

## 2005 – A YEAR IN BENIN: RECOLLECTIONS OF A PEACE CORPS COUNTRY DIRECTOR

When I write of my travels I usually tell the story chronologically. However, the story of my year in Benin became too long to actually follow. I have divided it into subject sections so that readers can explore the parts that interest them the most. I arrived in Cotonou in mid-February of 2005 so these recollections are from that era.

### *Benin in 2005 and a brief history*

The Peace Corps office and my house were in Cotonou, the principal city of Benin. Porto-Novo is actually the capital and, although the Assemblée Nationale and a few government offices were located there, the seat of the government and Embassies remained in Cotonou. The skies were not an intense blue, perhaps due to dust and other air pollution and, like Agadir, Morocco and other oceanfront cities, the morning haze tended to burn off about mid-day. According to the Rough Guide to West Africa, June is the wettest month with an average rainfall of 366 mm, which translates into about 15" occurring on a total of 13 days. Certainly not the 200" - 400" annually in Pohnpei, Micronesia from where I had transferred!



Benin, formerly known as the Kingdom of Dahomey, is bordered by Togo to the west, Burkina Faso to the north-west, Niger to the north-east, and Nigeria to the east. Nigeria is the most populous (160 million) and largest economy (ahead of South Africa and Egypt) of the African continent.

Benin's population in 2020 is estimated to be approximately 12.2 million, up from about 8 million when I lived there. It is about the size of Pennsylvania and extends approximately 500 miles from the Niger river in the north to the

Bight of Benin on the Atlantic coast. It is a tropical nation, a large exporter of cotton and palm oil with substantial employment in subsistence farming.

Although the official language is French, indigenous languages such as Fon, Bariba, Yoruba and Dendi are primarily spoken outside the cities, according to which ethnic group predominates. This of course meant that Peace Corps (PC) was teaching a large number of languages to its volunteers.

This situation arose from a very interesting ethnic history for such a small country, which Wikipedia explains as follows:

“About 42 African ethnic groups live in this country; these various groups settled in Benin at different times and have also migrated within the country. Ethnic groups include:

> the Yoruba in the southeast and center (migrated from what is now Nigeria in the 12th century);

> the Dendi in the north-central area came from what is now Mali in the 16th century. They are mostly in the Djougou area, which is a major commercial center for north-south traffic in Benin and access to Kara in Togo at the Keteo border post.

> the Bariba and the Fula (or Fulani or Peul) in the northeast who entered the country as nomads from further west. The Fulani cattle herders tend to wear royal blue garments, beaded jewelry, brightly colored scarves over their shoulder and a distinctive straw hat. While many have settled in villages, others are still nomadic.



> the Betammaribe and the Somba in the Atacora Mountain Range in the northwest are one of the oldest civilisations to migrate to Benin about 1000 years ago. They are famous for the fortress-like houses known as Tatas-Somba they built to protect themselves from the Dahomey slave raids. They are an extremely private culture and until recently clothed only to



cover their private sexual areas.

> the Fon in the area around Abomey in the south central; and

> the Mina, Xweda, and Aja (who came from what is now Togo in the 12th century) on the coast.”

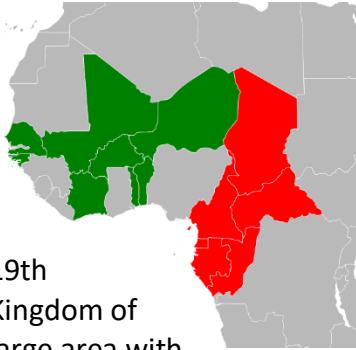
The largest religious group is Christianity (53%), followed by Islam (24%), and Vodun (18%) commonly referred to as Voodoo outside the country. In my experience this traditional religion remained a strong influence in conjunction with the Christianity and Islam including well-developed capabilities in using traditional medicine and local plants in healing (à la Micronesia and Morocco). It is believed that Voodoo originated in Benin and was introduced to Brazil and the Caribbean Islands by slaves taken from this particular area of the Slave Coast. The Muslims



in Cotonou were primarily Nigerians, and I was pleased to be able to hear the calls to prayer from the three mosques located nearby the PC office. Most of the Beninese Muslims were located in more northerly parts of the country.



The literacy rate was one of the lowest in the world, ~50% for males, ~27% for females, but the country has achieved universal primary education and about 50% of youth continue on to secondary education.



19th  
Kingdom of  
large area with

The currency is the cfa, for Communauté Financière Africaine. There are two versions, one for west Africa, green on the map, and one for central Africa, red. Both are pegged to the Euro. The west African version is in the process of being renamed the eco.

Little is known of Benin's early history. From the 17th to the 19th century, the main political entities in the area were the Kingdom of Dahomey, along with the city-state of Porto-Novo, and a many different nations to the north. This region of Africa was referred to as the Slave Coast from as early as the 17th century due to the large number of enslaved people who were shipped to the New World during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. After enslavement was abolished, France took over the country and renamed it French Dahomey. In 1960, Dahomey gained full independence from France. The sovereign state has had a tumultuous history since then, with many different democratic governments, military coups, and military governments. A Marxist–Leninist state called the People's Republic of Benin existed between 1975 and 1990. Vestiges of that era include active Embassies of Cuba and north Korea. Since 1991, it is a democracy and capitalist economy known as the Republic of Benin. Entrepreneurship was very much the way of life — virtually everyone was a merchant and bargaining was the norm.

In addition to nationals of other African nations, the foreign community also included many Lebanese and Indians involved in trade and commerce. At the time, almost all of the restaurants were operated by Lebanese (Christians and Muslims), regardless of the type of cuisine featured. The personnel of the many European Embassies, foreign aid missions, nongovernmental organizations and missionary groups accounted for much of the then-current 5,500 European population.

The city of Cotonou had/has a population of 700,000, 95% of whom were transported on zemijahns — motor scooters driven by a taxi driver. These carried one adult and up to two children (babies are carried on women's backs as in Morocco) and assorted bags, lumber, pipe, etc. They are the yaks of Nepal, the donkeys of Morocco, and the rickshaws of Bangkok. Driving among them is a real sport, not for the faint of heart. But not as intense as were Kathmandu, Bangkok or Casablanca. In Morocco we used to talk about drivers' skills being to avoid one another. It was like that in Cotonou. Picture a very crowded dance floor with each couple trying to do their creative moves (salsa perhaps?)





without bumping into others. That is the way the cars, trucks and zemijahns navigated through the streets, intersections and roundabouts — almost always succeeding in not colliding, but with no inches of space to spare! That which wasn't transported on zemijahns was transported on women's heads, or

men's in the case of the walking vendors who were everywhere, especially at street intersections with traffic lights. I dubbed them walking Walmarts.



On all the major roads in town the area between the pavement and the private property walls were filled with nurseries — plant vendors everywhere - which beautified the city. Elsewhere along the streets, vendors hung colorful batik and block print fabrics and ready-made clothes in the trees to sell, plus furniture — wooden, upholstered and rattan.



For a big, dusty, polluted city I found Cotonou amazingly clean. People were constantly sweeping their property and street frontage, bent over a short broom made of twigs. This felt very similar to Moroccans' attention to cleanliness. The tropical vegetation is constantly

dropping leaves which are swept away. At night people burned the day's sweepings, so there were mini-fires in front of every house.

