



Report West African Humanist Conference, Ghana, November 2012

written by Gea Meijers

From 23 to 25 November humanists gathered in Accra, Ghana, to reflect on humanist action in West Africa. The conference led to the kick-start of a regional humanist network in West Africa and offered a rich discussion of the objectives and role of organized humanism in West Africa. The conference was organized by the Humanist Association of Ghana and IHEYO, the youth section of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

The conference started with a public conference on Friday 23 November that inspired speakers and participants to speak out about the challenges for humanism in West Africa, especially in Ghana. This day reflected on the role of organized humanism as an alternative to religion. Answers were formulated to questions such as 'how should humanists approach religious beliefs and practices?' and 'what would be the agenda for humanism promoting human rights?'. Around 40 people participated in the conference that was held in the SSNIT Guest House, in the centre of Accra. The conference was structured into four sessions with nine speakers and a chair of the day.

Introduction session: humanism as lifestance and practice in West Africa

Daniel Addae of the Humanist Association of Ghana opened the conference with a welcome address in which he explained the history of organized humanism in Ghana, starting in the '80s with the rationalist centre. In 2012, the Humanist Association of Ghana was spontaneously formed in a burst of enthusiasm. The group offers a community for humanist minded people to speak out freely, with at the centre of all discussions, the issue of the appalling state of human rights in our society.

Leo Igwe, research fellow at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, former IHEU representative and a Nigerian humanist activist, declared that Ghana has booked its place in humanist history and it is at the beginning of a long road ahead. Developing out of poverty makes humanism necessary for West Africa, because humanism is not only about thinking, but also about creation. Some participants formulated this point as follows: humanists are willing to think outside of the box, while they aim to create a world that offers free choices based on human dignity for everyone.

Alphonso K. Weah, secretary of IHEYO's African Working Group and director of the Liberian non-profit organization YOCADS, introduced the humanist lifestance to those not familiar with it yet. He summarized humanism as a rational and moral beliefsystem, relying on reasoned, critical thinking based on free inquiry and guided by human rights and dignity: Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.

Leo Igwe also tackled the proposition that humanism is a Western concept. This idea is sometimes suggested by those that oppose humanism. Leo questioned the idea. What is Western about rationalism, about reasoning and free inquiry? Does it mean that superstition and blind faith are intrinsically African? He pointed out that Christianity and Islam are imported religions in Africa and not the traditional beliefs.

Second session: the role for humanism in West Africa, as alternative to religion

Raymond Nonnatus Osei, professor at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, concluded that humanism offers a stronger set of philosophical arguments for morally good behavior than religion. However religion also offers positive dimensions for people, thus he suggested that humanist should make a bridge with religion, where both work together in their focus on promoting social values.



Professor Osei explained this concept of social values that humanists and religious people should foster. In the context of traditional communalism in Africa that has undergone erosion due to the individualist greedy culture that came with colonialism, the prevalence of social values decreased. We are now faced with an unbalanced and unequal system that is weak when it comes to social values and that has locked many people into poverty. Human rights abuses such as against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) persons need to be viewed also a result of the weak social culture in which people are prone to ethical manipulation. The same goes for religion. The African form of religion is tied to the unequal and material harsh conditions of people. Unfortunately, while offering a spirit of community, religion at the same time hampers the development out of poverty.

In the subsequent discussion, participants discussed the role for West African humanism towards religion. Should humanist approach religious groups in a friendly, not too critical way? Manu Herstein, writer of the awarded book 'A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade' suggested a somewhat more aggressive approach. Humanists should encourage people to liberate their minds. The current religions are not traditional to Africa. The Christian religion was part of the imperialist agenda and only took root in Ghana in the past 80 years or so. Another participant called religion instrumental to Western imperialism: religion pacifies people and stops them from asking critical questions about their situation. Religion can also be viewed as a symptom of a lack of critical thinking, suggested another person.

In response to Osei's conclusion that religion and humanism share similar social values, one person pointed out that some of the humanist and religious social values might be the same, the practices of both are not. Humanists should strongly speak out to any human rights abuses caused by religious practices.

