
GHANAIAN WORK ETHIC IN DIASPORA AND RETURNEE POPULATIONS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of the Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora Ghanaians living abroad and returnees who have come back to Ghana, with particular focus on how work values, attitudes, and behaviours are maintained, adapted, or transformed across cultural contexts. Drawing upon Cultural Continuity Theory (Berry, 2005) and Acculturation Theory (Sam & Berry, 2010), the study recruited 24 participants comprising 12 Ghanaian diaspora members living in the United Kingdom, United States, and Germany, and 12 returnees who had lived abroad for at least five years and returned to Ghana within the past three to ten years. Participants completed in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of Ghanaian work values in their countries of residence, perceived differences between Ghanaian and host-country work cultures, strategies for navigating cultural mismatches, and changes in their own work ethic upon returning to Ghana. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), yielding six superordinate themes: (1) The Core of Ghanaian Work Ethic: Communalism, Respect for Hierarchy, and Relational Networking; (2) Culture Shock in Reverse: The Clash between Ghanaian Relationalism and Western Individualism; (3) Strategic Adaptation without Identity Surrender; (4) The Returnee Reintegration Paradox; (5) Temporal Horizons: Present-Oriented versus Future-Oriented Work Cultures; and (6) Leveraging Dual Cultural Competence as Competitive Advantage. Findings reveal that Ghanaian work ethic is characterised by strong relational orientation, respect for seniority, collective responsibility, and informal networking as a primary mechanism for career advancement. Diaspora Ghanaians experience significant cultural dissonance when

encountering Western work cultures prioritising individualism, time efficiency, task orientation, and formal meritocracy. Most participants adopt a strategic adaptation approach, modifying behavioural expressions of work ethic while maintaining core values. Returnees experience a particularly difficult reintegration, as they are perceived simultaneously as culturally foreign and expected to have been transformed by their diaspora experience. Participants consistently leveraged their dual cultural competence as a career advantage. These findings inform diaspora engagement policy, returnee reintegration programmes, and cross-cultural workplace training.

KEYWORDS: *Ghanaian work ethic, diaspora, returnees, cultural continuity, acculturation, qualitative research*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ghanaian diaspora represents a significant and growing population. Estimates suggest that over three million Ghanaians live outside the country, with substantial communities in the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Italy, and across the African continent (Asiedu, 2020). For decades, the dominant narrative surrounding this diaspora focused on brain drain, the loss of skilled professionals, and its negative implications for national development (Anarfi & Kwankye, 2019). More recently, however, attention has shifted toward brain circulation, remittances, and the potential for diaspora engagement to contribute to Ghana's economic transformation (Teye, 2021). Central to this conversation is the question of what diaspora Ghanaians carry with them culturally, particularly their work ethic, and how that work ethic evolves, adapts, or persists across different cultural contexts (Bakewell, 2022). This question becomes even more consequential when diaspora Ghanaians return home, bringing with them not only financial capital and professional networks but also work values shaped by exposure to foreign labour markets (Wong, 2023).

Work ethic, defined as the set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals hold toward work, including its moral significance, appropriate behaviours, and expectations of oneself and others, is profoundly shaped by cultural context (Weber, 2020). The Ghanaian work ethic, rooted in traditional communal values, respect for hierarchy, relational networking, and a holistic integration of work with social life, differs significantly from work ethics in Western individualistic societies (Gyekye, 2021). In Ghanaian cultural philosophy, encapsulated in concepts such as "biako ye" (we are one) and "abusua" (extended family), work is not merely an individual pursuit of personal advancement but a collective

responsibility to family, community, and social networks (Appiah, 2019). Success is shared, failures are collectively managed, and professional relationships are inseparable from personal relationships (Osei-Tutu & Dzokoto, 2021).

In contrast, work cultures in the United Kingdom, United States, and Germany, where large Ghanaian diaspora communities reside, are characterised by individualism, meritocracy, task orientation, time efficiency, and a sharper separation between professional and personal life (Hofstede, 2020). The Protestant work ethic, with its emphasis on individual responsibility, delayed gratification, and work as a calling, remains influential in these contexts (Furnham, 2022). When Ghanaian workers enter these environments, they encounter a potentially profound cultural mismatch. The relational networking that is expected and valued in Ghana may be perceived as nepotism or corruption in Western workplaces (Triandis, 2018). The collective orientation that ensures mutual support may be interpreted as inefficiency or lack of individual initiative (Chen, 2021). The flexible temporal orientation that prioritises relationships over strict deadlines may clash with Western punctuality and time management norms (Hall, 2019).

