Road to Libya

Boat to Italy

Stories from Ghanaian emigrants

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Boat to Italy

(To Be a Man is not Easy)

Stories from Ghanaian emigrants

Ineke Bosman

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Introduction

Why this book? It all started with Kwame Baffoe, the guy who 'only wept once'.
Kwame was the hospital driver at the time that I worked as tropical doctor at Nkoranza Hospital. One day Kwame Baffoe disappeared. After two weeks his relatives came to ask for his end of service benefit. I was then the medical director and asked: 'But he disappeared, vacated his post... Where for heaven's sake is he?"
They silently left.
This was in the mid-eighties. Ten years later when I needed a driver I met up with Kwame Baffoe again, who was then driving his own minibus. He looked as always with his half smile and twinkle in the eyes. I asked: 'Can you help? Drive me to Sunyani when I need to? Which is often?' 'Yes', he said. Baffoe has never been a man of many words.

That's how we met again and, many words or not, one day he told me the story of how he traveled to Libya and how it was to work there. I was taken aback by his adventures and the tone of his description, as if he talked about a trip to the supermarket. Facts, not emotions.
In 2006 I decided to meticulously note his story down as well as those of his many friends in town who had gone through similar experiences. Baffoe agreed readily and so did his friends. I listened and listened; it was addictive to hear these thrilling and amazing stories.
I wrote them down the way they were told to me and I could have done hundreds more. Nkoranza town is filled with people who have gone abroad or attempted to. Or just returned.
It is firmly believed that the hills are greener at the other side and sometimes they are, but at what a cost...
However the cost is kept secret. The defeats, insults, shames and blames are not mentioned to the families waiting at home in Ghana for the first money transfer from their 'son overseas'. School-fees and hospital-fees are paid and no questions asked. "All is well over there and yes, there is money to be made there, for sure!" The

travelers are local heroes who keep their suffering silent and so the magic dream lives on: ... get out, go through the Sahara or overseas and you will return with pockets full of money to set up your own business or educate your kids...

My admiration for the tenacious and often also hilarious Ghanaian spirit rose even higher after hearing the stories of the returned emigrants. Even now, some ten years later, we always wave, stop and chat when we meet each other on the sidewalk in Nkoranza town.

"Didn't you say you would put our interviews in a book?"
" Yes", I said, "that's what I said!"
I searching on the internet and mailed the Tropical Institute Publishers in Amsterdam. Nice, they said, but no, we publish themes, not individual stories. Try Rozenberg, in Amsterdam. And I wrote and they answered:
" Send me a story or two."
I did, immediately, I think I sent five. Thank God for email in Ghana too, even at that time. Then this: "Hmm, these stories need to be read! Let's go for them."

The book appeared under the name "To Be a Man is Not Easy" and had a wonderful reception especially in Nkoranza in 2007.

Rozenberg publishers have meanwhile disappeared like many small publishers did in Europe and all over the world and with it disappeared it my book.

This edition 2014 contains the same stories and is renamed into: "Road to Libya. Boat to Italy"
I had wanted to name it "no road... no boat" but found myself too cute... And after all there ís a road most of the time through the desert, only here and there it is guessing...and there áre boats, even if you have to pay twice and then the boat leaks...
This book is self-published by Bol.com in Holland, where it can be ordered on line.
Or order it with me,
inekemarambosman@Gmail.com.

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO KWAME BAFFOE AND ALL THE STURDY EMIGRANTS AND TRAVELERS FROM GHANA WHO REFUSE TO BE DEFEATED AND KEEP BELIEVING IN THEIR DREAM... EVEN THOUGH THEIR DREAM MAY BE DYSFUNCTIONAL OR SIMPLY TOO DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE.

This is non-fiction.
Many of these friends walk around in Nkoranza. Some live overseas but visit Ghana regularly to greet and support their families

.

The stories are hardly edited. Some repetitive parts may have been omitted and sometimes the local twi language was translated into English. From all the names only one has been changed, otherwise the interviewees preferred to be called by their own names. Good for them!

A scar reminds me of the day I wept.

