

THREE LESSONS FROM A MUD HUT - Susan-Marie Stedman Fish Culture, Gabon '82-'84

Lesson #1. The true self is inspiring

I arrived in Gabon in June of 1982. I'd been anticipating this moment for more than a year, dreaming of living in a jungle so green and verdant that vines enfolded my house and leaves peeked through the windows. I've always said that I joined the Peace Corps for two very different reasons: first, to do some good for the world, and second, to find out how tough I was. I felt vaguely that I had grown up very privileged, and hadn't ever been in a situation that really tested my character. Not in a way that meant something, anyway. I'd had my share of teen-age social crises - more than my share it often seemed - and felt I had failed miserably in most of them. But I had the sense that the challenge of living in a strange place with a different culture would reveal to me strengths that I hadn't been able to awaken in middle-class America.

So when our plane landed in Libreville, I had a lot of expectations. Fortunately, Gabon lived up to them. It was exciting, exotic, fascinating, and I drank it in as fast and as fully as I could. And in doing that, essentially turning myself over to the experience of being there, I discovered that you are your truest self when you forget yourself. I began to notice that I no longer felt awkward talking to people, that I laughed and smiled easily, that people seemed drawn to me - it was as if I glowed. Try to imagine what it would be like to have all of your insecurities and anxieties drop away at once and to discover that what you are underneath is everything you've always wished you could be. It was amazing.

Predictably, that euphoric state didn't last. It ended several weeks later when I started language training. Being with a large group of other Americans in a classroom setting brought back old ways of thinking and perceiving myself. But I've never forgotten the weeks I spent free of those self-limiting habits, and the memory of that experience helps me recognize when I'm encouraging my true self, and when I'm smothering it.

Lesson #2. Gender identity is overrated

I was posted to the small village of Moukoundou in southern Gabon. My job was to teach people to build ponds and grow fish to provide protein in their diets. Digging with a shovel, riding a motorcycle, working primarily with men - I was aware it was a little outside the Gabonese cultural norm for a woman to be doing

these things, but little did I know how far outside the norm.

When I first got to Moukoundou, my neighbors kept asking when my husband was arriving. When they finally understood “sorry folks, I’m all you get” they were angry. They had wanted a big male volunteer with a big truck to lend prestige to their village. Like George, in the next village over, or Mike and Mark in Lebamba, where the fish station was. Instead they got me, a skinny woman with a motorcycle. But how could I be a woman? I had no children, I had no plantation for growing food, I wore pants, and I rode a motorcycle, which for some reason they thought required immense strength. Wanting to fit in with the village, I worried a great deal about how to resolve this apparent conflict. I’d spend my off hours with the women, trying to grind manioc and carry water like they did. I wasn’t very convincing.

Meanwhile I started working, visiting potential fish pond sites with the men. One morning I was walking through the jungle in my khaki pants and t-shirt, weighing barely 100 pounds thanks to some intestinal parasites I won’t elaborate on, when a man from a neighboring village passed us on the path. He looked at me and asked the men from my village “ça c’est une fille ou bien un garçon?” - is that a girl or a boy? There was no joke in his question, no insult - he really didn’t know. Fidel, the chief of the village, looked at Joseph who shrugged. Fidel put an arm across my shoulders and said “ça c’est ma soeur” - this is my sister. Joseph then put his arm across my shoulders and said “ça c’est mon frère” - this is my brother. The man nodded, and we all walked on. Later Fidel explained that as his sister, I would be protected from improper advances from the men of the neighboring village, who were all, apparently, immoral and thieves. Joseph explained that as his brother, I would be allowed to join the men when the next palm-wine fête was held. But how could I be both sister and brother, I asked? Fidel and Joseph looked at me as if I had just asked something incredibly stupid, then Joseph looked at me very intently and said well, you are. And that was that.

From that day forward, the villagers and I stopped trying to figure out how I fit in. I was free to drift between hanging out with the men on the front stoops drinking beer, and hanging out with the women in the kitchens smoking small stone pipes. Every so often someone new would come to the village, usually male, and there would be this uncomfortable period when he would treat me like a woman, meaning he would drop in unannounced and ask me to cook for him or bring him a beer. But the villagers always set him straight, explaining that I was Fidel’s sister and Joseph’s brother, and he’d better treat me accordingly.

Lesson #3 Children are an endless source of entertainment

When the sun went down the jungle seemed to creep closer to the borders of the village, so people sat around small fires to keep the night at bay. With no television, no board games, and no playing cards, we did the next best thing - we watched the kids. I grew up in a house where the children were sent to bed before the entertainment began. In Moukoundou, the children were the entertainment. The babies would coo and make faces in that universal baby sign language. The boys would put on plays about things going on in the surrounding villages - the palm-wine fête that was overrun by army ants, the hunter that turned up with four gazelle and a deadly Gabonese viper. The girls would braid each other's hair or practice dances under their mothers' approving gaze. The smallest children spent their time trying to master basic skills such as balancing large baskets on their heads, and playing with machetes. My friend Joseline had a 3-year old daughter Antionette. One night as I was sitting with the family around the fire, Antionette picked up a small machete and began dancing around the fire with it, waving it in the flames. I looked at her mother and grandmother, expecting that one of them would take the machete away from the child, and sure enough, Joseline reached over to Antionette, took the blade from her, and then handed it back after showing her the right way to hold it. Antionette went back to doing her fire dance. A few months later, she was skilled enough to join the five or six kids who cut my lawn with their machetes. My ideas about the alleged fragility of children were strongly influenced by this experience, and although I don't let my own daughters play with machetes, I do let them take a lot of risks I probably wouldn't were it not for the memory of that 3-year old dancing with her machete.