

**Review of *Black Gold of the Sun* by Ekow Eshun
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'Where are you from? No, where are you really from?' asks the African businessman on the plane from the London to Accra. It's a question that Ekow Eshun has had to handle many times before. The usual answer he gives is 'My parents are from Ghana but I was born in Britain' - not a lie, perhaps, but for the young man who utters them, they are devoid of meaning.

Black Gold of the Sun is an account of a five week journey undertaken to find an answer to this question, and a powerful first hand document about identity, self awareness, and racism. The journey lasts five weeks, taking him from the capital Accra and its seedy nightlife to Elmina Castle, a former Portuguese fort and a key staging post on what was once known to Europeans as the Gold Coast, and through whose dismal gates thousands of slaves (the *black gold* of the title) passed on their one way journey to the New World; and thence northwards, to the remote border with Burkina Faso, as Eshun tries to come to grips with a disturbing truth about his own ancestors, discovered almost by chance after a call made on his oldest surviving relative.

Eshun was recently appointed Artistic Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, a prestigious post for a comparatively young man, and for anyone listening to him speak about his job, the answer to the identity question seems simple: he's a Londoner. He has the streetwise candor which is a mark of having grown up in Europe's most multi-cultural environment. When he was two he returned to Ghana for three years with his family, during a regime change; apart from that, it has been London all the way. But 'identity' is never as simple as a place on the map.

Black Gold of the Sun intersperses a more or less chronological account of the second return trip to Ghana with more or less chronological episodes in his London life. The youngest of four children, Eshun's father was a Ghanaian diplomat who (like many fellow Africans) had to negotiate the tightrope of regime change from abroad. This meant, in effect, having to decide after every change of government whether or not it was safe to return. In 1957 Ghana became the first African nation to achieve independence; but this event was followed by a succession of military dictatorships ousting democratically elected governments. In 1979 the 32 year old flight lieutenant Jerry Rawlings (of mixed Scottish and Ghanaian parentage) staged a coup which kept him in power until 2000, and Eshun's father found himself without a job. The family fortunes took a turn for the worse, and, with 11 year old Ekow about to start secondary school, the downsizing began. A comfortable house in the north London suburb of Queensbury gave way to a smaller house in the neighbouring, but less desirable, Kingsbury. The family Volvo disappeared, as did most technological appliances, such as the washing machine, and the phone line was soon cut off. Ekow's mother started working in a local hospital, while the presence of his father, now studying full time for a business degree, 'filled up the house.'

At school, Eshun is used to racist taunts. Some of his best friends, he observes laconically, were racists. At Queensbury Junior School, as the lone black boy, he is assumed to come from 'a place of mud huts and cannibals', and he has to put up with classmates who 'predicated on the dominance of the white race over wogs, Pakis and Yids.' Not that he blames them - racism was the norm on 1970s television in Britain, Eshun reminds us, and 'the closer you looked the worse it got'.

Kingsbury is different. The question which has haunted him from the beginning (albeit in its curter, more aggressive form *Where you from?*) returns, but this time his tormentors are

black - his West Indian classmates. Eshun describes the ringleader, Dwayne Hall (but in a note at the end we read that some names have been changed 'to protect the innocent and the guilty'), wearing a puzzled expression as he beat up his smaller victim 'as if he felt obliged to carry on pummeling me even though he wasn't sure why.'

The analysis Eshun makes of Dwayne and his cronies is worth quoting in full: 'Born in England to Jamaican parents, it seemed to me that they drew from their dual heritage without angst - in the patois they traded and the exercise books they stickered with the Jamaican flag. In their height, and the swagger with which they proceeded, three abreast, down the school corridor, I saw a self-assurance I could never match. For Dwayne and his crew, being West Indian and British brought with it an ineffable cool. They were school trendsetters. The first kids with the newest style of Fila trainers or the latest Streetsounds Electro album. They were the ones who pollinated patois across the playground and created the template for a teeth-kissing disdain of adulthood adopted by the entire fourth year. Looking back I can see they belonged to a generation of young Caribbean-originated Britons making themselves heard during the early 1980s. Black sitcoms such as *No Problem* were being broadcast on television. Jazz funk singers such as Junior Giscombe and David Grant scored hits in the charts. John Barnes was scoring for England. Thanks to that generation, black people were garnering a level of respect in Britain they'd never before held.

