

Cities as the Heavens of This Earth

from *Hustling Is Not Stealing*

Introduction: 45-62

. . . The evidence of culture is everywhere within this book. Culture has its issues and its problems that affect the decisions and inform the discussions of the many people who play their parts in this book's dramas, but it cannot be easily seen. Like the unconscious mind that is the source of personal motives, culture appears in unconventional ways, as if by choosing absurd crises it could elude detection and continue its work. When I was in graduate school, one of my professors who had held a post at a Nigerian university during the first days of that country's independence told me a funny anecdote. I did not ask about a way to check the sources, but the anecdote concerned a series of letters to the editor in a local newspaper. Someone wrote a letter to the effect that now we Nigerians are independent and we have to make sure that our children are well educated. In order to help them in their studies, we should all pitch in and see to it that the children get a lot of sleep so that they will be alert in school, and therefore, we should not allow people to make noise late at night by playing drums or talking loudly or blowing horns. The response was a barrage of irate letters that maintained that the children also have to know that they are Africans and know that Africa is their homeland, and the place wouldn't be Africa if it wasn't noisy.

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I must have become an African when I was there. The place I lived was just up the street from an outdoor nightclub where live bands played till the wee hours, and I was always able to sleep all right. I moved back and forth from the serious traditionalists who set the rhythms of my research to the cacophony of Accra without missing a beat. As much as I had managed to adapt my being to the spirit of an ancient culture, I

never felt out of place in towns like Accra or Lagos. I enjoyed those towns as I have never been able to enjoy American and European ones. The difference is the kaleidoscopic assortment of people who mingle there, as varied a group as one could imagine for any cosmopolitan place, but who seem to mix together more than in our type of atomized social world. I would meet more new people in a few days in Accra than I might meet in a year in the States, and then I would always be running into them because all of us were out of our dingy rooms and spending our waking hours in public places. Some people were going with the flow for fun and experience, and some were making contacts for survival. I met them easily because both conditions fostered a type of ambience that focused on sociability to an amazing extent. In a small bar, for example, someone entering will go around the tables and greet everybody else, "Good evening." This attitude comes straight from traditional lifestyles; in any village, one says good morning, good afternoon, or good evening to everyone one passes. In the cities, if you are walking down the street casually looking at someone, when you get to the point where normally you might avert your eyes, you'll see the person looking back at you, smiling, and nodding a greeting when he or she passes. People shake hands when they meet and hold hands when they walk together. They gravitate toward other people, and I remember being fascinated by that aspect of city life. I sometimes tested it in crowded places by staring at someone far across a room, and sure enough, that person would look up from the conversation and return my gaze. It was as if a physical network of tendrils connected the people who gathered anywhere.

Many of the people I knew were young like me. During my first year in Ghana, I was a graduate student who thought he had read enough books already and decided to drop out of the grind while he was there. At that time and place in my life, everything was data. Most of my friends in Accra were just trying to make do in the urban environment, usually because they either could not or would not fit into the more traditional lifestyles of their parents in the villages. They mixed peacefully despite their differences. They came from different ethnic groups and had grown up speaking different languages. They were of different ages and had different levels of education. The types of work they were able to do, if anything, were different and changing. Some

were born in the city, but others had left their villages and provincial towns where the yoke of tradition was too heavy. They were struggling and suffering but I could understand their choice. They were people who refused to be peasant farmers or somebody's third wife. The attractions of a city can never be minimized when one considers the alternatives. If I knew I was probably going to be broke all my life, I'd rather live my life somewhere closer to the center of the action. Accra was their New World, their Yukon, their California. Like our ancestors leaving their original homelands for America or, once here, leaving for the frontier, many were misfits, many were seekers, many were free spirits. Most of the young people I knew were without jobs and without education or any means of self-advancement, but they felt little bitterness. They were open toward each other, perhaps because they had to be, as a cynical observer might say, but probably because they enjoyed being that way — always ready to get together and get something going. Their motto, painted in two parts on the front and back of busses and taxis, was "Observers are Worried; Believers are Enjoying." They were ready to believe in anything that would connect them with each other and with life on the rest of the planet, interested in anything new, anything "pop," anything "free," anything they called "Afro," which was their way of talking about the unique style they brought to the experience of it all. The main thing they had in common was their ability to get with what was happening at the moment and see themselves inside it, and that ability was enough to hold them together, at least until tomorrow, and they had a motto for that, too: "Who Knows Tomorrow?" The ambience of Accra and the West African towns and cities I know was well summed up in the words of an African American friend: "Lotta freaks, lotta fun."

