

CHAPTER 6

IMAGINARY
STRANGERS

Waiting for the King

My mother and I are seated on a large veranda. From its high ceiling, eight fans are turning at full speed, and a light breeze from the garden blows through the screened openings; and so, though it is hot outside, we do not feel hot. Before us, on a dais, is an empty throne, its arms and legs embossed with polished brass, the back and seat covered in a fabric vaguely reminiscent of a scarf by Hermès. In front of the steps to the dais, there are two columns of people, mostly men, facing each other, seated on stools, the cloths they wear wrapped around their chests so that their shoulders are bare. Between them there is an open path to the throne. Around the throne itself are other men; some of them have one shoulder covered, toga-style, so we know they are higher in

rank. But in front of them on the top step sits a young man, shoulders bare, holding an umbrella open above the throne.

There is a quiet buzz of conversation. Outside in the garden, peacocks screech. We are waiting for the Asantehene, king of Asante. It is a Wednesday festival day, in Kumasi, during which the king will sit here for a few hours and people will come up to shake his hand, say a few words, pay their respects.

At last, the horn player blows the ram's horn, and its tune tells us that the man we have been waiting for has come, the *kotokohene*—the porcupine chief, the horn names him, for the porcupine has a multitude of quills, each signifying a warrior ready to kill and to die for the kingdom. Everyone stands until he has settled on the throne. Then, when we sit, a chorus of men in the rear sings songs in praise of him, interspersed with the playing of a flute. When, in the course of this music making, I catch his eye, he smiles at me. But mostly he sits there impassively; he has been king for five years now, but he looks as though he could have been sitting in state all his life.

By custom on this day, his first greetings will be for members of the royal family, children and grandchildren of his predecessors on the throne. They will not shake his hand. They will come and bow or curtsy, the men uncovering both shoulders, as one does for all the chiefs of Asante. The rest of us will wait our turn. And when it comes, each of us will be presented by the king's linguist and then summoned up for a word or two of conversation.

When my moment comes, I am introduced by the linguist as my father's son, as a professor at Princeton, as the bearer of some bottles of Dutch schnapps (for several centuries now an appropriate gift for a West African royal) and a gift of money (a million cedis, actually, or about a hundred dollars).

When I step up for my few words, the king asks me how things are in America.

"Fine," I say. "When will you next be in the States?"

"I have to come soon," he tells me. "I'm coming to see Jim Wolfensohn."

So the king of Asante, a kingdom formally part of the modern republic of Ghana, would soon be visiting the then president of the World Bank.

This is, for all but a few million Ghanaians, a relatively unfamiliar world. For visiting English cousins and American friends, it has usually seemed, at first, wonderfully exotic; our tourist industry no doubt depends on this response. Most people elsewhere would think of this Wednesday festival as belonging quaintly to an African past, and this sense would be confirmed by the discovery that today began for the king with a visit to pay his respects to the blackened stools of his ancestors. But as we waited for him, there were people taking calls on cell phones under those whirling fans; and the people who followed me up to greet him were a dozen men in suits, representatives of an insurance company. When the chiefs who pass by greet me, they ask about Princeton. And the meetings in the office next to the veranda are about twenty-first-century issues: the educational needs of twenty-first-century children, HIV/AIDS, the local university of science and technology.

Anywhere you travel in the world—today as always—you can find ceremonies such as these, many of them, like these, rooted in centuries-old traditions. But you will also find everywhere—and this is something new—many intimate connections with places far away: Washington, Moscow, Mexico City, Beijing. Across the street from us, when we were growing up, was a large house occupied by a number of families, among them a vast family of boys; one, about my age, was a good friend. He lives in London now. His brother, who helped look after my father when he was dying, lives in Japan, where his wife is from. They have another brother who has been in Spain for a while and a couple more who, last I heard,

were in the United States. Some of them still live in Kumasi, one or two in Accra. Eddie, who lives in Japan, speaks his wife's language now. He has to. But he was never very comfortable in English, the language of our government and our schools. When he phones me from time to time, he prefers to speak Asante-Twi.

