

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 2

Dagbon: Close From a Distance

Those of you who are Dagbamba know the scene I am describing, and perhaps you have no need for this introduction. The rest of you, leaning against the wall and looking at the stars and realizing that you could be almost anywhere on earth, may have an impulse to know where you are so that you can pinpoint yourself on a globe. You are in West Africa, in Ghana, and the town is called Tamale. None of my American friends has ever pronounced it correctly without prior coaching. Unlike a kind of Mexican food, everyone's first guess, the accent is on the first syllable: Tá-ma-le. You could also be in Nanton or Yendi or Tampion or Yelizoli or Karaga, all of them names with a nice ring if you say them, but it happens that you are in Tamale. When I went to Ghana for the first time, in 1970, I had never heard of Tamale. It was difficult enough to explain to some people where Ghana was, to say nothing of major towns like Accra or Kumasi or smaller towns like Kintampo or Bolgatanga or Tamale. I had traveled to Ghana with the specific idea of learning music within a general purpose of understanding the strengthening qualities that music tenders to the fibers of the great tree of culture. The truth is that I might have gone somewhere else, and the night sky would not have been much different. It merely happened that things worked out for me to go to Ghana instead of Nigeria or Sierra Leone or wherever. The tree of culture would have been a different species, probably the same genus, same genius. What I did not realize was how difficult it is to see tall trees in the ear, to find the entrance way of trembling timbers to the temples in my hearing.

In photographs taken from spaceships, or from the moon, or looking down from the stars, there are no countries in West Africa, or anywhere for that matter. On a map or a globe, the countries appear; they look rather similar, patches of color sometimes compared to postage stamps, and very few people are taught to pay much attention to where the individual countries are. Even the post office occasionally took letters of mine addressed for "Ghana" and sent them instead to "Guyana," until I began writing "WEST AFRICA" beneath the country name. On most maps of Africa, Ghana is a little place, and there is no room to write "Tamale." Fortunately, if you have a relatively better map of West Africa, you can find Tamale, and sometimes Yendi, in the northern part of Ghana. Some maps have the word "Dagomba," the English name for Dagbamba, written in fine letters

arching between the two towns. The Dagbamba themselves call this area Dagbon, a traditional state now incorporated into the nation of Ghana.

A few months after I arrived in Ghana, I took a trip and passed through seven countries, some larger than Ghana and some smaller, all of them still postage stamps on the globe. At ground level, the look of villages and landscape varies, and the capitals are diverse, but for some reason the small and medium-sized Third World towns look rather similar. They hide their character. Preparing a tourist itinerary for such places is tough. There are no particular museums, churches, opera houses, music halls, parks, or visible landmarks to what we tend to consider high culture. Away from the capitals, a generally low level of poverty evens things out. When I was living in Tamale, I used to watch tourists walking through, their heads up as they looked around, much as I did the morning after I had first arrived. The way the place was when I was there, I rarely saw these people twice; within a day or two they were gone and replaced by others. I understood why the tourists moved on. Some of them, their heads up, may have disappeared into the open drainage gutters on the roadside, built to carry the run-off of rainy-season deluges; perhaps the gutters carry a message from the place to its tourists, telling them not to bother looking up as they walk through the town. There's nothing to see and nothing to do. All the colors of everything and everybody are faded and covered with dust. The architecture is neither traditional, modern, premodern or postmodern. It is intermediate modern: concrete with corrugated tin roofs. The buildings, small branches of banks like Barclay's and Standard, or of retail outlets like Bata and Glamour and Kingsway, line the street; they are covered with dust, their once-bright colors now nondescript. The place needs paint, planeloads and planeloads of emergency paint flown in under international auspices and distributed free.

On the street, there is a symphony of tractors, busses, minibusses, big trucks and little trucks, cars, taxis, belching smoky oil that serves as a dust-fixative. Add valves and gaskets to the emergency list. The street itself has no sign and no name. It actually has two names, one for the place you'll reach if you go one direction, and the other for another place in the opposite direction: the main street in Tamale, therefore, is not a street but a road, both the Kumasi road and the Savelugu road. Cutting into the main road at odd angles are other roads, some of them branching off at odd angles again: the Sabonjida road, the Yapei road, the Nyankpala road, the Waterworks road. Some of these roads also have other names depending on how far you intend to go. The Savelugu road is also the Bolgatanga road; the Nyankpala road is also the Tolon road; the Waterworks road is also the Choggo road and the Kumbungu road. Few giants of recent history have emerged untarnished enough in retrospect to be immortalized on street signs: this is a place

where the young, in their quest for fame, can take heart from the number of unnamed streets. The British who originally developed places like Tamale evidently thought of their regional administrative centers as big intersections, as if they could not quite think of what to do with such places except build roads there. A reasonable choice: they could pave their way into the hearts of the chiefs and villagers with paid roadwork. As for the French, they were a group who had a sense of towns. In their major regional centers, the streets radiate off the hub of a central something, so that both colonialists and locals could know that Paris is in reality an idea whose time has not yet come. The sole concession the British made to this sentiment was to line one section of the Savelugu road with trees, as if to suggest that they would have preferred to be in Provence.

