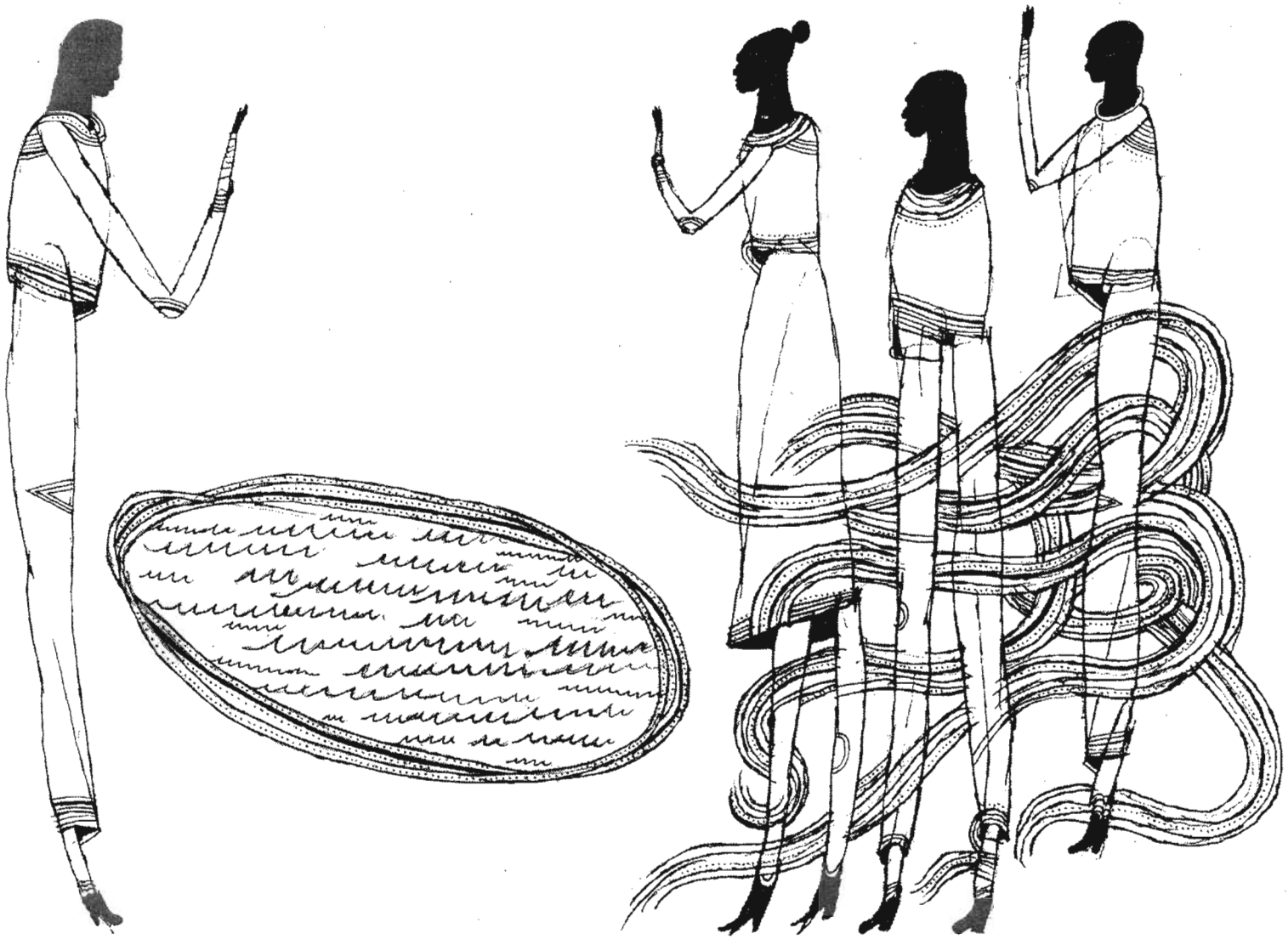
The Siren Call of Africa



Joseph Hart

By Ken Wiwa

PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria

Whenever I return to my family's home on the Atlantic coast of southern Nigeria, I remember the old African saying that we return to old watering holes for more than water; we return because friends and dreams are there to meet us.

Our myths and proverbs sustain Africans during winters of exile, but like so much about Africa, the dream of an idyllic homecoming is often the preamble to a rude awakening.

When the writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o returned to Kenya this summer after 22 years of self-imposed exile, his journey took a familiar arc. Acclaimed by thousands on his return, Mr. Ngugi declared in the first flush of homecoming that he had "come back with an open mind, an open heart and open arms." Dedicating his return to the collective struggle of the Kenyan people, Mr. Ngugi humbly confessed that he had "come to learn." Less than two weeks later Mr. Ngugi was robbed by gunmen and his wife was sexually assaulted. It was a bitter lesson but, unfortunately, a very African one.

