

Beauty

By Mamle Kabu

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Beauty.

It's in the eye of the beholder.

It's only skin-deep.

It lies within.

There must be dozens of these, Christie thought to herself. Counting as many as she could remember might be one way to pass the remaining hour bumping back to Parakuo. Travel could be so tedious when you were under work pressure. All that time just staring out of the window when you could be catching up with deadlines. Not that she didn't enjoy scenery but up here it could stay the same for hours. Shea nut trees, scrubby bush, rocky outcrops, typical savannah landscape. An Abyssinian roller interrupted her tally of clichés.

Now, there's beauty.

Her heart skipped a beat as the whirr of metallic turquoise flashed past the windscreen and settled on a low bush on the other side of the road. Seeing one of those was worth an hour of savannah gazing. She bit back the impulse to make the driver stop. It would only fly away when she got close enough to see its impossible colours and markings in glorious detail. What in the world did a bird out in the middle of dusty, scrubby nowhere need all that beauty for? It was almost annoying. This was not her first Abyssinian roller but the magnificence of the creature was such that every sighting was like the first. She grabbed her tattered bird book from her rucksack, glad she had remembered to pack it. Her husband had chuckled when he saw her squeeze it in.

“Oh, you'll be checking out the birdlife of Benin too on your three-day field trip will you?”

“Well, might see stuff from the car, you know.”

“You and your birds!” Well, you'll have enough time on the road, that's for sure. Just so long as you remember they're not paying you to watch birds.”

The roller page fell open and she gazed at the familiar illustration of the Abyssinian. It was like looking at a picture of the sun, rather than the real thing. But the real thing was already far behind, and had left her with the ache, the vague longing inspired by sheer beauty, so she studied it for a while. What a plumage! She was no longer looking at the book but at the

picture in her mind's eye. No illustration could capture the shimmering aquamarine of that living, flying jewel.

Now that's beauty. So much, it aches. Awes. Cannot be disputed.

She felt even more perplexed now. And quite disinclined to continue her list of clichés. She leaned back and closed her eyes, thinking she might nap for a bit. But the dazzling imprint of the bird in flight was caught on the inside of her vision, light against dark, like an inverted image on the negative of a film. For an illogical moment she wondered if the bird had any concept of its own beauty. And the interminable debate started up in her head again.

Can't you take a compliment? she reproached herself. *But I don't know how to take it.*

Why was it such a big deal? Every woman must be told she's beautiful at some point. After all, talk is cheap, especially for those with a vested interest. And even when it isn't, there's still the eye of the beholder thing. So it could happen to anyone. Anytime. And does. All the time. It wasn't her first time either. But she had never been in such a state over it before. She was irritated with herself. She had expected to come away from her meeting with the Gando and Fulani people thinking about their culture, their poverty, their fascinating history, already drafting her background section in her mind...

...A semi-nomadic people found all over the West African sub-region, The Fulani are often marginalized due to their genetic and cultural dissimilarities, their wandering lifestyle and their lack of social integration. Also semi-nomadic, the Gando are an anthropologically unique ethnic group. Although they speak the language of the Fulani and have a similar culture, they are physiologically distinct. Oral history has it that they are descendants of offspring from indigenous Beninese ethnic groups, abandoned as babies due to birth defects or difficult births, which caused them to be regarded as evil spirits. These abandoned infants were found in the bushes by the cattle-herding Fulani who adopted and raised them as servants, letting them go when they reached adulthood in order to prevent intermarriage...

Yes, she would write all that later on, but right now she could not keep her mind on it, or on the other things she would normally be doing at this point, like brainstorming about the design of the project for them if the proposal were successful.

It had all gone according to plan at first. She had been pleased to have landed herself in such a fascinating place, and smug at being in control of what could easily have been an intimidating experience. Her work had thrust her into large crowds before but she could not remember ever having been the only female among so many males. They looked at her with open curiosity, ironically shy of direct eye contact but bold enough to scan her body in the manner of men accustomed to that liberty. She understood instinctively that her feminine physiognomy was safe, familiar ground to them while the sophistication of her mind was unchartered, forbidding territory.

She retained her composure by reminding herself that she was casually, almost shabbily dressed and had deliberately selected one of her loosest pairs of trousers for the trip. Men in

such areas did not often see women in trousers and she had known they would arouse more interest than a skirt. Then again, she was not prepared to put up with the challenges of field work in impractical garments - clambering in and out of high vehicles, stepping over ditches, wading through tall grasses and sitting on anything from low stools to tree stumps for interviews. Loose or not, her trousers – or their contents – were being noticed and, by some, clearly appreciated.

