

Preface:

I feel like this whole thing deserves a bit of explanation, some type of context.

Not the context of the program I'm on, or what a Capstone project is. I assume that the audience already knows what this is, as someone from the YES Abroad program is basically my whole audience.

Moreso, I feel like this project deserves an explanation of what it turned out to be. Undoubtedly, in the coming months there will be some type of reflection I will have to provide YES Abroad, in which I explain how my project changed from conception, to end. In fact, I know this to be true, because the document was sent to me months ago, and it is now sitting on the tiny storage of this Chromebook, just waiting for an email to be sent telling me to fill it out.

Well let's just get it out of the way.

Long before the thoughts of having to actually do this project ever entered my mind -- say, November? December? -- me, and the other Americans in Accra -- Ghana's capital -- had already been discussing plans on going on a long independent travel to somewhere in Ghana.

After AFS Ghana took us on their "prescribed" -- to use the Ghanaian english word -- trip to the North, the place was sort of decided for us. The North was vastly different from the South of Ghana, and it was fascinating.

I had never before seen savannah, and the odd sense of scale that accompanied it. Driving for long hours of pot-holed roads, I couldn't help but stare out the window at the passing, beautiful scenery, dotted by mud and thatch villages, surrounding a dirty watering hole. The scene seemed to come straight out of every Westerners pre-conceived notion of what Africa was like, preconceived notions that had been defied almost consistently every moment of my time in Ghana so far, were now being thrown back in my face, and confirmed.

Not only was the landscape stunning and captivating, but the people were too. Each area has a long history of ethnic interactions and disputes, hiring and firing of tribes, chieftaincy struggles and violence. Yes that's right, chieftaincy. Traditional rulers

still hold a decent amount of power in local and ethnic communities, including some judicial and legal powers. Often times -- as I would find out -- disputes in small villages -- and often not so small ones like Tumu -- involving theft, or adultery, or some other type of dishonesty will often be tried and adjudicated by the local chief, before going to the official government of Ghana.

Then, to think about the fact that the north of Ghana has the vast majority of the ethnic diversity of the country. Talking to two different strangers from the street about their culture, where their people came from, what their people are known for, are their people thriving or dying, what the chieftaincy rules are, and who *is* their chief, will all bring about totally different answers.

Absolutely fascinating.

This type of ethnic demarcation doesn't *really* exist in the United States. The U.S. is more accustomed to absorbing, or congealing other cultures, chewing them up, and then spitting them back out to form the fabric of American Culture. This process, slowly but surely, turns the culture of new immigrants, into the culture of collective older immigrants. However, ethnic demarcation of this kind is so often a factor in the politics of other countries. Take the Middle East for example. There are many different ethnic groups competing for power and supremacy, and each of them has a long tally of wrongs and injustices done to their people by other tribes. The mentality that this conjures in the people living through it is so often hard for Americans to understand. Getting to experience this up close and personal was an opportunity that I did not want to miss.

So, the stage was set. The players chosen, and the destination in mind. The only question: what to do once we were up there?

Answer: Capstone project.

I answered the Capstone-proposal-thingy in a hurried and flustered way -- it may have been a little late -- explaining basically that I wanted to go to the north, and write stuff.

What kind of a boring, second-rate rip-off of an idea is that?

I had recently read Hunter S. Thompson's excellent book with the ever-famous title *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and I imagined myself writing a similarly irreverent take on the "African Dream" just as Thompson rags on the "American Dream," -- minus of course, the absolutely rampant drug abuse that made up the vast majority of the books little to no actual plot.

This was a stupid idea, for one, very basic reason: I ain't Hunter S. Thompson. I can't write like that, and if I tried, it would look bad, and sound bad, and hey guess what? it would be bad.

So the question still comes back to, what to actually write?

My father answered that question for me.

He suggested, kind of out the blue, that I collect stories.

My dad is a short, blond, ponytail having physicist with a scruffy beard and blue eyes. He lives almost exactly a mile as the crow flies from an active volcanic eruption, and he sometimes sleeps in his tree house, as long as it isn't too cold. He complains about his bad back loudly and often. Likewise with his hour to two hour commute (to be fair, gas prices on an island? No thanks). He lives in the Volcano village, so aptly named because -- as stated earlier -- it's essentially right on top of an active volcano. It's a little bit surprising that this village with such an uncreative, boring, and predictable name be an artistic and creative hotspot.

Whatever the reason for this miss-match of name and reality, one of my Dad's creative friends is a storyteller. His job is to essentially travel the world, and collect and share stories, particularly about and to kids. Isn't that a cool job. He suggested to my Dad that I collect some of these stories while I was in Ghana, while I was in the North. This was a fantastic idea, and I changed my focus to it in an instant. I was going to collect stories and histories from many different groups of people, all across the North of Ghana, and I was going to retell them, with my own description and my own flair. Exciting.

When I was up there, I realized something though. These places I was in, these small, little villages, would be so misunderstood and seem so foreign to an American

audience, that some context must be provided on my part. Some sort of commentary. So, in between some of the stories that I believe warrant it, I will do just this, add my thoughts and impressions, both about the story, and about the culture that the story has evolved in.

Something else should be mentioned, just quickly. These are stories from different cultures, and those cultures often have very different values than ours. Sometimes these stories might come off as sexist, or misogynistic, and yes, sometimes they are. But I assure you, that these tendencies are simply a reflection of the culture I am immersed in. True, I am retelling and adding details to the stories -- so that they work better on the page, seeing as how these stories were all told orally, by a translator, there tended to be some necessary fill-in-the-blanks -- but I am simply tapping into cultural norms and biases to give a more complete picture. In other words, the views expressed in some of the following stories do not reflect my own.

A last word on this project. While in these places, we often described our project as "research," or something along those lines. While this is not necessarily false, it should be stressed that all of the contents of this project are for mainly two reasons: 1) the fulfillment of the YES Abroad scholarship, and 2) entertainment. The learning was all done on my part, and everything I say about the histories or stories in this project should be taken with extreme caution, and should be treated as academically untrustworthy.

