

Jojo Cobbinah

Dr.
Amo's

Lonely – Novel –

Planet

pmv



Introducion

1706. The Dutch West India Company donates an African child to the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel. The little slave soon impresses his patrons with his extraordinary intelligence. Sponsored by them, the young African studies philosophy, medicine and law and finally receives doctorate degrees at the Universities of Wittenberg and Halle. Lecturing in Halle and Jena, he becomes one of the most articulate political philosophers of his time in the German-speaking world.

Dr. Anton Wilhelm Amo's good fortunes end when scientists "discover" black people as the long-sought missing link between man and beast. When he then falls in love with a white woman, he is made an object of public ridicule.

What happens after that is part of the dramatic reconstruction of a true life story highlighting the fundamental dilemma that has accompanied African immigrants in the white world ever since Prince Henry The Navigator's men penetrated the shroud surrounding Africa on the eve of the Age of Discoveries.

Jojo Cobbinah

Dr. Amo's Lonely Planet

Novel

Unabridged edition

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IMPRESSUM

*To all the victims of the Slave Trade:
The millions who survived
The millions who lost their loved ones
The millions dead.*

*Unless Nyankopon nods consent
No storm can blow my wawa down
Only He can see in the darkness
Where we came from, where we go.*

Prologue

This whole thing began a long time ago.

When religious zealots from the Arabian Peninsula crossed the Red Sea to bring a new religion to the vast region lying to the west of Arabia, a land they called Afrikia. Their message was simple: Believe or die. Africans who met them had to decide quickly. Faced with the glistening swords of these determined warriors, millions of fear-stricken Africans across the sprawling land mass of arid plains, verdant valleys, wind-swept plateau, craggy mountains and fertile oases, converted instantly to the new religion. They wanted to save their lives.

Only the Akans, a little-known group of people tucked away in the south-western precincts of the great Sahara, decided to find an alternative to the dilemma. Except for one reason, they would have readily converted to Islam. This reason was what they abhorred above everything else in their lives: the prospect of losing honour. The new religion required people to clean their anuses with sand or water. This, the Akans would not do. In their culture, a man who put his hands to his anus ceased to be a man. So when the hordes of Almoravid riders from Morocco finally

reached the Akans within the borders of the ancient empire of Gana in the twelfth century, the first people to pack their belongings and leave for good were the proud Akans, who had vowed never to surrender their freedom to anyone. Abandoning their God-given homeland to seek a new one in the depths of the tropical forests to the south became their only alternative. What they wanted was a place the roughriders could not reach with their horses, a place where the Akans could escape the dictates and constraints of a religion and culture they considered absolutely repugnant.

The Akans marched through unknown territories, fought wars of survival and succeeded in preserving their language and culture. In the end, they created a new country for themselves, far away from their original home. Since those days, they have had a proverb in their language which says:

Disgrace does not befit a person of Akan origin.

– Aninguase mfata 'Kaniba.

All of this happened at a time when the rest of the world was not watching, long before the first Europeans arrived on the West African coast of Guinea. They, and all the others who have since tried to breach the honour of these people, have been taken aback by the tenacity with which the Akans have always rallied together to defend it.

Part I

Kramo

*I went by smocks embroidered with fine silk.
I thought who wears it sells good talismans.
I least suspected smocks on charlatans.*

Francis Kayper-Mensah, “Adinkra Poems”

– 1 –

Nana Yankey’s Dream

“Is there any country of the white people that is ready to enter an alliance with us on our conditions?” King Yankey kept asking his councillors during their weekly meetings.

None of the councillors knew an answer, but the King was quite convinced that there must be such a country. His conviction had been nurtured by recent strange developments. Those days, no night passed by without the King dreaming about just that possibility.

In his dreams, he was the centre of attraction of a big wedding ceremony during which he got married to a woman with pure white skin. After the wedding, the many relatives of the white woman formed a circle around him, and each of them shook his hand and gave him a tight hug. Since he had never had anything to do with white people, the dream frightened him and had been occupying his thoughts for a while. What significance did such a dream have?

