

Some case-studies – a perspective from Uganda



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 depends on the family who will invite you but generally, you can ask e.g. "will the Mrs. (or the madam) be joining us at the table?". However don't insist or take offence.

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?

Again it depends on who you are interacting with and there is no one single way in which you will be perceived based on how you react/ what you say. I mean are you going for internship in a rural village or to a semi-rural area, or the city like Kampala where there are both some rich/poor and educated/uneducated people? It's okay to share about your life and personal information e.g. city, work place, family and is encouraged. Everyone knows certain things like plane tickets and iPhones are expensive but they probably won't directly ask you about that. The assumption is that white people have money (are wealthy) so whatever the cost they probably can afford those expensive things.

I believe the largest proportion of Ugandans do not support same-sex relationships. From my experience there are three categories of people: a) straight up homophobic, b) those who do not support it but will be tolerant (e.g. if you are thirsty I will give you water to drink but we will not be friends and I will not let you near my children) and c) those who don't care who one is having sexual relations with. Best not to bring it up or wait till you are sure about the other person's views about it.

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?

Yeah, you can go over and talk to your Dutch colleagues. Its only natural. You can also speak Dutch to your colleagues whenever you run into them. But if for instance you are doing group work and everyone has to be involved then try to speak English as much as possible to accomodate the hosts/locals. Also try to interact once in a while in the breakroom. Its just good manners.

Humour is not universal.

Body language is pretty universal.

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,...

Best to always go with a local for the first few times. Preferably give money to people who have stalls from where they are selling.

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 keep saying no and walk quickly away from them. Be careful about pickpockets especially in busy cities like Kampala.

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?

Yeah, you should accept the fact that you will pay more but make sure you are comfortable with the cost and quality of the product you are buying (same way we have higher tourist prices than locals). Some stores have standard prices though for every customer.

Is it wise to make pictures of people in the street? How to react when people ask money for you taking pictures?

There is generally accepted tourist behaviour e.g. in front of a market or monument it's accepted to take photos. But its polite to ask people first if you want a photo of/ with them.

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?

Privacy is important but may not be possible due to circumstances beyond your control (e.g. insufficient rooms). Just make the demands known prior to the trip like a single room. It can be arranged even though you might have to pay extra.

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?

Some Africans are obsessed with protocol. Anyway, try to respect that. If you have another opinion, you can respectfully disagree but don't insist. Then speak about it in the privacy of his/her office.

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?

That is a way of being hospitable and /or their job to make your stay as smooth as possible. It's okay for them to carry you heavy suitcase (you can help) however I think carrying your briefcase/ serving food is unnecessary. The other things are okay as long as it isn't any trouble for whoever is taking the initiative. Whatever you are uncomfortable with, make it clear.

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?*

Normally if you ask, the boss will probably say that the driver will have lunch somewhere else and has been given some money to cater for that. This may be true or false. It is so tricky, personally if i have some extra money i will slip some to the driver in confidence and ask him not to speak about it (you are giving this to him just as a good gesture and it doesn't have to be everyday e.g. it is not uncommon to appreciate someone with money for a good job. 10 euros might be nothing to you but mean so much to a driver). If not, just let it go and eat your food, donate to your favourite charity to make you feel better later on.

If your boss takes you out (and you're a student), the boss normally pays. If it is your fellow students, it would be nice to pay once in a while.

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?

There is saying we had growing up "spare the rod, spoil the child". A lot of people believe that spanking children is a tried and tested way to instill discipline. That's not about to change unfortunately. Sometimes the punishments given are picking up trash or cleaning a classroom.

Try to use different ways for punishment like making them go to a corner and think about their mistake. Picking up trash etc.

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Annelies.Verdoolaege@UGent.be