

JANUARY 1977 \$1

CAN U.S. BLACKS
FIND A HAPPY LIFE
GOING TO AFRICA?

Sepia

A BLACK
CINDERELLA
GROWS UP
IN A WHITE
WORLD

THE BIG
BOOM IN
AFRICAN
FASHION

THE BIRTH
OF A
HOLLYWOOD
SCREEN
WRITER

SHIRLEY
VERRETT:
NEW EMPRESS
OF GRAND OPERA

CHAKA KHAN:
SOUL'S MOST
OFFBEAT SINGER



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Racial profanity

I was listening to Richard Pryor's new album, "Bicentennial Nigger," one late evening and I discovered myself almost involuntarily wincing as the man who some have hailed as the best comedian of our time went through one after another of his much-publicized routines. This is the latest of Pryor's so-called "Nigger" albums, and perhaps the most raunchy of them all.



As I flinched at yet another of Pryor's mumbling repetitions of his favorite two words, always pronounced as one, it occurred to me that perhaps I must be getting square and straight-laced indeed. I could not but wonder about and question my annoyance and resentment at Pryor's obscenities, which have been so accepted by the public at large, as the million sales for his "Nigger" albums indicate. Yet I am afraid that despite all that general acceptance, I cannot but recoil and object not only to Pryor's continual references to "mothers," if I may abbreviate his vocabulary somewhat, but even more to his constant "Nigger" talk.

I pride myself on my good sense of humor, but I just can't find anything funny in long-winded jokes which use filth as a crutch for supposed hilarity. What amazes me is that not only Pryor but much so-called soul music has been going off on a sex binge that has nothing to do with either creativity or good music. One of the new soul bands flaunts "MF" as their symbol, supposedly to stand for Mother's Finest, but audiences well know what they seek to convey. Top tunes have names like "Shake Your Rump to the Funk" and the lyrics convey even more than the title.

May I be so bold as to suggest that it's time to call a halt to that kind of porno in public, especially the kind of sex trash that caters to all the racial stereotypes with which white bigots have long branded us. I do not by any means advocate muzzling anyone like Pryor or Mother's Finest. But nothing could be more effective to curbing this junk than the public simply not buying it. The minute profit goes out of porno, it will slowly fade from the scene.

Pryor found at a West Coast NAACP dinner where he tried some of his more questionable material that the audience wouldn't stand for it and many walked out on him. He surely won't be invited back. The "Nigger" bit, no matter how and where it's peddled, is not only offensive as racist garbage, but has seen its day in minstrel shows. It's the kind of filth we could expect from the likes of an Earl Butz and it was outrageous enough to force him to resign. Whether Butz or Pryor utters the obscenity, the abuse is equally disgusting.

I can recall when Alabama's Gov. George Wallace once said that no one would "out-nigger" him. Perhaps he has been topped at his game, not by white racists but by some of our own blacks.

Beatrice Pringle
 PUBLISHER

Can U.S. blacks find a happy life going to Africa?

