



A Personal Journey to Togo, West Africa

12-19 August 2011

On the 12th of August 2011, I (Karoline Buys) left COE's Youth Gathering in Baia Mare, Romania and embarked in an even greater adventure: COE's Youth Gathering in Togo, West Africa!!!

I had never been in that part of the globe so I was a little uncertain of what would await me. All I had heard about West Africa was how dangerous it was.

The trip didn't start smooth for me. On arrival at the Airport in Lomé, I realized that I had given Sam (COE's Hub Leader in Togo) the wrong date of arrival, so that to my unpleasant surprise there was no one at the airport to pick me up. The airport was very busy and daunting in a way, as I don't speak French and people were offering me taxi rides and staring at me. My mobile phone wasn't working in Togo and I didn't have any change on me to call Sam.

After a while, a girl who seemed to be a French Volunteer walked into the airport, so I asked her for help. She was very kind! She phoned Sam and found out that he was 3 hours away from Lomé at the place of the COE Gathering. She arranged my pick up with Sam and gave me 2000 XFO (4\$) for a drink saying: "Don't worry, Togo is a beautiful country"!

You can't imagine how grateful I was to hear those words!

5 hours later Sam's uncle (a Pastor) came to pick me up and took me to his humble home where I spent that night after enjoying a lovely dinner made by his wife. They were all very welcoming and friendly. The next day after having Breakfast with Obama (His picture was hiding under my pancakes) I met Sam for the first time face to face. It was like if we had known each other for ever!



We went to the church by motorbike where Sam plays the Keyboard.



Lomé was still recovering from floods caused by heavy rains. Coming from Europe I was shocked and sad by the amount of rubbish on the streets.



On arrival at the church I was warmly welcomed by members of the congregation. I had never experienced such lively gospel singing and dancing during a church service. It was very inspiring! There were many kids. Some were very friendly and curious, others a little scared at the sight of my pale skin which they had never seen before. After enjoying a community lunch together which they call “Agape” a Greek word that means “Unconditional Love” we went back home where we met Harriet my COE companion for the trip who had arrived from Ghana.



That same day (13th of August) we drove to Tsiko; the village where Sam grew up and which was close to the community where the COE Gathering was taking place.

We drove 3 hours on a Tro-Tro (African Microbus). If you have been in Africa, especially in Togo you know what I'm talking about. We were packed like sardines. Twenty five people in a Tro-Tro meant for fifteen max. Every time the Tro-Tro would stop we had the hope that someone would get off, but no! More would come in! Just when we thought there wasn't more space a big African Mama would squeeze herself in with shopping bags filled with fresh vegies and fruit.



That night we met Sam's lovely mom and some of the youth who were going to take part at the gathering.



On the 14th ten of us got into a Tro-Tro again and drove up the mountain to Dzedramé the small village where we would spent the next few days. The tropical landscape was just breath taking with Banana, Cacao, corn and coffee plantations. The COE Youth Hub members, all very talented musicians, sang African gospel songs of praise during the ride. It was a spiritual joyful experience.



The small houses at the village were made of red clay with simple tiled roofs. The contrast between the red sand, the deep green tropical vegetation and the high mountains was stunning. Thanks to the generosity of a Ghanaian Man who allows the Hub to host the youth gatherings at his place we stayed at the most luxurious mansion in the village. The Hub members welcomed Harriet and me warmly a showed us to our beautiful rooms which had a balcony and a bathroom with a bucket of water ready for us to take a shower. We were grateful with the Divine for such blessings!



That night we enjoyed Fu-Fu, a traditional dish made of boiled Yum and Casava cooked on the fire. The cooked Yum and Casava are placed in a big wooden mortar and pounded by two strong guys with wooden heavy sticks to form a gluey paste. This is then served with a red fish sauce or chicken. After washing our hands at the table, praying and thanking for the meal, we all stuck our hands in the large bowl of Fu-Fu. No individual plates were needed!!



That night the whole village came to the house to welcome us. We enjoyed an evening under the stars filled with traditional music, dance and storytelling around the fire. It is this way of community living which was so inspiring and humbling to me. A way of life that we've unfortunately lost in the West!



On the morning of the 15th, at 6:00 AM, a loud knock on our doors woke us up. We were called to join the morning prayers, meditation and Gospel singing led by Ablam, one of the Hub members. I have never seen youth so devoted to the Divine. As we were singing, the room was filled with Light, happiness and Love. A perfect way to start the Day! During this session we also had the chance to introduce ourselves officially!



