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## Chapter 3: A Study in Contrasts and Connections

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## CHAPTER 3

# A Study in Contrasts and Connections

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As I reflect on my time in Ghana and Togo, I realize that I will never teach, think, or talk about West Africa, or Africa in general, the same way again. For one thing, after visiting two such different countries adjacent to one another, I will never speak of “Africa in general” again. As a white person writing about Africa, I must confess a certain amount of trepidation. If I write about the absolute and awe-inspiring beauty I saw, I could easily be accused of ignoring the desperate struggle of many Africans. Worse still, perhaps, I might be accused of pedaling clichés. Yet again, to describe the problems facing Africa is itself fraught. On the one hand, “the West” certainly has much blood on its hands, and much of the plight of Ghana and Togo can be laid unequivocally at its door. But this places the people and cultures of West Africa in a permanent passive voice; never acting, always acted upon. On the other hand, to call out corruption, superstition, or misogyny can be read as part of the “grand tradition” of white writers—at best, pitying, and at worst, condemning—who describe an entire continent as “uncivilized.” But again, isn’t the failure to mention such things a failure to take the people of West Africa seriously? Doesn’t it contain an implicit suggestion that “they don’t know any better”? Thus, you can see my



dilemma. And, of course, there is always the danger of presenting oneself as a heroine or someone enlightened, or at very least, focusing on one's own "growth." As I know I cannot avoid all of these pitfalls, I simply beg my readers' indulgence. Nor do I offer any answers, only questions and musings.

### **Modernization and Its Discontents**

That modernity is not an unalloyed blessing is well accepted when given the evidence of world wars, genocides, environmental degradation, and colonization itself. At the same time, improvements in sanitation, construction, and especially medicine, seem to be unassailable benefits. But modernity isn't just about scientific and technological advances; they utterly remade the economy of the world and, with it, every aspect of life. The introduction of industrialization and capitalism were traumatic for Western Europe, but today so little remains of the pre-modern world that the cultural clash is impossible to see. Not so in Ghana or Togo, where there is the added connection of modernity to colonization and the sudden imposition of a foreign culture. Many areas of both countries are "underdeveloped" or "developing," to use old-fashioned terms. People live in small, ramshackle houses with little-to-no sanitation. Open sewers run through the streets, and public urination, and even defecation, are far from uncommon. Farm animals walk beside and across major roads, and school-aged children sell fruit to passersby, while a family of four moves down the street all on one motorcycle and all without helmets. It is easy to see such problems as demanding Western aid either directly—or indirectly through the education of West Africans—but the truth is that these problems wouldn't exist without the incursion of the

Western, modern world, and that continued incursion exacerbates the problems. For example, outdoor toilets were the norm everywhere until quite recently, and they worked quite well until population density led to water contamination. While the introduction of modern plumbing might be unproblematic, the cultural expectations brought with it can be worse than no help. In Togoville, the visitors' center had dutifully enclosed their pit toilets, with the result that there was virtually no ventilation (due no doubt to Western ideas of modesty that deem a roofless space with a half-wall insufficient). The result was truly noxious. Added to this, the people had been well-trained in the importance of handwashing and therefore presented us with visibly dirty water to wash with. Our hesitation led to looks of shocked disgust, so we had to wash, then use hand sanitizer. How one could call this "progress" is beyond me. The simple response would say that better infrastructure is required; "real" toilets indoors with proper plumbing and clean water must be made and installed. Fair enough. But leaving aside the issue of financing, what about cultural understandings of such things? I cannot help but think of observations made in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1971) in which he discusses commodes. After waxing lyrical about the Japanese toilet, he has this to say about Western-style facilities clad in white tile:

... and how very crude and tasteless to expose the toilet to such excessive illumination. The cleanliness of what can be seen only calls up the more clearly thoughts of what cannot be seen. In such places, the distinction between the clean and the unclean is best left obscure, shrouded in a dusky haze. ... It was not that I objected to the conveniences of modern civilization, whether electric lights, heating, or toilets, but I did wonder at the time if they could not be designed with a bit more consideration for our own habits and tastes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (Sedgwick, Maine: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 11.