Unless you came from Africa - in which case you were still nobody.'

In Accra Eshun arranges to borrow a house belonging to his mother's cousin, in the suburbs. Walking to the local grocery store he is followed by children chanting *Burennyi*. Eshun knows some Fante - the language of his parents, and one of the main languages in the country - but he has to check the meaning of this word with the housekeeper's niece. She explains that it means 'white man'. After feeling an outsider all his life in Britain, Eshun is evidently not just 'another face in the crowd' that he thought he would become when he stepped off the plane.

The crisis of identity is echoed through the biographical snippets of predecessors caught up, like himself, between cultures, and interwoven into the narrative. Such as the story of Jacobus Capitein, an eight year old Ghanaian boy kidnapped in the early eighteenth century by slavers, and adopted by a Dutch official of the West India Company. After growing up in Holland and taking a degree in theology, with a thesis entitled *Political - Theological Dissertation on Slavery as Not Being Contrary to Christian Freedom*, Capitein returned to Ghana as chaplain of Elmina Castle, where, scorned by the hardened Europeans in the fort because of the colour of his skin, and overwhelmed by debts, he began to buy and sell slaves himself. At the age of thirty he was found dead, presumably after committing suicide. At what point, Eshun wonders, did Capitein 'start to question his former certainties'?

This is only one of the parallel lives which Eshun presents us with, but it comes at a key point half way through the narrative, interwoven with pages which describe in banal detail the horrors of the slave trade as Eshun, rucksack on shoulders and apparently the lone visitor, explores the dank cells of Elmina Castle imagining the start of the journey of no return.

From Elmina he takes a bus ride along the coast to visit the man he calls *Nana Banyin*, an honorific title meaning 'grandfather' - Eshun's oldest surviving relative. For the whole afternoon they talk; and Eshun discovers that the founder of his mother's family line - his great great great great great grandfather - was a Dutch mulatto slavedriver by the name of Joseph de Graft. The family had grown rich on the slave trade. The shock to Eshun is physical. He feels suddenly 'aged and brittle', 'walking along a sand-blown highway no longer sure who you are any more'.

The rest of the narrative transmits a sense of aimlessness as Eshun first chills out at a beach resort, meeting dreadlocked Ghanaian backpackers who affect a Jamaican accent, and who, like himself, have found 'a tangled mess' instead of the roots they were searching for. And thence northwards, towards the border with Burkina Faso. Here he makes another chance discovery. A clearing in an area of scattered low, flat boulders turns out to have been a transit camp for slaves, taken from neighbouring villages, and kept there under the sun for up to six months by their Arab captors before the enforced march to the coast and the slave ships.

This final desolate image of the beginning of a journey is the end, almost, of Eshun's own journey. But it is the signs of resilience and human dignity that he finds there which leave the lasting impression - such as the scratches on the surface of the stones which the slaves had turned into rudimentary draught boards: 'this camp was a factory for the breaking of the soul. Yet the evidence of resistance was scratched into its rocks. Each time they sang the slaves asserted their freedom. Every time they shared food they held on to their humanity.'

This, ultimately, is the message that sings from the pages of this book - together with the realization that, although the past cannot be undone, 'the present is mutable.' Eshun recalls the last time he sees his erstwhile tormentor, the Jamaican Dwayne, now a young adult, and a born-again African recruiting converts to the cause in London's Edgware Road. 'Here my brother' he wheedles, thrusting a photocopied manifesto into the hands of the unrecognized Eshun. Suddenly - the year is 1989 - being African is cool.

Searingly honest, both in its analysis of other people's motives and its introspective self assessment, this is an unprecedented document about growing up as a black person in Britain; but the personal journey Eshun undertakes sets that experience against a global and historical background, reminding us that we are all actors on the same world stage, but it is up to us to write our own parts, because there is 'no template to being African or English' - and no future for the entrenched racism of the country he grew up in.

David Newbold, Venice, 20.9.2009