

Blackout in Paradise

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Blackout in Paradise
A Travel Report from Ghana

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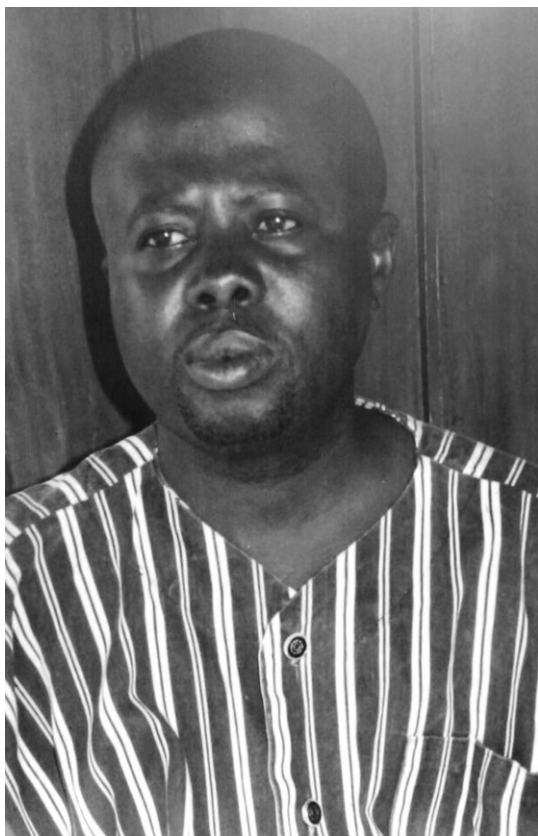
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In Memory of Paul Adusi Poku
(B. 10.May.1975 – D. 8.May.2016)



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Aloneside, were the ladies, dressed in light blue,
covering the black leather perspiring skin,
downcast eyes, rotation
in the century old fervor of pleasure...

Pier Paolo Pasolini

After a quiet six hour flight over the mediterranean and the Sahara we landed at about 20:00 hrs. in Accra, where the outside temperature of 29 degrees centigrade awaited us. The Lufthansa stewardess, who had so professionally cared for us, escorted us to the exit and with a smile released us into this very humid tropical night, since at about 19:00 hrs. in Ghana it is already pitch dark. By airport bus we were driven to the terminal to the passport control. There we were examined by authorities with infrared technology designed to test our body temperature, which was done as a result of the outbreak of the ebola epidemic in some other West African countries. The camera showed our faces on the screen as yellow, which meant healthy, then we were allowed to pass through to the passport control agent. My wife, Agnes, was concerned about the big television that she was bringing to a friend and wanted to get to the

baggage claim area as fast as possible. So she decided simply to race by the passport control desk for Ghana citizens, where far fewer people were waiting in line. However, since my wife is originally from Ghana but carries a German passport, I was expecting the authorities to send her back to the line. But this time she was lucky and finally I also managed to get through but found myself confronted with a very big television, which I had to lug outside and as you can imagine, not a very easy job. First of all, the madam had vanished with the other bags and her afro-hair style was suddenly also not so easily visible. With a courageous look on my face, I struggled with this big box. Just as I thought I was about to reach the airport exit, there came a hissing sound from a customs officer. In Ghana, when someone wants your attention, they hiss slightly through the front teeth. With as much cooperation in my voice and as much innocence in my eyes as I could bring forth, I explained to the lady that the television was for our house in Kumasi. She asked me when was I last in Ghana. Pointing to the stamp in my passport, I replied, four years ago. »Oh, four years ago«, she repeated, giving me my

passport back and allowing me to go through. No sooner had I began to quicken by speed toward the door, there came another hiss from behind me. There stood another custom officer. She also waved me to her desk and wanted to see my passport. My comment that I had already been controlled was for this petite little lady not valid. She asked, »how often have you been to Ghana?« I replied calmly and with a certain pride, »at least nineteen times«. »Nineteen times«, she asked astonished and looked at me. »And, when were you last here?« »Four years ago«, I replied. Then she smiled mischievously and asked in a half serious and half playful disappointment, »and why did you wait so long?« She smiled, handed me my passport and waved me through. At this moment, I felt that I had arrived again and so had my feelings for the love of this country and its people. I was happy to be back in Ghana.