One might flip the “African problems” previously mentioned on their heads. Children for millennia worked beside their parents—a tradition that gave rise to children in factories; it is the change in the economy that makes formal education necessary, and it is new ideas of what is appropriate to the stages of life that make the sight of children working distressing. Farm animals walk by busy roads because the roads cut through their pastures; a family of four all ride one motorcycle because they can no longer live, work, and worship within a walkable area, thanks to the destruction of villages.

Again, while the modern economy has greatly blessed some segments of the population, it has cursed others. In the Muslim village of Larabanga, Ghana, there were numerous unemployed young men scrambling to act as guides, request donations to the village, or ask for money to buy soccer balls for the children. What opened our pocketbooks was the abject poverty, the sight of despondent-looking women huddled with naked and half-naked children who appeared to be ill and possibly malnourished. But the next day, one of our “guides” appeared at our hotel in Mole to offer us services, services that were free through the national park, and to ask for more money for the children. At that point, we began to observe that he was dressed in nice American clothes and sneakers and that he had his own car. We felt we’d been subjected to a scam, which, indeed, we had been. But it isn’t entirely fair to be angry with the young man. True, as a Muslim, he surely believes taking money under false pretenses is wrong and that he should aid the poor children of his village. Looked at from his perspective, however, it might not be so clear-cut. Many Ghanaian men make considerable money through the tourist trade. And many nervous Americans hire personal guides to drive them and arrange all aspects of their travel, thus paying far more than they would doing things on their own. The difference between this and offering to “arrange” transportation that is available elsewhere for free might be hard to distinguish. Again, as a member of his village, his prosperity should theoretically translate into the prosperity of the village, but with the introduction of modern individualism, those who hustle benefit, and they no longer feel the compulsion to aid their neighbors. In theory, a fully modern

economy would employ such young men who would then care for their families, those unable to work would receive state aid, and the six-hundred-year-old traditions of Larabanga would finally die. There is no question of the village returning to its agricultural roots, thanks to the weight of modern economics and environmental factors, but surely such people were better off living as a farming community in which elders



ruled, young men farmed, and everyone worked together. Instead, they are encouraged to join the capitalist world at a moment when capitalism is struggling, even in the nations of its birth.

The solution to these problems, and one embraced by both West Africa and the United States, is education, and more specifically, STEM education. In fact, the belief in the need for such education is so strong that we encountered a group of grade-school students who were learning computer science *without access to computers* until a national service volunteer began bringing them to her former university. While certainly true that Ghana and Togo will benefit from well-trained engineers, doctors, and economists, they alone will not support change, assuming that change is desired. Here, I must quote from Chinua Achebe. Recognizing, of course, that he is Nigerian, I nevertheless believe that his words apply just as well to Ghana or Togo. In the 1990 essay “What’s Literature Got to Do with It?” found in *Hopes and Impediments*, Achebe writes that an expert

can build a bridge for us perhaps and tell us what weight of traffic it can support. But he can’t stop us from hiring an attendant who will take a bribe and look the other way while the prescribed weight is exceeded. He can set up the finest

machinery for us, but he can't create a technician who will stay at his post and watch the controls instead of going for a chat and some groundnuts under a mango tree outside.<sup>2</sup>

While such an observation could easily feed into some of the worst Western stereotypes about Africa, Achebe's point here is much more complex. His point is that science is worthless without the support of language, art, and, above all, story. He continues:

In other words, I am saying that development or modernization is not merely, or even primarily, a question of having lots of money to spend or blueprints drawn up by the best experts available; it is in a critical sense a question of the mind and the will. And I am saying that the mind and the will belong first and foremost to the domain of stories.<sup>3</sup>

The United States has Horatio Alger and Great Britain has Dick Whittington, but Ghana (or Togo) has no equivalent. Nor is such an equivalent necessarily desirable. These stories push Americans and Britons to work grueling hours for little gain in the hopes of getting rich one day; they fuel a faith in the system. Ghana (and Togo) must either create such motivational stories in a culturally true way or must find another system that is supported by its own stories. As Achebe says, "People create stories create people; or rather, stories create people create stories" (162).<sup>4</sup> It is through stories that we understand ourselves personally and culturally. When a society and its stories do not mesh, one or the other must change. And here too, there is hope. Stories do not simply uphold the status quo. As Achebe says of literature "it does also offer the kinetic energy

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<sup>2</sup> Chinua Achebe, "What's Literature Got to Do with It?" in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 157.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

necessary for social transition and change”(167).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the modernization of Ghana and Togo must happen on their own terms after they have made the story of the modern world their own, complete with the appropriate variations and adaptations. Only difficulties will ensue if they are asked to absorb a Western story.