Kwame Baffo,

Baffo returned To Ghana in 1994 and stayed at first in the capital Accra because the financial expectations of his family home in Nkoranza were too high. Much more was expected from him, a hospital bill, a funeral, someone's school fees, than he could afford. Even now, after twelve years, his 'been to overseas' status makes him the banker of the family. This happens to all who leave Ghana and then return as 'a rich man'. Baffo invests his money in buildings. Should he have put his money in the bank he would have lost it not only on inflation but on family bills. Now the cash is simply not there, it has become a wall, a roof, a building. 'Should I tear down the building to pay your child's bill?' Baffo helped a junior brother through university and helps in different ways to share the family burden.
This is Baffo's story:

In 1989 I decided to go to Libya. I was a driver in the hospital at Nkoranza but I wanted a better

future and my friends who had gone before urged me to join them in Libya where money comes easier as they said. So I did. It took me 26 days to reach there.
First to Niger, two days waiting for transport at the capital, a day and a half in a truck and three days waiting in Agadez for transport through the desert. The desert treks are risky so the cars depart three at the time. Pick-ups, filled with 25 persons each. You think there's really no more place and then another few persons are pressed inside but eventually full is full!
Drivers stick together because of desert storms and mishaps, alone may mean lost.
We went. You stand there body to body in the back of the pickup and you cannot turn or move. It was so risky that I wanted to come back but there is no way back. You have one gallon water for three days and you put salt in it which helps you to go slow on the water. You drive at night and in the day you wait somewhere in the shade. You reach the Algerian border town which is called Tamanrasset. Here you stay a week to treat yourself from your illnesses, nose bleedings, heat-strokes, malaria, craziness. If you pay the Ghanaian agent he cooks for you.

Then there is another trip for you, five cars in convoy this time. A three day journey. You go again with your gallon of salted water, now to the Mount Hogar. There you walk, you have to climb the mountain by foot and it is tough and you are weak. The bag you have is too heavy so people throw one by one their luggage away. If you are lucky you reach the mountaintop and you rest. At four in the evening you start walking. You walk for three days through pure sandy desert, again with another gallon of water. You have hired a guide who leads you to the border with Libya. You see so many corpses dead in the sand and everywhere along the road that you want to return, but return, how?! We Nkoranza people are more in number, in my case we were four, so we looked after each other. If one is sick we tell the guide to stop and wait for the Nkoranza friend to recover. If you are alone the guide does not mind you but if four people say stop he will stop. These guides are from Niger and Algeria. They show you the light of the southern city in Libya and then they return and you go alone. If you miss the light that night you have to wait another day till it is

night again. Short of water, short of food, no shade but all you can do is walk on.
Nowadays Mount Hoggar passage is no more used because of armed robbers. In my time it was safe, at least from robbers!
Once in Libya there is police everywhere because of the border and so you travel at night, secretly. Again two nights through the desert and then you get to the town called Obare. Now here you know you have made it. Border patrols stop here. I took a bus to Saba and went on to Benghazi. Tripoli is not as safe for black Africans as Benghazi because many more Ghanaians are deported from Tripoli, that's what I was told.
I arrived and settled in the 'Nkoranza house' in Benghazi. At that time there were between forty and sixty Ghanaians from Nkoranza living there. This is how it goes. In the morning you wake up and you go to a certain place. You sit there. A car stops and you all rush and jump on that car. The man says: I need two, you and you. So you sit there and run to each car that stops till they pick you up to work. Work in Libya can be okay but mostly you are cheated if you have to work that way. So I worked my way into a company. We cannot trust the Libyans for they do not see

us blacks as humans, they see us as work machines. If the machine breaks they throw stones or leave you to die alone. Not all are bad of course. Say after two years you have completed a job and you wait for your pay. They may just chase you away. A Libyan can bring you to a nice farm in the desert and give you a nice little house to live in. 'Run the farm for me, okay?' The owner goes and comes back a week later with some food and maybe some money. 'Well done, continue, next week!' People are taken prison for there is no way to cross that desert by foot. I heard of one man who had been alone for a year like that! Ghanaian friends were near to that farm in the desert, they were buying a sheep in that region of the country. Suddenly they heard shouting in our own Twi language: 'Come, come!' They went and it was something! That man was so happy, could not have been made happier by anything but the company of real people, his own people, he had not spoken to anybody for over a year. They spent two days together and talked and talked and talked. Ate the sheep! So then they left him and the man knew a little bit more about the outside world. I heard about another friend who

was hired like that. He drove with the Libyan to the desert and after many hours they reached sheep, a lot of sheep. The man said: 'I get you a camel and you look after my sheep, herd them, see that they eat and no one gets lost.' Our friend is from Ghana and does not know a camel but he said 'Okay'. He had no bed to lay his head at night, no roof against the sun, a gallon of water, some food and the owner was gone. The owner returned each week to give him medicines food and water. After six months the Ghanaian escaped through the desert and came to our Nkoranza House in Benghazi. We thought we saw a ghost or a wild animal, dirty, smelling, burned deeply black and wild hair all over him. The man never made it, he became mad and died. Egyptians are the dirtiest people. Poverty drives them to Libya, Egypt has no oil. They have no manners at all, no dignity. They can shit in public, they stink and what do they do? They may run a farm and bring one of our black boys there to work. The Egyptian sits there with a heap of stones beside him. If the farmer gets tired and slows down he throws a stone, then another one.