By MARION KAPLAN

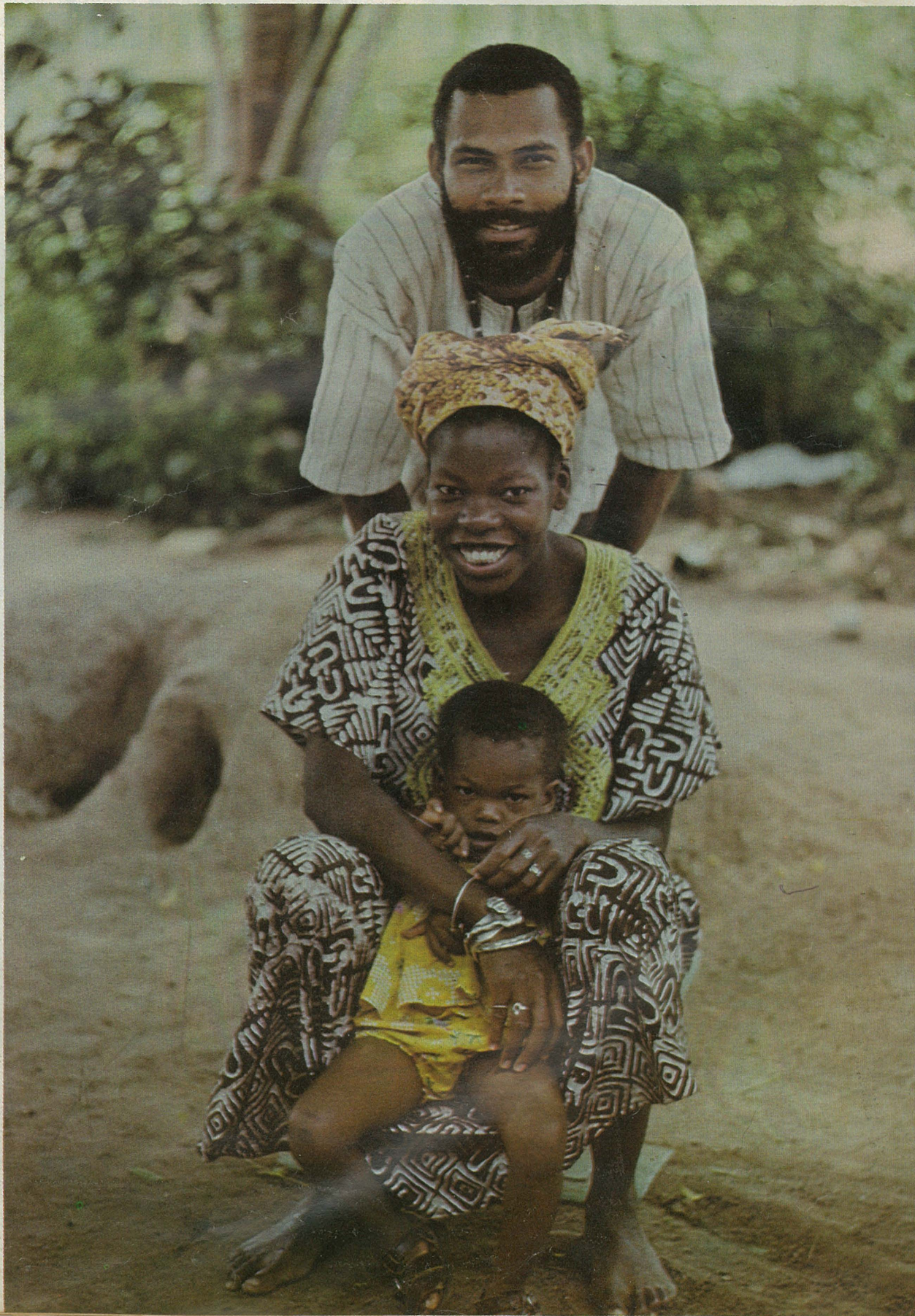
Can a black American go back to the home of his forefathers and find a good and happy life in Africa?

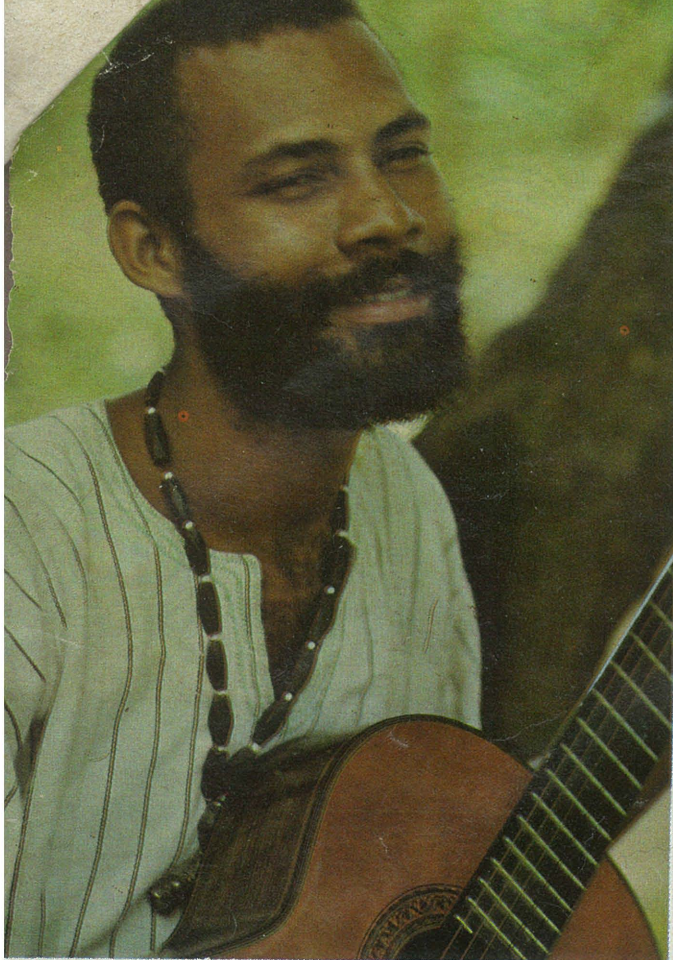
For almost two centuries U.S. blacks have been groping for an answer to that question, many returning to Africa to escape slavery and later racism following emancipation, hoping to reestablish their traditional roots in a home and lifestyle they could truly call their own. The exodus began after the American Revolution when blacks found British promises of freedom from slavery a far better choice than servitude and shackles in the South and then went to Sierra Leone when the Redcoats lost the Revolutionary war. It reached its peak in the back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey. The return to Africa continues today, even if involving but a minuscule fraction of the growing black U.S. population.