Carefully I maneuvered this awkward formed television outside, where Agnes awaited me with an explanation for her sudden disappearance. A passenger also from Ghana had recommended that she give me the responsibility for the television, since Agnes had entered the country just seven

months before and the custom officer could accuse her of bringing the television into Ghana only with intentions of selling it. That explains why the customs officer asked me when was my last visit to Ghana.

Waiting for us outside in front of the airport was Otwinoko in his silver mercedes with driver. Otwinoko is a well-known radio announcer at HOT-FM radio with a program Monday to Friday evenings from 20:00 to 22:00 hrs. where he moderated a talk-show program about current news themes with listeners mainly from Ghana, Europe and the U.S.A. The name »Otwinoko« comes out of a Ga-Language word meaning »The Mover«. Otwinoko's official name is Linford Asare. Five years previously the moderator worked for Fox-FM. At that time he became seriously ill which resulted in him becoming blind. There were accusations made against an employee suspected of jealousy who actually wanted to poison him. The police investigation ended without proof and unsuccessful. This elegant and popular moderator dedicated two programs exclusively to the search for my daughter, who had disappeared without a trace five years earlier. Unfortunately, his efforts to

find her were also unsuccessful. Otwinoko and I later engaged in discussions lasting at least four months over the question: Why Africa remains an economically underdeveloped continent although the Africans are far more religious than Europeans. Such a question would hardly be worth considering from the view of any European moderator. I complained bitterly and in detail about the problems of corruption and incompetence of African politicians but spoke less over my suspicions that it could be exactly the separation of religion and state that results in the success of the West.

After we delivered the television to the luxury villa of Otwinoko's uncle, which was located in a rather desolated area on the outskirts of Accra, we were driven by Otwinoko to an even more luxurious Hotel. Clearly he thought this would surely be the appropriate residence for a wealthy doctor from Germany. After a short inspection of the small and musty smelling room, at a price of 100 Euros a night, we quickly left. Otwinoko did not allow my obvious outrage to cause him to lose his composure and we were driven to another hotel where, supposedly, a friend of Agnes', Jasmin, who had se-

cretly come to Ghana and wanted to surprise Agnes at the airport and had reserved a room and had paid in advance. This room was priced at about 20 Euros. This hotel in East-Legon impressed me right away; with a large cashew nut tree in a small courtyard with an atmosphere that reminded me of other hotels I had experienced in Ghana.

The next morning we enjoyed the wonderful sunny weather and breakfast peacefully in the shadow of this beautiful tree and the light sun spots on the ground reflected through the leaves. Around 10:00 hrs., lead by his little son running ahead of him, Otwinoko appeared, accompanied by his driver. They were there to drive us to the airport. We had planned to travel to Kumasi. From Accra there are three commercial flights to the capital of the Aschant. We chose the starbow flight and arranged for the tickets. While Agnes was busy getting matters straightened out with Otwinoko concerning the goods her girl friends in Germany had asked her to deliver, I engaged myself in conversation with a security guard in front of the departure hall. He was obviously in a good mood and was determined to convince me just how great his co-worker

sitting next to him would be as an ideal marriage candidate for someone like myself. The argument was based on how well she could cook fufu and banku. After all, that is at the end of the day what really matters! The security lady seemed to enjoy the praise and was obviously flattered, whereas she did occasionally break into an embarrassing laughter and we of course cheerfully encouraged this sunny disposition. Around 14:00 hrs. our flight departed Accra and about 45 min. later arrived in Kumasi, where the younger brothers of our Otwinoko was waiting for us with his car.