Discreet as he was, Nana Kwamenla Yankey did not disclose his

strange dream to anybody at first. When he had almost forgotten it, the dream came back again with full force.

“I wish I could interpret this strange dream,” he said after telling his wife about it one morning.

“Do you think there’s any special message behind it?” he asked her with a wrinkled forehead after describing his experiences.

“What a strange question!” she replied, looking him straight in the face and shaking her head in disbelief. “This is nothing for ordinary people to interpret. The dream can only mean one of two things. It’s either the herald of good things to come or it announces the beginning of events that will have serious implications for our country. Don’t waste time thinking about it. Discuss the whole thing with your councillors and consult Nana Egyambra, our great oracle. But do it quickly,” she advised with a worried face.

“You’re right, my dear. I shouldn’t have asked what is so obvious. Of course, I’ll immediately consult Amakye Doku, our Chief Priest in Egyambra. He’s the only living being who can communicate with the gods and the ancestors. This is truly a case for them to look into.”

Nana Kwamenla Yankey was the Omanhene, the King of Evaluê. He ruled this little Kingdom on the Gold Coast of West Africa at the end of the 17th century. But for a sticky little problem, Evaluê would have probably been one of the happiest places on earth, if it had not been the type of country white people liked – a country full of shimmering gold and thick, precious diamonds. After heavy rains, it was not a rare feat to collect gold nuggets from the ground. Or to wash gold dust from the countless streams and rivulets that criss-crossed the land.

Here, the earth itself was very rich. The many big and small rivers, the streams and lagoons all teemed with fish. The forests were full of rare hardwoods. The soil was verdant and fertile. Spices and fruits of all kinds grew: black pepper, malagueta, chili, paprika, ginger, wild cloves, nutmeg, groundnuts, tiger nuts, paw-paw, oranges, watermelons and a whole lot of other magnificent

crops.

That was why more than a century before the rest of Europe came to know about the existence of Evaluê, the Portuguese had claimed this land for themselves. Ten years after landing here in 1478, they had begun to build formidable fortifications on the coast to prevent others from encroaching on 'their' area. The huge cannons they had once posted there to prevent so-called interlopers were still in place and could be admired by anybody who cared to do so. From their other colonies in America and Asia the Portuguese had introduced assorted peppers, rice, maize, yam, cassava, bananas, pineapples, mangoes, tomatoes, tobacco, sugar cane and a lot more, which they had successfully cultivated in Africa. Many of these were still thriving on Evaluê's rich soils, bringing relative prosperity to the Kingdom.

But it was not for agriculture that the Portuguese had started building forts along the West-African Coast. Finding gold in a country full of natural resources had spurred them to export the precious metal to Europe. The natural wealth of the land and its new products had all added to its attraction for other pale-faced aliens from hardly-known places with strange names like Denmark, Sweden, France, Britain, The Netherlands and what have you. Now they were all determined to travel long distances, fight storms and risk shipwreck in order to reach the Gold Coast.

Evaluê had one big problem.

It was nestled between two Dutch-controlled bastions and constantly had to fear for the freedom of its inhabitants. Fort Battensteyn, belonging to the Dutch, was located in Butre to the east and was just two walking days away. Fort Santo Antonio, the other Dutch stronghold in Axim to the west, lay three walking days from Pokesu, the capital of Evaluê.

Dutch Santo Antonio?

Yes, the Dutch had occupied Santo Antonio a hundred years earlier, after chasing out the original occupants, the Portuguese, who had built it over a century and a half previously. Taking it over by force, the Dutch had not bothered to change the fort's

name. A fact that did not seem to worry anybody in Axim, Pokesu or Holland.