Africa, now flexing its muscles with its power finally unchained from colonial rule, has become many things to many people, but to many black Americans the continent of their roots remains as ever a persistent far-off dream. Judson — now Oku — Singer is one youthful black American who made that dream come true, when he went there with his new bride, made his home in Ghana, became a father there — worked, laughed, struggled and created in Africa for five years.

In the truest sense, Oku feels he grew to manhood in Africa and found a full measure of happiness he never knew before. "I was able finally to savor life," says Oku. "Living without racism was delightful. My wife and I found spiritual freedom, emotional stability and an environment full of love."

U.S. couple Oku Singer (born Judson) and wife Olubiyi (born Marcia Louise) pose for family portrait with their Ghana-born daughter, Nonkululeko Yetunde in Medina.



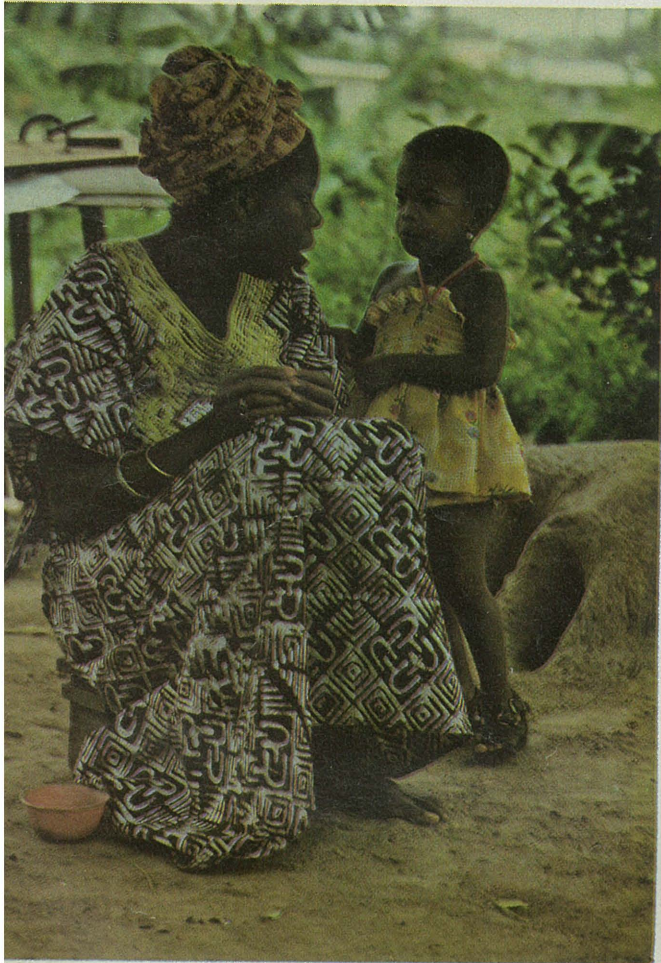


'Being black and having romantic ideas' not enough to win Africa's love, respect

Yet Africa was not all wine and roses for the Singer family, who are now back in the U.S. As in America, Oku Singer learned that common labor is no way to make a living in Africa and being black was no particular job asset. With that lesson he and his wife Olubiyi, formerly Marcia Louise McRae of Philadelphia, returned to the States with two vows – to learn trade skills that will better fit them into the African economy and most importantly to return once again to Africa to stay. "I returned to the United States because the things I need are here in abundance," says Singer, "and my chances of getting them are greater. I must have basic skills or knowledge that people need. Without these my horizons are limited. Being black and having romantic ideas about Africa is not enough to merit Africa's love and respect."