At the airport, the land not used for runways and taxi-ways was cultivated in vegetables by women who sold the produce at an informal market in my neighborhood which was close to the airport. More entrepreneurship! After Pohnpei's one aircraft per day I was surprised to hear several planes per day. Air France came five times per week from Paris and there was direct service to Johannesburg, Senegal and many other African capitals. Periodically there were long caravans of tanker trucks with a police escort en route to the Port. There was a staging area out of town to keep the trucks from adding to the traffic problems. Then when the supply ship arrived, they were escorted to the port.

Gasoline was a big issue. Oftentimes supplies ran out (as in Micronesia), costs were very high, and there was a great deal of smuggling across the closed Nigerian border. Most local residents bought their gas from street-side vendors selling questionable quality in liter bottles resulting from the smuggling operations. One day I was out on the inland waterway that separates Nigeria from Benin and was able to view the operation first hand. A motor scooter would arrive at the coast driven by a man laden with up to eight 25-liter plastic jerrycans filled with gasoline (think fire hazard). He was met by a colleague in a local canoe (pirogue) into which they would load the jugs. The boatman would then row or pole, depending on the tide level, across the lake, where he would be met by another colleague on a motor scooter on the other side. The jerrycans would again be transferred and delivered to the middleman in Benin. All of this, of course, illegal and under the watchful eyes (and greased palms) of border and customs officials. In 2004 it was estimated that 73% of the Benin market was satisfied by such smuggling.



Most of the paved streets were with interlocking paving stones laid on a bed of sand. One day I saw a team "paving" a street and it was like a ballet as the men tossed the pavers from man to man to the one who finally placed it. On another day it was time to clean one of the main streets in town, which is done with a large group of men sweeping with brooms. It was a divided roadway so they simply closed down one half and diverted traffic to two directions on the other half — at rush hour!



Beninese had several good things going for them health-wise. Sugar was not a part of the local diet. They have beautiful healthy teeth, partly because of that and partly because everyone chews a local plant that is a natural dentifrice. Few people smoked cigarettes. However, maternal, infant and early childhood mortality was very high due to malaria, diarrhea and malnutrition. I have read that concerted government efforts to improve health care has substantially improved those statistics. HIV/AIDs was a growing threat, but not the pandemic of east/south Africa.



Beninese' natural physical beauty is further enhanced by the vibrant colorful fabrics worn by both men and women. Women have very artistic composed hairstyles of braids and swirls and men mostly have shaved heads or very short hair. When it rained the women covered these elaborate hairstyles with large shower caps to protect them. I seldom saw dreadlocks or men with long hair. Cotonou is referred to by many as the Paris of West Africa. Everywhere in the country women use a wrap of cloth called a panga to serve as a skirt. They also fold one as the support for the monumental loads they carry balanced on their heads. Usually there was a baby strapped to her back with another strip of cloth and in the north the women were likely to be bare breasted. If not carrying a load, most women covered their heads with

another artfully wrapped cloth.



All children wore a khaki-colored uniform for school. All other clothes tended to be used European clothing —usually donated to charities and sold in the local markets. You saw outrageous tee shirts and had to remember that the person wearing it had no idea what it said or meant!



The local foods tended to be similar to Micronesia — made from root crops such as yams, taro, and cassava/manioc plus rice. Hand-pounded pillé and pot are the mainstay of the diet (it is like sticky stiff mashed potatoes). The major difference is they were seasoned with hot sauce — chilis — instead of sugar. You eat with your right hand, taking a small chunk and dipping it into the sauce, which is probably a mix of peanuts, tomatoes, onions and chilis or okra and green

leaves. There may or may not be bits of meat and/or fried cheese or a small fried fish. There are a huge variety of chilis.



For a European, everything was available in Cotonou. Drinkable French wines at \$4/bottle, French cheeses (not all 425 varieties), pastis at \$2 per bottle, and patisseries. Truck gardens filled every available vacant plot in Cotonou, thus Roma tomatoes, lettuce, radishes, cucumbers, avocados, etc. were all available - for \$4 for all I could consume in a week. Eggs were fresh and readily available. Ingredients to prepare every cuisine imaginable were there as well (except Moroccan black olives).

### ***Travel and tourism***

Friends from Micronesia passed through Benin on a visit in July, and it gave me the opportunity to visit historic Abomey, Ouidah and Porto Novo as well as the stilt village in Lake Nokoué at Ganvié.

According to Wikipedia, “Abomey was founded in the 17th century as the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey (1600–1904). Dahomey expanded rapidly in the 1700s, absorbing many of the surrounding kingdoms, and growing rich from the slave trade. One of their distinguishing military features was an elite corps of women soldiers known as the Amazones. After several attempts, the French conquered the kingdom on 16 November 1892. The 100-acre town was surrounded by a mud wall with a circumference estimated at 6 miles, pierced by six gates, and protected by a ditch five feet deep, filled with a dense growth of prickly acacia, the usual defense of West African strongholds. When UNESCO designated the royal palaces of



Abomey as a World Heritage Site in 1985 it stated:

*“From 1625 to 1900 twelve kings succeeded one another at the head of the powerful Kingdom of Abomey. With the exception of King Akaba, who used a separate enclosure, they each had*

*their palaces built within the same cob-wall area, in keeping with previous palaces as regards the use of space and materials. The royal palaces of Abomey are a unique reminder of this vanished kingdom."*

Each king was symbolized on a "common appliquéd quilt". Appliqué is still a major artisan activity in Abomey. Here is one that shows the symbols of those kings. Another of mine is a touristic map of Benin, and a third pictures a farmer with his oxen. I also have an apron sporting an elephant.



At a recent temporary exhibition of African fabrics at the fabric museum in Jouy en Josas near Paris, this Abomey appliquéd piece was displayed.



A visit to Ouidah is very moving. Ouidah saw its role in international trade rise when the British built a fort there in 1650. Ouidah troops pushed their way into the African interior, capturing millions of people through tribal wars, and selling them to the Europeans and Arabs. By 1716, when the massive English slave ship *Whydah Gally* arrived to purchase 500 slaves from the king to sell in Jamaica, the Kingdom of

Ouidah had become the second largest slave port in the Triangular trade. Then in 1727 the King of Dahomey attacked and destroyed the town, taking over the slave trade. The last shipment of slaves to the U.S. departed from Ouidah in 1860, even though such trade had been outlawed in 1808. The slave ship *Clotilda* deposited her illegal shipment in Mobile, Alabama.

Attractions in Ouidah include a restored mansion of Brazilian slavers (the *Maison du Brésil*), a Voodoo python temple, an early twentieth century basilica and the Sacred Forest of Kpasse, dotted with bronze statues. The *Route des Esclaves*, by which slaves were taken to the beach, has numerous statues and monuments, including the *Door of No Return*, a memorial arch. In 2003 a second arch was constructed to welcome home descendants of those slaves and named



the Door of Return. Ouidah is often considered the spiritual capital of the Vodun religion, and hosts an annual international Vodun conference.



The city of Porto-Novo was founded around the late 16th century by King Te-Agdanlin of Allada. Soon afterward Portuguese traders arrived to buy slaves from Allada and from neighboring Dahomey. By the 18th Century Porto-Novo was a major West African slave port operated by the indigenous people but supported by Portuguese merchants who resided permanently in the city. It was named after the city of Porto in Portugal. Most of the slaves from Porto-Novo were destined for Brazil but some reached Spanish America, the French Caribbean, and French

Louisiana. Its colorful mosque is said to have been the inspiration for churches in San Salvador Brazil. (Photo courtesy of Joseph Herve Ahissou.)