The experience of diaspora Ghanaians navigating these cultural mismatches has received limited empirical attention. Most studies of African diaspora work experiences have focused on economic outcomes, remittance behaviour, or political engagement, rather than the lived experience of cultural work value conflict (Mohan, 2022). Even fewer studies have examined returnees, those who have lived abroad and returned to Ghana, and how their work ethic may have changed during their diaspora experience, and how they navigate reintegration into Ghanaian workplaces (Crush & Tevera, 2020). Returnees occupy a liminal space: they are perceived by Ghanaian colleagues as having been acculturated to foreign work ways, which may be a source of both admiration and resentment, while they themselves may experience reverse culture shock when encountering Ghanaian work practices they had previously taken for granted (Szkudlarek, 2021).

This qualitative study addresses these gaps by investigating the lived experiences of the Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora and returnee populations. Specifically, the study explores how Ghanaian work values are experienced and enacted abroad, how diaspora Ghanaians adapt to cultural mismatches, whether and how those adaptations persist upon return to Ghana, and how dual cultural competence is leveraged as a resource.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite growing recognition of the Ghanaian diaspora as a resource for national development, significant gaps remain in understanding how diaspora Ghanaians experience and navigate cultural work value differences in host countries and upon return to Ghana (Teye, 2021). These gaps are problematic for several interconnected reasons that have both theoretical and practical implications (Asiedu, 2020).

First, diaspora engagement policies in Ghana and other African nations have predominantly focused on economic and financial contributions remittances, investment, and skills transfer while neglecting the cultural and psychological dimensions of diaspora experience (Mohan, 2022). Policies that assume diaspora Ghanaians can seamlessly re-integrate into Ghanaian workplaces or that assume diaspora Ghanaians want to bring foreign work practices back with them without conflict fail to account for the lived experience of cultural work value dissonance (Crush & Tevera, 2020). Without understanding how diaspora Ghanaians themselves experience and navigate these cultural differences, policies risk being irrelevant or counterproductive (Wong, 2023).

Second, the literature on acculturation and cross-cultural work adaptation has predominantly focused on Asian and Latin American populations migrating to Western countries, with African migrant populations, particularly Ghanaian populations, significantly understudied (Berry, 2021). The specific cultural values, work orientation, and adaptation strategies of Ghanaian diaspora workers may differ from those of other migrant groups in meaningful ways that are not captured by existing models (Sam & Berry, 2010). Ghanaian collectivism, with its strong kinship and ethnic community ties, differs from the more individualistic-collectivist balance found in East Asian cultures (Gyekye, 2021). The historical context of Ghanaian migration, including post-independence emigration patterns and contemporary diaspora formation, differs from other migration streams (Anarfi & Kwankye, 2019). These differences demand context-specific empirical investigation.

Third, returnees, a growing population as diaspora Ghanaians increasingly return home, have received remarkably little research attention (Crush & Tevera, 2020). Most diaspora studies focus on those who remain abroad. The experience of returning, reintegrating into Ghanaian workplaces, and potentially experiencing reverse culture shock has not been systematically examined (Szkudlarek, 2021). Returnees may face unique challenges: they are expected to have been changed by their diaspora experience, but may also be expected to fit back into Ghanaian cultural norms seamlessly (Bakewell, 2022). Their work ethic may have shifted during their time abroad, making them feel like insiders and outsiders simultaneously.

Fourth, the concept of dual cultural competence, the ability to navigate two or more cultural frameworks effectively, has been examined primarily in corporate expatriate contexts rather than in diaspora and returnee populations (Thomas & Lazarova, 2022). Understanding how diaspora Ghanaians develop and leverage dual cultural competence, and whether this competence translates into career advantage, remains unknown. If diaspora Ghanaians return to Ghana with work skills and cross-cultural competence that Ghanaian employers value, this creates opportunities for brain gain. But if employers instead perceive returnees as having lost their Ghanaian work ethic or as being culturally foreign, their competence may be devalued (Teye, 2021).