Over the years, the palace buildings have expanded. When I was a small child, we used to visit the previous king, my great-uncle by marriage, in a small building that the British had allowed his predecessor to build when he returned from exile in the Seychelles to a restored but diminished Asante kingship. That building is now a museum, dwarfed by the enormous house next door—built by his successor, my uncle by marriage—where the current king lives. Next to it is the suite of offices abutting the veranda where we were sitting, recently finished by the present king, my uncle's successor. The British, my mother's people, conquered Asante at the turn of the twentieth century; now, at the turn of the twenty-first, the palace feels as it must have felt in the nineteenth century: a center of power. The president of Ghana comes from this world too. He was born across the street from the palace to a member of the royal Oyoko clan. But he belongs to other worlds as well: he went to Oxford University; he's a member of one of the Inns of Court in London; he's a Catholic, with a picture of himself greeting the pope in his sitting room.

Going Home

Kumasi is where I grew up, but I haven't lived in Ghana for more than thirty years. Like many people today—like, for example, more than a hundred thousand Ghanaians in England—I live a long way away from the home of my earliest memories. Like many, I

return there from time to time, to visit family and friends. And, again like many, when I am there I feel both that I do and that I don't belong. At moments like the one at the palace, I know what is happening, and people know who I am. So, in one sense, I fit in. Nothing surprises me. I know how to behave.

On the other hand, there are things in Kumasi that remind me constantly that this is no longer where I live. I find I am irritated, for example, by the slow pace of things, by the unreliability of services. If, as often happens, my mother's phone stops working, it won't just get put right. Someone must go down to the central post office, and then she must wait—days, a week or two, who knows?—until they get around to fixing it. Everyone you talk to will be polite, but they will move to the very slow beat of a drummer of their own. I feel, in short, the way the city mouse feels visiting his country cousins. But, in fact, it's my home in New Jersey that is in the country. There I live outside a small town (population 2,696 in the 2000 census). Kumasi, on the other hand, is the second city of Ghana, with more than half a million people. At its center is the Kejetia market, covering nearly thirty acres; with thousands of traders selling a miscellaneous alphabet of goods from avocados, bicycles, and carburetors to yams and zucchini, it's often said to be the largest market in West Africa.

There's something else about Kumasi, something that probably strikes every tourist eventually: people are constantly asking you for things. It's not just the beggars, of whom there are many, often physically disabled—blind old women and men, accompanied by sighted children who guide them to your car window, polio victims on crutches, lepers with fingers eaten away by disease. Ordinary respectable people will ask, "What did you bring me?" Or, "Can you take me with you to America?" Or, "When you go home will you send me a watch?" (Or a cell phone or a laptop.) They ask you for help with visas and plane tickets and jobs. It may seem as if

they have a wildly exaggerated sense of the power and wealth to which you have access simply by living in the industrialized world.

To understand these constant demands you have to understand something about life in Ghana. It is true now, as it was true one and two and three centuries ago, that success in life depends on being enmeshed in a web of relationships. To get things done—to get a driver's license, a passport, a building permit, a job—you need to be someone or know someone with the social standing to work your will. Since most people don't have that status, they need to find someone—a patron—who does. In a society like this, to ask someone for something is to invite him to become your patron. It's a sign that you think he has the status to get things done. And so it's a way of indicating respect. Which explains an old Ashanti proverb that would otherwise seem completely mysterious:

Obi tan wo a, ansre wo adee.

If someone hates you, he won't ask you for things.

The Romans had a word for these dependents: it was *clientes*. Our word "client" has entirely lost this sense of the mutual dependency of patron and client. The client is now—except in the snootiest of restaurants and boutiques—the boss. In the Roman world, by contrast, as in Asante for the last few centuries, the patron was the boss, and the clients needed him to get on in the world. The patron's status also depended on his being seen to serve his clients: master and man each depend on one another. This is a thought that philosophers often ascribe to Hegel, who has a famous analysis in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of the dependence of the master on the servitor's regard. But any Roman could have taught you this lesson. The third book of Horace's odes begins with a poem, *Odi profanum vulgus*, that is, in part, about the burdens of wealth and status, the burdens of being a patron. He talks about the security of being some-

one who "desires only what is enough," and thus is not open to the risks of loss that face the rich. And at one point early in the poem, he talks, too, about a group of candidates for election, entering the public square in Rome. One is from a more noble lineage, one is a stylish fellow with a good reputation, and about the third he says,

... the crowd of that one's clients
may be greater.

