed much. The typical ones include the following: poor, disease, backward, primitive, HIV, charity, jungle, different, animals, exotic, hunger, underdeveloped, slave trade, war. Every so often some students will include culture, family, strong religions, trade, and kings. The exercise is intended to gauge both their attitudes and their level of knowledge about Africa.

Along those lines, I also typically ask why they want to take a class on Africa, given a preponderance of negatives the words reveal. Here responses are more varied. Many note that Africa remains a mystery and they thought this was their opportunity to delve into the continent. Occasionally, they will be students thinking about Peace Corps or other forms of service in the continent after graduation.

Another group will provide the typical response that the class fulfills part of their degree requirements. Whatever their response, it has always been a joy to find this diverse group of students in my class, because it gives me the opportunity to humanize the continent. Ali Mazuri, the renowned political scientist, stated that centuries ago, when Europeans came to Africa, they discovered the mountains, rivers, and vegetation, even naming some in their honor, such as Lake Victoria and Victoria Falls, and yet they never discovered the African people. Therefore, my course on the history of modern Africa is designed to introduce students to the creativity, community, and developments of the African people.

Fast forward to the University of Dayton's 2019 Global Education Seminar (GES) Africa. Faculty who signed for GES Africa typically came in with the stereotyped perceptions, beliefs, and ideas about the continent and its people. They did not invent those ideas. The ideas have been passed from generation to generation and are dominant in casual reading and in Hollywood movies. GES Africa was designed to educate participants and implode obsolete notions about the continent in the hope that knowledge will filter to the larger campus community. The trips to Ghana and Togo, with a brief detour into Benin, were exciting, educational, thought-provoking, and memorable. In order to fully understand the meaning of the trips, however, those nations must be contextualized within the larger continent of Africa. In sheer size, Africa is huge. It is over three times the size of the United States of America. With 54 nations, it is the second largest continent in the world, after Asia. Its 1.2 billion people belong to hundreds of ethnic groups speaking over 1,000 languages. Climate wise, most of the continent falls within the tropics, experiencing rainfall and sunshine all year round. It is flanked by several large and small deserts, with the largest and hottest in the world being the Sahara. Other large deserts include the Kalahari, Namid, and Karoo. The smaller deserts are Eritrean, Mocamedes, Danakil, Guban, Grand Bara, Ogaden, Chalbi, Nyiri, and Lompoul.

Africa has a long and rich history. It is the continent of pyramids, of Great Zimbabwe, of the origin of humans, of the agricultural



revolution, of the Bantu migration, and of great human community. But it also a continent which has been adversely affected by the major forces of history, including slavery, colonialism, industrialization, and neocolonialism. During the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Africa was heavily depopulated. While exact figures may never be known, historians estimate that between 10 and 25 million people were forcibly removed from Africa. In fact, any attempt to understand the continent's contemporary underdevelopment must begin with the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. Many analysts, including historian Eric Williams, have written that the slave trade provided the capital for the European industrial revolution. The trade resulted in the Black Diaspora, the scattering all over the world of people of African descent and their culture. The contributions of blacks to the global political, economic, and social systems have been documented in numerous studies.

In addition to its size and its complexity, Africa is endowed with immense natural resources and minerals. Those resources were, in fact, an important reason for European scramble and conquest of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. The raw materials included cocoa, coffee, rubber, palm oil, tea, timber, sugar cane, and cotton. Africa contains some of the most valuable minerals in the world. For example, eighty percent of the world's coltan, a mineral essential for the software industry, is found in the Congo. Other vital

minerals include uranium, gold, diamond, copper, silver, bauxite, manganese, and iron ore. Africa also has oil. The continent's forest contains all types of animals and birds, and the Congo, Nile, and Niger rivers contain a variety of fish and aquatic animals. The continent's resources remain vital to global industries. China's economy, for example, cannot do without timber, oil and other resources from Africa.

As part of the continent, the nations of Ghana and Togo fit well in the profile. Their societies were raided during the Atlantic Slave Trade. During colonialism, their economies were brought into the global market system as suppliers of raw material, and in the postcolonial era both economies continue to be victimized by neocolonialism. Togo was first colonized by Germany, and after World War I was taken over by France, while Ghana was colonized by Britain. A consequence of colonialism was that Togo became assimilated to French culture, and French is the nation's official language. Ghana became assimilated to British culture, and its official language is English. Urban elites in Togo and Ghana identify with the culture of their former colonial masters.