Men, she thought, they'll find what they're looking for no matter where you put it.

She could handle it, but it did reinforce her awareness that there was not a single female in the crowd facing her. She looked coolly back at them. Shy grins flashed white against black, toned muscles swelled through rips in ragged work clothes and great, flat feet, calloused and dusty, fidgeted in slippers made from car tyres.

“But I asked for the PTA members to come too,” she said to her two companions, representatives of the Beninese NGO working in Gando and Fulani communities.

“They are here *Madame*,” Seydou answered in his francophone English.

“All of them?”

He asked his colleague a question in Ewe. He in turn translated it into Boo and posed it to the village teacher. The teacher listened and then called it out to the crowd in Fula.

He nodded to Seydou who repeated to her “Yes, they are all here Madame, every single one.”

“What do you call ‘PTA’ in French?”

“*APE - Association Parents Eleves.*”

There, you see - ‘*Parents.*’ Isn’t that word there when you translate it into their languages?

Seydou nodded after a short interchange with his colleague and the village teacher.

“What about the parents whose children are not in the school?”

Another short interchange and then -

“He says they are here too Madame. It’s only the few still at their farms who are missing.”

For a moment Christie felt she must have slipped into some kind of waking dream of a village with no women. The kind of dream where something was terribly wrong but no-one else seemed to notice and one felt lonely and insane and would declare a nightmare upon waking. She steadied herself. This was no dream. It was reality and she was a professional and a gender expert and it was time for some hard questions.

“Where are the women?”

Seydou smiled as he translated the question.

As the linguistic chain advanced there were murmurs of realization.

“They say they didn’t know you wanted the women too, Madame.”

“What? Are they serious?” she asked in an undertone. But she did not need his answer. She could see the sincerity in their faces as they studied the shock on hers.

She felt the thrill, heady and terrifying, of standing alone at the crossroads of wildly diverging worlds. One within arm’s length and the other for now removed in space but right there within her, and in shock along with her. Having access to both but powerless to bring them together, to make either comprehend the extremity of the other’s differences.

“The defining characteristic of an assumption is that it does not recognize itself,” she remembered once writing. Today she had caught herself out by assuming that mothers were automatically recognized as parents of children. A fair assumption surely, she thought in her own self-defence. But one all the same, she now knew. Turning back to Seydou she asked –

“What about traditional leadership – you know, like we have queenmothers in Ghana, or village women’s leaders...do they have anything like that?”

No.

“And religious leaders? You know, like in women’s church fellowships...?”

No.

“Fetish priestesses?”

No.

“Village-level local government representation – any women there?”

Seydou could not help smiling as he shook his head at that one.

“OK, what about teachers? In the community school?”

“They have only one teacher *Madame*, our translator here.”

She felt defeated by all the shaking heads and the ‘no’s’ in so many different languages.

“OK” she sighed, “so what you’re telling me, I mean, *they’re* telling me is ...” and she spelled out her words slowly, as if reading them from the document she had not yet

written, "...women do not hold any leadership or representation of any form whatsoever in this community...?"

"*Voilà!*" said Seydou with a little shrug, clearly reluctant to pursue a futile line of questioning.

"And are not even recognized as...parents?" She had to stop her voice from rising in pitch on the last word. Professionals did not let their emotions interfere with their work. "Go on, ask them."

As the question finally reached them via its various stations of interpretation, she watched them react with the indulgence of people pondering a theoretical question which only brooked a positive answer, like "Isn't everyone a genius in their own way?" And then sat through the familiar but frustrating experience of watching them exclaim, argue, interrupt each other, draw the various interpreters into the debate, laugh and gesticulate, only for it all to be filtered down to a trite 'yes' by the time it got back to her. Perhaps sensing her frustration, they offered to call the women for her.

"Yes please, I'd like that very much. Let's wait for them."

"No, they say we should continue because they'll take time to dress and put on their 'make-up.'"

And Seydou echoed the chuckles of the men while someone was dispatched to fetch the women. Christie bristled slightly behind a compliant smile, noting with interest that their conspiratorial laughter counted her in, as if her trousers – erstwhile betrayers of womanliness - and her performance in such a gathering, now made her an honorary male and fellow mocker of female vanities.

"OK, let's press on then. Ask them this for me - if women have such a low profile in the community, why do they want to educate their daughters? Why the interest in enrolling girls in the community school?"