With that, I hope you enjoy.

Stories:

We're going to skip over the first about half of the trip. There were some minor hiccups in our plans that made it, unfortunately, impossible for me to collect stories and legends in Bawku, and the Upper East region. Unfortunate? Yes. But I still was able to get some fantastic stories from the Sisala people in the Upper West.

After staying a few days in Bolgatanga, we moved on to Tumu. From Tumu we went to Boti, then to Kandia, Kusale, and Konkohon. In each place, we tried to learn about the oral history of the place, and we heard the folk-tales that had been passed on for generations. That being said, the oral histories of the place, probably made the worst stories. Or rather, they translated worse onto the page than did the others. I felt like I could embellish a little bit with the others, spice it up. With histories, something felt off about that. So, I left them mostly how they were told to us, meaning that they might be lacking in some detail or storytelling *umph*.

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## **Tumu Origins, and Crows**

Tumu is the ancient seat of the Tumu kuoro, the king of all the Sisala. A seat of power, a center of the community, Tumu is the largest and most isolated town of its size. Tumu is the center for the Sisala people, and as such, it has a storied history.

The original Sisala came from Karaga, a village from down south, in Dagomba territory. A family set out one day, to try and make their own way in life, free from the constraints placed on them by Karaga.

Overland they traveled, through the wide open plains and savannah, moving from acacia to acacia for shade, watering-hole to watering-hole for survival. They traveled quickly, and silently, for roaming those lands were the Babatu, and the Samori. Two ancient horse-warrior tribes, that had taken quickly to the slave trade. They ranged afield, capturing and making a nice, neat profit from each and every person sold.

One day, when the family was sleeping, a crow rested in the tree above them. This crow looked around him with his intelligent, watchful eyes, and he spotted movement in the distance. Dust clouds rose in the air, converging on the peaceful, sleeping family. The crow took flight, making sure to push strongly off of the dead branch he had been perched on. It cracked and fell on the patriarchs head, waking him up.

Groggy, and bleary eyed, he was still able to make out the fast approaching Babatu and Samori riders. He woke his family, and scrambled in haste to flee. They made it alive.

After they had settled down in Tumu, they took an oath. No one would kill, or eat any crow. Thus, Tumu was founded, and until this day, the Sisala from Tumu refuse to kill crows.

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The Boy and the Goats

Children get orphaned. This is one of the harsh, sad truths of this world. Parents should always live long enough to see their own children grow up, fall in love, have their heart broken, learn from their mistakes, and parents should be there every step of the way, helping and guiding their loved ones. One of the only things more tragic than the death of parents at a young age, is for those parents to have to bury a small coffin themselves.

When children are orphaned in Ghana, they are passed to their closest living relative. Many of these children, when they enter their new “homes,” are looked upon with annoyance, pity, and barely concealed contempt. They are not welcomed into the hearts and souls of those who should be there for them, those who should be comforting a child in need of parents, a child in need of guidance.

Once, when one such child was orphaned, something happened. He... really wasn't a child at that point. Old enough to be an adult in his culture, but he still felt

innocent, still felt soft, not yet hardened with hatred and malice. He was treated -- as said above -- with hostility, and he was left as an outcast. As someone to fetch scraps from the edges of the family cookfire. As someone to do menial, and hard labor each, and every day.

The most dreaded -- and most frequent -- labor that was assigned to the child, was that of finding firewood. All the easy trees, and shrubs had been picked clean by years of overuse, and he had to venture far and wide to find enough wood to keep the cookfire burning the next day. He was sent out just as the family would sit down to eat, and only when he returned with a suitable haul would he be allowed to eat the meagre scraps that were left over by the family, the very bottom of the not-so-metaphorical barrel.

One day, he was sent out, and no matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he labored, how far he ranged, how long he stayed out, he simply couldn't find enough firewood. Stumbling with exhaustion, and feet drooping with tiredness, he bumbled his way home, knowing that tonight would be a hungry night.

When he dragged his feet into the family compound, he was met this time, with anger. The orphaned child took the fist across his face. He was told that he was lazy, and that he should go fetch water.

Exhaustion weighing on his shoulders, the orphaned child pieced himself back together, picked himself off of the dusty ground, and went to the watering-hole.

When the child arrived, he looked down at the water, reflecting his face. The child saw that he was filthy, that his clothes were rags, that his eyes looked sunken and hollow, that his lips were split from the fist that had hit them. He licked those dry, cracked lips. He was thirsty. So incredibly thirsty. Almost an entire days worth of work, in the hot sun, and nothing to show for it. He cupped his hands in the water, and he brought them, shaking, to his mouth. The cool water slid down his throat, seeming to revitalize him.

Blinking, he looked up, and noticed that a meal had been laid out next to him. Tuo-zaafi, green leaf stew, and fresh milk in a calabash. A modest meal, but even a modest meal felt to the child like an emperor's feast.

He looked around wearily. In the stories, it was always the bad children who seized on opportunity with gluttony. They were punished for their greed, for taking that which belonged to whatever spirit or being had prepared it.

"Go on child," a feminine voice spoke. "I made it for you."

Turning back to the water, the orphaned child saw a woman. She was glimmering, and glowing. Moonlight shown off of her bare, naked skin, outlining her curves and gentle sweeps. Her smile was kindly, and knowing. The woman's eyes seemed to pierce into the orphan, reading and understanding his soul, and finding it pure and good.

"Eat. You are hungry," she said. She watched as he almost dove onto the food, ravenously soaking up the stew, and lapping up the milk. The woman disappears before he could finish however, leaving the orphan there with thanks, dying on his lips, not knowing where to direct it.

He fetched his water, and he trudged back to his "home," feeling much refreshed. When he got there though, he was only met with red-hot, uncontrolled rage.

"Who fed you?!?"

"Where did you get the food?!"

"Don't lie to us! Don't say you've not been fed! Where?!? Tell us where?!?"

