

Experience Abroad Reflection: Cultural Competence and Personal Growth

My experience in Northern Ghana was transformative in every sense. As my first time traveling solo and living independently, it pushed me beyond my comfort zone, expanded my worldview, and taught me invaluable lessons about navigating life in a foreign country. Coming from a background deeply rooted in my Tamil-Canadian identity and growing up in Scarborough, I had never imagined that my journey would take me to a place as far away as Ghana. However, what started as an opportunity to contribute to the Savannah Women's Integrated Development Agency (SWIDA-GH) turned into a deeply personal experience of growth, cultural appreciation, and self-discovery.

Being on my own in Northern Ghana for close to five weeks was the first time I had ever left home for an extended period. My family has always been an integral part of my daily life, so the physical distance from them was, at first, overwhelming. I missed my Amma (mother), Appa (father), and my Accas (sisters) more than I could have anticipated. The longest I had been away from them was no more than three days, so the idea of being halfway across the world without their constant support felt daunting. Calls home was my lifeline, but with intermittent power outages and network challenges, even those connections were not guaranteed. However, this separation forced me to develop resilience and self-reliance. I grew accustomed to handling problems on my own, be it logistical issues or just the emotional difficulty of being homesick. Each challenge I overcame reinforced my sense of independence, and by the end of the trip, I had a newfound confidence in my ability to thrive in unfamiliar environments.

Language and Cultural Immersion

One of the first hurdles I encountered when I arrived was the language barrier. Northern Ghana, where I was based, is home to the Dagbani-speaking people, and while many people spoke English, the community primarily communicated in Dagbani. At first, this seemed like an insurmountable challenge. I had no prior knowledge of the language, and it felt alienating not to understand the conversations happening around me. However, I quickly realized that learning even a few basic phrases in Dagbani made a world of difference. I started picking up common greetings, simple conversational words, and phrases, such as greetings like "naa" (meaning yes or hello) and polite responses to offers of food or hospitality.

Incorporating Dagbani into my daily interactions allowed me to connect more deeply with the people around me. The effort was not lost on the local community; even my clumsy attempts at their language were met with enthusiasm and appreciation. This experience showed me how critical language is to human connection. It broke down barriers and signaled my respect for the culture I was immersing myself in. These small steps made it easier for me to build relationships with community members, reinforcing how learning the nuances of a new culture can be an act of solidarity and respect.

The food in Northern Ghana also played a pivotal role in my cultural adjustment. As someone from a Tamil Eelam background, I was excited to discover similarities between the food I grew up with and the local cuisine in Ghana. Meals were rich in spices and packed with flavors, which immediately reminded me of home. Like many Tamil dishes, the food in Northern Ghana was incredibly spicy. I found comfort in the abundance of familiar ingredients—rice, beans, plantains, and various vegetables that are staples in my own culture. In a way, the food connected me to my roots while introducing me to new variations of flavors and preparation styles. My favourite food during my stay in Tamale was Waakye-spicy rice and beans with a red shito pepper sauce and boiled eggs. This dish was flavourful and comforting and with a side of fresh fruit was the best meal I could ever ask for.

However, there were some key differences that required adjustment. Northern Ghana's cuisine is heavily meat-centered, and as a lifelong vegetarian, this posed a unique challenge. While I loved the flavours and appreciated the cultural significance of their dishes, finding vegetarian alternatives was not always easy. There were moments when I struggled to find suitable options, and I had to be creative in ensuring I maintained my diet. Despite this, the kindness of the people I worked with made all the difference. My colleagues and community members went out of their way to ensure there was food I could eat. They were intrigued and amused by my ability to handle their spicy food, often commenting on how they had not expected someone from a different part of the world to embrace the heat. I playfully responded that they had never tried my parents' Tamil cooking, where spice tolerance is a rite of passage!

Building Relationships: The Strength of Unity

What struck me most profoundly during my time in Ghana was the community's deep commitment to unity and collective care. Working with the Savannah Women's Integrated Development Agency (SWIDA-GH) allowed me to witness firsthand how the power of community manifests in

daily life. The people I worked with embodied the philosophy of "unity is strength," a belief that resonated deeply with me, given my own experiences being a part of and advocating for marginalized communities in Scarborough. The importance of working together to overcome challenges was evident in every interaction I had with the farmers, women, and youth involved in the project.

The relationships I built with the community extended beyond the professional realm. We shared meals, stories, and laughter, creating bonds that felt as though I had known these individuals for far longer than a few weeks. Their hospitality was unparalleled. I was invited into their homes, participated in family events, and treated with the utmost care and respect. In many ways, they became my family away from home, offering me the warmth and support I needed during moments of homesickness.

These relationships have continued beyond my time in Ghana, as we stay in touch through WhatsApp and other social media platforms. This sustained connection has shown me the lasting impact of building relationships based on mutual respect and collaboration. It is a testament to the strength of community and how deeply meaningful these connections can be, even across continents.

