

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!

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ I Saw Dead People Covered In Dust. Interview With Mr. Darko



I am Mr. Darko, 37 years old and I am married with two children. I'm from here in Nkoranza and I work as a car electrical mechanic in town. I will tell you about the experiences I had on my way to Libya. About three years ago I went to Libya. I started from Ghana, passed Burkina Faso and went on to Niger and then straight into Libya. That's what I thought, but it happened otherwise.

From here to Burkina the road is acceptable but once in Niger the going is rough. From Burkina you get to Niamey which is the capital of Niger. There are many Ghanaians there waiting for their chance to get transport into Libya. In Niamey

you wait until about thirty people have assembled, then you all get into an Urvan minibus. These buses take you to Agadez. Ghanaians wait for each other till they have the money to hire the car together. We Ghanaians, we like to travel together.

“Everyone pays about 300,000 cedis which is 30 dollars to the driver. The driver is not from Ghana, he is from Niger. You take off and although the distance is not too long the road is so bad that it takes you three to four days to get to Agadez. This town is the second capital of Niger and lays at the edge of the desert. The military police stops you many times and each time you have to pay up. When they see Ghanaians in the bus they say: ‘stop, out, pay.’ If you don’t pay they will throw you out of the car. You waste a lot of money on that stretch alone. Every time they stop you, you pay 5 dollars, this is on top of the 30 dollars which you already had to pay to hire the car. Every time the police halts the car they take our passports and documents and we don’t get them back till after paying the bribe.

So after three days and much money you get to Agadez. After Agadez it is all desert, there is no more road. There is a trail which the drivers know but they miss it sometimes when there is a desert storm.

Whenever we stop we sleep beside the car. Really to be honest you cannot sleep. We don’t feel sleepy for while you sleep anything can happen. People will grab your food and your money if you are not alert. So it is not sensible to sleep, so we don’t sleep. It is also very cold the more you get into the desert so you could not even sleep if you wanted to.

There are Toyota land-cruisers and heavy trucks in Agadez; these are the only cars that can drive through the desert. With 30 other people I got into a Toyota Land-cruiser to start the journey through the desert. If you are less lucky you get into a large truck which takes two hundred people at the time! You stand like sardines in these large trucks and the sun burns you and the desert wind fills your eyes and your mouth and even inside your ears with sand. Whatever type of car it is, it is overloaded and still, some people force themselves to get inside by sitting on the edges or by just jumping and clinging to the car.

Once in the desert

Once in the desert everybody is allowed a 7 gallons container with water to drink, and some small gari to eat, nothing else. The water-containers are tied to the car

and hang outside, side by side. Everybody strictly keeps to his own water else there is murder. This water has to last you. When there is a stop you take your tin cup and put some gari in it and then add water and then you eat. Everybody loses weight but we Ghanaians are strong and we don't care. In fact we can do anything, anything at all.

From Agadez to Libya it is '*live or die*'. Everybody becomes serious and has to struggle for himself. There are middle-men in Agadez who organize a car for you. You have to pay them to get into a car. Everybody likes to earn money from us and we have no choice but to pay. So you board your overloaded car! There is not any shade on the way and there is no road, some cars miss the signs and get lost, in which case you die.

But we went in a line, a caravan of five cars from Agadez to Durku, which is near to the border of Libya. That trip is a four day journey through the sand. When the driver gets tired he makes a stop. Then everybody sleeps in the dust but no-one actually sleeps. Early morning the driver shouts 'hajaaa', 'hajaaa', which means up, up, and you go again. You take some of your water from your container and mix it with your gari and that is your breakfast. Every time there is a stop the same you eat and rest a bit and go again.

Some start walking

When your car breaks down there is trouble. A breakdown is painful and then everybody fights for himself to live. You have to get on another car. Some start walking but the dust covers everything and you may panic and then you easily get lost with that sand everywhere.