Chit-Chats with Folks

Whether at the hotel, on the street, at a bus stop or bar, I had conversations in Togo and Ghana that turned into the most memorable moments of the GES trip. Hanging out at many of those places, just having a drink or watching people go by, was an education by itself. Those conversations were the times when I learned, through the eyes of ordinary folks, about the politics of the day, the gossip of the day, food, fashion trends, the economy, youth culture, hit songs, movie stars, and perceptions of Americans and their ways. One day at a cabaret I brought up the name of John Dumelo, one of the major movie stars in Ghana, and it opened the door into a spirited conversation with locals about elites, politics, and changing societal values. I informed my new friends that a few years ago Ghana had superb movie actors and actresses, but that it looks as if they ceded the ground to Nollywood actors (actors from Nigeria). These new friends responded that the Ghanaian movie industry

drifted because the movie stars demanded too much money and because some preferred to go into other things. They said that John Dumelo, for example, decided to venture into politics. And one person argued, “He will not even get votes from his own family. He should remain in acting.” When I introduced the names of Jackie Appiah, Yvonne Nelson, Martha Ankomah and others, my friends responded that the country needed a new crop of actors. From there we next went into politics and the Ghanaian economy. When I noted that Ghana was doing well, they affirmed but added that was the case only for “certain people.”

Bargaining in the market was always fun as well. At the Art Center market in Accra, I paid an exuberant price for a T-shirt because I liked the inscription on it, especially after the seller told me it was the last one available. Soon after that I walked into a lady’s store only to realize that I had been gyped. She had an abundance of those shirts and they were priced significantly less than what I paid. I explained to the lady what had happened, and she just smiled. She knew the guy who sold the shirt to me, but she did not betray him—perhaps out of professional courtesy. After that, we talked about doing business at the Art Center, and then we parted ways.

There were so many similarly memorable occasions during the trip. At the bar in Lomé, two guys and a woman walked up to me. After their greetings, we exchanged the usual how-do-you’s. In conversation, they informed me they were from Benin, a neighboring country to Togo. They were musicians, they added. I spoke to them about the GES cohort and why we were in Togo. We had some beers. And before they left for the night, they invited me to bring the cohort to a live-band place the following day, Thursday. *Le Phenicien*, an up-scale restaurant in Lomé, also had a band that played live jazz on Thursdays, and the cohort was to go there. So because of scheduling, only our driver Patrick and I could go to the place my new-found friends had invited us to. The music and the ambience were superb. It was relaxing. And they paid for our drinks. Yet, this welcoming and generosity was so typical. Everywhere we went, people were very kind—just friendly. That is the Africa I

remembered when growing up in Cameroon. It was good to know that that part of our culture still exists.

There was more. On another evening, a young lady approached me and a friend, engaged in a conversation. She talked about herself, and I reciprocated. Again, I spoke about the cohort, adding that we were looking for a place to witness the culture of the people. She informed us that she knew a place where they entertained visitors with Togolese traditional dance. When I informed my cohort, some were interested. After speaking with one of the hotel attendants, who confirmed that the place was real and would be fun, we headed out. The evening was unbelievable and turned out to be among the most memorable of my stay in Togo. The owner of the band there informed me that the band's visa applications to the US had been turned down last year. They had been invited to perform at an African festival. This unfortunate situation was a loss for the US. The traditional dance was marvelous—the choreography, the passion, and the cultural expression were all exciting. We eagerly showed videos to our colleagues who missed the event.

Togoville was also exciting. Located on the other side of Lake Togo, Togoville is an important place. It was from there that the country of Togo got its name, after Gustav Nachtigal, a German explorer, signed a treaty with Chief Mlapa III of Togoville in 1884. Colonized first by the Germans, Togo became a French colony after World War I. But Togoville was the place where Christianity and traditionalism came together. The town's cathedral, a significant fixture in the community, was built in 1910 and has a shrine to the Virgin Mary where people worship at any given moment of the day. In 1985 Pope John Paul visited and preached in the cathedral's courtyard. Being there was among the most awesome experiences in the West Africa region. Locals spoke proudly of the religiosity, pointing to the Catholic high school.