Afterwards we went jogging, did morning exercises and played a game of soccer. It was so early that there was mist all around us. Many children from the village came to join us and play ball. It was a wonderful experience!



When we went back, we had breakfast and got ready for the workshops.

I started with a circle of connection, meditation and music followed by an inspiring COE Power Point Presentation which showed active youth Peace ambassadors worldwide and their inspiring projects. During the presentation we (Harriet and I) officially gave the Hub in Togo the Keyboard donated by the Hub in Pennsylvania. It was a beautiful ceremony and the Hub members were very touched by Michael's selfless efforts. This was followed by our first interactive workshop which was led by Harriet and me on "What it means to be a Peace Ambassador". The depth of the answers was amazing, and the similarities with the UNESCO Pledge for A Culture of Peace were immediately evident.



That same night we drove, singing joyfully, to a Village called Apeyeme where the members of the Hub and group participants played music and sang inspiring spiritual songs on the street. The whole community was present at the event singing, dancing and clapping hands. After the group played I had my first Togo cinema experience. With the help of a projector, a white screen and sound equipment a movie from Benin was shown under the stars. It was very entertaining!



Afterwards we had the opportunity to walk down the promenade and taste all kinds of traditional dishes. It was a wonderful evening!



The following day after our morning meditation, it was time to help clean the house and bring water to the bathrooms.



After breakfast and a sharing circle, I gave a workshop on “Forgiveness as the first step towards world peace” and the power of Thought. With the help of a scientific documentary I put together with my Husband, I showed the participants how we all play an important role upon the planet and how our thoughts and actions create our reality. The scientific research of Masaru Emoto and other leading scientists showed the Hub members how music impacts the world and inspired them to continue singing to help make the world a better place.



That afternoon while some went to play soccer with the villagers I went with Harriet and some hub members on a beautiful hike up the mountain from where we could see the country of Ghana. The vegetation was just breathtaking.

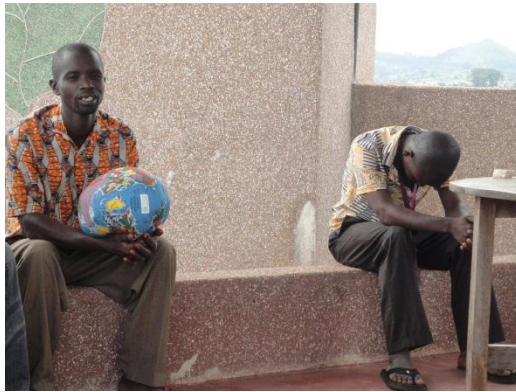


On our way back we reunited with the rest of the group and went for the last time to Apeyeme for another night of music under the stars.



The first time I heard them sing in French and in their African language called Ewe, I was astonished to hear them use sacred Names of praise in languages like Hebrew and Greek. I asked them about it and realized that they used the Names used by the Prophets of ancient times without knowing what language it was or the meaning of such words. As I'm passionate about linguistics I shared with them the meaning of some of the words they were already using and gave them a workshop on sacred language. This workshop on the last day (17th August) triggered many questions in some of the participants, and profound topics were discussed which led to the realization that there are many paths that lead to the Infinite Mind of Light and Love and that the Divine is not limited to manifest only through one Religion or another but it's rather omnipresent.

Before departing we all had a sharing circle in which we expressed our gratitude for all the beautiful experiences we could share together and ended the circle with a ceremony affirming our commitment to be true ambassadors of Peace and be the change we want to see in the world!



The camp was officially ended by singing together a song of Peace which Harriet and I learnt from the children in Nepal.

As this song has been sang by COE members in Nepal, Japan, Togo and Ghana I have decided to continue recording it around the world and to make a video that shows the world united with one song!



The next day, those who had stayed an extra day went for a hike and swim to a nearby waterfall. Before leaving the sight Harriet & I started a cleaning campaign and invited the Hub members to help us pick up all the rubbish and plastic bags which were lying around.



This was the starting point of an environmental Campaign which will be led by the COE Hub in September this year. They all promised not to throw rubbish on the ground again and to teach environmental awareness at schools and to people in their communities.

Considering the lack of infrastructure in Togo, their campaign will consist of recycling plastic bags by making Rugs out of them. They will invite kids at schools and people in the community to collect bags and will teach them the skills necessary to make the rugs, so they can sell them and have also a source of income. Since I came back to Germany Sam has also contacted the ministry of environment which showed interest in supporting their campaign 😊