

CRAN Newsletter No. 23/ September, 1999

Dear Friends of CRAN,

In the last newsletter issue, we have informed you about the forthcoming visit of a Freundeskreis' delegation to Ghana. In consequence, after impressing and delighting meetings, this is to report about the visit to convey an idea of the fascinating African people. Further information will be given at the CRAN autumn meeting on Saturday, 23 October, 1999. In addition, this letter provides you with brief information about other current issues and, at the end, with a book review: How appropriate is it to expect from Africa a functioning democratic society, respectively which alternatives, based on indigenous structures, are possible? I wish to all of you a joyful reading and dreaming of Africa!

- "The living conditions in the slums of the cities and in the villages are extremely poor: No flowing water, no electricity and poor sanitary facilities. There is no sewerage, the waste water is – if at all – flowing through open trenches next to the streets. There is a severe lack of infrastructure: bad roads, bad telephone lines, unstable voltage of electricity mains, no continuing provision with water: It is very hard to imagine how this country could be able to develop. Simultaneously, however, the developments within the CRAN projects are encouraging. On the micro-level, living conditions are improving, but it takes a long-term perspective and much patience. Investment in education is very important and will pay in later years." This is how Wolfgang Brüßler has summarised his experiences. We are observing any little improvement with thankfulness.
- In Ghana, it may take much patience to deal with computers: "Monday. Forenoon in the CRAN office. We have installed the first hardware and conveyed some know-how about windows basics. Tuesday: I am constructing a new PC composed of spare parts. The Modem does not work any more. Why? We take the defective transformer to a street-vendor, who is prepared to coil the spool anew for us. Meanwhile, Jan is teaching Word and is surrounded by a big bunch of people. Thursday: At 5:45 I drive with Michael to Accra by bus. We want to apply for an internet connection. Friday: The street-vendor has actually been able to repair the transformer. After several attempts I finally obtain a Modem Connection to Africa Online, but unfortunately the login still does not work. Saturday: I am spending the afternoon at the CRAN office, struggling with Africa Online's hotline. Why is it so complicated to install a new user? Tuesday: After repeated phone calls with Africa Online's hotline and after various threats we are actually online! Thursday: Again a day at the office. We are partly online. Sometimes it takes two hours for me to get a connection. So – more an African Offline. Monday: We decided to change the internet provider, and I have contacted AfricaExpress. Tony promises to configurate us this very day. Unfortunately only, he does not have a key for the office at the moment. Until 7 p. m. nothing happened. Why is everything so protracted here? Saturday: AfricaExpress is satisfactory working now. Sunday: Long divine service at Abakam. Setback in the afternoon: The modem transformer is defective again. But we do not have more time to solve the problem." I apologise to non-computer-experts for the technical terms. What becomes clear by these diary abstracts, however, is that a stable computer connection needs the helping grace of God as a substantial precondition.
- 17th of August, 1999: Official opening of the women training center at Duakor. There are some important people, and among four reporters a camera man from Ghana TV. The protectress of the event spontaneously conducts an auction and sells first products of the

trainees to the guests of honour.” So it has really been possible to construct the building and start the establishment within several months only.

- 19th of August, 1999: Liati-Wote village has organised an overwhelming welcome ceremony for us. We are led to the village square by a choir and are welcomed with solemnity. In a theatre play, the women show us the conventional method how to process palm kernels and Cassava. Afterwards: inspection of the mills. As per our wishes the mills will be set into function today. Apparently the only lack was of engine oil and of the mechanic from Hohoe. In the afternoon, the engines really start, and the first cassava is processed.” Good things take time. We wish to all people involved that the mills will go on working for a long while. We will come back to this issue at our autumn meeting.

Youth-Camp impressions (by Jan Neuhaus)

On our way to Shama-Kedzi we are passing Duakor, separated from the eternal sea breakers only by a small strip of coconut palms. We are passing the little turn-off to Sanka, passing the crossing to Elmina, where the peaks of the Best-Western hotels are visible, but nothing of the village Bantuma, which is located behind Elmina. Then, away from the coast through a green landscape. I am thinking of the visits of the first week, recalling people, wishes, dreams, but also actions and promises. Recalling African reality, each time experienced in a new way – the coconut given by poor, but willingly sharing hands, the shining red of pepper drying in the sun, the gigantic tree in the savannah – so much – perhaps too much.