My car did not break down but another car gave up and we saw people in the desert from that car. We took seven extra people aboard from out of the sand who otherwise would have died. No one knew how they still could fit into our car but they did, they joined our car. The other cars also took as many people as they could. If you did not make it to a car you died.

I saw dead people there, and what they do is cover them with some dust and put their passport on top of the heap. This is because someone might pass who knows them and if they do they take the passport and show it to the relatives.

Stranded in Durku

When we arrived in Durku we thought we had made it but then the big problem started! It was in December, three years ago. The trip had taken more than two weeks in all, and we were close to Libya. But then in Durku we got stranded.

There is only one type of car that can bring you from there to Libya. The land-cruisers in the meantime had returned already. When I came to Durku it was just at the time that Al-Qathafi had made a decree that nobody should enter Libya through the desert borders anymore! We were all locked up in Durku, what could we do? We waited because the president could change his mind which he often does. But no, he never lifted the ban and we were stuck in Durku, which is the farthest village in the desert of Niger.

The food was running out. Only water in abundance because of a natural source, but there was no food to buy except very expensive bread.

With me there were more than 500 Ghanaians stranded and many others like Nigerians and those from Mali and Niger. The Ghanaians stayed together, waiting.

Every day more people assembled in that tiny village. The land-cruisers brought loads of thirty to forty people and the heavy trucks brought them by the two hundreds. It was a complete refugee camp and nobody wanted to turn around and go back to Ghana. We ate what we had and we bought when we had the money but there was little money on me.

I kept all my money safely on my body and counted it every day. Some people had not enough to return with. Some were too adventurous and tried anyway to force themselves with that one car into Libya. We all waited but they did not succeed. After a number of days the car came back with only a few people left, very few people left. Most had died from thirst. The driver said that heavy border guards were patrolling at the border of Libya and there was no way through.

Waiting

All this happened because some Nigerians and Malians has smuggled cocaine and drugs into Libya through the desert. The president got to know of it and closed the borders just when I had arrived for my passage to Libya. It was a very hard blow to my plans.

You count your money every day and the day you find you have just enough to return then you have to return. We stayed three weeks waiting. We were quiet because of those who had died trying their luck crossing over to Libya.

I decided to return, I had enough money for myself and I could pay for a young boy from Nkoranza. I looked after him and took him back with me.

A few women were there too but mostly all this is too hard for women. Women also cannot push a car when it gets stuck so the drivers don't want them.

I left Ghana in December and I returned with the young boy in February. I was forty days on the road and three weeks in that border town, waiting.

I could not call or send a message but the word went to Ghana that we were all coming back. My family and my wife and children were so happy to see me alive. They had all heard about the news that many people had died. So they rejoiced but all the same my wife was sad that I had failed to get into Libya.

Your home town

If you help a friend who has no money you have to take a friend from your own town. That is the only way by which you will get your money back. If you see someone stranded from another town like Nkawkaw you don't help him for you never find your money back again. Those who have no helper will die, they just roam around till they drop down in the sand. There in that place we all have to fight for ourselves alone.

The boy from Nkoranza was lucky that he met someone like me who helped him. He is from my town. The boy paid back and he became a friend. His family is very grateful.

My wife was happy but sad. Happy for life but sad for the wasted money which we had lost. We wasted three million Cedis then, that would be five million now because of inflation. That is 500 dollar. We still cry about the waste. When I have the money now I will go again and this time I will succeed. I want to go for here in Ghana there is simply no future for me and my family.

Once in Libya you can either earn enough to start your own business here in Ghana or, if you are lucky, you get into Spain and then you get more money for you take any job you can. My brother is in Spain for over four years. He often calls me and tells me how to go about getting out of Ghana. He was the one who gave me money to travel to Libya when I failed and had to return. Right now last week he called me again and said 'Come! Try again!' Yes I am soon going to try again!

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Interview with Mr. Darko from Nkoranza (Ghana) - October 2005

Ineke Bosman - To be a man is not easy - Stories from Ghanaian emigrants
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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 metaculously. 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.

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

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.