Walking down Tamale's main road as a greenhorn tourist, you are undaunted by the uncanny resemblance of this place to the place you left yesterday. You decide that you will observe the moving people. Your interest is piqued by the sight of an open truck filled with workers disguised as sardines, "forty-nine sitting ninety-nine standing," as eulogized in the song *Shuffering and Shmiling*¹ by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a visionary Nigerian musician and social critic. It is obvious that to observe people, you need not be walking aimlessly, so you find a place to stand, and you hang on a wall. Everybody's busy, too busy to notice you. This time you smell the dust. The clothing of the pedestrians is faded from sunlight and repeated washings. A few of the locals will exchange a glance or a smile. The few foreigners whom you see pass by you and ignore you, some of them riding motorbikes, some walking briskly, some driving minibusses or Land Rovers. They're busy, too. To your left and right are petty traders sitting in front of small tables. Some are specialized, selling only bread or only bananas. A woman comes carrying her table on her head, followed by a girl carrying a box, and they set up shop a few paces beyond the nearest trader; they unpack the box and find room on the table to stack an incredible assortment of goods: pens, pencils, biscuits, aspirin, mentholated ointment, bandages, batteries, cough drops, chewing gum, razor blades, cigarettes, candles, penicillin ointment, tinned mackerel, bouillon cubes, matches, soap, detergent. Things are getting interesting. When the new arrival sees you watching her and smiles to greet you, you stroll over to examine her table at close range, and end up buying some biscuits. Reluctant to leave, you buy some chewing gum. For some reason, the interaction has made you feel shy about going back to hang on the wall. Reminded of your purposeful aimlessness, you tell yourself that you have exhausted the possibilities of that particular view of the town, and you start walking again.

Back on the main street in your dreamy walkabout, you pass the entrance of a market and then turn onto another street that bends around past small tailoring

shops and retail outlets with cheap goods displayed by the street entrances. Bearing right down a major road, you reach a filling station. In one corner, some teenagers are busy repairing bicycle tires. Beside them on a piece of scrap wood is the roughly painted word, "Vulcaniser." Apart from a foot pump, a pan with some water, a couple of files, some cut-up inner tubes, and a can of glue, their main tool for setting patches is a contraption that almost defies description. An iron rod attached to a hinge is bolted to one end of a flat board so that it can be lifted and raised; at the other end of the rod is a kind of clasp to clamp the rod in place; attached to the center of the rod is a used piston from a truck, and sitting on the board below the piston is a flat stone. You watch the children at work. They remove the tube from a bad tire and find the puncture with the water pan, then they cut a piece of rubber from an old tube. They use a file to rough up the rubber on the patch and the punctured tube, then they apply the glue. At that time they place the patched tube under the piston and clamp the piston down, then put some twigs into the piston and light a fire inside it, adding twigs for a few minutes until the piston becomes hot enough to melt the rubber slightly. After the fire burns down, they release the clamp and raise the piston: the patch is set. Then they replace the tube and pump the tire with their feet. They charge a few pennies for the job. Intrigued, you ask them who made their equipment, and they point to a place behind the filling station where there is a line of people working with metal. You go there.

The blacksmiths share a rough hearth fired with shells of palm oil kernels. Most of their piled-up work seems to be repairing buckets and washing pans that have rusted through. Some of them look up to greet you and let you know that they have no objection to your standing there and watching them. After a few minutes, a customer brings a job worthy of your observation. The customer rides a motorcycle from which one of the rear footrests has fallen, and there are no spare parts at the store. One of the blacksmiths stoops to study the other footrest for a minute or two, and then he begins work. He bends a short strip of thick metal into a U-shaped brace and punches holes in it. Then he cuts an iron rod and bevels one end of the piece; he punches holes in the beveled end. He uses a file to smooth all the pieces, and then he attaches the piece of rod to the brace by means of a pin through the holes, fitting the cut piece of rod so that it raises and lowers. He fashions another piece of metal and attaches the brace and footrest securely to the motorcycle. Somehow, although the blacksmith did not measure anything, the new footrest stays up when it is raised and, when it is lowered, stands at a fine ninety-degree angle. He asks his customer whether he should wind some rubber stripping cut from an inner tube around the new footrest to prevent a shoe or sandal from slipping off, but the customer is in a hurry and pays and drives away.