In previous writings, I have described West African towns a number of times and a number of ways. One idea that always seems to help people recognize the kind of places these towns are is the observation that Charles Dickens would have felt at home in a place like Accra or Lagos. People create their own opportunities, like a jack-of-all-trades who can fix anything. Everyone has to find a way to survive, and the disorder of development provides the openings. A blacksmith can fashion bicycle peddles from recycled scrap or build hunting rifles from tubing, and a village hunter I knew used match scrapings to fire his gun. A

motorcycle mechanic doesn't have a diaphragm for a carburetor: "No problem," he says, "it doesn't need it. The bike will run all right. They just put this thing inside so it will spoil and you will buy a new one." Need some cheap sandals? In the market, you can get sandals made from tire treads cut to shape, with rubber cross-straps fixed in place with bent nails. Ghanaians call them "Afro-Moses": the "Afro" refers to the locally gerrymandered solution and makes a joke on the poverty behind it; the allusion to Moses means that the sandals are guaranteed for forty years in the urban wilderness or forty thousand miles, whichever comes first. People need the guarantee: the Pidgin English expression "wakawaka" is used even in French countries to refer to the walking people do when going about dealing with their business. For the multitudes who do not see the benefits of the one-time investment in a pair of Afro-Moses and who prefer cheap disposables, there are people who actually make a living charging a few pennies for repairing rubber flip-flops. Africa: land of somehow. On a major road leading from downtown Accra to the suburbs, a young man is filling the potholes with gravel and sand; standing beside him is a sign that reads, "One-man contractor; donations accepted." Near the town center are letter writers with their old typewriters. Tailors and seamstresses who cannot afford their own kiosk carry their sewing machines on their heads giving door-to-door service. Runaway children push hand trucks at the stations. Even outside the markets, everywhere there are people who have something to sell, sometimes only one obscure thing, which they hold in their hands or place on a small table. Those not so fortunate hang around busy places, some waiting for an opportunity to carry something or clean something, others waiting for someone to beg.

It's urban poverty in action. Some readers may find that the stories in this book make them sad because of the way poverty messes up peoples' lives. On the other hand, some readers might be oddly disturbed by the way people in this book spend money. You may not get a feeling of poverty from these people, and in many ways they do not seem to be poor or obsessed with poverty. Yet you see their poverty from time to time, as when Hawa does not have forty cents for medicine, or when buying a bucket and a few pots is something to be shared among friends. Have you ever had to pack up your house recently? What the young

people in this book own can usually fit into a large suitcase. It is important to understand that poverty is a factor somewhere behind everything that happens in this book, influencing the smallest details as well as the whole, but it is also important not to allow the effects of poverty to overwhelm your perception of where the people are coming from. You should understand their poverty as they do. They know they're poor: to them poverty is something like a sickness that imposes troubles and pressures. It is difficult for poor people to make long-range plans, and they take their problems and their pleasures from day to day, and in that regard they resemble old people as well as sick people. Because of their poverty, too, they have to do all kinds of extra things and take many extra steps to achieve a goal. Even your best Marxists sometimes have no patience to appreciate how much poor people have to do to get something together.

Poverty is about what is not there, and poor people are aware of what they do not have; when they walk into someone's room, they notice what is inside. They are aware of what they need to make their lives easier: anything cool. Poverty is hot like a fever, and everybody would like to be cool, that is, moving comfortably and without worries. In the West African idiom, when someone is "hot," it doesn't refer to being popular or on a roll; it can refer to being annoyed or serious or worried, but also when someone says, "I'm hot," he means he's broke. Yet if poverty is like a sickness, poverty is something that people deal with in different ways. Some people dwell on it and think only about it; some people ignore it and act as if they don't know they're poor; some people suffer quietly and take its problems unto themselves; some people react against it and try to collect damages from anyone and everyone. If you're a stranger among them, when they see you walking down the street, some of them are hoping that you're having a good time and will speak well of their scene, and some are watching your movements and wondering whether you need help. Although some are seeing you and thinking about food, most poor people in Africa harbor not ill will and jealousy but rather appreciation of your good fortune. A few may try to get their share by hook or by crook, though without being especially malicious. True bitterness and hostility reside within the ideological preserve of some of their educated or indoctrinated compatriots. In this

book, the characters deal with their poverty on a case-by-case basis. It's always there and it's always bad by definition, and it makes them do some things that might upset some readers, but it doesn't always have the same meaning to the different people in the stories. It's a given, just a fact of life.

In the 1960s, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis wrote about what he called "the culture of poverty" as a common element of peasant and working-class life in much of the world.¹ He was trying to make the point that poverty affects people's lives so much that it overwhelms the cultural resources of a place; it determines so much of people's lives that it exhibits many of the characteristics of culture, even to the point that it instills lifeways and values that keep its victims and their children inside it in a vicious cycle. The notion of a culture of poverty was much debated and criticized, but a more interesting thing happened to Lewis's work. Lewis illustrated his ideas in the form of detailed life histories that depicted a number of Mexican and Puerto Rican poor people, and although the significance of poverty was evident throughout their stories, the magnificent spirit of these people showed through and caught the imagination of a large readership. The people in this book might not strike the same chords, but like the people in Lewis's books, they cannot be understood primarily in terms of their poverty.

