

WITH THE TEMNE IN THE WHITE MAN'S GRAVE

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In Memory of Tom Derge, PCV, Yonibana, Sierra Leone, 1974-1976

The sudden thunderclap broke the usual sounds of the jungle and, yanked from a heat-induced stupor, I sat bolt upright. Umaru, my middle-aged Temne 'houseboy', looked skyward as another bright flash blinded us, followed another blast so violent that my chest shook. Large raindrops slammed into rusty tin roofs and waxy palm leaves and the cacophony set me even more on edge. Sierra Leone had been called "White Man's Grave" for centuries by the time I got there and there was no reason to think otherwise now. The rampant diseases, famine and outright human cruelty, was making Sierra Leone one of the worst places on earth by anyone's yardstick. The lifespan of a Leonean was about 38 years and it didn't take long for me to see the Grim Reaper coming for me. Life was, as the philosopher said, "Nasty, brutish, and short". The Temne had seen the Peace Corps come and go almost since the Kennedy started the program. To them, I was just another of what they called "Piskoh".

As the thunder died down, I asked Umaru "What do the Temne call that 'boom' sound?" The Temne, a once feared warrior tribe, seemed adrift in the modern world and were reduced to subsistence farming and lowly occupations such as Umaru had – servile duties to young naïve and often arrogant Americans. I referred to them "Klingons" because, to me, that looked and sounded other-worldly while giving off the airs of the Spartans they once were, a long, long time ago. Umaru spoke little English and we spoke in Krio, a pidgin baby-talk English that made our discussion seem even less intelligent. I decided to learn what I could of their language and customs – almost out of boredom rather than any real desire to understand them.

"O-Kuru-o-fohf", he said. "God is talking."

Their expression for 'thunder' gave me a chill – they REALLY thought God was talking to them. I knew this was no figure of speech to them. I imagined Umaru probably thought I was the uneducated barbarian for having to ask such an obvious question. To most of us Piskoh, the Temne appeared cast in a Tarzan movie. Nothing in my everyday American life prepared me for the sheer shock of living among them. I came to help them but now, I just wanted to return to a world less primitive and threatening. The more I learned of them, the greater my apprehension for any kind of meaningful impact I might have. Kipling may be right, I remember thinking. 'East is East and West is West...' If the Temne and I had any common ground, I didn't know where to even begin looking. Worse, I gave up caring. As Umaru and I talked, I glimpsed his tribal markings, three scars on each temple, and was reminded that there were still mysteries about them. They had a secret warrior society, the Poro Society, rumored to be preparing to throw out the foreigners or otherwise rebel against the status quo. There was a rumor of cannibals still active, too. Cannibals! I was reminded of a conversation the night before I shipped overseas. A young woman I had recently met asked me why I was going to Africa and I had no satisfying answer for her and stammered something about 'helping those in need'.

“Why go over there?” she said. “You know, there are Americans that need help, too!” After a pause, she looked sternly at me and said, “You’ll end up in someone’s stew pot over there”. I figured she didn’t know there were no such things anymore and she had succumbed to a stereotype – but, then again, isn’t that the way exotic Africa appears in the movies? Safaris and the Great White Hunter ... And after all, what did I really know about Africa?

As I sat there with Umaru, the memory of this encounter caused a welling up of shame in me. On one hand, maybe I was wrong about the cannibals. On the other, I was becoming protective of my new home in the White Man’s Grave. My reaction startled me. I wondered what I’d tell people when I got back to the States about my experiences. What did I really think about these people? Soon a long-repressed memory forced its way into my consciousness. A memory of when I was a child

“Scalp any surveyors over the weekend?” asked my third grade teacher to the loud snickers of her colleagues.

“I’m not sure...” I said. Were they making fun of me? That weekend, my relatives - led by Chief Elton Greene - decided to resist the State of New York and the media couldn’t get enough of the drama of the conflict. When surveyors came to mark reservation land, we Tuscarora decided to stand firm and fight. Our men, recently returned veterans of World War II, fought to earn respect of their country. Instead, upon return, not much had changed. An uncle who served in the Marines in the Pacific was refused a beer in a stateside bar because “Indians and firewater don’t mix”. My father, a member of a wartime bomber aircrew, was publicly humiliated by his commanding general before a mission over Germany because, as an Indian, he was neither a Christian nor an ‘American’. The ‘Cowboy and Indian’ TV programs of 1950’s represented the prevailing attitudes. So, we Indians resisted, the resistance grew violent, the surrounding white community grew increasingly angrier at our insolence. The Indians were standing in the way of progress, they said. It was time to come into the Twentieth Century. At the height of the racial tension, my family was frightened. I was frightened even to walk to school. Yet I wondered “Why are we so despised? If they knew us, maybe they’d understand...” It was a confusing and traumatic time for me and my first introduction to being ‘different’. The gulf in understanding between Native America and the rest of America was enormous and seemed to be getting even wider. In a land whose capital had a sports team called the Redskins and President Andy Jackson on the five dollar bill, who said “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” and a never-ending series of TV shows depicted Indians as cruel savages intent on killing Whites and stopping ‘progress’.... well, it was clear to me that my future wasn’t bright.

My reverie ended with another thunderclap and I again found myself in Umaru’s presence. The analogy was almost too obvious and yet I had been blind to it. If it were so easy for me to treat the Temne without respect and understanding, how much easier was it for those who never experienced such treatment themselves? I forgave those who hurt me, and only in doing so, could I forgive myself. Umaru and I had more in common than I realized. My heart grew that day to embrace some of the world’s most unfortunate people. And I consider myself very fortunate and blessed to this day. My education had just begun at a time when I thought I knew it all.

Post Script

In many ways, not much has changed since that stormy day in Africa. Sierra Leone continues to be listed among the world's neediest places. Yet, I do see an important development. Movies such as *Blood Diamond*, a bestselling book such as *A Long Way Gone* and the songs of the Refugee All Stars have spotlighted the Sierra Leone to a wider audience. Today's American is much more informed about Sierra Leone in general than I was the day I landed in Sierra Leone.

Native America, too, has continued to suffer high rates of unemployment and alcoholism with all the misery this brings. Still, the casino gambling issue has brought many people onto reservations and forced an interaction in some way with Native Americans – and this may be a new beginning.

It seems everybody has some tale like the one I have told here: the adventures of an immigrant relative, a country cousin moving to big city, an urban dweller moving to the country, or simply finding oneself in strange company for an extended period of time. Often, the further we are from home, the more our innermost selves emerge as we become free of our hidden constraints. We can return home better people if we can see where we are both are victim and victor, arrogant and humble, American and citizen of the world.



(Courtesy photograph)

And in many ways, I have not changed much either. But, there is one change in me that I noticed in writing this. The picture above still fills me with pride. It was taken at during the conflict with the state of New York. The man in glasses is my father. The kneeling man is Mad Bear Anderson, a shaman. The man in the headdress is Clinton Rickard, the founder of the Indian Defense League, modeled on the Jewish Defense League. They were saying "keep out" to those whom they believed were trying to take our land.

Now, however, I think they should have also put “All Others Welcome” on that sign. If I have learned anything from this experience, it is that we are all in this world together and if we are ever to live in peace, we must listen and learn from each other. We are more similar than different. And we need to make an effort to know one another as the world shrinks and borders disappear.

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