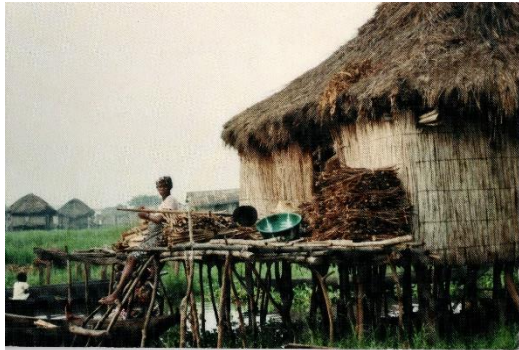


The British, who had colonized nearby Southern Nigeria in 1860, attacked Porto-Novo in 1863. After the attack the city accepted a French military presence for protection against the British. By 1883 the French controlled Dahomey and annexed Porto-Novo into that colony. In 1900 Porto-Novo became the capital of the

entire colony of Dahomey. There is some beautiful architecture and a very active port accessing the Gulf of Guinea via the Oueme river.

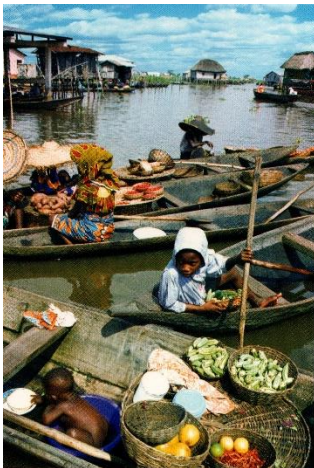
Nearby is the fascinating agricultural research center known as Songhai. The idea of its creation came from Father Godfrey Nzamujo, who is a Dominican priest with doctorate degrees in electronics, microbiology, and development science. Leaving his post as Fellow/Professor at the University of California, Irvine, he joined forces with a group of Africans and friends of Africa who shared the vision of giving back to Africa its dignity. Only Benin fully embraced his vision and an acre of land was donated by the Benin government to implement the project near Porto-Novo. Thus, Songhai was created in October 1985, borrowing its name from a powerful and flourishing West African empire of the fifteenth century. Four years after its creation, Songhai began to train young agricultural entrepreneurs in its vision of a systemic “green” approach to agriculture in which everything is interconnected. Livestock, crop production, energy production, and

aquaculture energize each other. The Songhai model has been replicated in 15 African countries with the support of UNDP (UN Development Program) and Songhai was recognized as a Regional Centre of Excellence for Africa by the United Nations in 2008.



Ganvié, only accessible by boat, is sometimes called the Venice of Africa. (Photo postcard courtesy of Giulio Castellani.) Even the market is held on the water with women and children selling wares from their pirogues. The ancestors of the Tofinu people who now inhabit Ganvié migrated from near the current Togolese border. By creating their village on the water, they were safe from the Dahomey slave traders who, for religious reasons, were forbidden to extend their attacks over water. The stilt village

was/is home to over 20,000 people who make their living primarily from fishing. They create a network of underwater fences with branches which trap the fish, storing them to be eaten, sold or kept for breeding. The village was often over-run with tourists as it is probably Africa's largest lake village. (Postcard photos of chilis, tomato seller and artisanal palm oil production courtesy of Emile Hazoumè and Lionel H. Postcard photo of floating market courtesy of Wolfgang & Keiser.)



Between April and June, I was able to make three trips to visit volunteers at their work sites in the central and northern parts of Benin. First of all, the north/south national route was very busy. Large trucks (including oil tankers) transport containers and all manner of imports to the interior - Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, etc. from the Cotonou port. Likewise, convoys of imported used cars whose drivers are untrained and were only given one day to travel the entire length of Benin (500 miles) drove at breakneck speed headed to the north. Southbound came the truckloads of raw cotton, bags of charcoal (produced in the country side and destined for the cooking fires of Cotonou) and vegetables and fruit.

Along straight stretches of road there were designated areas for the 18-wheelers to stop, whether to sleep or for repairs. The driver spread branches along the road for a long distance in front and behind his truck to alert other vehicle drivers that the road would become one lane. Tall rice sacks full of charcoal and bundles of wood lined to road to be picked up by the



transporters. The same occurred along all the interior dirt roads, as product was relayed from origin to destination, initially by humans, then perhaps carts, then small taxis or trucks and then bigger vehicles. In addition to 18-wheelers, every manner of transport was loaded beyond



capacity. Thus, there were constantly broken down and overturned vehicles to watch out for. On a typical day we would also see a taxi with three completely collapsed tires. The PC drivers were well trained and drove very safely.

Things were also for sale all along the road – the products of the farm and women – flour of corn, sorghum, manioc - made by hand pounding; fruits and vegetables in season –first small yellow mangoes, then large hybrid mangoes, then the beginning of corn. And always chili peppers and onions, the mainstay of every sauce. You would also find bush rat, rabbits and snakes offered,



and in certain regions pineapples (the local variety was taller, more slender and much sweeter – less acidic – than the Hawaiian variety). You also found locally-made wooden furniture and the

giant mortars with very long-handled pestles which teams of women used for pounding yams, sorghum and corn to make the local yam pillé and pot.



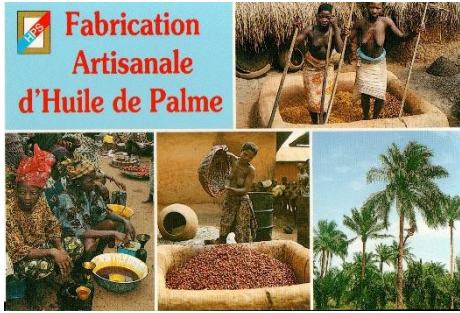
The roadside is also where manioc is spread to dry (looking like coral or bones) before being ground, and along with the cotton fluff that escapes the trucks they form a white border to the tarmac.

The countryside itself has many variations, and even before the rainy season it is much greener than southern Morocco. There are no mountains, but a few areas (Dassa, Kaboua, Tanguieta) have rocky hills which are quite dramatic. There was very little forest remaining, so mostly the countryside was cultivated in small plot subsistence agriculture. In general, fields were prepared using a short-handled hoe and everywhere you saw people walking with them hanging over their shoulders, much as machetes were everywhere in Micronesia. In some areas people had cows to pull a single blade plow, which was considered “modern agriculture”.

Breeding ostriches for meat was an up and coming agricultural activity.



Other agricultural production included palm oil, shea butter, and of course cotton. Watching the women labor to make palm oil, I'm not sure I can ever again use my savon Marseille without guilt. Soaps made from shea butter are also highly prized. However, generally speaking, Benin produced only the raw material and the higher value-added production was done elsewhere. There were, however, one cottonseed oil factory and one company making cotton fabric (bed sheets). I'm still using the bed sheets I bought.



At the time I was there the world price for raw cotton was below the cost of production in



Benin and the government had to subsidize its production.

