



Benin's Not Benign, But Beninese Love In Spoonfuls

I've recently returned from a truncated adventure in West Africa, initially spurred by my curiosity about the world voodoo festival held each year in Ouidah, Benin. The strange festivities consist of dazed adherents in crude costumes drumming and chanting and sacrificing and scaring. And every January 10th it takes place in a very poignant spot: It's the very beach where nearly a million slaves ritually circled a sacred tree, ensuring that their spirits would remain behind

in Africa, and then left the continent, ultimately headed for Brazil or Haiti or Louisiana. They took their voodoo beliefs with them, which now thrive wherever they ended up.

I've often traveled in rough, uncomfortable circumstances. But of the 107 other countries I've visited so far, Benin was the most challenging. More difficult than:

- Trekking treacherous trails in Sikkim's Himalayas, between Nepal and Bhutan.
- Hitchhiking from Nairobi through Zimbabwe and Zambia to Cape Town (four times).
- Medevac'ing myself out of the Papua-New Guinean Highlands following a mass attack of infectious fleas.
- Baking beneath baboons while waiting for *any* ride to *anywhere* on an empty rutted dirt road north of Malindi, Kenya, bound for Lamu Island.
- Unknowingly overnighting in a dangerous prostitute motel in El Salvador (alone), and semi-securing myself by stacking furniture against my door as a blockade (just like in the movies).



- Participating in a Coptic bachelor party in Egypt, where the celebrants seized me and urged me to slather the nearly naked groom with henna sauce.
- And others I'd love to tell you about some other time.

Webster's synonyms for "benign" include "favorable," "wholesome," "harmless," and "inoffensive." Not one of them describes my week in Benin; it was *anything but* benign. It was especially hard on me.

It wasn't difficult, physically; there wasn't much exertion. No grueling high-altitude hikes or cross-desert bicycle rides. And, I've endured plenty of stifling tropical hellholes (Belize City and Port Moresby come to mind) in past adventures.

But, *emotionally*, Benin drained me. I came home a few days early because I just couldn't take it any longer, and I was depressed for a week afterward.

I'm certainly not a voodoo guy. I didn't go to Benin for the voodoo itself. What fascinates me is the variety of belief systems people subscribe to, and the



fervency with which they believe that theirs is the best (and usually the sole “right”) way to think.

I’m passionately curious and want to know how people whose cultures are waaaaay different from a typical Westerner’s live their lives. (Would your mom slash your babyface, leaving a lifelong gash, because she was certain that inflicting the pain on you would help all her future children live disease-free? If she were a voodoo believer, she would.)

I didn’t go to Benin to see “tourist attractions” or natural wonders. There aren’t any museums or monuments or mountains or wild animals that are really travel-guide worthy.

Yes, I experienced the voodoo (or “Vodun,” or “vodou,” as it’s written locally) festival and had my eyes opened about the omnipotence of belief systems.

Yes, I saw the memorial to the many thousands of Brazil-bound slaves who died from mistreatment even before boarding their temporary owners’ ships.

And yes, I saw the festering, murky, polluted waters of Lac Ahémé with the carved-canoe fishermen scooping meager minnows in their nets to sell them at the market for fifteen cents.

I didn’t go there for the natural beauty of the place. It’s your basic coastal flat, dusty, seriously trashed, smog-bound tropical shanty and subsistence sprawl with a patchwork of sparsely scattered mini-farms.

Despite all this, I *did* find beauty in Benin ... but a *different* kind of beauty.

I found inspiringly resilient *people* who deal with a desolate dearth of comfort and security, yet still enjoy life. A family of dirt poor Africans took me in to live with them for a week in their dirt-floor compound, surrounded by chickens and babies and orphan children and more dirt. And despite having so very little to give, they gave me so very much.

The experience starkly and uncomfortably reminded me that more than half of the people on our planet endure life on less than \$1.00 a day. And there was nothing beautiful about that reality.



As I type now, I'm looking at a pink plastic used-and-re-used disposable spoon of the type that might come packaged with yoghurt at your supermarket. But mine's not shiny or new. My spoon is highly symbolic. At my departure ceremony when leaving the family, one of the children (and I don't know if he was one of the other strays they'd taken in, or a blood-relative grandchild) wanted to show his love to the

strange big playful visiting foreign alien white man. The only thing he had to give me was this flimsy, dirty, should-have-been-disposed-of-long-ago utensil. Reaching out with both hands, as if he were presenting me with a jewel on a satin pillow, he bestowed the spoon upon me and smiled. It was his spoonful of love.

I'm surprised at how much I wanted to write about my short dunk in the pool of half the human population's real life. It was especially impactful because I returned from that hopeless week of African poverty to my beautiful, smart, loving wife and our spacious art nouveau *Belle Epoque* apartment looking out at the Bentleys and Ferraris passing by Monte Carlo's Casino with billionaires' yachts docked beyond. I feel guilty about being so fortunate as to *not* have been born an orphan in a Beninese dirt-floor compound where my most valuable possession was a used plastic spoon.

I've written a lot about my one week in Benin, and offer it to you, split into chapter-like chunks that are not continuous or contiguous. There is some chronology, and mostly I like to capture whatever momentarily catches my attention. (For example, the masterful sales guy selling mysterious medicine aboard my swaying and sweltering bus from an unworthy UNESCO World Heritage site to Cotonou, Benin's capital. Or, the teamwork and dynamics of the yam mashers pounding in unison just before my celebratory feast. Or "Bicycle Mama," (below) my African host family's matron, who was always pedaling in motion and who felt fortunate that her deceased husband's other wife hadn't cursed her to death with a voodoo spell.)



I'll treat each chapter/chunk as a standalone story in a smorgasbord, so take another helping whenever you wish, or skip it after just a little taste. You may already have had enough. Read further only if you want to know what reality's like for a typical West African family. Or, if you just enjoy experiencing my bizarre adventures *virtually*, while remaining in First World comfort, my aim is to entertain.

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Before Beginning Benin: Leaving One World For Another

Although not part of its original intended meaning, most of us think of “Third World” as referencing poverty and ignorance, while “First World” describes affluent places where things run smoothly and efficiently like Switzerland and Singapore and the United States. If you think in those terms, France, where we’re living this year, comes out in a sort of “Second World” category. So, this is my chronicle of swooshing from the second to the third world, before really experiencing West Africa.



It’s my travel day, and it’s beginning in a very French way. Since Air France only allows seat selection 24 hours before a flight, I logged in yesterday and discovered that they’d booked me to the wrong connection airport. My flight from Paris to Benin leaves from Charles de Gaulle (CDG) airport, but they had me flying from my home near Nice to Paris’ Orly airport. Although both airports serve Paris, travelers’ web comments indicate that getting from one airport to the other can take over three hours if there’s significant traffic.

So, I phoned and asked the Air France reservation agent to switch me to a flight from Nice to CDG for a smoother connection. She was completely

baffled by this request, put me on hold, transferred me, and eventually came back on the line and said it was impossible and hung up. I called again, got a different agent, and asked about the Air France bus that goes directly from Orly airport to CDG. She was also baffled and cut me off. (Perhaps I unluckily encountered the *only two* Air France agents unfamiliar with these two airports and unwilling to help a passenger.)

Disinclined to give it a third try on the phone (even though I've come to quite enjoy their music on hold), I thought it best to take the very first train from our Monte Carlo home to the Nice airport, flash my Platinum SkyTeam Elite Plus card at the special Sky Priority check-in counter, and hope for preferential help. That meant catching a train at 5:18 AM, as shown on the only available printed French train schedule. (The schedule's more than a year old, but new ones haven't been printed and distributed yet.)

By 5:30, no train had come or gone. Once inside the station, I noticed that the official clock at the entrance was 31 minutes off from the official clock by the ticket office... which was closed, of course. The French in general seem to have some confusion about what the time is, except they're pretty sure it's almost time for a break from work, and a cigarette, and some wine, and possibly a work stoppage or strike or demonstration.

Finally, a train came at 6:13 AM, which got me to the airport with just barely enough time to catch the 7:10 first flight to CDG *if* my Platinum SkyTeam Elite Plus card worked its charm.

But... the Air France ticket agent at the counter was new and quite unimpressed with my flashy card, and had to get a supervisor to assist her with my bizarre request to take a more convenient flight. They both typed and talked and typed and talked some more, and finally advised me that I'd have to go to the ticket office, which wasn't open, to make such a change. The rookie agent added that it was now one minute past the check-in cutoff time for the 7:10 CDG flight, anyway, and although it had open seats and I had only a carryon bag, I couldn't get on. My Elite Plus status made no difference

The agent at the next counter over, who had been overhearing all this rule-following conversation, did some typing of her own, and, without saying a word, turned to me, smiled, and reached over to hand me a boarding pass for the "impossible to change" flight that went directly to CDG three hours later. I guess it all depends on who helps you.

So, now I'm waiting in the private lounge at Nice's airport for three hours, but can't send this because the WiFi isn't working. I shouldn't be surprised. At the post office yesterday, two of the three scales to weigh letters were broken.

Ah, but the quality of life in France is superb...so long as you want a little more champagne and don't expect to get anything done.

The Vanishing Benefactress Seatmate:

Fortunately, the transfer at CDG went smoothly, despite the French airport security personnel. Thanks to Barbie's insistence, I bought some small bottles of duty-free (but still overpriced and expensive) whisky, since she's afraid that if I drink Benin's local gin at the big voodoo festival, it might be spiked with some mysterious potion.