On the flip side, Togoville is the voodoo headquarters of the country. Voodoo dolls, items, and symbols are displayed in several strategic areas in the town. Voodoo was and remains an integral part of the culture. Voodoo priests perform different functions and are separated by gender. As a religion and as part of the culture, voodoo



helps to maintain the moral fabric of society. Equally important was the ability of voodoo and Christianity to co-exist peacefully. In African societies, traditional religion is the relation between an individual and his or her God; it will not be forced on anyone. And in African traditional religion, one will not find conflicts like the crusades of jihads. In a world in which Christianity and Islam often stand eyeball to eyeball, there is much that African traditions can teach. While colonialism prided itself on ridiculing traditional African beliefs, people in Togoville—like others in the rest of Africa—continued to welcome these beliefs. It is indeed a hallmark of the African people to treat all humans with respect and dignity, even during those times when Europeans conspired and conquered Africa.

Another particularly significant site visited by the cohort was the Manhyia Palace, which is the seat of the Asantehene, located in Kumasi. The Ashante Kingdom, the home of the Akan people, was established in the seventeenth century by Osei Tutu, who brought under his control a federation of several competing Akan states. The Golden Stool is the symbol of the Ashante unity, strength, and vision. It represents the soul of the living, dead, and the unborn. Our visit to the museum began with a short video, after which the tour

guide took us through the different eras of the kings, placing each one within a historical context. The tour ended with a visit to the gift shop, where people purchased different items relevant to the history of the Ashante kingdom.

The visit to the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park was just as beautiful. Nkrumah, the founder of modern Ghana, ruled the country from independence in 1957 to 1966. He was Ghana's most notable president who engaged in numerous development projects, including the creation of universities such as the University of Ghana at Legon, Cape Coast University, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Given that, it was only befitting that our visit to Accra began with a tour of the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, which is the location of Nkrumah's Mausoleum. The Park also contains the Nkrumah museum, which is quite rich in the life and times of Ghana's first president.

The time spent in both Lomé and Accra was enriching. Both cities are the capitals of their respective countries, and they reflected both the traditional and modern aspects of the countries. For example, Accra, the capital of Ghana, is a major metropolis. With a population of over 2.4 million people, it is the nation's economic and political capital. It is the home to many international banks, such as Ecobank, Barclays Bank, and Bank of Africa. It is home to several shopping malls. The cohort's most liked restaurants included Buka and 233 Jazz Bar and Grill. There were entertainment sites we visited too, places where we danced and just simply exhaled. Like Accra, Lomé is the political and economic capital of Togo. With a population of nearly one million people, it has an oil refinery and is the main seaport of the country. It too has several entertainment sites.

Visits to Universities and Other Places for Information-Gathering

An important charge of GES cohort members was information-gathering. To that effect we visited several outstanding universities in Ghana and Togo. In Ghana we visited the Atlantic City College, Ashesi University, University of Ghana, and the University of Cape Coast. In Togo we visited Chaminade secondary and high schools

and the University of Kara, all in the city of Kara. Irrespective of whichever university we visited, it was clear that institutions in both countries took very seriously their mission of educating students for the twenty-first century. We met and interacted at length with the administration, faculty, staff, and students. At the University of Ghana, for example, we met with faculty from the schools of engineering, education, health, and from the college of arts. The Vice-Chancellor welcomed our group, gave us an overview of the functioning of the university, and declared his interest in looking for ways to forge relations of mutual interest and benefit with our institution. At Ashesi University, we met with administrators, staff, and faculty who spoke of its new directions. A private institution, Ashesi is an engineering school, but it emphasizes the humanities discipline. Academic City College, a relatively new institution that is also private seeks to educate students to meet the urgent needs of technology in the continent.

At those universities we learned about their demographics, including gender breakdown, number of international students, and initiatives to recruit students from less affluent regions and background. It was gratifying to learn that the number of women and men was nearly equal. Those numbers confirm that educational leaders in Africa have moved to reverse previous practices that marginalized the education of females. Females were well-represented at the different professional colleges and disciplines. An equally important aspect was that those institutions were moving forward with a curriculum designed to fulfill the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In places such as Ashesi, those goals were posted outside for everyone to see.

