

# KING PEGGY

*An American Secretary, Her Royal Destiny, and the Inspiring Story  
of How She Changed an African Village*

*Peggielene Bartels and Eleanor Herman*

What if you woke up one morning to discover that you were royalty? Or learned that your destiny had changed overnight? **KING PEGGY: An American Secretary, Her Royal Destiny and the Inspiring Story of How She Changed an African Village (Doubleday)** is the remarkable story of Peggielene Bartels and her incredible journey from secretary to king (at age 55, no less). This charming real-life fairy tale has the sweetness and quirkiness of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series and the hopeful sense of possibility found in *Half the Sky*.

Peggy (known as “Nana,” which is a title reserved for royalty) was raised in Ghana, attended catering school in London, and has worked at the Embassy of Ghana in Washington, D.C. since 1979. Nana intended to stay in America for a year or two and then return to Ghana, but the years passed by and she eventually became an American citizen. After marrying her husband William in 1990, Nana desperately tried to have children but was unable to do so. William returned to Africa in 2002 and after their marriage dissolved, Nana’s work at the embassy – and as a nursing home receptionist on weekends – became her life.

Though Nana enjoyed her work, the best part of her day was her sleep. When she was asleep she didn’t have to worry about unpaid bills, office politics, missing William, or question whether her life had a purpose. Each day Nana poured libations for her deceased mother -- a way of showing respect to God and honoring the dead, who were always thirsty -- of water and Gordon’s Gin (in Ghana the ancestors liked schnapps, but Nana could only find peppermint schnapps in the United States, which her mother would not like). Nana asked for both her mother and God to look out for her.

On a hot August night in 2008, Nana’s world was changed forever by a phone call. Her cousin told her incredible news: her Uncle Joseph had died and sacred rituals revealed that the ancestors had chosen her as the king of Otuam, a village on Ghana’s central coast. Thinking it was a joke and shocked by the news, she almost hung up. How could an American secretary in Washington, D.C. – not to mention a woman – be named King of Otuam?

But it was true, and in an instant, Nana’s life was forever changed. Nana learned she had been selected by her elders via their schnapps-pouring celebration. The Chief Priest, Tsiami, and the royal elders had conducted rituals at a sacred shrine, pouring schnapps into the ground as Tsiami read the names of all 25 candidates in the family. If the schnapps sank into the ground, this meant the ancestors did not want that person to be king. If the schnapps steamed up, it meant that person would become king. When Tsiami called Nana’s name, the only woman on the list, the schnapps steamed up. In Ghana, the title *king* refers to the person who wields executive power. Lady kings are a very new phenomenon in a continent rife with male chauvinism, and Nana would become only the third lady king in all of Ghana. After much consideration, Nana accepted her destiny and met the challenges of her new position with her trademark humor, strength, and resolve. The childless woman was now the leader of 7,000 souls half a world away, and she would make their lives better.

Upon arriving in Otuam for her enstoolment, the elaborate coronation ceremony, Nana realized that the wonderful, chaotic and social life of the village was very different from life in Washington. She was greeted

by her entourage and instructed in royal etiquette. She should not frown or argue, eat or drink in public (if there is a witch in the crowd watching the king, she could make the king choke to death), or go to the bathroom. Nana's entourage would sleep in her bedroom for protection, as well as dress and fan her. While assuming her royal duty was the stuff of fairy tales, the dire reality of life in the Otuam surprised Nana: there was no running water, no doctor, and no high school, and many of the village elders were stealing the town's funds – the town's coffers were empty.

To make matters worse, her Uncle Joseph (the late king) sat in a morgue awaiting a proper funeral in the royal palace, which was in ruins. The longer she waited to bury him, the more she risked incurring the wrath of her ancestors. And furthermore, some of the townsmen had been beating their wives. Peggy's determination to change all of this set her on a collision course with Otuam's stubborn male elders, who were unaccustomed to heeding any woman. Yet she also found unexpected allies: her confidante, Cousin Comfort; the sober and reliable contractor, Nana Kwesi, who helped rebuild the palace; and a fisherwoman as strong as Nana herself.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Nana stepped into her role as king. Her immediate duties included burying the old king, renovating the royal palace, meeting with her elders, and collecting the village's fishing fees. But she also began to wonder if there was something rotten in the state of Otuam. The late king seemed to have died of fright; his children conspired to sabotage the funeral; and suddenly Nana didn't know whom to trust.

Nana's first two years as king of Otuam unfold in a way that is stranger than fiction. Transforming Otuam—setting up a bank account for the town; empowering local women; creating a new borehole for village water; buying a new ambulance; co-sponsoring a new high school and scholarships with a local Maryland church; creating a library; and starting a 501c3 charity, The Otuam Community Development Corporation—become Nana's new life mission. In the end, a deeply traditional African town is uplifted by the ambitions of its headstrong, decidedly modern female king. By changing Otuam, Peggy is herself transformed, from an ordinary secretary to the heart and hope of her community. **KING PEGGY** is an irresistible real-life Cinderella story, and an inspiring look at one possible future for Africa.

For more information, please visit [www.kingpeggy.com](http://www.kingpeggy.com)