The blows rained down, and the child curled into a ball, making himself as small a target as he could. He felt the fists, and the feet driving into his flesh, making the air puff out of him. He felt his bones shatter, splintering into pieces. Some animal instinct within him knew that he should cover his head, but he couldn't lift his arm up. The same animal instinct knew that he would soon be dead.

"I'll show you," he gasped, hot tears snaking their way through the dirt on his face. "I'll.... I'll show you where I got the f-food."

Stumbling, half blind from the red and sticky blood dripping into his eyes, he made his way back to the watering-hole. He felt numb with pain, every muscle, every tendon, every fibre of his soul felt like it was on fire. At a certain point, your body shuts down, having reached its tolerance for pain.

He reached the little clearing and depression that held the watering-hole, and he collapsed. His “parents,” saw the remains of his meal, and they knew that he was telling the truth.

They took calabash, bottle gourds, whatever vessel they could find, and they started to empty out the watering-hole, knowing somehow instinctively that whatever had fed the child, was down there. The child’s eyes opened wide in horror at this. Panic seized him, but he was too weak, too bruised, too beaten to do anything. Anything except sing:

Heavens above, waters below

Don't take this from me, no

Hunger will come

Oh yes hunger will come

And then I'll just be me,

Dead and done

Oh my lights, reflected on the lake

Do not consign me to this fate

Hunger will come

Oh yes hunger will come

And then I'll just be me,

Dead and done

*Slow starvation is it for me
If this job is finished, hurriedly*

*Hunger will come
Oh yes hunger will come
And then I'll just be me,
Dead and done*

The orphan's prayer was just a whisper, not loud enough to be heard, but it took all his remaining effort. He well and truly collapsed, not even having the energy to close his eyes.

The orphan's "protectors," yelled excitedly. They had found something in the mud. A small, feathered shape rose from the mud, and scampered about, trying to stay ahead of the grasping fingers following it. The family cooked and ate the guinea fowl, gorging themselves on the meat.

Satisfied and sleepy, they made their way back to their compound, content that they could continue their work at a later date. They left the orphan.

Dragging, and scraping himself back to his bed, the orphan made it to his quarters just as the moon was setting. He fell quickly into a dreamless, deep sleep.

He was awakened by a cry of shock, and pain. One of his "brother's," was relieving himself outside. He was straining, and pushing, trying to force the excrement out of him. Instead, emerging from his backside, was a goat's face.

Horrified and disgusted, his mother took up a length of wood, and swung it at the goat emerging from the bottom of her son. She missed though. At the last second, the plank of wood seems to jerk to the side, and the son seemed to squirm up to meet it, his head connecting with a sharp *crack*. He fell to the ground, dead.

Shocked and afraid, the family moved about in a haze of fear. It didn't take long though, for another one of them to have to use the bathroom. And another, and another.

All of them desperately and suddenly needed to empty themselves, and all of them found that they could only empty themselves of a goat, save the mother.

The matriarch tried to end the goats, but just like with the first son, her blows seemed to be magnetically drawn to the heads of her children and her husband. She was the only one left. Grief and anger coursed through her, and she looked at the orphan with pure, and unbridled hate and rage.

“Go. Get out of here. I never want to see you again.” she whispered, in a low, deadly tone.

The orphan hurried out of the compound. He was free, free at last from the abuse, from the hatred, from all the pain and suffering... and he had nowhere to go. He wandered, aimlessly, for a time. Only when the night had fallen, and the moon had risen, did he realize where his feet had been slowly taking him.

She was waiting for him, lounging on a rock near the edge of her watering-hole, filled with uncanny and glimmering grace in the moonlight. A smile played on her lips, and she nodded her head. “Yes, you may stay here,” she spoke. She stood up, and walked over to the orphan, and pulled him into an embrace. “Welcome to your new home.”

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This is probably the story that I twisted the most from the original, but to be fair, how the hell am I supposed to tell a story about people shitting goats? I mean, come on! That’s an almost impossible task to do with a straight face, and the lesson of the story, the moral, the meaning, almost requires one to have a straight face. This moral obviously being, “just because that child ain’t yours, doesn’t mean you can treat them badly.” Good lesson in my opinion.

And yes, it is as I said. These orphaned children are very often treated poorly, beaten and worked like a mule. The family unit is extremely important to Ghanaians. Any time that any type of support is needed, it can, and will be provided by the family

unit. There are essentially no social services in Ghana, so it is very difficult for these children to grow up and advance themselves. They are cast off to distant relatives who don't want them, and who only see them as a waste of resources that could be going to their biological children instead. An orphan has little to no chance of going to high school, let alone college. Maybe, just maybe, they might be picked up by an orphanage, but while there are surviving family members, that doesn't happen. And, unfortunately for these children, there aren't any water spirits to come and rescue them.

Also, while there was singing in the actual telling, absolutely none of said singing was translated for us. Just the very basic meaning of, "don't do that, or my food will be gone." This is nearly a direct quote actually. So, the lyrics are a fabrication. Please don't judge them too harshly. The lyrics of any other songs in this project are fabrications as well.

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The Twins

There was a man and woman, once. They loved each other, and they fit each other like a glove. Together, they had a child... or rather, children.

The twins came out of the womb conjoined, awkward, stuck together so that one was in front, the other behind. Siamese twins, connected to each other intimately and horrifyingly.

A meeting of the community was called together when they were born. What was to be done? Was there anything that *could* be done? The debate raged long into the night, until the chief -- who had been silent so far -- spoke up. "There is nothing that will be done to these children. They are part of our community, and they will stay that way. You will all welcome them into you hearts and homes as you would anyone else."

The matter was closed, and so it was.

Years passed and the twins grew. They were treated... passively by the rest of the village. Everyone would stare, and whisper, but they usually had the decency to do it

behind closed doors. People would greet them on the street, their horror and revulsion barely hidden behind faux smiles. Polite, and yet repulsed at the same time. This lifestyle continued for some time. It was not a good life, but it was one that they shared, and it was better than nothing.