### **Tales of Colonization**

Sadly, Ghana and Togo seem to have absorbed some Western stories all too fully. Visiting the slave castles at Elmina and Cape Coast was incredibly powerful. The sight of the small, dank, sunless cells, the tales of cruelty, and the juxtaposition of Christian worship with horrific inhumanity (the church is above the women’s dungeon at Elmina), were overwhelming. At one point, I began to feel physically ill. But I was also distressed by some of the ways in which the stories were told by our Ghanaian tour guides. They were scrupulous about getting the European history right, explaining the origin of names, discussing the wars that caused a castle to change hands. This would not be problematic, but it was juxtaposed with rather unusual ways of discussing some things. In the courtyard of Cape Coast Castle, for example, there are three graves. One, we were told, belonged to the man who shut down slavery in Cape Coast. Of course, the truth is, he just followed orders. Another belonged to the first Dutch governor who died of malaria (or another tropical disease). The guide explained that such deaths were common because Africa was the “white man’s graveyard.” I suppose there might be a certain pride in this—“our climate vanquished those weak people”—but it sounds more like the way white people might talk about that “dangerous continent.” And I found myself wondering why we don’t call the Americas and the Caribbean the “black man’s graveyard.” The guide followed this comment with a story about the wife of a governor who died suddenly, possibly poisoned by her husband’s Ghanaian mistress, who sneaked into the castle in disguise. Why was such a spurious story included? The gender and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 167.



racial elements hit me full-force, and I couldn't help but think, "Surely this is a white *man's* story." Another surprise was to hear the use of the word "slave" rather than "enslaved person." While a minor point of vocabulary on one level, the second expression emphasizes that being a slave is no one's identity.

In general, the tales heard were tales of being acted upon. No mention was made, at least on my first trip to the castles of the African role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade; it was as if a few hundred Europeans showed up and captured all the slaves themselves. The wars between the Asante and Fanti alone were responsible for enslaving a large percentage of people sent to the "New World." Our second tour guide at Cape Coast corrected this, making clear that many nations were involved in the horror of slavery. He even pointed out that, while the kings and other leaders might have at first thought that the Portuguese, Dutch, English, etc. were enslaving people along West African lines (non-chattel slavery with a fixed limit of years), they knew better before the end of the Trade. My point in this observation is not to exonerate Europeans and Americans, but rather to point out the power and agency of the African kingdoms. That Westerners tell a story that implies

superhuman powers on the side of Europeans and that West Africa was a sparsely populated, disorganized place is sadly not surprising, but that people who live in this place and know its history would swallow the same tale puzzled me.

I then began to think about all the instances I'd seen of people identifying with their former colonizers. Though I have long known and taught about the impacts of colonization on formerly colonized nations, my focus has always been on wars, divisions among people, the loss of culture, and economic poverty. Now I realize that the impact is more extensive, but also more basic, than I thought. I was very struck by how British Ghana was and how French Togo was, as odd as that may sound. One of the first things to strike me was how British the Ghanaian university system was. The way courses are taught, the nature of exams, and the faculty workload were all familiar to me from interactions with British colleagues and institutions. More surprisingly, perhaps, was the continuation of the British system of entrenched hierarchy within the university: the use of last names, the treatment of staff, the treatment of women (both academics and staff), the emphasis on titles, etc. One almost got the feeling of wanting to "out-British the British." Most surprisingly, the system didn't appear to be that of Britain in the 1940s but of the British academy today. One colleague, for example, explained the way tenure evaluation works, its strange nebulosity combined with a sort of "point system," and all I could think was that it sounded like the worst changes to the British university system of recent years.

I was also deeply struck by the difference in food cultures between Togo and Ghana. Togo still has its own traditional food, and, like most places, has incorporated international favorites, but it also has a strong tradition of French haute cuisine. Moreover, the approach to food was much more "French" in that it seemed to place considerable emphasis on presentation, fresh ingredients, and creativity. While I enjoyed the food in Ghana, it was much simpler, heavier, and more "pedestrian" for lack of a better word. Even while I didn't see much truly British cuisine in Ghana, I did see a British attitude toward cooking. Perhaps a good example is that in Togo

there were several good seafood restaurants where a variety of fish was prepared fresh and grilled, steamed, or stewed superbly. In Ghana, which is also on the sea, the only fish I encountered was tilapia, which is farm-raised.