Then Oku Singer pointedly notes: "For example, Africa needs technicians, farmers and trained midwives, rather than Avon representatives, short order cooks or astro physicists." He admits that when he went to Ghana, "We were not adequately prepared. Consequently our entire stay was

Oku's first enthusiasm was for music. Guitar is one of several instruments he plays. In Ghana interest changed to sculpture, although he played in band.



Mother plays with daughter in yard of their home in village near Accra.

Unusual school sign was among works done by Oku while in Ghana. He taught arts and crafts at school while wife took over nursery classes.



a struggle and a challenge, but we loved most of it and are much better off because of our experience."

Born Judson Singer 29 years ago in Columbus, Ohio, to parents in social service, Oku has travelled a long road in his lifestyle and thinking. After schooling in Pasadena, Calif., and Hawaii, the Army draft in 1967 while attending Pasadena City College sparked the ideas that eventually led to Africa. "I was disturbed by how the U.S. was spending its money and the whole war machine," says Oku. "My personal belief was that I couldn't deal with that, so I applied for and received conscientious objector status." Instead of the Army, Oku — along with two others — established a cultural center in East Palo Alto, a black ghetto. "We badly needed something like that in the community." Soon the center became widely known as "Nairobi, California," as an expression of militance and pride in the African heritage of the predominantly black residents in East Palo Alto.

"I had learned in Hawaii of larger

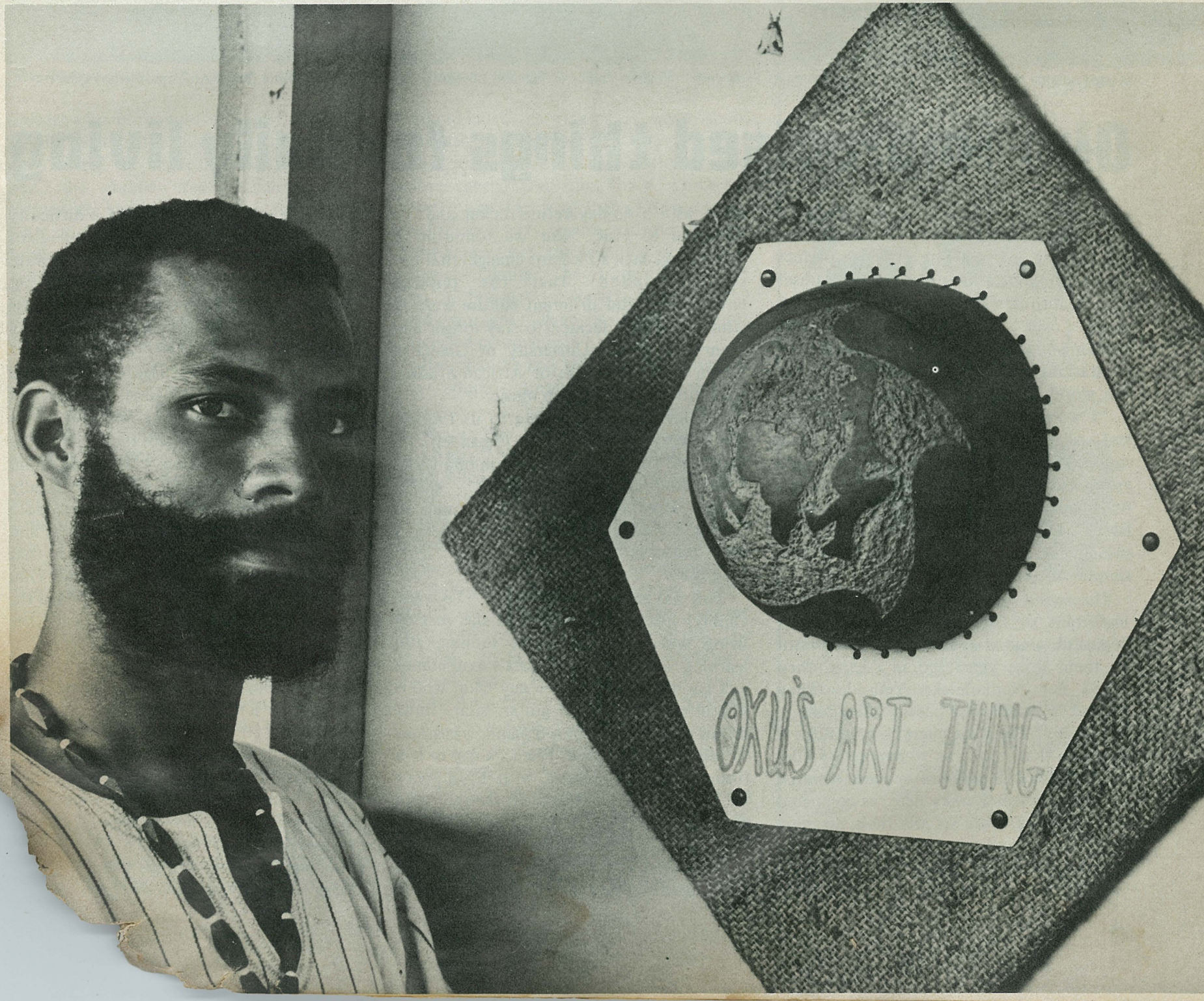
communities and worlds. 'Nairobi, California' was another new experience — one that finally decided me to get out and travel," says Oku. "I had been doing research on developing countries, particularly in Africa. I wanted to get out of the technical society and since my concerns were with arts, I especially wanted to see new cultural worlds. Music, the guitar, occupied me mostly then but my appreciation was wider as an artist. I considered South America briefly, and the Caribbean. But Africa came to fill my mind and in the end Ghana was my destination."

