
Episode 1: *Obruni: Take It Up*

By Amber Lockridge



“Obruni”, Obruni”. I hear the shouts following me wherever I go. The word means, “white person” in Fante, the local African dialect. An apt description as I am, perhaps, the only white girl moving purposefully through a dense crowd of West Africans milling about Market Circle. The sounds and smells of Ghana are omnipresent unavoidable. A fat woman swathed in bright orange, tie-dyed cloth, carrying a baby across her back, is

arguing over the price of some dried fish. The seller, a young girl, carries the goods in a large platter on her head. They move haltingly through the streets, serving to avoid pedestrians and honking incessantly. The air is heavy with the smell of food, sweat, and sewage, which runs openly through concrete gutters along the sides of the street. As I round the corner, my friend’s small store comes into view. It is really only a hole-in-the-wall garage from which his family sells cheap plastic toys and buckets of water from a hose. It is a welcome sight, however, in this strange land and a refuge from the persistent pleas of the street vendors.

As I approach, my friend spots me and breaks into a wide grin. His mother and brothers, previously lounging in chairs or squatting on buckets, jump up to greet me.

“Good Morning” my friend calls. He takes my hand, grasps it in three different ways before sliding his fingertips down mine and moving them into a smart snap.

“O te den”, he asks how I am.

“Bo ko”, I respond and everyone within audible range erupts in cheers and chatter at my pitiful meager grasp of their native language. The family bombards me with a hail of cacophonous Fante until my complete lack of understanding becomes clear and they switch to English. I laugh with them at my own bewilderment then take a seat on a bench next to my friend.

I reflect upon my past two weeks as the noise of this family and its culture swirl around me. Did I have any idea what I was in for when I registered to spend a year in Ghana as an exchange student? I thought so then, now I am far less sure. I’ll admit I imagined huts, perhaps smiling natives and ritualistic body paint. The kind on thing an 18-year-old inhabitant of American suburbia might watch on a Nature documentary. Instead I live in the upper level of a

modestly sized, if poor, concrete house. There is a gas stove and a refrigerator, even a veranda where I often sit to look out over the city.

Amidst these concessions of “civilized” life, however, nothing is as I imagined it. Sitting on my bench I wonder if I’m the only one to notice two men across the street, holding hands as they walk. In Minnesota, these two would be making a definitive and somewhat risky statement about sexual orientation. Here, only friendship can be assumed and the act is casually insignificant.

I pull myself out of my reverie long enough to purchase a bottle of Coke for 100 cedis. The exchange rate is remarkably favorable for the American traveler; the pop costs me less than 17 cents. While I am retrieving my drink from the refrigerator, two children spot me from the other side of the street. “Bruni, Bruni” they yell, waving their hands enthusiastically. I smile and wave back. The two boys are ecstatic to have successfully attracted my attention. They jump up and down, pumping their arms back and forth in glee before sprinting out of view. A few minutes later they are back, dragging with them four or five others. The oldest looks at me critically but breaks into a joyful grin when I obligingly wave. The youngest girl, who has been sucking the torn plastic edge of a bag of water, burst into tears and hides behind her older brother. Internally I sigh. I’m never quite sure what to think about these mixed reactions. I bend over to set my bottle of coke on the ground. Immediately the children begin calling me again. I sit up and, smiling, shout back at them:

“Obibini,” meaning “black person”.

They first look shocked and then begin laughing hysterically. A volleying banter of “Obruni-Obibini” follows for some time until I tell them my American name.

“Bibini, wo frem “Amber”

They stumble over it, unable to shape their mouths around the hard “r” sound at the end. Finally I offer them the Fante name my family has granted me instead.

“Kukuwa” I tell them. “Wo frem Kuukua”

They laugh and laugh with delight and disbelief. The young girl has stopped crying to stare at me with wide, terrified eyes, which is at least better than tears. They repeat my halting phrase back to me.

“Kukuwa? Wo fre Kukuwa?” I grow weary of the game quickly, having played it dozens of times since I arrived in this country.

Fortunately, my friend provides me with a distraction. He has been telling his family that I have a wonderful singing voice and now everyone is clamoring for a selection. Blushing, I try to think of something that won’t offend them. Most people in this area are devoutly Christian with adamant political and social opinions on a range of thus far uncomfortable topics

for me. So I am wary of the 1970's hippie protest song repertoire that served as my childhood vocal education.

The best I can come up with is “*Amazing Grace*”. I pick a key and launch into it, all out. I only know the first verse, but they make me sing it again and again. Laughing and clapping, they sing with me in a joyful, off-tune way. Someone drags drums up from the back of the garage. My friend and his elder brother start up a lively syncopation. I do a small version of some American dancing from my seat; the laughter is louder yet, as the 6-yr-old brother tries to imitate my strange movements. The music carries on and on; a small crowd has gathered outside the store, clapping and dancing. My friend's mother calls out to me.

“Kukuwa... Take it up. Take it up.”

So I send my line into a vibrato-laden cascade of soulful-exploding improvisation. Someone in the crowd shouts, “Praise Jesus” and another responds, “Halleluiah, Amen”! The music rolls through the store and all the people in the market, from just one verse of *Amazing Grace*.

At the end of forever, it stops. The crowd applauds fervently and drifts away. Even the children across the street have returned to their own preoccupations, though the two boys still glance at me hopefully. Happily satisfied, I drain the rest of my drink, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the my knees. I know this is just one more extraordinary, every-day experience in my new life. I will probably do the same thing tomorrow.

Looking down at my hands, I laugh. Though my skin has tanned significantly from the near translucent-white I was sporting upon arrival, I am surprised at how pale they are compared to the local scenery. My host mother tells me “Kuukua, you're an African now”. Staring at my white hands and American clothes I wonder if my friend's family would agree, or the children across the street.

Humming I settle back on my modest bench, debating whether to entice my friend into a game of cards or just play idly with the deck. As I shuffle I think to myself, “If I knew nothing when I arrived her two weeks ago, what will I know when I return”/



Obruni In Ghana: A series of podcasts documenting Amber Lockridge's time as an AFS exchange student in Takoradi, Ghana, Africa : Aug 2000- June 2001.

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Produced by Rockylou Productions

<http://www.RockylouProductions.com/Obruni.html>