Leo Igwe added to the discussion that humanists should definitely critically focus on religion where it hampers rational thinking and respect for human rights, especially since religion has a huge impact in West Africa. But it should not be the exclusive focus of humanists. For example, humanists should also speak out when the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) persons are trampled. A participant summed the task for humanists as follows: try to understand and respect religion, but point out where it hampers our development as society, while acknowledging other dimensions that hamper this development.

A distinction can be made between our views and how we communicate these views. In terms of the humanism that we communicate, some one suggested that we take an Afro-centric approach or try to brand humanism. One participant suggested that the approach towards religion should be informed as well by what helps the public to understand and respect humanism and humanists.

One participant recalled that religions, such as Christianity, are no uniform animals. In that light, humanists should not take everything that is found in the Bible as final indicative of how people practice Christianity. Religion adapts to local circumstances, making religion different from place to place.

Damilola Adegoke, president of the Nigerian Ibadan University Humanist Society, spoke about the agenda and characteristics of African Humanism. He said that in Africa humanists need to address superstitious beliefs, expose irrationalism and manipulation clothed in superstitious forms. For example be very critical of priests that make money selling superstitious practices. Humanists can take that role by stressing that humanism is based on logical thinking. We could also consider using local names that describe humanism for branding it.

Many humanists (atheists, agnostics, etc.) come from a background in which they had to leave religion behind. This process can cause a lot of hurt and leave anger with individuals. However several participants



concluded that humanists should raise awareness on humanism, not impose it as the only creed and thus become a radical in our point of view. Any form of radicalism is never good. We should not condemn the whole of religion or all religious people. We should practice what we preach: be understanding to the situation and people around us and critical where it is needed. Humanists could work with open minded religious people, while being critical of (ideas that propagate) human rights abuse in the name of religion.

Session three: what can humanists contribute to the promotion of human rights in Ghana?

Gyekye Tanoh, policy analyst at the Third World Network in Ghana, gave his account on how humanists should deal with human rights, in particular women's rights. He concluded that persons with a humanist outlook should have an egalitarian outlook. He explained what this egalitarian outlook means in practice. Human rights such as the rights of women, are all subject to the capitalist system we are living in, which has created a moral of profit making and a patriarchal class system. There is a close relationship between patriarchy and the class system. When you start to have a society with a surplus in resources to use, patriarchy and economic class distinctions come into existence. Women and children become viewed as property or heritage. In this system women are oppressed, but also the men (for example the husbands of women) because they are pushed to unethical behaviour. To create more equality, we have to address the ethical and material aspects of society simultaneously.

In this patriarchal class system, 'religion is the opium of the people' as Marx famously put it. A quote on which Tanoh agrees with Marx. This quote suggests that instead of expressing discontent with the capitalist system, people choose for a false consciousness. What human rights advocate can do, is to seek a critical dialogue with religions.

Tanoh ended his presentation with the following stimulating affirmation: Do we, human rights advocates, know about the humanist society of Ghana? That we have to answer this with a 'no' currently, is a loss for human rights advocates and a loss for humanists.

Nana Oye Lithur, chief executive director of the Human Rights Advocacy Centre in Ghana, spoke about the rights of LGBT and sex workers. In the homophobic society that Ghana is, the government commenced to support LGBT people. However they do not take up this work because they explicitly want to promote human rights. They do it because they want to protect the health of the public. The prevalence of HIV and AIDS under gay people is much higher than among the general public (17 % compared to 1,5 %). The percentage is even higher among sex workers (25 %). The government has not legally criminalized homosexuality; anal sex is criminalized

There are an estimated 6.000-20.000 LGBT people in Ghana, according to Nana Oye Lithur. Religion can be a dimension to convince people to stop discriminating gay people. One can point out that in some of the traditional culture homosexuality is an accepted practice. And it is highly needed to stand up for LGBT rights, because discrimination runs deep, even among the state, such as with the police force. Her organization is for example seeking justice for a gay person that was raped by the police when he reported a theft.