They passed years of their time like this, until one day, one of the twins died. Suddenly, a life long friend, companion, family member, and brother had been taken, and yet the surviving twin was left with a constant reminder, a physical weight to drag around.

The twin who was left behind was heartbroken. The only person who had understood implicitly what he was going through, the only one he could share his thoughts and feelings with, the only one who really knew him, was gone now. In a few days, he would start rotting.

Another community meeting was called. This time, the chief made no attempt to try and save him. He was to be put to death, to be buried with his twin.

“No. I will not die by your hands. I won't let it happen.” He said. He left that night.

Leaving his village behind, he trudged off down the dusty road. There wasn't much left for him in that village, but it was familiar, it was known. Even the comfortable rudeness, and malice from the other village people was better than the uncomfortable unknown, the uncertain.

He started to sing.

I will not lie, in the dirt to die

I will not fall, to please you all

I will carry on, steady and strong

My brother's weight, it is my fate

He walked, for what seemed like days, until he came across another village. There, he saw an old man sitting down. A hunched back, veiny fingers thick with

arthritis, he raised his bright and clever eyes to look at the twins. He motioned for the twins to come and sit next to him, noting the weariness and sadness surrounding them.

“What is the matter young man?” he asked.

“Well sir, I have had a death sentence leveled at me, just for being myself.” the surviving twin said. He launched into an explanation, from his birth, to the polite malice, to the meetings. It all came pouring out. He felt like it had been ages since he had someone to talk to, someone to confide in. In reality, it had only been days since his brother had passed on.

“Wait here for a moment,” the old man said, when he was finished with his story. The old man creaked his way to a standing position, and then he hobbled his way over into his house, out of site. A crowd started to gather as the old man was gone, and the surviving twin tried not to make himself noticeable. He tried to hide his brother, he tried to make himself smaller.

The old man came back, with a large knife. “Now young man, I need you to trust me. Do you trust me?” the old man said. Feeling the press and weight of the gathered crowd, the twin could barely nod his head.

The man cut the dead, desiccated, and rotting corpse off of the surviving twin, taking away that weight he had been carrying around.

“There. That’s much better. We’ll bury him, we’ll bury him with honor.” the old man spoke, a kindly gleam in his eye. “Now, my son here will take you back to your village.” He gestured at one section of the crowd, and a person stepped forward.

Walking back into that village, the twin felt like a whole new person. The old man’s son marched right to the chief and demanded that a council take place. Everyone gathered.

“What you have done to this man is an injustice. You would kill him, for doing nothing but being himself. He did no ask to be born how he was, and yet you all let him feel like it was a choice to be an outcast.” The old man’s son spoke with ferocity and passion. “You should be ashamed. You tried to kill this man, instead, you should’ve helped him.”

The village folk cast their eyes downward. They shuffled their feet nervously. They muttered half-excuses and apologies to noone in particular. They were ashamed, and embarrassed.

The village folk hesitantly welcomed the surviving twin back. As an apology, they gifted him a cow.

He lived among the villagers, content. He was treated better now, as horrifying as that might seem. There was still unease in the gazes of those around him, but it was better than the disgust that he had gotten before. The surviving twin lived a full life, taking any opportunity that presented itself, and he lived those opportunities for two. He died at a ripe old age, surrounded by loved ones.

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### **Kandia Origins**

There once was a hunter. His name was Naza. He was not the best in the land, nor was he rich. But, he could support himself. He caught and killed enough animals that he could live, that he wouldn't be starving.

Naza came from the village of Kolema. Each day, he would range out into the wilderness that surrounded the village, sometimes staying in the bush for weeks at a time, catching, trapping, and shooting his prey.

His usual haunt for prey was a little place with lots of water. It was situated on a hill, and it had gorgeous trees to provide nice, cool shade. A man from Kusale -- a nearby village -- had a farm there. This man was called Kra. Kra tended dutifully to his farm, going out to the fields and working until his back ached and burned from the sun, until his arms were sore and tired, until his face became weathered and worn, until his hands were tough as iron from calluses. Kra needed to work hard you see, because his daughter was crippled.

Born deformed and weak, Nahadia often made her slow way out to the farm, so that she could catch some fresh air, and feel the sun on her face, and hear the birds chirping in the trees... and watch for the hunter.

She loved to spy for Naza, moving and through the bush, muscular frame crouching low to the ground, carefully putting one foot in from of the other, watchful eyes darting back and forth and looking for any movement. Nahadia loved to watch him move, and Naza loved to talk to her.

Naza found her to be charming, witty, smart, funny, and full of life, despite her deformed body. Her jokes were quick and smart, her temper was hot and fiery, her laugh could brighten a whole room. There was a reason that Naza kept coming to the farm to hunt, but he wasn't just hunting animals.

They had a child. A blubbering, cute, and perfect little child. Kra wasn't too happy though. It was done out of wedlock, There had been no bride price exchanged. There was no guarantee that Nahadia would be taken care of.

Kra went to Naza, and demanded from him a house. Naza was to build a house for Nahadia, on the farm.

Naza went to work, laboring day after day. Building and working all day, and late into the night. When it was finished, he had constructed a proper house, one that anyone would be happy to live in, one that anyone would be proud to have built. It was still empty though,

Nahadia's mother came, and filled the house with all the necessities of a home -- beds, cooking supplies, clothes and whatnot. The air of a mother's touch descended on the house, and it turned from being a well built house, into a comfortable home.

When Nahadia entered the home, she broke down, crying. She had not expected to find herself in a position like this, loved for who she is, loved for just being her. "As for today," she sobbed, "I've found my home."

Their son grew up into a strong, handsome, and good natured man. His name was Sosonko. When it was time for him to leave the house, to go and make his way in



the world, he left for the village of Sakai. There, he met a young woman, whom he promptly fell in love with.

They had five children, Kuli, Seio, Bamula, Suang, and Navo. Together, these five sons traveled back to their grandparents home. There, they founded the village of Kandia. Kandia means, "I have a home."