Most villages were a collection of mud houses and buildings with thatch or corrugated metal roofs. The shapes (round, square, rectangle) and arrangement vary by region. So does the design of the thatch roofs, much the way that hay stacking/rolling methods vary in different regions of the U.S. Fences of corn stalks or woven palm leaves are used to protect gardens from animals and to provide enclosure and shade at houses to protect from the sun. Special structures were used for food storage. Some rural schools were also in traditional structures.





A typical village will have a meeting place (for the men) usually under a large tree, and the well will often be the socializing place for the women.

There are giant termite mounds (> 6 feet high) like I saw in Kenya. Some oasis areas reminded me of the oases between Ouarzazate and Zagora in Morocco and there are mangrove swamps á la Micronesia. The rice paddies in the north, irrigated from the rainy season Niger river, reminded me

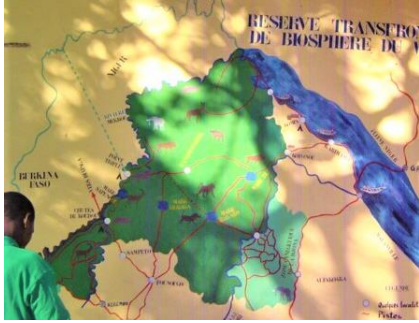


of Nepal, and the lakes felt like Thailand.



***The game parks W and Pendjari***

In December, one of my daughters came to visit for three weeks and we took a week's vacation in the game reserves on the northern border of Benin. The visit to parc W and parc Pendjari way exceeded anything we could have hoped for! Not the sheer numbers of animals of my 1997 Kenya safari, but also not the numbers of tourists.



In fact, in parc W we had the park to ourselves, aside from sharing it with a family of lions, scores of baboons, monkeys, buffalo, warthogs, several species of antelope,



elephants and amazing birds.



Parc W is named for the path of the Niger river in this location. It is actually a regional parc with portions also in Niger and Burkina Faso. Our guide, Azouma, is a highly trained naturalist park ranger who knows the Latin name of every animal and plant we encountered and thoroughly grounded us in the ecosystems we were experiencing.

We visited right after the end of the rainy season and so the park land was being burned to stimulate the new plant growth which is the food for the large foraging animals – especially the



elephants and buffalo. This was particularly interesting to my daughter who in her PhD program had just taken a course on savannah burning. Although the animal mix was different (and more limited in Benin than in East Africa – no giraffes, wildebeests or zebras for example) the terrain was very interesting with forests, 7-foot-tall savannah grasses, unusual geologic formations, and many ponds (think hippos, crocodiles and birds) and we could walk anywhere – not



constrained to remain in the vehicle. We were so close to the animals that we were not using long lenses to photograph them. In fact, the lion family resting in the shade we almost didn't notice and could have driven right past them!



In parc W we had a comfortable tent accommodation and in Pendjari we stayed in a hotel-type accommodation.





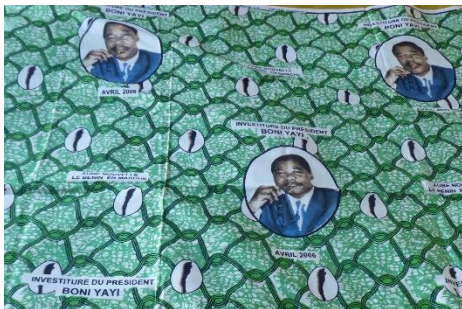


## Arts

Fabric (tissu) is an important part of the culture. Every group has a tissu from which all members make a garment. For example, all children receiving first communion will wear the same tissu. For a funeral, all immediate family members will be dressed in the same tissu and the family will select a tissu to be bought by friends of the family and worn to the funeral. We have a tissu for Peace Corps staff, and each volunteer group selects a tissu to have their swearing-in outfit made (this was done in Micronesia as well). There are religious tissus with pictures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, and various churches and shrines printed on them. In Cotonou the Dantokpa market was famous as a source of tissus of all types and qualities with hundreds of vendors in tiny stalls. It was also a source of fresh and processed food, Nigerian-made cosmetics, shoes and a Fetish Market. I also bought Ghanaian batik tissu in Accra from the artisan Sister Mercy.



It was an election year and Boni Yayi was elected the new president of Benin. I acquired the tissu celebrating his swearing-in (investiture in French) to occur the following April (2006).



Ironically, a year later (2007) when he paid a visit to Washington, DC, including the Peace Corps office, we were able to decorate the head table with my fabric, as I was working there. He was quite astonished to see it!

The clothing designs are creative (Cotonou has been referred to as the Paris of West Africa) and tailoring is a highly respected profession, along with the hairdressers who create the artistic hairdos. As can be seen in the photos, I dressed in West African tissu in outfits created by the talented tailor also used by my predecessor. I loved shopping for the tissu, although it was a challenge to find colors that complemented my white skin. A fun memory was when Omar the tailor delivered my first outfit having, of course, taken all my measurements before creating it. The skirt, however, wasn't quite right because while I have a very small rear end and larger stomach, the figure of my predecessor and most African women

is the opposite. From then on, he knew where to distribute the inches. I have subsequently given away all of my beautiful outfits except for two. It took a few weeks before I had local clothing, so in the early photos I am still dressed in my Micronesian outfits which also worked for the climate and culture.

The French Cultural Center sponsored various events including a ten-week series of African cinema, with a different film each week playing on Tuesday/Thursday evenings. They also sponsored art shows and it was at these that I acquired my collection of Benin bronzes and many wood carvings.



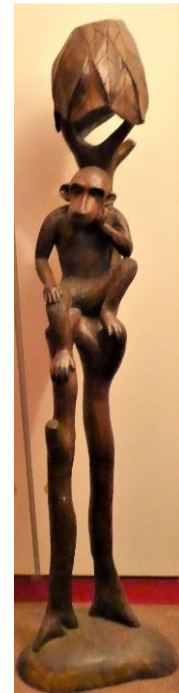
These bronze plaques depict warriors and the crocodile, a recurrent theme in many African art forms. My most prized bronzes are a king's sceptre and a



warrior holding an ibis and a weapon or hoe.



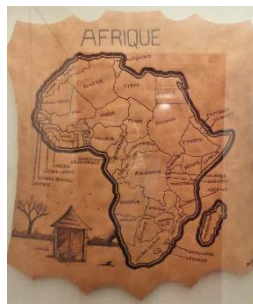
Among the wood carvings are a hippopotamus, an African elephant (tusks lost), a life-sized monkey sitting in a palm tree and a woman carved of ebony by a Togolese artisan based in Djougou.



Also carved from ebony, both the white and black part, are this pair of male and female profiles. A talented Beninese artist created the pastel of a typical village, and another this batik.



These moved with me through several subsequent postings, finally coming home to Paris, including gifts of a leather map of Africa and a typical hat worn by Fulani nomads.



Weaving was another of the local arts.



### ***Peace Corps Volunteer Life***

The volunteers were engaged in a wide variety of worthwhile activities.

Benin environment volunteers had created an environmental education manual that was in use throughout French-speaking West Africa. Environment PCVs assisted their communities with natural resource protection, training, and creation of community gardens. A special focus was on propagating the *Moringa Oleifera* tree, native to many parts of Africa and Asia. While almost all parts of this fast-growing tree are edible, the leaves are the most nutritious. Often cooked and used like spinach (which I was happy to see in Ethiopia when I was traveling there a few years later), the most important use is when they are dried and crushed as a highly nutritional supplement to infants and nursing mothers.

