Chris Henze

The Snake Man

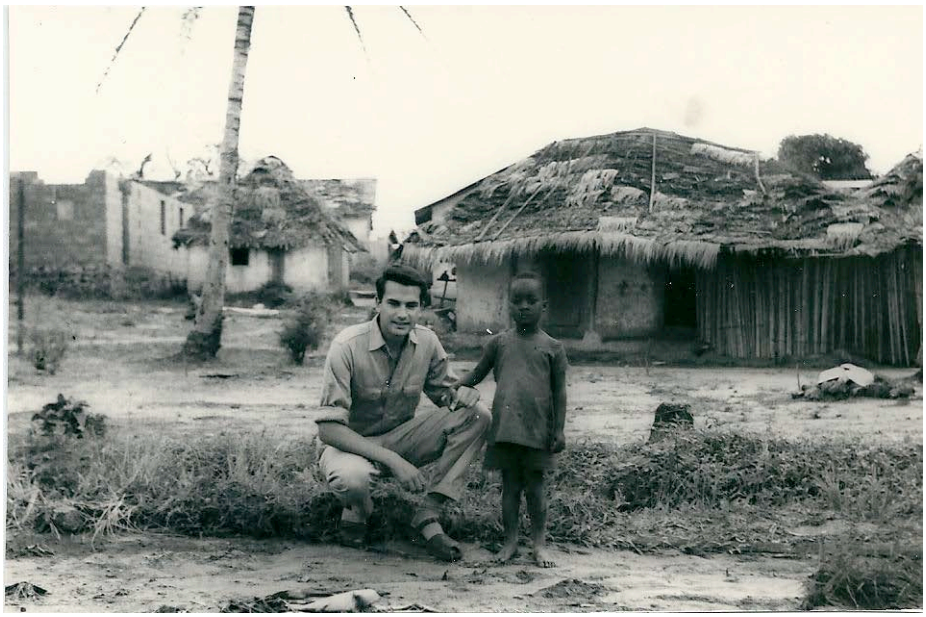
I joined the Peace Corps at age 22 in 1964 and served as an English and physical education instructor at a "Cours Complémentaire" in Danané, Ivory Coast, for two years. Danané was a town with a population of about 5,000 in the western part of the country, a 12-hour drive on dirt track from the capital Abidjan, and close to the Liberian and Guinean borders. Following is an excerpt from one of my 53 letters home.

My latest adventure happened last market day when a Dioula from Guinea was in town selling fetishes for 50 F to protect people from snakes. The gendarmes kicked him out of the market place, and he set himself up in a side street with 2 vipers, 1 black spitting cobra and 1 regular cobra in addition to all his "medicines" (little rolls of string, buttons, rags, etc.). There was a big crowd around him, and he seemed to be selling to quite a few people, urging them to touch the snakes after they had bought the protective paraphernalia. The Dioula himself had the snakes around his neck, stepped on their tails and generally proved to the public that he was immune to their deadly poison. The local people, however, have a terrible fear of any snake whatsoever, and they wouldn't go near the creatures even after having bought his fetishes; so he laughed and made fun of them.

All well and good, but then he started to try to get me to buy one. I said I didn't want to buy anything but I would love to have a cobra around my neck too. I reached for the nearest big viper and managed to grab its tail before he stopped me. He said I could not touch his snakes unless I bought some of his sacred threads. I then explained to my students who were there that this man's snakes had their poison removed, and that his threads would not protect them from any snake they

met. The old swindler was happy to see me go.

Anyway, I continued on to the local court, where I watched a man tried for threatening to murder his mother-in-law. After the trial, I was talking to the judge, who is a friend of mine, and mentioned the guy with the snakes. He immediately sent 2 gendarmes to arrest him, claiming that such fraud was a disgrace to Danané. I said I didn't want to get the fellow in trouble, but would like a chance to pick up his spitting cobra to show the crowd how they were being taken in. The judge and the gendarmes thought that was a good idea, and when they arrived with the guy, they told him he was to open his box and let me play with his snakes, and then told him they were going to pour gasoline all over the box and "burn everything completely with big flames everywhere and all the snakes would be carbonized," all this accompanied by descriptive gestures and noises!

When they brought the gasoline, I told the police they shouldn't kill the snakes, and they replied that they didn't have the slightest intention of doing so, but wanted to give the man a good scare. By now another crowd had formed, and I asked for the box to be opened. At this point the gendarmes backed out and said they couldn't let me anger the snakes just as they couldn't really burn them "because, you see, Monsieur, the snake is really a demon, and you never know what the guy might tell them before opening the box."

It was a good example of how even the more educated people cling to their old beliefs when it comes to a real test. They let the fellow go with a warning to get out of town (which he didn't, but set up the same afternoon in another part of town). The whole incident was very interesting to me, and it was the first time I had seen such magnificent cobras in real life. Among the students I now have the status of a minor god as far as snakes are concerned, but that is not what I intended.