

Encounter On the Road
J. Carl Dealy
Inland Fisheries, Republic of Liberia

I was an Inland Fisheries Volunteer so we had motorcycles. Coming home from a long day of aquaculture extension activity (drinking palm wine and shooting the breeze with some of my most innovative fish farmers) I passed through a rubber tree grove when I noticed a line of people in the distance walking single file up the road. My first thought was, these folks are returning from their Ku (farm work party). As I got closer my engine suddenly died. Very strange... I got off the motorcycle and checked to see if I had flipped the gas valve off or something. Everything looked normal. About that time the line of people reached my spot in the road.

It was a group of ancient looking women. I spoke to them in my best Mano, asking them how they were and if they were coming from their farm. They were very kind and cordial, but I did not fully understand their answer. Then I noticed... The lead woman had a turtle shell, nearly as ancient as she looked. This could mean only one thing, Sande society business. She held out her hand for a hand shake, supporting her arm with her other hand by holding it nearly at the wrist (a sign of deep respect). I was compelled by custom to shake her hand. But I was a little scared. I took off my helmet and my sweat seem unnaturally cold. These old ladies, thin, frail, and weathered, were not what they seemed. I did a micro-second debate in my head and decided NOT to take off my leather glove. I needed protection. I shook her hand and then gave the old but sprightly lady a nickel. She held the nickel to her forehead and did a little jig and then they continued down the road chattering among themselves.

I was left there alone with my broken down motorcycle. I thought to myself, "you have been living in the bush too long, man you are getting spooky". As I contemplated walking the machine another mile to my house, I thought what the heck, I'll give it another try. I hopped on and gave it a kick start, the engine engaged as if nothing at all had been wrong with it in the first place. Spooky!