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## HOME/LAND

The thoughts running through my head are questions to my self. What do I mean when I say 'I feel at home?' When I thank and compliment someone for 'making me feel at home?' How do I feel at home? Why do I feel as I do, at home? And what home do I refer to at any particular time from wherever I am?

I often stay on at the office after the regular closing time of 5pm to do some writing. The office is a three storey building and my office is on the second floor. The office compound is walled with a gate and there are always at least two security guards downstairs. Yet when it starts to get dark and I am alone on the second floor, I become fearful.

When I leave the office to drive home, I begin to tense up and worry when night begins to fall on the way. I imagine things. What if I get a flat tire? What if I develop an unexpected problem? But when I reach home and a few minutes later the entire neighborhood is plunged into absolute darkness, thanks to the rampant and unscheduled power failures, I remain completely calm and unaffected even when I am all alone in the house. So one of the thoughts on my mind is why do I become afraid of the darkness when I am in my office or on the road but not when I am home?

One can say that, like so many others, I too know my home like one gets to know the face of another with time. So I even know the darkness in my home too well. We say here at home, where 'home' refers to my homeland Ghana, "One does not need to light up the dark to recognize a face one already knows."

When it is dark in my home and I am upstairs, I know the number of steps to take to reach the edge of the staircase. I don't grope or miss a step when descending. Downstairs, I pick the box of matches on top of the refrigerator with familiar ease, to light up the kerosene lamps, having long given up on the non-lasting rechargeable lamps. Then I move on as if the lights never went off.

The Siberian proverb that goes, "Home is not where you know the trees but where the trees know you," defines 'home' for me in the simplest and basic sense. Feeling at home is knowing and feeling safe and secured and all right even in the complete absence of light. It is knowing even the darkness in my home and having the feeling that the darkness in my home also knows me. So that when in the dark for instance, I hear an odd loud noise that would ordinarily have scared me elsewhere, I tell myself to remember to check on later when the lights come on; and move on. The darkness elsewhere and I don't know each other. The darkness in my home and I know one another.

But which home am I talking about? It is the home I return to each day after work. My abode in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, where I live with my husband and children. Yet when I leave the shores of Ghana and mention 'home', I most likely mean my homeland Ghana. When I travel abroad for a long while and begin to yearn for home, it is usually not just missing my husband and children or even the darkness in my home. It is missing the air of my homeland Ghana – the colors; the all too familiar in orderliness; the hot sometimes

too harsh weather; the warmth of the people; the noise; the vibrancy; the culture. Missing home from abroad is missing the entire Ghanaian way of life - good and bad.

A Ghanaian friend married to a British man and living in Britain would sometimes moan and say, "I am going crazy! My umbilical cord is too steeped in the chaos and hectic of home. Everything is too structured and regulated here. I need a break." That is how she misses the homeland.

My homeland is a society of tribes. Our spirits are captured and bonded to our clans and our tribes. We say here, "He who is without a tribe is without a soul."

Wars have been fought and continue to be fought on tribal differences. Our respective tribes define essential aspects of our individual beings. We feel connected by virtue of our tribes. This gives rise to the one vital home – the common tribal home of the clan, which we often refer to as the family-home. It is the most essential home for every clan as an entity even if not the most important home for respective individuals or group members of the clan.

The family-home is always situated in the tribal homeland of the clan. Within the ten regions of Ghana are the various tribal homelands. Every region or in some cases, regional section, is dominated by a major tribe or tribal groupings which informs or dictates the tribal identity of that region or regional section.

The family-homes in the tribal homelands come in various forms. In a rural area, the family home is likely to be a cluster of mud thatched roof huts, sometimes bare sometimes plastered over with mortar.

In the towns and urban areas, the family homes are usually large compound houses with several rooms, constructed with cement blocks and mortar and roofed with corrugated iron sheets.