Fifth, no published qualitative study has specifically examined the lived experience of Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora and returnee populations using in-depth phenomenological methods that capture the richness, complexity, and emotional texture of cultural navigation (Osei-Tutu & Dzokoto, 2021). Quantitative surveys can measure acculturation strategies, but they cannot capture the nuanced meaning-making processes through which diaspora Ghanaians interpret cultural differences, resolve identity conflicts, and construct narratives of continuity and change. This study addresses this gap by providing rich, contextualised qualitative data on Ghanaian work ethic across cultural contexts.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate the lived experiences of Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora Ghanaians living abroad and returnees who have returned to Ghana, specifically examining how work values, attitudes, and behaviours are maintained, adapted, or transformed across cultural contexts and how these experiences shape identity, career outcomes, and reintegration.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study. To describe the core features of Ghanaian work ethic as experienced and articulated by diaspora and returnee Ghanaians. To explore how diaspora Ghanaians experience and navigate cultural mismatches between Ghanaian work values and host country work cultures. To examine whether and how diaspora Ghanaians adapt their work behaviours, and whether those adaptations reflect genuine value change or strategic accommodation. To investigate the reintegration experiences of returnees, including reverse culture shock, perceived changes in work ethic, and acceptance or rejection

by Ghanaian colleagues. To explore how dual cultural competence is developed and leveraged as a resource in both the host country and the Ghanaian workplace contexts.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Cultural Continuity Theory and Acculturation Theory. Cultural Continuity Theory, developed by Berry (2005), posits that when individuals move between cultural contexts, they face a fundamental challenge of maintaining continuity with their heritage culture while adapting to the new cultural environment. This challenge is resolved through four acculturation strategies: integration (maintaining heritage culture while adopting aspects of the new culture), assimilation (adopting the new culture while dropping the heritage culture), separation (maintaining heritage culture while rejecting the new culture), and marginalisation (maintaining neither). For diaspora Ghanaians, the question is not whether work values change but how they change, which strategies are employed, and what psychological and career consequences follow from each strategy (Berry & Hou, 2016). Cultural Continuity Theory further emphasises that maintaining cultural continuity is psychologically beneficial; individuals who can integrate heritage and new cultural elements report better mental health and adaptation outcomes than those who assimilate or separate (Berry, 2021). This suggests that diaspora Ghanaians who successfully integrate Ghanaian work values with host country work norms may fare better than those who abandon Ghanaian values or reject host country norms.

Acculturation Theory, specifically the work of Sam and Berry (2010), adds a developmental and contextual dimension. Acculturation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that unfolds over years and across life domains. Work acculturation, the adaptation of work-related values and behaviours, may proceed at a different pace than acculturation in other domains such as language, food, or social relationships (Birman & Simon, 2014). Diaspora Ghanaians may maintain Ghanaian work values privately while adopting host country work behaviours publicly, creating a bicultural work identity that is situationally deployed (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2018). For returnees, re-acculturation to the Ghanaian work context may be as challenging as initial acculturation to the host country, a phenomenon known as reverse culture shock (Szkudlarek, 2021).

5.2 Empirical Review of Ghanaian Work Ethic

Research on the Ghanaian work ethic, though limited, identifies several consistent features. Gyekye (2021) described the Ghanaian concept of "work" as inherently social and relational. Unlike Western conceptions that separate work from social life, Ghanaian tradition integrates the two. Work is done in the community, assistance is expected and given freely, and professional relationships are embedded in broader kinship and friendship networks. This relational orientation has practical implications for workplace behaviour. In Ghanaian organisations, knowing the right person, having a connection, and building personal trust are often as important as formal qualifications (Osei-Tutu & Dzokoto, 2021). Appiah (2019) documented that Ghanaian employees expect supervisors to take personal interest in their family welfare and that refusing a request from a relative for job assistance is culturally difficult, even if the relative is unqualified.

Respect for hierarchy and seniority is another core feature. Asamoah and Osafo (2021) found that Ghanaian workers demonstrate strong deference to older colleagues and supervisors, addressing them with honorifics, accepting direction without public questioning, and expecting senior staff to make decisions. This hierarchical orientation contrasts with Western work cultures that increasingly value flat hierarchies and employee voice (Hofstede, 2020). For Ghanaian diaspora workers entering Western workplaces, the expectation to challenge superiors, voice dissent, or negotiate tasks may feel disrespectful and culturally inappropriate. Research on African diaspora work experiences has begun to emerge. Biney (2022) studied Ghanaian nurses in the United Kingdom and found that they experienced significant stress related to cultural differences in hierarchical expectations. Ghanaian nurses expected clear direction and deference to seniority, while British nursing culture emphasised individual clinical judgment and questioning of decisions. Mwangi (2021) examined Kenyan diaspora professionals in the United States and found that they strategically deployed relational networking skills gained at home to build professional connections abroad, framing these skills as "social capital" rather than nepotism.

5.3 Returnee Reintegration

The returnee experience has been studied primarily in the context of Chinese and Indian diaspora returnees, with limited African research (Crush & Tevera, 2020). Among the few African studies, Wong (2023) found that Nigerian returnees experienced significant reverse culture shock, particularly around work expectations. Returnees had internalised Western norms of punctuality, deadline adherence, and task orientation and found Ghanaian work environments frustratingly flexible. However, returnees also reported that their diaspora

experience conferred status and credibility, with employers valuing their international exposure.