Another point of difference concerns nightlife. In Ghana pools closed at dusk, smoking was rare, and hotel bars were empty (and closed at 10 or 11). In Togo, the pools and bars were open all night, and people were up and about until the early hours of the morning, reminding me just a little of France. And finally, the language-culture divide struck me. Our driver, a Ghanaian, spoke perfectly decent French, yet he grumpily told more than one person that “we speak English” or claimed he knew no French. Clearly, being English-speaking was part of his identity. In fact, I learned from a colleague that the English-speakers of Cameroon even said (of their current civil strife with the French-dominated government) that “we must protect our Anglo-Saxon heritage.” While French and English are incredibly useful as *linguae francae*, allowing people of diverse linguistic groups to speak with one another within their countries and with the rest of the world, I wonder if the colonial language can be absorbed without absorbing *the language of the colonizer*.

### **A Meat by Any Other Name Wouldn't Sound So Scary**

I ate bushmeat. And I liked it. It was very rich, and I couldn't eat the entire serving, but I often have that occur with game (in fact, it happened just last week in Toledo, Spain, when I was eating venison). Why is grasscutter (also known as cane rat) “bushmeat,” while venison (deer) is “game”? Honestly, I was never sure what bushmeat meant; I thought it might refer specifically to eating primates. I then realized that the term could encompass much more. Was it the type of game? Surely not, since rabbit is not called bushmeat. Was it the nature of the preparation (smoked and served in soup)? No, because many meats are smoked, and in Ghana many meats are served in soup. So, what makes it “bushmeat”? That it's hunted in the “bush”? But while the deer of Spain are hunted in forests, while bear can be found in many mountains, and while boar have penetrated even city parks in Germany, we do not call them

“forest meat,” “mountain meat” and “park meat” respectively. We call them all “game”, and it gives them a level of prestige. So, what makes bushmeat “bushmeat”? Where it’s hunted and who eats it. I’m reminded of a discussion of fish sauce (garum) in graduate school that led to the professor explaining that there’s no such thing as people eating rotten food. Think about it. You can’t eat rotten food. “Rotten” or “rotted” is what we call another people’s food because it doesn’t conform to our own, or simply because we want to place them outside the pale.

Words have incredible power in shaping the way we view things. For example, who is a “king” and who is a “chief”? Chiefs appear in stories of the Americas and Africa (maybe the Antipodes?). Kings appear in stories of Europe and Asia (though “emperors” is often the attribution in Asia). Chiefs *can* be found in Europe, if we’re talking about “less civilized groups,” such as the Highland Scots. Wait! I hear you cry. Isn’t the difference that kings rule larger areas of land? Look at the size of the Asante Empire and compare it to the area controlled by Hugh Capet of France. Perhaps it’s different because the Asante had dozens or scores of chiefs beneath them and because their rule was dependent on these sub-chiefs? But then, Hugh Capet or any other medieval (or modern) king was dependent on dukes, counts, and so forth. So, what makes one a chief and one a king? Largely it seems to be about location again. True, we should consider how the people of the place refer to their leader (and I don’t just mean in the regional language; we have no problem calling Hugh “king” rather than “*roy*”; we’re happy to use the English word “emperor” for China); and the Asante use the word “king” when speaking English.

King versus chief, bushmeat versus game: these are just two examples of the dichotomous language we use. What makes one person a “practitioner of traditional medicine” or “herbalist” and another a “witch doctor”? What makes Africa’s clashes “tribal warfare” and Europe’s “ethnic cleansing”? I think you know the answer now. Racism. Not racism as it is so often misused to mean one person’s hatred, but rather racism in the sense of a deep structure. And these structures impact us all, regardless of our own

racial identity. I have heard Africans and African Americans use the terms above too. But all of us should stop doing it.