Again this provoked much discussion that was inaccessible to her. But this time she was more satisfied with her share at the end of it.

"They used a proverb Madame. 'We used to think only the rooster could crow but now we see the hen beginning to crow too.'"

She liked that.

"Good. So now I want to know from them – what do they see as the benefits of educating the girls?"

The debate was lively and everyone wanted a say. Responses began to trickle through the layers of translation.

“Madame, times are hard. A man cannot earn enough to maintain his family all by himself. We can’t just keep marrying many wives and having plenty children, nobody can afford that anymore. We all need education.”

Fair enough, she thought. Some of their responses might echo trendy development slogans, but underlying it all was a harsh economic reality which no-one needed to be taught.

“An educated man doesn’t think of his family, an educated woman does.”

“An educated woman can do maths in the market and not get cheated.”

“She can take better care of her children.”

“If education has all these benefits why don’t you allow your wives to attend the adult literacy classes here in the village?” Christie asked.

But that was a different matter. “What will we eat if she goes to classes?” they asked. “And what will you do when she stands up to you?” she filled in silently for them. Clearly the new attitudes were for the new generations only.

As she scribbled down the various contributions, the women arrived. With self-conscious smiles and eyes kept low they joined the men standing at the back.

“I’m happy you’ve come, ladies, I was feeling lonely!”

There were some smiles. She could see they had expected more formality from her. She introduced herself and explained the purpose of her visit to them. Then she continued with her list of questions but, as she had expected, the women were silent.

“Tell them I would like to see the women separately,” she said at the end of the session. She watched their reaction to this news. Anxiety and delight blended becomingly on their faces. She led them to the school building. The small, tin-roofed mud structure with its tiny windows was gloomy and stifling but perfect for her purpose.

The women balanced gracefully on the child-sized chairs behind the crudely fashioned desks like obedient pupils waiting for their teacher to begin the lesson. She asked them to bring their chairs out from behind the desks and arrange them in a circle. She closed the circle with her own chair, juggling her weight on its tiny frame. Then she pulled out a handkerchief and mopped her face, giving silent thanks once again that she had chosen her clothes for comfort and practicality. Their faces relaxed into apologetic smiles as they watched her. She marveled at their freshness. There was hardly a bead of sweat between them. Although nervous, their modesty gave them a quiet dignity and poise.

She tried to penetrate their serenity, conjure up the unspeakable. The forcing apart of their legs, the metal blade that sliced into, sliced off, their softest parts, annihilated nature’s

birthright of womanhood before they could ever discover it. How could anyone ever smile or speak or be serene after that? Her mind groped for the comfort of its impossibility but she held it back and, trying to stare through the invisible wall of calm, began to notice instead the details of their appearance as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. So that's what the men were talking about, she thought. On their cheeks and foreheads were fingertip dabs of reddish colour. Two or three on each cheek. Some also had lines of kohl under their eyes. They had the well-structured faces of northerners, with pleasing angles and smooth, dark skin.

Unlike the men they had had a little time to prepare and their clothes, although simple, were clean and bright. They wore western-style tops combined with local print wrapper cloths, tightened and tucked at the waist. Some wore bright headscarves. On their feet they had the plastic slippers sold in thousands of feminine designs in West African markets. They reminded Christie of her mother. Several also wore necklaces and bracelets strung with the tiny plastic beads she had watched women make in northern Ghanaian village households. A cheap but attractive alternative to the more traditional glass ones, they were melted down from waste plastic and reshaped into little balls, strung in striking combinations of alternating colour like the ones before her now - orange with green, pink with white, yellow with blue and red.

She dragged her lulled mind back to the unimaginable, to something Seydou had told her. She had thought she must have misunderstood it at first. About how young girls could be abducted at village ceremonies, gang-raped and brought back home to no protest and no reprisals. When she had argued it was impossible, she had been told it was considered a compliment to the girl's beauty and a proof of the young men's virility. "It's true Madame, we had a recent case in one of the schools we are working with," said Seydou, "The girl had to be hospitalized."

She looked at the women in front of her as she replayed his voice in her head. Could they...? Had they...? But once again, her imagination failed to transpose the horror onto the serene figures before her and her gaze returned to the dots on their cheeks and foreheads. Was it lipstick she wondered. Who would think of wearing lipstick like that? But the effect was agreeable. As she took in the simple, womanly elegance of their presentation she felt shamed by her own shabby appearance. No longer thankful but embarrassed by her shapeless, nondescript shirt and trousers, now dirty and sweaty, by her dusty, masculine trainers and by her wind-shocked hair.

