My Sojourn in the Lands of My Ancestors

During the early sixties in New York City, I met, fell in love with, and married a South African Freedom Fighter who was petitioning the United Nations over the issue of apartheid. A year later, my 15-year-old son, Guy, and I followed my new husband to North Africa. I worked as a journalist in Cairo and managed a home that was a haven to Freedom Fighters still trying to rid their countries of colonialism. I was a moderately good mother to a growingly distant teenager and a faithful, if not loving wife. I watched my romance wane and my marriage end in the shadows of the Great Pyramid.

In 1962, my son and I left Egypt for Ghana, where he was to enter the university and I was to continue to a promised job in Liberia. An automobile accident left Guy with a broken neck and me with the responsibility of securing work and a place for him to recover. Within months I did have a job, a house, and a circle of black American friends who had come to Africa before me. With them I, too, became a hunter for that elusive and much longed-for place the heart could call home.

Despite our sincerity and eagerness, we were often rebuffed. The pain of rejection in Africa caused the spiritual that black slaves sang about their oppressors to come to my mind:

I’m going to tell God
How you treat me
When I get home.

On the delicious and rare occasions when we were accepted, our ecstasy was boundless, and we could have said with our foreparents in the words of another spiritual:

My soul got happy
When I came out of the wilderness
Came out of the wilderness
Came out of the wilderness.
My soul got happy
When I came out of the wilderness
And up to the welcome table.

I had a long weekend, money in my purse, and working command of Fanti. After a year in Accra, I needed country quiet, so I decided to travel into the bush. I bought roasted plantain stuffed with boiled peanuts, a quart of Club beer, and headed my little car west. The stretch was a highway from Accra to Cape Coast, filled with trucks and private cars passing from lane to lane with abandon. People hung out of windows of the crowded mammie lorries, and I could hear singing and shouting when the drivers careened those antique vehicles up and down hills as if each was a little train out to prove it could.

I stopped in Cape Coast only for gas. Although many black Americans had headed for the town as soon as they touched ground in Ghana, I successfully avoided it for a year. Cape Coast Castle and the nearby Elmina Castle had been holding forts for captured slaves. The captives had been imprisoned in dungeons beneath the massive
buildings, and friends of mine who had felt called upon to make the trek reported that they felt the thick stone walls still echoed with old cries.

The palm-tree-lined streets and fine white-stone buildings did not tempt me to remain any longer than necessary. Once out of the town and again onto the tarred roads, I knew I had not made a clean escape. Despite my hurry, history had invaded my little car. Pangs of self-pity and a sorrow for my unknown relatives suffused me. Tears made the highway waver and were salty on my tongue.

What did they think and feel, my grandfathers, caught on those green savannas, under the baobab trees? How long did their families search for them? Did the dungeon wall feel chilly and its slickness strange to my grandmothers, who were used to the rush of air against bamboo huts and the sound of birds rattling their green roofs?

I had to pull off the road, just passing near Cape Coast Castle had plunged me back into the eternal melodrama.

There would be no purging, I knew, unless I asked all the questions. Only then would the spirits understand that I was feeding them. It was a crumb, but it was all I had.

I allowed the shapes to come to my imagination; children passed, tied together by ropes and chains, tears abashed, stumbling in a dull exhaustion, then women, hair uncombed, bodies gritted with sand, and sagging in defeat. Men, muscles without memory, minds dimmed, plodding, leaving bloodied footprints in the dirt. The quiet was awful. None of them cried, or yelled, or bellowed. No moans came from them. They lived in a mute territory, dead to feeling and protest. These were the legions, sold by sisters, stolen by brothers, bought by strangers, enslaved by the greedy, and betrayed by history.

For a long time I sat as in an open-air auditorium watching a troupe of tragic players enter and exit the stage.

The visions faded as my tears ceased. Light returned and I started the car, turned off the main road, and headed for the interior. Using rutted track roads, and lanes a little larger than footpaths, I found the River Pra. The black water moving quietly, ringed with the tall trees, seemed enchanted. A fear of snakes kept me in the car, but I parked and watched the bright sun turn the water surface into a rippling cloth of lamé. I passed through villages that were little more than collections of thatch huts, with goats and small children wandering in the lanes. The noise of my car brought smiling adults out to wave at me.