At the same time, there might be another element of racism here too. While we were driving back from Cape Coast, we got to watch a group of men hunting grasscutter. They had a large pack of dogs that flushed the creature from the bushes, at which point the hunters tried to club it with sticks or the flats of machetes. A bit further up the road, we saw men trying to sell their game by the side of the road, waiving the grasscutters by their tails or nailed to the boards used to smoke them. I was fascinated, and the fact that I had driven by similar scenes a few weeks earlier and had then eaten grasscutter when we stopped was something that in my mind reflected my openness to new cultures. But then my partner pointed out, “If you were driving through Appalachia and saw people selling possum on the side of the road, would you go to the next restaurant selling it and order it as a cultural experience?” This gave me pause because the answer was surely “no.” If I believed that something about the possum, either its species or the way it was hunted, made it unsafe to eat, then I shouldn’t be eating “cane rat.” If on the other hand, I thought both were equally safe, then what made me view one as an exciting cultural experience and the other as the action of benighted people with whom I want little contact? I could argue that part of the issue is that I know and like opossums, but this comes back to the familiarity issue, but from the opposite side: I know the animals of North America, not the animals of Africa. Either I need to exonerate the Appalachians or condemn the Africans.

### **Calling a Spade a Shovel?**

While recognizing the racism of certain word-choices might be difficult, I would argue that it is harder still to recognize the racism of refraining from using certain words. I mean the racism of not criticizing. Accra, and much of Ghana, is full of signs for Evangelical churches and prayer meetings in the vain of T. B. Joshua or Oral Roberts. While many people find prosperity theology deeply disturbing in the U.S., it becomes more disturbing when encountered in an impoverished country. Nor is seeing the poor give their money

to a snake-oil salesman the most distressing part. Faith healing can replace real medical intervention, especially for mental illness. In 2010, an Evangelical pastor was part of a group that burned a 72-year-old woman to death for witchcraft (she was likely demented); in 2017 another elderly “witch” was stoned to death. In line with prosperity theology, pastors argue that bad things only happen due to the influence of witches.<sup>6</sup> To quote Cameron Duodu:

So, a marriage breaks down, due to infidelity or pecuniary hardship, and the older woman in the household is responsible. A young, unemployed man becomes listless and shows signs of depression: an elderly lady wants to destroy him. A lorry driver gets drunk and crashes his vehicle at night: an elderly woman shone a torch into his eyes and blinded him, running his vehicle into a ditch. Even simple things such as pupils failing exams, or crops failing, or an inability to save money, are laid at the doors of "witches".<sup>7</sup>

Duodu further explains that people motivated by “both traditional superstitions and the modern equivalent preached in the ‘charismatic churches’, embark on acts of brutality against helpless scapegoats”.<sup>8</sup>

As Shelagh Roxburgh has observed, part of the issue here is Western perception and a conflict of worldviews.<sup>9</sup> To many people in Ghana, witchcraft and the spiritual world are very real, as real as our understanding of science. Moreover, witch hunts reflect a deep insecurity about life, which no doubt stems from modernization,

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<sup>6</sup> Cameron Duodu “Why Are ‘Witches’ Still Being Burned Alive in Ghana?” in *The Guardian*, 31 December 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Shelagh Rosxburgh, “Witchcraft and Violence in Ghana: An Assessment of Contemporary Mediation Efforts” in *Cahiers d’études africaines* 4 (2016): 891-914.

weak economies, and the destruction of traditional societies as discussed above. And of course, current understandings of the witch crazes of Europe and the United States in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century explain the phenomenon in the same terms. Moreover, as Roxburgh argues, colonization and modernization have destroyed the traditional means of dealing with witches, which could involve other forms of mediation and healing, not only violence.

Yet understanding the origin of these beliefs and practices does not mean that we must condone them. Nor is this worldview the only one that exists in Ghana, where some people have top-rate educations and where STEM education, as mentioned above, is highly valued. In such a context is there not also a disrespect in saying “that’s just how they do things there”?

While visiting one of Ghana’s top universities, we met a young scholar who claimed at various points to have a specialty in about eight different things – something that would cause people to raise their eyebrows or even demand explanation in the “West.” Further, he told us about being a pastor in his own Evangelical church and about how his dreams were prophetic, a fact made more worrying when considered in the foregoing context. Had someone said this in the United States or Western Europe, at the very least people would have been suppressing giggles or looking uncomfortable if they did not openly ask about how this meshed with one’s education. After all, this man wanted to be taken seriously as a scholar and presumably in an international context. Instead, we all sat silently, including myself. Did we not disrespect this man? Did we not by our silence suggest that he did not share our rational worldview despite his education? Were we deciding that Ghanaian university education must be far inferior to our own? In other words, is failing to criticize things we would criticize elsewhere considered cultural understanding or a form of racism?

