I made my first sojourn to the motherland in 1983. I was a second year graduate student at the time and studying ecological-community psychology. The seeds of my African culture had been planted while growing up in “Black” Chicago but because I had attended a small and predominantly white private liberal arts school as an undergraduate, those seeds had yet to germinate. So, as a graduate student I decided to take advantage of a fellowship I had received and the considerable resources of the African Studies Center at Michigan State University and venture off to Kenya for six weeks to study Kiswahili with a group of undergraduate students.

The six-week journey was a very powerful one for me in many ways and I promised myself to return annually for renewal and rejuvenation. I was unable to fulfill that promise until 1994 and a trip to Ghana, and with the exception of only two years, have managed to make at least one annual trip to the continent since that time. While I mostly take university students and faculty I have occasionally been able to engage in short-term research projects on these trips. Regardless of the purpose, the renewal and rejuvenation I experienced on that first trip have stayed with me and indeed motivates me to provide the opportunity for others experience the many faces of Africa.

There have been many who have written about their sojourns and extended stays on the continent. For African Americans those experiences are often bitter sweet and at times discouraging. A reading of some of these experiences would have one believe that African Americans can perhaps visit but no longer “go home” as they expected. While I understand how this conclusion could be arrived at I believe these assessments fail to appreciate the fundamental truth about how the African human story sits at the core of our broader human story.

I teach a course on independent Africa in which we discuss the many problems and challenges facing the continent. Those challenges discourage both those who experience them firsthand as well as those of us who just visit. I teach about the places that I have been, some of them sites of sadness and others where horrific events have occurred. I have yet, however, had a
visit that was unfulfilling or where I did not again experience those initial feelings of renewal and rejuvenation.

One of my mentors, Professor Kofi Asare Opoku, a scholar of African religion from Ghana, made the following statement at the beginning of the new millennium: “The 21st Century belongs to Africa.” Many who heard this statement were perplexed and unbelieving. How could that be? They said. They could not see beyond what they saw as the intractable problems of the continent…and just look at what 50 years of independence hath wrought!

The year 2007 was a most fascinating one for my African sojourns. I was fortunate to be in Ghana on March 6th to participate in the 50th Anniversary Jubilee celebrations of their re-independence from colonial rule. We joined in the celebrations and interviewed Ghanaians from across the country on their views of independence, Nkrumah and pan-africanism. While most saw the events as an important and joyous time, they also provided sober analyses of both what had not been accomplished and the challenges continuing to face the country and Africa as a whole.

That summer I co-led a group of U.S. scholars on a three week trip to Uganda, Rwanda and South Africa. The purpose of this latter trip was to explore post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction in these countries. We met with a broad range of people from leaders in government and non-governmental organizations to genocidaires (Rwanda) and freedom fighters (South Africa). The experience offered a powerful contrast to other sides of independent Africa where there may be less opportunity to celebrate.

As a scholar, a teacher and a Black person I am an Afrocentrist. The experience of African people in the Diaspora calls me to tell their story. That story is a multifaceted one that shines a light into the depths of the human experience. To think of it otherwise is not only inconceivable but to deny my own humanity. To illustrate, let me walk you through one of these journeys.

As most people who travel to Africa will tell you the experience begins well before you arrive. Africa, of course, is a huge continent, three times the size of the United states from Cairo to Capetown and from Dar Es Salaam to Dakar. If you're fortunate, and you get to fly on a clear day,
the aerial perspective will be both beautiful and profound. From the seemingly undisturbed
desolation of a desert to the lush canopies of the rainforest. If you look carefully, you may see the
still predominant isolation and simple beauty of village life as well as the concrete and dusty
expansiveness of the cities such as Accra, Lagos, Nairobi, Kampala, Durban, and Addis Abba.

Once on the ground African Americans who travel to the continent often begin to recognize
cultural commonalities and behaviors they have with African people. For instance, just like many
African Americans who migrated “up north” continue to have strong ties with their southern roots,
city-dwelling Africans also maintain strong ties with their home villages and families. In fact, while
us northern folks in America may venture south maybe once or twice a year (if we’re lucky and still
have family there), it would not be unusual for a city-dweller in Africa to do so every weekend. In
fact, in a very real sense it is necessary and of course serves to maintain and strengthen the bonds of
family and community.

On a few occasions I have been invited by a colleague of mine, an Accra city-dweller, to
tavel with her, her husband and children back to their home village on a weekend excursion. Their
village is in the eastern region of the country near Lake Volta, a beautiful and lush mostly forested
area with small mountains, waterfalls and hidden valleys. The beauty one sees in the air is added to by
what you experience on the ground. That beauty is of course mostly seen in the eyes, voices, and
faces of the people, especially the children, but indeed all the people.

One of the main reasons for families to return to their home village is to insure that the
children are connected to and learn the great lessons and wisdom of their elders. Often times these
lessons are conveyed through storytelling that takes place in the evening, after the meal, and
sometimes with numerous families and children around.

I’ve heard many stories while in Ghana and the one that most came to mind during the 50th
independence celebrations is a story that does not come from Ghana but instead is told by the Mbuti
people who live in the Ituri rainforest deep in central Africa. The story has to do with "a most
beautiful song" and goes like this:

One day a boy walked in the forest and heard a song, it was the most beautiful song in the
forest; the boy followed the sound. He peered through the bushes and saw bird swinging on
a vine. Although bird continued to sing his most beautiful song, the boy saw that bird was
hungry. He put out his hand, bird jumped into it and he gently lifted bird and placed him in
his small leather pouch.

He took bird back home to feed him. When his father saw bird, he became angry: “Why
waste food on a strange bird he argued. But the boy was very persuasive. His father fed
bird. The boy took bird back to the forest and bird continued singing his most beautiful
song.

Next day, the boy walked in the forest again. And again he saw the bird singing, and that
bird was hungry. So he took him back home again to feed him. Boy’s father was angrier
than ever. Why waste food on a strange bird he argued? But he fed bird. The boy took him
back to the forest and bird resumed singing a most beautiful song.

The next day the boy waked in the forest and he came to where the bird sang his most
beautiful song. Once more he saw that bird was hungry so he took him back home to feed
him. The boy’s father was so angry that he ordered the boy to go away. The father had
decided that instead of feeding bird, bird would do just as well to feed them. So as he raised
his machete in the air, bird looked up into his eyes and began singing his most beautiful
song. At that very moment he realized the same thing that his son had 2 days earlier. He
gently lifted bird and took him outside. Bird flew up into a tree and from that day forward
bird woke them every morning and sang them to sleep every evening with his most beautiful
song.

So goes the end of this tale.

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1 This story is an adaptation of a story from Kaula, Edna Mason (1969). *The African Village Folktales
While the contrast between the 50th celebrations in Ghana and the horrors of genocide and civil war in Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa were stark, they were not necessarily profound. The many challenges faced on the continent are challenges of the human condition…the human experience. We often see Africa as that “other” place and too many around the world do not see Africa and her peoples as they see themselves. Those who do understand quite well what Professor Opoku was saying about the 21st century belonging to Africa. The Africa he was talking about is one that is globally conceived. That Africa is one where the geographical continent is at the heart of a global community. That Africa is one where the human story continues to play itself out across generations and millennia, the tragedy and the triumph, just like it has in all other parts of the world. It is really not a complex story when thought about in human terms. Just like bird, Africa has been looking into our eyes and singing a most beautiful song. Appreciate it and do what father did…lift it up and it will nurture us.

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