We still do not know what is expecting us, where and how we will sleep tonight, whom we will get to know, we just know that we are on the road with friends, who do and will do anything to make things as comfortable as possible for us. We turn off, leaving anything which we Europeans would call streets. A dust track in the beautiful, but omnipresent red of this coast sector’s soil. Passing little settlements, churches, street-vendors and people who have to walk along this street on foot. Will we be there soon? No – we won’t imitate the children on the back-seats – we have been conveyed enough of the practical and nerves-saving African “waiting mentality” within the first week. The hills are becoming higher, and suddenly we can see the school buildings of Shama-Kedzi on the left. A row of houses in “school uniform”: Brown below and a light ochre above. Class rooms for an entire elementary school, including the toilets, and in front of them a bunch of people. But we are driving on. George wants to show us everything, Shama-Kedzi is a big village. After leaving the hill nearby the school we have to pass a valley with march and mangroves and another hill before reaching the actual village. After the first houses there is a first square. We are driving on through the only street, parallel to the coast. What is not so clear is whether we are viewing the village or whether we are presented to the village inhabitants as the “Jewu” (Ewe for “white man”). At the end of the street we are turning round, driving back almost to the first buildings of the village again. It really was just a welcoming tour. At a sign indicating the way to the CRAN kindergarten we turn off and stop before a fenced-in compound. There are already some people opening the gate for us, one of them is Jonathan, but there are so many new stimuli that we will need two further days to become acquainted with his actual role. At this moment, everything is like a miracle: An entire house just for us, two rooms with double beds and a large living-room, with space for two further beds. Armchairs and tables and even electric light, and behind the house an external bathroom: a room with a hand-basin, a toilet and a shower room. Next to it, there is a big poly-tank (a plastic tank containing water) set up upon a wooden frame. After distribution of the rooms, we are quickly placing in our luggage. Meanwhile, a cooking-stove is being set up in the hall, and food and ware is being delivered.

Everything is cared for! Well, the generator is not yet there, but it will come soon, and there is no water in the tank, but it doesn't matter either, water will come.

We haven't mentally worked up everything yet, haven't understood the miracle of being lodged in such a house, when already faced with new actions to undertake. The elders of the village are waiting for us (probably since one o'clock – it is almost four o'clock now), the official introduction and welcome still has to be done. Well, fortunately it is not the first time for us. We are again driving down the street through the village to stop somewhere, then following Doris, Seth and the others. They are going straight towards one of the fenced-in compounds to enter it. Somewhat uncertain of how to behave, we are following them into the yard, seeing some women cooking at open fireplaces, who are welcomed. We do not know that they are already belonging to the cooks working for the Youth Camp. We have to subcross some clothes-lines to reach the other side of the yard, turn round one, two corners, walk through narrow gaps between houses and coconut mats which usually mark off the compound areas, to face suddenly the front of the old school building. In the interior, some people have already been waiting for us. Without saying anything, we sit down on prepared benches. Everybody is waiting. More people are joining us, and we try to identify who is who. George starts with a speech in which he thanks for making it possible that the Youth-Camp is going to be conducted at Shama-Kedzi again. Then he leads over to telling the audience that this time, some visitors from Germany will attend the Youth-Camp. After this speech, there is silence firstly, then we have the opportunity to admire the African cultivation of discussion. Some people briefly talk with each other, afterwards the chief's speaker stands up and replies in a formal way. He welcomes everyone of us and praises the efforts made by CRAN, but he adds that further things are needed, such as establishments for school classes 7 to 9, a hospital and better basic sanitary facilities. Subsequently it is our turn to reply. We begin by praising and thanking for the hospitality in Ghana. In addition, our speech is mainly to convey two statements, firstly that the CRAN Freundeskreis is just a group of people supporting CRAN Ghana, but that decisions and their implementation are remaining within the responsibility of CRAN Ghana. Secondly we stress that it is most important to include all village inhabitants in the project works, and that improvements can just be made if changes are also initiated by the village people on the spot. Finally we introduce ourselves by names and get to know the names of some of the persons vis-à-vis. After a long ceremony of shaking hands we are awaiting the response to our speech. Some time is passing by in which the village inhabitants are deliberating within several discussion groups, whereas the chief does not say anything, he just nods from time to time when being asked or informed about something. It is exciting to observe this process. Finally the speaker stands up again and replies to us. As a direct answer he reports that Mr Godwin has given his net to enable the Youth Camp participants to do fishing. But he adds that a comprehensive reply would need more time to deliberate and decide. Within the following week there would surely be an opportunity to speak with each other. Then the speaker formally receives us as village guests and stresses that the village people are very much appreciating the activities of CRAN and that they would be thinking over possibilities how to support them. After another time of silence, George asks on our behalf for the allowance to leave the meeting, the official and usual way of taking leave. After stepping out of the building, we lastly cross the school yard to take a look at the sea, which is beginning just behind one row of houses. The sea breakers are noisy, and their sound will continuously accompany us during the following week. But for exceptionally huge waves it is not necessary to hear them, they can be perceived by the shaking of the ground. Hard to imagine how people living in the first houses may feel within a storm.

