

One Language, Two Cultures

The waiter gently lifted the lid from the bowl. Beneath the swirls of steam I saw, with horror, the cooked head of a goat floating in the midst of a pool of orange brown soup. Its eye stared blankly back at me, its lips were peeled back in a deathly grimace while its tiny teeth glistened with slicks of oily soup.

“But I told you I was a vegetarian when I ordered,” I blurted out at the waiter.

“But Madame,” he replied, “you don’t need to eat the meat, just drink the soup. It is very nutritious.”

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I had arrived in Ghana a few days earlier and was staying with a family in the virtually unpronounceable Adjiringanor, a leafy suburb of Accra the capital city. As a first time visitor to Africa, I had been advised to come to Ghana. It had a reputation for being ultra friendly and, as a former British colony, had the added advantage of English as the official language. With directions from my host family, I set out un-chaperoned to travel to the Arts Centre, a market for local handicrafts.

Things got off to a good start and I managed to successfully join a minibus heading for Central Accra. The minibus was actually an old rusty van with windows hacked out at the sides and ancient ripped plastic seats bolted to the floor. I squeezed myself in next to a sleeping policeman, careful to avoid touching his knees between which nestled a shiny machine gun.

The driver’s mate sat perched on a seat by a sliding door calling out the stops as we approached.

“Shan Grilla”, he bellowed, “Shan Grilla.” I couldn’t understand what he meant until the minibus ground to a creaking halt opposite the Shangri La Hotel.

The three lane highway was packed with traffic speeding along. Gleaming 4 x 4 vehicles did battle with battered taxis for road space. The taxis bore strange religious texts painted on the back windows. Texts that sounded powerful but didn’t actually make much sense.

“Except God”

“Still One Door”

“God is One”

“Obey”

The one thing that none of the vehicles were doing was obeying the rules of the road.

Brave hawkers, the weight of the goods piled high on their heads creating wrinkled furrows in their brows, wove dangerously between the fast moving lanes as horns blared and brakes screeched. Bags of water, boxes of tissues and packets of chewing gum were exchanged for money tossed through open windows. The groundnut saleswoman wore a crown of peanuts on her head, each one carefully arranged to interlock with the next like Lego bricks, while the man selling car accessories sported

necklaces of steering wheel covers around his throat and wands of windscreen wipers in his hands like a mad magician.

Breathing a sigh of relief at safely reaching journey's end, I started off on foot towards the Arts Centre. Soon I was head down and scrambling over broken pavements, stepping over open drains and being jostled and pushed by other pedestrians. Before long I realized that the crowd had swept me in the wrong direction. Instinctively I ducked down an alleyway to my left and emerged into an open square. Music boomed from huge speakers and beneath a canopy sat men and women all dressed in black and white clothes, eating, drinking and laughing. I stopped to ask directions.

"Come and join us," called out a large woman sheathed from head to toe in a tight fitting outfit of black and white brocade.

"Thank you," I hurriedly replied, "maybe later. What are you celebrating – a birthday?"

"No, my dear," her ample frame shook with laughter, "a funeral"

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The waiter at the Arts Centre Restaurant gently replaced the lid on the bowl of soup.

"So do you have anything to eat that is just vegetables?" I asked.

The waiter screwed up his face and looked miserable.

"Maybe you would like rice and stew" he said at last. Visions of boiled beef and carrots rose to my mind.

"What's in it?" I asked suspiciously.

"The stew is made from onions, pepper, ginger and tomatoes," he ticked them off on his fingers as he spoke, "all fried together."

It sounded more like a sauce to me. I did know that some soups here were like stews so maybe some stews were more like sauces? At another table I suddenly spotted something I recognized.

"Is that fried banana?" I asked, pointing.

"No, Madame," the waiter replied patiently, "it is plantain."

"But it is a vegetable," I said triumphantly, "I'll have that."

It seemed that it would take me a while to get used to the subtle different nuances of language and culture here. The language *was* English but not exactly as I knew it.