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## **Sankofa: *Returning Home***

by Sandhya Nankani

**First Encounter.** Anywhere in America:

**Stranger:** Where are you from?

**Sandhya:** New Jersey, I guess. That is where I'm living right now.

**Stranger:** No, I mean where are you from?

**Sandhya:** You mean, where is my family from?

**Stranger:** Yeah.

**Sandhya:** You mean, their ethnicity?

**Stranger:** Yeah.

**Sandhya:** Well, my parents are Indian.

**Stranger:** So, were you born in India?

(If Stranger is from the Indian sub-continent: Oh, where in India were you born?)

**Sandhya:** Actually, no, I wasn't born in India.

**Stranger:** OK, so where you born then? New Jersey?

**Sandhya:** Noooo. I was born in Africa.

**Stranger:** (Eyes widen) Wow! Africa!! Where in Africa?

(If Stranger knows anything about Indians in Africa: In Uganda?)

**Sandhya:** I was actually born in Ghana. That's in West Africa.

**Stranger:** So, your parents are diplomats, huh? Is that why they moved to Africa?

**Sandhya:** Nooo, my father was born in Ghana too.

**Stranger:** (Confused but pursues conversation nevertheless)  
And your mother too?

**Sandhya:** Nooo, actually my mother was born in Casablanca, Morocco. (Before stranger can respond, I continue) Yes, Casablanca like the movie.

**Stranger:** (Long pause) I see. (Purses lips, looking like (s)he is going to spit out a brilliant conclusion) So, your grandparents were born in India and they moved abroad?

**Sandhya:** No, they were born in Sindh, a province that is now part of Pakistan.

**Stranger:** (Probably thinking: I don't want to touch that one.) So, you've never been to India then? You moved to America as a

child?

**Sandhya:** No, I studied in India as a kid. First to fifth grade. I lived with my grandmother and my aunt. I moved to the U.S. when I was twelve. I've been here ever since.

**Stranger:** (Silent for a few seconds) So, New Jersey, huh? Where in Jersey do you live?

The above conversation, roughly reproduced for your reading pleasure, has repeated itself every single time I have met somebody new over the past 12 years; that is, ever since I moved to the United States.

When I was younger, I dreaded this inevitable where-are-you-from query. Often, I would fantasize about lying and simply answering, "I am from India." Sometimes I would change the subject because I didn't have the energy to explain. Other times, I would tell the person everything about myself (from A-Z: Ghana, Morocco, Sindh, India, New Jersey) before (s)he could ask me any more questions. Result: I would leave this perfect stranger wondering why I felt it was so important to share my family history with him/her.

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"Sankofa. It means that in order to move forward, we must return to the past."

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Five years ago, when I returned to Ghana for a summer vacation, I stumbled upon a treasure that completely altered the way I dealt with this much-dreaded scenario. My treasure was a simple word in the Akan language - Sankofa. It means that in order to move forward, we must return to the past.

When I first heard this word, it struck a chord within me. Why? Because it allowed me to legitimately seek answers to questions that I had been asking myself for years. I had found a word that expressed what I had been feeling for a long time: that for me to truly understand myself and explain that Self to other people, I needed to first travel back to the crevices of my family's past.

The word Sankofa has been used in the context of the African-American's return to the homeland to reconstruct the painful memories of slavery. I know that my ancestors were not part of the devastating holocaust of slavery and that I am not African by blood. Still, five years ago, when I went "home" with my family, this one word provided me with a starting point for my quest to reclaim my roots and redefine my identity.

Upon arriving in Ghana, my primary goal was to see the country through the eyes of someone who had never been there before. This, I quickly realized, was impossible. The people I met were quick to remind me that my ties to Ghana were almost those of blood. No matter how hard I tried to separate myself from my family's experiences in Africa, I was told, I would never be purely Indian or even purely American.

One of my grandfather's ex-employees, who knew my father in his childhood and who had last seen me when I was ten years old, came to visit us one Sunday morning. A retired professional boxer who had toured throughout Europe and America, he spoke to me of his encounters in the "white world," expressing the bitterness that he felt when he realized that he would never be accepted in Europe because of the color of his skin.

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"But, if I can identify with India, America and Africa, what does that make me?"

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"You come back here when you're old," he told me emphatically. "Here, you will be accepted. It doesn't matter what color you are. People will remember you because you were born here, your father was born here, and your grandfather lived here. Kumasi is your home. Don't forget that."

His words made me think about the core of my identity. I began to question what I truly am. Yes, my blood is 100% Indian and I have lived in America for most of my life. But, if I can identify with India, America and Africa, what does that make me? I realized that each of these environments holds something significant for me that I must draw upon to complete my being.