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I will always have fond memories of Kandia. It was certainly one of the best villages that we visited.

Our haggard group had walked the couple of miles it was from Boti, in the hot, dusty sun, and we arrived thirsty. Getting water, we asked someone sitting nearby where might the chief be, and they directed us to a meeting happening just around the corner, under a big, shady tree. Plastic chairs were arranged in a big circle, and it looked as if every important elder was present. A community meeting we were told.

Ushered forward, we greeted them in the standard matter -- going from right to left, shaking hands and crouching to our betters. The chief surprised us. He was a young man, certainly not out of his thirties yet. He motioned for someone to get us chairs, and we sat -- feeling all the while self conscious of having interrupted the meeting -- and told them our mission at their behest. They asked us to wait until their meeting was finished, and they would see if they could help us.

They provided us with free food, and free lodging. The majority of the stories I collected are from this one village. They busted out a huge, old xylophone, and started sing and dance, when we casually mentioned that we would maybe be interested in hearing some music.

Totally awesome.

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### **The Man, the Hypocrites, and the Palm Nut Tree**

Once upon a time, there lived a man and his wife. They lived for long years, and they loved each other. Unfortunately, they were poor. They had no land, and no house to call their own. They had to make do by wandering the forest, finding various fruits, vegetables, and animals that they came across, trying to eat around the rot and decay. It was a hard life, but they managed.

One day, the man and his wife came across a palm tree in the forest. The red fruit hung heavy on the topmost furls of the tree, simply bursting with the delicious oil. The man climbed the tree, grunting and groaning and straining. If he wasn't careful, there were splinters a-plenty for him, ready to embed themselves in his palms and fingertips.

Finally, after minutes of hard labor, he made it to the palm nuts, in the swaying and sawing fonds that rustled back and forth. He reached a hand out for the fruit... but it was too far away. He swung his body out, precariously gripping the trunk of the tree, and grasped again with his now extended reach. His fingers reached, they stretched, they grasped and... the man slipped!

He fell down, down, down, seeming to fall from a distance much taller than the tree top. He spun and spun as he fell, the sky and ground whipping back and forth in front of his eyes, and he landed with a resounding *thud*. Dazed, the man layed there for a few seconds, staring up at the trees, the... unfamiliar trees. A few plantains, a silk cotton, and over there, a baobab. No palm nut. He slowly peeled himself off of the dirt, taking a good deal of dust with him. Standing up and stretching, he looked around and saw that his surroundings were unfamiliar to him as well. He had not landed where he should have, that was for sure! Mud walls curved all around, encircling a shared living space, a cook fire, multiple storage shed, and separate, closed off and protected sleeping areas. It was a compound, someone's house. Someone -- it seemed -- who was rich.

A woman approached him, took his hand, and lead him to one of the storage sheds. She was attractive, in paternalistic and caring way. As they were walking, she said: "I am your wife. This is your compound."

This, obviously, confused the man, because this certainly was not his wife, and he didn't have a compound.

They arrived at the first of the storage sheds. The woman opened it, and revealed inside a plethora of food. Yams stacked to the roof, tomatoes in perfect pyramids, onions piled up in one corner. Peppers looked spicy enough to make one breath fire. Fruit gave the air a sweet smell, as mangoes and guavas were plentifully accounted for. After so long of scrounging, having to eat whatever he came across -- whether that's a rotten mango, or a half eaten bird carcass -- or risk starvation, this all seemed to be glutinous, too good to be true.

The woman -- the man's wife she claimed -- took his arm and pulled him away from the sight, to the next storage shed.

Behind this door, there were clothes. The riches, finest clothes, woven and sown to exquisite taste. Colors blended and matched perfectly. Patterns captured the eyes, in swirling and geometric blocks that seemed to three-dimensionally rise out of the fabric, in a glorious, psychedelic fractal. The man looked down at his rags, feeling self conscious for the first time in a while. His plain, brown, and threadbare rags barely covered half of his body, and poorly at that.

The woman -- his wife apparently -- took his arm, and pulled him away from the sight, to the next storage shed.

Inside this door, riches. Blue, purple, black, pink, yellow, red, and brown gemstones sparkled in the light, giving the room a halo. Gold nuggets -- some as big as a fist -- filled cauldrons. Gold coins were stacked in neat and orderly towers, so that they resembled miniature, haloed cities. There was so much of the yellow metal, that Mansa Musa himself would've been appreciative. This display of wealth shocked the man, as he had never held enough money to buy himself more than perhaps a single meal. This was more wealth than some empires had.

Shocked and awestruck, the man let himself be lead dumbly away. He barely heard his wife speaking to him.

“This can all be yours, this can be your home,” she said. “There is one, simple rule that you must follow however. Do not enter that room.” She gestured to a squat structure, with mud walls that seemed somehow more crude than the ones surrounding it, that lay back near where the man had first fallen down.

The man nodded, stunned and dazed.

For a while, the man lived happily. His wife and many children that were apparently his, accepted him wholeheartedly, and loved him most dearly. He loved them back in return, and he watched the little ones grow. He was free from any fear of starvation, any worry of wild animals, any flight from sickness. For all that, he was never bored. The man’s life was full to bursting with purpose and fulfillment.

The village that seemed to come into existence just as the compound had, was packed with interesting people, from far away lands that held mysterious stories and fables in their hearts. Games were played, and fun was had. There wasn’t a day that went by when an event, or celebration, or party of some kind was thrown, and each new event, or celebration, or party was new and exciting. Nothing seemed to get old or boring for anyone in the village.

But, always, the man kept an eye on that one squat structure.

One day, looking up from his compound, he noticed a group of houses sat on a hill, that lived on the edge of town. He had never been up to those houses, but they looked opulent. Each one its own villa, its own palace. He asked his wife who lived there.

She cast a dark glance over to the hilltop and said, “Hypocrites and liars only. Pay no heed to them. I’d advise against going to meet them.”

