

Maulidun Nabiyyi

I tightly gripped the waist of Mohammed Bun Bida while we sped on his old, sputtering motorbike through the narrow streets of Sabong Zongo, more informally called Aboabo. This neighborhood, in which I had just started working, is home to the largest community of Muslims in Kumasi, Ghana. This day was the annual Maulidun Nabiyyi: Celebration of the Prophet Mohammed's birth (blessings be upon him). Bida was taking me with him to a voter registration center before we attended the celebration. We passed through the dirt schoolyard, and a mob of children screamed out my name, "Baturiya! BAAAturyia! Baturyia!" or "White Woman! White Woman! White Woman!" It is amazing how one can bring laughter so easily to these children by smiling at them and shouting back "Bibini! Bibini!" or "Black Person! Black Person!" The kids punched their friends and giggled: "Did you hear her?! Did you hear her call me that?!" I slid off the motorbike, and I was suddenly swallowed up by children. The girls giggled shyly and wrapped their white shawls around their faces, and the boys pointed at me, poked me and called me names jokingly. They stared at me as if they were expecting something amazing to happen and I felt as if I were some kind of alien who might suddenly turn my skin purple.

Maybe I would turn inside out or turn one of the kids into a goat. Instead I slipped out my camera and snapped a photo of the boys. Screams of joy erupted from the children as if I had done some fabulous magic trick. As Bida came out from the building where he had registered, he threw a sidelong glance at me as if to tell me I should not make such a ruckus, but I could see that the children were on break and were running from across the courtyard to take part in this little adventure. I was helpless to stop them. How can a normal person simply by existing be the highlight of these children's afternoon, or were these children exceptionally playful and happy? I could not contain a broad smile from showing on my face at how easily one could enliven the children's imaginations. Bida started the motorbike and insisted that we get going. The children moved back while pushing smaller ones out of the way, and as I waved back at the kids they shouted as loud as possible, "Baturiya! Baturiya!"

We exited onto the road among huge, horned, desert cattle, chickens, and Muslims who were walking, performing *wudu* and preparing for prayer. I felt completely submerged in this incredibly unfamiliar society that was at the time oblivious to me. As we slipped in and out of people, animals and vehicles, I could not help watching the men who were leaning

over the gutters to wash their hands and face. They do this 3 times a day, Bida said. I tried to imagine myself purifying my body 3 times a day and every other member of my family and community doing the same beside me. All of us would bow down to God in submission while beautiful voices would echo above the buildings on the mosque minarets: the call to prayer. It was Friday and the holy day for Muslims; therefore, most men and boys were wearing white robes and women were covered in heavily-sequined shawls. Because I was riding on the back of the motorbike, I felt like I was watching a fast paced movie of their lives. I felt overwhelmed. Ahead, I heard shouting, but it was not from children. It was from men. Fear filled me as we rode towards a large group of shouting, angry men. They were beating drums and they were carrying a large rectangular box through the streets. A powerful Imam, or religious leader, had just died, Bida said. They were mourning his death. To my relief, the men did not glance at me as we passed. Death is a silent affair in America. Many Americans mourn alone and away from the public eye. We bring the dead to their grave site in a sealed box inside a foreboding black vehicle. However, these Muslims were carrying their dead on their shoulder and loudly proclaiming the religious leader's ascension into heaven. They were

wailing mournful dirges and banging drums. I was scared, and I wondered whether I was more scared of death than these men were.

Finally, we arrived at the celebration. This particular celebration draws more Muslims to Kumasi than any other event during the year; for this reason, the courtyard was packed with people. I wrapped my white shawl around my head with Bida's help and followed him into the courtyard where everyone was seated. The seats were arranged in a square all the way around a center stage. I looked carefully at where everyone was sitting. All of the women and girls were sitting on one side. All of the men and boys were sitting on another side. The centermost row of chairs seemed to where the most important men were seated. As men entered the area near the stage they would approach these seated men, bend low before them and shake their hands. If the man shaking the seated man's hand was important, the seated man would stand up half way to meet the other's hand shake. They would smile, greet, nod their heads and move on the next man. Bida led me to a particular row where a man with a graceful, luminous countenance sat. He was large and well, yet conservatively, dressed. This, Bida told me, was the most powerful Imam in Kumasi. When I greet him, I must slip my shoes off before I step

onto the mat under his feet. Bend low and crouch slightly with your knees, he said. He may not shake your hand for religious reasons; therefore, keep your hands on your knees. If he does shake your hand, shake with your right hand. My heart was beating hard in my chest. *Head Imam!* I thought. *Does this mean that if I commit a cultural mishap he can do something terrible to me? Is this similar to meeting the Pope? What will happen if I disrespect him?* I was reminded of how many Middle Easterners did not like Americans. *Was this a feeling a commonality among Muslims or Arabs, and, if it was a feeling among Muslims, would this initial interaction with this man determine my fate in Aboabo where I am working?* I was hastily pushed forward onto the mat by Bida. I slipped off my shoes, bowed graciously and extended my right hand. He extended his hand slightly but kept it on his lap. I understood this to mean he wanted to shake my hand but when I reached for his hand he quickly slipped it inside the folds of his robe. I tried not to look at his face but I had to slip a glance. His eyes looked at me with a glow of humor. I looked quickly away and bowed to the next man. After collecting my shoes I nervously asked Bida about the interaction. He laughed, told me to relax, and then left me with the rest of the women for the next two hours.

In this time, I contemplated my mistake and the Imam's response among a throng of loquacious women and spitting, laughing babies. For some reason my shawl kept falling off my head, and every woman was convinced that she knew best how to secure it. It was as if seeing me in disrepair evoked in the women a deep womanly need to arrange my hair, arrange my dress, touch my face and earrings and somehow set me right. Meanwhile, other women were tossing babies into my lap and giggling at how I bounced them up and down and loved on them. The ladies guessed one after the other about my country of origin: Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and the UK. They were flabbergasted when I said I was from America. *We thought American women did not like babies, they said. Also, you are a Muslim, and so it is very surprising.* I realized it would be very unusual for a non-Muslim to come to this celebration, wear a shawl, and bow down to the head Imam. Whereas Christians do not outwardly display their religion, unless they wear a cross on a necklace, Muslims around the world use particular Muslim greetings, dress a certain way that distinguishes them from non-Muslims, pray in public 3 times a day, and fast collectively for a whole month. The women helped me to understand what the speakers were talking about since they were speaking in Hausa.

One man talked about a community project which had been successfully completed. Another man spoke to the crowd about being proper, honorable, and loving brothers and sisters in Islam.

Afterwards, I considered all that I had seen that day and tried to unravel some kind of meaning from it for my life. Mishaps are embarrassing, but, after surviving several of them, I was a remarkably more confident student. I also learned not to panic when I do not understand a situation. Undoubtedly, I can best address a problematic situation if I can think clearly. Lastly, I concluded that being around those whom you are so different from best helps you to define who you are and, moreover, adds beauty and color to your character. This is especially true when you try your best to understand who they are by undertaking a lifestyle similar to theirs. I found out that I am perhaps a magician, alien, and cosmopolitan Turkish woman, who has problems keeping her shawl from falling off her hair.