When coming back to our lodging, the women have brought water in buckets - everything is cared for...

The sounds of the morning – insects, birds, goats, hens, men and drums in the distance. Fafa and Ruby are working in the corridor to provide us with break-fast. Tea or coffee, jam, Ghana's white bread, peanut butter, fresh pineapples or oranges: luxury, though one may dream of leaven bread sometimes. While walking the way to the building site on foot, we meet the first women carrying sand from the shore in buckets to the building-site, covering about two kilometres, over two hills, with a smile and a jest, at least for the cameras. After the ascent to the site, the welcome starts. Nelson is not an admiral, but the commander of the Youth-Camp, organiser, actively contributing worker, permanent motivation and example for the participants, preacher and tremendous source of knowledge about Ghana. The cooks and Maggy are looking forward to the whites' support, and the white men start trying to get hold of some tools from time to time, enabling them to contribute to the building works. The best opportunities are found during the breakfast break, in which warm food for the Youth-Camp participants is offered – most of them deserve it well. Compared with their power and their skills, our work is negligible, but we notice that even our efforts to try are motivating the young people. They snatch away the picks from us not only to save us from hurt, but also to continue their work with more power. It is not so easy to integrate in the working process, but managing it leads to be rewarded with the warm feeling of being creating something new together, the shape of a new building which is slowly developing. Lunch on the site terminates the works, and we are eating what has been created by the magic power of the kitchen crew. Cooking is not so easy with wood, over open fire only, for 130 really hungry workers – and the whites are even provided with special food, sometimes without pepper, sometimes without fish. And the cooks are always joyful. We are curiously observed when trying the “normal” food, which is spiced in the usual way, eating it with fingers. And we are earning appreciating glances when finally being able to eat properly and to clean the fingers in a way that does not soil the water. After lunch we use to go home to digest our impressions. Dinner is provided at home, mostly joined by those preachers or seminar leaders who are the current speakers at the Youth-Camp. Outside, the sounds of the night: insects, drums, the eternally sounding sea breakers. Starry skies which are probably never seen in Germany, composed with the black shadows of the palm-trees.

“To take a bath”? Naturally in buckets. What is important is the cup or whatever is used to scoop the water out of the buckets. Once one has observed how long the way is which a young girl has to cope with, carrying the water on her head, one realises that nothing of this water should be wasted, even if the girl smiles and enjoys to assist in making things as comfortable for the guests as possible. It does not take a shower to be really clean, which is not only demonstrated to us by the participants of the Youth-Camp. Everybody wears clean clothes everyday, and for excursions, even jackets and ties. Shirts are ironed – the flat-irons are heated with living charcoal from the kitchen. The neatness, especially among the very poor people from the country, is a very special topic and should be taken by us as an example how to stand extremely difficult situations in dignity. Observing that even those huts are swept everyday which German children would refuse to take as their tree shanties, and having the opportunity to look behind the scenes of surface soil and chaos, provides a totally new point of view. In the Best Western hotel at Elmina, I threw the dirty towels on the floor, even those I had used a single time only, to let them be cleaned – In Duakor I attend the divine services together with many people in neat clothes, knowing exactly how much manual work is needed to reach this state.”

Book review:

Gero Erdmann: Demokratie, Kultur und Tradition. Zum Problem vorkolonialer Herrschaft in der afrikanischen Demokratiedebatte.

(Democracy, civilization and tradition. The topic of pre-colonial rule within the African debate on democracy.)

Focus Afrika, IAK Diskussionsbeiträge Nr. 11, Institut für Afrika-Kunde, Hamburg 1998.

Is (western) democracy appropriate for African society, or wouldn't it be better to support indigenous African political structures? This fundamental question has already been discussed for several years. Since the era of the ubiquitous "wind of change" democratic structures have arisen in many countries, but with considerably different results. Yet, a multiparty system with various forms of civil society participation known from western countries was nowhere seen as totally "suitable" and has nowhere been purely implemented. One of the core problems is actually: what do possible "African" political structures look like?

Ad hoc several elements are imaginable:

- They should allow as much participation as possible – perhaps in a more direct way compared to the western parliamentary system
- They should adjust to traditional ("Palaver") structures of discussion leading to consensus (well described by the saying "they talk until they agree")
- They should trace back to pre-colonial time to avoid the influences of European power structures
- They should recur to tradition and indigenous civilisation, so that rights and duties emerging from them could easily be understood by the people.