Despite the warning, the man’s curiosity got the better of him. One day, he went to call upon the men of those households. The doors were thrown open and he was greeted with warmth and hospitality. Food and drink were plentifully distributed. The Hypocrites asked the man how he was enjoying his stay in the village.

“Please, very well sir. Everything is delightful here. I do not have to scrounge on my hands and knees for food. My clothing can be fresh and new daily, clean and soft to the touch. Any earthly possession that I wish to obtain, I can purchase with ease.” he said with enthusiasm. “The only thing... ah nevermind me.”

“Tell us, tell us your troubles good sir,” the gathered Hypocrites chorused.

“It’s just... there is one structure in my house that I am not allowed in. My wife,” he said, embarrassed, “has forbidden it.”

“What? That is ridiculous. You are the husband. You are the man of the house. It is not your wife's place to tell you where you can and cannot go.” the Hypocrites cried out.

After the meeting, the man went back down to his house. Life seemed to resume as normal. There was fun in the air, the man wanted for nothing, and he loved his family.

But he could not take his eyes off that squat little structure now. The horrors of what might within dug its way into his mind, like a lecherous parasite. The man would find himself thinking about the structure, when he didn’t realise it. He would be going about his day, and come across something strange and not immediately explained, and he would ascribe it to the structure. He couldn’t sleep, and would stay up into the small hours of the dark, staring up at the ceiling, thinking of the mystery. Sometimes he would get out of bed, go out into the compound, just to look at the small, squat structure. When the moon was high, and casting its silvery glow over everything, the structure seemed to bore unseen eyes into him. Goaded him, prodding him, pushing him towards some type of resolution.

It became too much for him. The presence that he felt emanating, exuding, threatening from the now looming structure cast a shadow over his daily life. He could not sleep. He could not eat. He could not laugh. When he looked at his wife, all he saw was telling him to stay away from the structure, all he saw was her, holding him back.

So he beat her.

“What’s in the Room!?”

He beat her savagely.

“I said, what’s in the Room!?!”

Blow after blow rained down on her. The man’s fist split, and broke against the soft, fleshy parts of her body. His wife’s blood, tears, and sweat coagulated in a pool that reflected the horror. A mirror of pain. A mirror of madness.

His sons pulled him off her.

“What’s in the Room?” he cried, hoarse and weeping.

“Don’t... look,” his wife gasped, choking on her own bile. “Don’t... look in there.”

But the man was through with taking her orders. He strode toward the squat little structure. That little structure that seemed to rise out of the ground out of spite for the man. That little structure that seemed to be born straight from nightmares. That little structure that seemed to loom across all their lives.

His sons tried to stop him.

So he beat them too.

He beat them until they were reduced to the same state as their mother. Crying, lying in a pool of their own fluids, broken, but still defiant.

The man left them on the floor.

He strode toward the door of the structure, a look of pride on his face. This was his moment of triumph. This is what it all came down too. He could feel it, his whole life was to be determined by what he did next. Whatever dark and twisted thing, whatever horror, whatever monster was behind that door, he was ready to face it.

Without a glance backwards, he strode through the door, heedless of his families groans and cries for him to stop, and he found himself... under the palm nut tree.

The village was gone. His house was gone. His family was gone. The pools of blood, and piss, and spit, and bile, those mirrors of madness were gone. All that was around him, was a clearing in a forest, a completely silent forest, with a single palm nut tree in the center.

He was wearing a simple, brown sack. Threadbare and filled with holes, it irritated his skin as he looked desperately around. But nothing remained.

He tried to climb the palm nut tree, to slip and fall as he had. But nothing happened, save a new ringing in his ears.

Not even the birds chirped. He was alone. Completely alone.

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This was one of the longer stories collected by us, and one of my favorites. It reminds me of a Narnia Esque world, a mythical land that disappears and doesn't appear until it needs you again -- or conversely, you need it.

The moral of this story -- as it was told to us -- was, "don't listen to hypocrites, they ruin everything." Now, the use of that word may have confused the reader during the story. Classifying what the men on top of the hill did as hypocritical -- at least, with the information we have -- seems to be illogical. My understanding of the word "hypocrite," was someone who would preach and lecture to others, who would then not act upon their own teachings. In Ghana, the subtext of the word "hypocrite," seems to have taken on a different meaning. "Hypocrite," is used colloquially to mean, "bad person," or perhaps, "deceitful person."

I blame religion. I hear the word "hypocrite," more often in the context of religion here, and often in contexts that do not portray any hypocrisy. Followers of traditional African religion, for example, are called hypocrites by the christian members of their community. Traditionally, when the bible warns of hypocrites, it is warning of those who would preach the teachings of Christ, and yet not actually follow them. People who are profoundly un-Christian, but who come to church every Sunday, and thus think that they are saved. I find it ironic that sermons about hypocrisy are so common here, while at the same time, televangelists and mega-churches are also so very popular. I've heard a couple of sermons that implied, "if you give money to this church, God will help you financially," which is decidedly a very unchristian thing to say. The pastor then turned around and warned about hypocrites.

It is also worth noting that our translators grasp of the english language -- for all of these stories mind you -- was not the best in the world. It's quite possible that the word used in by the storyteller in sisale was quite far from the word "hypocrite," and our translator simply jumped to a word that seemed to fill that space. A word that he had heard used in a negative way to describe deceitful, and unjust people before.

Nevertheless, I decided to keep the word used by the storyteller the same, even though another word might've been more accurate to the actual meaning.

For me, personally, the story speaks more of being grateful for what you have, and not letting the little things bother you. It also speaks of trusting those closest to you, instead of those who have only a surface level understanding of you.

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### **The Hunter and the Frog**

Once upon a time, there lived a hunter. No animal was safe from his bow and arrow. Bush bucks, guinea fowl, wild boar were no match for him. He would spend days away from his family, traversing the sparsely populated savannah, weaving his way through bush and underbrush. At night, he would lay back and sleep under the stars, looking up at the swaying acacia branches overhead. He could go where he pleased in those times, unworried so long as he didn't stray into a rival clan's territory. The hunter loved the outdoors, he loved hunting. He felt truly free.

