

Different perspectives on culture

An exchange between Ghanaian and German students

„Culture: We are all equal. Or not?“. This was the theme of the 2023 consultation between the Evangelical Presbyterian Students Union Legon and the ESG Bremen. In the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 there had already been a lively exchange between Germany and Ghana. To continue this, ESG-Pastor Dr. Andreas Quade and the general secretary of the Norddeutsche Mission Reverend Heike Jakubeit travelled to Ho in Ghana with five students, ready to learn together and from one another about culture.

Preparation

In preparation for the consultation, the students met up with Reverend Heike Jakubeit and Reverend Dr. Andreas Quade to get to know the group, clear up questions about vaccinations, visa applications and the flights, as well as discuss the schedule for the visit. Furthermore, the students were shown pictures and told stories from the last consultation. Lotta, who had already been part of the last consultation and had spent 6 months in Ghana for a volunteering service, also passed on some personal experiences concerning Dos and Don`ts in Ghana to the rest of the students. Suitable clothing, greetings, food and tap water were briefly addressed.

Another topic, which the German group talked about intensely, was the situation for queer people in Ghana and how they would like to deal with this topic during the consultation.

In Ghana, we were most warmly welcomed by Reverend Dr. Bridget Ben-Naimah, Reverend of the EP Church, who supported, organized and executed the consultation from the Ghanaian side.

Presentations and Workshops

Out of the 11 days in Ghana, four were spent on the actual consultation. The first three days were dedicated to one of the sub themes which both the Ghanaians and Germans prepared content on. This could be in the form of a workshop, a presentation or a role

play regarding the topic. At the end of each session, there was time for questions and discussions. Moreover, the group put in place that at the start and end of each consultation day, group members could bring up topics, that they felt had to be discussed or cleared up more. Plus, the first day was begun with a devotional while the second and third day had a bible study in small groups each.

The topic of the first day was „What even is culture? How can it be defined?“. The Ghanaian students had prepared a presentation which gave a huge insight in the Ghanaian culture. They delivered an overview on different ethnic groups in Ghana, gave examples for rites of passage, briefly explained hierarchies in ethnic groups and talked about Ghanaian music, dances and cuisine. The workshop by the German students concentrated less on German culture but invited the group to have a more theoretical discussion what culture means for each student. The focus here was on visible cultural goods as well as invisible parts of culture (for instance values). The students shared a quantity of examples which reflected the complexity of culture very well and sparked a conversation on why certain parts were deemed central by a person.

The second day with the topic „Why is culture so important? Does religion have an influence on culture?“ was started with a role play, for which the students were split into two groups and were supposed to make up their own culture. Afterwards, a one person was sent to the other group to watch their made-up culture and describe their experiences with their own group. The game showed very clearly how easily the encounter between two cultures can bear misunderstandings and that well-meant corrections can appear threatening to strangers, if they are not able to understand the gestures used. The relevancy of cultural guides was very apparent. In the afternoon, there were two presentations on the significance of religion in Germany and Ghana.

The presentations showed on one hand, that even though Germany's culture was historically hugely influenced by religion, the society is becoming more and more secular, especially young people. On the other hand, the presentation by the Ghanaian students clearly showed that the majority of the Ghanaian society is religious and the different churches therefore have a huge societal influence. Another interesting aspect of their presentation was an overview on the indigenous Ghanaian religions, that are still present in Ghanaian society. This part of the consultation surfaced the differences between the German and Ghanaian context very much and the discussions proofed to be very helpful in getting an Impression on the normality of the other group. The role

play was also very useful in this, it was remembered very vividly and referenced multiple times.

The third day was dedicated to the question „What could culture look like in ten years and how could it be lived then?“ The presentation by the Ghanaian group showed two different concepts for Ghana’s future. Both concepts showed that the students saw the culture in conflict ongoing globalization and that there were different ways that traditions could be actively furthered (i.e. As part of tourism, through different types of historical documentation, through schools and universities or through daily customs such as traditional clothes and local indigenous names). The German presentation questioned the concept of culture as something connected to nationality and instead presented the idea of „locality“. This idea focuses on the individual which can feel connected to different places or social groups and therefore is local in different contexts. Therefore a person can unite different cultural influences and have more than one home.