Oye Lithur called upon the participants to also stand up for the rights of sex workers. The research the Centre has done, shows that there is also a practice happening in which police officers force sex workers to have sex with them without a condom.

Oye Lithur ended her speech with asking a difficult questions for each individual to answer: "Are you prepared to promote an issue that takes yourself out of your comfort zone? Or are you happy to just have your values, without standing up for them in society? In the end who is going to tilt the scales towards a



respect of human rights?”.

In the following discussion, participants tried to answer the questions posed by Oye Lithur. A participant did not see it as a possible choice to make. Because when you are human rights advocate you are going to ruffle the feathers. The question is not to engage or not, but the questions to ask are tactical or strategic in nature: ‘how can we reach our goals?’. One participant added that Humanists are not safe when LGBT are attacked, because we are also a minority.

As a strategy to cope with standing up for difficult issues, several people pointed out how important it is to join hands with others. Working together with other groups can protect someone from attacks. It is also a successful strategy to promote an issue. On the opposite side, conservative forces that want to control sexuality are working together to achieve their aims. Tanoh believed in this context that solidarity should not stop at the boundaries of belief groups (being a Christian etc). People in West Africa are all impacted by the patriarchal class system in which almost all of us form the large majority who loses out to the capitalist owners.

The humanist agenda in Ghana should focus on promoting individual freedom in combination with collective freedom said the chair of the day, Charles A. Anaman. And a participant concluded: “We have to live as humanists in our society, thus be part of the struggles in our society. Our only societal insurance is to be active”.

Session four: what can Humanist contribute to the promotion of human rights in West Africa?

The last session framed human rights in a geographical broader context with speakers from Nigeria and Sierra Leone. ‘Yemi Ademowo Johnson, project director of the Young Humanistas Network and lecturer, talked about superstition versus the humanist quest for development in west Africa. He explained what kind of superstitions exists in Africa, dividing them in four broad categories. He explained the impact of it. Superstition leads to a lack of creative, critical thinking, of tolerance and human rights violations. We can remedy superstitious thinking through popularizing critical thinking education in any form, for example through blogging.

Titus Sei Massally, coordinator at the Humanist Watch Salone based in Sierra Leone spoke about his personal experiences as a humanist that promotes human rights. Human rights and humanism are closely related he said. As a humanist he aims to add meaning to his own life and to everybody’s life. In his work, he does this by creating access to justice and offering support to rape victims. In Sierra Leone there is a very weak law enforcement for rape victims. Of all 900 court cases on rape as crime, no decision has been taken.

In Sierra Leone, there is also a big issue for women to get legal access to land. And women lack the resource to hold politicians accountable for their lack of monetary commitment to the Millennium Development Goal 3 that promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women.

In line with previous statements, Massally contested the idea that humanism is foreign to Africa. Humanism has had for a long time a foothold in West Africa, across countries. He concluded his speech with a personal device: “you have to look first at your own life and personality and be harmonious, before changing the world. You lead by setting a good example”.

For the last round of debate, participants continued to discuss the role of humanists in promoting human rights. One participant asked if the Humanist Association of Ghana could not start with a human rights campaign. Tanoh said that it makes it easier to make people accept humanism when humanists use their lifestance to help overcome economic deprivation instead of addressing religion in its positive and negative



impacts. Ademowo responded to this suggestion that religion is a factor on its own to address where it violates human rights. Humanists are not like any other humanitarian organization; we promote human rights with a specific focus that follows from the humanist lifestance.

The example of witchcraft in Ghana was put forward. Tanoh pointed out that this practice is related to a lack of access to material well-being and the disappearing role of old women in the material reproduction. His conclusion was that people accept superstitious practices, because they desperately want some control over their lives. Several participants reacted by saying that the dimension of superstition and religious beliefs is of course interrelated to other dimensions such as poverty, but that it is an aspect that is relevant to take as an own dimension, not as a byproduct of other factors. As one participant formulated it, one cannot explain for example the pastors that abuse religion and superstition to earn big bucks solely with poverty or any other factor, thus humanists need to take religion seriously as a factor on its own.