Upon boarding and taking my seat on the connecting flight to Benin (far forward window on the shady side of the plane, of course, as always), I met Helene, my seatmate in 10B. Although she didn't speak English, Helene was very friendly and chattered continuously. My rudimentary French was barely sufficient to establish that she lives in Paris, but was born in Benin.

On the tarmac before we took off, she started making phone calls from her Beninese cell phone. As far as I could tell, she was calling someone to give me a welcoming and hospitable ride to my hotel once we landed at Cotonou's Cadjehoun International Airport in a few hours. I'm not quite sure, but I think she was also lining up someone to take me on an expedition to the north of the country on the back of a motorbike. If she's representative, I think I'll find that the Beninese are extraordinarily welcoming, friendly and helpful people. I felt good about having already made a connection with someone who would open doors to unexpected beneficial encounters.

I like landing at airports where people applaud. Our flight was absolutely routine, but I guess that most people who land at Cotonou, Benin don't routinely fly very much. So, many passengers broke out in cheers of gratitude as we safely touched down. That's a sign that I'm not going to encounter many other foreign visitors here; this flight and destination aren't popular with tourists.

I'm cheating raw adventure by having an actual hotel reservation for my first two nights in Benin. I've always found that wonderfully fortuitous things happen when you are plan-free and make no reservations. But I must confess: Perhaps it's my age, but I do like having a confirmed place to sleep waiting for me, rather than negotiating through the usual swarm of porters and taxi drivers and hotel touts clustered at the exit of most third world airports, all vying for my attention... I mean, my money.

I thought I had understood my benefactress seatmate Helene, but apparently I was mistaken. There were plenty of times during the flight when I had just nodded along as if I understood her, although I wasn't at all following her enthusiastic blathering in a mix of French and some native language. When we arrived and went through Immigration, I expected to find the friends she'd called from the plane waiting to welcome us, maybe even holding up a little sign. Instead, she kissed my cheeks four times, told me she'd see me for breakfast at 9:00 AM and then vanished into the pulsating crowd of shouting Beninese.



Fortunately, my hotel reservation included a van to take me to the hotel, and for that I was grateful. The Novotel hotel here in Cotonou is a normal Accord property, which means it's in sharp contrast to the shabby shacks along the airport

road. It's designated as four stars, and on that scale, any Holiday Inn room rates five. There are just a few Europeans eating here in the hotel dining room, plus some very well dressed local gentlemen who I assume are probably oil company workers or government officials embezzling public funds. No normal Beninese would be able to come into a place like this. The guards keep them out, even if they have some money.

Good Morning, Cotonou, Benin!

Now, it's my first morning in the capital of Benin, and I'm glad to be in an air conditioned hotel room close to the airport. The outside air is thick and murky with very limited visibility. Low-lying smog is smothering the airport's surroundings. It's a typical third world scene I'm used to: Some buildings within sight are — and have been for a long time — under construction, and the one-third-complete poured concrete floors are propped up with sticks, not steel scaffolding. Along the Atlantic seashore near the airport, there are a few huge walled mansions, probably owned by government ministers. And everything else is moldy and crumbling. Welcome to another third world tropical city! I want to get out of here, and into the countryside.

The lobby of this Novotel has shelves lined with glass jars filled with voodoo fetishes: odd bits of rusted metal, scraps of circuit boards, bent bottle caps, used pipe cleaners, and wood shards affixed together into strange mini statuettes. These are meant to be representations of voodoo protection symbols that ward off evil spirits. They're supposedly in the lobby to please visitors as decorative touches reflecting local culture, but I suspect that the Beninese workers here view them differently than the international guests do.

“Bartolemy” is working at the hotel's front desk. He's very nice and knows the answer to almost no question. Because I'm a railroad nut, I had read that there's one single scheduled train service that runs from the coast up through the middle of Benin. I hoped to ride on it. I ask Bartolemy where I can catch the train to the north, and he just cocks his head and squints as if he has no idea what I'm asking about.



Finally, when I slowly and carefully sound out “ray-al-row-duh” and “tuh-rain” with exaggerated lip movements, it clicked and Bartolemy smiled and shook his head. He had once heard of a train, but thinks it hasn’t run for years. A different desk clerk stepped up and told me that the train indeed still runs, but just not every day. Then the door guard stepped over to the counter and chipped in that he'd never heard of any such train.

When I told Bartolemy that I want to travel to Parakou, a city 400 km to the north, he said I should take a taxi. “No, I prefer to go by bus,” I said, since the train didn’t seem to exist. He looked at me very skeptically, saying he thought it would take 12 hours to go by bus. I guess not many white Novotel guests relish 12-hour bus rides. But I just wanted to get out of this city, and I didn’t want to pay the white man cab fare for a 250 mile taxi ride.

Last night, at the airport ATM, I withdrew 200,000 CFA francs. Each 10,000 note is equivalent to about \$20, which is far more than most people can make



change for. I “broke” one 10,000 note at the hotel last night and got a pile of limp, dirty 1000 CFA bills in exchange. This morning, Bartolemy, who is still working and also looks somewhat limp and dirty, says the hotel doesn’t have enough change for a 10,000 CFA (\$10) bill!

An interesting day ahead, I have a feeling.

The Anglophone French Lesbian Voodoo Phase

I was down in the hotel lobby at 9:00 AM, ready to meet my seatmate and benefactress, Helene, but she didn't show up. I stood around, waiting, looking at the fetish-filled jars. There was nothing of interest near the hotel that I could walk to, and I'd really thought I was going to be in Helene's care. So I stayed within the hotel's grounds, wondering how I'd make my way to the voodoo festival in Ouidah, 22 miles away, since it looked like I was going to be on my own today for the big celebration.

West Africans love to be playful. I love to be playful. So, the staff and I got along just fine.

I walked out through the hotel's dying, dusty, parched front "garden," waving off the several taxi drivers hoping for a 400 km white man fare. Ahead were khaki uniformed slouchers manning the metal pipe that's meant to be a gate controlling road access to the hotel and keeping out those unsightly local residents. I never just nod and walk past the guards at hotels like this. I like to engage in some playful banter and make sure that I stand out from the other guests. If I have any kind of trouble, I want the porters and security guys to remember me and be ready to assist if there's an invasion of kidnappers, or a power failure, or a swarm of price-gouging taxi drivers.

One guard's job is to raise and lower the pipe gate. When I exaggeratedly pretended that I was hitting my head on his metal pipe because he hadn't raised it high enough, he broke into a smile, ready to play. Once he knew I was just joking around, he laughed, and started jovially slapping my hand in some kind of complicated and as-yet-unlearned local handshake code. These little touches break down barriers and make everything more pleasant.

Just then, in a cloud of hot dust, a motorbike pulled up to the jovial guard's metal pipe gate and there was Helene on the back!

She's a very enthusiastic person, probably in her early 40s, and by West African standards she would be considered attractive, except for her lack of ritual facial scars. On the plane, I had made sure to talk about my wife, Barbie, several times to make sure Helene didn't think there was any potential for international romance.

A half-hour late, finally Helene joined me for breakfast in the hotel's dining room, which was vastly more expensive than anyplace where Beninese people would eat. Well, actually, two kinds of Beninese people *do* eat there. Some are extremely rich and well dressed and I make the immediate assumption that they are embezzling foreign aid funds and probably hold government ministerial positions. Others are multinational workers employed by Houston's Slumberger, the world's largest oilfield services company, and I know they're on expense accounts.

Over a peculiar egg, bacon, ground maize, plantain, and baked yam breakfast, I think Helene was telling me that she has a French friend who is going to attend the big voodoo festival in Ouidah and that I could go with her. This was all a little vague.

After eating, Helene motioned that we should go out from the hotel to somewhere else, and I assumed she meant to her house. However, I wasn't sure about anything I thought she'd said since our first greeting 22 hours earlier back on the airport tarmac in Paris.

When you want to get somewhere in Benin, you have to flag down a "zémidjan," or what everybody here calls a "zem." While Benin is just slightly larger than Cuba, about the size of Virginia, people there speak more than 50 local tribal languages. "Fon" is one of the most prominent. "Zémidjan" is Fon for "Get there fast."

After I paid for our breakfasts, Helene and I walked out past the head-bumping metal pipe's saluting and smiling guard and stopped two zem motorbikes. These were not Hondas or Yamahas. Motorbikes in Benin are mainly unfamiliar Chinese brands like "Zongshen," and Yingang," though I especially liked one brand name I spotted: "Better." (I can't find any mention of this brand using Google, so maybe the zem driver had affixed his own official-looking but homemade trumping logo to his gas tank.) The zems all seem roughly equivalent to a Honda 50 scooter. All official zem chauffeurs wear tattered yellow shirts with registration numbers stenciled on them. I just hope that their vehicles are in better condition than their shirts are.

At this point, when traveling in the Third World, you have to just decide that you're going to let the experience carry you along. If you don't get on a zem, you're not going to get far. I've never witnessed more than 1% of passing zem drivers wearing a motorcycle helmet, and many wear flimsy sandals on their



feet. I'm wearing the same rugged boots I use to trek in the Himalayas and am glad that at least my feet will be safe should we become involved in a collision... which seems likely. I just hold on as best I can and off we go. If I worry too much about dying, I won't be living.