One thing that can be said about poor people in general is that they do not like to have someone's idea of poverty interfere with their idea of themselves as human beings. They know what's not there but they also deal with what's there. If you find yourself focusing too much on what's not there, remember that electricity and flushing toilets and supermarkets are recent inventions that even the rich and royal people of old did without, and no one makes much of that or calls them poor. What poor people in Africa don't want is a person who feels that he or she is better than others, who tries to show himself to be above them or who separates himself from them or who presses down on them. Most do not

1. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: An Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961), *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Random House, 1964), *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty — San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965).

mind seeing a rich or powerful person if they have even a slight hope that they might have access to consumables or resources. Therefore, to be fair, we should consider the proposition that people who do not pity themselves for their poverty should also be exempt from our pity. What they have to do or think they have to do to survive is often lamentable, but to them, many of the consequences of their poverty are not sad but funny. Given the amount of attention they have to give their poverty, they have quite a few ways of dealing with it, and one of the more successful strategies in their repertoire of responses is to become very adept at laughing it off. They're not about to let their poverty spoil their life completely. Poverty, like any kind of problem, brings out the best and the worst in people. Poor people can be selfish, petty, and jealous about their lack of means, but poor people are often the world's most generous, and many of them don't mind spending their last penny to help a friend or to enhance a moment.

While I was with them, I was a believer and not an observer. I went along with the positive view, and I enjoyed the benefits of being positive. During my first year in Ghana, 1970-71, before I moved into town, I lived at the University of Ghana, seven miles outside Accra. I felt I had read enough of the books that were on the curriculum, and when I was not away in other towns and villages doing research into "culture," Accra was a place to have fun. My routine was to hang around the Institute of African Studies in the mornings, talking to colleagues and friends, or to relax in my dormitory room reading or writing, then hitchhike to town in the early afternoon. Unless I had to buy something, I needed only about two or three dollars for the day, one dollar of which was reserved for a taxi back to campus in the small hours. Once in town, I had a general walking route that would take me through several areas, and I would visit friends and let the day develop any way it wanted. In the quick tropical transition from harsh daylight to evening, the images of dilapidation, repair, and construction softened and faded, but the pace of life abated only a few steps. In the evenings, the streets were full of traffic. The petty traders were everywhere, many selling food or tea. People were on their way to visit each other. People were sitting outside and playing draughts or conversing or watching the passing scene. Actually, I went to Ghana partly because of a conversation I had had with a Ghanaian who

was living in the States. He described Accra evenings by saying that many people go out "to refresh their minds." The phrase intrigued me for a few weeks while I was deciding to go there and see how my mind might be refreshed by the scene.

After my daily strolls through the town, in the evening I usually ended up at one of the bars or nightclubs with resonant names like Lido or Tiptoe or Metropole or Apollo. These nightclubs were outdoors, with metal tables and chairs partially under a roofed area and arranged around an open cement dance floor. I had early on befriended the people who watched the gate at these places, and I entered free, though I often had to wait outside for the right time to enter. No problem. Outside the nightclubs was another convivial scene. There were a lot of people hanging around enjoying the outside view while listening to the sounds from inside. People with small tables sold everything from kebabs to cigarettes to aspirin, and people with kiosks sold locally distilled spirits. At that time, a full shot glass — a "tot" — cost about a nickel. Two tots in a tumbler was a normal quaff, taken at a gulp. I would be hanging, perhaps chatting with one of the petty traders or taxi drivers or barhoppers or friends. The invitation to a drink was, "Shall we cut something small?" For ten or twenty cents, we sported each other to the stuff. I still can't believe how much I was able to drink in those days. Inside the club, excellent beer was about fifty-five cents for a 66 cl bottle, but people from inside also came out to buy the cheaper "hot" drinks or, if they preferred something "cool," to go around the corner to a darker spot in order to smoke marijuana, which they called "groove." On their return, people would tease them, "How you doing?" "Groovy," or "Coo-o-l," they giggled. Around the clubs in Nigeria, where capitalism was more advanced, the marijuana was sold already rolled; in Ghana the marijuana was folded and tied inside cut-up pieces of airmail paper suitable for rolling one cigarette. One "wrap" cost a shilling, just under a dime, and many groovers would nurse a drink inside the club and then step outside and rely on the marijuana to add a buzz to the evening. In Ghana, the marijuana sellers were not usually around the club; at a cost of about fifty cents, a taxi driver could be sent on a quick drive to get five wraps for several groovers and receive a commission for himself of one wrap from the seller and one from the buyers.