Look at them, she thought, as they sat around her in silent expectation. They are beautiful.

She wanted to tell them they were beautiful, that she was awed by their strength and dignity but she did not. She feared it might sound patronizing and did not want to be the city sophisticate, admiring the quaintness of the villagers.

"Women's Focus Group Discussion" she wrote at the top of the blank page. Fancy bit of development jargon for a good old girls' chat she thought as she underlined it. Well, as much of a girls' chat as we're going to have with three male interpreters in between. She wondered how to break the ice. She had never considered herself an intimidating person but she knew

her opinion was not what mattered right now. She had to put herself in her interviewees' shoes and see herself and the whole situation through their eyes. She pondered what an equivalent situation might be for her. Being live on the Oprah Winfrey show perhaps, with a visible audience of hundreds, an invisible one of millions, and an icon of womanhood as your interviewer.

Yes, it must feel something like that for these women. About to be asked their opinion, likely for the first time in their lives. Meeting what was to them an Oprah, face to face. Being accorded an importance they never knew they had, as something they didn't even know they were – parents, stakeholders, people with rights. A part of them must long for it, she knew, just as Oprah's guest would thrill to that huge audience. But of course there was the terror of saying the wrong thing, the pressure to get it right when your opinion suddenly mattered, suddenly went public in a way you had never even imagined. And the sober knowledge that when the cameras stopped rolling and the excitement was over, you would still be accountable for everything you had said.

Look for common ground she thought, that will help relax them. Despite all the gulfs, there is solid, common ground.

“How many of you have children?” she asked.

Of course, all the hands went up. She asked each in turn how many they had and what sex they were. She marveled at their strength in having so many and mocked her own cowardice for having only two. Right on cue they urged her to have more and she laughed, joked and exclaimed, using West African sounds and body language which reached them directly without passing through the interpreters. When one of them was bold enough to ask what sex her children were, she knew she was making progress. Another asked who was caring for her children while she was away. She could have said ‘The nanny and their Daddy’ but she wanted to see their reaction.

“Their father of course,” she said.

It was as if she had said God was her babysitter. They made sounds between incredulous laughs and horrified gasps. They did not even know whether to believe her, she could tell. She made sure the interpreters communicated to them that she was serious. When the concept finally sank in she saw both agitation and awe in their eyes. She joked that she hoped her husband would remember all her advice and asked how theirs would cope in such a situation. Enjoying their laughter, she feigned ignorance of the absurdity of the question, pleased it was serving its purpose. When the noise died down, she felt the atmosphere was right to begin. She started with questions which flowed on naturally, disguising the beginning of their formal discussion as a mere progression of their chat. They responded easily to questions about their daily lives and grew in confidence as they talked about their domestic routines.

It was easy to move on to marriage, womanhood and their status in the community. She had to tread carefully with the delicate issues because they were wary of her disapproval and

clearly fearful of dishonoring their community. Even in total privacy, they would be unlikely to speak freely to a stranger about such things, let alone in a discussion group flanked by three unavoidable male interpreters, one of them their village teacher. So she knew she would not get meaningful answers to some of the questions, but she still asked them because body language often supplied the best answers to tricky questions and allowed her to learn without compromising her interviewees. Although lively and attentive to their responses, she took pains to hide her own reactions and to avoid appearing judgmental, keeping her eyes on her notepad for a while after her simple question received the simple answer –

“We don’t know if our rights are being respected because we don’t know what they are.”

After the longest pause since the discussion had begun she looked up and said -

“Tell me why you want to educate your daughters.”

They responded without hesitation. “Because we want them to be like you.”

She had expected that. It was the most obvious thing for women like them, meeting their first ever educated role model, to say. She knew they meant it. But she had heard too many illiterate villagers parroting slogans about the importance of education without really understanding what it was.

“What is it about me that you want for your daughters?” she asked.

“You are beautiful,” they said simply.

What?

This time she was completely unprepared. She forced down her instinctive reaction while she gave herself a few moments to think. Later, on the journey back to her hotel in Parakuo, she would examine those reactions at leisure and later still, she would even list them in her diary.

Dismay - they seemed to be going off on a tangent. What did beauty have to do with education?

Disappointment – perhaps they really didn’t understand what education was all about. She wondered for a moment if they had heard about university beauty contests, all the rage in Ghana. These days one could hardly be blamed for being confused about the purpose of women’s education, she mused. But she dismissed the thought. Even if they existed in Benin, they couldn’t possibly have heard of them out here.