One of our PCVs was working with the NGO Nature Tropicale, and I was invited on the day they released the turtles born of incubated sea turtle eggs into the ocean. This NGO had been encouraging sea turtle preservation throughout the coastal area of Benin, where traditionally



they were a food source. However, over the years they convinced the community of the importance long term of preservation and propagation of this resource. The baby turtles were released to the ocean on National Voodoo Day, January 10, with a great ceremony including the local Voodoo chief who dispensed milk, voodoo Zangbetos, and a local crowd cheering them on (only about 1 in 100 of the turtles would survive to adulthood).



Zangbetos are voodoo spirits that were originally guardians of the night. However, their spinning raffia shapes now also help celebrate special occasions, especially for traditional ceremonies.

Small enterprise development PCVs worked with rural credit unions, small business owners, artisan groups, community cooperatives and municipal governments to strengthen management and computer skills and improve income generation. Here are artisans learning carpentry and sewing, women gaining business training and men learning computer skills.





Volunteers in the education program taught English as a foreign language in secondary schools as well as often helping establish or improve library resources. Helping the students create a world map on the exterior of their school was a frequent project.

Since lack of sanitary facilities was often a constraint to girls' attending school, a secondary project of mobilizing community resources to build latrines such as this one in Kotchi were often initiated.



Here are students waiting the receipt of supplies for the new school year.

Volunteers in the rural community health project were assigned to government social centers where they worked closely with local counterparts to promote improved



maternal and child health care. In collaboration with environment PCVs they also introduced the use of moringa into the local diet.

I visited a site with two newly sworn-in and one second-year volunteer and saw my first baby-weighing. These are done to encourage mothers to monitor growth progress and are accompanied by vaccinations for the babies. About 20 of our volunteers were involved in these activities. The challenge was how to combat malnutrition and how to reach the families in the most rural villages. With the sharply increased price of fuel, approximately \$1.00 per liter, there was no budget for the government health department staff to travel even by motorcycle taxi.



The volunteers had a stipulated cycle of activities beginning with their pre-service training of 11 weeks, then swearing in and moving to their sites. Pre-service training focused on safety and security, health, and French language as well as the specific skills required for their sector. Once at their sites they could access tutors for ongoing language training, either French or their local language, and be reimbursed by PC.

Calcul des Bénéfices et Pertes  
 1. Quel est le but d'une entreprise ?  
 — Créer un Bénéfice.  
 2. C'est quoi un Bénéfice ?  
 — C'est le reste des Recettes  
 Après avoir soustrait les dépenses.  
 3. Bénéfices = Recettes - Dépenses.  
 4. Hypo: Une vendeuse achète deux  
 paquets d'arachides à 1500 F  
 Chacun (3000 F) Elle paye le  
 taxi pour aller au marché. Les  
 arachides au marché et elle  
 achète son déjeuner à 200 F  
 Elle vend à ses deux voisins  
 les arachides à 2000 F chacun  
 (4 000 F Total).  
 5. Le Compte d'exploitation

Recettes des ventes	4 000 F
Moins dépenses:	
Arachides	3 000
Taxi	200
Déjeuner	200
	(3 400)
Bénéfice (Prest)	600 F

Feedback on our 11-week pre-service training was largely positive, although we were in the process of redesigning it to better adapt to the learning styles of the Millennium Generation. During training I traveled hardly at all — just visited a couple of volunteer sites near where training was occurring. After having their training in different parts of the country by sector, the day of swearing in was a great reunion. Each group was dressed in their unique fabric. We had local

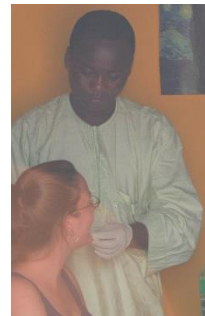


entertainment, and of, course, the U.S. Ambassador to Benin, Wayne E. Neill, administered the oath of service with several Benin government Ministers also in attendance.

Then came the emotional separation of heading off to their sites, luggage, musical instruments, bicycles and helmets, motorcycle helmets and tearful partings.



There were various other trainings and mandated medical checkups and inoculations during their two years of service. They received their monthly stipends by going to the post office in Parakou or Cotonou.



Almost all the PCVs lived in concrete houses without plumbing, i.e. an outdoor latrine, bucket shower, mosquito netting and water drawn from a well. Many planted gardens to provide fresh produce and as an example for their villages. Gradually their villages were receiving electricity. Many were in remote locations without a market and had to travel by moto-taxi to obtain provisions.



About three months before finishing their service we hosted a Close of Service conference. This always took place in a very nice resort setting. The COS conference is a very helpful “training” as its purpose is for PCVs to reflect upon and celebrate their two years of service, plus receive valuable advice towards job searching, graduate school, and the challenges of re-entry to life in the U.S.





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Ambassador Neill was a strong supporter of Peace Corps and participated in many of our activities. Here he is handing out Certificates of Appreciation to volunteers at COS conferences, in which the appropriate Benin government Ministers also participated.



As with my arrival in Micronesia, I was fortunate to participate in a COS conference for our education volunteers during my first few weeks in Benin. This gave me an opportunity to hear with great candor what was working and not working, from the PCVs' point of view. Most aspects of PC Benin were going very well. I was

thrilled to be able spend quality time with outstanding volunteers at a beautiful resort in Gran Popo, about an hour west of Cotonou. The resort has ocean and lake frontage. I watched local fishermen and women wade with nets for fish and crabs, and traditional dugout canoes being poled through the lake. On the ocean the canoe was similar to the Micronesian outriggers with a square sail a bit like an Asian junk.



In the evening the fishermen hauled in the nets from the ocean.

The post of Country Director had been vacant for some time before my arrival so I prioritized visits to volunteers to support the great work they were doing and learn of any unmet needs.





Gradually I learned the cultural tips PC teaches its volunteers during training. For example, when you arrived at someone's house you would be offered a bowl of water. This meant you are welcomed in peace. You touch your lips to it or pour a bit on the floor to honor the ancestors.

The process of greetings varied from one language group to another and might include bowing, hand-holding, or touch the right hand to the heart. It was always a lengthy process, as in Morocco, asking about the family, the home, how it is where you came from, often multiple times.



As you walked through the village you had to greet every person, including all the marché mmans selling street food or wares.



My French vocabulary expanded to include shepherd (berger), fence (clôture), thatch (chaume), pea hen (pintade), foyer anterieur (energy efficient mud oven) and bonne arrivée which is how you were greeted at every arrival.

While in a volunteer's village I got to meet the kings of several villages who were gathered for the funeral of the mother of the local village king. They had just killed a cow and honored us by allowing us to take their picture and gave us some choice meat. They also permitted us to take a formal photo of the Village Chief's family.



In another village we visited a man who made the large pots called marmites used for cooking. His assistant melted the metal over a fire while the artisan turned a bicycle wheel to operate the bellows to keep the fire hot. Then the metal was poured into a large mold.



The first Thursday and Friday of each month were what we called volunteer days. Staff members were not permitted to travel, so that volunteers could count on having meetings with us if they traveled in to Cotonou. PC facilitated that travel by running a shuttle the

length of the country for which the PCVs could sign up in advance. It was much safer and faster than their alternative travel options.

