

## The Homelessness of a Postcolonial Missionary Kid

I grew up as a missionary kid in Nigeria. To some, that makes me a heroic figure whose parents sacrificed the comforts of a Western upbringing for me in their efforts to save souls. To others, that makes me a part of a nefarious system trying to impose their beliefs on others who have no need of them. Regardless of how people view the missionary or missionary kid experience, the fact that I grew up in Nigeria elicits all sorts of bizarre *National Geographic* inspired questions: Did you wear clothes? Did you ride to school on elephants? Had you seen a car before coming here? And my favorite, from a well meaning little old lady at a church in Cincinnati: "Did you go to school with the natives?"

"What was it like to grow up in Africa?" is a common question which I find more difficult to answer than the previous, since I do not know what it was like to grow up elsewhere. I suppose it was pretty similar. I had friends; I played; I went to school. Perhaps the major difference was the mobility of those around me. Being a part of an expatriate community and going to an international school entails that many of your best friends will not stay around for long because if your own parents are not called elsewhere, theirs' probably will be. Growing up as a missionary kid has made me somewhat 'homeless', always dreaming of a place that can never quite be again, because so much of the community and the people—Nigerians and expatriates—who made it home to me are no longer there. In spite of this, I would not trade my upbringing for anything. To a global nomad like myself, geographic stability and boredom are very nearly synonyms. David Livingstone, one of the most famous missionaries of all time, realized 140 years ago that missionary kids had "...no place on earth which they can call a home."<sup>43</sup> This 'homelessness' is an important part of the missionary kid identity and can plague them for the rest of their lives, regardless of how long they end up staying in one place after the initial 'abroad' experience.

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<sup>43</sup> David Livingstone, *Missionary Researches and Travels in South Africa* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1858), 131.

Daughters and sons of missionaries are, of course, not the only ones who grow up in such settings. There are also children of businesspeople, diplomats, military personnel, for example. All of these children spend their lives in a nomadic manner always moving in and out of one mobile community or another. There is a shared experience between almost all children who grow up in such settings—they fit neither into the culture of the place their parents are from, nor into the culture of the place they live. Also, they are not immigrants, because wherever they are living for the moment is unlikely to ever be their country of citizenship. They will always move on somewhere else because of their parents, because of education, or because of their own nomadic nature. The collective term for those of us who grew up in such a manner is ‘Third Culture Kids’ (TCKs)—because we fit into a ‘third culture’ somewhere in between that of our parents and that of our place(s) of domicile.

The influences of the ‘third culture’ are not only the parents’ ‘home’ and the children’s place(s) of upbringing. When one goes to an international school as well, the influences become even more varied, and the ‘third culture’ even more complicated. In such settings, even the non-expatriates (compatriots) attending the school become TCKs. Let me describe some of this from my own experience. Two of my best friends in primary school were a Bulgarian-Vietnamese boy whose father was a devout atheist and a British-Nigerian Catholic whose father had ancestry in Brazil. Another classmate was a Lebanese Nigerian Muslim whose grandfather had come from Lebanon via Chile. At the time, none of this seemed unusual, and my own triple citizenships, ‘ethnic’ name, and Nigerian upbringing was not perceived as unconventional. The children of those laundering the dictator’s money and Nigerian pastors’ children studied side by side in the school I attended. Children of those executed by the state for their stand against it and the children of the officials of that same state lived in the same dormitories. Children of a conservative Eritrean Muslim clan whose businesses in Nigeria were funding the Eritrean war for independence were close friends with the children of conservative Christian missionaries who would not allow their children to dance. Not only were these people schooling together, but they were also interacting all the time, sometimes even dating. Such a setting often left people confused about what their nationality, culture, ethnicity, or even religion really was when they moved on.

According to Akhil Gupta, we cannot consider any part of the world truly ‘postcolonial’ until the nation state structures that allowed colonialism to



develop and persist are themselves gone.<sup>44</sup> As TCKs, even though our parents' jobs (military, diplomatic, missionary, corporate) often were central to the structure and practice of the colonial and nation state system, we emerged actualizing postcoloniality because our understanding of the meanings of borders, citizenships, ethnicities, and identities just do not fit the traditional assumptions of the nation state system. The boundaries of the nation state, real and imagined, do not hold for us. We are, therefore, part of Gupta's postcolonial world

Unfortunately though, TCKs and missionary kids in particular no longer have the type of influence they once did. Earlier in this century, missionaries and their children were vital to American foreign affairs policy making, especially regarding China where missionary kids like Yale's own Henry Luce were instrumental to the shaping of American policy regarding that country. Now, the vast reservoir of knowledge of diverse cultures TCKs possess and their potential roles as bridge builders between varied cultures and ethnicities is not being utilized fully. Now, often restless TCKs can be found all over this country working in jobs that have no relation to the uniqueness of their upbringing. But, they will inevitably still be dreaming of home, a place they likely cannot really identify.

I chose to make my own dreaming of home a career, so that my past is very much a part of my present, and my future. Sometimes, it does get frustrating when my identity as a Nigerian is called into question because I appear 'white'. Sometimes, studying African History in an academic setting can also be frustrating to someone like myself for whom Africa is such an inherent part of my life, a passion. However, as someone who has always moved between two worlds, I have a unique advantage studying Africa as one fitting in between the usual categories of African and non-African scholars. I fill that space somewhere in the middle as a simultaneous insider and outsider.

I will end with words from a representative of another category of 'nomadic' people, migrant laborers. As Thoohoe Ratalane, a Sotho migrant poet said, "Gentlemen, a man's home is everywhere; take up your

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<sup>44</sup> Akhil Gupta, *Post-Colonial Developments* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

stick and ramble."<sup>45</sup> And ramble we TCKs will, always searching for that home which is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in David Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word Music of South Africa's Sotho Migrants* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125.