Illi turba clientium sit maior: he may have a larger crowd of clients. Having a host of dependents was a source of status in Augustan Rome. It was something that got you respect; it might even have gotten you elected to office.

If you are not from Kumasi that world may seem, as I say, strange ... striking and colorful, too, perhaps, but certainly alien. Many of the things that worry people there, many of the projects that engage them, won't be worries and projects of yours. But that doesn't distinguish people in Kumasi from many of your neighbors down the street. You've either been born again or you haven't; whichever side of this divide you're on, you have a very different take on the world from those on the other side. And there's the same division between Pentecostals and the older mainline denominations of Christianity in Kumasi. More importantly, even if this world strikes you as strange, you can nevertheless make sense of it. You don't know how to behave in Kumasi, but you could learn, as my mother did when she moved here from England half a century ago. Of course, as my Asante kinsmen say, *Ɔmanfrani myini kronkron*, "the stranger never grows to perfection." If, like my mother, you move to a place and learn its language in your thirties, you can't expect to get everything right.

And you can *imagine* having beliefs that you don't, in fact, share. No doubt, you don't believe that it's important to keep the royal ancestors happy by placing food offerings on their blackened stools;

but if you believed that their spirits could shape life now, for better or worse, you would want the Asantehene to make his offerings, too. You might find the constant demands of friends and acquaintances mildly disconcerting; but, once the underlying principles of the relationship between patrons and clients has been explained to you, you can understand why they do it.

Finally, there's just a great deal of everyday life that is utterly, humanly familiar. People in Ghana, people everywhere, buy and sell, eat, read the papers, watch movies, sleep, go to church or mosque, laugh, marry, make love, commit adultery, go to funerals, die. Most of the time, once someone has translated the language you don't know, or explained some little unfamiliar symbol or custom, you'll have no more (and, of course, no less) trouble understanding why they do what they do than you do making sense of your neighbors back home.

Do We Need Universals?

Why is it so easy for a human visitor from anywhere to make sense of Asante? One answer, which you will get from cultural psychologists, is that the machinery of the mind is the same everywhere. There must be some sense in which this is true. You need to be careful, though, in parsing the claim. People everywhere see red and green and yellow and blue. Still there are also people born congenitally blind everywhere; and there are tetrachromats, who see more colors than the rest of us, and people with various kinds of color blindness, who see fewer. In what sense, then, is it true that human color vision is universal? The world's finest musicians and mathematicians come from all over the planet: but there is something about the machinery of their minds that we do not all share. In Euclid

there's a theorem known as the *pons asinorum*, the bridge of asses. Mathematical incompetents, it was said—the asses—couldn't get across. You could give Suzuki classes to everyone; only a few will end up playing like Yo-Yo Ma. In what sense are the cognitive capacities for mathematics and music universal? You will find people everywhere who are kindly, sympathizing with others. But there are sociopaths and psychopaths scattered across the planet, too. In what sense are kindness and sympathy universal? The answer in each case is not that *every* human being has these traits or capacities. Rather, they are present in every large enough group of our species; in particular, they are the statistical norm in every society.