At that time and up to now, in French-speaking countries like Togo, Burkina Faso, or Côte d'Ivoire, the nightclub scene was annoyingly neocolonial. Instead of large open-air nightclubs that attracted a diversity of people, major towns in the Francophone countries had small European-style discos, indoors and air-conditioned. There was no cover, but inside, a 33 cl bottle of beer could cost as much as six hundred to twelve hundred to fifteen hundred or even two thousand CFA francs, about three to six to nine dollars depending on the exchange rate. Needless to say, the patrons were primarily European and Asian expatriates and members of the African elite. The whole scene stunk of class and threw patterns of sociability and conviviality totally out of kilter. The discos were often nearly deserted, though at several of them, drinks were cheaper by half and more people were present. Although there were some open-air nightclubs that functioned on occasional weekends with local bands, the main drinking holes for the general population were small bars with tables extending to where a sidewalk might someday be placed. You could go from bar to bar, corner to corner, to change views. In those bars, the large-size bottle of beer was about seventy-five cents, and of course, many people who attended a nearby disco but were serious about drinking would nurse a single small bottle inside the disco and then come outside to satisfy their thirst before going back inside to dance.

The drinking routine was for different people to buy rounds of several large bottles that were shared into the company's glasses; as soon as your beer was even slightly below the rim of the glass, someone would serve you and top it up. If you thought that you were already too loaded and wanted to stop drinking, you would leave your glass full, because if you drank even a last polite sip, someone would fill it up again. The cafelike atmosphere of the street bars was generally made even more typical by the presence of huge speakers that would blast popular African music onto the street. The sound systems were not up to the standard of those in the discos, and the records were sometimes scratchy, but at least the street bars had the advantage of never playing French popular music. For me, sticking my head into a couple of the dark discos and hearing Johnny Hallyday was about as far as I went into that particular scene.

I was into traditional African music, and my first requirement for urban nightlife was hearing the modern music that came from traditional beats and developed to suit the styles of the changing times. Inside the Ghanaian nightclubs, live bands provided the beat for the cross-section of urban life that congregated there. The first people I befriended were the musicians and the music lovers who were friends of musicians. From them, I met more people at the tables where we sat and talked. The ambience was clubby with the twist that all strangers were included. If I was sitting alone, it was commonplace for someone I didn't know to approach me and invite me to sit in company with him and his friends. I had traveled a bit before I went to Ghana, and I knew that going out alone is the best way to meet people; I always had the patience to sit by myself and wait for something to happen, and something always did. Somehow or other, I picked up the nickname "Psychedelic," and within a few weeks after my arrival, there was almost no place in central Accra where I could go and not hear a friendly voice calling me, "Hey! Johnny!" or "Hey! Psychedelic!" In addition to the sociability, the main difference between these nightclubs and the bars I knew at home was that the people were of all ages and social backgrounds. There were shortages of old people of course, and married couples were vastly outnumbered, but the young and middle-aged mixed together, and it was not uncommon to find a table with people in their twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties.

For the most part, I was with the younger set, and I was a "guy," a word that in the local idiom can refer to either a man or a woman, someone who is a friend to all, someone who is straightforward, someone who does not bluff, someone who can joke and hang with people. A guy is a believer, someone who believes in himself or herself and believes in others, someone who is prepared to get with what's happening. A guy has what they call an "easy" or a "simple" understanding, meaning that it is an easy matter for a guy to understand and agree with what someone was saying, at least for the moment. We guys shared a sense of togetherness as young people; we were in our teens and twenties and thirties but we called ourselves boys and girls, terms that in the context distinguished us from married people. My interest in the nightclub scene naturally extended from the music to the whole social atmosphere the music fit into and enhanced. I remembered teenage dances in the States where

there were always people looking for a fight, bars in the States where I would have gut reactions to the ambient hostility, public places where people had to be sensitive to the space around certain characters. There was none of it in those African clubs, and yet the people there were so different from one another.

One thing that fostered the togetherness was the way that people just put aside many of the labels that we might ordinarily think would define their identity. For example, ethnic consciousness – what used to be called "tribalism" – is an obvious case: it was there; it was definitely a factor in the networking of the workaday world; it was often a factor in self-help associations in the neighborhoods. At the clubs, people from the same family or original hometown might sit together and converse in their vernacular. It was occasionally a factor in the many personal dramas that preoccupied people, and it was possible to find people who would talk about it privately. But I hardly ever heard people openly abusing each other about their ethnicity or publicly talking about "these" people or "those" people. There are over seventy linguistic groups in Ghana, more than two hundred in Nigeria. An African city like Accra is so pluralistic that people cannot be sure about other people's backgrounds and cannot allow their ethnic sentiments to prejudge a person who might become a friend. One evening I was in the company of an American radical and a group of Accra guys, and the American was talking against colonialism; he was evidently thinking to ingratiate himself and develop international solidarity while he delivered a speech about how much he liked the Ashantis because they had fought the British. I cringed because the group included not only Ashanti guys but also some Ga and Ewe guys whose ancestors had also fought the Ashantis. The potential discord was quickly glossed over, as usual, but whenever anybody at the university asked me what "tribe" I hung out with in town, I used to answer, "Apaches."