Decades ago, it used to be that somewhere behind one of the huts or in the middle of the cluster of huts or somewhere within the compound of the family-home a special tree was planted and nurtured like a family treasure. It was the family tree (unlike a diagram showing the generations of a family). Under the family tree was buried or at least, had to be buried the umbilical cord of every child born into the clan. It bonded the spirits of clan members to one another; to the larger tribe; to the family-home and to the tribal homeland. The Ghanaian saying, "Home is home. You can never deny where your umbilical cord is buried," encapsulates it all.

The practice is no longer common and feasible as it once was, due to the realities of today. Many families live far away from their family-homes. Women deliver their babies in hospitals and clinics and have no control over what happens to the umbilical cords of their babies.

In the days that the practice was rife, expectant mothers delivered their babies mostly inside the special delivery huts that were almost always part of the cluster of huts of the family-home. The traditional midwife also believed in the need for the practice and therefore took care of each umbilical cord to hand over for the necessary rituals and burial under the family tree. Today, altered social and religious values, have affected the thinking and attitudes of Ghanaians towards the practice and its relevance. A doctor or midwife at a modern hospital will not waste time saving umbilical cords to hand over to mothers for burial. Aside the pressures of work and in conduciveness, religious inclinations may cause one to also decide the practice was primitive and pagan and shun it. In an interesting twist of fate however, blame is sometimes attributed to the non-burial of the umbilical cord in the earth of the

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tribal homeland for a clan member considered to be unrealistic. A day dreamer whose feet are deemed not firmly on the ground. Others like my friend in Britain make automatic references to it even when they know their umbilical cord most likely ended up in hospital sewerage – “.....my umbilical cord is too steeped in the chaos....”

We express what home is in various sayings. “Home awaits on bad days,’ denotes the family home as the ultimate support base. It held some absolute truth in the days of communal meals in the family home. One simply walked home and got served with food even when one did not contribute to the cost of cooking. A bad day at sea for the fisherman; an unlucky day for the hunter in the bush; or a period of poor harvest for the farmer did not imply he and his wife or wives and children would go hungry. Food was cooked in a common pot and dished out to all.

According to a Ghana Institute of Engineers report, fifty-one percent of Ghanaians would be living in the urban cities by the year 2010. There is an aggressive drift from the rural areas to the urban cities especially by the youth; both male and female who are seeking better lives than what the villages are offering them. It can be likened to the many would be immigrants from Africa who flee poverty to seek greener pastures in Europe and America by attempting to cross the Sahara desert and enter Spain illegally.

For the inland rural city migration, many who abandon their villages and family homes for the cities, don’t make it. They get caught up in a vicious cycle of daily struggles and survival. They came to the cities with the dream of making lots of money but find themselves just scraping by and remaining above water. Having failed in the mission that brought them to city in the first place, they consider themselves as failures. Returning empty handed to the village remain an unattractive option. They feel too ashamed.

Similarly, same is the situation of those who try to make it to Europe illegally. Many die in the desert or at sea. They never make it to the shores of Europe. The few who succeed, find themselves in situations worse than the one they fled. Yet for them also, returning home free willingly becomes difficult. Their shame is even greater because they left to go to other lands whose streets, many back home think, are lined with gold. If they do return, then it is most likely they were forced to by deportation.

The common factor in both situations is the fear of returning home with the shameful burden of having failed. For such is the saying, “If you fail out there, don’t feel ashamed to return. Home is large enough to contain both you and your shame.”

The metaphorical largeness here of the family-home is not the size or dimension but of its ‘motherhood’. Home here symbolizes the family in its entirety; the completeness of the extended family. It is also the physical structure of abode that it is, in a sense. There is always a spare room in many family homes for the unexpected visitor or the sudden returnee. Each member of the clan is part of the family-home. It is a case of the right hand bathing the left arm and the left hand bathing the right arm. It is the ability of home in all its senses, to absorb shocks, shield and shelter, protect and offer solace. The abode and the persons belonging in it are each other’s keeper.