Yet, one could counter to these spontaneous proposals with a row of questions:

1. "Tradition" and "civilisation" are vague terms. Both are not fixed data, but subjected to a permanent change, going through adjustment and development. Further, there are many characteristics Africans have in common, but on the other hand there are as well many differences between every region and every ethnic groups with their traditions and cultures. The differences arose from different conditions they were being situated in – nomadic shepherd tribes, trading towns or kingdoms subsisting on farming have their own typical characteristics. Besides, what was "original" is not known to us without manipulations, as any document, any remembrance of contemporaries which are still alive is coming from colonial time and is reflecting the views of those who were the predominant social classes of that time. So the problem of an "invented tradition" cannot be denied.
2. Ethnological studies of that time, which should provide a more scientific basis, were mostly conducted only once, but not repeatedly. For a long time, moreover, there was a lack of scientific reviews which could have proved the reliance of the studies.
3. It is a common ideal in Africa, too, that the ruler should be obliged to the public weal – an ideal which is likewise used to divert from actual misuse of power.
4. The classical village assembly is characterised by a hierarchy determined by age, sex and social standing. Equal rights in the sense of "one man, one vote" does not really exist there. The rules are open for various methods of influencing the process. The term "consensus" does actually not reveal how the agreement may be reached.
5. "Tradition" is not a set of fixed rules, yet it only provides guidelines which must be translated into practical decisions – thus there might be a considerable scope for interpretation.
6. The declaration of "African Human Rights", passed by the OAU in 1981, remains to be an imitation of the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations (based on "western" values).

The only “positive” difference is that individuals are obliged to support the members of their families and of the social group they are belonging to. Therefore, this debate has been assessed as “empty talk about ‘African’ human rights”.

Which outlook is resulting from these considerations?

1. When declaring indigenous “civilisation” as the basis for new models of political and civil society structures in Africa that are to be developed, it must be observed that this term has to be filled with life.
2. De facto, a real “African model how to rule a society” has not been developed yet. Even the Ujamaa approach of Tanzania, which did not actually have a traditional basis, but which was seen as an autonomously developed model of society, was recognised as not functioning and given up more or less freely.
3. Moreover, the African society is not, or at best at some spots, a “traditional” society. Mostly it has adjusted to modern external and internal influences or has even been transformed by them. Besides, many Africans, among them surely the elite, are not seriously willing nor capable to undo or at least to shape this development.
4. These considerations, to the opinion of the author, do not lead to a “solution”. On the contrary, he states: “I do not believe that such a model [an alternative African model for democracy, H. W.] or substantial elements of it can be derived from recurring to the African past. This past is too contradictory and heterogeneous to serve as a source from which a coherent model could be generated. On the other hand, it would be naive to believe that a European or an American model of democracy could be exported to Africa and remain functioning there in the same way. The export would fail, the African society would inevitably change the model.”
5. Therefore, a more likely expectation is the development of “practical” approaches, capable to shape concrete strategies – Claude Aké has said it this way: it will be deriving from practical experience and improvisation, within the course of a hard fight.

As a quintessence we can summarise: if claimed at all, a canon of African values and norms would have to be filled with life. It is at least problematical to derive such a canon from recurring to positive pre-colonial structures.

A short comment on these considerations: What is actually needed or wanted?

1. The discussion has not clarified whether possible regional approaches do exist or not. It should be considered that societies such as Switzerland, Great Britain or Belgium have developed specific differences within their political structures.
2. Some few values may be considered as “universal for human beings”. The responsibility of rulers to act proportional to the society’s capacity, considering its strengths and weaknesses, is an unalterable requirement of any democratic principle. This approach refers to the human being (as an office holder or social actor) as a starting point of the problem and its solution.
3. The function of securing rights and duties of human beings - as individuals and within their roles in society - is an essential precondition for the acceptance of a social system. One can indeed take it as a fact that African reality differs from Western structures and ideals in this respect. This provides a good opportunity to conceptualise desirable conditions.
4. Orientation to consensus is a good fundament for building up a society. It is a basic learning process how to interpret this principle in practice.
5. It is even more challenging to ask which answers are offered by a society as possibilities for its members to fill their lives with sense. A traditional society might stress different

aspects compared to a modern society. In societies consistent of both elements, the synthetic process is determined by the answer to this question.

6. Which assistance does Christian faith offer in these areas? Christian parishes themselves are “little societies”. The values, convictions and spiritual theory and practice may be demonstrated and offered as a good social model “within the world”. Consequently, CRAN has likewise the chance, respectively the task, to help the people in Ghana (even if limited to the number of people living in the little world of the project areas) in finding their way of acting answerably, within the scope of the responsibilities entrusted to them, and in a shape which is concretely realising democratic society in the sense of guidance and service.