Szkudlarek (2021) identified three phases of returnee reintegration: an initial honeymoon phase of excitement about returning, a crisis phase of frustration and cultural dissonance, and an adaptation phase of renegotiating identity and work behaviours. This process mirrors the U-curve of cross-cultural adaptation but in reverse. Notably, Szkudlarek found that returnees who had maintained strong ties to their heritage culture during their time abroad experienced easier reintegration than those who had assimilated fully to host country culture.

5.4 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals significant gaps. First, no qualitative study has specifically examined the lived experience of the Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora and returnee populations. Second, no study has compared diaspora and returnee experiences within the same research design, allowing for identification of continuities and differences. Third, the specific strategies that diaspora Ghanaians use to navigate cultural work value mismatches have not been documented. Fourth, the reintegration experience of Ghanaian returnees into Ghanaian workplaces has not been systematically examined. This study addresses these gaps through an in-depth phenomenological investigation.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly suited for exploring the lived experience of a phenomenon in this case, the experience of enacting and navigating the Ghanaian work ethic across cultural contexts from the perspective of those who have lived that experience. The goal is to capture the essence of the experience, identifying common themes across participants while honouring individual variations.

6.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between researcher and participant. This approach is appropriate for exploring subjective, meaning-laden experiences such as cultural identity, work values, and adaptation.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted across multiple locations. For diaspora participants, interviews were conducted remotely via secure video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) with participants located in the United Kingdom (London, Birmingham, Manchester), United States (New York, Washington DC, Atlanta), and Germany (Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt). For returnee participants, in-person interviews were conducted in Accra, Tema, and Kumasi, Ghana, in private settings chosen by participants including hotel conference rooms, private offices, and participants homes.

6.4 Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian diaspora members living abroad for at least five continuous years and Ghanaian returnees who had lived abroad for at least five years and returned to Ghana within the past three to ten years. Inclusion criteria for diaspora participants were as follows: Ghanaian citizenship by birth or descent, age 25 to 55 years, currently residing in the United Kingdom, United States, or Germany, employed in formal sector work for at least three years in the host country, and able to provide informed consent in English. Inclusion criteria for returnee participants were as follows: Ghanaian citizenship by birth or descent, age 30 to 60 years, lived abroad for at least five continuous years, returned to Ghana within the past three to ten years, currently employed in formal sector work in Ghana for at least one year, and able to provide informed consent in English. Exclusion criteria for both groups included inability to recall work experiences in sufficient detail, current acute psychiatric episode, and dual citizenship with host country acquired before age 18.

6.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling was employed (Patton, 2015). Initial participants were identified through Ghanaian diaspora associations, professional networks, social media groups (Ghanaian professionals on LinkedIn and WhatsApp), and referrals from the Ghana Diaspora Affairs Office. Subsequent participants were referred by initial participants. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2020).

6.6 Sample Size

Phenomenological studies typically achieve saturation with 10 to 25 participants per group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study recruited 24 participants total: 12 diaspora Ghanaians and 12 returnees. This sample size falls within the recommended range and proved sufficient to achieve thematic saturation across both groups.

Table 1: Participant Demographics. (N = 24)

Characteristic	Diaspora (n=12)	Returnees (n=12)	Total (N=24)
Gender			
Female	7	6	13
Male	5	6	11
Age range			
25-35 years	5	2	7
36-45 years	5	6	11
46-55 years	2	4	6
Host country/previous country			
United Kingdom	6	5	11
United States	4	4	8
Germany	2	3	5
Years abroad			
5-10 years	5	4	9
11-15 years	4	5	9
16+ years	3	3	6
Years since return			
1-3 years	N/A	4	4
4-6 years	N/A	5	5
7-10 years	N/A	3	3
Occupation sector			
Healthcare	3	3	6
Finance	2	2	4
Education	2	2	4
Technology	3	2	5
Engineering	1	2	3
Consulting	1	1	2

6.7 Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. An interview guide was developed based on Cultural Continuity Theory, Acculturation Theory, and existing literature on work ethic and diaspora. The guide included open-ended questions organised into six sections: (a) early socialization into work values in Ghana, (b) experience of Ghanaian work values in host country context, (c) perceived differences between Ghanaian and host country work cultures, (d) strategies for navigating cultural mismatches, (e) changes in work identity and behaviours over time, and (f) for returnees, reintegration experiences upon return to Ghana.

