



EUTOPIA  
CERTIFICATE  
OF  
INTERNATIONALISATION  
Student Portfolio



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As long as you are in your own familiar environment, culture, it is difficult to find out what exactly is special about your own culture. You need contrasts, the encounter of different cultures in order to know what makes up your own culture.

My development volunteer service in the year 21/22 was such a clash of different cultures. I lived in Togo for a year with a host family and worked in a youth center. During this year, I was able to learn a lot, break down prejudices and discover similarities as well as some differences. Togo is a small country in West Africa that was colonized by the Germans, British and the French. Togo became independent on April 27, 1960 (Source 1). The Togolese are more friendly towards the Germans, as they perceived the German colonial period as friendlier and France unfortunately still colonizes some African countries through the French colonial franc called CFA (Source 2).

We were six volunteers who went to Togo with the YMCA. We spent the first month together in the capital Lomé. After that, two of us stayed in Lomé, two went to Atakpamé, a small mountainous town near Lomé, and Sarah and I went to Kara together. Kara is a university town in the north of the country. It's interesting to catch yourself with preconceptions. I had no idea what life in Togo would be like. A few of us thought we would be living in mud huts. I personally expected a lot of things, but not that I would be living in a villa. My host mother worked in a high position at the university in Kara and was also during my time in Togo on a business trip to Paris. I admire this woman. Her husband suffered a stroke, so he is at home and has to be cared for. Physiotherapy came once a week. So my host mother is the sole breadwinner and also takes care of her sister, who looks after the property and food, as well as the children who come from relatives in the village to live with her and go to school. The difference between individualistic and collectivistic societies is already visible here. While we in Europe or Germany often only live together with our core family and are supported by the state's safety net, people in Togo are dependent on their family and contacts. It is normal there not to have an immediate overview of who is a biological sibling in a household and who is not. Togolese people often call each other brother and sister, even if they are not related. Women are called mom from a certain age to show them respect. I must honestly admit that I was surprised at how different family life can be in Togo. 4 of us 6 volunteers lived with host families. And each of these host families was very different. One volunteer lived with a single mother with 5 children and was confronted with violence against the children. Another volunteer lived with a middle-class host family with children our age. Sarah lived with my host mother's daughter along with two young children, a housemaid and the host father. And I lived with the grandmother, her sister, the grandfather and two host sisters from the village in a rather rich, western-style household. We discussed current world politics, climate protection, language and much more at the dinner table. I thought it was good that we volunteers were all in different families. This enabled me to learn that, just like in Germany, every family somehow has its own little culture.

Sarah and me worked in a youth center in Kara. Among other things, I offered girls' clubs, German clubs and organized various events, such as a Christmas party or the children's Bible week. You can find the video of the children's bible week on Youtube (Source 3). It was very exciting to organize such a big event in another country. The Children's Bible Week took place for one day each in Lome, Atakpame and Kara. When the Children's Bible Week took place in Kara, I had malaria. Before my voluntary service and at the beginning, I was terrified of this disease. I took professional anti-malaria medication and wore long-sleeved clothes in the evenings to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. In the first few weeks in Togo, two of us volunteers fell ill with malaria, even though they protected themselves very well. I was also often bitten despite using mosquito spray. Over time, my fear of malaria became less and less. The health system is specialized in this disease. It is very unpleasant and you have to react in time, but as soon as the diagnosis is made, the disease is quickly cured with the right medication. It's interesting to see how great the fear of illness is when I talk to people in Germany about my time abroad. I was afraid of it myself. But in the whole year I was only ill twice. One time I had eaten something wrong and the other time I had malaria. I also always carried a small first aid kit with me for the first few months. But nothing ever happened. I'm glad that so many good things happened that year and that so little was about illness.

When I think of cultural differences, the cliché that comes to mind is the different sense of time. One prejudice against Africans is that they are often late and live more in the moment. In fact, I have been able to confirm this prejudice in some situations. I had to wait a lot that year. Even up to 4 hours before a concert. With my German understanding, I didn't understand at first how that could be, it just depends on the right planning. Over time, I found out that the time given as the start of the event is often the time when people start to get ready and set off. Often an event only starts when the person at the top of the hierarchy arrives. It would be disrespectful to start before that person(s) is/are there. I thought that being late was so normal that I got into the habit of being late. In private, however, this was not so welcome. So I have also experienced many punctual Africans and events. Above all, I experienced a very good and punctual bus system. I am very happy about our German culture of punctuality. I thought that it was sad that events often started so late, as I often couldn't stay until the end and could have done other things in the waiting time. I will therefore continue to strive for punctuality.

I felt particularly unfamiliar and above all uncomfortable when I was out and children saw me, waved and sang chants, often shouting "Yovo! Yovo!", which means "White! White!". Also adults shouted this or chatted to me. Men asked if I wanted to be their wife. I was secretly or obviously filmed and asked for photos. At first I refused when people wanted to take photos with me. It felt ridiculous. As if I was a superstar without having done anything for it. Later on, I took photos with people and said hello back, as well as chatting and joking with lots of people. I learned that this led to funny conversations and encounters and that I was able through these small actions to make a lot of people happy.