Tanoh further explained his point of view. Humanists need to be aware that it is an unfinished project to promote to people to give up superstitious beliefs without changing the material conditions. Ademowo nuanced this approach. As humanists we need to be aware we cannot do everything. That is why networking and collaboration with others is so important. As an example from his humanist work, he explained how his organization takes children away from dangerous crowds that see them as witches. They work with other organization who shelter the children and educate them following this rescue. Through the collaboration and joint effort they are together able to address the different dimensions of the situation.

The very interesting discussion could have continued. For sure what all agreed on that as organized humanists we can offer a community to people, according to chair Charles A. Anaman. And one participant posed a promising thought: "Today marks the first humanist meeting representing West Africa. We need to realize we are not small. We have a very big constituency behind us".



Second part of the conference leads to a new regional network

On 24 and 25 November humanists from the different organizations and groups in the region brainstormed together on collaboration in the region, the use of social media and lessons learned from each organizational work. Between 10 to 15 participants took part in the one and a half day meeting.

Saturday 24 November started with a session on what we can do with social media to foster our ideals. The importance of blogging was stressed. In the second session that focused on the organizational aspect of humanism, participants discovered that humanists have organized themselves in different ways in West Africa. It ranges from setting up NGO's with programmes to recently the Humanist Association of Ghana that is organized as a community with a very active online presence. The day ended with the formulation of a West African declaration on humanism. Finally, on Sunday, the first West African Humanist Network was launched.

A special part of the Saturday programme was a visit to the only Planetarium in West Africa, where people learn in a unique way about the universe. In the planetarium is also very active in teaching science in an easy way to children and school teachers. It proved an impressive visit (<http://www.ghanascienceproject.net/>).

Kajsa H. Adu, a lecturer, writer and TV personality, opened the Saturday with a session on the importance of social media. The tools of social media that the participants used, were listed, such as facebook, twitter and blogging. People also reflected on why we make use of social media. As very active blogger, Kajsa shared her experience on blogging, explaining its value for those not familiar with it. Blogging helps to show your ideas to others, you can control the information that people can find about you, it helps you to formulate your thoughts, be more attentive in real life (so that you can write a good blog about it), it helps you to connect/get in touch with others, and can serve as an archive to your experiences/ideas. Some of the personal blogs in the group are: kajsaha.com (Kajsa Adu's blog), grahamghana.wordpress.com (Graham Knight's blog), www.hawkafrica.blogspot.com (Yemi Ademowo's blog).

Yemi Ademowo Johnson who had spoken at the previous day facilitated the brainstorming session on the organizational part of humanism in West Africa. The session was introduced by Gea Meijers, co-founder of IHEYO and its previous President and Treasurer. She explained some characteristics of networks. Networks are non-hierarchical in structure, have a common purpose derived from a shared need for action, and have clear objectives and focus. She also pointed out that different networks are differently structured, depending on their objectives. From her experience with IHEYO conferences, she suggested to participants that with any collaboration between organizations and groups take modest and easy to achieve objectives, such as sharing information and knowledge and joining each other's events.

In the following discussion, participants agreed that each form of humanist group or organization has a structure, while they also discovered that the structures (formal or informal) differed greatly. There was a debate if leadership needed to be institutionalized in the form of a board that is mandated by a legally approved constitution.

The participants concluded that currently a regional network is missing in West Africa, even for basic stuff such as sharing information. Participants agreed to set up this network that should give expression to humanism as it is formulated by West African humanists. The IHEU 2002 Amsterdam Declaration was seen as possibly be too Western-centric. As a result, the participants went through the declaration to come to an own agreed formulation of humanism for members in West Africa (see below).



The West African Humanist Network

The following was agreed about the network:

Membership

For people that are resident in West Africa and that agree to the West African Humanist Declaration 2012

Objectives

Information sharing, added with capacity development in the form of joining or co-organizing events.