With Pokesu and Axim, Evaluê possessed two important ports, both hotly coveted by the Europeans. Already, the French, owning two forts, and the British, with about twelve, were pressing Nana Kwamenla Yankey for alliances and special rights. The King knew that if he did not react positively, his country would soon be invaded by one of the “friends” who usually came with one hand open and the other clenched into a fist.

The Omanhene opted for a policy of neutrality with all his immediate and distant neighbours. His greatest hope, in fact his sole wish, was to keep the peace in his Kingdom and increase the welfare of his people through peaceful interaction with all countries. This he wanted to do by safeguarding the lucrative trade that had been going on for many years between his country and the white people coming from many places around the world. Among these were the businesslike Dutch, the obstinate British and the haphazard French.

The name Gold Coast, a rough translation of ‘mina d’ouro,’ had been given to this strip of African coastline by the Portuguese. On their arrival here in 1471, they had claimed that the land they thought to have just discovered belonged to them. And all that simply because they had been the first white people to have reached it.

People here normally laughed at such absurd ideas and would have done so in this case, too, had it not been for the earnestness with which the Portuguese had taken up the issue. The Portuguese had believed in their idea of having discovered land so strongly that they had actively prevented all other people from even putting a footstep on the territories they had considered to be their property.

This state of affairs would have remained so for a long time, had it not been for the highly motivated Dutch, who came generations later to drive the Portuguese out of their strongholds in West Africa. The luckiest of the Portuguese, escaping the deadly Dutch assaults, sailed farther off to the west and south-west of the

same coast. There again, they occupied other people's lands and tried their luck at finding what they had lost on the Gold Coast – gold. This is how the Portuguese ended up settling down in N'zadia N'kong, which later came to be called the Congo, Benguela and Lobito, today called Angola.

Because of Evaluê's nagging problem, Nana Yankey did not sleep well. In fact, he was plagued with nightmares. The proximity of the Dutch to his Kingdom and the covetousness of some of Evaluê's powerful and belligerent neighbours were among the root causes of his sleepless nights.

Not even in return for military advantage did Nana Yankey want to become a vassal of the Dutch and their local ally, Asante. He feared losing his independence. At a time when everybody else was making efforts to secure strong allies in times of war, little Evaluê had been cheeky enough to rebuff all advances. Its single-minded leaders were only interested in continuing their tradition of trading with everybody.

Nana Yankey had five major reasons for his political stance. Firstly, he abhorred war. Secondly, he wanted to preserve the peace at all cost. Thirdly, he detested the trade in slaves. Fourthly, Evaluê's independence had to be safeguarded. Lastly, he was convinced that peace was the necessary prerequisite for profitable trade.

All the attempts to avoid alliances of any sort had been made for those reasons. In his view, the slave trade brought only chaos to those African nations that participated in it. He wanted none of it and is prepared to do anything to prevent his people from becoming victims of undertakings that brought profits only to the foreigners who indulge in them. His current wary attitude had been born out of experience won by dealing with white people for a long time.

"They've always come to cart off valuable goods in exchange for things ordinary human beings here don't need," stated the King. "The white people who come here do so to acquire as much gold and to collect as many slaves as possible. All they give in return

is plenty of alcohol, gunpowder, guns, glass beads, iron and cotton products. They call this kind of lopsided exchange ‘trade’, but a lot of people here have realised in the meantime that it’s just another name they use for stealing the real things that matter. For, indeed, what can anybody in his right mind do with brandy and glass pearls? Especially in exchange for gold, ivory and people?” he frequently asked his councillors. Whenever King Yankey sat to discuss topics of national interest, he often put this question to his critics, quite a few of whom wanted to get rich quickly: “If the slave trade were not profitable for them, the white people, would they travel all the way to our land to participate in it?” “Very unlikely,” a councillor had once remarked. “What I’d like to know: Would we eat grass if these people didn’t come here with pearls, alcohol and gunpowder?”