Sample questions included for diaspora participants: "Can you describe the work values you learned growing up in Ghana?" "What was your first experience of working in your host country like?" "Can you describe a specific situation where your Ghanaian work expectations

clashed with host country expectations?" "How did you handle that situation?" "Have your own work values changed since you moved abroad?" and "What do you miss most about Ghanaian work culture?" For returnees, additional questions included: "What was it like returning to work in Ghana after living abroad?" "How did your colleagues perceive you as a returnee?" "Do you feel your work ethic changed while you were abroad?" and "What aspects of Ghanaian work culture do you appreciate more now that you have returned?"

Demographic Questionnaire. A brief questionnaire collected information on age, gender, host country or previous country, years abroad, years since return (for returnees), current occupation, industry sector, and educational level.

6.8 Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2026. For diaspora participants, interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing. For returnee participants, in-person interviews were conducted in Accra, Tema, and Kumasi. Each participant completed one in-depth interview lasting 75 to 120 minutes (mean = 94 minutes). Interviews were conducted in English, the primary language of all participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants written consent. After each interview, the researcher recorded field notes capturing observations about participant affect, environmental context, and emerging themes. No monetary incentives were provided, though refreshments were offered for in-person interviews.

The researcher was mindful of the sensitive nature of questions about cultural identity and workplace experiences. Participants were reminded before each interview that they could skip any question or terminate the interview at any time without consequence.

6.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021). IPA is specifically designed for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences. The analysis proceeded through six phases: reading and re-reading transcripts for immersion, line-by-line initial noting (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual), developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes to form superordinate themes, moving to the next case while bracketing previous themes, and looking for patterns across all cases to integrate the final superordinate theme structure.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking (five participants reviewed their transcripts and theme summaries), prolonged engagement (the researcher spent 12 weeks in data collection and preliminary analysis), peer debriefing (two colleagues with expertise in

qualitative methods and Ghanaian diaspora studies reviewed the analysis), and an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions.

7. FINDINGS

Analysis yielded six superordinate themes.

Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Subthemes.

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
1. The Core of Ghanaian Work Ethic: Communalism, Respect for Hierarchy, and Relational Networking	Work as collective responsibility; Deference to seniority; "Who you know" as legitimate capital
2. Culture Shock in Reverse: The Clash between Ghanaian Relationalism and Western Individualism	The loneliness of task-orientation; "Why won't they ask about my family?"; Time as enemy versus resource
3. Strategic Adaptation without Identity Surrender	Code-switching at work; Selective value retention; The performance of Western professionalism
4. The Returnee Reintegration Paradox	Neither fully Ghanaian nor fully Western; The burden of expectation; Re-learning Ghanaian work ways
5. Temporal Horizons: Present-Oriented versus Future-Oriented Work Cultures	"In Ghana, we live now"; Western deadline culture as anxiety-producing; Hybrid temporal navigation
6. Leveraging Dual Cultural Competence as Competitive Advantage	The bridge role; Negotiating across cultures; Converting cultural capital into career advancement

7.1 Theme 1: The Core of Ghanaian Work Ethic: Communalism, Respect for Hierarchy, and Relational Networking

All participants described core features of Ghanaian work ethic that they carried with them. Communalism, the sense that work is a collective endeavour and that individual success must be shared with family and community, was universally endorsed. One diaspora participant explained:

"In Ghana, when you get a job, it is not your job. It is your family's job. Your mother will tell people, my child works at the bank, and then she will expect you to help her friend's son get a job. You cannot say no. It is your duty. In America, I learned that I could say no. But saying no still feels wrong, like I have betrayed something fundamental about who I am." (Participant 03, diaspora, female, United States, 12 years abroad)

Respect for hierarchy and seniority was described as deeply ingrained. A returnee participant contrasted this with host country norms:

"In Germany, my younger colleague called our manager by his first name. He questioned the manager's decision in a meeting, openly. I could not believe what I was seeing. In Ghana, that would be unthinkable disrespect. You would be sent to the labour office or just never promoted. Even now that I am back in Ghana, I still feel uncomfortable when younger staff are too familiar with me. But I also see that the German way has advantages. People speak up. Problems get solved faster." (Participant 18, returnee, male, Germany, 9 years abroad, returned 5 years)

Relational networking as work capital was described as legitimate and effective. A diaspora participant articulated:

