

## LESSONS FROM MY PEACE CORPS EXPERIENCE

My African name is Almami Salifu. I am a young American Peace Corps volunteer. I live with the Limbah people of Bafodia, Wara Wara Bafodia Chiefdom, Koinadugu District, Sierra Leone, West Africa.

The organic mud brick house with rusting zinc pan roof looks just like those around it. There is no electricity. Water for cooking, drinking, washing is toted several times a day from nearby springs and streams. The house belongs to Bafoday Darahmay, the village Imam. I share the house with his teenage son, Sediki. In the yard, there are five orange, two coconut, and one palm oil tree, as well as some clumps of medicinal lemon grass growing around the kitchen bafa. In the dry season, goats rest in the shade of the trees.

On my first day in Bafodia after unpacking my bags into the house provided to me at no cost by Bafoday, I was sitting in the back yard with two of his sons sucking oranges taken from the several trees there, when he appeared tall, wise, and fatherly. He asked me, "Na who dat gi yu?" (Who gave that to you?) I was immediately apologetic. Orange juice refreshingly dripping sweet and smelling. Oh, I am sorry I should have asked you first. I thought it was okay. I looked at his sons for help. He shook his head. "No, no, no," and he asked me again, "Na who dat gi yu?" I apologized again. I was at a loss for what to say or do. He asked me back again then smiled. The boys knew the answer. In Krio and Arabic – pardon the use of my own phonetic spellings - "Na Gohd gi yu. Alhamdililai arabil al amin, bi simmih lai." (God gave you, thank God, bless this food.)

I learned much from the Imam. He treated me like a son. He sometimes called for prayer at 5 am from what seemed like right outside my window. Sometimes I joined him. Occasionally, I was invited to break fast with his family during Ramadan although most of my meals were taken with another family with whom I farmed. When large work groups gathered to clear a farm, we ate with our hands from a few large platters.

I arrived in the dry season in time to start a garden by the stream that ran down the center of the mountain valley. Bafoday took an interest. He gave me some land not far from the house, his own garden nearby. He was too old to work much but he visited daily. One day he came over, got down on the ground, and ran his hands through the earth. He said, "Dirty na power." How many ways can I interpret this statement of multiple meanings on so many levels? Plants get their nutrients from the soil? People with land have control? Mother earth? The resting place of our ancestors' spirits? There certainly was no stigma of the earth being dirty, of not being healthy.

Kerekeru, the boy who lived across the compound, occasionally climbed up the tall coconut tree, so that we could enjoy a meal of coconut milk and meat. He helped teach me to tap palm wine, also called "From God to Man." The wine ferments in the tree, we love it naturally. The palm tree has many uses and sustains life.

The village is the chiefdom headquarters and a seat of tradition. Foot paths connecting villages have been used for centuries and are worn knee deep. The Limbah have accepted and accommodated Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion. Many people have a Christian name, an Islamic name, and a traditional name. They attend church on Sunday, the mosque on Friday, and traditional rites as called for. They are farmers who live with the sun and the moon and rely on the rains.

I enjoy long walks and long talks. In Bafodia, I learned to walk and talk all over again. The calm acceptance of and respect for life could be called harmonious except that the industrious, competitive modern world reaches deep into the bush. Cash crops such as tobacco compete with food crops but money

cannot be eaten. Many people are entranced by the opulent illusions of a Hollywood world. They leave the farm for the city with high hopes. They forget what their grandparents knew and valued.

Besides serving as a goodwill ambassador, my Peace Corps assignment was to introduce alternative farming systems. This included turning swamps into irrigated plots for intensive rice cultivation. Population pressures had made upland slash and burn methods impractical. However, we continued other proven cultural practices of turning, leveling and weeding. Rice responds to nurturing. Fertilizers and insecticides are expensive, inaccessible, and potentially poisonous. Ironically, 200 years earlier, the Atlantic slave trade specifically took Sierra Leoneans to the Georgia and South Carolina coast because of their rice cultivating expertise.

Since my time as a Peace Corps, throughout the 1990s, Sierra Leone was torn apart over get-rich-quick greed for diamonds. Rebel bandits terrorized the country and the world mostly sat idly watching. It was not in our vital interest? I learned, unfortunately, that American foreign policy does not stem primarily from humanitarian concerns. Meanwhile, I worked to raise awareness of the plight here in the United States and raise money for the victims. The war is over and Sierra Leone is rebuilding. However, Sierra Leoneans continue to struggle to find ways to not only survive but to thrive in a confusing world of rapid change.

At times, it really feels to me as if we are worlds apart. I have to search out information to keep up with what is happening in Sierra Leone. At other times, such as when I receive a phone call from a Sierra Leonean in the United States telling me what they are doing both here and back at home to build a more connected world, I feel very close.

The third goal of Peace Corps is to bring back what you have learned about the world and share it with others. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the history of Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone and have been continuously involved in projects aimed at raising awareness of the important historical and cultural ties between the United States and Sierra Leone. I currently work at a University to promote global learning, to assist young students engage the world. A globally relevant education emphasizes the development of multicultural communities centered on respect for differences as well as the ability to address equitably and cooperatively common problems affecting humanity.

The complex interdependent world of today requires deep appreciation and understanding of humanity's relationship across cultures and with the planet. We need a globally-minded civil society that stops blaming victims as terrorists, that stops wasteful over-consumption, and instead nurtures the diversity of life, conserves precious resources, and respects human dignity. Envisioning a future with less fear, less blame, and less divisiveness requires acting together to build deeper connections and greater understanding across cultures.

I am an agent of change constantly undergoing change myself. My experience in Africa allowed me to learn that everyone has an important role to play and significant knowledge and understanding to contribute in solving the challenges facing our shared global environment. The teacher is a student and the student is a teacher. There is a boundless world to love and respect, to differentiate and include. We need to foster connections and open our hearts and minds. Service to others is service to ourselves, to our future.

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