

NELL IRVIN PAINTER

Ghana is one of the best things that ever happened to me, even though it was a long time ago. My family and I lived there for two years in the mid-1960's. Ghanaians impressed me from the moment I stepped off the plane. For aside from a few travelers, everyone was black, an even, opaque, velvety black that I had never seen in the United States. The customs officials, families greeting passengers, taxi drivers, policemen, they were all intensely and beautifully black.

The people in the airport not only looked different from American Negroes, they also carried themselves differently. They stood with self-assurance and spoke without implied apology. Their dress seemed to announce that they were sure of themselves. They wore the bright colors and large prints that respectable American Negroes eschewed for fear of being conspicuous or seeming to reinforce unfortunate stereotypes. Ghanaian women wore long, two-piece dresses of a batiklike print that I learned was called wax print. The dresses were designed to flatter African figures and to take advantage of the prints, whether they were flowers or portraits of public figures.

Most of the men wore Western dress, white shirts with plain, dark ties and trousers. The contrast between dark skins and white shirts dramatically reinforced the blackness of skin and the whiteness of cloth. A few men wore traditional dress, a toga-wrapped cloth of either printed cotton or Kente cloth, made of several narrow hand-woven strips of blue, yellow, red, and white silk sewn together. Kente cloth, which is both beautiful and expensive, announced the wearer's national pride and his importance. Men wearing traditional dress showed off their

A S E N S E O F P L A C E

calves and their sumptuously decorated sandals. In comparison, the American men travelers in their boxy suits seemed dowdy.

The city of Accra and the university at Legon presented me with a new spectrum of color. I squinted into an enormous, brilliant sky. All the buildings and walls presented complex patterns of textures and colors, for something grew on every surface—bushes, flowers or mold. The California Bay Area that I had left was a gray-blue place with mostly light-colored people. But now I moved in a world of bright contrasts. The dirt was red, the trees and grass blue-green, the buildings white with red-tiled roofs. Cerise bougainvillea climbed whitewashed walls and cascaded over fences. This colorful landscape and the very black people in white or brilliant clothes together altered my visual sense of everyday life.

Many Ghanaians invited us into their homes, chemistry professors, a carpenter, an herb doctor, and our landlord, among others. We ate in mansions more luxurious than anything we could ever afford and in bungalows so crowded that we winced. At every point on the scale of wealth, the people were Ghanaian, each one as black as the others.

As black Americans unaffiliated with the United States Embassy, we enjoyed several advantages. Nearly everyone regarded us as kindred, and they called us Afro-Americans, not American Negroes. Ghanaians disassociated us from their main grievances against the United States: imperialism and racial discrimination. Those who had studied in the United States or visited for any length of time included us in their nostalgia, if their memories were fond.

With our unstraightened hair in wax-print dresses, Mother and I looked enough like locals to pass, provided we kept our mouths shut. This silent assimilation made me something new. I felt inconspicuous and free. This is not to say that I felt like a Ghanaian. The better I came to know the various sorts of Ghanaian lives and customs, the more I realized how thoroughly American I was. Yet I never felt terribly foreign in Ghana. Knowing full well that I could never take part

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in Ghanaian national life, I felt far less an outsider than I had sometimes felt in California. As a black person in a black country, I was very much at home.

At first I found being a member of the racial majority disorienting. I had grown up in Northern California as a member of one of several racial minorities. In the 1940's and 1950's my family had encountered outright discrimination in housing and occasional difficulties in getting decent service in restaurants. But by and large, racism didn't present us with serious problems on a day-to-day basis. My parents taught me about racial discrimination, however, and for as long as I could remember, I felt connected to people of African descent in the South, the West Indies and Africa. Any failure of mine, I was convinced, reflected badly on 400 million black people throughout the world. My successes, of course, made them all proud. I bore my responsibilities without complaint, certain that my actions counted in the world.

Growing up as I did with a strong Pan-African orientation, I took my social and political bearings by race. How to decide which team to root for? Favor the one with the black players, then later, the one with the most black players. (This system doesn't work so well anymore.) Which side of a political issue to support? See how it will affect black people as a whole. Which movie to see? The one with a black character. Without my realizing it, my response to racism was a keen sense of race.

In Ghana, however, racial solidarity and the American way made little sense. I realized this first in politics, mostly at the Star Hotel. Ghanaian and Afro-American students and my friends and I spent many tropical nights at the tables around the Star's outdoor dance floor, drinking Ghanaian beer, smoking Ghanaian cigarettes and talking politics. That is, my friends talked politics. All I could sort out was colonialism, which was related to racism.

In the independent republic of Ghana, however, the issues were not racial, but economic. Should the inefficient collective state farms

A S E N S E O F P L A C E

expand, although they were losing money hand-over-fist? Should the prosperous, private cocoa farms, which brought in most of the nation's hard currency, be nationalized? Should the government emphasize the development of agriculture or industry? When those who profited and those who suffered were all equally black, I couldn't figure the racial angle. But as economic questions superseded racial ones in my mind, I slowly discovered the politics of class.

Similar processes occurred in other areas of my life, as the racial thinking I had brought from the United States gave way. At the university, where geniuses, dumbbells and average students were black, I discovered the quality of ordinariness, which American race relations denied to blacks. In my studies of African history, I began to separate the politics of power from color. The outlines of human nature emerged.

Ordinary humanness affected me deeply as a woman. In the United States I was a woman, but always—outside the tight circle of family and close friends—a Negro woman. A Negro woman in the United States was not the same thing as just a woman, without a racial qualifier.

In Ghana, I became just a woman. I let down my burden of responsibility to the 400 million people of African descent, for I was surrounded by friends who were thinking seriously about the future and also having a good time. I had love affairs. I had my heart broken and broke hearts in my turn. I was free to enjoy myself and be something I have often missed intensely in the years since I came home—ordinary.

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