I was not being clever. Actually, during the period of time when I was in Ghana, a considerable number of young people in Accra called themselves Apaches. They evidently took the name from some movie in which the U.S. cavalry comes upon the smoldering remains of a wagon train, and the scout picks up an arrow, exchanges glances with the lieutenant, shakes his head, and mutters, "Apaches." The Apaches, as

understood by uncertified Accra anthropologists based on the ethnographic accounts of Hollywood screenwriters, are generally quiet and understanding; they can sit and watch something for hours, blending into the scenery; they are individualists with a strong sense of interpersonal loyalty; they are true to themselves and they are prepared to die at any time; they mind their own business, and they don't like people who come around and make a mess. The urban scene is one in which people have to hang together and take care of each other to survive; they don't have time for "tribalism" unless it's going to help them or hurt them at a given moment. They try to avoid it in general, even to the extent of calling for themselves a celebrated heritage from thousands of miles away.

I fit into that spirit, happy that my own tribe was not much of a factor. As an American, I had to learn my share of tricks to avoid being typified by people who didn't know me, but by and large, I was just another one of the young boys who were there with no specific purpose apart from hanging. I was relatively passive in that regard, mainly because I was interested in the nightclub scene and thinking about it as an entry point for focusing on the music and the lifestyle of the urban setting. Thus, I did not choose some people over others; I decided to be friends with all of them, and I guess I became well liked because of that. During my first months, I had my share of guides who were masters of that particular social territory. I maintained my laid-back demeanor because many people opened up to me, and as I got to know more of them I learned a lot about where they were coming from in the scene. After a while, when I entered a nightclub after hanging outside for a while, I might already have greeted many of the people who were there. If the place was uncomfortably crowded, I might join a table; otherwise I circulated.

The main activities, as one might expect, were drinking, talking, and dancing, and it was through dancing that I came to know many of the girls. The bands played their music in nonstop sets; when one song ended, the drummer would add a coda that led into the next number. On crowded occasions, people would leave their seats for the dance floor en masse; as if being pulled by a magnet, they leaned out of their seats and were dancing by the time they stood up. To get a partner for a dance

was simple: one could approach a table, salute the people with a greeting, and ask anyone who was not otherwise preoccupied. But since I was often hanging around just talking, girls who knew me felt free to ask me to dance if they had no partner. I figured they liked my style of dancing since I had been trained by a very cool guy from Newark whose revised moves had not previously made it back to the motherland. But probably what the girls knew about me was that I hung with the musicians and I was not a boyfriend of anyone in particular and I was not going to spoil anyone's game because I was one of the guys. Those girls who were regulars at a club would often sit together, and sometimes I sat with them instead of with other friends. If I had brought an extra dollar or two to town, I would buy a couple of bottles for the table; if not, one or another of the girls was buying. I suppose I had a somewhat privileged position because once I became known, it was general knowledge that I was not going to hassle anyone. The girls kept me dancing, which was good, and I enjoyed their conversation. The benefits of their friendship eventually extended to the point where I would often visit their houses during my daytime movements through the town. They also visited each other to cook and eat together in the afternoons, and I would sit outside with them while they cooked and we talked, maybe played a game of Ludo, and then ate.

I first met Hawa in 1971 when her boyfriend was a good friend of mine. Her place was also a popular gathering place that was close to the center of town. It was just up the street from an automotive shop owned by a Lebanese friend who had offered to fix up an old BSA motorcycle for me. We never got the bike on the road, but for a while I used to pass by there almost every day to check on whether or not he had found this or that spare part, and from there I used to go to Hawa's house, where there was often a group of friends cooking or hanging around. Urban housing for most people is typically a room or two in what is called a compound house. The house itself is basically a series of rooms off a yard, or compound. The kitchen is outdoors, generally in a shaded area of the compound, and the cooking is done on an open fire fueled by charcoal. One sits on wooden benches or stools or relaxes on a woven mat that is spread on the ground. People cook and eat together first of all because everyone knows that eating alone is a miserable experience. Second, the

local food is usually a stew or soup that should be made in quantity, or at least in more than a single portion, and eaten fresh. Third, in Ghana cooking is hard work that is best shared: the stew or soup is usually served on a heavy paste made from some type of boiled flour or else on a starchy dough called *fufu* that is made by pounding cooked cassava, plantain, or yam in various combinations. Fufu is pounded in a large wooden mortar with a long wooden pestle, and although most women can do it by themselves, it is much easier if one woman turns the fufu while another pounds it.