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ No Other Treats Than Daily Fresh Insults. Interview With Yaw Charles From Nkoranza



It was a few years ago that I went from Nkoranza to Libya to look for work. This was because I had no job and nothing to do in Ghana.

During the two years in which I stayed in Libya I lived in Tripoli. I did contract work, mostly mason jobs and welding jobs. I was there with my brother Sampson, but Sampson got into a company while I worked on daily or weekly basis or whatever longer contract work was available. Life is better if you work with a company in Libya. Because Sampson worked with a company outside Tripoli far away from the capital we did not meet much of one another during our time in Libya. After our journey together all the way up to Libya we lost contact, although we Ghanaians all know from each other where we

are and how we live and so on.

The desert trek was all right for me. I don't mind whatever happens to me as long as I am alive and can fetch some money. So yes I got work to do and I saved money and decided to go to Italy.

Mosaratta is the place in Libya where you get boats to Italy. Just when we were preparing to get into the boats and take off over the sea towards Italy the police came to cut us! They put us in prison for four months and then they simply sent us back by plane to Ghana. Libyan people are not good. They are so arrogant that for example they don't let us, black people, into their houses. They do not talk to us.

In prison they treated us very badly. They kept beating us every single day and we got nothing to eat. We received no other treats except daily fresh insults. During these four months in prison we did not even get a bath! No soap, no water, no towel, nothing, except beatings. Actually they enjoy disgracing us. Cruel people they are. Now I am back and have nothing to do except some little farming work.

I am waiting for money and then I will try my luck again. I have a friend in Italy who may send me the money to go back to Libya. I am waiting. Now I am weeding the farm while I wait for my chance to go.

I am not married. I will get settled with a woman when I return from there with money. I cannot disgrace a woman by staying with her without money or marrying her in order to just go away again.

The Libyans disgrace us but I can stand it for it is the money that I need.

Next time I go however I will do it differently. I will not try to go to Italy. I will return to Ghana as soon as I have gathered enough money and then I will settle, take a woman and start a business.

Next time I will get into a company the way my friend did. Now I know how to go about it. It is a matter of paying the man who leaves the post. The deal is among Ghanaians of course for we look after our own. I will wait in Tripoli till a friend at the company goes to Italy and then I will get his position. It is all a matter of being in the know and paying. To get the job you pay the man who is leaving, that is all. I will go and stay for two years and then return. And then I will settle with my woman and we will live happily and get children and all that.

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ I Want To Get A Life But I Can't Because I Am Waiting. Interview With Richard Kwasi Ntim



I am a native of Nkoranza, Richard is the name, 42 years old. In 1987, at the age of twenty, I decided to leave Ghana. Always I have had the urge to travel; for the sake of traveling, exploring new environments and meeting new people, not specifically to work or doing anything special. I had already visited three West-African countries before I went to Libya. Traveling is my habit. I was in Mali, Senegal and Cote D'Ivoire, just casual visits. I am an O-level student and completed secondary school here in Nkoranza.

So it was in 1987 that I went to Libya. I worked there at a company in Tripoli. Those days it was difficult to get a visa into Libya so I went by road. We passed through Agadez, then to Tamanrasset and on to Gat, which is a town in southern Libya. To get there you have to walk for three days. We walked with a group of Africans, eighty in all, from three cars. There were ten Ghanaians among us and many other West-Africans. Difficult! But interesting because I met other people and shared my experiences and before I knew it we had crossed the desert and were there. You have to be strong else you get sick or mad. Some people died along the roadside and we had to call their relatives to inform them of their misfortune. But I and the majority made it.