Personal Growth and Identity: Navigating Intersectionality and Challenging Colonial Frameworks

This experience in Ghana was not just about cultural immersion but also about critically reflecting on my role in the development work I was contributing to. My identity as a Tamil-Canadian youth from a family that survived genocide shaped my understanding of oppression and privilege, but it also required me to reflect on the broader dynamics at play in global development work. I recognized that development research and work have historically been and continue to be exploitative and extractive, often reproducing harmful colonial power structures. Development projects, when led by outsiders, can be problematic when they reinforce dependency, ignore local knowledge, or fail to build capacity for long-term solutions. These reflections forced me to confront my own positionality and the privileges I carried into this space.

From the outset, I was committed to not reproducing these colonial systems of extraction and exploitation. I understood that coming into Northern Ghana as a researcher, regardless of my own marginalized identity, still carried layers of privilege—access to education, the ability to travel and

work internationally, and the backing of academic institutions. I was cognizant that, while I have experienced the trauma of displacement and marginalization, my role in this space was different. This awareness shaped how I approached my work with the Savannah Women's Integrated Development Agency (SWIDA-GH) and the local communities.

A key part of this commitment was ensuring that I engaged in open and transparent conversations with both the organization and the community members. I made it a point to continuously clarify my role—what I was there to do, what my limits were, and how my work could contribute to long-term solutions rather than short-term gains. I asked myself tough questions: Was I truly there to collaborate and support, or was I unintentionally perpetuating a dynamic where outsiders "parachute" into communities and impose solutions? These questions guided my daily interactions and helped me navigate my position as both an outsider and an ally.

One of the intentional steps I took to mitigate any extractive tendencies was to ensure that all research and project outcomes remained in the hands of the local community. For instance, the policy toolkit we developed through the workshops was co-created with community members and was designed to be used and modified by SWIDA-GH and local stakeholders. The emphasis was always on community-based participatory research (CBPR), where the community's needs, knowledge, and experiences were at the center of every decision made. I was conscious of not positioning myself as an "expert" coming in with solutions, but rather as a facilitator who could support the organization and other stakeholders in centering the voices of the women and youth who were already leading change in their communities.

Moreover, I continuously reflected on my privilege, especially in the context of my interactions with the women farmers and youth activists. Many of them faced systemic barriers that I, despite my marginalized identity, do not encounter to the same extent. Acknowledging this disparity was crucial in preventing me from falling into the savior complex that so often accompanies development work. Instead of seeing myself as someone who was "helping" or "saving" anyone, I positioned myself as someone who was there to learn, contribute, and work alongside the community.

These reflections also shaped how I understood the impact of the work we were doing. It was not just about implementing projects—it was about questioning how the systems of power were functioning, both locally and globally, and ensuring that our work did not reinforce the very inequalities we were trying to address. The open and honest conversations I had with SWIDA-GH

about these issues allowed us to work collaboratively in a way that prioritized sustainability and empowerment over short-term, donor-driven goals.

By acknowledging my positionality and privilege, I was able to take more intentional steps to ensure that the work we did was empowering rather than extractive. This critical reflection will continue to inform my approach to development work and research, as I aim to always work in partnership with communities, rather than assuming a position of authority or expertise.

Conclusion: A Journey of Transformation and Responsibility

My time in Northern Ghana was undoubtedly one of the most transformative experiences of my life, but it also came with a deep sense of responsibility. Beyond the personal growth and cultural immersion, this experience pushed me to critically engage with the systems of power and inequality that shape global development work. It was not enough to simply enjoy the food, learn the language, and appreciate the hospitality—I had to confront the realities of how my presence in that space could perpetuate or challenge existing systems of exploitation.

This reflection has not only expanded my understanding of cultural competence but also deepened my commitment to ethical development work. I leave this experience with a stronger understanding of the importance of intentionality, transparency, and accountability in my work. The relationships I built, the lessons I learned, and the critical insights I gained will shape how I approach future projects, both at home and abroad.

I have come to realize that being a responsible researcher and advocate means constantly questioning how my actions and decisions can either contribute to or dismantle systems of inequality. It means acknowledging my privilege and ensuring that I use it to amplify the voices of those who are often unheard. Most importantly, it means working alongside communities, recognizing their knowledge and expertise, and ensuring that the solutions we create are rooted in their realities and aspirations.

In conclusion, this journey was far more than a professional development experience. It was a reminder of the interconnectedness of our struggles and the shared responsibility we must address the inequalities that affect marginalized communities around the world. As I move forward in my advocacy and research work, I will carry with me the lessons of unity, resilience, and care that I learned in Ghana. The power of community, coupled with the awareness of our collective

responsibility, will continue to drive my commitment to fostering meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable change.