

BLESSING THE RAINS: FIELDWORK MEDITATIONS ON 'AFRICA' BY TOTO

As an anthropologist who works in West Africa, I have ambivalent feelings towards the 1982 song 'Africa' by Toto. It is a song that lyrically does not make sense, although it powerfully draws its audience into a romanticized mental imagery of the continent with 'drums echoing', 'wild dogs crying', and 'old men' with 'long forgotten words or ancient melodies'. In contrast to the seemingly romantic, albeit essentializing and factually incorrect, portrayal of the African continent within the lyrics, the colonially stylized music video makes use of deeply embedded stereotypes of the 'dark continent', with spear-throwing men that set Western-mediated understandings of Africa ablaze, reproducing and re-legitimizing images that position the continent and its peoples as fundamentally 'other' to modernity. The reproduction of colonial discourses about Africa in the song is perhaps not all that surprising; the song writer, David Paich, self-consciously admits that his knowledge of Africa was limited to the narratives he'd seen in UNICEF commercials and the National Geographic, or those told by returning missionaries (Simpson 2018; Locker 2015).

Despite my annoyance with, and critique of, the lyrics and the video, I often found myself humming, 'I bless the rains down in Africa', during my fifteen months fieldwork in the small town of Klikor in south-eastern Ghana. As if out of nowhere, those words would form in my mind and, over time, became a recurring internal refrain during my daily routine. For me, the song came to signify a plea for disconnection from the relations I had worked so hard to develop

and a celebration when that disconnection was momentarily achieved during the downpours in the rainy seasons. It was during these brief periods of rain that I was able to temporarily isolate myself without feelings of guilt and 'take the time to do some things', something I felt was not possible with the social demands of long-term fieldwork using participant observation.

Like other new anthropologists in the field, much of my time during the first couple of months in Klikor was focused on building relationships with people in the community, establishing the much needed rapport essential for carrying out ethnographic research. I studied a female religious affiliation to indigenous shrines known as *trokosi* and *fiasidi*, which is commonly described as a form of 'female ritual slavery' and is the subject of an extensive transnational abolition campaign. Protagonists of the campaign, largely from faith-based NGOs, argued that the initiate acts as a perpetual figure of restitution for the offences committed by another lineage member. They also claimed that initiates were forced to work for the shrine priests, were raped by these men, and stigmatized in their communities because of their slave status. The highly publicized abolition campaign stimulated a counter-campaign, largely emerging from the three shrines in Klikor where I based my research, which described the initiates as Queen-Mothers (rather than slaves), role models to their lineage (rather than figures of restitution), and as socially privileged. Based upon the dynamics of the conflictual understandings of the initiates and their experiences in the shrines, establishing

a relationship of trust, as well as ‘respect and reciprocity’ (Musante 2014: 266), was crucial to the overall success of the research.

I especially went to great lengths to set myself apart from other researchers and journalists who had previously visited the community to investigate the alleged abuses experienced by initiates in the shrines. These researchers and journalists would typically come to the community for a day or two, ask the shrines’ priests and the chief of Klikor questions, and then leave once again. My research was fundamentally different due to my use of participant observation, a methodology where ‘a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning both the explicit and tacit aspects of their routines and culture’ (Musante 2014: 251). A part of my research strategy was also to live in one priest’s household with two of his wives who were shrine initiates, and a number of their children. Living in this particular household and taking on a social identity within it proved to be an important aspect of my research, although it compounded the feeling that I never truly had down time.

During the first couple of months, I struggled to carve out time for myself or even to write field notes. This was partly because when I first arrived in Klikor, the three shrines were in the midst of the month-long annual festival to the deities. The annual festival is a time where rituals are going on in the shrines that involve the initiates, such as preparing the corn and brewing it into wine. As many of the initiates do not actually live in Klikor, this was an opportunity both to establish relationships with those in the community as well as speak to those who had come in for the festival. After spending the day in the shrines, observing and participating in the rituals of the day, or visiting with initiates in their houses, I would make my

way back to the house in the evening to have dinner in the open courtyard with the family, play with the children, chat with the wives, and finally heat water for my bath.

