

Travelogue

Stranger in a Strange Land, Obronis in Kumasi



By Noah Dewitt; pix by Courtney Hendricks

An early morning bus ride brought my thirteen fellow American students and me northward to the fabled home of the Asante stool: Kumasi. Ah, Kumasi! From what I'd been told, it was a town of particular import to the whole of Ghana. It is blessed with bedrocks of gold and was once the center of an expansive kingdom. And in the face of imperialism, it is a stronghold for traditional Ghanaian culture. On the bus I was eager to arrive, to stroll along Kumasi's streets, to talk to its people, to pay respect to the golden stool. The drive was beautiful, which made up for the road's pervasive potholes. It was a glimpse of the real Ghana, a refreshing escape from Accra's confined city streets. Through my window I saw deep green mountains shrouded in cloud, stacks of sweet bread on hawkers' heads, home-

made palm oil, rice patties, plantain trees, and grass cutter fresh from the bush dangling by the tail. Accra and Kumasi: what a contrast. Driving through Kumasi's orderly and architecturally colonial downtown, I knew I wasn't in Accra anymore. With public rubbish receptacles positioned on many street corners, I could tell that Kumasi's city planners weren't as overwhelmed with rural emigrants as Accra was. Compared to Accra's littered streets and gutters, the Kumasi pavement seemed clean enough to eat off it. Upon arrival we visited Manhyia Palace, where our tour guide, an endearing old man with streaks of comedic genius, taught us about the Asante kingdom and its glorious history. He imparted many facts, the most fascinating of which was, in my opinion, the Asante tradition of matrilineal inheritance. So rare is it that powerful institutions recog-

nize and respect the inalienable worth of women. In a world overrun with male chauvinism, matrilineal inheritance and matriarchal power would be a major point of pride for me. Oh! What I'd give to kiss the Queen Mother's hand. Day two in Kumasi, we spent shopping. Although this seems to reinforce stereotypes of Americans as overly consumptive, it was actually a great way to learn about Kumasi's material culture. First we went to Bonwire, the village where Kente cloth was born. We entered its dim, one-room factory, where we received a demonstration of how the colorful designs of Kente are created. Afterwards we walked the circumference, admiring the cloth on display. The weavers shouted out promises of good prices, but as obronis, we struggled to bargain them down to a reasonable amount. However, most of us did end up sending our cedis into circulation, supporting the vil-

lage's cottage industry, and walking away with a beautiful work of art. We repeated the above at Ntonso, where the Adinkra stamping technique developed, and Asoufua Asanmang, a village famous for its glass bead production. In each case, our guide demonstrated the technique, allowed us to try our hands at it, and released us to bargain with the industrious crafters. Our day of shopping culminated in a visit to Kejetia, Kumasi's central market, the largest outdoor market in West Africa, and the second largest on the African continent. As our bus descended the hilly street towards the edge of the market, I looked out onto a shimmering expanse of corrugated tin. In the cracks and gaps between the structures, I saw Kejetia pulse with human activity. Led by our Ghanaian friend who knows Kumasi well, we took a brief 45-minute jaunt

through a few of the market's corridors. Although I saw only the slightest fraction of the market, I could tell it contained more goods than I could ever need or want, more than I could even fathom: crates upon crates of canned and fresh foodstuffs, hundreds of household items, radios, clothes, suitcases, knives, machetes, bush meat traps, and exotic animal skins. As a recently converted omnivore (up until my arrival in Ghana I had been vegetarian for two years on moral grounds), the meat section of Kejetia was revolting. The pig feet, goat cuts, and cow stomachs gave the air a distinctly unappetizing smell. But I'm happy to have seen it. As an American, I grew up completely disconnected from the production of my food. The number of Americans who grow, or even cook, their own food is low and getting lower. In sterile supermarkets, we Americans

purchase our meat pre-cut and packaged in plastic. Sheltered from the means of production, most never realize that our beef comes from factory farms—the bovine equivalent of ethnic cleansing. Here in Ghana, however, we eat our meat only after seeing it neaten, slaughtered and cooked, which is in my eyes, far more humane. As I walked through the rest of the market, I took in all the sounds, sights and smells, looking downward every other step to ensure I didn't muddy my sandals. Rubbing against the busy people, greeting the vendors of various wares, I reveled in the bazaar's chaos. Kejetia was easily the highlight of my weekend in Kumasi. I can think of no better way to experience Ghanaian culture than to get lost in a maze of local products and people.