The one variable however, that controlled all life in the savannah though, was water. If one was unlucky, one could wander for days without finding a suitable watering-hole. Even the most dirty, the most dry, the most desiccated and filthy depression of scummy water could mean the difference between life and death. The hunter knew, and so did the animals.

One day, when he was returning from a hunt, he stopped for a drink at a watering-hole relatively close to his house. He arrived to find it mostly dried up, barely a



drop left. He was close to home, so he would live... the Frog at the bottom however, would not.

"Please, good hunter sir," the Frog croaked. "Bring me to a better source of water."

Our hunter, sympathizing with the feeling of being dried out and parched, picked up the Frog, and carried him home. Once there, he deposited the Frog at the watering-hole that his family used to fetch water. The Frog thanked the hunter, and all was well.

The next day, the hunter went to fetch water from the usual place.

"Stop," said the Frog, crouching defensively over the watering-hole. "If you take water from this place, then by the time you reach your home, then your father will have died."

The hunter ignored this threat. After all, he had helped the poor Mr. Frog. Surely, Mr. Frog would not return that kindness with death. As he approached his compound however, he heard screams.

Running and dashing through the entrance, he found his father keeled over on the floor, foam trickling out of his mouth.

In despair, the hunter goes about the funeral preparations. Family members were called up, room was made available for guests, and the body was sanctified. The hunter sacrificed a goat, by ripping out its windpipe with his teeth. Everything was in order.

The hunter then realised, that he needed to fetch water for those who had dug the grave. They were tired, and had been working relentlessly under the blazing sun.

He went back down to his watering-hole, and again, Mr. Frog spoke to him reproachfully. "Don't take water from here, or else when you get back up to your house, then your wife will have died."

Ignoring this warning -- for, as a polite host, what could he do other than see to the needs of his guests? -- and took some water. As he neared his house however, he heard screams. Rushing and scrambling, he sped into the house just as he saw his wife collapse, shaking, to the ground.

Enraged, the man returned to the watering-hole, bow and arrow in hand, intent on extracting revenge. How dare this frog do this to him. To be repaid for kindness with poisoned water? It was unheard of, it was criminal. Anyone would agree that an eye for an eye was just and moral in such a situation.

When he got to the watering-hole however, he saw no sign of Mr. Frog. He was hiding under the water, afraid, filled with cowardice. The hunter stormed and swore, kicking up sand, throwing rocks in the water, and yelling so loud as to alert any animal in a five-mile radius. One such animal, was Mr. Hawk.

Mr. Hawk was intrigued, for he had never before heard such anger and passion from a human before, and he decided to go and see what was the issue.

"Please good hunter, what seems to be the problem?" Mr. Hawk inquired of the hunter, as he swept low and spread his great wings to bring himself to a stop.

"You see Mr. Hawk," began the hunter, "I was saved this frog's life by putting him here, in my very own watering-hole. Now, everytime I go to fetch water, he says that when I reach home a family member will have died. I have lost both my father and wife to this frog's treachery and significant lack of gratitude. I have come for revenge now, but the coward is hiding," the hunter shot a glare at the pool of water.

"That's terrible," cried Mr. Hawk. "You know what? I will help you catch this frog. You can go somewhere nearby, out of site of the pool, so that Mr. Frog thinks you are gone. I will fly high above, and Mr. Frog doesn't know me, and he doesn't know that I am helping you, so he will not mind me. I will catch him in my hand, and I will bring him to you. Sounds fair?"

"More than fair Mr. Hawk," the hunter said, with a mad gleam in his eye.

The hunter took his position behind some rocks, near enough to see the action, far enough away and hidden enough to be unnoticed. He waited, tensely and with bated breath, crouched behind his boulders, as he saw Mr. Frog break the surface of the water, swim to shore, and stretch.

Quick as a flash, Mr. Hawk swooped down, scooping Mr. Frog up in his talons, and soaring over to the pile of boulders. The hunter stretched his hand out, and grabbed both Mr. Hawk and Mr. Frog!

Struggling, wrestling, and gasping, they fell to the floor, kicking up all manner of dust.

“What is wrong with you?” cried Mr. Hawk. “I have done as agreed, but you are holding onto me! What is wrong with you?”

It just so happened, that a malam -- an islamic scholar, magician and priest -- was passing by on the nearby road just then. Curious at the scuffle, he approached.

“What is going on here?” the Malam asked.

“Please sir,” said Mr. Hawk. “This hunter has done me ill! I have helped him in his mission -- capturing this here frog -- and yet he has grabbed hold of both me and the frog, and he refuses to let me go!”

“Is this true, sir hunter?” the Malam asked severely.

With a slightly abashed look on his face, the hunter answered, “Yes, good malam. This is true.”

“Well then you are in the wrong. This hawk here has helped you, you should repay him with kindness, not by punishing him. Release Mr. Hawk, if you may.”

Obliging, the hunter let go of Mr. Hawk. With a cry of delight, Mr. Hawk dove at the Malam, tearing and scratching at his chest. When Mr. Hawk flew away, there was just a bloody hole where the Malam’s heart had been.

With his dying breath, the Malam said, “Inshallah” *God willing*.

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So, this is one of the stories that’s a little bit confusing. The moral that we got, was that in this life kindness is, unfortunately, not paid back with kindness, but rather with anger, hostility, and all sorts of back-stabbing. This, to me, is really interesting. Often times, when we think of fairytales and fables, the morals we think about are almost always

positive. Even in older -- and thus, more dark -- versions of the Disney classics, the good guys usually win, and the bad guys get their comeuppance, with the moral telling little children not to be mean and bad. The moral to Cinderella isn't, "people will be mean to you if you are kind to them," although, that could certainly work with the story. The moral is, "kindness pays off, ugliness -- inside -- doesn't." One has to wonder where this harsh lesson comes from in this particular Sisal community.

