

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Dollars In The Wall. Interview With Mr. Babbs Haruna From Nkoranza



You know it is difficult to make money here in Ghana so that's why I decided to go to Libya. Twice I went there and both times I had bad luck and returned empty handed. But as soon as I have enough money I will go for a third time. Until I succeed.

My second attempt to make money in Libya was in 2003. I learned from my first trip and so I took another route. To Bawku, the border town, and from there with several trucks and vehicles to Agadez, which is a desert town in Niger. That road to Agadez by the way is the worst in West Africa, worse than driving through the desert itself. Humping and bumping through deep potholes in the road, broken vehicles everywhere, mummified cow-skeletons along the road and a burning sun. So, up to Agadez the route was the same as the road I traveled before, but once in Agadez, where you pass straight into desert land, I made a different choice from my first journey. It costs more but it is worth it if you have the money. You wait until there are enough people, 200 in all, and then you are pulled into a large truck, the type we call 'combine', and that truck brings you right through the desert where there is no road to a village called Durku. That is the last village in the country of Niger, after that you are in Libya.

We were with over 200 people in that lorry, packed like fish standing on their tails. It's a miracle that we did eventually arrive. After Durku there is nothing anymore except sand and stones and you wait. You may wait one week or three weeks if you are lucky but some can spend four months or more over there before they find transport to Libya.

Staying in the village of Durku gives a problem for each day you have to eat, at least something. The water is free for there is a natural water source over there. Everybody is careful with his money because it is needed for the connection car to Libya, cars that are run by Libyans and costs 60,000 CFA per person. That is the

amount you pay but you also have to have money at hand to pay for a present for the driver for there are always more people than cars. These connection people make good business. Now if you are not careful and spend too much on food while waiting for your connection and you have not enough to bribe them then you can go back to Ghana and have to start all over again!

I took a connection car and went straight and painlessly to Libya, to the town of Saba. The other border town is called Black, that's where I went the first time when I crossed to Libya, which was in 1997.

Let me tell you about that first time. That time I took the Mount Hogar route, which is less costly but much tougher. It may cost less money but has claimed a lot more lives. That first time I suffered too much before I reached Libya. It took me 12,000 CFA to pay a guide in Agadez and a lesser amount for a car that brings you to the foot of the Hogar Mountain. There you are all dropped in the sand and that is it. The cars return and you are left to yourself. You and your guide climb over the Mount Hogar which is very difficult and if you make it you walk for a week by foot through the sand and you feel thirsty or sometimes you feel nothing, you just walk, only walk. It is a horror. It is important to dodge the official borders so you cross somewhere secretly into Libya. That first time it took me three months to go from Ghana to Black in Libya. Some got sick, some started acting abnormally, some also died.

My best friend, a man from my hometown Nkoranza, died and left me alone. He and I walked together through the desert. One night he slept and the next morning he did not get up, he was dead. He was my very best friend.

Over there, there is no shade. You walk in the sun and at times you sleep. Always short sleeps. We were with a group of two hundred people and in our case five of them died. I don't know why my friend died. No snakebite, nothing like that. He still had some water and some food. He just died. If someone dies we don't use tools, we have none, we use our hands to push the sand away and we put the person there in the manhole and we close it with sand and put some stones on it.

During the desert crossing the way is indicated by way of second hand tires but some are lost. When in 1997 I arrived in the village Black, in Libya, I was exhausted and had to rest for three months. My friend was dead, I had a fever and my money was finished. I then went to town to look for work and was hired to wash people's clothes. Then I did mason work which is very popular work in

Libya. The Egyptians and the Libyans are the contractors, they are the bosses. We Ghanaians mix cement and plaster walls. We get paid per contracted work after completion. Some times we would be hungry while working three months on the construction of an apartment and get pay afterward and be rich. You earn more than in Ghana that is why we do it. We stay in connection houses where Ghanaians live. I stayed long enough in Black to recover and earn money to travel to Tripoli. In Black I saved 150 dollars and I spent 75 dollars to go to Tripoli. So I had some money left and ate better and gained some strength to do the same work in Tripoli. There I saved 1500 dollars. With that money I had enough to pay for the connection to Europe so I paid them. But the connection got busted. They arrested us and the sea-band which was steering the fishing boat to cross us over to Europe was jailed. They threw me in prison, took my money and flew me back to Ghana. I had lost.

Had I decided to cross from Morocco instead of from Libya the chances would also have been equally poor. They arrest you there and maltreat you for six months before they also send you back to Ghana so there is no reason trying the Morocco connection. The Malta connection is good.

In 1999 I returned to Ghana after being in Libya for two years. In Nkoranza I had to tell the parents of my best friend that their son had died. They did not take it easy but were grateful to me for telling them. I told them all the details, as much as I could. Between 1999 and 2003 I lived in Ghana by renting out bicycles but two of the bicycles broke down and the business went bad. How do I live? My friends sometimes wire me Euros from Spain, the ones that made it. I am also married and had two children before I made my second journey to Libya. My wife is in agreement of course, she knows what it means to always live without money so she said 'please do it, go for us'.

The second time that I decided to go to Libya I went through Durku as I told you. Then from Durku to Saba with a car, no more by foot to Black! Then straight on to Tripoli, where I had spent one year doing the same work as I did before, which is mason work. I was going about my way very successfully when out of nowhere there was an announcement over the radio. Al-Qathafi: 'Out, all you Ghanaians. No more Ghanaians in Libya, out, all of you!'

At once, within a few hours, we had to go to the airport and mostly we had to leave everything behind. We were deported right away, because the Libyans had

a problem with the Americans and when they settled their problem they wanted only blacks that are from America in Libya, that's why they wanted us, the Ghanaian blacks, out. But I am not sure if all that was true.

So that was in 2003. I had to run and I could not take my money home with me. So far I had saved 900 dollars. You can never leave money in your pocket let alone in your room. It will disappear. So we have what we call the 'wet-bank'. You wrap your dollars in plastic and stuff them in the back of your bowels where they are safe. You put a lot of cello tape around it or else your money gets wet and falls apart. But I had, this time, saved my money by putting it in a hollow in the wall of a house that I was plastering. I had it safe behind the plaster, in fact it is still safe! The only problem is that I will never see it again! How can you go later to someone's house and say: 'My money is hidden in your wall behind the cement'. You are not even allowed in a Libyan house because blacks are not allowed in Libyan houses.

I put 900 dollars in that wall and lost it for good. But as soon as I have the chance I will go for a third time, and that time I must succeed. Soon you'll see me go again! By the way there's more dollars in those walls than mine alone!