Then on from Gat to Tripoli. Not so easy but I was lucky for I had means to board a plane and flew to Tripoli. There I worked for a year. I had a job at a construction company. After a year I decided to leave for the environment in Libya is not conducive to peaceful living. Fortunately I got a visa at the Dutch embassy in Libya and went to Holland. It was hard to get the travel documents and they

asked many questions at the embassy but I impressed them and they issued the visa and I took a trip from Tripoli to Amsterdam. Malta airlines, with a two-day stop in Malta. In 1988 I arrived in Holland. I knew nobody there so what I did is I stayed for a few days in a boardinghouse in Amsterdam; later I got to know a man from Ghana who introduced me to other Ghanaians and the house where those from Nkoranza live. I moved in and it was nice for we all knew each other from Nkoranza from before; we were all born and bred in Nkoranza and as you know it is a small town. I lived with a person in one room, the apartment contained four people, in the center of Amsterdam near the Wibautstraat. Another guy from France came to join us. The rent was not too bad, 450 guilders for all of us, so we shared the rent and the light bill and so on. Manageable, a good place. My room mate was illegal and I too. I lived there for two years up to the 90's. At that time it was easy to find jobs. Work two hours here, then three hours there, then two hours cleaning a hotel in the evening and so on. Nowadays finding that kind of work is difficult in Holland but in the eighties it was easily available. Later I worked with 'Carpetland' which is a big company with branches in many towns. I worked with a job manager whose name I still know, Willem I think. They were good people at Carpetland and I traveled a lot for them.

One person helped me to get papers and so I used them. They were not my own paper as I had none so we shared them and I would pay for using the papers. So then what? Two years in Amsterdam, Carpetland. I had to process my own papers one way or another for I used those of others. So I decided to get a Dutch woman, she was from Surinam. We were going to marry but just then I received a permit for one year so we did not have to marry. The woman had to work and I also worked and stayed at my place with the Nkoranza people. We did not live together. It was friendship and we met each weekend, I worked and in the weekends I stayed with my girlfriend. I was twenty-five and she was over forty. No children with her she was too old but here in Ghana I have two children from before I left.

I had my residence permit for a year and now I did everything I could to obtain a work-permit. I even had a fiscal number. I was legal from the start for I decided to process my papers immediately. In 1989 I was legal. Then what happened I don't know because they got me. They got my papers too and kept them away from me. They started to give me problems. They said I should leave the Carpetland. Then I worked in a hotel and later at a blade-industry in Sloterdijk. I paid my rent, there

was no problem. Fridays I go to the girlfriend and Mondays I come home and start work again. That's how I lived for two years in Holland, 1988 till the later part of 1991. Then all of a sudden, and this is fifteen years ago, I was forced to return to Ghana!

I was processing my work-permit and already had my fiscal number. All was well. Then one day when I woke up in the morning the police came to my apartment. They say can we see your papers. I show them. They say 'pack all your belongings' and I did so, boxes and suitcases, all, brought it to the police car and it was sent to the police station. I went with them and later returned to the apartment. The next day I came back to the police to collect my things and I saw that the bags were destroyed. With hammers and knives they had been beating and cutting everything I had. When I came there all my things were scattered on the street, bags and boxes emptied out and ravaged, right in front of the police station.

I became very worried and made a complaint. The officer said 'Oh well I don't know' and that I should wait. I never found out, they said nothing to me. Before I knew what happened they put me in a car and onto the plane and back to Ghana! Forcefully I was put in a backseat of the plane. I had no passport, just before we landed they gave me my passport back. The one year-permit and all papers were removed from my passport, I can't believe it, still.

Upon arrival I went straight to the Netherlands embassy in Ghana as I was furious. I asked them why, why all this! They say they don't know. They say they would find out. They would send a telex. That is fifteen years ago and since then I have been waiting and they never came with any response at all. In 1991 I was so frustrated that I decided to just fly back to the Netherlands but when I reached Amsterdam they arrested me at the airport. They said all my papers are in Ghana not in Holland so I can't enter the country and they forced me to return to Ghana again. I went back like a thief. Up and down and up and down and nobody explains me what the problem is. I wait. I don't live, I am waiting. The embassy in Accra never said anything! I say to them: 'I went to Holland and they say in Holland that my papers are with you at the Embassy in Accra'. They say 'Oh no, we know nothing about it. Come later'.