The "roads" are not only swarming with swerving zem motorbikes, they're also in awful condition. Big potholes, piles of trash, pigs and goats picking through rusted tin cans hoping for some edible morsel, and of course the ever present plastic bags. Most of the trash piles are smoldering and the acrid smoke obscures the so-called road.

Turning down one of the dusty, cratered alleyways, my zem and Helene's came to a stop and she paid both fares. Some shouting and haggling broke out because she said the fare should be 200-300 CFAs each, which is about \$.50. The drivers, though, wanted to charge 500 each because I am white. Helene became very animated and made a big fuss and I'm not sure what she ended up paying, but neither driver looked happy. She was tough.

We had stepped off the bikes in front of a sturdy metal fence with two large gates. Someone inside opened them to reveal Helene's home. Surprisingly, it was a two-storey multifamily apartment building that she apparently owns. Her father died last year, and I suspect that she inherited it. I also suspect that the funds used to purchase it in the first place were ill gotten, as Benin is rife with corruption. (Benin scores 2.8 on the world corruption index, better than Afghanistan's 1.4. USA rates 7.1. New Zealand's at the top with 9.3.)

Just inside the gate, in the ground floor apartment, she introduced me to "Blondie," a somewhat dykish, apparently French woman with very short spiky white hair. I was relieved to discover that she was a semi-Anglophone and spoke some English!

My immediate impression of her was that she might be a lesbian. When she introduced me to her companion from the Cameroons and explained that she'd come to Benin just to visit her girlfriend, I became more convinced. They were openly and lovingly affectionate whenever I was around them. Blondie is very white and lives in Algeria. Her younger girlfriend is very black, possibly works in the Cameroonian Foreign Service, and is lovely. I immediately wondered if there's some kind of African interracial lesbian network that hooks people up. Both of them were consistently friendly and kind to me and I liked them both.

At this point, Helene indicated that we should get moving and head off to the big voodoo festival with Kleman, who might be her employee, but I'm really not sure. Helene said she wouldn't be able to join us, but had arranged for Kleman to drive. We squeezed into a battered van of indeterminate make and jounced across some ruts to the local "gas station" in preparation for our road trip to the voodoo festival.

En Route To The Voodoo Festival: Why No Beninese Say, “Fill ‘Er Up”

Most of the gasoline sold in Benin is illegally smuggled from Nigeria. Apparently there are big petroleum pipelines running across that country and enterprising entrepreneurs puncture the pipelines and drain off barrels of gasoline, which is then transported to Benin and neighboring Togo. About every hundred yards along any road in Benin, someone has set up a rickety wooden table with several old, chipped liquor and Coke bottles filled with gasoline. Lined up beside them are smaller plastic bottles fashioned into funnels and fitted with dirty socks as strainers. This is their version of a gas station. (I did see a few actual Western-looking gas stations, with never a single customer in any of them. They charge twenty cents more per liter for un-smuggled official gas. Beninese prefer the value of the smuggled dirty gas.)



A few young children at our unofficial station carried out juice or water bottles filled with gasoline and poured them through the dirty sock into the funnel so

we could tank up for our voodoo expedition. The total charge for about 5 gallons came to 8000 CFA, roughly \$16, and Kleman asked me for the money. I was happy to pay.

One thing I noticed throughout Benin is that people buy just enough gas to get to the next place. Their gas purchase may be a half gallon, two liters, if

that's how much they think they'll need. They just don't have available funds to buy a tankful, or they just don't see the value in it. Why think that far ahead? After all, there's sure to be another rickety table with Coke bottles of unofficial dirty gas within a hundred yards of wherever you run out.



Our destination was the voodoo festival in the town of Ouidah, and it was very slow going. Only a video can adequately convey the congestion and horrid condition of the roads. Our average speed was about 15 miles an hour and all of the passing zems were making much better progress at about 17 miles an hour, sinking and lurching through the lunar potholes. Many of the tiny motorbikes had three or four people on the back and it looked to me like a setup for multiple fatality accidents.

We finally arrived at Ouidah two hot hours later and began asking directions to the big festival. I thought that Kleman would already know just how to get there, but he seemed to be in unfamiliar territory, though it was only about 24 miles from the home he'd lived in all his life. Locals kept pointing us to a sandy lane several kilometers long that had been the path nearly a million slaves walked down before boarding ships bound for plantations in Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Slave trading was flourishing here long before the first Europeans arrived at what was then known as the "Slave Coast" of the Dahomey Kingdom. Ouidah was a major slave trading port and the slave trade accounted for its wealth and prominence well before the white man got here.

When we finally got to the voodoo festival grounds, there was a good deal of frenzied drumming emanating from various groups and bands of voodoo priests with their followers jumping and pounding and shouting and singing everywhere. The costumes were crude and not at all convincing, though they were certainly colorful. There is a whole panoply of gods in voodoo and some of the participants were supposed to represent these various strange beings, like Ogou Balanj, the spirit of healing, and Yemanja: the female spirit of waters.



A side note: Westerners generally associate “voodoo” with pin-pierced dolls and witchcraft. However, it’s a valid, official religion in Benin with six million believers. However strange and foreign it may seem, my Google search turned up this:

“There are a number of points of similarity between Roman Catholicism and Vodun:

- Both believe in a supreme being.
- The voodoo spirits resemble Christian Saints, in that they were once people who led exceptional lives, and are usually given a single responsibility or special attribute.
- Both believe in an afterlife.
- Both have, as the centerpiece of some of their ceremonies, a ritual sacrifice and consumption of flesh and blood.
- Both believe in the existence of invisible evil spirits or demons.
- Followers of Vodun believe that each person has a ‘met tet’ (master of the head) which corresponds to a Christian's patron saint.”

(Please take no offense if you're Catholic, or Mormon, or Muslim. I just wonder if voodoo's seemingly bizarre belief system is really all that different from those in the mainstream elsewhere.)

Dispersed through the crowd were lots of police wielding batons but no guns. They were there for crowd control, which was a good thing because there was a good deal of questionable gin being consumed, and spirits were elevated and elevating. During my time at the festival, the noise and frenzy ratcheted up continuously as the participants got drunker.

I stood at the fringe of a crowd surrounding a masked and scarified voodoo guy who had shinnied up a single stout bamboo pole that was wedged into a hole in the open field. He got up about thirty-five or forty feet in the air and then shifted his weight around so the pole swayed to the 2:00 and 10:00 positions. He'd balance atop the very point of the pole, way up there, and then shift his position and hold his body out horizontally as the pole bent even further to 3:00 and 9:00 and we in the crowd gasped. (Some voodoo deity was apparently protecting him, though, and he didn't seem afraid of falling.)

My Most Fortunate Meeting

While I was crowded in with the others who were taking in the voodoo festival, the most fortunate thing of the week happened. In the Third World, I'm normally just a little cautiously circumspect when strangers approach and try to engage me in conversation. But this time, the stranger spoke English pretty well, and I was grateful for the chance to communicate with a local person.

He told me that he teaches English at the local secondary school and introduced himself as "Vogle." The sound of his name was unfamiliar to me, so I immediately associated it with "John Bogle," the founder of Vanguard Funds, as a memory crutch and repeated it back to him just as he'd said it, "voh-glai," trying to get it right. He looked surprised when I said it correctly and told me he had never met a white man who could say his name right. This seemed to serve as an immediate bond for us. He was grateful that I had taken the trouble to make sure I got it right.

He offered to show my lesbian friends and me around the various historical sites in Ouidah, and for the rest of the day, he was my sidekick.

It only took one sweltering hour for me to feel that I'd fully absorbed most of what the voodoo festival had to offer, and I was ready to leave. However, the two lesbian ladies had wandered off and disappeared in the crowd and we couldn't leave without them.



Kleman and I made our way through the thousands of celebrants who gathered around and then moved between multiple stage areas. We scanned for Blondie's spiky white head, but it took an hour before the girls reappeared. Vogle never left my side.

He had a whole itinerary in mind for us and when we eventually all found each other, we piled into the rattling van. Vogle directed Kleman to take us to the memorial for the many thousands of slaves who had died before even boarding their temporary owners' ships.

Then, he asked if we were ready to go see the Temple of Pythons.

I said I'd be much happier to have lunch first.

That First Voodoo Lesson

Vogle guided us to a “buvette,” or small restaurant in Ouidah, where I treated the five of us to beers and delicious fish dishes. I love being generous when five people can enjoy tasty meals and a couple of rounds of local “La Beninoise” beer and the total bill comes to \$25.

I ended up drinking quite a few of the local beers in the following week, careful to shun the local “purified” water. Not that I’m any sort of beer critic, but I’d agree with this review I found online: “La Beninoise: Transparent gold,



moderate white ring, oily top. Skunked nose, light corn grass, actually considerable hops. Flavor is lightly grassy, nice hop, lightly dusty, corn. Decently carbonated, balanced. Not bad.”

(And I thought wine snobs were pretentious! I just thought every cold La Beninoise tasted pretty good and I didn’t even notice any skunkiness or dustiness.)

