

Story for performance #797
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Source: Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Damien Cave, 'Hear a general, hug a sheik: Congress visits Iraq', *New York Times online*, 26/08/07.

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That year we left Jos at the end of my summer vacation, on a three-day train trip down to Ibadan. Me with my new Englishman, the stranger, getting to know the country; him fortified in his right-on-ness by his hippy credentials, previous jaunts through India, beard, and tendency to drape his loins in homespun cotton. He wasn't very comfortable: the people were too close, too hot, too strange, not much inclined to deference. Maybe it's different in India.

A long lazy journey, me packed tight with baby. We shifted together in our intimate cocoon—that flutter, that butterfly tapping, is it me? Is it...*Her?*—getting acquainted. The smell of our salt. The timbre of our voice. The taste of our mood. During the long rocking hours on the train I read *The Travels of Mungo Park*, matching that long-ago landscape with the savannah vistas unfurling alongside.

Park, having nothing, was met with much kindness. His phrasing struck me: 'The women are good-natured, sprightly, and agreeable...their language (Wolof) is said to be copious and significant...'

Mostly it was dry and hot. Rocks and scrub. Glimpses of the Niger; train rocks, river rolls. Sets of little huts woven into grassland, more nomad's camp than bona fide village—not many people around in the empty Middle Belt. A group of herdsman bathed in rock pools by the river, concealing their privates in cupped hands while the train passed. Lean muscular men, glistening with river water and modesty. Early in the morning we passed through Kafanchan and saw green palms and terraced hills, a generous symmetry of abundance, like an oasis imagined by Henri Rousseau. If we visited again I wonder would it still look like Eden? Maybe the dew made it look so fresh just because it was that time in the morning.

Today, a lazy Sunday, nearly the end of the summer vacation, I can hear the soundtrack of a video playing in the next room. It's a steam-train tour of Namibia, one of those jaunts you see advertised in up-market Sunday supplements. A Boys' Own Adventure, tarted-up steam trains with all-black staff (except, naturally, for the engine drivers) cooks and stewards in starched white jackets with shiny buttons, chambermaids in uniforms that look, to me, like a joke in very bad taste. The clipped tones of the commentator emerge from a background of puffing and hissing.

'Deep dramatic inselberg hills were once worshipped by the local inhabitants, and have Mysterious Tribal Names... (puffapuffapuffapuffapuffapuffapuffapuffapuffa) What a spectacular scene they make, illuminated by the dramatic African dawn!'

I do wonder sometimes whether time goes backwards, more so since thirty years ago our train from Jos to Ibadan was diesel, surely? Where in hell did the old buffers resurrect such an antiquated argy-bargy of shiny steam-driven mammoths from? And how have they managed to so people their dream with other people's livelihoods? It's like a cautionary tale: Old Hippy Cred in

the Age of New Conservatism, comic book version, Reverend Audry through a Hergé lens. But perhaps, not one to take personally.

I was entranced imagining the sprightly and agreeable Wolof ladies (who another time were said to 'vie with each other in displaying the most voluptuous movements imaginable' and to be 'rather more remarkable for their gaiety than delicacy,') unleashing their copious and significant addresses onto the dour Mr. Park. Starving and lost, he had no choice but to be as attentive as possible to any nuances of language he might encounter, as life and limb, not to mention dignity and freedom, might prove casualties of negligence. Notice how I'm getting infected by those well-tooled 18th century formulations?

He was lost one time in one of those dusty savannah villages. Park made his way to the central baobab tree and sat, exhausted. He describes how a woman, returning from her farm, came up to him, gave him a jolly hard look, and told him to come home with her. He had no qualms about doing so, being by then completely used to relying on the charity of the people of that country. He was fed and given a place to sleep. Park writes:

'The rights of hospitality being thus performed towards a stranger in distress, my worthy benefactress called to the female part of her family, who had stood gazing on me all the while in fixed astonishment, to resume their task of spinning cotton; in which they continued to employ themselves the greater part of the night. They lightened their labour by songs, one of which was composed extempore; for I myself was the subject of it. The words, literally translated, were these:—'The winds roared, and the rains fell. The poor white man, faint and weary, came and sat under our tree. He has no mother to bring him milk, no wife to grind his corn.' *Chorus*:—'Let us pity the poor white man; no mother has he' etc.

At Bussa the train filled up; people in corridors, people hanging out of doorways, people, and goods, piled everywhere. First Class was clear, but you couldn't get through the corridors. I threw a fit because my Englishman wouldn't wade through the people (and goods) to get me my dinner from the dining car. Being pregnant, I felt justified not wanting to wade. It strikes me *now* that I was hard on him *then*: who wouldn't, so visibly a stranger, feel intimidated by such a crush of people?

Hard to be a stranger. Good to be observant: harder to let things go. I conclude with a strict injunction to my friends to dress me plenty of victuals, as Mr. Park would say, when I want them, in future; the better to let go of that long-ago unobtainable First Class chicken dinner. Time may indeed go backwards, though: because Park, returning to West Africa, tried to shoot his way down the Niger and was capsized, and shot to death, unsurprisingly. It happened at Bussa; maybe it's the place where you will be tested? And found...wanting?

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Folake Shoga.