My money and everything is gone! From 1991 till now I have been put on hold. For 15 years I call the embassy and nobody minds me. I am a very angry person. I

don't work, how could I work, I can't even concentrate except about my papers. I hired a lawyer but nothing comes out of it. I want to get a life but I can't for I am waiting. I cannot take a wife because I have no money. I am not married. I am just so angry. I do not rely on anybody anymore, I trust nobody. Where can I get employed? I have no brothers and no friends among my own Ghanaian people too. I am getting crazy. I thought the truth would come out but till now no truth has come out. Day after day I call the embassy but nothing happens at all. In the meantime I have done nothing wrong. If I were wrong I would not fight like this.

Why? I would have known it if I had an enemy, I have no enemy. If, say, I were a cocaine dealer or a smuggler, would I have come back the next morning? Would I? I would have disappeared! No but I returned for my luggage because I am innocent. My friends here in Ghana do not want to talk to me now. Why? Because they are rich and I am poor so they ignore me. They say I mismanaged and was repatriated and now they shun me. They don't care. They are all rich so they don't mind me. They don't like poor friends and they say I have disgraced myself.

I will never find out what happened but I will not start living till I have found out. I have done nothing wrong. I did nothing against anybody so why do you frustrate my life like that?

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Mercy, The Girl With The Red Leggings



The rumor arrived before she herself made her appearance: 'Mercy is back!' 'Mercy? Really, you are kidding! Mercy back?' 'Yes, she is in the country and will be here any day now!'

Two days later Salamata came inside my house and announced with restrained excitement as if she introduced a famous star: 'Here ... is ... Mercy!' And there was Mercy! Glowing, beautiful, graceful and courteous Mercy, with

Philomena in a sling on her back and a present for us in her hand.

We all started talking at the same time. Mercy, you are back! You look so great! Hugging, exchanging compliments, truly happy to see her so well. She had hardly time to sit down because she had not seen her own parents yet and had to move on with her taxi to the small village nearby. Of course we could not keep her long and yet we did, we simply had to!

Mercy, who worked with us at our home for the handicapped children, left four years ago and she left rather unceremoniously. Mercy had been a very good caregiver and her children Inno and Philo had thrived by her playful and loving care. When she came to me that Friday night four years ago she cried uncontrollably. 'I am so sorry but I have got the ticket to fly to Italy and the flight is Sunday and I simply have to go, it is my only chance'. Taken aback, though these kind of sudden departures happen quite a bit in Ghana, we kissed and I thanked her for her work in our community and waved her good-bye.

Life goes on. We heard about her every now and then. In Italy, always good news, and once we saw Philo in a beautiful new dress. 'From where?' Oh, Mercy has sent money over from Italy and the caregivers together had bought the most intensely beautiful dress for Philo from the money. Philo wears that dress every Sunday. And now this... Mercy is back!

She left like a girl with red leggings and a gentle though somewhat casual style of doing things and she re-appeared transformed into a demure, graceful lady! 'Mercy, tell your story if you will?'

Well, they did get a ticket for me, my uncles in Italy, and I was to look after a child, was to be a nanny. Then I worked extremely hard all the time and everywhere, mostly in textile factories. I still do, from early till late at night. People in Italy like hardworking foreigners and next year I will get my Italian citizenship. And also ... Mercy is married!

Did you know him before you left Ghana? 'No, but they told me about him and I had a full year in Italy to study his character and then I said yes, I want to marry Ebenezer'. What we gathered is that Ebenezer, her new husband, was originally in Holland but as the immigration laws in Holland got tougher every year he had drifted down south to Italy where seemingly it is easier to become a legal immigrant. That's by the way why many boat-immigrants travel overland from Spain to Italy where they can breathe freer without being immediately picked up by the police. Spain too is difficult for immigrants. Whatever the cost was, and it

must have been a whole lot more than the few hardships she had endured in Italy of which she talked about, she reappeared as a woman radiating success and we were so happy to see her almost majestic appearance.

