

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ It Is Love For One Another That Makes Us Continue. Interview With Kojo Sampson



I am Kojo Sampson. Three years ago, in 2002, I traveled to Libya and returned last year. I am a plumber but in Libya I did different work. I worked with German people at a gas-company near Tripoli. That is a factory that sees to the transport of piped gas. The pipe is government property but the contract has been given to a German firm. I planned from the beginning to find work there and succeeded in doing so. That helped me for the conditions of living are better with the Germans as compared to the Libyans. So relatively I had it easier. But I was away from my Ghanaian friends in Tripoli and I missed them. Therefore I did not also know how bad they had it. I thought I had it bad the way I was treated and at a certain stage I wanted to run to Italy for I could no longer stand the humiliations. Only later did I hear that those Ghanaians who work contracts in Tripoli suffered much worse from the local people. I had hoped to receive money from my family but they disappointed me and so I had no money to make the trip to Italy.

I started thinking about going to Libya after completing school. This was because I needed money to establish my own business. I have no helpers in life and so I had made plans to help myself.

I started to save money I earned here and there with the single aim of paying for my trip to Libya. The business that was in my mind was opening a store in Nkoranza where I would offer combined plumbing works and the placing of tile-floors and bathrooms. That was what I had in mind since I completed school where I learned these skills. I attended the Technical Training Institute at Abetifi in the Kwahu Mountains and specialized in plumbing and tiles setting. I also decided that I wanted to be my own boss.

I went to Libya and worked hard in order to come back with enough money to

establish my own store. I am back now and as you know I am in business and it is growing and doing well. I have become known in Nkoranza already!

At that time it took me two million Cedis to go to Libya, which equals 200 dollars. I took the route through Agadez in Niger and from there I went to Tripoli where I have spent two years making money.

The journey was rough. I did not like it. I will not advise anybody to go to Libya because the trip is too dangerous for any human being. I would not have done it if I knew then what I know now. The road is bad. The cars are not maintained in fact they are terribly overloaded. A pickup from Agadez to Druku is filled with 27 Ghanaians in the back, while there is place for only 10. If you make it during that trip, there is another pickup waiting for you to drive you through the desert to Libya. Same situation, overloaded with again 27 people and the car is old.

They treat you like cattle. The pickup shakes and there you are with two hundred percent overload. You take turns and sit in the back or hang over the edge of the pickup. On the way between Agadez and Druku I fell off. The car goes at night and we all get sleepy. They drive at night because of the police patrols during the day and also the sun gets too hot. So we travel late evening till early morning and during the day you can't sleep either because you have to protect your money and your belongings. One night I fell asleep, however much I struggled to keep my eyes open. Everybody pushes all the time and I fell, I did not even notice it till I hit the ground. Because we are all Ghanaians, Nkoranza people, we look out for one another. If not you die. They saw me falling off the car and knocked hard on the back window of the cabin to make the driver stop and pick me up. If no one would notice it or if they are strangers then you lay there and you are lost in the desert. So it is important to travel with your own people.

Then during the second stretch, the desert stretch between Durku and Libya, we missed the road and had to stop somewhere in the middle of nowhere. We don't even know how we finally reached Libya. The drivers sat together in the sand and did not know their way, we could see it. The water got exhausted and some of us got afraid. The drivers were doing some bad praying and performing some secret things, kind of Voodoo, and then all of a sudden, alone and out of nowhere, came a man walking towards our car. He was a ghost and he was able to direct the car the right way. There was no village around and no one knew where that man came from. The drivers connived to call him to lead them out of the desert. They do that, they use black magic. We were all thirsty and exhausted. All 27 people in

the car were from Nkoranza and we all made it! We really got to know each other very well and all of us will be friends for life. From car to car we all stay together, all the way from Nkoranza to Libya. So, yes, we all became one.

Only from Agadeze to Druku one Nigerian joined us. He said he was from Accra but soon we realized he was a Nigerian. He was not a good person. He started fighting in the car. Then we dropped the guy out of our car because he troubled us too much.