The fourth day was used to write down central outcomes of the consultation and talk about the future of the consultation. The students made cultural maps in small groups, on which they put down what they deemed important for their understanding of culture and cultural learning during the consultation. The results showed that the students thought tolerance, curiosity and education to be especially important for cultural learning. However, all participants were also aware that a culture can be excluding to strangers because of their own symbols and language barriers and that some aspects of ones own culture are ambivalent. All participants were in favor of a continuation of the consultation to give more students the chance of learning from one another and to further a mutual understanding.

Activities and free time

While and after the actual consultation we were able to take part in many great activities in different constellations (some with only the Germans but most with at least a few of the Ghanaians). During the stay the Ho, this involved a visit to the local EP Church girls schools with their own fabric making, a bus tour around Ho and a tour through a Kente weaving factory. Next to these act

In addition to these activities, which showed us a lot about the country and its people, the evening gatherings in the garden after dinner were also crucial for the success of the consultation. In addition to “Conversation Material,” a game that Heike Jakubeit

brought with her, we played many other board games or continued conversations from the day. This is how we grew together as a group and after the first bus ride we always sat mixed rather than in nationalities. During the bus rides, next to clapping games, there were also discussions on politics, traditions and faith. Of course, people didn't always agree, but there was always mutual respect and a willingness to understand and appreciate the other person.

At the end of the consultation, EPSU Legon held a church service on Sunday, where Pastor Heike Jakubeit preached about the diversity of God's creation, which we cannot imagine and therefore should not limit to binary gender roles. The clear words continued to accompany us throughout the week in our evening discussions within the German consultation group. After the service, we had a Turkish meal with the entire consultation team before part of the German group had to return to Germany in the evening. Over the next week, not all Ghanaians were able to take part in the activities because they were unable to attend due to exams and work.

Early on Monday, we went to the former slave fortress Cape Coast Castle, from which people were trafficked for 300 years for the transatlantic slave trade. During a tour we were able to learn a lot about this historic place.

On Tuesday, we were shown the campus of the University of Ghana by the Ghanaian team and then we learned in detail from three people from Trinity Theological Seminary about their work there and theological education in Ghana.

On our last full day we saw more of Accra, visited the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial and learned more about Ghana's history and independence. We also visited an arts market. We saw a lot of impressive things, but the hospitality of our hosts from EPSU Legon made the time the special experience that it ultimately was.

Reflection

Now, well over two months after we were in Ghana, we can look back and reflect on what we experienced. To this day, we are impressed by the noticeable creativity and energy throughout the entire trip in Ghana. Each lecture format was immediately accepted by everyone, and everyone quickly became enthusiastic about each topic. Everyone was always happy to be open to discussions and, in some cases, answered critical questions and fully engaged.

Group work and long conversations in the evenings made it possible to really get to know each other and grow together as a group. Everyone always showed great

willingness and great interest in understanding each other's perspectives and so we were able to exchange ideas respectfully and intensively about many interesting topics. We particularly noticed some differences that still concern us today in our dealings with and awareness of our own and other cultures.

Ghanaian students place great value on their culture. In many lectures they spoke about the importance of culture and also showed us with their concerns about globalization that they want to protect and preserve their culture. During these lectures and in discussions afterwards, we became more and more aware of how different things are in Germany. We German students tend to be very careful about "praising" or portraying Germany and its culture in a positive way. This is probably also due to Germany's history and the danger of right-wing populism and anti-semitism that unfortunately still exists today. Simply to distance ourselves from such positions and from Germany's past, none of us would probably say that we are proud of our country or our culture. Whereas in Ghana - with completely different historical backgrounds - it is very central and important to appreciate your country and its culture.

Maybe that explains the difference we noticed when visiting Cape Coast Castle. For the Ghanaian students it was simply a trip where they took photos and just looked at it together. We German students associated this historically important place (transatlantic slave trade) with the memory of the slaves and thus simply showed a different cultural remembrance in that moment.