Nor are West Africans blind to the discomfort of Americans—both black and white Americans—in criticizing any behavior; some West Africans see it as an opportunity to profit. When we were in Togo, we visited the market; having been to the Art Center in Accra, we felt prepared to deal with the hawkers in Togo. This, however,

was on a completely different level. From the moment we arrived, we were swarmed by a group of men who would not leave our sides. They pushed into our personal space and literally shoved articles at us. There was no question of our browsing; they wanted to know what we wanted. At one point, people in our group were separated and a few of us were convinced by a hawker to enter a shop. There, the pressure was increased. I



decided to leave, but the man kept telling me that I needed to stay, that my friends were inside. He physically blocked my path. Then I did something unheard of: I pushed past him and escaped to the outdoors. I immediately saw another colleague and warned her not to enter. She said, “Oh no. I fell for that already; that’s why I had to buy this.” The man I’d gotten by was genuinely shocked! He said, “You’re in an African market!” Of course, had we been Ghanaian, I doubt we would have been treated the same way. He seemed to think that we would do anything not to offend and that we might want stereotypical behavior. I ultimately did buy something. One vendor who was not in the group mobbing us noted that I was eyeing some baby dresses and asked me quietly what I wanted. I talked to him, we made a deal, and I bought a dress. Surely, I am not the first American to respond this way. There were similar, less-intense salespeople in Accra too. Wouldn’t observation show that Americans prefer that less intense kind of treatment?

There were times within the cities and at tourist sites that I felt like a walking ATM. It wasn’t just the beggars (all cities have them) or the hawkers; it was people like the young man from Larabanga who assumed that if we had given him money once, we’d just keep

doing it, as long as he had excuses. He was a charlatan, and yet, somehow, we feel we cannot say this. Why not?

Nor is profit the only thing some Ghanaian men were seeking. I was approached one evening by a man who asked me to marry him. I now understand what the numerous “marriage proposals” really are. He said we should “go home and get married in bed.” This is far from the first time I’ve been propositioned on a street; it’s happened in Belgium, in France, and in Italy on numerous occasions. But it was his “game” that got me. He said, “It’s a dream of mine to have sex with a white lady.” And then he became more overt and tried to beg. I find myself wondering if and why this combination of pity playing and flattering work on some women? Do they want to give him the “privilege” of being with them? Surely, this too was playing into presumed stereotypes. And again I find myself shocked that I didn’t call him a pig. Would I have laughed off such a comment in the U.S. or even Europe?

### **Nothing to Sneeze At**

America’s failure to take Ghana and Togo seriously isn’t just a matter of racism; we do it to our detriment. While I have noted the tension between tradition and modernity in Togo and, especially in Ghana, there are also examples of stunning successes. No experience stands out so strongly to me in this regard as Mole National Park. I have visited several national parks and forests in the United States, and I’ve enjoyed my time there. But I also paid dearly for the experience, and it was the natural splendor alone that I enjoyed; the rangers might as well not have existed. This is not to disparage the staff of America’s many wonderful national parks; I recognize that they do a good job, especially given the meager funding they receive. Rather, my point is how amazing Mole is. If you wish to have a “luxury” experience, you can stay at Zaina Lodge and glamp in a yurt (or something like that). There you get a supposedly curated experience and lots of safaris that I assume are led by rangers. But for much less money, you can stay at Mole Motel. It’s nice enough. And it’s about a three-minute walk to the rangers’ station. There, for incredibly low prices, you can set off on a variety of safari