During the second round of beers, Vogle began educating me and the lesbians about voodoo. He’s quite well spoken, is able to discuss Putin’s political views, knows Obama is the U.S. President, and seems fairly well educated. Yet, he asks if the U.S. shares a border with

Indonesia, and fortunately knows nothing of Justin Bieber. He’s a true voodoo believer. He says that the Western media has given voodoo a bad rap and that it’s not all bad; voodoo has the power to do lots of good.

As examples, he says that a voodoo priest can bless the leaf of a certain tree for about \$200 (almost a year’s average income) and if you carry that blessed leaf in your pocket, it will give you good luck on any journey and prevent vehicle accidents. Or, if you have a job and want to get a promotion, a voodoo priest can utter some incantations that will give you an advantage over your

competitors. If you feel that people don't like you, go to a voodoo priest and he will mix up some special potions and you'll immediately notice that people start becoming friendlier with you.

As we sat at our table in front of the buvette, bands of increasingly drunk chanting voodoo adherents passed in front of us, some covered in white powder. I asked Vogle what the white powder meant, and he said, "Oh, it just makes them look different." By now, the passing voodoo-ers seemed to be in trances, but were probably just very drunk. Their eyes were rolled back and their bodies looked very limp. Although they didn't fall down, they seemed to drag the toes of their bare feet as they staggered along the dirt path, somehow reminding me of the shuffling zombies in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video.



During lunch, I was sitting beside Kleman and finally decided to ask him what I'd been wondering for the last few hours. He had a very prominent scar on his face that looked like a machete had slashed from his left temple to the corner of his mouth. You just couldn't miss it. If you knew the guy, you'd certainly refer to him as, "my friend with that big nasty scar on his face." I wondered if Boko Harum kidnappers from Niger had attacked him, or if he'd had some terrible zem accident.

No, it was nothing like that. With Vogle translating, he explained that before Kleman was born, his mother had given birth to a dead child, which meant the next child born must have its face disfigured in this manner, which would ward off evil spirits and ensure that this next child and any future children she might bear would survive.

Some Beninese sitting at the adjoining table had been overhearing this English explanation and seemed surprised that I didn't already know why he was scarred. Wasn't it obvious? His older sibling had died and the cut was to keep him and any future siblings safe.

Doesn't everybody know that? If a woman gives birth to a child who subsequently dies during delivery or at an early age, and if the mother believes in voodoo and is really lucky, she'll quickly have another child. This will take some praying to the voodoo priests, of course. You never want to be childless in Benin. That would be shameful.

So, if she *is* fortunate enough to bear another child, it is imperative that she incises the newborn child's face with a knife (probably dull and rusty) so the child will live. And this will also ensure that any future children will remain alive and safe from any dangerous voodoo spells. If you don't disfigure the first child after having one die, it is absolutely certain that all subsequent children will die.

Poor Kleman had been in the unfortunate position of being the first child to be born after one had died. He wasn't ashamed of his scar, and he was not the object of undue attention or ridicule... or even pity. It is simply a fact of life that one must have his or her face slashed or else the voodoo gods who were responsible for the first child's death will make sure that you and all future children die. Everybody knows that. Any Beninese who sees Kleman immediately knows his whole story. I guess I need more voodoo lessons to understand things like this.

Scarification is common throughout West Africa. Vogle explained that people's faces and bodies are disfigured in different patterns, depending on their towns of origin. In Ouidah, for example, you signal your citizenship by having a total of 10 gashes carved into your face, two on your forehead directly above your nose, two on each side of your face at eye level, and two more on each of your lower cheeks.

Vogle continued with his little lesson on voodoo and explained that people are becoming much more educated and worldly these days. They used to believe that everyone who is short has bad voodoo, but many people no longer believe this. Progress!

In Benin, you never eat with your left hand, and never give or receive a gift with it. I have long ago learned to forgo using my left-hand when I travel in places like this.

In many parts of the world where there is no toilet paper, the left hand is considered taboo. It's used for only one thing: wiping your ass. It's your unclean hand. In Indonesia, for example, you assume that everybody's left hand has remnants of fecal matter under the fingernails. That's the only thing the left hand is used for. So, I assumed that the West African shunning of the left-hand was for the same reason. Oh no, Vogle explained, it's because your left hand has bad voodoo. But, as with local beliefs about short people, the left hand voodoo beliefs are also subsiding. More progress!

Belief systems fascinate me, and I'll leave it at that.

After lunch, Vogle explained that we really must visit the Temple of Pythons. This is a tourist trap. One particular sect of the voodoo religion reveres snakes and there's some complicated story about the reason for this, which I didn't fully understand.

Any visitor to Ouidah certainly must visit the Temple of Pythons. If you're white, there is an admission fee of about four dollars to enter the enclosure...



unless you have a camera, and then it's ten dollars. If it's a video camera, it's twenty. This is a money making machine for the priests of this particular voodoo sect.

Once inside the enclosure, a "guide" attempts to explain that this very enclosure is revered throughout the voodoo world. He led us to an upended pottery vase

about one-third buried in the ground. It had a lot of colored powders sprinkled around its base, which was now its top, and he explained that this is where many sacrifices take place. Every seven years, the priests turn the vase right side up and fill it with some sacred leaves and then it's turned back upside down for the next seven years. I didn't understand this at all. But, then, I don't understand very much of what Hindus and Seventh Day Adventists believe, either.

The guide also explained that the pythons only eat once a month. They're allowed to leave the enclosure and slither around town foraging for rats and other food, but once sated, they all return to their special sacred enclosure. If they cross the street and happen to enter the Catholic basilica, the priests carry them back to their own temple.

And finally, for the high point of our Temple of Pythons visit, we entered the snake chamber. This is a round hut about 20 feet in diameter containing roughly 50 pythons. They're just lying about not doing much until the guide picks some up and drapes them around visitors' necks. Then, you're asked if you want a photograph with the python around your neck and there's no telling



what this costs.

By now, I'd had enough of the pythons and the voodoo festival and was quite ready to return to my hotel.

Driving with Kleman back along the long bumpy dirt highway, I noticed that there was some old road building equipment by the roadside, though no road building seem to have happened for quite some time. Graders and trucks had flat tires and a bulldozer was arthritically rusted atop a dirt mound. All of the equipment was emblazoned with Chinese graphics. This is because part of China's long-term global political strategy is to ensure that it is the dominant foreign force in the African continent. I had first noticed this way back in the 1970s during my vagabonding travels throughout Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. I never saw any Chinese people, just their equipment. Apparently the project managers live in camps and don't mix with Africans. But if there's a road under construction almost anywhere in Africa, you can be sure that the Chinese are behind it.

As it was now late afternoon, I was quite exhausted from all the translating and straining to understand voodoo, and I just wanted some quiet time alone in my hotel room. That was going to be difficult because I suspected that Helene would be waiting for us when we got back to Cotonou.

I asked Blondie to please explain to Kleman in French that I felt sick in the tropical heat and needed to get back to the air-conditioned hotel without delay. But, Helene was expecting us, Blondie informed me, and it would impolite to go straight to the hotel. So, sure enough, we bumped along to Helene's apartment building and she was thrilled to see us. I was afraid this would turn into dinner and drinking so I begged off and jumped on the back of a zem, even at the white man price, and headed back to the hotel, grateful for some quiet time alone so I could write this for you.

A Typical Morning In A Beninese Family Compound

Vogle rode all the way to Cotonou with us after the Temple of Pythons visit and invited me to meet his family back in Ouidah the next morning. This is the kind of opportunity I always expect will crop up when I travel with an open mind, so I gratefully accepted, checked out of the hotel in the morning, and took my backpack on the back of a zem.

Vogle was on another zem, and guided us back to Ouidah, where he took me around to various ongoing voodoo celebrations in open fields around town, and furthered my education about local customs.

After seeing one voodoo gathering after another, we rode zems to his home compound on the outskirts of Ouidah. That's where I first met the family I stayed with for the next week.

After introductions and a strange dinner of gelatinous corn dough and slimy okra, Vogle opened a door to a small, unlit room with a foam mattress on the floor and said I could sleep there. Although he told me it was his brother's room and he was away at school, I'm pretty sure it was really Vogle's and he was just trying to make me feel better about taking over his room.

And now, it's my first morning with the Beninese family that has taken me in.

It starts with sweeping sounds. Just before 6:00 AM, one of the orphans living with my new family sweeps the dirt floor of the compound. Roosters are crowing and the "bicycle chickens," (so named because they are constantly racing around), are clucking and pecking at dust piles, hoping that his sweeping may have revealed some piece of grain.

As is always the case close to the equator, there is no long lovely sunrise. It's completely dark right now, and in about 45 minutes, it will suddenly be light. This takes me back to my first visit to Africa, in 1970, when I initially experienced the year-round equatorial rhythm of 12 hours of light, and 12 of dark without extended sunrises or sunsets.

There is just one light bulb here in the dirt compound, and it went out last night. I asked if there was some technical trouble, and my hosts said, "That's what they want us to think, but we are sure the authorities intentionally turn off the power in some parts of the town because there is not enough to go

around, and they don't want the whole village to be dark all the time." In the middle of the night, our light bulb came on again, and some other part of town went dark.

There are two mud brown structures in this compound. They're made of cinder blocks, but must be plastered with a coat of mud during the rainy season. Together, the two structures have four small rooms that are home to about a dozen people, but I've not been able to figure out who is who.