None of King Yankey’s critics ever provided any good answers to such questions. But honestly speaking, who could really answer such difficult questions? Of late, however, more and more people here had been asking themselves these questions. Many were in no mood to continue being the fools of ruffians and rogues coming from abroad. There was a reason for that.

Not long ago, the Omanhene of Butre had signed an agreement to trade unconditionally with the Dutch merchants of Elmina. When the Dutch had then stationed soldiers in Butre and appointed a sort of governor to take charge of the garrison, they had used their powerful weapons to establish their own rule and dictate to the inhabitants. When the Butre people had rebelled against Dutch bullying, the white people had simply sailed further up the coast to the Kingdom of Egyaa close to Anomabo and imported several hundreds of people for resettlement in Butre. Of course, the new arrivals had been armed by the Dutch and charged with seeing to it that the Butre people did not revolt. The ‘treaty of cooperation’ that Butre had then signed with the Dutch had made the village suddenly become the enemy of all those who had a score to settle with the fat-headed cheese sellers, as the British here call the Dutch. At the cost of his throne, the

Butrehene was forced to support whatever policies the Dutch, owning already 17 forts on the Gold Coast, adopted for this area. Peaceful Butre, now a loyal and staunch ally of the treacherous Dutch, had become an enemy of the British, the French, the Danes and the Swedes in no time. Now Butre had a Dutch commander living in Fort Battensteyn, a stone fortress perched high over the little town. The commander had not as yet shown any interest in the welfare of the Butre people. At least, he had done nothing to underscore the supposed interest the Dutch claimed to have had before gaining actual military control.

Since this episode, King Yankey was even more convinced that all alliances were bad. They solved one problem and lead to another.

“A proverb in our language says:

Only the fool lets someone step on his testicles twice.

I, Nana Kwamenla Yankey, son of Amenlema, will never put my testicles on the anvil for irresponsible people to hammer on. By any means possible, I’m determined not to let Evaluê suffer Butre’s fate. Therefore, I say: No compromising alliances!”

The worry lines on Nana Yankey’s face were becoming more visible each day.

To him, life under subjugation was the most terrible thing that could happen to any people. Alone the idea of being forced to obey other people’s laws, live foreign cultures, worship unfamiliar gods, pay unjustified tribute and possibly speak strange tongues; these prospects were simply unacceptable!

And Nana Yankey’s thoughts were not born out of unfounded fear. The Asante Kingdom, the new major power on the western seaboard, had succeeded in extending its territory with staunch Dutch support and was now threatening to overrun the British-held territories to the east of Evaluê. The least the Kingdom of Evaluê and its leaders wanted was trouble within and without its borders. If the leadership and people of Evaluê did not want to be overrun and ruled by their powerful neighbours, quick solutions had to be found.

What made the situation so difficult was that neutrality had also not brought any advantages to Evaluê. On the contrary. Evaluê was isolated and an object of constant threats from powerful As-ante and its most prominent ally, the Dutch.

Nana Yankey and his elders were aware of the precarious state into which they had manoeuvred their Kingdom. Evaluê needed a powerful ally, but one with different motives and aims. An ally ready to do serious but clean trade in gold, ivory, metal and spices. but excluding the exchange of human beings.

Yes. That episode with the Omanhene of Butre and his fundamental blunder with the Dutch were still on the mind of the wise King. The Omanhene of Butre had trusted the foreigners blindly and not bothered to consult the gods about his encounter with the white people. The Dutch had ultimately deceived him and the gods revenged the neglect by not heeding the prayers of those people when they dearly needed help.

Nana Yankey was too clever to repeat such a mistake. Before beginning any such adventure, he was determined to ensure that no tricks are involved. He made up his mind to consult the Oracle of Egyambra and sacrifice to its powerful deity. This deity could do what humans could not do. He was convinced that somewhere on earth, there had to be a country ready to do what he was looking for. He was sure to find that country with the help of the oracle.

...