Togo was no exception. In Togo, we visited the University of Kara. Established in 1999, the University of Kara is the second largest state university in the country. Its focus is on science and engineering. It hopes to educate young people to meet many of the challenges of the day, including water resource management, technology, solar energy, and other contemporary necessities. We toured three laboratories: chemistry, physics, and electrical engineering. The goal, we were repeatedly told, was to use local



material to promote development. Educational leaders at the institution spoke at length about the essential standard of developing relations with universities on the other side of the Atlantic for mutual benefit.

The students at the University of Kara were particularly informed about developments taking place in Western countries. Most of them have grown up with android phones, and frequently relied on them for information. Yet, the abundance of information has still not reversed traditional perceptions of the wonders of westernization, many of which were promoted during colonialism. Students generally lacked confidence in their own creativity and were still unable to point to developments coming out of the African continent. They referred to outsiders as their heroes and continued to glorify Westerners. They still held on to the belief of an abundance of wealth by Westerners, which translated into an uncritical glorification of whiteness.

We also visited the Chaminade schools, whose history began in 1958 when Marianists from their province in Switzerland arrived in Northern Togo to start a school, College Chaminade. Sometime later, College Adele was created adjacent to College Chaminade, and it was managed by the Marianist sisters. At both institutions we were received so generously. It was marvelous. When we arrived on the school grounds, we were welcomed with refreshments. A tour of campus followed, during which we visited classrooms and interacted with students and staff. And afterward, more refreshments. Then the Marianist sisters gave us a similar reception: refreshments, classroom visits, interactions with students, refreshment again. Both the sisters

and brothers were rightfully proud of the education they delivered to the students. In addition to their teaching the typical disciplines mandated by the state, they offer religious studies, art, and music. Education for faith was a vital part of their program. Extra-curricular activities involved various clubs promoting social responsibility. The Marianist brothers and sisters gave me a reason to return to Kara. It was a memorable experience.

Confronting Race and Sources of Black Inferiority

Negative perceptions of Africa in the Western mind are not new. For centuries black Africans were depicted as primitive, backward, cannibalistic, and lacking. Those views were used to justify slavery and colonialism. And though colonialism of most of Africa ended over half a century ago, those perceptions have endured. Africa is often treated as a place in need of charity and not a place of great cultures. Its countries are often seen either as places for an exotic experience or places for service. Most students, never having done more than cursory reading about Africa, see the continent through a lens of its helplessness. When current US President Donald Trump dismissed Africa as a place filled with “shithole countries,” many rushed to challenge his ignorance. And yet when GES Africa was announced, a prospective applicant saw this as an opportunity to visit the “dark” continent. Even despite research, many people—including many very learned people—continue to perceive Africa as a wasteland. The trip to Ghana and Togo, therefore, offered many opportunities to “humanize” Africa and its people.

From arrival at Accra International Airport or at the Lome Tokoin International Airport (also known as Gnassingbe Eyadema International Airport), it was clear that these were two very modern cities. Our cohort lived at the fancy hotels in Ghana and Togo: the Fiesta Royale Hotel, Golden Tulip Hotel, Onomo Hotel, and Coconut Grove Beach Resort. From top management levels to lower levels, these hotels are managed by locals, evidence that immediately imploded notions of African incapability. This was also true at recreational centers, educational institutions, and other facilities in those countries. For example, when we flew Asky Airline, whose

hub is at the Lomé international Airport, the pilot and entire air crew were Africans. When we visited hospitals, the entire medical staff and crew were locals. The major cities in Africa are renowned urban centers. It was gratifying to see locals at work, running things, directing and implementing development projects. All of this bustle and industry are a far cry from the usual depictions coming from outside the continent.

It is indeed true that racism is a product of ignorance. A society like the US society, for instance can be highly developed, but it will still contain large pockets of ignorance. To see some of this ignorance dissipate during our stay was gratifying indeed. Of course, GES's choice to go to Ghana and Togo was well thought out because each country played a role to educate and challenge perceptions of African inferiority. Ghana's story is well-known. It received its name from Ancient Ghana, an empire known for its gold and long-distance trade. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, studied in the US, Britain, and Russia. A leading Pan-Africanist, he hoped to rebuild Africa's image, and he spared no effort to do so. He famously announced in his first speech as president that "Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with total liberation of Africa." Then he turned his attention towards that goal. He worked with such other African leaders as Sekou Toure and Patrice Lumumba towards that end, and he denounced such leaders as Ahmadou Ahidjo, whom he termed a "stooge" to the French.

