

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Stories From Ghanaian Emigrants. Contents & Introduction



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Introduction

Why this book? It all started with Kwame Baffoe, the guy who only wept once. Kwame was the hospital driver at the time that I worked as a tropical doctor at

Nkoranza Hospital. One day Baffoe disappeared. After two weeks his relatives came to ask for his end of service benefit. I was then the medical director as well as the administrator and I had to say No, he vacated his post so sorry, no. But where for God's sake is Baffoe? They silently left. This was in the mid-eighties.

Between 1994 and 1996 I studied in Chicago. When I returned to Ghana afterwards, to look after the children living at our community and be the mental health coordinator for the region, I needed, among others, a car and a driver as my job meant a lot of traveling up and down. So I bought a car and then, then I met up with Kwame Baffoe again! He was driving his own minibus for public transport and looked the same as always, included the half smile and the twinkle in his eyes. I asked: 'Can you help? Drive me to Sunyani when I need to? Which is often'? 'Yes', he said.

Baffoe has never been a man of many words. That's how we met again after more than ten years and, many words or not, one day he told me his story. How he traveled and when he returned to his country Ghana. I was impressed especially since he told me his story the way you and I would talk about a trip to the supermarket. Facts, not emotions.

One day last year, when I had some leisure time, I decided to interview Baffoe more thoroughly so as to document his experiences. He agreed readily. So did thirteen other persons here in Nkoranza. It became a passion, almost an addiction, to hear these stories and write them down meticulously. All these interviewees became my friends and we keep meeting in town.

I did these interviews between August and September 2006 and found all of them, not one excluded, exciting enough to write them down. I could have done hundreds more but I was saturated. My admiration for the tenacious and often also hilarious Ghanaian spirit, which is already high, had risen tremendously by listening to these stories. Then one by one they came to me and asked: where is the book? Didn't you say you would put our interviews in a book? Yes, I said, that's what I said! Whooooops!

I started searching on the internet and mailed the Tropical Institute Publishers in Amsterdam. Nice, they said, but no, we publish themes, not individual stories. Try Rozenberg. I looked up Rozenberg, of which there are many, but I found Rozenberg Publishers in Amsterdam and I wrote, Are you interested?□

‘Send me a story or two’. I did that, immediately. Thank God, by the way, for computers! I could hardly breathe waiting for his reply. ‘Breathe’, the guy from Rozenberg said, ‘in the long run that is better for your health’. Then this: ‘Hmm, these stories need to be read! Let’s go for them.’

And so it happened! Here is the book! Even if you only browse through some stories you might still catch some of that tough great spirit of Ghana! But I’m almost sure you’ll read the book from cover to cover. Do, but keep breathing, remember?

I dedicate this book to Samuel Kwame Baffo, my loyal friend whose voice you hear in the chapter alluded to ‘A scar reminds me of the day I wept’ and to Bob, my dear husband, my muse and my editor! And thanks to you too, Auke!

This is non-fiction.

Many of these friends walk around in Nkoranza. Some live overseas but come regularly to Ghana to visit and if possible financially help their family.

All the life-stories that I listened to with my tape-recorder and all my heart are written down almost verbatim. Some repetitive parts have been omitted and sometimes I had to translate the local language into English. From all the names only those in one story have been changed, otherwise the people interviewed preferred to be called by their own names. Good for them!

From the Preface

It all started with Kwame Baffoe, the guy who ‘only wept once’.

Kwame was the hospital driver at the time that I worked in Nkoranza Hospital as tropical doctor. One day Baffoe disappeared. After two weeks his relatives came to ask for his end of service benefit. I was then the medical director as well as the administrator and I had to say ‘no, he vacated his post. Sorry no entitlements when someone walks out and does not return within ten days. Trade Union agreement. But where is Baffoe?’ They smiled silently and left. This was in the mid-eighties.

I returned to Nkoranza after studies in Chicago and, apart from caring for my mentally handicapped children, I had received the appointment from the Ministry of Health to be regional mental health director in our regional capital, Sunyani. This meant a lot of travel up and down. I bought a car and then ...I saw Baffoe! It might have been 1997. He was operating his minibus as a taxi and looked well,

the same half-smile plus now a tiny little belly. I asked him 'Can you help me? Drive me to Sunyani any time I need to? Which is often?' 'Yes', he said. Baffoe is not a man of many words.

That's how we met again and, many words or not, one day he told me his story. How and where he traveled and how and when he returned to his country Ghana. I was impressed, flabbergasted is the more appropriate term maybe, especially since he told me the story the way you talk about a shopping trip at the supermarket. Facts, not emotions.

I felt the topic of his 'end of service benefit' still hanging in the air. And yes a few days later he asked me why I withheld 'his money' when he left for Libya. I told him that I did what I thought was right and that it was not 'his money' but 'the hospital's money'. 'Okay', he said. 'Now, older, and after understanding all that you went through, I might have been milder', I said, which is true. 'No, you are right. Okay'. Speaking about it after so many years settled the issue so the case was closed.

In my dreams his hazardous travel stories kept following me and one day last year, when I had some more leisure time, I decided to interview him once again and to document his experiences. He agreed readily. So did thirteen other persons here in Nkoranza. It became a passion, almost an addiction, to hear these stories and write them down meticulously. All these interviewees became my friends and we keep meeting in town. I could have done hundreds more of these interviews but to everything there is a natural end.

About the author:

The former Dutch tropical doctor *Ineke Bosman* once had a very special dream: the creation of a safe and loving place to live for intellectually (and often multiple) disabled children in Ghana. These children are still undervalued and abandoned, among others as a result of the widely spread fear for "evil spirits".

By founding the *Hand in Hand Community* in Nkoranza in 1992, Ineke Bosman was able to make her dream a visible and unique reality. Ineke retired in 2009 and left for Holland. Since then Albert van Galen, together with his wife Jeannette, has taken over the leadership of this wonderful community.

See also: <http://www.operationhandinhand.nl/>