

Baptism

by Baba the Storyteller

A diseased, parasitic depression was feeding on me from somewhere deep within. My thoughts were trapped in a dark hole from which there seemed no hope of escaping from myself. I had only arrived in Senegal four days before. The dream of self-discovery that had carried me across the Atlantic from the United States was rapidly decaying into, what felt like, an unbearable hallucination.

This journey, my first trip to Africa, was begun as a sort of pilgrimage. I had come in pursuit of reconnecting an intangible broken link with my ancestors. In a classic exhibition of youthful exuberance tied to ignorance, I landed in Africa with almost no money. I was armed with only a contact name, address and phone number. I had also failed to prepare for this trip properly and was now paying the price, quite literally, through blood, sweat and tears.

Through the compassion of a host family who knew me less than I knew myself, I was given a place to stay. My room, which I shared with three others, was a tall stack of cinder blocks with a thin sheet of tin thrown over the top forming a makeshift roof. A brick wall along the small alley of these cinder block bungalows acted as a partition, separating us from the open-air community outhouse. The toilet, a large hole in the ground, was housed within its' own rectangular row of cinder block walls.

On this particular day the sweltering heat of the sun was roasting my flesh. I felt as though I were being cooked in a giant oven. I, and about ten other men, sat outside of our stone enclosures, leaning against the coarse walls under a sliver of shade provided by the overhanging tin. Talk consumed energy and so was avoided. Even though I sat surrounded by others, depression and loneliness remained my only true companions.

Intermittent breezes appeared as both blessings and curses. Weak sporadic winds brought a slight coolness to our scorched, dry surroundings. These deceptively inviting wisps of air also transported the choking stench of stagnate pools of urine mixed with decaying piles of feces from over the adjoining wall of the community outhouse. We covered our faces with cloth as each nauseating draft passed through. Dogs, appearing lifeless lay, panting motionless except for the rise and fall of their distended bellies and tongues hanging from their mouths.

I sat with my back uncomfortably pressed against the gritty concrete wall, head buried in my hands, slowly approaching a dispirited point of tearful regret. Why had I come to Africa? What the hell had I been in search of?

Dark clouds began gathering above, rescuing us from being cooked alive. Never in my life had I seen clouds come together so quickly. It was eerie yet intriguing. The clouds were zipping across the sky blending into one another, forming larger darker, more ominous clouds. This sight was miraculous to me. None of my mute

companions were as impressed with this spectacle of nature as I was. It was a common occurrence to them, but uncommon to me. Something about nature's distraction displaced my depressing thoughts.

Without warning, a vicious reverberating thunder shook the air around us. The clouds released a torrent of water unlike any I had ever experienced in my life.

Everyone, everywhere got up and began running. The dogs that I had assumed were dead came to life fleeing the heavy downpour. I was transfixed in a moment that was as surreal as it was real. I had been abandoned, left alone outside as everyone else ran for cover into the bungalows.

Enormous drops of water were hitting the ground, which, initially, made tiny billows of dry dirt plume. I sat, partially protected, beneath the overhang of the makeshift tin roof, my back pressing more forcefully against the wall. The plummeting water beat out loud, chaotic rhythms on the tin roofs of the bungalows. There was nothing else my ears could discern from my surroundings, only the dead thud of drops of water hitting the ground and the resonant drumming as it beat against the tin roofs.

My feet were exposed and being pelted by hot, clear, huge dollops of water crashing down from above. I was wearing a floor length tunic. I pulled it up to my knees exposing more of my bare legs to this wondrous deluge of hot water falling from the sky.

From the safety of their windows my companions stared out at me. They were all motioning for me to run for cover and join them inside.

So much water was falling and so quickly that puddles began forming all over. This rainstorm was hot. It was hot! I had never experienced the sensation of hot water falling from the sky. Without hesitation I stood. I had no objective, no plan. I walked out from beneath the overhang and stood in the open air allowing the waters of the cloudburst to bathe me. Within seconds my tunic was drenched and clung to my body like a second layer of skin. Instinctively I allowed my eyes close. The stale wafting of putrefied excrement, puddles of stagnated urine and dry dirt was dissipating, ousted by the cleansing scent of fresh rainwater. Whereas my nostrils had contracted in retreat from the bitter odor of my surroundings previously, they now flared in acceptance of an uncontaminated fragrance.

It felt as if each drop of water falling on my head was cleansing me of my foul state of mind.

Eyes still closed tightly, I tilted my head back, allowing my lips to slowly part, my jaw to fall and my mouth to open wide. I extended my tongue out to greet the rain. Spoonfuls of water pelted my tongue, face, hands, arms and feet. My mouth filled with tasteless, unpolluted hot rainwater that streamed down my throat. The violent strength of the rain forced into hiding those obnoxious fumes from the other side of the wall. Even the air smelled and tasted clean, purified. The mud began encroaching

around my feet, rising to my ankles. My toes were experiencing a bath of mud and warm water as they submerged under a tiny lake of saturated earth.

For the first time in four days, since my arrival in Africa, I smiled spontaneously. To this day I still do not know why. I just smiled.

As quickly as the clouds had gathered and delivered their overpowering burst, they abruptly stopped and tore apart from one another. The sun was back.

I stood there out in the open, dripping wet. I slowly lowered my head and allowed my eyes to open. Everyone, everywhere was staring at me from the dry comfort of the bungalows. Their eyes were suspiciously inquisitive, housing hints of dread or fear. I saw them. They were clearly thinking that they were in the presence of a mad man. I continued smiling at them, but this effectively heightened their perception of me as deranged. Some of them guardedly smiled back at me but their smiles were forced, awkward.

Something shifted inside of me at the conclusion of that phenomenal cloudburst. My depression exposed itself as having been a monster of my own making, a dysfunctional ally in helping me to interpret my surroundings regardless of where I was in the world. I now had a better understanding of why it had been necessary for me to come to Africa.

The end