She left, really had to see her own real parents now (Bob and I are like second parents to her) and so we kissed and she was gone. She will come back in two years, by that time an Italian citizen with her lawful young husband Ebenezer. Who knows, a baby as well. We are proud for her!

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Education, Solidarity And Being Able To Say No. Interview With Matthew Essieh



Matt Essieh is my name, born in Sampa which is a village on the border with Ivory Coast. I loved school but had to stop at age twelve after completing middle school. My parents were very poor, even so that I had to live as an altar boy at the Catholic mission. My parent's house was literally too small for all their children and you know that we Africans can improvise! So I grew up at the mission. After middle school I went across the border into Ivory Coast and stayed with an aunt. It was my own idea and the only way I knew to find money to further my education for which I have a passion. Yes so my plan was to do odd jobs and so raise enough money to support myself through secondary school. I decided on moving over the border into another country because in those days the economy over there was better. It was for example possible to earn money delivering loads at the local market with your wheel barrel and I also sold ice-cream with one of these bicycles with a cold box up front. I was willing to do everything. I cleaned tables in one of the hotels and many other 'by-day' jobs, whatever I could find.

This hotel had a restaurant where many of the Peace Corps volunteers used to come and have a drink after their work. The French language is hard for the Americans and I spoke English with them. Two Peace Corps volunteers took a special interest in me. They were maybe 21 years old and I was then 15. They really wanted to help me go through high school. So with the money I earned over these three years in Ivory Coast, and with their help, I found admission at secondary school in Brong Ahafo in Ghana. I was a little tiny skinny kid at that time so I looked as young as the other students. These volunteers helped me so much because they paid most of the tuition fees. I almost finished secondary school but during my last year one of the volunteers died. She had leukemia and died in Washington DC. I heard later that before this girl died she asked her parents to please look after 'the boy in Ghana'. They then took such an interest in me that they helped me go to college in the States. I went to Oregon, Southern State Oregon University. When I left Ghana and entered college in The States I was probably 20 or 21.

Oregon is beautiful and quiet. It was the perfect place for me coming from a small rural town in Ghana. The atmosphere is nice that's why I was specially grateful to be able to attend college over there on the West Coast. I graduated in computer business and then also got a Masters Degree in business studies.

Of course when you grow up here in Ghana you never forget your family. You feel strongly that you need to help your own country. So I studied hard and worked hard and was quite successful in both. I sought to get jobs which enabled me to best help my family in Ghana, like other Ghanaians do to their family.

My first job was at the computer department of a bank. I worked there for four or five years in software and accounting. In the meantime I had been in the States for over seven years and had never spoken my own language again. There was nobody from Ghana in my area and I felt cut off. I speak Twi. There were Nigerians and people from Sierra Leone but I did not get to speak my own language. There were no telephones, cell phones and all that in Ghana at that time.

So I really felt homesick and in 1985 returned for the first time to my country and my family. It took me a week to get the feel for my language again and that was a very strange experience. When I came back I saw my mother and my brothers and sisters, their young children and all the extended family. I wanted to help them all. It baffled me. I just had this little job which I was doing and how could I have

enough money to support my family and extended family and the whole town?

So I went back to the States. I started thinking a lot about my obligation to help. I can only help if I have something! That inspired me to start my own business because working for somebody else limits you. In the USA, while I did not encounter racism, it was still hard to break into the system as somebody from the outside, particularly as an African. I decided therefore to start my own software consulting business. In the computer and software field there is a market and when you know what you are doing color does not play a role anymore. Besides computer science is really my branch.

I created my own website for the company and soon received clients from all over the world. From the Netherlands and England and of course from inside the USA. From many other countries as well, so much so that I was baffled by my own success.

I provide software for financial institutions. We now have our own building, a large facility in Portland, and we support several customers in Chicago and in the New York area and even in the Southern part of the country. I am the primary owner and have a large staff of employees and engineers. The business is important but more important is what I do with the funds. I had started my business with the sole aim to help my people in Ghana. There was a reason for this business beyond just becoming successful. Eventually I decided to set up a foundation with my family. My wife is a beautiful lady from Nigeria and I also have three kids. My son is now 17 years old. He is also here in Ghana at the moment, spending his summer vacation in Sampa.

