# *A Drummer's Testament*

*Introduction part 5*

## Dagbon: Closing the Distance

The trip from Accra to Tamale is just over 400 miles, not far as the plane flies, but quite an experience by road. Putting oneself into the hands of transport operators is one of the standard ways for expatriates to confront their souls. Such traveling affords another dimension to sensing poverty as a lack or limitation of means. Even before you leave Accra, if you are traveling by a government bus, you have to compete for a ticket; if you are traveling by private bus, you have to wait for a vehicle to get passengers and pack them on board. One of the marginal occupations around the transport yards is that of bookers who find and direct passengers like you to appropriate and available transport. Departure time — "anytime from now" — is measured in terms of remaining places to be filled. You later realize that the trip itself seems to have been in question, for it is only after the bus is full and the money collected that the drivers commit themselves to buying gasoline. Then, suddenly, everything and everyone is in place, and you move.

As you reach the outskirts of Accra, the transition to a different world is abrupt. If Accra is at the political and economic heart of modern Ghana, then at the time I was there, the fragile nature of that body politic could be inferred from the thin tendrils that link the cells. By eight miles, after you pass Achimota and the first police roadblock on the way to Nsawam, the road is a two-lane country blacktop winding through rolling hills. On a map of West Africa, the coastal forest that stretches from Sierra·Leone through Liberia and the Ivory Coast breaks into dry grasslands for a few hundred miles along the coast of Ghana and Togo before starting up again in Benin and Nigeria and continuing east. Accra is relatively dry, and the Accra plains are within that gap; scattered forest begins inland a bit and only gradually becomes thicker as you head north outside the city. Already the few settlements along the roadside are rustic in appearance. In contrast to the busy streets of Accra, there is hardly any traffic, and the countryside seems underpopulated. Isolated cassava and plantain farms have been hacked out of the brush, away from areas of habitation, and the only people you see are walking or riding bicycles along the roadside or waiting for sporadic transport or sitting as vendors at village junctions. For the most part, the landscape is green and untended, neither wild nor inspiring, except for an

occasional baobab tree to serve as a reminder that you are in Africa; its massive trunk and a few scraggly branches make it seem turned upside down as if air were earth and its branches were roots.

If you are riding in a bus, the pace of the trip is confusing and hard to chart because your momentum is erratic: breakneck speed on straightaways, moderation when the road meanders through regions of low hills, many stops and unnervingly long delays for the loading and unloading of individuals and their goods or for police checkpoints. It is useless to wonder about anything, whether the civil authorities have the need for such records or whether you are just on a toll road for drivers of overloaded transport, or why several dozen people should wait, and whether it is patience or powerlessness for them to do so without complaining, while somebody's brother goes to fetch the chickens that are to be loaded on top of the bus. If possible, should a delay stretch out, it is a good idea to seize the moment and relax with a calabash of palm wine in a shady grove. You can nibble on peanuts or roasted plantain and think of an urban marketplace, of hassles with visas and paperwork, of things that seemed important in Accra. You started your day early in the morning, not even taking food so that you could rush to the transport yard and get the first bus, and you might have thought that if you were lucky, you could make Tamale in a day, but now as time and distance collapse and expand, you realize that several hours into the trip, you are not even halfway to Kumasi, and you cannot force your way through the physical constraints or the social rhythms that acknowledge them.

As you approach Nkawkaw, a hundred miles from Accra, the undramatic uniformity of the landscape is broken by a spectacular escarpment rising to the low clouds. Perhaps the bus will stop again at the foot of the mountain in Nkawkaw, this time for refreshment, and you will note that your fellow passengers had also foregone breakfast for a quick start; most of you will buy food and eat. When you depart again, you gradually realize that the trees beside the road are taller and more numerous, not a jungle perhaps, but definitely a forest. A few hours and many stops later, you reach Kumasi, the Garden City, capital of the Ashanti confederation. If you have indeed been lucky, you can look for transport going north. If not, you may decide to spend the night in Kumasi and continue the following day. It is hard to know what to do. You are less than halfway to Tamale, which is now only just under two hundred and fifty miles away, but to cover the hundred and seventy miles to Kumasi has taken longer than you thought it would.