But photography in general is also a big difference between Ghana and Germany. While we students from Germany are rather "cautious" and used to taking few photos due to various data protection regulations, the students from Ghana liked to take as many photos as possible in order to capture every important moment. And even though on the German side you had to get used to not being irritated by cameras or cell phones pointing at you - in retrospect we are very grateful for all the many beautiful photos and memories from our trip!

During the presentations by the Ghanaian students, we were able to look at globalization and the concerns about increasing globalization and the loss of traditions from a different perspective. The Ghanaian students seem to be more interested in how the culture can be protected from external influences and how it can retain its important core. Dealing with globalization also focuses on how it and digitalization can be used to preserve culture. We, on the other hand, in the global north, are more used to seeing the advantages of globalization and how we can make good use of it. We

also probably just don't have such a strong connection to "German culture" so we don't necessarily want to preserve it.

Another big difference that is still present in our minds today was religiosity. At many points from the Ghanaian students we could see and hear how important God and religion are in their daily lives. Prayers over food, going to church every week, seeing the country of Ghana as given by God - many things showed what a big role religion plays in Ghana. Things are quite different here in Germany. In many conversations or topics we probably wouldn't see any connection to God or religion, whereas in Ghana it was much more all-encompassing. In many conversations we were able to learn so much about their view on religion and also show them how different it is in Germany.

We also remember some critical topics. For example, we had a lot of questions about puberty and rites of passage in different regions of Ghana. In some cases, the girls there are prepared for a life as a good wife, while testing and celebrating virginity also plays a major role. That was a big difference to the image of women and the issue of equality here in Germany. But even with such topics, the Ghanaians were very patient in answering all of our questions. It also became apparent that they were also rather critical of some rituals and were also able to understand our point of view.

We had at least as many questions about grieving behavior, funerals and death. In Ghana, after death, someone becomes an ancestor if they have lived a good life. We were curious as we wanted to know exactly what the criteria and guidelines for a "good" life are and who gets to decide what a good life is. Such difficult questions were sometimes passed on to the highest-ranking person.

We were able to discuss many differences, clarify many curious questions and of course also found some similarities. Family and community, for example, are very important to all of us. Getting to know friends, talking to people and staying in touch with them is an important part of both cultures. And the biggest thing we all had in common was, of course, the interest in understanding each other. Spending time together, immersing ourselves in the other culture, learning from each other and triggering many new ideas - all of this was possible for us during the consultation. Exciting conversations, including about politics, autocracy, salaries, contraceptives and politeness, accompanied us throughout the entire time and are still in our heads now. Some questions still remained unanswered and we were unable to fully discuss some topics. We often wanted to show Ghanaian dishes or places from Germany, introduce them to parts of our culture and at the same time have even more opportunities for

exchange. We really enjoyed getting to know the Ghanaian students and their culture. Immersing yourself in it, getting to know and experience the country, the people, the food, the climate and so much more all at once, has enriched us incredibly. Many impressions shape our everyday lives, in many situations we think of conversations with Ghanaians or we ask ourselves "What would they think about this?". We are incredibly grateful for the many experiences and changes in perspective.

Thank you!

Everyone who took part in the consultation returned with priceless memories and experiences. Making this possible was a collaboration between many people. On the one hand, thanks go to the Bremen Regional Church for the financial support. On the other hand, we would like to thank the full-time staff of the Evangelical Student Community of Bremen and the North German Mission, who, in collaboration with the Evangelical Presbyterian Student Union Legon, made the planning and organization of the consultation possible.

We would also like to thank everyone who took part in the consultation directly for their commitment and the numerous food for thought. The host was the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ho. Reverend Dr. Bridget Ben-Naimah, Reverend Dr. Andreas Quade, Reverend Heike Jakubeit and Marie-Lena Berger (ESG) developed the questions, as well as the topic of the consultation. Of course this had a significant influence on the success of the consultation. Again, a big thank you for your support before, during and after the consultation. The students from EPSU Legon were also a central component and gave us an insight into their culture. Thank you for your many patient answers, your honest insights and your interest in us and our culture! All in all, thank you to everyone who put time and effort into planning and implementing the consultation. It has enriched our lives with many experiences and memories.