

Dora's Children

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INTRODUCTION

This book came about as a result of my desire to document the numerous photographs that I had seen in albums lying around as a child. They had always been part of my childhood for as long as I could remember. Even though I had left to go abroad to live thoughts of them were always at the back of my mind. In 1998 when I had the opportunity to go back home to visit these photographs came back with me. I started scanning them and retouched those that needed to be restored. The plan was to compile them into a photobook that I would give copies to each of my children. Every time I looked at them they also reminded me of events that had taken place growing up as a child in the larger environment, some of which I had documented. I thought that one day I could turn these stories into a book. And so, even though these two projects were conceived of separately, there is now an opportunity to combine them into one. Dora's Children is the result.

CHAPTER ONE

Maame Dora was mother to us all whether we were her children or grandchildren. She refused to be labelled grandmother by me or any of her other grandchildren and preferred to be called mother. I therefore used the same name for her as well as my mother–Maame. The distinction between the two lay where the emphasis was in the pronunciation.

My earliest recollection of her was in the small town, Otumi, where she lived with my step-grandfather Rev. Mensah. He was the minister in charge of the Presbyterian Church. I still remember what a joyful occasion it was the day they got married. It was as if the whole town had taken part in it as I listened to chants of 'the Reverend is getting married, so lah ti doh.'

I was about six years old must have been sent there to my grandmother while my mother was busy taking care of her own affairs. It was likely that she was trying to get her life in order since my father had recently left to go back to Britain.

The Pastor's compound was a large one. The rooms were situated on the periphery of the property leaving a generous space of red clay in the middle which was kept spotless by sweeping it every morning. I was privileged not to have any chores in the house probably because of my age. I was about six years old. Nevertheless I would participate in whatever activity was going on if I were allowed to. And so I swept the compound, fetched water, rang the church bell, polished silverware and lighted kerosene lamps for the night. All of this was fun for me and I felt proud because I could do what grown-ups did. It was a happy time as I was surrounded by people who loved me. When evening came we would sit in the kitchen by the fire and tell Ananse stories till it was bedtime.

Maame Dora was a full-time homemaker who took care of my step-grandfather the Pastor, who in turn took care of the church and its flock. She did this dutifully and also played the part of a Pastor's wife very well. In her spare time

she would find a spot in the centre of town to fry her snacks and sell them. Plantain fritters, cassava nuggets were always available and I will hover around and pick at them whenever I had the chance.

The centre of Otumi town was always busy for its size, especially on Thursdays when a blue truck would arrive with goods for sale. The goods would be sold to individuals or to small shopkeepers to retail them. Whenever I had the chance I made sure I was there. As I look back now I must have remained in Otumi for less than a year. That's because I remember starting school in Primary class one there and moving to Oda to continue it at the same level. Even though my stay in Otumi was short I have very fond memories it. Going down by the river to fetch water with the servants was always fun trying to balance a bucket of water on my curly hair, picking shaddock fruit or cutting palm branches for roasting plantain later.

Although Maame lived in Otumi it had not always been her home. The family home was in Akim Oda where she had a thriving business in retailing. These were mainly dry goods bought at wholesale from stores like the United Africa Company (UAC) or G. B. Ollivant. She settled in Otumi when Reverend Mensah was posted there and they decided to get married.

My mother was now ready for me to return to her in Oda. She now had a sewing business with a few apprentices and Oda became my home for the rest of my life in Ghana. Maame joined us a couple of years later after her marriage broke down. She complained that Reverend Mensah never loved her. And so this was my family along with my aunts, uncles and cousins.

CHAPTER TWO

Akim Oda was a thriving town much bigger than Otumi and full of energy. It was a centre for the timber, cocoa and diamond trade. The timber business was what brought my father, Peter Carter Woodham of Bourne, Lincolnshire, to this town. He landed in Ghana, then the Gold Coast, at Takoradi harbour in 1947. A search on ancestry.com reveals that he arrived on a ship called HMT Empire Ken which sailed from Glasgow in January of the same year. His profession was listed as Logging Assistant and last known address before he left Britain as 33 West Road, Bourne, Lincs.

I have no recollection of my father as a child. I remember a lot of things from my childhood but none of those scenes ever featured him. As I grew older I would inquire from my mother about him. I believe I asked about my father not because I missed him but because I realised that other children had fathers. The usual answer was that he went back to Britain to prepare for us to join him there. At that

time this answer was good enough for me because I believed he was still preparing for us to join him. And so life continued in Oda. I was enrolled in the Presbyterian Primary School and continued to learn my alphabet and numbers and getting confused by the letter G and the number 6.

I don't recall much of Class 1 but have a lot of memories of the susequent classes. I do remember myself as being very shy which led to my own detriment sometimes. I remember clearly developing an upset stomach in class one day and could not bring myself to tell my teacher, Mrs. Akuffo, that I needed to go to the bathroom. Fortunately she noticed my discomfort and gave me permission to go home which was not far away. I almost didn't make it in time to relieve myself.

Life at home was pretty normal. I now lived with both my mother and grandmother. From time to time one of my uncles or aunts would come live with us for a period of time. I now had also become fully aware of me as an individual.

CHAPTER THREE

The house we lived in was one of two on the property. I always thought it did not look like a normal house. It looked like one large building with three compartments - a bedroom, a living room with my bed and a third room which served as a store and guest room. There were not too many windows but three large entrances which provided adequate ventilation. I later found out that it used to be a warehouse. I loved it because unlike other houses it had a very high ceiling made of woven raffia. Many times I would lie on my back and look at the ceiling to figure out the pattern and the hands that wove it. In front of the house was a large verandah which served a number of purposes - as a play area, cooking or selling goods. My grandmother loved to sit here tending to her stall or receiving people who had come from the country to sell their goods. Sitting with them and listening to their conversations was always a favourite pastime.