Means of Communication

Facebook with a closed group of members that are accepted.

It was agreed that the Ghanaian members present would set up the group. The country representatives present would co-moderate the group together (implying checking if no offensive messages are placed, etc.).

West African Humanist Declaration 2012

The participants at the 2012 West African Humanist Conference, organised by the Humanist Association of Ghana and the International Humanist and Ethical youth Organisation, in Accra, Ghana, agreed the following shared values. We therefore seek to adopt them for the West African Humanist Network.

1. **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others.
2. **Humanism is rational.** Humanists believe that science and critical thinking are the best methods to explain, understand and respect the environment.
3. **Humanism supports human rights.** Humanism holds that human development is a matter of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
4. **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism is un-dogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
5. **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
6. **Humanism recognises the transforming power of art.** Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music and the visual and performing arts for personal and social development.



**ANNEX International Conference “West African Humanism in Action”
Accra, Ghana, 23 November 2012**

Venue: SSNIT Guest House, Avenue 22, Ringway Estates, Osu, near Ako Adjei Interchange, adjacent DFID, Accra.

Time	Conference Schedule
09.00-09.30	Registration and coffee
09:30-11:00	Session 1: Opening discussing the necessity of humanism in Africa Alphonso K. Weah, IHEYO, -welcome address Daniel Addae, Humanist Association of Ghana, -welcome address Leo Igwe, Research fellow University of Bayreuth, - The necessity of humanism in Africa Alphonso K. Weah, IHEYO, - Humanism as a lifestance and in action
11:00-12:30	Session 2: Humanism as life stance and in action Prof. Raymond Nonnatus Osei, University of Cape Coast, - The relevance of secular humanism to contemporary african Society. -Damilola Adegoke, Ibadan University Humanist Society, - Humanism, belief systems, development in West Africa
12:30-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:30	Session 3: The promotion of human rights Gyekye Tanoh, Third World Network, - Women rights Nana Oye Lithur, Human Rights Advocacy Centre, - LGTB Rights
15:30-15.45	Short Break
15:45-17.00	Session 4: Humanism and the promotion of human rights -Yemi Ademowo Johnson, Young Humanistas Network , - Superstition versus the humanist quest for development in west Africa -Titus Sei Massally, Humanist Watch Salone, - Humanism and the promotion of human rights
17.00-17.30	Closing of conference, followed up with cocktail

Method of the sessions

Key note speakers will present on average in 15 minutes their speech followed by interactive discussions with the other speakers and the audience.

About Humanism

Humanism is an ethical stance based on reason, freethinking and rationalism and not on the belief of a transcendent being like a God. Humanist ethics promotes solidarity, respect for human dignity and self-determination.



ANNEX: About the Speakers and Facilitators

Damilola Adegoke

Adegoke is president of the Ibadan University Humanist Society in Nigeria. The organization is committed to promoting humanists' networking and humanist education among students of the University of Ibadan. In the past 8 years he has written articles, such as chapters in books, on humanism and belief systems. He is completing his PhD programme in Sociology of Development. One of the books he contributed to is: "50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists", edited by Russell Blackford and Udo Schuklenk.

Leo Igwe

Igwe is a Nigerian humanist and human rights activist, and a former Western and Southern African representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Igwe has campaigned against child witchcraft and is currently engaged in researching African witchcraft accusations and their social impact at the Bayreuth International School of African Studies, Germany. In his fight against irrationality and deadly superstition, Igwe has famously locked horns with Helen Ukpabio, the founder and head of Evangelical franchise Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries in Nigeria.

'Yemi Ademowo Johnson

Johnson has a long track record in humanist activism and philosophy. He is currently project director at the Nigerian Young Humanistas Network and he is a junior research Fellow at IFRA, Institute of African Studies, and teacher at Afe Babalola University. He has campaigned against childwitch hunting, provided critical thinking training, as well as peace education and Social tolerance advocacy (sponsored by IHEU). He has also been active as secretary general of IHEYO and was the co-founder of the IHEYO African Working Group. <http://younghumanistasnetwork.net>, www.hawkafrica.blogspot.com.

