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“Belonging Beyond Borders:A Tale of Historical Reminiscence, Black Diasporic Communities, and Me”

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## **“Belonging Beyond Borders: A Tale of Historical Reminiscence, Black Diasporic Communities, and Me”**

The African continent is home to a myriad of rich cultures, languages, and deep histories. As a child of the Ethiopian Diaspora, I have always been fascinated by the stories of other African countries, their folktales (like Anansi the Spider), and music. Some of my earliest memories from childhood included music by artists like Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, South African singer Miriam Makeba, Ethiopian singer-songwriter Teddy Afro, and others, as they filled our home with positive energy and good beats. Beside their musical offerings, many of these artists were also strong political activists, using their artistry as a platform to raise political, social, gender, and economic issues to the global forefront. It was through this I developed a deep connection and desire to explore the continent extending beyond Ethiopia’s borders.

In the summer of 2022, I was fortunate to cross my second African country off my travel list – Ghana (with the first being Ethiopia!). I finally had the chance to visit the bustling, vibrant city of Accra, the Cape Coast Castle (a British holding prison for enslaved Africans) and fishing port of Cape Coast, and kayak down the Volta River alongside the bushy, dense mangroves. I delved deep into Ghana’s political history, met people from the African Diaspora, and reflected on my sense of belonging as a young, coming-of-age Black woman in the U.S. Thankfully, the UC Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative’s Community and Culture Project could not have come at a better time for me to explore some of these questions, experiences, and ideas further coupled with my academic training and research interests. With this blog, I would like to share some of the most profound aspects of my trip to Ghana, from its prolific political history to its vibrant Diasporic communities, and how all these elements culminated in a poignant feeling of belonging across the world.



(Pictured: Earrings designed by local businesswomen at the Accra Arts and Cultural Center)

### **Ghana's Rich Political History:**

Ghana is often referred to as the “Gateway to Africa,” and for good reason. Ghana was the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to win independence on March 6, 1957, and charted the path for the African continent in a way that was both instructive and inspiring. Led by the notable freedom fighter and visionary, Kwame Nkrumah spearheaded the independence movement, decolonization, and its transformation into modern-day Ghana. As we walked through the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and Mausoleum, we were surrounded by the serene reflective pools and unique Ghanaian architecture. I felt like I was walking through the pages of history, the entire space was infused with a sense of purpose and urgency. He constructed this movement to be one of Pan-Africanism, stating that “We face neither East nor West; We face forward.” At the first Organization of African Unity (OAU) conference, Kwame Nkrumah gave one of the greatest speeches (probably of his life), which has since become the definitive blueprint for the strong and continuous fight for African unity. Nkrumah not only led Ghana to independence, but also became the first Prime minister and President of Ghana. His rallying cry of "Forward Ever, Backward Never!" still resonates in the corridors of Ghanaian history, and in the ethos of Africans worldwide striving for self-determination.



(Pictured: Alexandra in front of Kwame Nkrumah statue and mausoleum at Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park)

### The African Diaspora in Accra:

Accra is not just a Ghanaian city; it's a global African city. The diversity of Blackness was on full display, and what I encountered in Accra was unlike any I had ever experienced. Of course, I met and gathered with Ghanaians, but also Afro-Caribbeans, African-Americans, Afro-Brazilians, and Africans from other parts of the continent — all coexisting in a vibrant cultural mosaic. From dancing and singing to Burna Boy songs in the wee hours of the morning in a club, to eating Mexican food for lunch at a Ghanaian-Mexican owned restaurant, to hearing reggae music and American hip-hop blending seamlessly with Afrobeats and Highlife on the beaches at sunset, the presence of the African Diaspora was palpable in all areas and aspects of life in Accra. I was even surprised that there were *multiple* Ethiopian restaurants tucked around the various regions in Ghana, and of course, had to try them out (shoutout to Abyssinia in Labone and Simret!).

I had the privilege of interacting with members of the Black Diaspora who shared their experiences of relocating to Ghana and the sense of belonging they have found there. Many who left the U.S. shared what it felt to feel safe, safe to be Black and free in their fullest selves, while exploring their roots. Others who came from other parts of the world shared their appreciation for the pace of life in Ghana, the time that is valued around spending time with family. Of course, some of these realities and lasting that local there was a a desire come together to more broadly, for a their stories made me reflect on a sense of often feels disconnected.



perspectives overlook the legacies of colonialism Ghanaians face; yet, amongst these folks to build Accra, and Africa better future. Parts of resonated with me and the importance of finding belonging in a world that fragmented and

(Pictured: Alexandra Gessesse & Zingha Foma, graduate student at NYU, and Cameroonian fashion designer... Yes, those outfits were made by her, from the design of the Batik cloth to the style of the outfit.)

### **Finding Belonging in Another African Country:**

As an Ethiopian-American woman, finding a sense of belonging in another African country was a deeply personal and transformative experience. From local Ghanaian groups like the Akan, Ewe, and Ga people, to those from other African nations, the Caribbean, Europe, and the U.S., Accra is a true melting pot of Black cultures. Walking the streets, I heard many different African languages and patois being spoken in the markets and shops. It was beautiful to see so many varied groups living together in one place. It was more than just the similarities in food, culture, and dance, but the warmth, political fervor, humor, and feelings that arose dipping my feet on the other side of the Atlantic and connecting to the land.

Ethiopian exceptionalism can sometimes create a sense of separation from the rest of the continent and Diaspora. Yet, in Ghana, I felt no such separation. Instead, what I found was an immediate sense of community and mutual recognition. The communal sense of sharing food instantly transported me to memories of eating injera with friends and family from one plate back home. The beats of the talking drum echoed the familiar rhythms and beats of Ethiopian *kebero* drums. But more importantly, the ethos of “Ubuntu”—the Nguni Bantu belief in a universal bond that connects all humanity, “I am because you are” — was felt at every interaction.

Throughout my trip, I was reminded of the shared struggles and triumphs, Black joy and care, and political urgency that bind us as Africans on the continent, and in the Diaspora. Our struggles may feel different by where we live, but in reality, we the Black Diaspora are living under

different tentacles of the same beast – racism, genocide, colonialism, and exploitation. Where there was strong presence of racial unity and humanization, class differences were real and visible, and it is important to acknowledge and name. Our stories are interconnected and our destinies are intertwined, and through community and care, we live to see it through.

### **Conclusion:**

Accra proved to be more than just a travel destination; it was a journey into a shared history and a diversified, yet united future. Whether we are from the East, West, North, or South of this beautiful continent, we share a common history, and a common future. It is up to us to honor our past, celebrate our present, and work towards a brighter future for all Africans, and her descendants. After all, we are, as Nkrumah said, "one people with a common destiny," and my trip to Accra was a beautiful reminder of that inescapable truth.

### **About the Author:**

Alexandra Gessesse is a doctoral student in the Department of African American & African Diasporic Studies at UC Berkeley. Inspired by her ancestors, elders, and colleagues, her research explores the changing social, political, and racial dynamics of Black immigrants' identities, their spatialities, and orientations. More broadly, Alexandra's research interests include urban policy, social movements in the U.S., Black intellectuals, race and inequality, community and neighborhood organizations, and the African Diaspora. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Black Studies in Social Policy and Politics with honors from the University of California, Santa Barbara.