Now, it is quite contingent that these particular skills and capacities are distributed in this way. It could have been that there was a valley where everyone was red-green color-blind. Anthropologists and psychologists and linguists would troop to the place, and, as H. G. Wells implied in *The Country of the Blind*, it might well turn out that it would be the visitors who would be at a disadvantage. (Plenty of our fellow mammals do quite well without color vision.) Still, it's presumably just because there isn't such a place that there's a pattern to the way basic color terms work in every human language. As Brent Berlin and Paul Kay showed, in their book *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, there is a (rather complex) cross-cultural pattern to the way basic color terms work. A basic color term is, roughly, a term—like “blue,” but unlike “sky blue”—whose meaning isn't composed from meaningful parts. Languages vary in the number of basic color terms they have; but Berlin and Kay argued that the evidence showed that they always have black and white, and that if they add further basic color terms, they add them in the same sequence, starting with red, followed by yellow or green, up to a total of eleven basic colors.¹ Later studies have not confirmed all the details of their account. But the broad outline of their story is now widely accepted.

Color language is a good example of the way in which basic features of most normal people—the way our retinas and visual cortexes work, and the inbuilt capacity for learning a language—are shaped by experience and by culture. Someone who was raised inside a house where everything was painted black or white, wore only those colors, was surrounded by people dressed likewise, and was exposed only to black and white food, and so forth could understand only those color terms (and, of course, the names for colors found on the human body). Whether you have a word for the color purple, on the other hand, won't just depend on whether you've ever seen something purple; it will depend, too, on the resources of your language.

Cross-cultural analysis reveals that there really are some basic mental traits that are universal—in the sense that they're normal everywhere. It has also confirmed, for that matter, that some unusual traits—the incapacity to make sense of other people that we call autism—are found in every human population, too. Building on these traits, on our biological natures, cultures produce a great deal of variety, but also much that is the same. Part of the reason for this is that, in culture as in biology, our human environment presents similar problems; and societies, like natural selection, often settle on the same solution because it is the best available. Donald Brown, in his book *Human Universals*, has a fascinating chapter called "The Universal People," which describes many of the traits we humans share. As with all scholarship, it contains claims that other serious scholars would deny. It is hard, though, to resist the evidence that, starting with our common biology and the shared problems of the human situation (and granted that we may also share cultural traits because of our common origins), human societies have ended up having many deep things in common.² Among them are practices like music, poetry, dance, marriage, funerals; values resembling courtesy, hospitality, sexual modesty,

generosity, reciprocity, the resolution of social conflict; concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, parent and child, past, present, and future. "If a lion could speak," Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "we couldn't understand him." It's a shared human nature, he meant, that allows us to make sense of one another.

But my ability to connect with people in a Chinese village, or your ability to figure out what is going on in Kumasi or Kuala Lumpur or Kalamazoo, doesn't depend just on what all human beings share. When two normal people meet, they often share not only what all normal human beings share but also much else. This is one result of the constant contact across societies produced by our traveling habits and the trade in goods, both physical and symbolic, that now connects us all. The cosmopolitan curiosity about other peoples does not have to begin by seeking in each encounter those traits that all humans share. In some encounters, what we start with is some small thing we two singular people share. Around the world there are people who are fascinated by astrology or insects or the history of warfare or Zeno's paradox. Interest in none of these things is a human universal. (I have failed to get people interested in Zeno's paradox in three continents.) Nevertheless, interests like these can and do connect people across societies.

The conclusion is obvious enough: the points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough we share, there is the further possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not yet share. That is one of the payoffs of cosmopolitan curiosity. We can learn from one another; or we can simply be intrigued by alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

There is a clue here to what I think is a deep and important rejoinder to a common form of skepticism about the cosmopol-

tan enterprise. "You are asking us," the skeptic says, "to care about all human beings. But we care only about people with whom we share an identity—national, familial, religious, or the like. And those identities get their psychological energy from the fact that to every in-group there's an out-group. Loving America has, in part, to be about hating, or anyway disliking, America's enemies: amity is the daughter of strife. And the trouble with humanity, as an identity, is that, until the *War of the Worlds* begins, there is no out-group to generate the binding energy that every in-group needs." (Sometimes humanists want to respond that our fellow animals provide an out-group. This seems to me false to human psychology. Out-groups have to be people: creatures with languages, projects, cultures.) The force of the objection is not that we can't take a moral interest in strangers, but that the interest is bound to be abstract, lacking in the warmth and power that comes from shared identity. Humanity isn't, in the relevant sense, an identity at all.