experiences: walking safaris, game drives, night-time expeditions, birding, canoeing. The driven safaris are charged by vehicle, and the rangers encourage and help people to create groups, making the cost per person lower (and the environmental impact too). Further, once we had our first safari with John, whom we liked very much, he led every other safari we went on except the canoe safari that we decided to do at the last minute. This emphasis on relationship was surprising and wise. Our guide knew what we'd already been told. He knew which animals he didn't need to name and he knew how much we could be trusted and how hardy we were. We, on the other side, fully trusted him; we asked many questions both because we felt comfortable and because we'd learned enough to have new ones. And John was an amazing source of information, as was Abdullah, our other guide. He knew the animals intimately, especially the elephants. He talked about their relative ages and their habits. When one younger elephant got angry with us and started pawing the ground and pointing his trunk, John made eye contact and raised his hand. He also had us step back. An older elephant came up to the young one, and it seemed our guide had a conversation with them through gestures. The older elephant led the younger one away. John then remarked that the calf was a "joker" (I suspect his eventual name) and that he would be a very friendly elephant one day because he's already so interactive. This depth of connection with the animals really struck me, as did the thorough knowledge about them. Even if some of this knowledge was passed on from other guides, it suggested a deep institutional memory. And it turns out that there's a good reason for this.

The guides and other park workers live in the "community," a small town within the park itself. The children have a school, there's a church, and there's a mosque. It is worth noting that here, as in many parts of Ghana, Christians and Muslims live peacefully side-by-side. When we encountered the elephant, Old Man, for the first time, he was hanging out in the community. People had come out to watch him, and they did not seem apprehensive; they, especially the children, seemed excited. Later, when we were going off on our canoe safari, I asked Abdullah if the children who grew up in the

community ever became guides themselves. After all, they would know the animals well and it might be a hard life to leave. “Oh yes.” he replied, “I myself grew up here. My father was a ranger.” We went on to learn that his father, though retired, still lived in the community. What a marvelous system! And this generational job security is especially appropriate in a place where the traditional way of life has been destroyed. In 1971 when the wildlife refuge was made a national park, the last villagers were removed from their home because of the threat they posed to the animals (and because of the threat the animals posed to their crops). Unfortunately, their removal made their livelihood very hard; they had depended on hunting and woodcutting; thus, they struggle to survive while simultaneously harming the park. And it must be remembered, it’s not that these people are ignorant or evil and want to kill elephants and other animals without reason; nor is it that the animals are “out of control.” The problem is colonialism, global climate change, and population growth, all destroying both the humans’ and animals’ homes. Elephants that once lived in many places were killed off and now must live in a protected area, but the people of that area could no longer live traditionally with the elephants present. Thankfully, some solutions are being explored. One is Mognori, founded about ten years ago as a tourist site. An “eco village,” it provides canoe safaris, demonstrations of shea butter production (which it sells), dancing, drumming, and more. While there is, of course, the danger of the villagers becoming objectified as living museum pieces, this arrangement still seems better than the alternative. And they are keeping up traditional practices, even if they are doing so for tourists. These two pushbacks—the Mole National Park community and Mognori—against a full embrace of Western modernity seem to fulfill Achebe’s ideal of an African modernity, driven by African stories. They are worthy of more thought.

Togo too had its compromises with modernity. While there we visited Togoville, described (I think unfairly), by some writers as a tourist trap. Claiming to be the capital of voodoo, it contains several shrines, and the houses fly the protective flags of voodoo. The people seemed poor, but happy. There were signs of modern life in the form

of bars and a Vodafone store made of plywood and corrugated metal, children in school uniforms, and a gift shop aimed at tourists. One could begin to think that the shrines were largely ignored (though we did see someone approach one to worship) and that the village was indeed designed to snare tourists, but with one exception: the children had clearly never seen white people before. They ran up to us, talking excitedly, and grabbing our hands. One child kept turning my hand back and forth, marveling that the skin and palm seemed to be the same color. Another very small child stood close but didn't touch me. When I reached to touch him, he jumped away. Even one older girl, perhaps about twelve, kept trying not to stare, but couldn't help herself. When I smiled at her, her face lit up with true surprise and joy. This does not necessarily mean that no tourists visit. After all, people from other parts of West Africa, from even other parts of Togo, may visit—I do not have statistics—but I saw more African Americans than white Americans and Europeans visit the region as a whole, which suggests it is not a true tourist hotspot like many parts of Ghana. In other words, I think the people of Togoville were maintaining as much of their traditional life as they could and were using tourism and sales of crafts to tourists to supplement this.