Rather than be confined to another bus full of people, another road full of frustration, you will relax and be a foreign tourist. Kumasi is beautiful, with more

trees than Accra, and it seems that the people here invest their money in buildings, four or five stories tall, and painted different colors. You might go to the market, one of the largest in West Africa, and despite your sure knowledge that there are astounding things inside it, you get lost in what seems to be a square-mile of can openers and tinned fish and consider yourself fortunate to find your way out. You might go to the Manhyia Palace to see if you might get inside and maybe have a chance to see the Asantehene, the paramount chief of the Ashantis, but they won't let you in. You might go to the military museum and see the spoils of wars where Ashanti soldiers participated courtesy of the British empire, Abyssinian spears from Ethiopia, German eagles captured in Togo, some Japanese stuff captured in Burma, and Congolese masks from the recent days of United Nations international pacification. Local treasures are conspicuous in their absence, for they are tucked away somewhere in Britain. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the British subdued the Ashantis and exiled the Asantehene for more than a quarter century before he was repatriated. After few hours, you have had enough of tourism and its burdens: the favors extended to foreigners in Accra now sit too awkwardly and self-consciously on your shoulders, and you are already anxious to join new fellow passengers in anonymity on the road again.

There are two ways to reach Tamale from Kumasi. As when I first made the trip in 1971, one route crosses rugged hills past Mampong and moves down onto gradually drier plains. Eventually you reach Yeji, where the bus joins a long line of vehicles waiting for a ferry across the Volta lake, the largest man-made lake in the world, stretching hundreds of miles north from the dam at Akosombo. In addition to the ferry are dozens of small boats and canoes, some for passengers and some for fishermen. Drowned and dead trees, their lower trunks submerged along the shoreline, speak of the youth of the lake. Vendors of snacks swarm around the backed-up traffic, and roadside vendors do business with produce and fish. It is a scene rich with slices of life, allowing you to handle the wait in leisurely style. Finally you board the ferry and cross the lake, rejoining the road past the old slaving town of Salaga and on to Tamale.

The other road from Kumasi to Tamale is the one I often used because the ferry had become unreliable. After an atrocious stretch of road that for years and years had been constantly under construction or under repair, the bus passed Techiman and Kintampo, crossing the northern fingers of the lake by bridge After the big bridge at Yapei, it is a straight fine ride to Tamale. On this route, the change in the landscape is less dramatic, something you might notice from time to time as the forest thins and you glimpse rough rock escarpments on horizons suddenly distant, the beginning of the great savanna between the forest and the

Sahara desert. Lulled by the bumping bus, you might not even notice the transition until you are well inside it. There are two main seasons, dry from October through April and rainy from May through September, and should you pass this road during the dry season, the picture is one of striking harshness, a reddish brown and dark gray landscape baked under a bright sun, the earth itself and the trees only blackened dead things scorched by innumerable brush fires. From November through February, when the harmattan winds blow dust from the Sahara, the air is hazy at midday, golden at twilight. You can see small villages of clustered houses, their roofs made of thatch instead of corrugated metal, dotting the great open fields where there are people scraping away at the dust. The dryness is real but its devastation is an illusion: a few rains and, like a miracle, the bush is green again; the charred trees come to life and the grasses proliferate, and tall crops of sorghum, called guinea corn here, even hide the houses from view. Scattered among the growing grains are the mounds of yam fields; at Kintampo you eat some fried yams, which taste like potatoes but have a more pleasing texture. Further north, near to the occasional water holes are cattle tended by young boys; by the bridges over the branches of the lake are more cattle, as well as fishing and transport canoes, and many people, especially groups of women and girls washing clothes and spreading them to dry on the rocks, or fetching and carrying water, or buying from the fishermen.

The bus stops briefly by the bridge at Yapei, and many of the passengers get off to stretch their legs, some to buy fish or produce. Several men on bicycles ride past; down the road a bit they stop, dismount and squat when a dignified elderly man passes. Along the road walks a line of girls carrying bundles of firewood on their heads. Beside the road, at a foodstop, you hear a group of four women pounding yams in a big mortar, rhythmically alternating the blows of the heavy pestles. The social environment has changed with the physical, becoming clearer and more open, its emergent character a blend of features: extended spaces and discrete sounds, clustered houses on a human scale and ordered groupings of people, the pace of work and mannered communications. On the road again, you are nearing Tamale, and this time the pulse of life that was only intimated in the ambience of the Tamale nights seem indeed to be the fundamental cadence of the place.