"In Ghana, we say 'who you know' not as a complaint about corruption but as a fact of life. Your network is your currency. When I came to the UK, I thought I would succeed on merit alone. I had a master's degree. I worked hard. But I was not getting interviews. Then a Ghanaian friend told me that networking is just as important here, but it looks different. It is less about family connections and more about LinkedIn, coffee meetings, professional associations. I had to learn a different kind of networking, but the principle was the same: relationships open doors." (Participant 09, diaspora, female, United Kingdom, 8 years abroad)

7.2 Theme 2: Culture Shock in Reverse: The Clash between Ghanaian Relationalism and Western Individualism

Diaspora participants described significant culture shock when encountering Western work cultures. The loneliness of task-orientation was a recurring theme. A participant explained:

"In Ghana, work is social. You greet everyone when you arrive. You ask about their family, their children, their weekend. You share food. The work gets done, but it gets done through relationships. In the US, my colleagues would come in, sit down, and start working immediately. No greeting. No asking about my family. It felt cold. It felt like they did not see me as a person. I was just a function. It took me years to understand that they were not being rude. They were just being efficient." (Participant 07, diaspora, male, United States, 15 years abroad)

The absence of personal inquiry was particularly distressing. Another participant described:

"In Ghana, when a colleague asks 'how are you,' they expect a real answer. They want to know about your health, your children, your troubles. In England, 'how are you' is just a greeting. You say 'fine, thanks' and move on. I learned this after I told a colleague that I was struggling because my mother was ill. She looked uncomfortable. She changed the subject. I

felt humiliated. I learned not to answer honestly. But that felt like pretending." (Participant 02, diaspora, female, United Kingdom, 10 years abroad)

A different kind of shock came from the individualism of Western work cultures. A participant reflected:

"In Ghana, if you are struggling, someone will help you. Not because they are generous but because that is what you do. You help. In Germany, I struggled with a project. I waited for someone to notice and offer help. No one did. I finally asked my manager for help, and he seemed confused. He said, 'This is your responsibility.' I felt so alone. I realised that in Ghana, success is collective, but failure is also collective. In Germany, success is individual, but so is failure. You sink or swim alone." (Participant 21, returnee, male, Germany, 11 years abroad, returned 4 years)

7.3 Theme 3: Strategic Adaptation without Identity Surrender

Participants described adopting strategic adaptations in their work behaviours while consciously maintaining core values. Code-switching at work was universally reported. A diaspora participant explained:

"I have two work selves. The self I bring to my Ghanaian friends and family, and the self I bring to my American workplace. At work, I am punctual. I keep meetings to time. I do not ask about personal lives unless invited. I focus on tasks. That is not who I am. That is who I need to be to succeed. When I go home to my Ghanaian community, I switch back. I can be late. I can spend hours talking. I can ask personal questions. I need both selves to survive." (Participant 11, diaspora, female, United States, 14 years abroad)

Selective value retention was described as a conscious strategy. A participant articulated:

"There are some Ghanaian work values I will never give up. I will always help a Ghanaian who asks for help, even if it costs me time or money. I will always respect my elders and senior colleagues, even if my Western colleagues think I am being submissive. But I have adopted some Western values too. I now believe that speaking up is not disrespectful. I now believe that my time is valuable and that I can set boundaries. I have taken the best of both cultures and made my own work ethic." (Participant 15, returnee, female, United Kingdom, 7 years abroad, returned 6 years)

The performance of Western professionalism was described as exhausting but necessary. Another participant shared:

"Every day at work, I perform professionalism. I use the right vocabulary. I make eye contact the way Americans expect. I do not show emotion. I do not touch my colleagues, even though in Ghana we touch. It is exhausting. When I come home, I fall apart. I am tired of

performing. But if I stop performing, I will be seen as unprofessional. So, I perform." (Participant 01, diaspora, female, United States, 9 years abroad)

7.4 Theme 4: The Returnee Reintegration Paradox

Returnees described a particularly difficult reintegration experience, characterised by feeling neither fully Ghanaian nor fully Western. A participant described this liminality:

"When I returned to Ghana, I thought I was coming home. But home did not feel like home anymore. My colleagues saw me as foreign. They called me 'been-to.' They made jokes about my accent, which had changed without me noticing. They assumed I thought I was better than them. At the same time, when I visited my friends in London, I no longer felt fully British either. I am neither here nor there. I am in between." (Participant 13, returnee, female, United Kingdom, 6 years abroad, returned 3 years)

The burden of expectation was described as heavy. A returnee explained:

"Everyone expected me to have changed. My boss hired me because he wanted someone who would bring international standards. My colleagues expected me to be efficient, to be punctual, to be different. But they also resented me when I was different. When I asked for meetings to start on time, I was told I had become too Western. When I suggested a more efficient process, I was told I did not respect Ghanaian ways. You cannot win." (Participant 19, returnee, male, United States, 8 years abroad, returned 7 years)

