

M. Eliza Hamilton Abegunde

Tell Them Arroyo Sent You

Between December 1998 and February 1999, I was the lead team teacher between Puerto Rico and Brazil on the historic Middle Passage Voyage with Captain Bill Pinkney. Together, the Captain and our teaching team developed curriculum based on our on-site investigations and research of African culture, especially in Puerto Rico. Approximately 160 schools across the country participated via video, satellite, and email. While I am currently completing a poetry manuscript based on these experiences, my journal entries contain the clearest depiction of the emotional, spiritual, and physical impact this trip had on my life. The following are excerpts from entries during the trip. I am grateful to everyone who sailed that First Leg from Puerto Rico to Brazil.

PUERTO RICO, 1999

7 January 1999, Thursday
San Juan Marina

Took a shower but I don't think I'll feel clean until I'm on land again. Amongst ourselves we've been discussing how we feel. I am sleeping with my luggage because I don't have enough space for things. I keep thinking about what Africans did. Those who had religious taboos, those who had Ancestors they couldn't bring with them. I'm thinking how difficult it is for me to not carry my things (emotional and material). For them, it wasn't even about taking one thing only. It was about taking nothing, sometimes, not even the skin on your back. How we came to such lands carrying what we knew in our heads after such horror and nearly losing our minds. How long did it take us to remember what we knew once we were able to push the fear a little behind us. That is my way of working isn't it? How would I pray if I had no access to the rituals and implements that I normally used. Ifa survived because Africans adjusted, changed, made it adapt. We made do. We created things from nothing and sometimes a lot of blood.

8 January 1999, Friday Evening

Raining early this morning. I still got up at 7 a.m. to pray.

I was thinking of all the things that we are "supposed" to be thinking. This space. I cannot fathom right now how Africans survived. Here I am repacking stuff because I have too much now that we are getting started.

Earlier today, I went to the Wynham Casino. One of the cleaning crew, a young woman, approached me. Was I in the religion she wanted to know. I didn't know what she was talking about at first, but I noticed she was looking at my ilekes. I let her know I didn't speak Spanish (I've been working on my Portuguese and I can only think and answer in French when someone speaks to me). She began speaking to me in English. Once we knew who we were, she went to find another woman. As she was doing this, another woman came by to ask if I wanted anything. She asked me directly if I was Osun or Yemaya. Neither of us had been "crowned" yet. But, she said that she was not crowned as high as me. It sounded as if she was trying to assure me that things would be okay, and that my crowning would be magnificent. At Marshall's, the check-out girl asked me the same thing: Am I in the religion. She spoke no English, but I understood.

Don't know what was in the air today. Lost \$5.00 in the slot machines. All the Santeros.

9 January 1999, Saturday

The quietness is already settling inside me. I seem to be "encouraged" to get up around 5:30 a.m., do my prayers, do yoga, go back to sleep. We are not able to do much work right now. We have already been here nearly three weeks.

If I had no commitment, I would walk; I would stay in Brazil once I arrived. Here, I feel a kinship with people. The maid in the hotel who spent days trying to tell me in some form of Spanish that she was interested in the religion. Who then brought a friend to meet me. The sales girl who helped me, and then asked if I did readings and if I could help her. I couldn't say no. In the dressing room, I am holding her hand, telling her life while Gail and Loretta wait for me.

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I am overwhelmed by what it means to be a priest here, by what it means to have people constantly recognize you and come to you with gifts, information, songs. I am overwhelmed by the way in which they want to keep me close.

23 January 1999, Saturday

The wind is high today. Oya-Yansa at her finest. We leave at first light tomorrow.

Finished reading *Stigmata* by Phyllis Perry. Very moving for me. I used to pray for stigmata as a child. My test to God to see if God existed. "Stigmata", says her character, so she doesn't forget. I couldn't forget if I tried.

At Norcroft, where I was silent and writing for two weeks, the Ancestors entered my room. Three old Africans, two Indians. They entered as little lights, then took form. Then they showed me myself as light before the universe was born and as it was being born and the lives we had been given and chosen.

So, what do I know so far? I was taken immediately after my initiation into Egungun. The Japanese Zen Samurai was between the African lives. I needed to learn about healing, patience, the peaceful warrior, and meditation before this life.

I have made the Passage before and survived it.

ON ROUTE TO BRAZIL

24 January 1999, Sunday, At Sea, 7:30 p.m.

We left at 8:22 a.m.. We are now in Porta Del Rey to refuel.

I vomited a little bile this morning when we first started. I slept the entire trip, waking up intermittently to see the water and landscape. While I was sleeping I could feel the Ancestors' pull on me and one particular story stays with me.