If we drop such a person we only do it when we are sure another car with Nigerians is behind us to pick him up for we can't let him die all by himself, trouble or not. Those people wherever they go they create problems. For example any time we meet police we all pay up but the Nigerian said: 'I don't have money, no money there' and the police says: 'If you have no money how could you go to Libya? Better return now!' You see, these kind of things. We Ghanaians, we know how to behave ourselves but for them they create problems wherever they go and they steal too. So we let him off the car.

As I said the car that left from Nkoranza carried the same group of people that eventually arrived in Tripoli. Even one of my best friends is now in Italy. He slept in my room in Nkoranza until our transport arrived. We did everything together, we traveled side by side all the way. But after making enough money in Tripoli he traveled by boat to Italy and that's where he now is. He calls me, we write and we remain close.

He sends money to Ghana for others to continue to Italy. I too I wanted to go to Italy but my family disappointed me. They delayed sending money for my boat-trip for they had none. My family would have sent the money through a connection-man. There are connection-people there in Libya who arrange for the money of many Ghanaians. They have been there so many years that they know all the ways and they stay there and that is what they do for a living. They tell your family in Ghana to send money to Libya and they give it to you in dollars. They charge of course. The money for transport to Italy amounts to 800 dollars. No passport, only the boat. You become a refugee. Dangerous! One of our friends died on the sea, he was one of the friends who worked at the same company in Tripoli. He drowned. He is from Nkwabeng and recently they have sent his body back to the village, it was a very big funeral. I know his family and often talk with them.

So one day the police trapped me and simply sent me back.

Love between one another is what makes us continue. The Libyans have no love for us. When they call us we just look at the way they shout at us! They won't allow you to drink from their cup, rather break it than give it to you as a black man. If you have music they hate it and destroy your machine. They shame us, they treat us less than animals. That is why many of us do not want to keep working in Tripoli. It is because the Libyans are so hostile that we are driven into the sea and try to reach Italy. Once in Italy you are treated well and you can feel what it is to be a human being again. Not so in Libya, we are not considered to be human there. I will never go there again. We want to make money and then go back to Ghana to do something with it, but the cruelty of those Arabs makes us get into these shaky boats to risk our life trying to cross the sea to Italy. More often than not also they catch us and take all our money and then you have to start all over again.

The German company provides a good environment for us. But the directors are Libyans and out to attack and humiliate you, to insult your mother, to kill sometimes. That is the normal thing for them. Only some Libyans who know Ghana or have traveled overseas are better. If they have been to Ghana they call you and start a conversation: 'I have been to your country, I was in Kumasi', that kind of thing. Most of them have never even been outside Tripoli and those are the ones that make you want to run away.

No juju, no, they just pester and try to kill you. Some times small boys climb on a car when they see a black man in the back and they tease and beat us and try to throw us out of the car. Nobody minds. They have no culture. They are bad.

I came back as a deportee but I came back with my money. I brought 800 dollars back with me. The police picked me up and brought me to a Ghanaian camp and from there they flew me straight to Ghana. They had no chance to steal my money. October 11th of last year was the day I flew back to Ghana. I was shocked but went straight to Nkoranza and started right away with my business. It is now a year later and I am doing well. People trust me and they like my work. I have reached success already.

I have no wife and children yet. I want to set up the business very well before I get a wife and start a family. The worst experience was the desert!

The car that got lost in the desert and the insulting. I remember them still in my dreams. I would not allow any of my family to travel the way I did. I see bones in the desert, piles of bones with a passport on top. You stop, you look at the picture, if you know the person you take the passport and bring it back to the relatives. When the car lost its way and we ran out of water I thought I was going to die. I dream about it often. Some guys became mentally mad and violent too. We helped each other.

The stranger, the ghost, came and finally we met in Libya with the other cars but then we saw that one of the three cars was missing. We left Druku with three cars, one to the left and another on the right side. One, a car with strangers, never arrived. We all waited and then the drivers of our two cars went back to search in the desert. They returned. We waited overnight and the next day we waited. So we know 27 persons have died and that is one out of three. We were lucky and now I am lucky to be back and will never go again and never allow anybody to go again!