As they cooked, the girls joked and talked about whatever — the events of the previous day, their plans for later, the films they had seen, their other friends, their boyfriends, their problems. Often they told extended anecdotes about themselves or things they had seen. The range of experience and people they described was very wide, reflecting the cosmopolitan scene as well as the fact that they were single. After all, one of the attractions of being single anywhere, for men and women, is being able to move with different people; a married person, as everyone knows, has settled down and sees less of life's diversity. When I met Hawa and began visiting her house on occasional afternoons, one of the first things I noticed was that she was very, very popular among her friends because of her storytelling. To me, her popularity suggested the notion that she spoke for her friends as well as for herself, that she was telling them the truth about themselves and the type of society they lived in. They gathered at her place and shared their stories, but she was the best raconteur among them. She could tell a story for an hour or more, holding them spellbound or making them laugh till they rolled on the ground.

When I returned to the States between 1972 and 1974, I thought about those happy afternoon conversations many times. I decided that when I went back to Ghana, in addition to continuing my studies in music, I would try to collect some stories from people in order to convey something about modern African youth and the type of lifestyle they have. I thought their voices would help me communicate some matters that were difficult to describe about the spirit that had attracted me to the nightclubs and other places where people relaxed and did their own thing. I thought to choose two young people from the people I knew,

Hawa and an equally articulate and charismatic male counterpart, hoping to use them as a point of entry to discuss the pluralistic openness of the modern cultural milieu. When I did return to Ghana, however, I fell straight into my work on music. I continued working with contemporary and traditional artists, and I could never seem to get around to sitting down with Hawa or my other friend to tape-record their stories. The situation was complicated by the fact that Hawa had moved from Accra to Lomé, in the neighboring country of Togo. One of the traditional areas where I was working was just by the border, and I saw Hawa often during frequent visits to Togo because I would stay with the old friends from the nightclubs in the compound house where some of them were living. As in Accra, we ate together, and we all often met in the evening at roadside bars. I first suggested this project to Hawa in 1975. I was more interested in her stories as vivid and intimate descriptions of the way people interacted than in her own personal story as such, though a life history seemed a convenient format. I told her simply that I believed many people in America would be interested in knowing how a young African woman felt about her life, and I expressed my conviction that she would be able to communicate effectively. She was sympathetic to the project, but a number of problems were occupying her attention, and she could not spend enough time with me for us to do any recording. For a while she was absent from Lomé and no one knew her whereabouts, though she was rumored to have stumbled into some kind of serious trouble.

Meanwhile, my plans further unraveled regarding the man I had had in mind to complement Hawa. He remained a tight friend and was very close to me in Accra, but he changed the way he talked. It was not that he lost the ability to talk but that his manner of talking became so complex and full of artifice that it could no longer be comprehensible to a Western reader. His verbal agility was too great to be used for an uninitiated audience, too thick to be presented without an overwhelming number of explanatory footnotes. What happened was that he and some of his friends became enamored of Nigerian Pidgin English and began spending most of their free time in bull sessions that were oriented toward developing an argot of puns, multilingual phrases, fractured syntax, and deliberate mistakes that satirized semieducated usage of

English. To them, Nigerian Pidgin was a model language because it raised linguistic ironies to new heights. He and his friends themselves had only primary or middle-school education, but they were incredibly alert to the ways in which concepts become twisted in translation and classes of words change from one language to another. In their pluralistic world, people are always learning other languages and making hilarious mistakes, particularly when they try to puff themselves up by using the language of the elite, English. In the way my friends used English, there was probably an element of parodied class-consciousness that poked fun at the elite and the bureaucratic pomposity of their speech, but the allure of Pidgin, with its odd personifications and strange metaphors, goes far beyond such inspiration. Nigerian Pidgin is particularly funny. Nigerian newspapers have humor columnists who write witty pieces glorifying Pidgin's descriptive power and flexibility; I remember one column I read in which the main character was explaining to a potential girlfriend that he didn't have a car, "I no be car-owner; I be leg-owner."

The Accra guys sat around and passed their leisure time sharing the latest samplings of such usage that their ears had collected and also making up their own examples. Their evening conversations were thickly laced with gradually built-up combinations of dislocated Akan Twi and Ga and Ewe as well. For example, my friend Santana, whom I will describe in the next few paragraphs, once saw someone wearing a shirt with the name of the Miami Dolphins football team. Such used clothing sent from overseas, particularly jeans and modern fashions, sells well. The local name for it is *buroni-wawu*, from the Twi *Oburoni w'awu*, in which one addresses the former owner by addressing the worn article of clothing, "Oh! White man, you died." Santana turned "Miami Dolphins" into *Mia-mia-odo-phians*. The Twi word *mia* means to squeeze and also to hug, and *miamia me* means "squeeze me tight," or "give me a big hug" or, in some contexts, "screw me." *Ɔdɔ* is the Twi word for "love," and *ɔdɔfo* is "lover." The suffix "-fo" indicates "a person who," and Santana also associated that syllable with the English suffix "-ians," or "relating or belonging to a group," to mean "the people of," as in "Philadelphians." The result, *Miamia-odophians*, meant people who really like to screw, and when we would go a nightclub and Santana would see a lot of girls

hanging around the bar, he would say, "Yes. Those are the Miamia-odophians."