When Oku arrived in Ghana in May of 1971, he brought with him a new wife — Olubiyi, tall, slender, as gentle in her ways as her soft-spoken husband. Her name is Yoruba from western Nigeria, an African name acquired long ago — she can't remember when.

It was a profound personal experience that turned Judson into Oku. "Seven or eight months before coming to Ghana," he recounts, "I was riding with Olubiyi from Nairobi, California, to San Francisco. It was evening time. We were



Imaginative "Welcome" sign was designed from scrap material Oku picked up at random in Ghana village. "Art thing" (below) reflects sense of humor.





In yard outside their Medina home, Olubiyi prepares food while daughter smiles at her and husband. Oku plays guitar while friend Ali Yemoh enjoys the music.

Oku improvised things for daily living

going to visit a friend — as it happens, a Japanese-American. Everything was pleasant. It was just one of those perfect days when good things happen. The sunset was beautiful. The clouds were rolling slowly over the mountains like surf breaking on rocks. I had a feeling of exultation! Tragic events could not change the world that day. Everything was good.

“I wanted to give a name to that day and called it ‘Okudweem’ — a word meaning nothing but signifying for me: exultation! Olubiyi started calling me by that name. We were married six months later. In Ghana, Oku sounds by coincidence like many names and everyone simply called me Oku.”

The sound and significance of names is important to Oku and Olubiyi. When a beautiful, almond-eyed daughter was born to them three years ago in Ghana, they called her Nonkululeko Yetunde. They wanted a name that meant “freedom — born free.” The Zulu name Nonkululeko is close to that. And, as it happens, smiles Oku, “There is even a second material meaning: hospital costs here, as compared with America, were so low then, no more than two dollars.”

But when Oku and Olubiyi came to Ghana there was no Nonkululeko. They

came with a 45-day return ticket and the intention to visit. “But we found it so interesting, such a pleasant change, that our stay extended. Just the physical environment and different culture were so stimulating. We decided to stay longer and I enrolled at the University of Ghana in Legon in the Institute of African Studies, concentrating on African music.

“Things were happening to us though. My interest in visual arts expanded ... exploded! I started applying it in odd ways. I collected all kinds of things — shells, seeds, pieces of metal, cloth peculiar to Ghana. I used these shapes, colors, designs and patterns to make strange little sculptures.”

