

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 10

The Treasure

When I worked with the drumming elders to finish this work, I saw the benefits of my friendship with Alhaji Ibrahim in many ways. And I have also seen the truth of what Alhaji Mumuni told me about the children of wisdom. I am using what Alhaji Ibrahim taught me every day, and it is benefiting me in my life. I am now much, much older than when I was lucky enough to meet Alhaji Ibrahim. The tree is growing in my ear. I understand Alhaji Ibrahim's talks more deeply. As I become older, I realize too what a blessing it is to have elders. When Alhaji Ibrahim died, my father Alhaji Mumuni and my fathers and grandfathers Namon-Naa Issahaku, Palo-Naa Issa and Nanton Lun-Naa Iddrisu were there for me to turn to. But there were others who helped Alhaji Ibrahim and me to do this work, and like Alhaji Ibrahim, they are no longer there, and we cannot ask them anything again. Alhaji Adam Alhassan Mangulana, Alhaji Shahadu Issa, M'ba Sheni Alhassan, Lun-Zoo-Naa Abukari Seidu, Fusheni Jeblin: they are all gone, as are Nanton Lun-Naa Iddrisu Mahama and Namon-Naa Issahaku Mahama, and Alhaji Mumuni Abdulai has also passed away. You will meet some of them in this book, they and other great and wonderful people, and you will hear their words in the words of Alhaji Ibrahim. This is their testament, too, their witness to the temples they built in their hearing. And it was their inheritance, too, before it has become yours, their children and grandchildren.

The final lesson can be learned but not understood: the wisdom of the elders is a treasure that we inherit. We grasp it with uncertainty and anxiety, and we find ourselves holding it and becoming older, becoming responsible for those who are young. Thus, because of fruition, are the aged so deeply passionate about life. For those who are close behind them, perhaps the problem is not one of understanding but of acceptance. It is hard to accept the movement of the generations, of death and growth. How strange it was for me to be in Dagbon without my friend. There is an Akan proverb that one does not know how long the frog's legs are until it is dead. We cannot know the value of the elders' presence until we must live without them, nor can we know the mystery of their continuing presence even in death, until we and others become like them. When Alhaji Ibrahim was alive, I enjoyed his friendship but I did not know its reach. He always saw farther. When we first became friends, he told me that if we could

maintain our friendship well, it would extend when he was not there and even when neither of us would be alive, and now I have seen the part that I can see. When we began the work on this book, in our first session, Alhaji Ibrahim talked about the time when he would not be there again. He lived his life with the thought of what he would leave behind him that would last after his death. As Alhaji Mumuni said, the truth Alhaji Ibrahim and I had used to hold one another was still there, and it finished this book. I followed Alhaji Ibrahim's advice and took Alhaji Mumuni as my father, like Kissmal and Mustapha and Ben who also referred to him as "our father"; and Alhaji Mumuni also called us his children. Alhaji Mumuni worked patiently and caringly to listen to every chapter that Alhaji Ibrahim had not heard.

And then, in further evidence, apart from the talks that we read through with Alhaji Mumuni, there were some additional points that Alhaji Ibrahim and I had not been clear about. These points concerned the earliest history of Dagbon, and they are matters that are shrouded in secrecy and darkness, prohibitions and sacrifices. Alhaji Ibrahim knew some of that history, and we had also pursued it with some of the elders; we had parts of it from Namo-Naa Issahaku, parts of it from Nanton Lun-Naa Iddrisu, and parts of it from others. Before he died, Alhaji Ibrahim had been learning more about it, but I do not know how much he was able to add to what he already knew. There was therefore a small gap in our book which we had intended to address. When Alhaji Mumuni finished listening to all the chapters we had to read through, more than seventeen years after I first went to Dagbon, we went to the house of Palo-Naa Issa, the chief of drummers in Savelugu. I told Palo-Naa simply, "My father was holding something for me, but he didn't get a chance to give it to me before he died. And so I have come to my grandfather's house to collect my inheritance, and I want to inherit it from the living and not the dead." And I told him that if there were sacrifices necessary for the talk, I was prepared for that, because Alhaji Ibrahim always taught me to follow the way of the tradition, and that was how we had always done our work. Without hesitation Palo-Naa said, "Yes, Alhaji always held tightly to the tradition, and that was why we all liked Alhaji. We all thought that he would bury us. But God turned everything upside down, and it was we who buried him. But as we are here, you shouldn't worry. What you have said and you are asking, I have agreed." And what I was looking for, they taught me, straightforward, to their extent.

I mention this incident because I have added those talks to the appropriate section to be as if Alhaji Ibrahim himself talked them, and my reason is simply because, on a deeper level of truth, we drummers talk with the names of those who

taught us and assume the names of those who gave birth to us. This book is the testament of a drummer, Alhaji Ibrahim, Father Drummer, and of a drummer, me, and of other drummers and all drummers. When we started those final talks, we offered a sacrifice, and Palo-Naa called the names of dead drummers, “Your grandchild Lunzεyu has come to eat the benefit of drumming. Your grandchild Lunzεyu has come to eat the benefit of his grandfathers.” It was because of them that Alhaji Ibrahim was there, and it was because of Alhaji Ibrahim that I was there, and those who talked to me stood in his place and their place. Those who spoke took the names that Alhaji Ibrahim himself took, and I take those names now. As it was when Alhaji Mumuni did his part of the work, it was the same talk of Alhaji Ibrahim going on. That alone is beautiful, but it would have been the same beauty, no different, if Alhaji Ibrahim had been there himself in Savelugu and not only in our hearts. Because what of those who were in his heart? We cannot know all those who talked to him and through him, or those even before them who talked and passed down the inheritance of culture. And before them: who? He himself never saw them. And even my father Harold and my mother Florence, who encouraged and nurtured my friendship with Alhaji Ibrahim, though he never met them, he felt linked to them and he prayed for them, and now they too have passed on. And so, what of us? Culture moves through human beings, but it is vaster than any one person. This book is tiny before its magnificence. The treasure is there. We take it into ourselves, and in the end, we disappear inside it. Thus did Rilke write in the eighth *Duino Elegy* and respond in the ninth:¹

And we, spectators always, everywhere,
looking at, never out of, everything!
It fills us. We arrange it. It decays.
We re-arrange it, and decay ourselves.
Who’s turned us round like this, so that we always,
do what we may, retain the attitude
of someone who’s departing? Just as he,
on the last hill, that shows him all his valley
for the last time, will turn and stop and linger,
we live our lives, for ever taking leave.

Praise the world to the Angel, not the untellable; you
can't impress him with the splendour you've felt . . .
. . . So show him
some simple thing, remoulded by age after age,
till it lives in our hands and eyes as part of ourselves.
Tell him *things*. He'll stand more astonished, as you did
before the roper in Rome or the potter in Egypt.
. . . These things that live on departure
understand when you praise them: fleeting, they look for
rescue through something in us, the most fleeting of all.
Want us to change them entirely, within our invisible hearts,
into — oh, endlessly — into ourselves! Whosoever we are.
Earth, isn't this what you want: an invisible
re-arising in us? Is it not your dream
to be one day invisible? Earth! invisible!

Note:

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: The Norton Library, W.W. Norton, 1963), pp. 71, 75, 77.