The deceased father of this family had two wives, and my hosts say they are very fortunate that before he died, he brought his two wives together and insisted that they live in peace. So, there are various children and grand children, plus the orphans who've been taken in. I don't know what the blood connections are, but they all seem to be one family.

Normally, when a Beninese man dies, his multiple wives hire voodoo priests to kill the other wives so they can lay claim to the husband's belongings. Vogle's uncle had four wives and when he died, war broke out between the wives and their respective kids. Although the four wives are still alive today, their children are dying one by one as a result of the conflicting voodoo spells.

There is certainly no possibility of an Internet connection where I am. There are a couple of Internet cafes in the town, but I have no way to get there, and could never find my way back here, so the compound's dirt courtyard is now my world.

An old blackboard is propped up against one wall beneath the light bulb. At least, I think it was



once a blackboard. Now, it's the center of learning here, though its surface is wavy and weathered and has no remaining traces of black. Last night, one of the adults scratched some

lines and angles on it with a nub of chalk and was trying to teach geometry to one of the orphan kids. As I observe the young boy's confused blank look, it seems to me that he's not going to get it. Although nobody looks malnourished, there is certainly not sufficient nutrition to make young minds sharp.

I'd really like to have a cup of coffee this morning, but that's out of the question, although I did bring Nescafe powder with me. It would be unwise to drink the water they use for everything here, even if boiled.

I also limit my food intake. There is no toilet in the compound, and I really don't know how the people in the family handle bathroom needs. My host showed me where to urinate behind one of the buildings, and there is a small hole in the back wall, but I just can't imagine how one defecates and then somehow pushes excrement through the hole. Later today, I hope we'll go into town and find a restaurant that has a larger hole in the floor so I may relieve myself.

Propped up beside the wavy "blackboard," I see the rolled up woven mat of palm fronds that was our dinner table on the dirt last night. Everybody is



amazed when I sit on the mat with them and eat their food. They say no white man ever does that in Africa. But I want to experience real African life. I don't know what I had for dinner last night. There was some white gelatinous substance in a ball about the size of a baseball, and it was wrapped in leaves. You peel off the leaves and end up with this white stuff that's apparently made from maize flour. Although it's just about tasteless, the people here say that what we ate was very special because someone brought it from another town yesterday, which they say has a special preparation method that gives it the superior flavor...that I can't detect.

We also had a small bowl of brown sauce with some tiny bits of fish, and some onion pieces. There may have been tomato sauce in there, too, but it certainly didn't come from a can.

And that was dinner.

It's 6:15 AM now, but not a hint of light yet. There's a radio crackling, and plenty of roosters crowing all around, so light should be here soon. Two of the women in the family swish past me in the dark, but I can't tell who they are. They greet me softly in Fon, the local language, and I smile, hoping it will convey my appreciation at being here to start the day with them.

Now, two scrawny kittens have emerged from where they live beneath the trash pile in the corner of the compound. They don't bother the several baby chicks that are pecking around. Even the adult "bicycle chickens" are very small. I don't think the kittens have the energy to chase anything, though.

Several dented aluminum pots are piled beside an old cockeyed chair. They're used for cooking, bathing babies, washing clothes and dishes, and who knows what else.

There's a well right beside me, and I can't imagine what a water quality test of its water would reveal. Yet, these people get by. They do have the luxury of a water tap by the entrance door of the courtyard, but only use that liquid for drinking, since it's measured and they have to pay for the semi-clean water. I'll hold off until I can get a Coke or beer in town.

More signs of life now, as voices come from the other compound building. Each "room" has foam mattresses on the floor, and each is shared by various adults and children. I've been honored as a respected elder with my own



mattress and the privacy of having a room all to myself.

At 6:30, children begin to emerge from the doorways. They rub their eyes and look at me, still not quite believing that a white man is in their compound. One little girl just approached me and tenderly took my hand to greet me. Last night, I had listened as she read her French schoolbook to me, and I

told her she was very intelligent. Since then, she smiles every time she sees me.

All of the adults gnaw on wooden sticks about five inches long and roughly the diameter of a pencil. They chomp on the end until the moistened plant fibers soften, and then scruff their teeth with the stick. There are no electric toothbrushes here.

Oh, how I'd like a cup of coffee and a toilet. But that's not going to happen.

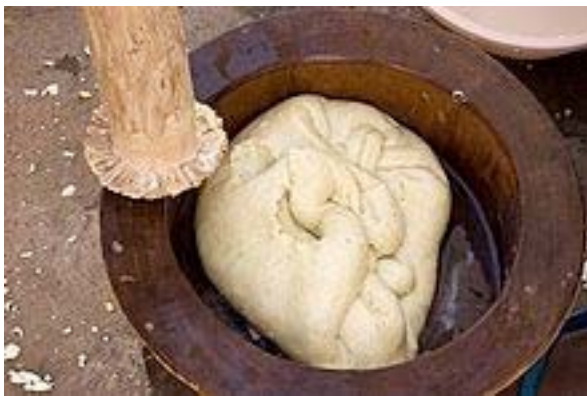


The Formal Family Feast

I wanted to show my appreciation to this family for taking me in, feeding me, and treating me as a family member. So, I told Vogle that I'd like to take everybody out for dinner. I had in mind an actual restaurant with air conditioning and silverware, but there is no such place anywhere around here. He took me on his motorbike to find someplace where we could later go for dinner. Since it's just not commonly done, he can't think of a single place. Nobody takes a whole family, including the children, out for dinner, and certainly not a white man.

What we found is not what you'd call a "restaurant." There's a woman on a dirt road who is known for being a good cook when it comes to preparing a local specialty, "Igname pilé." She was sitting on a rickety crude wooden bench outside the decaying doorway of a walled courtyard, though the word "courtyard" carries the implication that there was something appealing about it. There wasn't. She agreed to prepare her specialty for the family later in the evening.

I don't know how to properly pronounce her Igname pilé specialty, but I can tell you how it's made. It starts with white yams. These are boiled to soften them up. Then, the yams are placed in a sort of mortar, which is a tree trunk that has been hollowed



out. The diameter is about 13 inches, and it's about that deep, too. She and a muscular young man both pound the yams with pestle-like pieces of wood roughly as thick as baseball bats, and about half again as long. They have a rhythmic way of working together so that as one lifts one pestle, the other smashes the second one into the tree trunk's cavity, further softening the yams.

When the yams have been pounded into a pasty consistency, the woman dives both hands into the tree trunk and kneads the glop. Finally, she grabs off a fistful and puts it on each diner's plate.

And then there's the meat sauce. I'm not sure what meat it is, and it doesn't resemble any animal body part that I recognize. The chunk of meat is served in a chipped and rusted metal bowl, along with some brown sauce.

If I'd been asked what kind of food I liked, yams would be right down at the bottom of my list along with eggplant and okra. And, I wouldn't choose any piece of meat, even if I recognized it. However, as their guest and host, I couldn't be so rude as to suggest that their special food wasn't to my liking.

Surprisingly, I *did* like it! I took pictures of the dark scene and made a big deal about how good it tasted, but I didn't eat much. I'm afraid to eat much because I still haven't seen anything resembling a toilet! I've been waiting a couple of days to find one.

There were ten of us at the family feast, and getting back to the compound with the three available motorbikes took a couple of trips. I rode on the back of Vogle's, and other bikes each carried two or three riders. The youngest babies are strapped around the mothers' waists and somehow manage not to fall out of their sashes.

These kids had never been to a restaurant before, and were very grateful that I'd included them for this wonderfully lavish experience. Each family member had practiced how to say, "Thank you very much for take us out," and lined up to individually thank me in English.

The evening went a little downhill after that. I had decided to use my very thin sleeping bag so that I'd have a barrier between my skin and the colonies of insects that probably live in the foam pad I sleep on. However, the power went out soon after retiring, which meant the fan quit and the stifling hot air just settled on me. I lay there on top of the unzipped bag sweating in the still,

humid air. I must have slept a little, because I remember having a dream about rain, but when I told Vogle about it, he assured that there will be no rain for the next few months.

Simmering Sacrificial Goats And Silly Sproingy Santa Hats

It's another voodoo festival night in Ouidah, Benin, West Africa. Throughout the town, drums are beating as various voodoo priests gather their followers. I'm at one of these pulsating assemblies, and there's a big kettle on a fire with parts of a goat that's just been sacrificed. People in wildly colorful costumes stir the pot with big sticks and jostle the branches of the fire to coax the flames.

Only when they're close to the flames can I really see them because it's dark, dark, dark, as are they. Groups of 4 or 5 dancers in trance-like frenzies stomp their feet and shake crudely fashioned metal bells in front of the priests, who wave magic "wands" of animal hair to show their approval. The throbbing is intense from various drummers who somehow beat in unison. It sounds like you'd expect a movie sound track about voodoo drummers to sound.



The women dancers in one group are bedecked with the goofy hats you might see for sale at Wal-Mart in early December. They're made from a head-circling band of fluffy white "fur" that's topped with a spiral of material that resembles a thick red pipe cleaner, and at the very top is a white puffball. It's the kind of

hat you might wear to a company Christmas party if you wanted to look really silly. As you dance, the spiral sproings and the puffball bounces up and down. Somehow, these voodoo women have acquired these Santa hats, though they surely have never heard of Mr. Claus.