By this time, you are feeling somewhat better. You exchange smiles with the blacksmith. When you turn away, the gritty scene has taken on a new aspect. The afternoon sun is setting, and as evening approaches, the dusty air has become golden with diffused light. Strolling back through the town, you see groups of men gathering for the evening prayers on cemented verandas beside the houses of maalams, the local Islamic scholars. Some of the men are seated quietly as they count their prayer beads; others are washing their feet and hands, using a bit of water to clean their faces, nostrils and mouths. Traffic on the street has reduced. You branch down a lane to walk through the corridors between the houses. In one section of the town, the houses are still in the traditional style of architecture, a collection of thatched-roof rooms linked by shoulder-height walls. You are impressed by the soft contours and human scale of the buildings. You hear only the quiet sound of children's laughter and adult's voices; there is no shouting, there are no noisy televisions or stereos, and only the rumble of a last distant truck going home reminds you that you are in a town and not a village. You reach your hotel, bathe, and come out again for another stroll just after the sun has set, always around six o'clock in this tropical land. People are grouped in threes and fours around bowls of food, conversing quietly as they eat their evening meal. At night, none of the ugliness of the town is visible. Everything jagged is smoothed out. Small kerosene lanterns illuminate the tables of the street vendors, and the moonlight is enough for those who have finished their meals and are leaning against the walls of their houses with their sitting friends. The stars are uncountable. From the far distance, later into the still night, the muffled sound of drumming can sometimes be heard, its source obscured by the breezes that carry it.

When I had my first occasions to appreciate the peacefulness of the evenings in places like Tamale, I did not trust my own feelings. Later, when I left Dagbon for other places and looked back in recollection, I could not recall those feelings, nor even conjure their semblance. But it was not I alone who ever felt and gleaned the peacefulness of the savanna cultures in the evenings, nor I alone who missed it elsewhere. I have heard other visitors talk about it, some of them foreigners, some of them from other cultures in the south of Ghana. The effect is real: there is something about the place, and the evening is the time one senses its emanations. It is rather the contrast between the day and the evening that is imaginary, as if the eyes cannot see in the daylight. Just as we must sometimes squint to see better, so sometimes does it happen that what is noticeable obscures what is essential. What prevents the eyes from seeing? It may be the brightness of the sun, or perhaps the dust stirred by the movement of people and vehicles. It may be the poverty, the grittiness of the buildings, the visibility of sick people and of working children. It may be the sense that the workaday conditions are those of

work-in-progress, of a temporary society in an unfinished transition, not traditional but not yet a contemporary society where industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization have altered the relationships and scale of human life. Are the evenings irrelevant and forgotten in the daytime, or are they an element of the hidden character of the town, a way of living to which the banks and stores and filling stations are rather the irrelevant image?

Whatever, the elusive quality of the evenings is nowhere stated directly, and town's character is only intimated in the way the people work and carry themselves, to be glimpsed only as a spirit embodied in the passing people. In places like this Third World town, the cultural monuments are internal and personal, and since they cannot be seen, an outsider needs time and personal mediation in order to know who the people are and how they came to be that way, what they feel about themselves, and what they want of their relationships in society. To see the tradition that supports them is difficult, as difficult as it is to connect with one of these human beings in the daytime on the busy main street of the town. It is easy to connect with a glance or a smile in the daytime, a minimal solution, but a closer look at the people cannot break through their reserve. On the streets of Tamale, one cannot know the Dagbamba. Can we sweep away the distractions that confuse the eyes? In the evening, when the eyes are limited, when the people can forget the sight of the germinating cement and petroleum hybrids they are trying to harvest, they are into themselves and seem difficult to approach. With time, however, through the words in this book, words once spoken by a distant person who knows much about his tradition, we can know these people who live within it. Truly, it is possible to dwell in shyness and reach beyond the assertive alienation of superficial perceptions and isolated images.

Yet when we meet some of those people who have fostered the cultural atmosphere of the evenings, we must be prepared for a kind of continual releasing of the perceptions we form, because once inside their vision, our own vision dissolves in the complex swirls of their lives. When the daylight fades along with the manifestations of modernity, one might think that what remains is a more typical cultural ambience. That impression too is deceptive. The subjective profundity of the feelings one may experience reaches into but one dimension of hidden depths. The soothing calm of Dagbamba evenings is indeed there and is profoundly real, but indiscernible beneath it are cultural currents of disturbance and pain that go beyond the normal share of the heartbreak and sacrifice that attend human destiny. The traditional leadership of the society has for generations contested for power, sometimes violently. As portrayed in indigenous history, they are people who did not mind to say or do what they want, and die. The struggle for power continues even now. The conflict is accompanied by

passionate feelings of fidelity to cultural precedents, by intense debate about the nature of the institutional order, by bitter memories and compelling hopes. Call it, if you will, an element of their heritage that attests its vitality in this present day, attesting as well that this book is not a sentimental glimpse of a disappearing past or of a fading reality, not a chronicle of a world that once existed and is gone. To be sure, in Father Drummer's words is a commemoration of the past, a commemoration too of great people who played their part in keeping their culture alive and in passing it as an inheritance to those who followed them. In the past, there were Dagbamba who lived their lives and raised their children with a belief in the value of their culture, and there were Dagbamba who were willing to die because of what their culture meant to them. Their names are not forgotten. People praise them and sing of them, and although they are gone, today there are still people like them. Culture links the living and the dead. "O tall tree in the ear! Even in the silence . . . , change went on." But people are still living with faith in Dagbamba culture, and people are still dying over what that culture means.

Note:

1. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, "Shuffering and Shmiling," Phonogram Coconut, PMLP 1 005; Celluloid Records, CELL6117.