So I have set up a non-for-profit foundation with the profits of the company. I use it for example to support our kids from Sampa in their education, and also to help children of Ghanaians who come to the States. I make it a point to see that they get quality education instead of just doing day to day jobs here and there. Good education sets them off right in life and gives them a foundation to prosper. Right now we're supporting one youngster who just completed his Bachelor's degree. He is working at Intel. Another is in Canada where he just received a Masters degree and we are also helping two other students. So I primarily assist young talented Ghanaians with good education and if they succeed in America they hopefully think about the people they left behind in Ghana.

At the minimum they will help their own family and hopefully more than that. We don't expect from the Ghanaian kids in the USA that they repay their school-fees

to our foundation but what we expect from them is that they study seriously, graduate, find a good job and help their homeland. Well right now they don't pay us back, I may change that in the future.

Our foundation also helps with some projects in Sampa. We use some of the funds to help with medical supplies and do fundraising to construct a dormitory for girls at Sampa's secondary school. That's why I am in Ghana now, to see how the construction of the dormitory is going. It goes well. My son stays on to help while I have to return to the States.

You could say that I run a development agency for my town Sampa in Ghana and for good education of Ghanaian children in the States. That was the cause, the reason for starting my now well known software business. I have to say that always and always keeping that goal in mind was one of the reasons that I succeeded. To work just for money is sometimes empty. I make profit for a cause. There is a motive for the profit beyond myself and my family and I have seen that that is a satisfactory way of living in all kind of ways.

Of course there are difficulties in running a business, all kind of problems. It is however a fact that they change into light burdens if you know that the aim of it all is to help people! It gives the energy to go on when it becomes hard.

The problems in Africa can be so overwhelming that you just throw your hands in the air! However if you develop your talent well and you get friends and family to help, then you can do miracles for others even beyond your immediate family. That is what we emphasize in our foundation and to the students who we sponsor: 'Have a heart for service to others!'

Well I've visited all the families of the kids in the States that we helped through their education. They have shown dedication to their family in Ghana so that side of the equation has happened. We have a fundraiser for this girl's dormitory at Sampa and many have come to help, so at that level too it works. But it could work better still. What I am talking about, structural help, is more difficult because the outcome is a long term effect, you can't see it immediately. Mostly our people want to help relatives, not an infrastructure for the village.

What we do therefore is select the students who we sponsor. We have to make decisions. It is very difficult to get an insight in people when they come for an interview. They come in, they have a name and they want education and pretend they are going to help. How to select the genuine and generous talents! So what I do is ask the community more information about the child and so get more of a

background picture. There are people I believe in.

There are people I turn down because we have limited resources and we can't waste them. My own money and even more importantly the money of the foundation can build a house for someone, things like that. I don't do that, I want development at a larger scale. Yes I have built a house for my old mother of course but beyond that it stops and we work for the community. My wife is member of the foundation and my son will be part of it as soon as he is 21.

We have to get our own children involved. My wife is very supportive while she is not even from Sampa, my wife is from Lagos in Nigeria. Yet she went to Sampa and she helps the foundation with all her heart. We also raise funds at the school of my children. So the project is under way in Sampa and as far as getting my family involved and making them part of the process I am pleased. My son decided on his own to come to Ghana. He never made locks before and now he is making locks and works with his hands at the construction site and he is happy.

I have a 15 year old girl who likes what girls of that age like, so for her I have to be careful not to push it. I want to make them aware and then the choice is theirs. I have an 8 year old girl and she has a caring side.