The clan can always be relied upon as an entity. When all is gone, the clan remains. The clan is always there. The persons who form the clan at any particular time keep changing through births and deaths just as the occupants of the clan’s common home. But the home remains where it was built. The home that symbolizes the oneness of the clan. It is always there to be

returned to. It receives its hungry children and feed them, both physically and emotionally. Cooking in the common pot, especially on occasions like festivals when several clan members return to the family homes, persist till today. And there is almost always an old lady there with a very patient listening ear to give solace to a troubled heart clan member in the family-home.

I became acquainted with Ohemaa, a twenty-eight year old single mother of one, at the office where she hawked pineapples when it was in season and pawpaw when pineapples went out of season. Ohemaa means queen-mother in the Akan language. And she earned that name because she called everyone so in her attempt to woo customers. Ohemaa migrated to Accra from the village in an inner region and dreamt of making lots of money in the city to pay for her hairdressing apprenticeship training and go on to own her own hairdressing salon one day. Ohemaa was good at wooing customers. She would praise and flatter till she sold a pineapple or pawpaw. And if one encountered her later in the day with an empty tray and a big smile, her usual response was, “Yes, it is finished. I am sold out. I am going home. I am going to find some place to have a good sleep. I must be up again at dawn.”

The oddity of Ohemaa announcing she was going home and then was going to find some place to sleep, hit home when she fell sick unexpectedly and stayed away for days. She still looked very unwell when she showed up again at the office. That was when we found out more about her life. Where Ohemaa had been calling home was someone’s wooden kiosk in which the owner sold provisions. Whenever Ohemaa said she was going to find somewhere to sleep, it was usually under a shady tree somewhere because she could only go home after the owner of the kiosk had closed business.

Ohemaa came to see us one day not too long after and informed us that we wouldn’t be seeing her for awhile because she had decided to return home. The sickness, she explained, was simply refusing to go away. “Home proper,” she added with a weak smile. She meant the family home in the tribal homeland. When the going gets tough, home was always there to fall back on; the home that was always there to receive and offer solace.

A common feature with families residing in the cities is the periodic trips back to the tribal homeland. Even where the tribal homeland has developed into an urban area with all the accompanying hazards of urbanization – noise, pollution, night-life, crime, etc. – such families still go to the family homes to ‘escape’ the stress of the city and revamp their energies.

Many more are those who regularly dispatch their children attending very westernized and international schools in the cities, back to the family homes during school holidays in order for the children not to ‘loose touch with their roots’.

There is always a fear of the unknown about weakening one’s bond to the clan and the family home. In death, rituals performed include announcing to the ancestors of the clan, the new member on the way to join them.

We are a superstitious society. Modernization, Christianity, globalization and all, we remain superstitious. We believe in karma and in repercussions. And in death, when all is ended and we leave everything we have acquired in the world behind, we join the ancestors with nothing more than our naked souls.

The prospect of a hovering spirit and an unsettled soul unsettles us all. So even where one's bond to the clan and the family home was weak, every effort is made to revive and re-establish the bond above all else upon the death of the one.

The body is laid in state for viewing and wake keeping in the family home most of the time. And in most preferred cases the corpse is buried in a cemetery in the tribal homeland.

Many times, no expense is spared to have the body of a Ghanaian abroad flown back home to be buried in the earth of the tribal homeland.

Similarly, many migrants to the cities with no permanent abodes and all by themselves like Ohemaa, would return to the family home in a situation as hers.

Ohemaa died shortly after she returned to the family home in her tribal homeland. We had problems with her when she used to come and sell to us. She had a skin problem and her body odor was not pleasant. She was apparently miserly with the use of water and didn't bath as often as she should have because she had to buy buckets of water on daily basis for every use. She also had to pay for the use of the public bathhouse.

We learnt after her death that Ohemaa was very religious. She entrusted her fate in a prayer house in her village that believed in absolute faith healing, so she didn't visit the hospital. We found it ironic that she should leave the city for the tribal homeland and not end up at a herbalist or fetish priest's shrine but an orthodox prayer camp. The post mortem revealed that Ohemaa died of tuberculosis. Her family and the clan are still at loggerheads with the prayer camp and want them out of their tribal homeland. But members of the camp are also from the tribal homeland and have a right to remain there. Members of the prayers were chased away from her funeral, we were informed. Her clan blames them for her death.