For another example, someone would take a Twi word like *ntem*, which means "prompt, hurried, early, quick," and add an "s" for the English plural and the suffix "-ment" to make an English noun. Then, when talking about a situation when he was extremely hurried, he would say, "The *ntements* were too much." Such mixed-language words followed each other so rapidly that even the people who could follow the allusions were always catching up with what had just been said and trying to slow the speaker down with interjected laughs, "Ha-ha! Yeah! The *ntements*!" They used English itself at one moment like James Joyce and in the next like an illiterate who had misheard what he was trying to say. A breeze would blow, and one person would take a deep breath and say, "Aha! Airfreshments!" Then another would say, "Ah-h-h! French air!" And everybody would fall out laughing. It was great stuff, but it was dense, and it lacked the extended dramatic thrust with which my friend had formerly imbued his stories about himself. While I joined in the laughter, I cursed myself for not having acted to record his stories previously when they would have been more presentable to people who are total strangers to the scene.

Since I had originally intended this book to be about both a young man and a young woman, I might as well tell something about the man who was intended as Hawa's counterpart, just to balance the view because there is no one quite like him in Hawa's stories. Santana was my friend's nickname. The nickname itself was a corruption of "Sartana," the main character of a popular spaghetti western entitled *Sartana the Angel of Death*, one of the many spinoffs of Clint Eastwood's and Sergio Leone's Man-with-No-Name films from the 1960s. The replacement name "Santana" pushed the name "Sartana" from popular consciousness in 1971 when the American musical group of that name played a well-hyped concert in Accra. For youthful Ghanaians of the moment, the name "Santana" was synonymous with a totally modern, do-your-own-thing attitude and style. "Santana" fit my friend well enough, and the switch became permanent. The film was popular enough in its time that a person could have the nickname Sartana the Angel of Death, and many

people would understand the allusion. When the name Sartana changed to Santana, though, my friend also retained the epithet Angel of Death.

Santana truly deserved that nickname. He divided his time between Accra and a farm about thirty miles outside the city. Fed up with mooching relatives, he had built a rustic compound deep in the bush, where he worked sizable plots entirely on his own, living what he called a "heavy hippie life in the jungle." At night, he hunted with devastating effectiveness. He also caught live snakes barehanded, including cobras, for the zoology department at the University of Ghana. I met him during my first year in Accra, and he stayed with me in a house I was sitting for a generous professor who had traveled for the summer vacation. When I returned to Accra in 1974, Santana joined me in a small apartment I had rented in town. He would spend three or four days a week fooling around in Accra with me, arriving with bush meat from his hunting and sacks of food from his farm. He was still catching snakes for the zoologists, who paid him the paltry sum of two dollars each, but he stopped after I nearly opened a pillowcase he had deposited in the kitchen as if it held some limes or cocoyams when actually there was a deadly carpet viper inside it. After that he only brought the skins of dead snakes, which he sold to Hausa traders for making leather goods. Each skin, whether of a ten-foot cobra or a twelve-foot python, was accompanied by a fantastic story of The Big Fight between Santana and the snake. Santana normally did not kill snakes for fun, but when a snake moved into the compound and began eating Santana's chickens, it was war. Telling every detail of how he stalked and found and then chased the snake through the thatched roof of his house until the story culminated with the final blows of a machete, Santana would say, "Yeah, that snake had a very strong spirit!" Apart from his hunting, Santana also derived his epithet from his powerful hands, which were calloused from his furious machete farming into something like huge blocks of wood. On the very few occasions when Santana would get into a fight, the fight was over with one blow. I have never seen anything like Santana's hands. Everybody who shook his hand would jump back and exclaim, "Wow!" Then Santana would laugh and say, "Yes. I am the Angel of Death."

Santana did whatever he wanted, and he was such a funny and uninhibited guy that people knew him wherever he went. Everybody