To promote the black race, Nkrumah teamed up and collaborated with leading black nationalists from other parts of the world, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Sylvester Williams, Marcus Garvey, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and George Padmore. It was only befitting that he invited Du Bois, generally known as the Father of Pan-Africanism, to Ghana to write and direct the *Encyclopedia Africana*. Even though Du Bois did not complete it before his death, he initiated the process for others to complete.. DuBois died in 1963, and his home in Accra was converted into the W.E.B. Du Bois Centre in 1985. The Centre is made up of the museum, which contains memorabilia and his personal library, and there is an Open-Air Theatre there where lectures and other events take place. The walls in the Centre are

decorated with photos of leading Pan-Africanists, such as Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmed Sekou Toure, Modibo Keita, Kenneth David Kaunda, and Leopold Senghor.

Who was Du Bois? The information at the Centre fills us in. Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, he rose to become one of the most foremost civil rights activists in America. He was a philosopher, sociologist, and historian. He was, he once noted himself, the black race's "biggest propagandist." The first African American to receive a doctorate degree from Harvard University, he devoted his life to uplifting the black race. He was a founding member of the Pan-Africanist Movement, as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Despite the greatness and all the accolades, he was also uniquely a man behind the times when it came to gender issues. Of the over twenty photos on display on the wall at the Centre, only three women are included: Winnie Mandela, Harriet Ross Tubman, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Still, whether visitors come for leisure or scholarly interest, the Centre is a great place to visit. It is open daily until 4:00 pm, and the staff is very friendly.

The cohort also visited Elmina Castle. It is a must place to visit in Ghana. It stands as a reminder of the evils of humanity and the modern world, and a tangible spot for world visitors to say that never again will such atrocities be allowed to happen. While several slave castles were constructed along the West African coast, Elmina is among the most well-preserved. The Castle was constructed by the Portuguese in 1482 and called São Jorge da Mina Castle, now known more simply as Mina in present-day Elmina, Ghana. First a trading post, it was turned into a post of the Atlantic Slave Trade. In 1637, the Dutch took over the castle, keeping it until Britain took possession of it in 1872.

Tour guides at the Castle take visitors into the dungeons and describe in graphic detail the rapes, the role of religion, the alcoholism, the punishment given to disobedient captives, the women's section, the men's quarters, the type and quantity of food given to captives, and the torture. Finally, the "door of no-return."

Elmina Castle typically contained 1,000-1500 slaves, their bodies cramped into different dungeons. Visitors were often challenged to imagine how they would fare in some of the isolation quarters. People wept. Some got sick.

The Castle brought to reality the dehumanization process that came with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Someone once noted that “Man is an adaptable beast.” This holds for good—and for bad. Going through the slave castles confirms human brutality. Typically, slaves were brought, chained, from long distances in the interior, so by the time they arrived in the Castle they were already emaciated and weak. They came from different ethnic groups and social classes and they spoke different languages. Some of the captives had been destined in their communities to be successors of their kings, while others were farmers or magicians. Slavery changed all that. Though one cannot serve as accountant of the evil in an attempt to compare which atrocity was worse, the slave trade (more euphemistically described as “forced migration”) remains one of the most gruesome acts of modern times.

Less euphemistically put, blacks were enslaved because of their skin color. Once the decision to enslave was made, other reasons were quickly concocted to serve as justification for slavery: heathenism, primitive and uncivilized ways. Still later as an argument came the needs for labor in the New World to cultivate the wilderness. These arguments used to justify slavery were fashioned and re-enforced in the modern world. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade became a uniquely modern phenomena, raising fundamental questions about the very notion of modernity as the age of “reform.” Arguments used to justify the slave trade defined Africa and its people for generations to come. Africans were dismissed as subhuman, backward, wild, cannibalistic, and incapable of self-rule. They were different part of the “other.” Such labels remain dominant and have helped to preserve the more modern brands of racism.

Whether or not one is a specialist on Africa, no one who visits any part of the continent even for a few days can speak about Africa and its people in the same manner as before. Africa’s effect on visitors is palpable. Ghana and Togo have made tremendous

contributions to global cultures, economies, and lifestyles. The warmth of the people, the sense of social responsibility, the group consciousness, the smiles, the chit-chat, the courtesy shown readily to strangers, and the lessons and gifts Africa brings now to the world—all these made UD's GES Africa intellectually, socially, and personally relevant. Africa is worth the attention.