Nor is the balance of traditional life and modern economy the only admirable thing about Ghana and Togo. We could learn from parts of their educational system. In the northern Togolese town of Kara, we had the privilege of visiting two Marianists schools. The children came from all over Togo to attend these boarding schools. Leaving aside the question of when children should leave home, I was impressed by the incredible affordability. Part of this is likely due to the way the schools tried to be self-sustaining where they could. At Chaminade School, run by the Marianist brothers, we saw a substantial garden, ponds stocked with koi, and many free-range rabbits. And the children seemed very happy and well-adjusted. The school tried to be as homelike as possible. The dormitories were even called *foyer*, the powerful French word evoking the hearth and home. Nor was the academic side neglected. In addition to seeing high schoolers review rigorously for geography and chemistry examinations, we were serenaded in French, English, and Spanish by

a class of much younger children at College Adèle, a facility run by the Marianist sisters. If only the United States valued foreign languages and music so much!

In fact, even at the university level it turns out that the humanities are highly valued. On several occasions in both countries we were met by groups of engineers and other scientists, only to learn that there were huge humanities programs that outnumbered the sciences in enrollment. This may in part be due to their desire to improve their science programs, but I wonder if we've given the impression that American universities care about only science. And in so far as this can seem true at times, perhaps we should be visiting their humanities programs to see how we might improve our own.

### **She Who Forgets the Present Is Doomed to Misunderstand the Past**

The well-known cliché states that “he who forgets the past is doomed to repeat it.” While this might be true, the historian forgets the present at her own peril. In his wonderful book *The Historian's Craft*, Marc Bloch quotes Henri Pirenne as saying, “If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life.”<sup>10</sup> Bloch then continues, “This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian.”<sup>11</sup> He elaborates:

For here in the present is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only a great effort of the imagination can restore to old texts. ... In the last analysis, whether consciously or no, it is always by borrowing from

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<sup>10</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Those Who Write It* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1964):36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

our daily experiences and by shading them with new tints that we derive the elements which help us restore the past.<sup>12</sup>

And what better way to expand our knowledge of “that vibrance of human life” or increase the number of “our daily experiences” and thus better understand the past than by traveling? At the risk of falling into one of the tropes Bingyavana Wainaina describes in her wonderful essay “How to Write About Africa,” I must say that my experiences have “illuminate[d] something about America or Europe.”<sup>13</sup> In my case, this illumination has been as much of the past as of the present.

In teaching my world history course, I always talk about the painful process of modernization in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism. I talk about the upending of traditional work life, family dynamics, self-sufficiency, and even food culture, but I always have had to rely very heavily on imagination and literature. Now I have an inkling of what that might have looked like. The continuation of traditional modes of production and lifestyles alongside modern ones, incredible wealth and poverty side-by-side, the disruption of family life and masculine identity now have a little more substance for me. Nor is it only the modern world that is illuminated.

Having left West Africa, I immediately traveled to Spain and ultimately to Granada. As I walked along the old Arab neighborhoods and saw the modern attempts at a *zúk* or market, I realized that I suddenly had a much better sense of how the pre-modern use of space might have looked. Again, I knew that medieval markets did not have shops in the sense of buildings, but I also knew they weren’t just piles of goods on the ground. In Ghana, I saw incredibly modern commercial spaces (the mall I visited was very posh, for example), but I also saw something more *ad hoc*. People

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> Bingyavana Wainaina, “How to Write About Africa” in *Granta* 92 (2005); rpt *Granta* 147 (2019).

had shops, but not of the sort you'd see in Europe or the U.S. They had a less permanent quality. Constructed of plywood, corrugated metal, and cloth awnings, they were small and constructed right up to or even on the sidewalk. Nor were shops the only business to take this form. One of my favorite spots in Accra turned out to be Purple Pub. It was made up of a bar, complete with cocktails and beer, a pool table, music, a disco ball, and tables—85% of which was outside. There was a small two-part storefront made of what we might think of as a metal carnival building in the U.S. Then on the opposite side of the sidewalk were tables and bars under cloth awnings or simply open to the air. Tables edged their way onto the walkway, but no one complained. The crowd was vibrant, festive, and happy. And it all worked perfectly well. I suspect that this “make it work” attitude, this mixed use of space, was much the same in the cities of medieval Europe, and now I can visualize that.

Right across from Purple Pub was a chop shop or street-food vendor doing a thriving trade. Its name was “T.I.A. This Is Africa” At first, I thought it was a bit self-derogatory, a symptom of internalized racism. But then I thought again. No. This is Africa. And it is wonderful.