I am the only white face among the several hundred chanting, stomping, staggering, swooning worshippers, and many of them are looking at me. I surreptitiously reach for my tiny camera, despite the low light, and take one dim picture of some celebrants. Then I notice that they're noticing me! I decide against taking any more photographs.

The Mad, Rare, And Valued Native Speaker:

While in Benin, I had the opportunity to visit two different secondary schools. The family that adopted me included three teachers who worked at local government schools. Lucky for me, all three were *English* teachers. But that doesn't mean they could really *speake* English.

One of the schools, which is distinctively named "School Number Four," was sadly Third World. There were some concrete block buildings around the perimeter of the large red brown dirt field, which was continually being crossed by groups of loudly chattering and laughing kids, even though the classes were in session.

The English class my host teaches is not in any building. There is a cracked concrete floor and large tree branches have been stuck in the dirt around it in an upright position, and there are some cross-tresses nailed together, and a fairly new galvanized steel corrugated roof. But that's it. There are no walls, and adjacent classrooms have no separation. This particular school has a much better reputation than the notorious School Number Three. You see, School Number Four has actual blackboards! (We'll get to School Number Three in a minute.)

This particular school actually employs about a dozen part-time teachers. They are paid two dollars an hour and are fortunate to have eight hours of class time scheduled each week. That gives them a monthly salary of about \$64, which is roughly *double* what half of Benin's population lives on.

I speak two dialects of English. The one I use when I'm in a Third World non-English-speaking country is far, far different than the English I use when I'm talking with you or writing this description. When abroad, I speak slowly, am extremely distinct, and enunciate clearly, using only words that I know would likely be in an early English learner's vocabulary. I'd never say it was a "scorching hot" day, for example. They're certainly not going to know what that means. Only "very, very hot" will be understood. (To be fair, School Number Four's head teacher told me it was "*boiling* hot" that day and smiled, proudly showing off that he had an advanced mastery of English vernacular.)

I had been invited as a rare guest speaker at the teacher staff meeting. Talking to these English teachers, I noticed that they were all leaning toward me and intently watching my mouth move as I spoke. Yet, you know how you can tell

when someone doesn't really understand you, perhaps because they're hard of hearing (as I am)? They don't nod at quite the right time and if you say something that's supposed to be funny, it may take a half second too long for them to react.

School Number Four's English teachers reacted that way. They were grateful that I was there because it gave them a chance to hear a true "native speaker." The English that's taught in a primitive Francophone country is a lot different than an American postgrad student's "native" English.

I told the educators how much I admired them for persevering as teachers, despite their very harsh circumstances in Benin and the utter lack of teaching resources they have to work with. Everybody knows that schools receive only a thin drizzle of the funding that's allocated to them. They're not happy about it at all. And yet, they accept their reality. The truth is, they're glad to have any job where they can count on \$64 a month. "The system" is something they can't change, and besides, if they had some way to eject corrupt leaders, even more corrupt leaders would take their place.

(We're still going to be getting to notorious School Number Three.)

Throughout my stay in Benin, the very few English speakers I encountered were surprisingly ignorant of the English language and consistently grateful for my "advanced help," even when they themselves were English teachers.

In one of the classes I observed, the very, very basic subject revolved around "Sports And Games." Some of the students used photocopied and tattered pages from thin stapled and outdated schoolbooks. But many students didn't even have photocopies. After all, a photocopy is expensive to obtain if you're poor in Benin.

So the teacher was reading these "sports and games" words, urging his students to repeat what he was saying, and then giving them a little quiz. There was a crude picture of a man on a playing field with a whistle in his mouth, one hand raised, and wearing a striped shirt. In the list of the dozen vocabulary words beside the picture, one of them was "referee."

The teacher held up his own tattered photocopied book and pointed to the picture of the referee and admonished his class that they must repeat after him

several times to properly learn how to say the word: "Ruh FURRR eeee." I didn't upstage the teacher by interjecting with the correct pronunciation.

This teacher always brandished a four-foot-long tree branch about three quarters of an inch in diameter at one end and sharply pointed at the other. One student accidentally said "REF eree" instead of the teacher's mispronounced "Ruh FURRR eeee" version, so the teacher whacked the kid on the head. Hard.

Beside a picture of the two pigtailed (presumably white) girls made to look like they were twirling a rope between them was the term "rope skipping." When the teacher reached that picture, he made it clear to his class that the vocabulary entry was correctly pronounced "RUPP-skeeeepin." When one student repeated what sounded more like the proper pronunciation, he got a whack.

Like teachers all over the world, these teachers had entered their profession because they were motivated to help young people. They were taught English by someone who was taught English by someone who was taught English and "referee" had morphed into "Ruh FURRR eeee."

They're not bad people... quite the contrary. They just didn't know how to speak the English they were supposed to be teaching their students to speak. You might wonder why they don't get a DVD and teach themselves how to pronounce simple English words. Are you kidding? They can't afford a DVD player. "Okay, there must be plenty of English courses online," I hear you thinking. But the school doesn't have even a single computer, and just about nobody has one at home.

While staying with the English teachers in my host family, I had time to teach them a little "really advanced English." When they were appropriate in our conversation, I introduced words like "nepotism" and "brackish" and explained what a "whistleblower" is and what it meant if you said someone was "tightly wound." They know that this is advanced English that doesn't turn up in a basic textbook, so they were really grateful for my help. A few minutes later, I'd hear them find a way to toss in a "whistleblower" in our conversation to make sure I knew that they'd paid attention and learned the word.

My other school visit was quite a bit different. This was the widely known as the notorious School Number Three. As we approached the school down a very dusty, dirty pathway lined with piles of rubbish accumulating in the

adjacent vacant lots, I could hear a din of excited voices. I was on the back of my host's motorbike, and there were plenty of other motorbikes buzzing past as teachers came and went. Yet, the din was much louder than any chorus of motorbikes could drown out.

Because of the noise level, I assumed it must be recess, or lunchtime. You know how excited young kids get as they chatter with their friends during lunch break. These kids ranged in age from about 8 to 14, so there's a certain amount of hormonal activity going on, too.

I was wrong. It wasn't recess. This was just the normal noise of the day during class time. School Number Three doesn't have anything close to "walls" surrounding or separating the classrooms. There are some cheaply and roughly woven palm frond panels propped up around the perimeter and leaning against the tree branches that hold up the roof. But they're not attached. So with every slight breeze, the tattered panels fall off into the dirt and nearby students leave their seats to prop them back up again. Don't be thinking of a panel that you might buy at Ikea or a Pier 1 Imports store. These were very roughly woven



gatherings of palm fronds that had been used and reused so many times that they were soiled and shabby and falling apart. There weren't enough to go around, either.

As the class began, I marveled that any students could even hear their teacher. This teacher's own curriculum (and I presume there must have been some teacher certification process) had obviously not included any instruction on "classroom behavioral management." The 62 kids in the "classroom" laughed and talked loudly among themselves while he was mispronouncing "referee"... so long as his back was turned and he was writing on what was supposed to be a blackboard. But it wasn't a blackboard.

It was a roughly 4' x 8' piece of what you might call quarter inch plywood. Only, it had been used and reused so many times that it was warped and dog-eared, with a rough surface that had never been smooth in the first place. It was screwed to the upright tree branches that served as the separation between the classrooms. The teacher used a small nub of chalk, which he had had to buy himself, and he carefully wrote "referee" on the plywood. In order to erase these traces of chalk, he had only a torn piece of a tattered shirt that snagged on the splinters.

The trouble was, this particular piece of plywood had apparently been used for years, so the so-called "blackboard" had an academic archaeologist's dream of layer after layer after layer of years of traces of written English words that had been mispronounced by the teachers.



As the teacher finished writing each "sports and games" vocabulary word on the piece of plywood, he would turn around, face the disruptive class, identify the two or three worst behaved students, and whack them on the head with his stick. The other students cowered, while giggling that they had gotten away with their own shenanigans without getting a beating.

I was literally angry about the school's conditions. I consider no job more important than the job of being a teacher, particularly in the case of an extremely poor Third World country. Of course, the kids are the country's future, and their teachers are shaping them, and it's really the only hope for things to ever get better in that country.

Not even a chalkboard eraser, let alone an actual blackboard that could even be erased!

My hosts and I had developed a very open and honest level of communication right from the start, so they were happy to explain exactly why things were so bad. In Benin, schools have two sources of funding. The first is government money, which probably came from a supportive foreign government's donation. That money, though, never reaches the schools. It's immediately embezzled and redirected to officials' secret bank accounts.

The second source of funding is "school fees." Girls pay nothing for public education. But a boy's family must come up with \$30 in fees for a year of classes. The trouble at School Number Three is that the collected school fees are entrusted to the principal's care. He is widely known to be and is referred to as "one of the thieves."

When one young female teacher applied for a position at School Number Three, this principal first impregnated her and then hired her. She became his third wife. Both he and wife number three are on the government payroll. They have a car! They have a house! But the school's teachers do not have erasers to smear what they've written with nubs of chalk on rough plywood while the unruly children... all 62 of them in this case... laughed, chattered, poked each other, and stared at me, the strange white man, sitting up front. (Just sitting on wobbly a stool; there is no such luxury as a teacher's desk.)