Once in Tamale, therefore, you are ready to take its noisy face in stride, and you are not deceived by the hubbub around the station. During my time there, across the street as you disembark is the Rivoli cinema, its marquees advertising a continuously changing bill of fare of Chinese and Indian movies, each with one showing only. You study the announced diversions. The Chinese film posters

look alike, dominated by a handsome Shaolin master leaping out from an arrayed montage of fighting men in various poses, conveying the message that the power of goodness will always triumph no matter what the odds. The more popular Indian films contend with posters that are crammed fuller with scenes of action and promise more, too, a colorful mosaic of a convoluted plot that includes bejeweled dancing girls with flashing eyes, young lovers in song, armed rogues, anxious matrons, an elephant or a flying carpet in the upper-right corner, while in a lower corner a glaring hero looks upward and surveys the whole poster courageously. The Indian films are worth a viewing. Their sentiments and style somehow bridge continents. Like the Chinese films, they are morality tales, but they are full of music and dancing as well. Not only in Tamale but in all of Ghana, people are in love with Indian films. Most of the films have played Tamale many times, and they are seen again and again by a youthful audience familiar enough with their favorite films to sing along in Hindi with the songs. The audience is also involved enough to cheer and applaud the singers and dancers when those artists blithely ignore the surrounding melodrama of which they are a part and take pause for a romantic song interlude of moving sensuality, made both more innocent and more erotic because they never kiss on screen. The songs and dance styles of Indian films have found their way into the artistic repertoire of Dagbamba youth in the Simpa music that they play at communal occasions, and the young girls of the towns and villages emulate Indian movie stars and dot their foreheads with magenta or red lipstick to make themselves more beautiful when they dress up. You can view such harmless influence with equanimity, and the village mothers evidently concur when they help their daughters prepare for festival days or artistic displays.

The day is winding down, and it is easier to be at peace with anything at such a time. You walk through the town, and at some of the small verandas of the maalams, the mid-afternoon prayers have ended Although the evening prayers are more than an hour away, some people are sitting and counting their prayer beads. The gathering for prayers seems less a refuge from the mercurial shifts of the day and more the local presence of a broad moment of harmony uniting vast parts the world. As you pass the market and walk up the Sabonjida Road, you join a small group of people outside a provisions store to watch the progress of a board game called *wari,* in which the two players move and capture beads around two rows of indentations, an ancient game played widely in Africa. Leaving the game, you stand in front of a bar called Day by Day and look across the street and down a lane between some houses where a group of men are gathered and sitting outside against a wall. They are drummers. The drums they play are of two main types,

both types carried on the shoulder and beaten with curved sticks. One is a bass drum shaped like a large tomtom with a snare that gives a buzzing quality to its deep voice. The other is a drum that some Westerners call a "talking drum"; it is shaped like an hourglass and has thin skins stretched over each mouth, and the two mouths are laced together with strings that can be squeezed or released to change the pitch of the sound. Dagbamba call the bass drum *guŋgɔŋ,* and the hourglass drum is *luŋa;* when they talk about a "drum," they are referring to *luŋa.* Some of the drummers are finishing sewing the mouths of drums that have broken and need repair, and they are chatting among themselves. Others are performing their ablutions or counting their beads.

The distance across the street is not far, and on this second trip to Tamale, your impressions are more sensitive, your sense of estrangement has loosened its confusing hold on your perceptions, your shyness has taken on the soft face of gentleness, and you will cross the street to sit with these men. I am now standing beside you to lead you to them, to greet them and sit down, to introduce you simply as a friend who is a stranger. "You are welcome," they tell you. As we sit, people walking in the lane stop and squat down to greet them with a smile, "*Aniŋwuliya* — Good evening," and the drummers look up smiling from their work and reply melodically, "*Naa-a,*" without breaking the movement of their hands. They exchange pleasantries, and then the passersby stand up and move on. These people have time. It is enough to sit there without talking, to feel the security of not having to talk, just to watch the superb craftsmanship involved in making the drumheads, to probe the inwardness with which they prepare for their prayers, to relax from the pressures of your journey.