liked him. We were inseparable, but if we had not been around a particular area for even a couple of weeks, if I went there alone, the first thing many people would ask me, even before they asked how I myself was doing, was "Where's Santana?" He was a believer whose expressed motto was, "Do your own thing; no copyright." Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who sang mainly in Pidgin, had a song called "Gentleman" that went, "I no be gentleman at all; I be Africa man, original," and Santana boisterously upheld the message. One time when we were boarding a bus, Santana farted loudly, and an elderly man looked sharply at him. Santana said, "Yeah, na so we dey do for my country"; the old man said, "Oh? Where from you?" Santana laughed about the incident for days. A self-styled "original African man," he would fart and say, "Yeah! I dey!" meaning, "I'm here," an amendment of Descartes's philosophy into Santana's original African principle *Flato ergo sum*. He dressed in outrageous amalgams of styles, but his clothes were always clean and pressed, uniquely sharp, and he walked with a spring in his step. He wore wild hats because he neither cut nor combed his hair, and though his hair did not grow into dreadlocks, he was a Rastaman; as the song says, his vibrations were positive. His laugh was loud, and he was friendly to people. The only people who didn't like him were the occasional policemen or soldiers (whom he referred to as "government dogs") who tried to prevent the Angel of Death from doing his thing, but when we were together, we didn't get into trouble. I guess I may have protected him from unnecessary hassles from hustling authority figures, but all things considered, when Santana came to Accra, he came mainly as another fun-lover in a town of believers.

As I mentioned above, one of the delights of Santana's company was his use of language. It was not only I but everybody who enjoyed Santana's use of language. He liked to parody proverbs, and with an air of wisdom would say incomprehensible things like, "Yes, small boys are young because they are very little." He had attended only middle school but had an extraordinary vocabulary, and his interest in language extended to a mastery of American slang to which I was only occasionally able to contribute. He talked to anybody and everybody, from perfect strangers to his language-busting friends, making weird sense with references to things they could not possibly know about. For example,

he had a bad tooth that could not tolerate cold. We were buying water at a busy kiosk that had some very frigid ice water, and Santana took a swig and shrieked, "Ayi! The thing is TOO HOT!!" As several dumbfounded onlookers stared, Santana set the cup on the counter and said to them, "Yeah, make I put 'am down so he go cool small." Anywhere and everywhere, Santana could always be counted on to enliven a scene by running his mouth and turning expressions upside down and inside out. He was usually equal to the challenge of explaining himself with further metaphoric dislocation, until his interlocutor, with brow twisted quizzically, would give up and laugh, saying, "Santana!" But Santana had more than his match among the Accra guys for whom such joking was their pastime. I enjoyed their use of language but I was not interested in presenting Santana as an example of that: it was Santana's personal stories that would have been worth sharing, for he had had many fascinating experiences at the crossroads of culture, and his positive attitude resembled and complemented Hawa's in many ways. I just missed the boat. By the time I became serious about recording his stories for this project, his language itself had become an obstacle that would have bogged most readers down even though it might have boggled their minds most pleasurably.

I decided to become serious about getting at least Hawa's stories. The next time I saw Hawa was in late 1975. She, Mama Amma, and Jacqueline visited me in Accra when Hawa and Mama were on their way to Ouagadougou. Their plans were to return within a month and then go to either Lagos or Abidjan. Hawa failed to return as promised, and there was no word of her in Lomé. Finally, I traveled to Ouagadougou in mid-1977 to find her, a task that involved some tricky detective work. She was going under a different name, and of course, no one could be sure whether I might be someone whom she wished to avoid. After several days of inquiry, I was able to trace her and then contact her through an intermediary. She was happy to see me, and when I reminded her of our conversations of years before about recording her stories, she agreed to talk about herself on tape. We then recorded many stories from her life, sitting for hours at a time. The experiences she discussed covered the period of her life from the time she was around eight or nine up to her late twenties. The interviews were so extensive that I realized that I

could forget about recording a male counterpart and could just rely on her stories alone. When we finished, I returned to northern Ghana to pursue my other research. In 1979 I went back to Ouagadougou again, and when I met her there, we recorded another series of tapes that added further material and bought her stories more up-to-date.

As it turned out, this book does not directly address my original interest in the public atmosphere of the African urban scene, but it will rather take readers more deeply into the private lives of the different types of people there. Perhaps it answers my interest more adequately, if indirectly, in the way it elevates the reality of their problems and the values by which they live. In retrospect, Hawa gave me what is probably a better solution to my original intention to describe the public places I frequented. After all, the public places are only the setting of the real drama, only the tables and chairs where the characters arrange themselves. From ground level, the setting need only be sketched, taken in with a glance before one starts dealing with the people. This introduction serves that purpose in part. In the stories that follow, you will hear next to nothing about modernization and tradition, Westernization, feminism, bureaucracy or economics or government, capitalism or Marxism; but you will meet urban youth and villagers, expatriate Europeans, men and women, farmers and contractors and civil servants and police, business folk and poor people. As for the type of values that sustain the people, your awareness of that will emerge gradually. There are no sermons, no psychologizing, no treatise on ethics. What is bad is simple and clear: abuse of position, lack of respect for a fellow human being, gossiping, small-mindedness, greed, jealousy, the usual stuff. There are some things people do in this book that are going to annoy a lot of readers. Accept these actions for what they are, but do not judge the people in Hawa's stories because of the failings on display. As Durkheim might have said, it is the bad things in life that give us the opportunity to know what is good and that give a storyteller the opportunity to show it.