In the late afternoon I reached the thriving town that was my destination. A student whom I had met at Legon (where the University of Ghana is located) had spoken to me often of the gold-mining area, of Dunkwa, his birthplace. His reports had so glowed with the town’s virtues, I had chosen that spot for my first journey.

My skin color, features, and the Ghana cloth I wore would make me look like any young Ghanaian woman. I could pass if I didn’t talk too much.

As usual, in the towns of Ghana, the streets were filled with vendors selling their wares of tinned pat milk, hot spicy Killi Willis (fried, ripe plantain chips), Pond’s cold cream, and antimosquito incense rings. Farmers were returning home, children returning from school. Young boys grinned at mincing girls, and always there were the market women, huge and impervious. I searched for a hotel sign in vain and as the day lengthened I started to worry. I didn’t have enough gas to get to Koforidua, a large town east of Dunkwa, where there would certainly be hotels, and I didn’t have the address of
my student’s family. I parked the car a little out of the town center and stopped a woman carrying a bucket of water on her head and a baby on her back.

“Good day.” I spoke in Fanti and she responded. I continued, “I beg you, I am a stranger looking for a place to stay.”

She repeated, “Stranger?” and laughed. “You are a stranger? No. No.”

To many Africans, only whites could be strangers. All Africans belonged somewhere, to some clan. All Akan-speaking people belong to one of eight blood lines (Abosua) and one of eight spirit lines (Ntoro).

I said, “I’m not from here.”

For a second, fear darted in her eyes. There was the possibility that I was a witch or some unhappy ghost from the country of the dead. I quickly said, “I am from Accra.” She gave me a good smile. “Oh, one Accra. Without a home.” She laughed. The Fanti word *Nkran*, for which the capital was named, means the large ant that builds 10-foot-high domes of red clay and lives with millions of other ants.

“Come with me.” She turned quickly, steadying the bucket on her head, and led me between two corrugated tin shacks. The baby bounced and slept on her back, secured by the large piece of cloth wrapped around her body. We passed a compound where women were pounding the dinner *foo foo* in wooden bowls.

The woman shouted, “Look what I have found. One Nkran which has no place to sleep tonight.” The women laughed and asked, “One Nkran? I don’t believe it.”

“Are you taking it to the old man?”

“Of course.”

“Sleep well, alone, Nkran, if you can.” My guide stopped before a small house. She put the water on the ground and told me to wait while she entered the house. She returned immediately, followed by a man who rubbed his eyes as if he had just been awakened.

He walked close and peered hard at my face. “This is the Nkran?” The woman was adjusting the bucket on her head.

“Yes, Uncle. I have brought her.” She looked at me, “Good-bye, Nkran. Sleep in peace. Uncle, I am going.” The man said, “Go and come, child,” and resumed studying my face. “You are not Ga.” He was reading my features.

A few small children had collected around his knees. They could barely hold back their giggles as he interrogated me.

“Aflao?”

I said, “No.”

“Brong-ahafo?”

I said, “No, I am…”

I meant to tell him the truth, but he said, “Don’t tell me. I will soon know.” He continued staring at me. “Speak more. I will know from your Fanti.”

“Well I have come from Accra and I need to rent a room for the night. I told that woman that I was a stranger…”

He laughed. “And you are. Now, I know. You are Bambara from Liberia. It is clear you are Bambara.” He laughed again. “I always can tell. I am not easily fooled.” He shook my hand. “Yes, we will find you a place for the night. Come.” He touched a boy at his right. “Find Patience Aduah and bring her to me.”
The children laughed, and all ran away as the man led me into the house. He pointed me to a seat in the neat little parlor and shouted, “Foriwa, we have a guest. Bring beer.” A small black woman with an imperial air entered the room. Her knowing face told me that she had witnessed the scene in her front yard.

She spoke to her husband. “And, Kobina, did you find who the stranger was?” She walked to me. I stood and shook her hand. “Welcome, stranger.” We both laughed. “Now don’t tell me, Kobina, I have ears, also. Sit down, sister, beer is coming. Let me hear you speak.”

We sat facing each other while her husband stood over us smiling. “You, Foriwa, you will never get it.”

I told her my story, adding a few more words I had recently learned. She laughed grandly. “She is Bambara. I could have told you when Abaa first brought her. She how tall she is? See her head? See her color? Men, huh. They only look at a woman’s shape.”