It was difficult to make real friends in Togo because I could never be sure whether the person was really interested in me or in the benefits that friendship with a white person could bring. While I mainly have female friends in Germany, it wasn't so easy for me to find female friends in Togo. I asked myself why that is. I think it's partly insecurity, but also that girls are often more involved in the household than boys, so it's harder to meet up with them. It was much easier to make male friends, although they often hoped for a romantic future. I was glad that I got to know Lumière. Sarah and I were on a German interpreting course at the university. Lumière had asked me for my number. We then met up a lot. And we're still in touch now. Last year, she spent a few months in Germany doing voluntary service. It was very surreal but wonderful to have her here. She gave me hope that it is possible to find soul mates anywhere in the world. She is my sister from another continent. My best Togolese friend.

What confused me at the beginning was that when I was invited to someone's home for dinner, I was often left alone during the meal. I suspect that this was done to give the guest privacy. Culturally, men and women eat separately and don't talk during the meal. But this is no longer the case everywhere. I would have liked to spend time with the host during the meal.

But in general, I loved the way the food was handled. In Germany, food usually plays a rather secondary role in everyday life. Food should be quick and easy to prepare. I found it very inspiring and pleasant to see how much time and energy is put into preparing food in Togo. My host family had a large garden with chickens, goats, lots of papaya trees, manioc, lemon bushes and much more. They owned a field next to the house and we were often out in the fields in the village. We bought food from the local market. We spent a lot of time preparing the food. It was a completely different way of life to eat so fresh and local. I actually wanted to get into the same habit as soon as I got back to Germany. Unfortunately, I have to say that, despite the quality of the food I buy is very important to me, I have fallen back into the German habit of eating quickly and simply. But later on I definitely want to have a garden.

The topic of culture shock has kept me very busy during my time Togo. That's why I would like to conclude this text with some thoughts about that topic that I published on my blog at the time (Source 4).

"Culture shock? Maybe a little bit...but it's not a shock, it's more of a taking in. Perceiving without judging. Drifting through the world and absorbing everything. Replacing ideas with impressions. Puzzle together misunderstood words, facial expressions and gestures. Smiling mouths speak for themselves. Encounters, encounters, encounters. Salut, Çava? I'm doing well. Between all the motorcycles, women in colorful festive dresses, the tooting, honking, hissing, chirping. Glances. Dust and lots of green. Juicier pineapple, sweeter papaya, green oranges. Flat screen televisions. The weather forecast shows the weather in Togo & other countries. Bagged water. Only interact and eat with the right hand. Garbage. Magnificent villas towering between corrugated iron roofs and unfinished

buildings. Get married here! A few supermarkets, but the market is actually everywhere. Wait and see and what you want will come to you. Haggling. Goods on heads. Masses of shoes. Concrete streets. Dusty roads without concrete, but with puddles, deep valleys and hills. Goats on car roofs, 5 people on a moto. Boxes, chairs, tables, mattresses are transported like this...as long as it still drives.... Finally daring to walk the streets alone. Making insiders with acquaintances. Where is my fear? I'm not even looking for it. Are we tired of life? No...we're going to die anyway. That's why we soak it up, life. As long as we live. Take care of ourselves. Because I like being on this earth. And yet inside I ask myself...where is the fear? But life is better without it. With cockroaches, spiders, vehicles about to die, risky ventures. It's good for me to simply trust life and God. I am learning to let it come to me, to live from moment to moment and I am filled with great gratitude and appreciation. Thank you God for all the wonderful people, the kindness, the delicious food, the health, preservation & all the enriching experiences you give. Merci beaucoup. Amen."

### **Sources**

Source 1: [https://www.togo-assist.ch/die-geschichte-von-togo/index.html?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwK8MWhleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABp886-JOhbHblwvat13Jgy5KwK4fKFaD\\_COzJBuwb0R-OkanBxxsnM9ylwz1\\_aem\\_oTSG1NHQdndH0QwNcwWI6Q](https://www.togo-assist.ch/die-geschichte-von-togo/index.html?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwK8MWhleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABp886-JOhbHblwvat13Jgy5KwK4fKFaD_COzJBuwb0R-OkanBxxsnM9ylwz1_aem_oTSG1NHQdndH0QwNcwWI6Q)

Source 2: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/der-westafrikanische-franc-frankreich-und-der-unsichtbare-100.html>

Source 3: [https://youtu.be/1Y0FpDS0uOo?si=4ObGiWNbks-2eH\\_N](https://youtu.be/1Y0FpDS0uOo?si=4ObGiWNbks-2eH_N)

Source 4: <https://steinkesalome02.wixsite.com/salotogo>