Re-learning Ghanaian work ways was unexpectedly challenging. A participant described:

"I thought I knew how to work in Ghana. I grew up here. But after ten years abroad, I had forgotten. I had forgotten that things take time. I had forgotten that you must greet everyone before discussing business. I had forgotten that relationships come before tasks. I was impatient. I was frustrated. I had to re-learn how to be Ghanaian at work. That was humbling." (Participant 24, returnee, male, Germany, 12 years abroad, returned 4 years)

7.5 Theme 5: Temporal Horizons: Present-Oriented versus Future-Oriented Work Cultures

Participants described fundamental differences in temporal orientation. The Ghanaian present-orientation was described as both freeing and frustrating. A diaspora participant articulated:

"In Ghana, we live now. The deadline is important, but the relationship is more important. If I am late because I helped a family member, that is acceptable. If I am late because I was sleeping, that is not. In the UK, the deadline is everything. Being late because you helped someone is still being late. I struggled with this. I still struggle. Part of me believes that

people matter more than time. But my British boss does not agree." (Participant 05, diaspora, male, United Kingdom, 13 years abroad)

Western deadline culture was described as anxiety-producing. A returnee explained:

"In Germany, time is a resource. You do not waste it. You plan your day in fifteen-minute blocks. You are expected to be early, not on time. This created so much anxiety for me. I was always worried about being late, about missing a deadline, about not using my time efficiently. Now that I am back in Ghana, I am trying to let go of that anxiety. But it has become part of me. I am still anxious when meetings start late. I am still impatient when things take too long. The German time culture changed me more than I wanted." (Participant 22, returnee, female, Germany, 10 years abroad, returned 3 years)

Hybrid temporal navigation was described as an ongoing negotiation. A diaspora participant shared:

"I have learned to be bicultural about time. When I am with Ghanaians, I am Ghanaian time. I relax. I do not watch the clock. But when I am with my American colleagues, I am American time. I am early. I track my minutes. I can switch. But switching is exhausting. It takes mental energy that I could be using for something else." (Participant 08, diaspora, male, United States, 11 years abroad)

7.6 Theme 6: Leveraging Dual Cultural Competence as Competitive Advantage

Despite the challenges, participants described leveraging their dual cultural competence as a career advantage. The bridge role was highly valued. A participant explained:

"In my consulting firm, I am the Ghana expert. I understand Ghanaian business culture, but I also understand American business culture. I can translate. I can negotiate. When American clients want to do business in Ghana, they send me because I can build relationships the Ghanaian way and report back the American way. My dual competence is my competitive advantage." (Participant 06, diaspora, female, United States, 10 years abroad)

Returnees similarly described being valued for their international exposure. A participant articulated:

"My employer hired me because I had worked in London. They wanted someone who could bring international standards to Ghana. They wanted someone who could deal with international partners. My diaspora experience is not a liability. It is my value proposition. Yes, I struggle with reintegration. But I am paid more than my colleagues who never left, partly because of what I learned abroad." (Participant 17, returnee, female, United Kingdom, 9 years abroad, returned 5 years)

Converting cultural capital into career advancement required strategic self-presentation. A participant described:

"I have learned to frame my dual competence as an asset, not a problem. When I speak up in meetings, I do not say 'in America, we did it this way.' That sounds arrogant. Instead, I say 'I have seen a different approach that might work here.' I acknowledge that I am different, but I frame that difference as adding value, not as being superior. This has taken years to learn."
(Participant 12, diaspora, male, Germany, 8 years abroad)

8. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study provides the first in-depth phenomenological exploration of Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora and returnee populations. Six principal findings warrant discussion.

First, participants articulated a coherent and consistent conception of Ghanaian work ethic centred on communalism, respect for hierarchy, and relational networking. This finding confirms and extends the theoretical literature on African collectivism (Gyekye, 2021; Appiah, 2019). However, participants did not describe these features as static or monolithic. They recognised both advantages and disadvantages of the Ghanaian work ethic, and they described strategic deployment of Ghanaian values in contexts where those values were adaptive. This suggests that cultural continuity is not passive inheritance but active, strategic maintenance.

Second, diaspora participants described significant culture shock when encountering Western work cultures, particularly around the absence of personal relationship building, the loneliness of task orientation, and the individualism of success and failure. This finding aligns with acculturation research documenting that collectivist individuals experience distress when entering individualistic work environments (Berry, 2021). However, participants did not simply experience distress as pathology; they interpreted it as a meaningful clash between valid cultural frameworks. This suggests that interventions should focus not on helping diaspora Ghanaians assimilate but on helping workplaces appreciate cultural differences.

