



The Bats of Brong Ahafo

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Aluizah Amasaba Abdul-Yakeen is a member of the Ghana Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (GSPCA) and works as a volunteer trying to protect bats. He is keen to raise awareness about bats in his local area. If any-one has any ideas about sources of funding or other organisations that might be able to help Amazulah, or could publish his work let me know and I'll put you in contact. He's agreed to keep us posted on his work



When I was a kid, I lived in the Village of Accra. There is no more Accra Village. Now, there are many, many villages, all surrounding the big City of Accra. MaxMart, the biggest supermarket in Accra, stands at the center of what used to be Accra Village. Now, there are robots (what some may know as traffic lights), where there once was only dirt. Those robots are kept very busy because now, there are so many vehicles, where we once only footed it. There's even a Nandos and a Chicken Lickin' at the center of what used to be my Village. There is very little to remind me of the way my Village once was.

One thing has remained constant, the fruit bats. Even today, above the traffic, above the trotro fumes, above the trees, you can see the fruit bats circling. They fly at all times of the day, so thick, they can block the sky. They seem to be circling with no goal. They fly in loops; it seems they have no destination in mind. But I know better because when I was a kid in my Village, my grandmother taught me to watch the bats. She helped me to understand them, and by quietly watching, season after season, I figured out their purpose and I grew to understand their movements and to appreciate their goals. But not everyone in my Village

felt about the bats as I did.

My people come from the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. As children, we are told the story of our ancestors of the Nkronza traditional area. While migrating from the Ashanti Region, they encountered persecutors. My ancestors took refuge in a cave, and from no where, a large number of bats appeared and sealed the entrance of the cave, leading the assailants to believe the cave was full of bats but no people. My ancestors escaped their persecutors, unharmed. The bat has since been my tribe's totem, and is deeply respected.

My grandmother told me that story and many others. She was very wise, and because of her wisdom she was well-respected and became a leader in our community. She explained why we should not cut down certain trees, and no one would cut them down. No one would even take their branches. They became sacred trees to us. She explained why we should not kill certain animals—back then we had more than just goats, sheep, and chickens roaming through our community—and people refrained from killing. She showed us which snakes were dangerous and how to avoid being bitten. She showed us which snakes were harmless, and we didn't hurt them.

Emmanuel, my school chum, lived in a nearby community. They had no one like my grandmother and they had no trees and no animals—except for goats, sheep, and chickens. Mostly, they had dirt. Bare dirt surrounded their homes, swept clean to keep the snakes at bay.

We had lush fruit trees, weighed down heavily with mangos, avocados, and papaya. We had shade, in the hot season, and protection from the heavy rains in the wet season. Emmanuel's community had only muddy gullies, and hot sun to dry their fish and bake their clothes. Emmanuel's community was safe from snakes, the poison kind and the harmless kind.

My community had dozens of leafy trees full of fruit bats. I watched the bats as they slept and as they flew and as they ate. I learned that they could see and were not blind. I learned that they slept upside down in the trees, ate the fruit, but never destroyed their homes. I watched them move from tree to tree, giving sufficient rest for the tree to recover from its bat visitors. I never saw a bat get tangled in anyone's hair. I never saw a bat attack another being. I learned that they drop the small seeds of fruit in their guano, and these seeds grow into bushes and trees. I saw the bats eat mangos and drop the mango seed away from the



parent tree, to germinate on its own in full sun. I saw how their guano fertilized our vegetable gardens and fruit trees. When I ate a dripping, ripe mango, I thanked the bats, who pollinate the flowers and drop fruit seeds, and supplied that mango to me.

The story goes, my grandmother told me, that the fruit bats settled at the 37 Military Hospital in my Village, after they accompanied an ailing Akyeme Chief who was sent for medical attention from his native village in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to this account the chief didn't survive his sickness; alas he visited the ancestral world. Many generations afterwards the bats are said to be waiting for their chief so they can return to their native village together.

When I was 14, my grandmother died. No one from my community had the wisdom; no one had the standing in the community that she did. When she died, so much of what she knew died with her. There was no one who could read the natural world like she could.

As Accra was growing up around us and we were being engulfed by city, our Village ways were being tossed aside. Now with my grandmother gone, there was no one who could speak for the trees and the animals. My neighbors started complaining about the fruit bats. Instead of appreciating the bats for everything they did for us, they only saw how the bats left their guano all over the vegetable gardens; dropped their guano on our stools when we stood up; even dropped guano on our clothes when they were put out to dry. They complained about the noises the bats made, how it woke them in the morning, even before the roosters called. My neighbors began to scream at the bats, wave sticks at them, throw stones at them. The Village eventually was up in arms over them. They saw the bats as encroachers squatting on their land. They found their behavior appalling.

People in my Village were so furious at the bats, they pleaded with the Ghanaian army soldiers to rid us of

the bats. A systematic defence was launched. Radios announced a warning to the public: stay off the street during certain hours while the Ghanaian army engaged in battle with the bats! And then, on fixed dates, the military shot at the bats to scare them from their roosts. Determined to carry out their duty, the soldiers donned full military gear, to reclaim the territory from the harmless bats. From all directions we could hear the sound of the Kalashnikov. We could see the bats take off from their roost in fright, trying to avoid the marauding soldiers. Scare them from their roosts.

When the guns were quiet, after two or three hours, the bats would resettle in their homes. This cruel military operation to dislodge the bats went on and on, month after month. The soldiers would shoot, the bats would disperse, and after a few hours, the bats would settle back down. The soldiers were being outwitted by the bats. This prompted the soldiers to invent another plan. They began to prune the branches of our beautiful leafy trees, in an attempt to deprive the bats of their roosting place.

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Just as I had watched the bats going about their business without a care about the humans below, I now watched them as they were being harassed by the soldiers. Bats had once helped my ancestors, and now I had to help the bats. I had an idea. To stop this cruel battle, I would have to show my neighbors what life would be like if the soldiers were successful—if they actually rid the Village of bats, the pollinators of our flowers, nurturers of our fruit trees. I would take them to Emmanuel's village to show them life in a village of bare ground, with no shade, and no fruit trees.

At Emmanuel's village, my neighbors saw the mud gullies, the hot baked soil, where nothing grew. They felt the dry, parched air. The only noise

they heard was traffic, not the musical whistling of bats. Life in Emmanuel's village was hot, gritty, and brown. Life in our Village was green, lush, tropical, and cool.

My neighbors left Emmanuel's village convinced that the bats had their place on this earth, and we had to save them from the soldiers' onslaught. We pleaded with the soldiers to stop the harassment, and they were glad to comply. This was an easy way out of the mess. The soldiers could save face in what had become a battle of wits; one which the army was losing.

Now, the bats still create a spectacle, as they move in billowy columns, covering the airspace, whistling over the traffic. When I go back to what used to be my Village, I still watch the bat antics. Now, in densely populated Accra, where there is little left of the natural world, the bats have become a tourist attraction. Now, you can see foreigners and Ghanaians strolling along the avenue, standing at the robots, looking up with binoculars and camera in hand, taking away their memories of Accra's bats.

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