Disbelief – how on earth could they find her beautiful in her shabby, androgynous attire? Dusty and sweaty with spiky hair and no make-up, while they sat there coolly in their bright clothes with pretty beads and delicate pink spots on their cheekbones... it was impossible. Were they blind?

Disillusion – why would they say something so ingratiating? Their discussion had been frank and straightforward and now it seemed to be heading in the wrong direction.

And finally, the ones left out of the diary list - joy and humility - of the type inspired by a great accolade. Because at a fathomless depth of her being, past reason and logic, she felt it for the sincere tribute it was. But she pushed it away, unwilling to accept what she could not explain. She would not allow the golden glow to set in her soul, not until she could fully comprehend it.

It might have been simpler if the women themselves could have explained it to her. But they could not. When she finally gathered her thoughts and found her voice she asked the interpreters if they had used the correct word. They all nodded. She pressed them. Beauty was such a subjective concept, such an overused word, so easily misinterpreted, were they sure the women hadn't meant something a little different? Perhaps like...accomplished, learned, privileged? She was sure it would all fall into place if she persevered. The women would say they wanted their daughters to be like her because she could read and write, speak a European language, because she lived in a city, had a job, earned money, could buy nice things.

The interpreters held a short conference but before they could get back to her, the women queried the teacher. When he told them what the issue was, there were smiles and exclamations. One of them seized the role of spokeswoman – a different one this time, a woman of about Christie's age. She looked her straight in the eye and shook her head slightly as she spoke, with the power of the words. When the English translation finally reached her, it seemed late and superfluous.

“You are so beautiful.”

Christie felt the prick of tears behind her eyes. Frustrated with herself for being unable to make sense of what her soul instinctively felt, accepted and embraced with loving thanks, like an unexpected gift she could not yet unwrap, she asked if the women could explain what they meant. But they could not. After another attempt by the interpreters, Seydou finally said in a tone pitched to impart resignation, “Madame, they just like the way you are. Just take it like that.”

And she tried to do that, but she could not. In fact, it occupied her mind for the entire two hours of the trip back to Parakuo. Exasperated, she tried to dismiss it as one of those many less than lucid interview moments which never made it into a report and were quickly forgotten. But it pulsed all around her, even after she had left Benin, like a sensory experience that affected all the senses at once – a glow, a warmth, an aura, a...feeling. She told a few close friends about it and asked what they thought the women might have meant.

“You're so different from them darling. I mean, those poor things, stuck out there in the back of beyond, can you imagine how monotonous their lives must be? – Anything new is going to be beautiful to them isn't it?”

Well, there was truth in that she thought, but it was too simple somehow. Then there was -

“But you’re not bad looking you know sweetheart, they were just stating the obvious. You need to learn how to take a compliment.”

No, they didn’t understand, they had never seen her out in the field, dressed for the northern savannah and village interviews. And looks just weren’t the point. And they hadn’t been there, they hadn’t heard, *felt* the way the women had said it. She did not consciously set out to ask her mother about it, but it came up all by itself. Her mother had dropped round to bring her some food, complaining that she had hardly seen her since her return from Benin. She explained that she was under time pressure to complete the proposal.

“I’ve just finished the background section. Let me read it to you” she offered proudly.

Her mother sat down and folded her hands in her lap as if in church. Afterwards she shook her head.

“Imagine being betrothed even before you’re born! You know, I think it happens here too, in some places up north. Can you read that part again?”

Christie scrolled up on her computer screen, pinpointing the paragraph with her finger as she read it out.

“The traditional marriage system allows girls to be betrothed in infancy, sometimes even before birth. A man can claim the offspring of a pregnant woman and initiate betrothal customs if a girl is born. Girls betrothed in this manner are ‘paid for’ over the course of their childhoods by free farm labour supplied by the prospective husband to his future father-in-law. Marriage can take place any time from the onset of the girl’s menstruation.”

“Meaning they can be married off even before they reach their teens,” said her mother. Although she spoke in the vernacular it was as though she were just reading a conclusion off the screen. She shook her head, tutting sympathetically in the West African way.

“Poor things, they don’t stand a chance.” And then she continued with a light of pride in her eyes, “I bet it was quite something for them to meet a woman like you.”

And the way she said it immediately transported Christie back to that stifling little schoolroom. There was something in her mother’s tone, almost as if she had been there with them. It was unnerving, like traveling miles to look for something and returning home disappointed, to find it waiting for you in your bedroom. Without understanding it, she knew the time had come.

“Ma, they told me I was beautiful.”