Part III

*He who recognises the necessity to adapt is wise
and conscious of the Divine.*

Epictetus (Greek philosopher and former slave)

= 1 =

The Loss in Surinam

The Africaense Galleij, with about five hundred and some odd slaves, a few paying passengers, big brother Kaku Anto Miezah, little brother Kwasi Adiaba Amo, and their good friend Jacobus Eliza Capiteyn sighted land on a sultry afternoon in late August 1706. It was like waking up from a dream.

The privileged treatment on the ship had left the boys healthy and surprisingly fit, despite the seemingly unending nature of the journey. As if to welcome them, swarms of shrieking seagulls flew low over their heads, some plunging occasionally into the sea to lunch on inattentive fish.

With land in sight, the team of young boys was allowed on the open deck to see the fast approaching land. From there, they could make out a low, green outline shimmering in the far distance.

“Where’re we going now?” Jacobus Eliza asked Herr Bodel in a broken voice. He was nursing a bad cold he had caught by often staying too long on the upper deck with its strong, sometimes biting winds.

“What you see over there’s the coast of Surinam. In half a day, we’ll be in Paramaribo. Be patient until we get closer and you’ll get a better idea of where we are going,” said Herr Bodel.

“When shall we get there?”

“I say, by the end of the day. Before the sun goes down,” he controlled himself to utter patiently. The names the man mentioned were new to the boys, and it was useless asking further questions which engendered further incomprehensible answers. They would have to wait and see. For the moment, the boys accepted the promise and continued to gaze out into the open expanse of ocean spread before them like an endless question.

The entire coastline of the country they had reached was an impenetrable thick forest which loomed in front of them like a formidable green barrier. The sea had an opaque, brownish dirty colour, intriguing and full of mystery.

Soon the ship had found an opening in the wall of jungle facing them and begun to penetrate it slowly. Obviously, they were sailing into the mouth of a big river that emptied into the sea at this point. It was like being swallowed up by a huge dragon. Then the contours of a large town spread on both sides of the river also came into view, revealing houses with red tiled roofs and painted in a glistening white which stood out in the waning sun.

“We’re now in Surinam and this is Paramaribo, its biggest town,” the boys’ supervisor announced, drawing closer to them on the railing.

“What a funny name,” said little Amo laughing.

“There’s nothing funny about it. Pa-ra-ma-ri-bo. Actually not difficult, if you say it slowly.”

“But is this not Africa?”

“Not at all. We left Africa months ago. What you see here is another country, er, continent – South America. And the country we’re in now is called Surinam. Red-skinned people live in it, but it’s ruled by our King.”

“People with red skin? I only know about those with black or white skin. Like you and me,” said Miezah.

“Well, you’ll grow to see there are more strange things in the world. Far more than you can imagine,” replied the sailor.

Because of his lighter skin, Capiteyn wanted to know if the comment was directed at him and asked if the sailor thought it was

strange that people had different colours.

“Not strange, but unfamiliar.”

“Whatever its name is, this looks like a big place,” said Capiteyn, obviously satisfied with the answer.

“Yes. We’re now in the estuary of a huge river also called Surinam, and this city here is much bigger than Axim, Elmina and Dutch-Accra. I’ll show you around town later. I’ve been here several times,” the man with the moustache promised and disappeared into the bowels of the ship.

Except for the houses on the waterfront, with porches pegged on wooden stilts, almost everything about the place resembled the home they had left behind several weeks ago. Strangely, most people they saw walking about were just as black as the people back home.

Hundreds of onlookers had come to see the arrival of the Africaense Galleij. This happened whenever a ship arrived. Crowds always came to the port for various reasons: to meet friends and relatives, to purchase slaves, to receive goods from Africa and Europe, or simply to look at what was going on. In the huge bay were several other ships with assorted flags fluttering in the wind. Other ships were belching out hundreds of Africans who were continually marched off into silent, low-lying warehouses that lined the riverbank. Goods were being carted in all directions. Across the bay, more white birds, mostly seagulls, shrieked and fought over fish; horses and donkeys laden with produce made their way through crowds of people. A lot of coming and going took place, everything was alive and in motion around the port. Whenever a slave ship laden with Africans threw anchor here, a familiar ritual that had stood the test of centuries began.