Once the annual festival was over, I fell into a slower research routine. I would typically visit one of the shrines in the morning, greeting everyone I saw along the way. There, I watched petitioners offer drinks, chickens, or goats to the deity for protection and spoke with the priests in their down time. In the afternoon, I visited various initiates in their houses to talk while cooking an afternoon meal on the charcoal stove or helping to prepare foodstuffs to take to the market to sell. I just could not seem to find an appropriate time or space to concentrate, however, much less relax, since my household was as much a part of my research site as anywhere else. While I had my own room, being in there alone was often taken as a sign of being ill and whenever I sought refuge there during the day or evening others living in the household often followed me in. Their intent was not to disturb, but rather to just sit with me while I was writing or unwinding from the day to make sure that I was not lonely. Nonetheless, I found it incredibly difficult to get used to, and hoped that it would stop once I had been in the household for a while. Months later, though, I was still rarely in my room without others being there as well. In the end, I succumbed to the idea that I would not be able to concentrate or be by myself until everyone in the household had gone to bed. While everyone else slept, I stayed up finishing my field notes and occasionally escaping into a novel.

After navigating the demands of sociality and working towards overcoming feelings of anxiety and irritation during the first couple of months of research, I was worn out and ‘frightened of this thing that I’d become’, a mildly grumpy person that I no longer

recognized. I craved the feeling of being anonymous and autonomous, alone with myself, to be momentarily not in the 'field'. I was, after all, experiencing the effects of culture shock, a term that is thrown around almost haphazardly by socio-cultural anthropologists and does not seem to give adequate weight, or bear witness, to the actual experience. Most methodology courses and text books are quite comfortable in discussing the importance of building a relationship with research participants and creating an identity within a new, and often culturally unfamiliar, community. What seemed to be lacking, at least at the time of my research in 2005, was a more sustained and serious conversation in methodology courses about the need for finding strategies to carve out time on a regular basis to take care of one's physical and mental health, especially when using participant observation, which often necessitates the researcher's always being in research mode, even when not actively collecting data (Musante 2014: 282). While researchers may be encouraged to take periodic breaks from the field to limit the impacts of culture shock or burn-out by physically removing themselves (cf. Bernard 2017: 303), one may get the impression, as Irwin highlights about her graduate training, that 'there is something inherent about studying anthropology that protects one against 'culture shock,' and that anthropologists are 'naturally' better at negotiating unfamiliar situations than other sojourners' (Irwin 2007: 5). The result is a discourse that seems to overemphasize rapport-building strategies at the expense of honest discussions about anxiety, depression, and frustration. This contributes to the frequent feeling that novice researchers have that they are failing to do research properly if they are not continuously engaged in collecting data, building rapport with others in the community, or at the very least writing field notes—itsself an

endeavor that requires going back through one's day, albeit with an intellectual distance.

Then, one day, the rains came with force, reducing the dirt roads to mud and filling the open spaces of the household compound with standing water puddles. Initially, I watched from my doorway as all the children frantically ran around putting out bowls and buckets to collect the water, but soon after everyone retreated to their rooms to wait out the downpour. The sound on the tin roof was deafening, accompanied by the lower tones of the rain pounding the dirt outside. I was elated. In that moment, I felt no social pressure to be outside interacting with the family or other research participants. In that moment, I could do whatever I wanted and retreat back into my own sense of cultural and individual normalcy. The possibilities were endless and I was overwhelmed with the sense of freedom, despite the restrictions of my physical space and the loss of electricity. I put in my ear buds and pushed play. Within a few songs, 'Africa' came on and I soon had the song on repeat and was singing along, blissfully rationalizing that the rain would drown out my voice. Several hours later, my fieldwork assistant burst into the room, bewildered by my performance. Unbeknownst to me, the rain had stopped and a small crowd had gathered outside my room to listen to my outpouring of the refrain 'I bless the rains down in Africa.'

Despite my initial embarrassment, this song became symbolic of my 'strategies of withdrawal', which Davies describes as those 'employed to mitigate the disorientation which can often attend any radical re-orientation to unfamiliar instrumental and symbolic worlds' (Davies 2010). While walking down pathways throughout the town, watching rituals, talking with informants, 'I bless the rains' would at times run through my thoughts. In moments of truly needing to take a break, I would start to

sing the song under my breath, (like a ‘wild dog crying out in the night, as they grow restless for some solitary company’) beseeching the weather to give me a day of guilt-free, expectation-free respite. Eventually, it would ‘rain’, sometimes literally but more often than not just an imagined torrential downpour, ‘a cure to what’s deep inside’, that would allow me time to disconnect momentarily and to be ready for the next day.

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JULIE JENKINS
VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
ANTHROPOLOGY DEPARTMENT
SKIDMORE COLLEGE
jjenkins@skidmore.edu