The idea of returning is a dream that teases and torments many African expatriates. I am still trying to find a line through the complex thread of reasons that compels me to leave my young family behind in Toronto every three months and make the trip to Nigeria, a country that fills me with memories I would rather forget. The simplest line runs through my sense of duty to my family and in particular to my parents, which is strange because my mother lives in Britain and my father died nine years ago.

Actually, "died" is a somewhat inadequate description. My father is Ken Saro-Wiwa, the author who was hanged by the late Gen. Sani Abacha for daring to speak out against official corruption and misrule. But I always return to Nigeria, partly in homage to my father's memory and the sacrifices he made for me. I also return because, for those whom I have left behind for an easier life in the West, my homecoming provides emotional comfort and financial support. My coming back confirms that I have not forgotten or abandoned them to their fate. Going home is not just about me, it is also about those left behind.

There are many like me — second-generation African émigrés or those who left as children — living in Europe and North America who feel a psychic need to reconnect with the mother continent. It is a strange and cruel paradox that, while many young Africans are desperate to leave the continent, those who have been lucky enough to escape the harsh economic environment of Africa will, at some point, hear the continent calling them back.

Among the generations of Africans who came of age during colonialism, outspoken writers and artists like my father and Mr. Ngugi are legion; Jack Mapanje of Malawi, Ahmadou Kourouma of Ivory Coast and Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, are some of the more well known. Lucky are the ones who live to relate their story and even luckier are those who have been exiled and then are able to return for the ceremony of an African homecoming. But for every Ngugi wa Thiong'o, there are thousands who make the trip alone and unheralded. Mostly the returnees are the old who, like the lions of the Serengeti, make the arduous journey to the place of their birth to die.

> For exiles, love for home is more powerful than fear.

Mr. Ngugi was hardly an unwary exile, though. He of all expatriated Kenyans will have known that Africa, if we can generalize about the most diverse continent in our universe, is the land of the paradox, a place of astounding generosity and communal spirit with a streak of violence and cruelty. Mr. Ngugi has tasted its bitter pill before, in 1977, when he was imprisoned without trial for a year. In 1982, Mr. Ngugi, fearing for his safety, escaped into exile. The paradox of Mr. Ngugi's physical exile was that here was a writer who, even in his prime in Kenya, insisted that the African mind had been exiled by colonialism. In works like the novel "A Grain of Wheat" and his famous polemic, "Decolonizing the Mind," Mr. Ngugi proselytized for African literature in indigenous languages.

Mr. Ngugi's devotion to his own language, Gikuyu, speaks to the nostalgia for home — the need to locate the authentic self and free it from foreign influences; it is this lingering need to reconnect with an identity untainted by the complications of a foreign culture that often compels Africans to return. After all, this is what Mr. Ngugi said when he and his wife had taken refuge in New York after the attack: "Kenya is my country and I will come over and over again."

We return even though we know that going home is a journey fraught with complications: the sepia tint of nostalgia is pitched against the dark memories of one's exit, which was often under traumatic circumstances; the euphoric thoughts of homecoming will be punctuated by the guilt of having to face those you might have left behind or neglected. Going home is like re-entry from a parallel universe, an experience that can leave you feeling disorientated and alienated: a native stranger.

The risks for returned exiles are real and self-evident, but we just have to take sensible precautions, pour a libation to the ancestors and pray that we don't fall foul of the laws of diminishing returns. When we have safely negotiated our terms and conditions of re-entry, we can only hope that our friends and dreams will be there to greet us when we stoop to slake our thirst at the water hole. □

Ken Wiwa is the author of "In the Shadow of a Saint: A Son's Journey to Understand His Father's Legacy."

Bringing Change to Africa

To the Editor:

Ken Wiwa ("The Siren Call of Africa," Op-Ed, Sept. 18) mentions the execution of his father, Ken Saro-Wiwa. But he doesn't mention that the maelstrom after his father's hanging became a catalyst for change, forcing multinational corporations to begin to incorporate human rights into their operating principles.

I traveled extensively in Africa with my husband, Thomas B. Moorhead, who was deputy under secretary of labor for international affairs from 2001 until he died in 2003. Like many, I am drawn to Africa. But as white Americans, where do we fit in?

Last year, I spent a month working for Save the Children in Ethiopia during a cycle of famine that affected 12 million people. I met many young Africans working for change, a few of whom had studied in the United States and had turned down career opportunities to return home.

We need more Africans, like Wole Soyinka and Ken Wiwa, with a strong, clear voice to go home and engage those of us who care passionately about Africa by letting us know what we can do to help.

How can we be there, not with handouts of food, or as missionaries or business executives, but with programs and policies that will offer technical support that will eventually lead to sustainable development?

It will not be comfortable, but Africans must shape the new Africa.

ELIZABETH HOWARD MOORHEAD
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