The whole scene is what made me angry. The country of Benin doesn't work now and I don't see much hope that it will in the future. The U.S. Department of State website shows pictures of clean, smiling, attractive Beninese children

being “saved” from poverty. But regular citizens believe that America has cut off foreign aid to the country because so little ... if any ... of it actually reaches the country’s ordinary citizens. I never saw a single American flag or other indication that U.S. funds were affecting anybody’s life.

I guess my teaching the word "nepotism" to the teachers didn't quite do the job. I should've taught them: "Rampant greed and corruption to an astounding extent, perpetrated by morally bankrupt bureaucrats who make no attempt to alter the status quo so they can slurp at the trough of school fees until the next batch of nepotistic sycophantic scumbag demagogues take their jobs.”

Benin Bus Ride: In a Puddle of Pandemonium

Finally, this bus is moving. I'm headed from Abomey, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, back to Cotonou, the commercial center of Benin. The distance is about 88 miles, but it's an all-day ordeal to get there.

The "bus terminal" is a dusty field outside of town surrounded with vendors selling barbecued meats, odd mixtures of mashed and salted seeds, and a few clothes. Several men stand around holding up single pairs of dirty jeans, hoping for a sale. A man walks past me wearing a once-white soiled tee shirt printed with a campaign slogan from some candidate who ran for sheriff of a



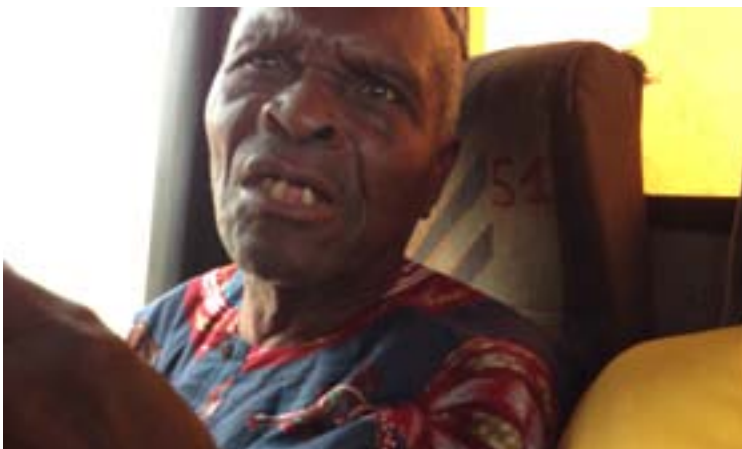
county in Pennsylvania. The man wearing it now certainly has no idea what his shirt says.

One woman sits beside her tattered white sack filled with what looks like dried mud. She spoons out small dollops to her customers, and I buy a scoop. It's



very, very salty, but I can't identify what it is. Vogle explains that when people can't afford to buy any meat or even a small piece of fish, they buy this salty, muddy mixture of fermented seeds and pretend it's meat.

When we boarded our bus, pandemonium broke out among the passengers because of some seat conflicts. When you buy a bus ticket in Benin, you should receive a well-thumbed dirty square of cardboard with a number written on it. That should correspond with the magic-markered number written on each seat of the bus. The problem is that when this bus finally arrived from the north of the country, some people had already been sold seats with the same numbers as those which the new passengers had been assigned in Abomey.



So, the yelling began. I thought the arguing might even come to blows. Everybody's yelling and pointing and pushing. I just remain silent, figuring that in the end, it will all

work out, so long as I don't dare step off the bus.

I'm in the very back of the bus, in seat #52. A very kindly 88-year-old man is seated beside me and talks to me periodically in his native tongue, which may be "Fon." But, it may not. Depending on what part of the tiny country he was



born in, he may be speaking "Aja" or "Phla-Pherá." It's certainly not French, much less English. He smiles, and other passengers sitting nearby refer to him as "PaPa," since elders are widely respected.

I'm glad to be here in the back row, because it's just a few rows behind the roof vent, which might yield a breeze if we ever start moving. "Air conditioning" consists of this one vent, which is wedged partly open with a stick, and held in that position by some straightened coat hangers attached to the luggage rack so that the roof of the vent doesn't just fly off.

Please, can we just start moving so this hot, heavy, perspiration-laden air can circulate a little?

Before we finally began the journey, while all the shouting pandemonium was underway, I was streaming with sweat, as was everybody else. There are puddles of liquid on the floor that just might be pools of perspiration. I start to wonder how many previous passengers have sweated in my soggy seat.

Of course, I'm the only white person on the bus, which means I'm referred to as "Neuvo" (or something like that) in this particular area's local language. There are dozens of words for people like me. The most common I hear is "Yovo," or "white man" in Fon.



(Now that we're finally underway and everybody seems to have a separate seat, an onboard sales pitch has begun. There's a man standing in the aisle telling everybody about the special medicine he has to sell. He appears to be quite persuasive and does look healthy. I'll watch to see how he does.)

I'd originally planned to be headed north from Abomey, to the three-point border where the territories of Benin, Togo, and Burkina-Faso meet. However, I gave up after one day of travel. This is my 108th country, and it's the most difficult place in which I've ever traveled. So instead, I'm on a bus headed south, back to the coast where I began.

On the bus, I unfold a country map to follow our slow progress. It shows several airports along the way, and I wish I could be on an airliner instead of this swaying, sweltering, sales-pitching bus. But, there is really only one functioning commercial airport in the country, despite the symbols on the map. Government ministers tell the people about the marvelous projects their tax money is funding. Airports everywhere! But there are none, my friends say, even though they show on the map beside Natitingou and Djougou. My Beninese friends call them "ghost airports." Aside from the commercial flights in and out of the only real airport, I've never seen any airplane.

According to my friends, the ministers who boast about these nonexistent or non-functioning airports, though, have villas and shop in Europe for their girlfriends and wives.



As the bus lurches and sways past impoverished farmers scratching a living out of their bean fields, we occasionally pass huge but incomplete mansions. They're just out in the middle of nowhere, and I can't imagine why they're there. Vogle explains, "Oh, they're the houses of the government thieves. They begin to build them so they can bring their girlfriends out for the weekend, but then they forget about the projects and just abandon them. They never did any work for the money, so they don't care."

(The medicine salesman now reaches into his black plastic bag and is now showing off little bottles of brown liquid about the size of a shampoo bottle you'd expect to find in a hotel room. He's demonstrating that you can moisten

a bit of cotton with the brown stuff and stick it in your ear, which will cure any ear or hearing problems. There's just one taker so far, but he's clearly an



eloquent and persuasive fellow, using lots of hand gestures and very animated facial gesticulations.)

One reason I'm on the bus is that there are no flights within Benin. But there is a railroad, which is one of the reasons I came to Benin in the first place. I love to ride unusual trains. I should say there are "train tracks" in Benin. It turns out that one of the hotel clerks on my first night in the country advised me correctly: The last train ran two years ago. Now the train tracks are overgrown and disappearing.

(Oh, it turns out that the salesman's brown liquid also cures impotence and stomach problems, my friend Vogle explains. No more takers just yet. The pitch is getting even better though. He's squatting in the aisle vigorously scratching his leg. This is to demonstrate that it will cure some local disease that makes you itch and itch, which forces you to scratch and scratch until you bleed... unless you buy his potion. Two people just bought bottles for 1500 CFA, about \$3.00. Who would want to itch to death?)

I'm on the bus because with no planes and no train, the only other alternative, which I used to get to Abomey the day before, is something I just couldn't face enduring again today. I'd been staying in my new friend's home outside

Ouidah, the voodoo capital of the world. To get from his house to Abomey yesterday involved the following procedure:

1. Walk a quarter mile to the “road.” This is a cleared path about the width of a road, and which may, at one time, have looked like it might *become* a road. But now, it’s just a dusty ditch. Beside it, a few men sit on motorbikes, waiting for customers. The price always doubles because I’m white. My friend, though, undertakes the negotiations on my behalf. They want to charge over a dollar, but the real price should only be half of that.
2. We perch on the backs of the bikes and ride about 20 minutes along the dusty ditch, swerving because of the loose soil, until we reach another place where motorbikes, called “zems” wait for customers. More negotiating, except this time the zem driver insists that both Vogle and I ride on the back of his single zem. Each of us has a backpack, and I cannot imagine that we could pull this off with even a hint of safety, though the driver insists that we can, and suggests that he’ll prop one of the packs on top of his handlebars. I refuse, and we pay for two zems and head for yet another dusty place where we may be able to get a taxi to the next town down the road.
3. Again, the negotiations begin in earnest. But we’re not negotiating for the cab. We’re bargaining for two seats in the cab. These cars are all battered wrecks that could absolutely never pass any kind of safety inspection, not even for participation in a “Destruction Derby.” We finally secure two places in the single front bucket seat. There are already four adults and a child in the back seat, along with a bulging burlap bundle of apparently edible weeds. We set off, and within a half hour, I just can’t stand it. I’m hot and sweaty and jammed up against the door and feel that my body is going to remind me of this ill-advised ride for days.
4. And then, we transfer to another cab toward another town, but this time we have very good luck. A rattling wreck pulls in with two white people in the back seat, and some Beninese in the front. It turns out that the foreign couple is from Quebec, and they’re also headed for Abomey, our destination. They’ve paid four fares to ensure that they have the whole back seat, and indicate that they don’t care what happens in the front seat, as long as they’re assured that they can remain alone in the back. My friend and travelling companion, Vogle, successfully negotiates a fair price so the two of us can squeeze into the one unsold front seat.