On the Friday I hosted a luncheon for four volunteers and three staff invitees. The menu was canapés, salade composée, onion quiche, cheese and fruit plates and individual pastries served with mint iced tea. All were foods to which volunteers had no access at their sites. It provided an opportunity for PCVs to interact with support staff whom they otherwise didn't get to know.



One of the unusual aspects of PC Benin was that the PCVs were permitted to ride on motorcycle taxis when that was the only transport available to their sites. Otherwise motorcycle riding was prohibited throughout PC at that time. So, each PCV was issued not only a bike helmet to accompany their PC-provided bicycle, but also a motorcycle helmet. They came to be known as the "people of the casques" (the French word for helmet). So, at my luncheons there would typically be four motorcycle helmets stacked in the corner of the living/dining room. After the luncheon there was a Volunteer Advisory Council meeting where about a dozen elected volunteer representatives brought PCV concerns to staff for discussion.

PC Benin also maintained two "work station" facilities, one in the north in Natitangou and one central in Parakou. PCVs could check themselves into these facilities where they had access to electricity and internet, accommodation. Here is one of our two Medical Officers, Dr Rufin, on a visit to the Parakou motorcycle work station. Note the helmets of visiting PCVs.



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In Accra, Ghana there was a fund-raising marathon in which many of our PCVs competed. The Embassy organized the outing for its staff and invited our volunteers who wished to participate. Getting regular exercise is often one of the challenges of volunteer service, especially for female volunteers.



The next significant event for our community was International Volunteer Day on December 5. Together with the other volunteer organizations in Cotonou we set up a massive clean-up campaign in the city, enlisting people from each neighborhood to organize their area to collect trash and sweep the streets. Although, realistically, there was very little trash, as everything was made use of. Other volunteer organizations including CRS, the Red Cross, Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam and Japanese volunteers (JOVC) were also actively involved.



Also, in December there were whale-watching excursions on three Sundays sponsored by an NGO one of our volunteers worked with. Whales were sighted on two out of the three trips and a successful new venture was launched.



Hippopotamus viewing was another activity in the south of Benin and we had a volunteer assigned with that NGO as well. Figuring out how to organize it in a way that was acceptable to international visitors from a safety and security point of view was one of the goals. But that is the stuff of development work.

We constantly faced the emotional challenges involved with our 100 volunteers' lives. When they were struggling to succeed, were ill or even worse when they had to be medically evacuated, we and their Beninese friends and family were very sad. The relationships formed during volunteer service are very strong and it is highly emotional when they are prematurely severed.



One of the challenges was the discrimination faced by Asian-American and African-American volunteers. Many people refused to believe that they were Americans! They got taunted in the streets not only by the word Yovo (which means both white and stranger) but were also called chinois or kung fu. This had been true in each of the three Peace Corps countries I had experienced up until then. And that is one of the goals of Peace Corps, to help people understand the diversity that is America.

When I was making site visits during December a group of volunteers organized a surprise Christmas party complete with gingerbread house!

These are just a few examples of the contributions PCVs were making to the lives of Beninese during their two years of service. I have many photos and fond memories of those volunteers and have stayed in touch with many. I love watching their lives continue to unfold.

### ***Peace Corps Country Director life***

The PC Director's house was quite large with a garden surrounded by a high wall. The plants were mostly the same as in my garden in Pohnpei, Micronesia, and the temperature as well. We were just starting into the rainy season which had similar tropical downpours, but accompanied by thunder and lightning — perhaps once every couple of days. During these downpours trees and billboards overturned and giant



car-sized depressions opened up in the streets. During frequent power failures, the guard at the house ran with his large flashlight to turn on the generator. When we also lost public water supply the guard had to switch the system over to use the water storage tank on my roof. As one who has prided myself on being relatively self-sufficient over recent years, it was a challenge to accept being dependent on others for basic support. I will ever be comfortable in a society where the local population are servants for the white population. This is their country and I should be serving them, not vice versa. Living behind gates with guards and drivers (for official functions) was not comfortable for me.



My predecessor employed a cook, a housekeeper, a gardener and a driver. I kept the housekeeper, Eugenie, who had managed the house for a decade I think, and I will admit that it was wonderful to have the laundry done and ironed and no sweeping or cleaning to do. I cooked for myself, and she helped when I entertained. She was actually a very good cook and disappointed at this arrangement.

Peace Corps provided a guard on weekdays from 7pm to 7am and on weekends when the housekeeper was off. I extended Eugenie's hours so as to cover the daytime 7am to 7 pm. On the weekends I employed a daytime guard, Romain, who doubled as an experienced gardener, an arrangement which made him very happy. The house had been empty for six months before my arrival and although the lawn had been kept mowed, the garden was seriously overgrown. The gardener and I embarked on a project to prune and divide many of the plants which we transferred to the garden of another house rented by PC. You could almost sense the plants' happiness at being able to breathe and grow again. In total my costs for domestic staff were about twice what I paid in Micronesia, but worth every penny. However, I was personally challenged by the lack of privacy in my own home.



Eugenie had been participating in a group savings plan known as a tontine which are a common way in Africa for a group of people to save for future needs. She had long hoped to have her own transport and finally achieved that! Here are Eugenie, her scooter, Romain the guard/gardener and me.

Instead of the pristine lagoon lapping at my house foundation, the house was surrounded by large walled in/gated homes on dirt streets that became impassable except by 4x4 when the rains were heavy. It was exactly 5 km from my house to the office — the distance I used to walk for exercise every morning

in Pohnpei. However, since our staff did not consider the route a safe one to walk, I drove to work. But I could manage about a 5 km walk within my neighborhood, before work, and swim

Friday afternoon and Saturday and Sunday mornings at a hotel a 10 - minute walk from my house. On Sunday mornings I treated myself to a cafe au lait and croissant eaten while reading Les Echos, Libération and Financial Times of London which arrived weekly on an Air France flight. Although the beach (on the Bight of Benin) was also ten minutes from the house, the undertow made swimming too dangerous. Because as a CD you are on call 24/7 for the safety and security of your PCVs and staff, I had learned that maintaining my exercise program was key to keeping stress under control.

In addition to the COS conference described above, within the first six weeks I had also led or participated in a two-day all volunteer conference, a two-day staff strategic planning retreat, many Embassy meetings and events and three days of driver training. Instead of travel by boat and airplane we traveled overland. The PC fleet included six Toyota land cruisers, a pick-up truck, a large truck, a 14-passenger van and a motor scooter. I was really touched when a couple of days after the training our six drivers showed up in my office – each one greeting me formally - to thank me for the training we had just provided for them. It was quite ironic when ten years later I was traveling for pleasure in Mongolia and the PC admin officer was the same woman who had been our admin officer in Benin, and she hosted me for my nights in the capital. Mongolia was hosting a driver training for PC countries in the Europe/ Mediterranean/Asia region and who should be in attendance, but drivers I knew from my time in Moldova and Morocco! It was great fun to renew acquaintance.

At my first regularly scheduled all staff monthly meeting each sub-group (including the drivers and guards) produced a skit about their work. They were truly witty and great fun.

The All-Volunteer conference provided an opportunity for PCVs to learn what activities each sector was engaged in and find ways and resources to augment their contributions to their own communities.