This was an exploratory stage — Oku and Olubiyi had savings then and the cost of living was low. They were looking and learning, delighting in Ghana’s exuberance and good fellowship. One day Oku, who is a skillful musician on guitar, sitar, flute, drums and African thumb piano, was asked to join a highlife band. For \$2 a day or less (usually less) he played with F. Kenya’s Riches Big Band, traveling around with them to play at cocktail parties in Accra, the capital, or in small rural communities where mime and drama were mixed with the highlife sound to entertain villagers.

Language was something of a difficulty but Oku soon picked up fragments of the many dialects in the Akan group: Brong, Ashanti, Fanti, Akim, Nazima. At the coast, where he settled, he and Olubiyi had to know some Ga and Twi. But they managed.

They learned to manage in other ways. Oku’s income was negligible, their savings about gone and even in the area some distance from Accra where they made their home, costs were rising. “Music could no longer sustain me,” said Oku, “financially as well as in terms of my enthusiasms. More and more I moved towards visual arts and began making handicraft objects that people would like.” In addition, Oku taught arts and crafts at school — first at the Ridge Church School in Accra, later the Morning Star Preparatory School.

“I liked working with children,” he says. “You find out so much from what they say — and they have so little to lose by being honest.”

Oku and Olubiyi gradually settled into Ghanaian life. They made friends in the artists’ informal world. Oku, too, was developing skills in himself he was previously unaware of. He found that he could use his mind and his hands to make things — and it became his un-



Wife Olubiyi reads for her daughter from lesson book which she uses for neighborhood children in nursery.

objective to improvise for himself and his family most of the things they needed for daily living. He made a cooking stove, a bed, the child's cradle, chairs, tables, shelves. He made a workbench for himself with tools from car parts. He made a furnace for smelting from collected fire bricks — using slowburning palm kernels for fuel. He made a vise from scrap auto parts. He fixed up his own fluorescent light fixture from wood, turned a bicycle dynamo into a flashlight, and a lampstand into a work of art interweaving carvings of man 'born in liberation' with woman through an Ashanti Adinkra symbol standing for unity.

Olubiyi, too, was expanding her own world. She built up an Institute of African Learning through which she taught nursery school classes to neighborhood children. Olubiyi's school was announced outside their house in Medina by a sign that has infinitely more charm than the usual school boards. In their yard hangs a wind chime that makes gentle sounds and looks compatible with the tree it hangs from — "I like an interesting environment," says Oku.

One small room of their house was a private gallery exhibiting works entitled "From Dust to Dust" (in which a woman gives birth while death — a skeleton — waits). There were more cheerful pieces like "Mr. and Mrs. Dignity" and "Mohammad Ali, son of Africa." In front of a "Welcome" sign made from horn,

feather, calabash, a twist of metal, spool and bits of this and that. On a door a design labeled, with humor and self-mockery, "Oku's Art Thing." Quite the most outstanding of Oku's many sculptures, art works, creations and contrivances was the wedding bracelet he made for Olubiyi. They both preferred the idea of bracelet to wedding ring and the finely-wrought silver is Olubiyi's most cherished possession.

But changes had to occur in the lives of the couple simply out of economic necessity. "I learned something of the subtleties, the dynamics and nuances of life in Ghana," Oku says, "but there was no hold. Ghana was the only African country we'd seen. We felt we needed to go somewhere else. I like being in Ghana and I liked the opportunities — but the profession of artist is a very precarious one.

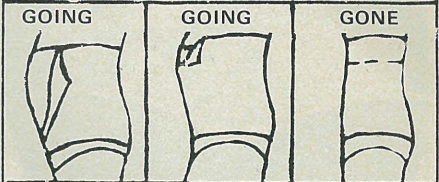
"I knew if I was to continue, I must study, expand my knowledge, acquire further education, discover new circles. The criterion to be met was that whatever I learned must be something the world needs. An artist, a sculptor, has difficulties in a narrow field, but in the broader area of design all kinds of opportunities and needs exist.

"So I decided to go back to America and develop more skills. Ghana was a vital, enriching experience. As an Africa-descended person I have an idea now of what Ghana is about. But I'm part of a

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Oku's main way of transportation was scooter to Accra as his family lived on a tight budget.