(Now, the medicine man on our bus is rubbing his stomach, which I guess means that the magic liquid will also cure stomach upsets. He's grimacing, apparently showing how awful you'll feel if you have indigestion but don't have the brown miracle medicine. He's so very good at his demonstration; I'm tempted to buy a bottle just because he deserves it after this marvelous performance.)

The appeal of Abomey is that it was once the seat of a succession of twelve rulers of the Dahomey Kingdom from about 1625 to 1900. At least, that's what the various crudely lettered artifact signs indicate. Although we reach the royal palace enclosure a few minutes after closing time, the man who takes our 2500 CFA admission fee (about \$5.00) agrees to show us around.

The tour includes a series of crudely carved wooden thrones, some magic wands of animal hair, and we're then led inside a steamy hut where the last king is buried, along with 41 of his 4000 wives. Really. Four thousand. These 41 just couldn't face life without their king, so they agreed to die along with him. Before entering the dank, dark enclosure, we must remove our shoes as a sign of respect for the king and his wives, and carefully avoid stepping on the two shallow soup bowl-sized depressions in the dirt floor where the king's spirit is "fed" every few days.

(The salesman has now moved to the back of the bus, right by my seat. I'm avoiding eye contact with him as I type.)

I've been to a lot of UNESCO World Heritage sites around the world, and Abomey just doesn't rate up there with the Sphinx or Petra or the Grand Canyon, that's for sure.

(Now he's showing a mason jar filled with some kind of magical wood chips, but Vogle has fallen asleep, so I have nobody to translate and explain what this stuff cures.)

Vogle does all the negotiating, yells when people are in our assigned bus seats, arranges each successive zem and taxi ride, and speaks not only English and French, but also Fon, the local language, and a little German, along with a few other dialects. Plus, he knows how to avoid bad voodoo.

(Now, the salesman holds up small cellophane packets of some white powder, each with a slip of paper inside, probably explaining just how to use the powder. If it protects against pools of putrid perspiration, I want some.)

My original plan was to say farewell to Vogle in Abomey so he could return south to teach a class in Ouidah the next day. I was to head north, alone, to a national park and possibly into Togo and Burkina-Faso.

So, why am I headed south, rather than sticking to my original plan and continuing to the border in the north? The truth is that I just can't handle this on my own. I've learned to listen to my gut. It told me that it's just too tough for me to travel alone in this country, and potentially unsafe, too. So, that's why I made the wise choice to return with Vogle to the relative safety of Ouidah, the world capital of voodoo.

It's Hard To Believe What People ... Including Us ... Believe

I am continually amazed at the belief systems of different cultures. That was my main curiosity about visiting West Africa in the first place: What are the voodoo-based belief systems?

More than half of the people in Benin believe in voodoo. It's well entrenched in every aspect of life, and yet there are also lots of evangelical and Catholic churches, often located right beside sacred voodoo trees or shrines.

The average person is absolutely convinced that "it will help" if you stop and pray and make a little offering to a certain sacred tree if you want to get a promotion at work. If you pray to the god of smallpox, you won't get the disease. And if you don't show respect and make offerings to the voodoo priests, you'll be in real trouble.



I had to visit the sacred voodoo forest of Ouidah, of course, since it's considered one of the main points of interest in the world center of voodoo. It's a pretty sad affair. There is an admission fee, of course, of

about four dollars. That is, if you're white. A "guide" who doesn't speak English explains the couple of dozen crude statues which represent various gods. There's the one with the absolutely gigantic erection who delivers messages to the gods, another who is the God of metal, and there's one with two heads, and another with three heads, and, of course, Sacpata, who rules over various diseases, though there is a special separate deity just for smallpox.



The high point of the forest visit is what appears to be a large and old tree with lots of orange and white powder on the ground in front of it. It's not *really* a tree, though. It's actually one of the gods who transformed himself into the form of a tree and, if given proper tribute, will ensure that you get to meet that special potential girlfriend you've had your eye on. You make an offering and tell the tree/god the name of the girl you want to meet, and it'll happen. There are rules to be followed. You can't just say, "I want to meet a nice girl." You must have a particular girl in mind and be sure to use her name. I guess it's the Beninese version of "the law of attraction," or maybe it's Match.voodoo?

Being an open, communicative, curious guy, I talked about sexual practices with my host, and I steered him toward the subject of cunnilingus. He knew what it was, and sort of lowered his voice to confide that none of your male friends would ever talk to you again if you confessed that you'd "done it" to a girl. Hmmm. I told him that every girl I'd ever known thought it was a darned nice thing to do. "But, everybody will know you are Satan!" my friend whispered. "You should never talk about this. It is unclean and satanic." (So, if you're a girl considering moving to Benin, keep that in mind.) I didn't dare ask about homosexuality or speculate about my lesbian friends' relationship.

The things people believe!

One of my favorite moments of disbelief during my Benin visit came on the last day and involved a "Palm Groove Digilizer." At the restaurant table beside mine, I noticed that a traveling salesman was demonstrating a magical device to the restaurant's owner. It was a high quality metal box, similar to those shiny pieces of expensive airline luggage, only it was the size of a lunchbox. It contained what appeared to be a voltmeter. That's a simple electronic device that a home handyman would use to determine if voltage is getting through. You've seen them. There are two little wired probes and you touch one to one end of a battery and the other probe to the other end and hope that the needle jumps into the green zone.

But the Palm Groove Digilizer didn't just have a red or a green zone. Inside the cover of the very impressive metal box was the outline of a human palm print with very small writing and lines going to different parts of the hand. Descriptions at the end of each line offered explanations of what diseases were indicated by voltage in that part of the hand. The chart looked very much like a small acupuncture diagram of the human body showing where various

chakras and pressure points are (I'm sorry, but I've only had one experience with acupuncture and it's one of my favorite stories to tell. But not now.)

The man with the Palm Groove Digilizer was convincing the restaurant owner that he should attach a small alligator clip to the skin at the base of his thumb while this specialist moved the pointed probe along the various grooves in his palm. When the needle would jump, the specialist would consult his little diagram and I assume he was saying something like, "...oh no, did you see that needle jump? That means you are going to have a bad kidney."

I just quietly watched and resisted blurting out my skepticism about any itinerant huckster's ability to predict kidney failure with a voltmeter. Yet, the restaurant owner was eager to pay for this knowledge.

I kept thinking about the great business prospects if this guy could only team up with the salesman on the hot bus ride from Abomey. He was demonstrating the mysterious brown liquid that would cure anything from impotence to alcohol addiction or psoriasis. What a team they'd make! The Palm Groove Digilizer guy could run the probe over customers' hands, and based on when the needle jumped, simply refer them to the man with brown juice who would verify that yes indeed his special secret potion would prevent kidney failure or any other dreadful disease the groove digilizer specialist told the customer he'd get.

I thought you could learn about absolutely anything using Google on the Internet. But no amount of searching tells me about how the Palm Groove Digilizer works. Every search takes me to some *Palm Grove* resort. In fact, I haven't found one single reference to the device. I only wish I had been able to photograph it to prove it really exists and I didn't dream this up. I noted its name carefully, so I know I'm spelling it right.

So, I started this Benin adventure with the intent of experiencing real Third World life in West Africa. And, I did ... so much so that it whacked me out, emotionally.

To think that half the world's population lives like the family I stayed with, or not even that well. Earth isn't just Hong Kong and Paris and New York. The United States is the 7th richest country (Qatar's at the top with more than double the Purchasing Power Parity index score.) Down at the bottom, in spot number 187, is the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although Benin stands at

position 158, and is thus better off than Haiti or Niger or Mozambique, it's still much more representative of the world's population than is Norway or Australia or Canada.

What depresses me is the feeling that nothing much is going to change. I honor Bill Gates for countering the "myth" that poor countries cannot be saved, however... I just don't see much hope for the Third World. The corruption is seemingly endemic and unalterable. Nothing that truly aids the population seems to get done. And when there is some improvement, such as a new water system or bridge, it falls apart in short order because of poor construction, or lack of maintenance, or just plain apathy.

Without a doubt, my lowest points came when I visited the schools, which I see as the country's future. It just made me feel sad to know that the meager resources allocated to education would dribble away before they funded blackboards.

And yet...

The poorest Beninese I encountered were not despairing. In my family compound, everybody pulled together. Bicycle Mama glopped her hot maize mush into green leaves and wrapped them up, ready to sell them for a few cents to her neighbors. Zem motorbike drivers bought their next liter of dirty hijacked gas and went a few kilometers farther, happy to pocket each 50-cent fare.

There was always music. My hosts had never heard of John Lennon or even the Rolling Stones. They did know of Michael Jackson and Akon. But I was uneducated about the type of music that was always blaring with different songs from different compounds' and businesses' speakers. Vogel translated one Cameroonian song's lyrics. It sounded a little like reggae, and my friend's translation was along the lines of, "You can embargo us, but if we have music and our friends and a little alcohol, you can't make us unhappy."

No normal Westerner would have even entered that family compound in Ouidah, or slept on that infested foam pad, or eaten maize mash on the floor mat with the orphan kids. I'm grateful that I'm not normal.

I hated having the hopelessness — which is only my interpretation based on my First World perspective — rubbed in my face. And yet, I couldn't know the world if I overlooked this dimension of the human experience.

You don't have to love a place to love having been there.