Suppose, for the moment, that all this is right. (Though, as you'll see at the end of chapter 8, I think this objection gets something seriously wrong.) Still, engagement with strangers is always going to be engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available. Some American Christians send money to suffering fellow Christians in southern Sudan; writers, through PEN International, campaign for the freedom of other writers, imprisoned around the world; women in Sweden work for women's rights in South Asia; Indians in the Punjab worry about the fate of Punjabis in Canada and Britain. I care about some people in other places, people whose oppression would engage me particularly, just because I have read their philosophical writings, admired their novels, seen them play spectacular games of tennis on television. So, if we change the examples to suit the case, do you.

The problem of cross-cultural communication can seem

immensely difficult in theory, when we are trying to imagine making sense of a stranger in the abstract. But the great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end.

2. "Hadji Murat," in Leo Tolstoy, *Master and Man and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Foote (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 240.
3. William G. Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Atheneum Press, 1907), p. 331.
4. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 56.

Chapter 4. Moral Disagreements

1. Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
2. See Paul Rozin, "Food Is Fundamental, Fun, Frightening, and Far-reaching," *Social Research* 66 (1999): 9–30. I am grateful to John Haidt for a discussion of these issues.
3. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.
4. Menstruation: Leviticus 15:19–28. Male ejaculation: Leviticus 15:16–18.
5. Leviticus 17:11–13. In a footnote (p. 618). Alter suggests what the content of this explanation really amounts to. "The proscription itself is in the preceding verse.
6. H. L. A. Hart introduced the idea of "open texture" to discussions of jurisprudence in *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), chap. 6. He borrowed the idea of open texture from F. Waismann, who thought open texture was an irreducible feature of language. The example of the bylaw about vehicles in the park is Hart's; see his "Positivism and the Separation of Law and Morals," *Harvard Law Review* 71 (1958): 593–629.
7. W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 169.
8. Charles L. Black Jr., *Capital Punishment: The Inevitability of Caprice and Mistake*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1981).

Chapter 5. The Primacy of Practice

1. Cass R. Sunstein, "Incompletely Theorized Agreements," *Harvard Law Review* 108 (1995): 1733–72.
2. Joseph Appiah, *Joe Appiah: The Autobiography of an African Patriot* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 22.
3. I have put this complaint in the mouth of a Muslim. But the truth is you could hear it from non-Muslims in many places as well. It is less likely to be heard in non-Muslim Africa, because there, by and large (as Amartya Sen has pointed out), women have a less unequal place in public life. See Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Chapter 6. Imaginary Strangers

1. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
2. Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

Chapter 7. Cosmopolitan Contamination

1. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 18 of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 270.
2. Quoted in Larry Strelitz, "Where the Global Meets the Local: Media Studies and the Myth of Cultural Homogenization," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, no. 6 (Spring/Summer 2001), <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/strelitz.html>.
3. Ien Ang, *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985); Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of Dallas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, and Stuart Cunningham, eds., *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Rob Nixon, *Homelands. Harlem and Hollywood. South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Strelitz, "Where the Global Meets the Local."
4. See J. D. Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 8 (1991): 39–59.
5. The quotes from the Zulu student Sipho are from Larry Strelitz *Where the Global Meets the Local: South African Youth and Their Experience of the Global Media* (PhD Thesis, Rhodes University, 2003), pp. 137–41.
6. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 394.

Chapter 8. Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?

1. Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). The history of Asante in the nineteenth century has a great deal to do with its wars and treaties with Britain. Sir Garnet Wolseley's sack of Kumasi was intended to establish British dominance in the region; though the fact is that he entered Kumasi unopposed on February 4, 1874, and had to retreat two days later because he needed to take his sick and wounded back to the safety of the Gold Coast colony. The expedition of 1895–96, in which Baden-Powell took part, was intended in part to enforce the settlement of 1874 and to establish British sovereignty over Asante by the forced submission of the king. The British eventually exiled a number of political leaders, like the Asantehene, to the Seychelles, remote islands in the middle of the Indian