Two children brought beer and glasses to the man, who poured and handed the glasses around. “Sister, I am Kobina Artey; this is my wife, Foriwa, and some of my children.”

I introduced myself, but because they had taken such relish in detecting my tribal origin I couldn’t tell them that they were wrong. Or, less admirably, at the moment I didn’t want to remember that I was an American. For the first time since my arrival, I was very nearly home. Not a Ghanaian, but at least accepted for an African. The sensation was worth a lie.

Voices came to the house from the yard.

“Brother Kobina,” “Uncle,” “Auntie.”

Foriwa opened the door to a group of people, who entered, speaking fast and looking at me.

“So this is the Bambara woman? The stranger?” They looked me over and talked with my hosts. I understood some of their conversation. They said that I was nice-looking and old enough to have a little wisdom. They announced that my car was parked a few blocks away. Kobina told them that I would spend the night with the newlyweds, Patience and Kwame Duodu. Yes, they could see clearly that I was a Bambara.

“Give us the keys to your car, sister; someone will bring your bag.”

I gave up the keys and all resistance. I was either at home with friends or I would die wishing that to be so.

Later, Patience, her husband, Kwame, and I sat out in the yard around a cooking fire near to their thatched house, which was much smaller than the Artey bungalow. They explained that Kobina Artey was not a chief, but a member of the village council, and all small matters in that area of Dunkwa were taken to him. As Patience stirred the stew in the pot that was balanced over the fire, children and women appeared sporadically out of the darkness carrying covered plates. Each time Patience thanked the bearers and directed them to the house, I felt the distance narrow between my past and present.

In the United States, during segregation, black American travelers, unable to stay in hotels restricted to white patrons, stopped at churches and told the black ministers or deacons of their predicaments. Church officials would select a home and then inform the unexpecting hosts of the decision. There was never a protest, but the new hosts relied on
the generosity of their neighbors to help feed and even entertain their guests. After the travelers were settled, surreptitious knocks would sound on the back door.

In Stamps, Arkansas, I heard so often, “Sister Henderson, I know you’ve got guests. Here’s a pan of biscuits.”

“Sister Henderson, Mama sent a half a cake for your visitors.”

My grandmother would whisper her thanks and finally when the family and guests sat down at the table, the offerings were so different and plentiful, it appeared that days had been spent preparing the meal.

Patience invited me inside, and when I saw the table I was confirmed in my earlier impression. Groundnut stew, garden egg stew, hot pepper soup, kenke, kotomre, fried plantain, dukuno, shrimp, fish cakes, and more, all crowded together on variously patterned plates.

In Arkansas, the guests would never suggest, although they knew better, that the host had not prepared every scrap of food, especially for them.

I said to Patience, “Oh, sister, you went to such trouble.”

She laughed. “It is nothing, sister. We don’t want our Bambara relative to think herself a stranger anymore. Come let us wash and eat.”

After dinner, I followed Patience to the outdoor toilet; then they gave me a cot in a very small room.

In the morning, I wrapped my cloth under my arms, sarong fashion, and walked with Patience to the bathhouse. We joined about 20 women in a walled enclosure which had no ceiling. The greetings were loud and cheerful as we soaped ourselves and poured buckets of water over our shoulders.

Patience introduced me. “This is our Bambara sister.”

“She’s a tall one, all right. Welcome, sister.”

“I like her color.”

“How many children, sister?” The woman was looking at my breasts.

I apologized, “I only have one.”

“One?”

“One?”

“One!” Shouts reverberated over the splashing water. I said, “One, but I’m trying.”


We ate leftovers from the last night feast, and I said a sad good-bye to my hosts. The children walked me back to my car, with the oldest boy carrying my bag. I couldn’t offer money to my hosts, Arkansas had taught me that, but I gave change to the children. They bobbed and jumped and grinned.

“Good-bye, Bambara Auntie.”

“Go and come, Auntie.”

“Go and come.”

I drove into Cape Coast before I thought of the gruesome castle and out of its environs before the ghosts of slavery caught me. Perhaps their attempts had been halfhearted. After all, in Dunkwa, although I had let a lie speak for me, I had proved that one of their descendants, at least one, could just briefly return to Africa, and that despite cruel betrayals, bitter ocean voyages, and hurtful centuries, we were still recognizable.