The image: One woman jumping overboard with her baby. She went to the

bottom, started walking, and then came up. The baby died. The mother kept floating, willing herself to die. But she kept saying over and over: It's so hard to drown, so hard to drown. I have no fear, that is why. I cannot drown because I have no fear of drowning or dying. My baby was afraid. But I am not. I want to die. But, how can I die when I have no fear. Perhaps I should fear living more and then that will take me to the bottom. Perhaps, I should think of the horror of living instead.

M. came to check on me several times and to make sure I had water and food. I drifted in and out.

27 January 1999, Wednesday

I have been using a tape recorder the last few days because writing while sailing is difficult. I am not certain I am going to make the rest of the journey to Brazil if every moment of my day and night will be filled with images, voices, memories I can't shut out. I am thinking of going home from Barbados.

DREAM: General came to me in white and laid across my sheets to let me know I would be all right.

I need that reassurance now. Sleeping in my bunk is disconcerting, disturbing. So much water. I've developed this fear of water seeping through the walls. What if I wake up and the water is coming in. What if there is a leak. What if I drown. So, all night long, water.

I am sleeping in my shoes, clothes, and glasses every night since leaving Puerto Rico. I am afraid to be naked or to be caught with nothing on in case something happens. This morning, I completely washed off my body. The most I can usually manage is to brush my teeth and wash my face.

29 January 1999, Thursday
Barbados

I am the only one of the teaching team who will stay. Seems like another part of my life from centuries ago. I was sent to make the journey because they knew I would survive it and that I would live to tell it.

31 January 1999, Saturday

My message for today: You cannot experience yourself as what you are until you experience what you are not. Every day, since we've started, I've been pulling these little cards to help focus. This one is rather poignant for me so I write it down.

Everyone left yesterday. Before we went our separate ways, the Captain had us gather at the beach with him. We all held hands. He reminded us that this was for the children and that we should continue teaching and doing what we can. I returned to the ship with him. Silent. We waved as long as we could.

This morning, a deep sadness. This journey is beginning and ending in a way I could not have seen, and yet felt might be so. Sometimes, it is frightening.

6 February 1999, Saturday

200 miles off the coast of Guyana

10 February 1999, Wednesday

We are several hundred miles from the mouth of the Amazon. Humid and hazy. I have to write in pencil because the pens have stopped working.

Everyone is complaining about something. The water. The refrigerator. The heat. Unable to distinguish the horizon from anything else. In Barbados, saw the sun turn green as it set. I should spend more time taking pictures.

11 February 1999, Thursday

03 N 45 W near the equator

I am ready to go home. No epiphanies. No defining spiritual moment. Tired of the constant noise around me even when no one is talking. The ocean knocks against the bow as if we are a toy. In the face of a 30-foot wave, I can only hang on. The Captain laughs at me as I scamper across the deck on my butt. I am too afraid of being taken over.

Sleepless nights. Souls which have followed us are talking and breathing louder so that between waves I hear their whispers. I crawl into my bunk like I am

dead. I do not know which I fear most--the long days of avoiding the voices or the nights of being in this coffin. I want to put my feet on solid ground again. I want to feel the Earth meet me halfway. Yet, I know the moment my feet touch land and lead away from here that I am a stranger to everyone, especially myself.

I am grateful to the Captain for not insisting I hold watch. Not that I am not interested. I watch him. Closely. I asked many questions. I need to know where things are, how they work. Just in case. But, a day or two out of Barbados, I stopped. A warning from a dream. I am terrified of drowning, of being pulled over the side.

The Old Ones talk to me in the day times. They come, put their hands on me and journey with me. Longitude and latitude have no meaning. I understand now that the world turns on a sound. Find the right wave length, the right tone, and we will all be filled with ecstasy or madness.

The Old Africans say that some of them drowned at the bottom of the hold, that some of them let the others climb on top so they could get air.

13 February 1999, Saturday

Crossed the Equator. 2:10 p.m. 00.00 42 W.

GOING HOME

19 February 1999, Friday

Having fun with my limited Portuguese. Everyone has been helpful. I arranged a cab from the yacht club and found out about Customs and other things not in the guide book. It helps that your name is the same as someone's mother.

AT HOME

11 February 1999, Thursday

The Ancestors say:

Tell the stories. All over the world, people have told their atrocities and have made good fortune from them. No one will tell because there are no living witnesses. We make you and your sisters and brothers living witnesses. We will come when you call. As time goes by, you will know our names, our stations, our countries, our languages.

You will begin your telling with the horrors, the screaming that is racking you now, and you will shape it into language so beautiful all who hear it will cry. You will pass the barrier of thought and sound, and your gift will be to leave them in the bowels of the ship and then to bring them home.