The day of arrival saw frantic activity everywhere. A schooner manned by four skippers immediately pulled alongside the Africaense Galleij. Out of it came grim-looking, ugly bearded men with flexing muscles. They unloaded and transferred buckets of palm oil and countless bales of coarse Indian calico to the au-

thorities on the Africaense Galleij. The calico was to be cut into little strips for making what the Dutch called 'pantjes', the typical loincloth which slaves were given to wrap around their waists before leaving the ship. The palm oil was for smearing the skin of the slaves to let them appear healthy.

Just as their supervisor had said, the world was indeed full of strange things. From the safe haven of their hideout on the upper deck, the boys became spectators to a scene that seemed to originate from a dream world. They looked on and did not have to pay to watch it. In fact they were part of the show, but nobody made them aware of it.

First, all the paying passengers were cleared and allowed to leave the ship as quickly as possible. Then preparations for the landing of the human cargo began. The newly arrived were marched onto the ship's main deck in droves. An endless line of captives, most of them in an utter state of dilapidation, peered into the broad daylight wincing in the bright sun, after days of living in complete darkness. They were driven up in groups to get fresh air and to exercise their weakened limbs. A dull drum beat delivered the tact for a few push-ups, turns and arm-raising amidst loud shouts and commands, occasionally accompanied by whippings and bootings. Even though the boys knew all along that there were plenty of people packed into the ship's belly, they were still fascinated by the numbers that had been stacked into the vessel.

Disembarking times also meant the time had come to wash down the filth of months of incarceration. The captives were made to sit in long rows, after which several buckets of seawater were emptied over them until a broad black and stinking stream flowed off the deck into the sea. This exercise was accompanied by moans, groans and shouts of pain from the slaves, whose various wounds apparently smarted from the saltwater. When it was thought that an adequate level of cleanliness had been reached, fresh water was also thrown at them to rinse off the salt. To complete the cleaning phase, the slaves were ordered to smear their bodies with the palm oil supplied the day before. This reddish oil

from Africa was known to soothe the skin and help heal wounds. In the bright sun, the poor souls looked fresher and more presentable, with their black bodies glistening in the sun like polished shoes. Fresh cornbread and fish soup thickened with potato was served on deck to pep up the weakened bodies. Next to follow were the customs officers who entered the ship to take inventory of the gold, elephant tusks and all other imported goods from Africa. After clearance, the slaves were marched off the ship and herded into the warehouses of the slave trading agents who bought entire shiploads of people and goods for further retailing. All captive passengers would await the auctioning here.

Back on the ship, Jacobus overheard a conversation between the Captain and one of his officers in Dutch.

“Is everything ready?”

“Not yet, sir, but it won’t take much longer.”

“Get your men to hurry up. Tomorrow will be a busy day. Cazimierc, that blood sucking Pole, will arrive early next morning to start the selections,” informed the Captain. “You know what follows then. I want you to get everything ready, so that no time’s lost. The faster we are, the quicker the business is over with.”

“I’m aware of this, sir. We’ll do our best to complete the whole exercise as fast as possible.”

This conversation meant nothing to Capiteyn, but he instinctively felt that something important was in the offing.

“Tomorrow’ll be a special day here,” he told his friends in their cabin. “The sailors are speaking in undertones and talking about things to come. Don’t know what it’ll be, but it sounds like it’s something special. We’ll see whatever that means tomorrow.”

The next day after breakfast, they hid themselves on the open deck to see what was going to happen. All hands on deck were apparently needed for the job to be done, so nobody paid any particular attention to their whereabouts. They looked on.

The man who came to do the selections was an independent merchant, often employed by the bulk traders for his expertise in