"When the Missionaries came to Africa, they possessed the Bible and we possessed the land. They called on us to pray and we closed our eyes. When we opened them again, the situation was the other way round. We had the Bible and they had the land." – Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu; South African Archbishop.

But in death, the prayer house returned Ohemaa's body to the clan and the family. Wake was kept for her in the family home. Her spirit must be at peace.

When I drive through the Achimota school in Accra from the direction of the University of Ghana, I marvel at the rate with which new homes and shops have sprung up on the plots of land that was once part of the Achimota school land and which are now reclaimed by the traditional owners. By virtue of its status as the capital city and seat of government, Accra is very cosmopolitan. It is inhabited by people from every part of the country but Accra is the tribal homeland of the 'Ga' tribe. Certain areas of Accra are inhabited mainly by Ga people and only interspersed with very few people from other tribes. But the 'Ga' tribe is growing more and more protective of their tribal home space and intolerant of the sale of their tribal lands to other tribes. Chiefs are the custodians of lands in Ghana; not the state. And 'Ga' youth especially are displeased with their chiefs about what they see as the careless sale and giveaways of their tribal lands in the past.

'Ga' lands were taken over by successive governments also in the name of the 'development of the capital city'. But in recent times, such parcels of land either under utilized or not utilized at all for the purpose, for which they were taken by the government, have been reclaimed by the original Ga family owners.

There is increased growing protectiveness of tribal homelands such that plots of land are no longer sold outright but leased.

But I must return to the earth of my homeland and the issue of the umbilical cords that are should have been buried in there.

I began to pose questions – post Paros – about the issue, asking to know if people knew what happened to their umbilical cords. One quite forthcoming taxpayer I asked, a middle aged man, first became suspicious and asked to be sure if it was a trick by me to get him to reveal something that could result in a higher tax assessment for him. After getting the needed assurance, he had a story to tell. He was indeed a very frustrated man.

He bemoaned an unexpected additional burden that had been placed on his head by his brother who was resident in the U.S.A. The brother's son who was the frustrated man's nephew had just been deported back to Ghana from the U.S.A. upon the request of the young man's father, i.e. the frustrated man's brother. Naturally I asked what happened.

According to the frustrated man, his brother was a desperate father who did everything to instill 'our cultural values' in the young man. He even spoke vernacular with him so often that the young man could speak it adequately as if he was born here at home. They mostly ate Ghanaian food in the U.S.A. especially 'fufu'. Originally this is pounded tubers like cassava, yam, cocoyam or plantain, ate with spicy hot vegetable soup. Here at home (Ghana), we construct our homes (abodes) with fufu pounding in mind, taking into consideration the noise and stress to the ground. Ghanaians abroad, unable to pound fufu there, have invented their own fufu with kneaded potato puree mixed with potato starch.

"...they tend to ward off melting into the new place by creating elements of the homes they left behind." Frank Trippet about immigrants to the U.S.A.

The desperate father thought he was raising his son as a Ghanaian in America, but the son became completely 'Americanized', as the frustrated uncle put it. And when the desperate father tried to instill a bit of Ghanaian discipline in the young man, the son threatened to report the father to the child care authorities. The Ghanaian discipline of course meaning some good sound spanking. Then the son got caught up in a shoot out while out partying with friends. The desperate father decided enough was enough and went to express his fear about the son's safety in the U.S.A. to the immigration authorities. He wanted his son to go away for a while. Thus the young man's deportation back to Ghana.

According to the frustrated uncle, his nephew was having a tough and rough time adjusting to life here at home. The nephew is simply not bonding. So in answer to my one line question which brought on this whole story in response, he said had the nephew's umbilical cord been buried under the family tree in their tribal homeland, Americanized or not, the nephew would have bonded with home easily and naturally. Home is home, he went on. His nephew could never have denied where his umbilical cord was buried.