My business has been in place for 17 years. We have never laid off people, we consider them as extended family. In 2000 when the economy and technology in the USA went down I kept my people. I told them: you can feed your family, pay your mortgages and pay your rent. We don't lay you off. Because of this they are loyal; we have many employees who have worked over 10 years with me. Our employees are mostly Americans, mostly Anglo's, also a few Koreans and some Africans. We have diversity and we are able to work together. Sometimes I am surprised with our customers who are mostly from the South where they are not so open to blacks. They love us there because we produce quality and provide customer satisfaction which seems to make color fade away! We don't have problems getting contracts in the South, Alabama, Atlanta, etc. We do what we promise we are honest and our values transcend race and nationality.

We have had competition come and go, it is not easy to run a business with customers all over the nation and it is not easy to turn a profit while we have to keep the employees comply with all the laws and get new products. Our employees know about our fundraising but I don't force it. If someone wants to donate that is a private issue.

I think my old environment, I mean growing up in Sampa with the extended family

which is so dependent on each other and the atmosphere at the mission-church has formed me and I have been very lucky. It was natural to help at the family's farm from as early onwards as I can remember, all our brothers and sisters did the same. My mother, grandmother and uncles instilled staunch values in us, of which education is one and solidarity another. That dear Peace-corps family helped me so much. My mother is Catholic, my dad too. But I have some aunts who are Muslims and that gave me the vision that we are all one. When I went to school the Muslim kids did not have a school and some of them were my best friends. I would go to Mass and they would say their own prayers.

Each time over and over again when I return to Sampa I have the same problems that each Ghanaian faces coming back home to Ghana. Everybody wants help and you have to say 'no'. It remains difficult. I'm a top manager as they call it and still I find it hard to say no for it hurts and it keeps hurting. I've learned that it hurts more if you don't say no when you have to. My mother must be in her early seventies. You know African families, after I left she got still more kids. My parents did not marry. I see all of my family as my brothers and sisters. I am very proud of my brothers who have a building material corporation in Sampa. When I come I encourage them to stay in the same town. There is more profit in larger towns. It remains overwhelming and all I want is to make the greatest contributions I can. If I have the money and somebody really needs help I help him. I can help people with computer education. Some people may complain that I give to some an education and not to others but I can only take people who can be effective managers. I have to make decisions. Not everybody knows how to manage money. With money you can help someone but then the money is gone! Therefore I really want to help the community even if someone is going to be angry about it. You can't make everybody happy so I make those decisions. In my case I have been lucky and blessed. I have been successful so I have the resources. Some of my colleagues in the States have a job and a salary but maybe not that much. They have all that extended family back home with all their expenses and that is why they do not sometimes come back to Ghana, because the problems are so overwhelming.

In my case because of the foundation and the way I know to say either yes or no we succeed. I try to come back every other year and if I don't make it my wife and my kids come. I try to bring the kids so they can see and compare and make their own decisions. My son when he first got here said he saw everyone sitting around

a fire and talking and laughing. In the States everyone gets in the room and watches TV. He liked it here. On the compound he would play with his cousins and the nieces.

Will we or the children come back to live here when we are old? I think you have to realize not everybody has the same idea about building a house here after living in the States for over 30 years. And I don't know how it feels when I have reached that age!

What is sure is that I will come and spend time here and will go back and forth. I am now in two worlds and now we have all the communications we want to reduce the gap. I can take the phone and be there by plane within 24 hours. It's accessible in all kind of ways. But who knows in time I may decide to come back and stay here. The most important thing in my view is being connected with the place where I grew up. My children live in two worlds too and they say they are more American than African. Myself I will always be an African and hopefully through me and my extended family they can at least know their roots and acquire the knowledge that they are part of one world and that service to men, in this case Ghana, is a noble pursuit.

If I had stayed in Ghana I would have gathered money to invest, starting small and then extending gradually. Education is key, however now in Ghana the rural schools are plainly bad. They should be improved.

We should export services instead of products. The key to success in Africa is in the service industry. We must be able to export our services and knowledge just as the Koreans and other Asians do. The Indians set a great example with their service businesses which knows of no borders! They have developed a niche with their ability to prepare tax-returns for citizens of other countries, mostly for the USA. Here in Ghana we could do that too. Maybe if and when, who knows, I would retire here.