Ambassador Neill gave a briefing on many aspects of Benin and the U.S. government activities in support of the country. He

discussed the new Millennium Challenge Corporation initiative created by President Bush with a goal of reducing poverty through economic growth. The first project in Benin involved modernization of physical facilities at the Port of Cotonou as well as introducing computerized systems which by minimizing paperwork handoffs would also, hopefully, minimize corruption opportunities and improve trade.



The two-day staff strategic planning meeting was held at my home. It was a highly participative event and Eugenie was happy to be able to cook for the group!



Just before leaving Micronesia, friends gave me Paul Theroux' Dark Star Safari which I read en route. It is about an overland trip he makes the length of East Africa from Egypt to South Africa. It was a wonderful reminder of African history, landscape and travel challenges. Most telling, however, was his lambasting of the history and current practices of aid donors and missionaries. While Benin was not as impacted by this experience as many other African countries, volunteers in certain parts of the country had to overcome the notion that they came with lots of money to do projects. And since the vehicle of choice for such organizations is the Toyota land cruiser, I felt some pangs of guilt every time I rode in one of ours.



There was also plenty of western culture. The French Cultural Center was very active with plays, movies and music, at least one per week. The American Language Center had a lovely American jazz event — New Orleans + Chicago — played by a talented Beninese group of musicians in celebration of American black history month. It was actually a very special evening under a full moon and of course in an outdoor courtyard. The audience was virtually 100% Beninese.

In addition to the traffic in Cotonou there were multiple little vignettes to share from my early weeks. One morning on the way to work (just after daylight about 7am) a goat and her kid ran across the road in front of me. That was my first wildlife. Then, en route to the COS conference resort there were adorable pygmy long-haired goats with their kids. I realized I was still missing Morocco' s donkeys. The electricity was very unreliable so several times per day the office switched onto the generator to function. Telephone and cell phone service were only somewhat reliable, and worse the further from Cotonou one traveled.

Another fauna observation. The lizards were fabulous - very colorful and plentiful and, hopefully, eating the malaria-carrying mosquitoes. It took some time to become disciplined about repellent, hand washing and water. I was good about bleaching vegetables from my volunteer days in Morocco and used boiled/filtered water at my house, but



somehow, I managed to contract intestinal amoebas within my first month there! Of course, it was possible that I brought them with me from Micronesia.

Early on, I had attended a few official events. One, I am happy to say, was launching the national campaign to educate the population about the new family code signed into law the prior September. It was similar to the new code in Morocco. For sure it would take a long time to implement, but women's and children's rights were substantially enhanced.

Another event was the Ghana National Independence Day diplomatic celebration. To begin with, I forgot that Ghana was an English-speaking country, so I greeted everyone in my bad French. Then the open bar for the reception was primarily British — gin + bitters + whiskey + several liquors I'd never seen before. Not a drop of wine in sight! A lovely party, though, with Ghanaian dancers and choral groups, and held at the convention center built by the Chinese government, which has a beautiful view over the beach and ocean.

The pricing and availability of European products was another interesting factor. I remember an economics concept called "market pricing" whereby a multinational company would make the decision that they wanted to have a presence in a country. Then they would decide what the market would bear for their products and price accordingly. Thus, my French Jacques Dessange shampoo, which I had stocked up on for my time in Micronesia, was now available much more cheaply in Cotonou than in Paris!

I attended a funeral in Cotonou — a Catholic mass. While the liturgical music was familiar (Mass in French) the remaining music was a bit like gospel with drums and tambourine but to a slow and somber beat. The party which followed, however, was lively with pulsing music. Funerals are expensive and family members who have paying jobs must bear the bulk of the costs. As part of our employee benefit plan Peace Corps contributes for the funeral of an immediate family member and staff members also give according to their means.

My hotel accommodations when traveling were more than quite acceptable. Our per diem permitted 20,000 cfa or about \$40 per night which bought an air-conditioned room with toilet, cold shower and mosquito net. Candles were provided since probably the electricity would go out at some point during the night. This was about 2/3 of the room





cost in Micronesia and twice the staff room cost in Morocco. The drivers received the same accommodations. For safety purposes we were required to be off the road by 6 pm and to have an accommodation with a secure enclosure for the vehicle (car theft was very prevalent, especially of the highly sought-after Toyota land-cruisers). I tried to always have a hotel with a restaurant so I could treat any volunteers in the area to dinner. Restaurant food was somewhat expensive (minimum \$10-15 for dinner) but street food was very reasonable.

We carried bottled water sufficient for the trip because it was not available outside the cities (PCVs boiled their drinking water as did I at home in Cotonou). I also carried extra medicines in



case I should contract malaria while on the road, since starting treatment can't wait the two days it could take to get back to Cotonou. We lunched along the route at typical local eateries.

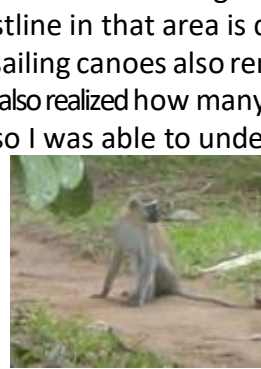
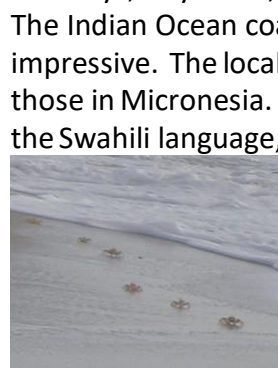
In August I attended an excellent five-day meeting of all Africa country directors in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. I was able to meet my colleagues from this region as well as my boss, the Africa Regional Director. As usual, I learned so much from these colleagues and was able to seek advice from them on an ongoing basis.



I also discovered the Tingatinga art work. Originally created by Eduardo Saidi Tingatinga using bicycle paint on particle board, in around 1968, a group developed around him and after his death in 1972 from a police shooting the group continued forward. The themes, originally of African animals and traditional Tanzanian life evolved over time to the more urban aspects of African life. I bought a few of their works on canvas.



I took the weekend following at a small resort called Amani Beach about an hour outside of Dar Es Salaam. I decompressed by walking the beach, enjoying the pool, the monkeys, tiny crabs, butterflies and vegetation.



The Indian Ocean coastline in that area is quite dramatic and impressive. The local sailing canoes also reminded me quite a bit of those in Micronesia. I also realized how many Arabic words there are in the Swahili language, so I was able to understand a fair amount.

In early November we celebrated the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, with a fête, known as Eid el Ftoor. It is a holiday in Benin. The activities on the holiday were typical of a day in my then-current life. My alarm woke me at 6 am (instead of the normal 5:30 am on a work day). I did my daily yoga stretches and took my daily medicines for malaria prevention and heart conditions. Then I walked 10 kilometers, (~ 1 1/2 hours) enjoying the early light of day, the neighborhood waking up, the marché mamans bringing their tables outside to sell food, and because it was a holiday, the young men organizing football (soccer) in the street. The streets were mud/sand and we had had a lot of rain the prior two days so sometimes I had to slow my pace to carefully pick my way around the slick mud. The neighborhood in which I walked on weekends and holidays was a study in contrasts. Gigantic 2-3 story concrete houses with high walls concealing their gardens were intermixed with rusty corrugated metal shacks. Cars and motor scooters competed for street space with children, chickens, goats, women carrying basins and baskets on their heads (and babies on their backs), the football players and me. Later on, the shops, mostly four poles with a sheet of corrugated metal for a roof, would open with hairdressers, dressmakers and tailors, auto mechanics, phone card sellers and more. Many buildings were abandoned and just as many were under construction. The cement blocks for building are fabricated on the site and laid out to cure in the sun. Along my route were also the Embassies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Haiti, Denmark and Belgium as well as the offices of Oxfam Quebec, Médecins Sans Frontières and Africare.