Prof. Raymond Nonnatus Osei

Professor Nonnatus Osei is an Associate Professor in Classics and Philosophy, University of Cape Coast. He is a senior lecturer at the University and was acting dean for the faculty of Arts from October 2011 to July 2012. He has (co-)authored many publications on philosophical topics and spoken at many different conferences. His dissertation was about: "The Role of Sense-Experience in Plato's Theory of Recollection". And his most recent publication focused on "Rorty's point of departure from mainstream pragmatic approach to epistemology". He also active in the educational field. Among others, he introduced the four-year Bachelor of Arts and the two-year Master of Philosophy degree programmes in Philosophy.

Nana Oye Lithur

Oye Lithure is Chief Executive Director of the Human Rights Advocacy Centre. The primary aim of HRAC is to assist individuals, communities and others whose fundamental human rights have been infringed upon to seek redress within the remit of domestic and international legal framework. The Office runs a human rights and referral centre (Human Rights Clinic) for individuals.

Gyekye Tanoh

Tanoh is policy analyst at the Third World Network. Among others, he has monitored the development of the European Union's (EU) trade negotiations with Ghana, in which the EU want to sign an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA's). Tanoh has analysed the negative impacts and dangers of this agreement for African development.

Alphonso K. Weah

Weah is executive director of the Youth for Community Academic and Development Services (YOCADS), a non-for-profit Liberian Civil Society youth organization. YOCADS is presently carrying out humanist education to communities and students in the Montserrado County. Additionally, it is implementing the

Kick for Your Future, a multi-dimensional youth project which five major components which include: soccer, cultural activities, waste collection, skills training and information technology (IT) training with youth from the ages of 12-18 and 18-30 years. Weah is also Secretary General of IHEYO's African Working Group.

Titus Sei Massally

Massally is national coordinator at the Humanist Watch Salone (HUWASAL), an indigenous human rights and development organization. The organization started as a community based organization in 2003 as an action front of the Humanist Movement International. The organization's overall mission is to strive towards the enhancement of sustainable peace and development in Sierra Leone through active participation and inclusion of marginalized populace such as women, children, youths, physically challenged and people living with HIV/AIDS in the society. Currently, the organization is working towards increasing young people voices in local governance through awareness raising activities.

Daniel Addae and Charles A. Anaman are active members of the Humanist Association of Ghana.

Other facilitators and Speakers on the Saturday 25 November

Kajsa H. Adu, a lecturer, writer and TV personality, kajsaha.com

Gea Meijers is one of IHEYO co-founders and has been active for IHEYO between 2002-2012 in the board. She is currently editing the IHEYO book 'Critical Thinking in Humanist education: an overview of best practices worldwide'. Besides her international and national humanist spirit of activism, she is also very concerned about the lack of full rights for women. She is active for WIDE+: wideplusnetwork.wordpress.com.



ANNEX: Media report about the Conference

<http://kajsaha.com/2012/11/my-road-to-the-humanist-conference-in-accra-ghana/>

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/15/religion-africa-humanists-idUSL5E8MEDY220121115>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/11/26/atheists-in-the-worlds-most-religious-country-just-hosted-an-international-humanism-conference/>

<http://soundcloud.com/bbc-world-service/nigerian-atheist-leo-igwe>

<http://www.thinkatheist.com/group/atheist-alliance-international-official/forum/topics/great-to-see-a-humanist-conference-in-ghana>

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2012/1125/In-world-s-most-religious-country-humanists-rally-for-secular-space>

The announcement:

<http://www.modernghana.com/news/428152/1/ghana-hosts-international-humanist-conference.html>

<http://news.gkrom.com/articles/freethought-conference-humanists-ghana>

<http://edition.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201211/96714.php>

<http://www.africangrio.com/news/193698-ghana-to-host-international-humanist-conference.html?print>

<http://africatopics.com/ghanaweb/ghana-hosts-international-humanist-conference.html>