We first drove to the »Paloma«, a reasonably priced and good restaurant near the Asafo-Market where we ate lunch. Afterwards we made our way to Atematim where we have a house. At this time, visiting our home was not without personal complications. Agnes had made her previous trip to Ghana in August 2014, but did not live in the house. Instead she rented a small room in another area of Bokrum. During her flight there, she had experienced an uneasy premonition not to go into the house and first she had to contact the Priest Ebenezer, who conformed her fears. Lydia, the older sister

of Agnes, had put a curse on the house as revenge because of a dispute between the two of them, which resulted in Lydia and her children having to move out. Should Agnes afterwards go into the house, she would risk her sanity. So, before this trip, Agnes contacted the priest by phone and he gave her permission to enter the house. According to the priest, the curse had in the meantime lost its power and had been exorcised through prayer.

To western ears, this must sound like pure superstition but actually there is more to it than meets the eye. As soon as one stands on African ground, the western prevailing laws governing cause and effect are suspended and you find yourself confronted by a coordinated system of spiritual powers under which Christianity constitutes only one or perhaps no real important powers.

The Afro-American writer, Richard Wright, travelled in the beginning of the 1950's to Ghana, which was at that time a British Colony, then known as the Gold Coast and a few years later in 1957 became the first African country to gain independence from Colonial Europe. Wright some-

what favored the philosophy of existentialism and had lived for some years in Paris. He was rather speechless to hear from educated Ghanaians, who also had studied in England, assuring him that there was »Juju« (some truth) in these spiritual powers. Although these concepts were strange to Wright, he still wrestled with the thought in order to find understanding that would do justice to the world of his ancestors. However, he comments about »magical powers« were »the Africans present the mysterious between cause and effect: There is a strong preference of belief toward a supreme power of thought, a belief of an effect of one spirit over the other. The more I listen to Africans speak about their successful experiences in the area of magic and spirit, the clearer it becomes to me that the major difference in the views of western society and non-western societies exist in how facts relate to each other«. (1)

That one spiritual problem was solved – the other – the disappearance of our daughter – remains a big mystery. Five years ago our daughter, Unice, travelled to England and afterwards broke all contact to her family and friends. In anticipation of our up-

coming trip this year to Ghana, there were three hopeful possibilities to bring some light onto this darkness. Agnes had mentioned wanting to visit a Priest in a prayer-camp to spend three days of fasting and prayer – Agnes believed, it was this tactic and action which enabled her to bring Unice with her to Germany unnoticed without a valid passport or visa. As if she had been wearing a magic hood covering her, not one custom officer or passport control officer took any notice of the seven year old. There was also the thought of visiting a psychic Priest that Unice could be magically brought back, so to speak, by way of Juju-Magic. At these suggestions I was myself a bit shocked, since I was convinced that Agnes was strongly anchored in the Christian religion.

Even Richard Wright noticed that during his visit to Ghana that »Africans, in religious questions were obedient on the outside but somewhat retractive and never really converted from the inside«. (2) In agreeing with Wright, then it is indeed questionable if Christianity has really replaced the original West African religions. For example, in »The Aschanti Religion, the idea of the ori-

ginal sin is rejected because the very thought that the entire mankind is threatened with suffering because two ancestors long time ago had sex with each other« (3), according to African understanding, »totally ridiculous«. (4) Also the Christian concept »that the world is a place of earthly sin and should be departed from, for the African mentality, could only be a joke«. (5)

Wright viewed Christianity as the cause of this human hybrid and there relationship to nature and the devastating results, for example, the ruthless destruction of the rain forest simply for profit. »The children of the forest were a folk of modesty, obedience and honesty. The pre-christian Africans were aware of their own insignificance and treated the earth with respect, in order not to disturb or destroy the invisible and existing ever-present Gods. When they wanted to confront the fearless majestic ocean in order to fish, they first had to present the surging rapidly approaching sea a sacrifice. They would not dare uproot a single tree without first calming the spirits, so that they would not be persecuted. They lived their fragile lives and were convinced that the spirit also loved the trees. The nature was so forceful

and changeable that they, who were only human beings would never attempt to interfere with the spirit or entertain the idea that they are the center of the universe. Only after the appearance of the humiliated friendly Jesus, was it that this overwhelming arrogance fell upon them.« (6)

After Agnes changed here mind and decided against a visit to the psychic priest, the only option for us left was a meeting with the preacher Ebenezer at his »Miracle and Workshop Center« located in a rural area somewhere between Kumasi and the town of Obuasi. So we went on Good Friday to the church services of this very popular man of God, who is also regularly heard on the radio. I do not want to deny that my opinion of preacher Ebenezer was always that he is in reality a charlatan, who takes the money out of the pockets of the poorest of the poor. And this happens in a land where the previous country president, Kufour, introduced a health insurance system, which has collapsed in the meantime, and the patients can not afford to pay either the hospital or the doctors. They are left alone with their health care situation. So was it in the case recently, that an uncle of Agnes'

was left to die because the family could not pay the hospital bill, which amounted to about 1000 Euros.