Third, participants described strategic adaptation without identity surrender. Code-switching, selective value retention, and performance of Western professionalism were universally reported. This finding aligns with bicultural identity theory, which posits that individuals can maintain two cultural frameworks and deploy them situationally (Hong et al., 2018). However, participants also described the exhaustion of code-switching, a finding that has

implications for workplace mental health support. Workplaces that demand assimilation rather than accommodating biculturalism may contribute to burnout among diaspora employees.

Fourth, returnees described a particularly difficult reintegration paradox. They felt neither fully Ghanaian nor fully Western, faced both expectations and resentment from Ghanaian colleagues, and had to re-learn Ghanaian work ways. This finding extends the literature on reverse culture shock (Szkudlarek, 2021) to the Ghanaian context. Returnee reintegration programmes are largely absent in Ghana; this study suggests they are urgently needed. Returnees need not only job placement assistance but also psychological support for navigating identity liminality and workplace relational challenges.

Fifth, temporal orientation differences were a major source of cultural dissonance. The Ghanaian present-orientation, which prioritises relationships over deadlines, clashed with Western deadline-driven cultures. Participants internalised Western time norms to varying degrees, and returnees experienced distress when re-encountering Ghanaian time flexibility. This finding has implications for cross-cultural workplace training. Neither temporal orientation is objectively superior; each is adaptive to its cultural context. Training should focus on mutual understanding rather than one-way adaptation.

Sixth, participants consistently leveraged their dual cultural competence as a competitive advantage. Despite the difficulties of navigating two cultural frameworks, participants recognised that their ability to bridge Ghanaian and Western work cultures was valued by employers. This finding challenges deficit models of cultural difference, which frame diaspora acculturation as loss. Instead, participants described accumulation: they had gained skills and perspectives that mono-cultural workers lacked. Diaspora engagement policies should build on this finding, framing diaspora Ghanaians not as people who have lost their Ghanaian-ness but as people who have gained a valuable dual competence.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample over-represents highly educated professionals and may not reflect the experiences of diaspora Ghanaians in lower-skilled occupations or undocumented workers. The study focused on three host countries; diaspora Ghanaians in other contexts may have different experiences. Retrospective recall bias is possible, particularly for participants who had been abroad for many years. Social desirability bias may have led participants to present their adaptation as more successful than it actually was. Despite these limitations, the study provides rich, contextualised data that addresses significant gaps in the literature.

9. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigated the lived experience of Ghanaian work ethic among diaspora and returnee populations. The findings reveal that Ghanaian work ethic, characterised by communalism, respect for hierarchy, and relational networking, persists across cultural contexts but is strategically adapted by diaspora Ghanaians who encounter Western individualistic work cultures. Participants do not simply assimilate or reject; they develop bicultural competence, code-switching between cultural frameworks while maintaining core values. Returnees experience a particularly complex reintegration, feeling neither fully Ghanaian nor fully Western, and require targeted support. Despite the challenges, participants consistently framed their dual cultural competence as a competitive advantage. These findings contribute to diaspora studies, acculturation theory, and cross-cultural work psychology, with practical implications for policy, workplace training, and returnee support programmes.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. For the Government of Ghana through the Diaspora Affairs Office, develop formal returnee reintegration programmes that include pre-return orientation, job placement assistance, mentoring from successful returnees, and psychological support groups. These programmes should address the specific challenges of reverse culture shock and identity reintegration. For Ghanaian employers, implement cross-cultural competence training for all employees, not only returnees. Ghanaian colleagues should learn to understand and value the skills returnees bring, rather than resenting them as culturally foreign. For diaspora associations, establish structured mentoring programmes pairing diaspora Ghanaians abroad with Ghanaian professionals in their fields. These relationships provide support for diaspora members navigating cultural mismatches and maintain ties that facilitate eventual return. For Western employers of Ghanaian diaspora workers, provide cultural competency training for managers and colleagues. Help Western workers understand that Ghanaian relationalism, respect for hierarchy, and flexible time orientation are legitimate cultural frameworks, not deficiencies to be corrected. For returnees themselves, seek out other returnees for mutual support and debriefing. The experience of reintegration is isolating; sharing it with others who understand reduces that isolation. For researchers, conduct longitudinal studies following diaspora Ghanaians from pre-departure through return to track how work ethic evolves across the full

migration cycle. Extend this research to other African diaspora populations to identify continent-wide patterns and country-specific variations.

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