

Some case-studies – a perspective from Tanzania



Who am I and what can I say in a particular context?

You meet a few people at your internship location in the south of Senegal and one evening you are invited for dinner at their place. Over dinner you get to talk to the pater familias, while his wife serves you from the kitchen.

Is it appropriate to insist the lady of the house joins you for dinner, or should you not interfere with their traditions?

It is okay to ask or request but not to insist. Different cultures deal with it differently. Sometimes there might be some barriers such as language that might still hinder her/his participation in the conversation.

After dinner, you discuss life in Belgium and the husband has a lot of questions for you: do you have children, how much do you earn, are you married, do you go to church, how much does a plane ticket to Belgium cost?

Should you be honest about how much you (or your parents) earn; can you say that you do not believe, that you never go to church and that you just live together with your boy/girl friend; what about talking about your bother who is gay and can you be honest about the cost of your plane ticket or even the price of your iPhone?

You don't need to be honest about how much do you earn. In most cases the question about money is private even in Africa. Likewise, the gay topic is taboo in Africa except South Africa. It is better if it is avoided unless if you are dealing with people whom are comfortable with it. On the issue of religion, this depends on the tone, you may freely say that you don't have a religion. But you should avoid ridiculing their belief.

Having a bad day and language

You've had a terrible day at your internship location in the local hospital of Dar es Salaam. You are tired and it seems everybody is angry with you. You want to skype with your friends in Belgium, but guess what...no internet today. The heat is terrible and you never manage to get one single moment of privacy. Fortunately, there are some Dutch students working in the hospital as well. Let's have a chat with them.

Can you just have a conversation in Dutch with your fellow students, while your Tanzanian colleagues are also around? Do you think irony and humour are universal? Is body language universal?

Well, in Tanzania, people are so accommodating. You can get away with it. But generally like any other places, cutting others out of conversation is not okay. Especially during tense moments.

Some body languages are universal but some are localized. For example clapping fingers like you do to a pet in Tanzania is not as offensive as it is in Europe. But raising your middle fingure is.

Sightseeing in the city

Together with a few Belgian friends you have decided to pay a visit to the centre of Kinshasa. You walk through the local market; there are a lot of people in the street – local taxi's, people selling stuff, beggars,...

How do you deal with intrusive street vendors, with beggars, shoe polishers or people who want to sell you tourist souvenirs? Do you give money and to whom? Just relax and joke with them. In Tanzania sometimes they may say "I Love you" or through a kiss (not real kissing) just to make you feel comfortable. They don't mean any harm. Kind of friendly gesture ...

When buying something, how far can you go in bargaining? Can you accept the fact that you will pay more because you are from Belgium – will that necessarily be the case? Street vendors are treaky to everyone especially men and foreigners. When bargaining aim for 50% or less of the initial price. Sometimes the price is indicative... Example 17,000=15,000. 14,000=10,000 their pricess can be rounded 5000, 10000, 15,0000, 20,0000 so you remove the top.

Is it wise to make pictures of people in the street? How to react when people ask money for you taking pictures? Not wise to take picture of people. In most cases they will agree if you politely ask. Very rare that people will demand payment in Tanzania.

Staying in the country side

Life in South Africa is more difficult than you had expected. You stay in a village in the Limpopo Province but you do not get along with your host mother – she is too strict and you always need to be home before dark. The food is always the same – beans with starch (pap) and you are never alone – you even have to share a room with two of the smaller kids in the house. You rather want to go home.

How important is privacy for you? What can you do if you do not get along with the locals? What are the implications for you, your host organisation and future UGent students who will travel to the same location?

It is very tricky, it is not easy to generalize this. Depending on the financial capacity of the family, you can ask for changes when it comes to meal. But hard to chase everyone in a room when there is limited capacity. If you have an organisation that booked you a family, it is better to have a polite conversation.

I don't think it will have an impact on the coming students unless it ends in bad ways.

Hierarchy and status

Today is an important day at your university in Jimma (Ethiopia), as the Minister of Education will visit the university. As a Belgian guest you are also invited to the ceremony; you even get to sit next to the rector of the university.

Can you handle authority and strict hierarchy? How do you behave when having a conversation with people who have more authority? What will you do when you have another opinion?

It depends on the people you are dealing with. In Tanzania people will be polite with you and accommodate your mistakes. But try your best to observe protocols. DRESS WELL; avoid dresses that reveal a lot if you are a woman. Avoid wearing jeans and casual clothes. Try to be like them... They may not judge you but your host...

How will you react when you are (perceived to be) higher in rank and people do things for you – carry your bag, serve your food, clean the table, arrange a taxi for you? If you are not comfortable feel free to negotiate. Some privileges are entitled to whoever takes a certain position. People are paid for it. For example you might be assigned a driver, a cook, a guide of your home. Just feel comfortable and live with them peacefully.

Hierarchy and money

Your Head of Department at the University of Nairobi has invited you and your Belgian colleague to visit another campus of the university, a bit out of the city. He will take the two of you with his car + driver. On the way you have lunch together in a local restaurant, but the driver stays in the car.

Will you address this with the Head of Department and suggest the driver gets to eat together with you? What will you do when the bill comes – will you offer to pay?

In Tanzania drivers tend to avoid sharing meals/drinks with their bosses. But it is up to the boss to change that. Sometimes drivers avoid to eat with their bosses because of the bills, they are paid little. (1) If it is a work-related trip and everyone is paid you have to pay your bill unless if the boss decides to pay for all of you. (2) If you invited a driver then you might be required to pay for him/her.

NOTE: Kenya is a capitalist country and in most cases people pay their bills. But in Tanzania, mostly the boss will pay for you all.

Punishment

The teachers are strict at the school in southern Tunisia where you do your fieldwork. When three boys talk too much during class, the teacher takes out his measuring rod and hits them on their fingers.

What will you do? Will you address this when talking to the teacher after class? How will you punish the children when they miss behave?

Yes, you can politely address it by talking with the teacher outside. You cannot do it in class. Better to deal with the teacher in person in a consultation rather than in a police way.

I recommend that you avoid punishing students. People react differently when punished by foreigners, The same way black people can say N words amongst themselves but when white persons use the word it changes to insult.

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