

Interesting Neighbors Greetings From Ghana #21

In the saga of the Finance Minister being called on to resign. . . he was accused of spending money that had not been allocated as a line item by parliament. His defense was that he was innocent of that because he spent that money that had been approved and allocated. He said the allocations had originally been for other things, but they were allocated funds. Nothing is said about the government spending 120% above and beyond what the country earns in one year. The new budget corrects that by raising taxes and fees. This is not going over well.

And it has been about a month so nothing is being said about the illegal mining that was supposed to be urgently getting fixed. But now the government says it is trying to find a way to swap gold for oil. And in the process removing paperwork and hurdles that stifle investment.

There is snow in the mountains back in Port Angeles and winter is settling in across the U.S. Soon we will be in Harmattan, the season where dust storms across the Sahara come south to the populous area. Living near the forests of British Columbia there have been occasions where the smoke from their wildfires changed the air, turning it a shade of brown/grey. Here, the look is familiar. The air quality seems a bit worse. And you sweep and dust a bit more often.

If you consider how this country and others in Western Africa are considerably younger than others more familiar, it is not difficult to create possible scenarios to explain parts of the society.

For a while now I have been mentally reflecting on the police of Ghana and those in Togo, their similarities and the stark differences, differences because of their governments.

In the U.S. there are a variety of police forces including highway patrol and sheriffs. If a commercial vehicle is violating laws or in need of assistance in a breakdown, the police are there. In the U.S., the police are mobile and on patrol. If someone is driving in a way that endangers others, if a vehicle is obviously not road worthy, the police are there to resolve the situation. Here, not so much. Actually, not at all.

That used to bug me. "How can you have something like that on the road?" I would mentally cry out when I would see an overloaded truck broken down in the fast lane, or

be following a vehicle with no rear lights as a motorcycle cuts across in front of the car to ride on the other white line on the left side. Then it came to me. I do not know if I am right or not, but if I were to be a new government and just won the contest to rule a brand new country of some 21,925 square miles/ 56,785 km² (Togo) or one 92,098 square miles/238,533 km² (Ghana). . .kinda like when you buy your first house, you realize how limited some of your resources are and that you need a lot of things. (Okay, maybe not the best comparison).

Suddenly the government is responsible for trying to establish police for the protection of the populous and to somehow cover vast areas going from coastal to mountains and urban to very remote. Staffing it to the level of a region in a country like Canada or even a large western state would require enormous amounts of manpower and equipment. Neither were in great supply. So rather than try to create a massive force the powers that be set up police check points, similar to the ones done now for vehicle inspection of firearms or illegal cargo or to verify ownership and insurance. I can see that in my mind. Whether or not it happened in real life, I have no idea. But it works out in theory as for the foundation for what I have seen.

From what I have been told, gangs of criminals would roam in areas and in many cases outnumber the police. Back then, police would travel in small groups for their own safety and be outfitted with obvious firepower, like rifles. Random police checks caught many criminals and put a damper on activity. The policy was adopted as viable. It is still used today. Check points may be effective but it is a shame that there are not enough police for roads to be patrolled as they are in the U.S. Last night we encountered two large,slow trucks with no operating lights and only headlights and two cars with no rear lights. I really miss our highway patrols.

Looking at Ghana and Togo,the fashion of their uniforms and their methods may be similar but the purpose and motivation behind the two different police cultures is completely different. Travel anywhere of any distance in either Ghana or Togo and you will find a police checkpoint on the road.

In Ghana, police carry rifles to reassure the public that they are protected and to intimidate criminals while providing the officer with a form of protection. Police checks are to make sure vehicles are not carrying contraband, have the proper registration and insurance, or that the occupants are duly registered citizens and visitors in compliance with immigration.

Officers in Ghana dress differently depending on their function. Some, like Immigration, wear military camouflage. Police officers wear black (*in this heat!???*) uniforms. Traffic officers wear white. You can usually tell when officers are attempting to control traffic. The backups are tremendous.

Every time I have tried to take a picture of the police, I have been told that that is the best way to get pulled over by an irate cop.



By and large, the Ghanaian police forces are working for the public. Togo has a completely different mindset. The police there dress in black and carry submachine guns. They drive around in vehicles with rocket launchers. Their purpose is to intimidate the citizens and remind people who is in control. When the president of Togo goes from his palace (complete with gun turrets on the corners) to the airport, there is one soldier with his submachine gun on every corner (four to an intersection) along the route. As a friend of mine once remarked, "You know, if he was a nice man he would not need that kind of protection."

Togo police perform traffic checks. Sometimes by simply stopping the truck in its lane of traffic. The truck operator has a choice, provide all the documentation requested or pay a fine to the officer. And in that aspect, many of the police, regardless of country, share the same custom. . . the African Handshake.