“Yes” her mother nodded, as if her daughter were simply recalling a moment they had shared.

“What do you mean, ‘Yes,’ Ma? What on earth does beauty have to do with education?”

“You showed them something they had never seen before. Education is not just knowledge and skill. It is the way you carry yourself, your confidence, your ease in communicating with others, your knowledge that you are not inferior to anyone, regardless of your gender, colour or anything else.”

Christie listened silently, like a thirsty person finally taking a long, cool drink.

“They saw you talk to their men as an equal. And even more than that, they saw you in a role of leadership. Knew you were not afraid of anybody. That you had the freedom to travel, learn and pursue your own goals, be yourself, despite being a wife and mother like them.”

“And that was beautiful to them,” Christie murmured as her mother continued.

“And by demystifying it all, sitting and chatting with them like that, you showed them you were just a human being, just a woman like them. That all they admired in you was not some other-worldly magic, but something they themselves might have been capable of, and could still hope for, for their daughters. That was another beautiful thing they saw in you.”

“Hope,” muttered Christie, completing her mother’s explanation. She felt like someone who had not been able to read something because it had been written on her forehead and she had not had the presence of mind to go and look in the mirror.

“You’re right Ma, so right. But how did you know all that? I mean, you weren’t even there.”

“I didn’t need to be there, my dear. I know it because I think you’re beautiful too.”

Christie could not find a reply to this compliment either, but this time it was not because she did not understand it. In the next few days, although she had finished the main writing on the proposal, her mind stayed on the topic, making new connections and realizations, as if her mother’s explanation were a code that had unlocked a wealth of knowledge lying unseen right under her eyes. She had never seen herself through her mother’s eyes like that before. That her mother gloried in all her achievements and her superior education, she knew very well. But that she saw an intangible beauty in her very manner, her bearing, in - and now she heard Seydou’s words again - “*the way you are*”... Yes, she had been given the answer right there and then, she now realized.

When she printed out the completed proposal a few days later she made an extra copy for her mother and took it to her house after submitting it officially. She found her in the kitchen, presiding over sizzling pans and wearing the bright wrapper cloth she had brought her from Benin.

“We must celebrate. You’ll stay for lunch, of course, it’s your favourite.” As usual it was a statement, not a question. As Christie brought out the document she said -

“Put it on the dining table my dear, it will get soiled in here. And you can stay in there and lay the table, this place is too hot, you’ll just start sweating like me!” And she pulled off her limp headscarf, wiped her dripping forehead with it and tied it firmly back on. It really was stifling in the small kitchen but Christie lingered a moment to inhale the rich blend of scents - fried fish, sizzling plantain and the exquisite accents of ginger and chilli pepper wafting from the stew pot. Her mother’s cooking held an eternal supremacy for her which was mainly her own nostalgia combined with the fact that her mother still cooked in the time-consuming old way she could not fit into her own lifestyle. After laying the table, she sat at her old place and read the concluding part of her background section once again. As she read, she imagined that she was the donor, the decision-maker, reading it for the first time.

“The lifestyles of the Gando and Fulani compound their marginalization because their quest for pastureland takes them further and further from the sites of public services. Their locally initiated community schools are a recent response to this age-old dilemma. Having schools in the heart of the community has led to a new phenomenon, namely the enrolment of girls. This is remarkable in view of the low status traditionally accorded Gando and Fulani women, who count as mere possessions of their husbands, little more than their cattle, in fact. The men say they have been encouraged to educate their daughters by radio messages broadcast by ongoing development programmes in the region. Supporting these schools will provide a landmark opportunity for the first girls from these communities to be educated, accelerating a major socio-cultural transition between contemporary generations of females in north-eastern Benin today.”

“Oh Ma, I hope those schools of theirs get funded,” she said as they clinked their beer glasses together. I really want to go back.

“Yes, and I’m sure those women would love to see you again,” said her mother, again with that uncanny air of having been a part of it.

“I want to thank them for the compliment.”

“Good!”

“And actually, I want to thank you too Ma. For being their best interpreter. All those men floundering about in all those languages and you just...” She shook her head and murmured more to herself than anyone else, “It’s so clear to me now, don’t know why I couldn’t see it. I was their Abyssinian roller.”

“Their what?”

“Never mind, just something incredibly beautiful in the middle of nowhere. And you know what else I’m going to tell them? That I hope...”

“Yes?” her mother prompted gently.

She smiled shyly but spoke with confidence.

“I hope their daughters will have the chance to grow up as beautiful as me.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said her mother.