Preacher Ebenezer's miracle and worship center belongs to a large group of Evangelical Free-Church organizations, who dominate the community religious life in West Africa. Obviously these are copies of the American imported church with more of an African mentality rather than that of the Catholic or Anglican churches and they create their own logic, philosophy and Christianity. The preacher sets a high value on studying the Bible – and this »Book of Books« is very often the only book that Ghanaians read – therefore understandably, also the middle point of the three to four hours church services of group prayer, in which each prays out loud for him or herself to drive out the bad spirits combined with songs and dance expressing a tremendously unrestrained joy for life.

Often under similar conditions somewhere else in an open-nature atmosphere with concrete walls and sheet-metal roofs, a church service, likening to that of a battlefield, where the war against the evil spirits takes place, where the evil spirits are surrounded

by passionate, and as if possessed, frantic praying and spirit filled dancers.

Now, things around Ebenezer are coming to a rather peaceful closing, his preaching and the church services are approaching an end. After all, there is another church service scheduled for the evening, which usually last until the early morning hours. All night services take place once a week in the Free-Church and are known for their exceptional intensity.

Our church services were now ended and we moved to the first row and took a seat together with other church members who had already been seated. These were all people who had their own special request for Ebenezer. After everyone had first bought one or two bottles of blessed oil, we formed a line in front of the Preacher and he had a short individual conversation with each one. I stood behind Agnes, who stood in the front row. I obviously appeared to be a tourist standing there with my typical backpack. However, there aren't really many such tourist in Ghana. As Agnes began to tell Ebenezer about the disappearance of our daughter, I felt a burning piercing glanze of this unusually good-looking man who ap-

peared to be searching with all his strength to find the answer to this mystery. After he had answered Agnes in the Twi language, I was next in line. I waited, expecting him to say something to me as well. And he did. In his good and friendly art, he spoke to me in Twi, which I, of course, did not understand and then he said, good-by. Naturally Ebenezer spoke an excellent English, but that's a part of the Ghanaian nature and humor. The rather unexpected appearance of this white man lent itself to a playful amusing scene, whereby I almost reconciled with this charismatic man of God. This scene functioned very well, since one of his co-workers broke out into a laughter which he really could not control and caused him to literary fall to the floor!

As we drove back home, I noticed that Agnes was completely changed and as if a heavy burden had been lifted. Ebenezer had spoken only one sentence to her: »She will come back.«

We drove to Atematim where there was already a delicious light chicken soup with Fufu waiting for us. A distant cousin of Agnes', her husband and their four children live in two rooms of our house there. Although

the cousin, Julie, completed her training as a Hair dresser on the Ivory Coast, she does not work in that field. Instead, she goes every morning to sell Gari, a coarse-grain mill made out of barley, that she carries to the market balanced in a basket on her head. Before that, about 07:30 hrs. in the morning, the children are dressed in school uniforms. They politely say good-bye and make their way to school. Julie's husband also leaves the house every morning in his white shirt and black trousers going to school where he teaches French. His monthly income is approximately 100 Euros. It is clear that the family can not make much economic progress under those conditions. The children are very happy when their cousin, Agnes, makes a cup of hot chocolate every morning and a slice of bread with margarine.

On Sundays everybody in the country puts on their finest clothes, the best suit or the best dress to wear to church. Also during the week days members of the community meet in the church for Bible study and prayer. Kofi, a 23-year-old young man and relative of Agnes from the Ivory Coast and for some years has lived in our house, said he found his way to God. For four years, his life