Then I went home, showered, and dressed in casual African clothing (a booboo with wide legged pants of batik fabric from Ghana). Off to my favorite cafe for a café creme and a pain chocolate and a read of newspapers. At 9:30 I was in my office to check email, finish redrafting some documents with deadlines and then off to the Ambassador's residence to discuss an urgent sensitive personnel issue. He squeezed me in between his morning workout and an official visit from a USAID Washington, DC person. Then I stopped at home to change clothes because I realized I wanted to be more formally dressed for the Eid el Ftoor party, and on the way home I stopped at the patisserie to buy pastries for the next day's luncheon event. For the party I wore a long white dress from Essaouria, Morocco and a filmy top/cape of Mauritanian fabric created by a Moroccan women's group, the project of a former Morocco PCV colleague.



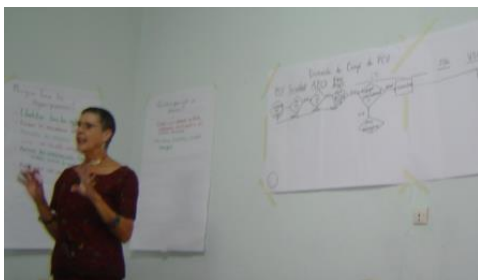
I was back in the office at 11:30 am for the debriefing meeting with two members of the Peace Corps Washington Office of Inspector General staff (IG) at the end of their three-week administrative audit, which we needed and welcomed. Just as we started the meeting, I received a phone call from one of our Medical Officers regarding a newly sworn-in volunteer who needed to terminate her service. Since we were about to incur expenses regarding her house, I immediately called the safety and security coordinator, whom I had noticed was also signed into the office, so that he would stop the repairs to her house.

Following the IG meeting we arrived at the party hosted by our wonderful senior program advisor, Brownie Lee (who was both a mentor and inspiration for me), and had a chance to meet many spouses and children of the staff. The holiday there was pretty similar to Morocco — a day to visit and greet neighbors and friends. Many people were stopping at several gatherings over the course of the day. One of the IG auditors is Muslim and he had gone to the beach earlier in the morning where 4-5000 joined together in prayer. He was impressed with the honor bestowed upon the Imam leading the prayer, the combination of French language with Arabic Koranic sutras, and the young children praying. After the party I returned the auditors to their hotel to await pickup for their flight back to the U.S. that night. It was 4 pm and I decided to try to have a bit more exercise. So, I went home, changed into my swimsuit and went to the pool to do water aerobics. Since I usually go there right after my morning walk on Saturday and Sunday when the pool is just opening, the attendant warned me that the pool was very full. I did my normal routine, which takes about 45 minutes, without difficulty, and returned home. I then called the Medical Officer back to learn more about the volunteer who needed to leave and arranged to meet with her early the next morning.



I prepared the meat, cheese, hors d'oeuvres and salad plates for the next day's luncheon, made my notes about the day, and capped it off by watching a movie from the Embassy video library. On balance, I had a great holiday!

One of my vignettes concerned the swimming pool. When I first started going there, a little boy was signed up to learn to swim. However, he was terrified of the water and screaming. The instructor did a great job of gradually helping him overcome his fear and I would see him in the class from time to time. By a few months later he was swimming like a fish, diving off the diving board and his family could barely get him to leave the pool at closing time.



By the fall we were rearranging the duties of eight staff positions, essentially 1/3 of the professional staff. This, of course, resulted in a great deal of anxiety despite the fact that no one would be economically harmed. The priority for the following six months would be working with the new incumbents to define the processes of their positions. In anticipation of this need I had already started to teach process management to the staff. This would improve not only our operations,

but also staff morale as people were placed in positions more suited to their skills and interests. However, as a result of these changes a voodoo priest had been consulted to place a hex on me. I actually was feeling a little sluggish and down-spirited when one of the Beninese staff pointed out the signs of the hex at various times leading to my office. I consulted with my astrologer who said I should imagine myself surrounded by white light which would ward off the effects of the hex. That seemed to work!

I enjoyed the Beninese people, although one had to realize that it was not one culture but a complex set of ethnic groups with long historic interrelationships. On the other hand, the U.S. is not one culture either!

I spent the other holiday that week, All Saints Day, November 1st, downloading from camera to computer, all the photos I had taken since July. It was exciting to see the arrival photos of our recent trainee group and watch their transformation into volunteers.

There were a wide variety of restaurants available in Cotonou and eating out was one of our major forms of entertainment. For security reasons we were limited to a maximum of five Americans at one time in a venue. We had Indian, Italian, Chinese, Thai, Lebanese and French restaurants in abundance as well as good pizza. I enjoyed the Beninese local foods with their spicy tomato and onion-based sauces which I ate for lunch in the office in Cotonou and when visiting PCV's I could appreciate the regional differences in the cuisine. A Moroccan restaurant

opened run by a Moroccan couple so I took the opportunity to introduce the staff to Moroccan food and treated them to dinner one night.



I was very excited to have a visit from one of my daughters. In addition to our game parks visit, other highlights of our three weeks together were volunteer visits, fabric shopping at the Danktopa market in Cotonou, an outdoor starry evening performance by

singer Zeynab Habib who had just won the Kora Award (Africa's Emmy) as best artist of West Africa, and a great dinner/dance party on the roof of friends' house. We also visited Abomey and Ouidah together.

In addition to getting some French tutoring, my daughter also had a chance to spend time with professors at the university dealing with watershed management and to accompany them on a water sampling trip on a large inland lake. Turns out they were using the same equipment and techniques that she did in her work.

As it was the holiday season, we hosted a Moroccan dinner for 36 people for which she and I prepared tajines and other dishes – of course on the day there was no electricity – hence no air conditioning to comfort us during our preparations.





In early January we hosted Peace Corps' Office of Medical Services chief of quality control and enjoyed entertaining senior representatives of each medical specialty in Benin at my house.



About this time, we also hosted IT trainers/specialists from Peace Corps HQ and Ghana.

Just as I was told my name was being proposed for a second tour of 30 months as Country Director in Benin (which is what I had been hoping and asking for), my heart decided to slow down, beating at a little less than half speed due to a congenital defect. That was at the end of January, 2006, and through a monumental effort of Beninese, Peace Corps and U.S. Embassy doctors, technicians and administrative staff, I was air evacuated to Paris where a pacemaker was installed at American Hospital. I will never be able to sufficiently thank everyone who gave their all professionally, emotionally and in prayer to accomplish a life-saving successful outcome.

Unfortunately, the Department of State, which controls medical clearances for Americans working abroad for Peace Corps, would no longer clear me to work in Benin. However, they did let me return for one week to bring closure to my experience there and celebrate my good health with the Peace Corps staff. It was emotionally very difficult to return and then leave again, but very important for everyone. The staff had selected a new tissu and had my tailor, Omar, make me an outfit in it. We had a wonderful farewell party and they presented me with



a beautifully framed formal portrait of everyone in their new tissu.

I remain very attached to the people, landscape and cultures of Benin.