Making friends in Africa "easier than breathing"

larger human family . . . I want to move, to travel, and look after my family."

Now back in the States, Oku reports: "I plan to get all the knowledge I can on the casting of metal and general foundry work at both the practical and technical level. This will be a valuable supplement to my knowledge and skill as an artist. My one big lesson learned in Africa is that we black people need nation-building skills, skills to make us self-reliant."

Oku Singer sums up his five years in Africa: "During my stay many things impressed me and many things disappointed me. The natural harmonious way of life was an overwhelming experience. Sensitive people can live peaceful and fulfilling lives in Africa but America crushes them or causes them to develop tough shells from which they rarely emerge.

"Africans are naturally gracious and hospitable folk and making friends is easier than breathing," he continues. "People do everything together. There are few secrets that remain secrets long. This helps to insure the well-being of the community. Africans living together in a community love each other in ways we of the West may some day come to learn. The Africans we met struck a nice balance between pride and humility and self-image is not much of a problem as it is with Afro-Americans."

Speaking of black life in the States, Oku becomes somewhat more emotional and declares: "During my five years of absence, it seems conditions are worse for the country in general and black folks in particular. We are succumbing to a well-orchestrated program against our freedom. We are unmistakably colonized people and an atmosphere is being created



to kill our revolutionary fire on the one hand while the stage is being set which will allow for the severest repression against blacks and other poor people. We continue to be our own worst enemy. We African-Americans have no overall unifying philosophy and we're continuing to do 'our own thing' to our detriment.

"If I were to bring a personal message from Africa to the brothers and sisters here, I'd say that mainstream American life will only compound our problems and we'd better quickly create some alternatives. We buy liquor, dope, flashy cars and clothes which we don't produce before we'll build or buy our own homes, or support liberation efforts."

Not uncritical of Africa either, Singer found dismaying "bribery and corruption which is widespread" and admits: "Afro-Americans who travel to Africa soon realize that though we call ourselves poor, we are much better off materially than the masses of Africans." Oku found disturbing the fact that "strong traces of the colonial mentality still has Africans thinking that which is foreign is superior and that which is indigenous is inferior."

A return to African roots is not for most U.S. blacks, he warns. "Any new world black returning to Africa must be able to regard Africans as equals," Oku declares. "We've stirred some bad feelings in the past by truly coming off as ugly Americans full of condescension. We've cried out for telephones, hamburgers and discos while refusing to integrate ourselves into the unique experiences of the life and culture at hand. There are definitely African ways of doing things and disregarding these or being unable to adjust will only create problems.

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Olubiyi speaks in African language in conversation with daughter. Oku put together workshop (left) improvising everything from auto parts and junk.



Income of \$4,000 a year seen enough to live comfortably

differences should find lots of friends in Africa. I made more intimate friends in Ghana than anywhere I've ever lived. The best advice I could give to Afro-Americans travelling to Africa would be to be themselves. Being positive gets more mileage than being slick.

"We are each individual ambassadors in a sense of the largest and newest black tribe in the world and have more skilled manpower and education than any other. In Africa we are viewed as exotic strangers and first impressions are indelible. If we are beautiful people, we'll allow ourselves options in trying to create the realities we dream of. If we're niggers, we'll blow a potentially dynamite scene and nothing would please our oppressors more."

Finally Oku Singer reports that an income of \$4,000 a year or more would allow the average black American to "live comfortably" in rural areas or in the city. "Adapting to African foods and customs is not difficult generally because their cuisine

can hold its own against any other although some foods definitely require getting used to," he notes.

A warning from Singer is that no African government has openly expressed a willingness to accept Afro-American immigrants and "survival there is considerably more challenging than in the U.S." But "the intangible benefits of being in the motherland makes life's struggles infinitely more worthwhile ... at least to me."

Oku and Olubiyi never had much money, but they had a dream ... a dream they fulfilled for five years in Africa living with love and moderation, enjoying the essence of life, learning and art. They answered a call of their heritage, yet realizing that Africa is part of a larger world and seeking to find their place in both Africa and the world at large. They are going back one day, confident of fulfilling their personal vision of a better life.

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