Another interesting thing, is the malam. The community told us that they had only turned muslim in the 80's, pretty recently. One has to wonder then, is the malam an islamisation of a certain character(my guess being a fetish priest), or is the story itself much newer. If it is much newer -- which I doubt -- where did it come from, or rather, what event started the telling of this particular story? The elders all said however, that all these stories came down from *their* elders, so it is unlikely that this story is new.

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### **The Story of Mr. Tortoise, and Mr. Rabbit**

Once upon a time, in a village not unlike this one, there lived a beautiful woman. She was admired and looked up to for her grace, for her full lips, for her curvaceous figure, for her head-turning, heart-stopping smile. Her tuo-zaafi was always cooked to perfection, and her mixture of spices used when cooking Baobab trees was unrivaled. She was kind, gentle, and friendly to everyone she came across, from the lowest of the low, to the kuoro(king in Sisale). She was caring and warm with children, and everyone spoke of how she would make a fantastic mother one day.

Being the daughter of the chief, it was the responsibility of the chief to find her a suitable partner. She needed to be married off before she was too old. But, the chief was having a hard time deciding who could be worthy of marrying his beloved daughter. There were two main applicants for her hand, Mr. Tortoise and Mr. Rabbit.

Shrewdly, he came up with a plan. He would have a race. At the end of the race, there would be a platform, where his daughter would stand. Whomever made it first to the platform would win her hand.

The day of the race came, and excitement was in the air. The whole village came out to see the spectacle, to see who would win the beauty of the chief's daughter. As the sun dawned, and the sky turned a warm peach color, the race started, and the two contestants were off!

Mr. Rabbit quickly gained a lead, dashing off ahead into the distance. His little feet pittered and pattered, and pattered and pittered until he was well ahead of Mr. Tortoise. He couldn't even see Mr. Tortoise he was so far ahead.

"I'm so much faster than that Mr. Tortoise. I can win this race with my eyes closed!" he said to himself. He proceeded to do just that, sitting under a tree and closing his eyes for a rest.

The sun moved across the sky, and the race wore on.

When Mr. Rabbit woke up -- between blinking his eyes, and stretching -- he got startled. The sun was almost setting!

Dashing and leaping, running and sweating, huffing and puffing, crawling and crying, he made it in sight of the finish line just as Mr. Tortoise stepped up on top of the platform, to claim his prize.

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This story is, I think, the most fascinating one that we collected. Obviously it is a retelling/perversion of *The Tortoise and the Hare*. I thought for a moment after hearing the story that maybe, just maybe this was the origin of the fabled tale we tell our children? But no. A quick Google search tells us that *The Tortoise and the Hare* comes from *Aesop's Fables*.

Who brought this fable to this part of the world? A little West African village, off the map, with no good roads, totally agrarian... who had brought *The Tortoise and the Hare* to these people?

The most fascinating part however, isn't imagining who brought that tale to those people, or how the story has twisted over time to match cultural biases(or, well, I guess it is), but it's the moral. The western reader will be quick to yell out, "Slow and steady wins the race!" when confronted by this story, but that is not the moral we were told this story held. "Respect everyone, even your lessers," was what we were told it's meaning was.

This, clearly -- to me at least -- is a cultural divide in priorities. In Ghana, respect and appearances matter much more than they do in the United States. When I'm in the United States, and I go to a new town or city, I am not obligated to meet with the elected official or cultural leaders and squat before them, reverently shaking their hand. I am not required to bring my boss kola nuts, simply because he's my boss. Generally in the U.S., we treat others as equals, with the same level of respect given to one person as we would give to anyone else. Or at least, that is the ideal to which everyone tries to adhere to.

There are some instances where we give more respect to one person over another. If I see a coworker, or fellow schoolmate working themselves ragged, pulling out all the stops, never giving themselves a moments break, and still being a kind-hearted person, my respect for them jumps through the roof. If you are an artist, and you can doodle on a piece of math homework a scene that I could never recreate, that shows me how much you put into perfecting that skill of yours, how much work and effort, how many hours were invested into a personal hobby, and I respect you more. In the United States, respect is earned through hard work, and hard work requires one to be slow and steady, so that they may win the race. In Ghana, respect is more so tied to social status and standing. In the U.S., I will respect you if you show me you deserve respect. In Ghana, a level of respect is required from some inherent property (being born

the son of a chief). In Ghana, most people won't raise their hands in class to answer questions, for fear of losing face and getting the answer wrong.

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While I did not get to collect folk-tales from a wide variety of different culture -- as hoped -- the oral histories and fables that we heard from different Sisal communities more that made up for it.

When choosing a project to do, I found that I wanted to do something that wasn't tame, or cliché. Maybe that's a bit of arrogance on my part, some hubris, but that's what I was searching for. To be able to do this project, to be able to go to remote villages and ask people what their favorite story is, that is something I never thought I would ever do, and I am eternally grateful to YES Abroad for allowing, and facilitating this to take place.

I seem to remember it being mentioned at the National PDO, that one of the main reason for having us students do these projects is to help secure funding from Congress. So, dear Congressperson -- or for that matter, dear intern a certain Congressperson told to read this -- if you are deciding whether or not to continue funding for the YES Abroad program, then I encourage you not only to continue funding, but increase it if you can find the money there somewhere.

I can truthfully, and un-ashamedly say, that through YES Abroad I have learned more in ten months than I have in multiple years of high school. A decent portion of this learning happened while working on this project -- probably the most ambitious thing I've ever thought to finish.

Yes, there were times during this year that were stressful, that I wished went another way. However, if I was given the chance to do this project over again, I would not hesitate to do it exactly the same way, because I know that the life lessons I learned from these experiences -- some of which were, again, distasteful -- are more valuable and cherishable than any potential situation that I -- or my fellow exchangers -- might've been in.

Maybe this is an abrupt ending, maybe not. But, I feel as if this is long enough, and I don't want to keep more of my audiences precious time. Thank you for reading this, it was my pleasure to work on it.