I began to ask my father questions about my grandfather's settlement in Ghana. Analyzing my grandfather's experiences would, I thought, help me see how I got to where I am today. Sankofa.

In 1932, my father's father left Sindh for Ghana, sponsored by an Indian trading firm. He arrived in the town of Cape Coast, site of the renowned Elmina Castle where slaves were held in bondage before being sent to the Americas in the 15th-18th centuries. My grandfather built his business up from almost nothing and left behind a corporation that survives to this day in

Accra and Kumasi, the two major cities of Ghana. His life in Ghana was not easy. For the first twelve years, he was alone. He went to India twice between 1932 and 1948, once to get married and the second time to arrange for my grandmother to travel to Ghana.

My grandfather formed a partnership with his brothers and cousins in Ghana; together they ventured into the arena of film distribution. He was one of the first people to open cinemas where Indian films were screened to "full-house" audiences night after night. While my father was growing up, Ghanaians found Hindi films fulfilling because they could identify with the combination of mythical, spiritual and musical imagery presented to them. Older Hindi films that were set in Mughal India attracted the large Muslim population in Ghana who could empathize with the Islamic practices and family relationships they portrayed.

As I walked through the crowded market in Accra that summer, the vendors often raised their voices in unison, singing to me in Hindi. The songs they have memorized are from films starring Amitabh Bachan and other Bollywood idols whose names still ring bells of recognition in Ghana. At work, one of the first things that my Ghanaian co-workers told me was that they loved Hindi movies -- the songs, the dances, the costumes and the beautiful women with their long hair.

While I spent my time trying to learn all about Ghanaian culture by attending dance performances, exhibits, and films, and visiting the market place, Ghanaians I encountered were eager to learn about me. When I went to get my hair braided rasta-style in the market-place, the women pinched my nose and caressed my hair, asking me why I wanted to imitate their hairstyles when I had such beautiful hair. Yes, it was nice to be complimented. But, what touched me more was the extent of genuine interest and kindness that I found in the Ghanaian people. While I went in with the mentality of wanting to learn about "their" culture, they taught me to be happy with my own, which they graciously and laughingly pointed out, was a combination of theirs and everything else to which I have ever been exposed. Sankofa.

My wanderings that summer taught me that overlaps can exist between Ghanaian and Indian culture: both emphasize rituals and place great importance on music, dance, and kinship ties. Ghanaians and Indians are deeply concerned with the preservation of the extended family system and are religious to

the core. Driving around Accra, I saw messages such as "God E Dey" (pidgin English for "God exists") or "God's time is Best time" on all the modes of public and private transportation. Even the names of shops and tiny vegetable stands throughout Ghana drew their names from religious messages. This reminded me of the ubiquitous presence of God in the Indian landscape, whether in takes the form of pictures of the various gods and goddesses or in the inscription of "Allah" on storefronts. Sankofa.

These were all angles to which I had never been presented. Being in an academic environment dominated by the study of other worlds in a "comparative perspective," I had become conditioned to think that differences outweigh the similarities between cultures. I realized that during my adolescent love affair with the concept of American culture, and in my attempt to fit into the political category of South Asian-American, I had forgotten that I am an Indian (carved out of the mold of partition), born in Africa, partially educated in India, now living in America.

What does that make me?

My Ghanaian friends pushed me to break out of the practice of pigeonholing myself into one cultural category. As soon as they found out that I was born in Ghana, I automatically became "one of them" regardless of the color of my skin. Still, they also saw me as American -- because of my accent and my clothes. And, as Indian - a "brunie" - because of the color of my skin.

I came back to the United States armed with a new understanding. I had been trying so hard to make America my "home" that I had been blinded to the fact that the word "home" has multiple definitions. Home: (noun) A house or other dwelling place where a person or a family lives; residence. The country, region, city, etc. where one lives. A birthplace or region during one's early years. The place where something originates or is found (Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary).

My experiences in Ghana forced me to reread this dictionary definition. In so doing, I learned something that -- although it may seem mundane and obvious -- has changed the way I see myself and the way I see others. I learned that my parents' house in New Jersey is my home; America is my home; Ghana is my home; and, India too is my home.

Today the once dreaded "where are you from" encounters are

occasions I welcome. Instead of brushing aside questions, as I once used to, I allow these conversations to play themselves out, like a slow-rewinding cassette, answering every question in detail -- more detail than any normal person would want to hear!

My reasoning: I want to use these encounters to stretch, smudge, blur and tear at our society's definitions of home, culture, identity, race, and ethnicity. . After all, to move forward as a society, we must all return to - and understand - each other's oft-complicated pasts. Sankofa -- I want to share this beautiful word with everyone I meet!

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