

A Peace Corps Volunteer's Adventures: Guinea I, 1963-65

Guinea was the first country to gain independence from the French, and it set the stage for all other French colonies in Africa. The political situation with the French, and thus the West, was difficult. In addition, President Sekou Toure turned to the Russians and the Chinese to provide additional assistance. Guinea then was considered on the far left in African politics.

Four African countries that were strongly socialistic were Guinea, Ghana, Mali and Egypt. In Macenta, the town of my assignment, the government sponsored events always included music that extolled the virtues of the four socialistic countries, their people and their leaders. However, the value of traditional Guinean music and dance was not being lost. The musician, Harry Bellafonte, visited Macenta and other towns in 1964 to begin founding a Guinean group that would perform their traditional music and dance in the United States.

The orientation of my PCV assignment was to agricultural development in Macenta in Southeastern Guinea. We were Guinea I, the first group of volunteers, and we planned our assignments with PC staff and Guineans as best we could. Primary elements of my assignment were to introduce an improved poultry breed and meet the nutritional and other needs for higher levels of production, teach students through field training to grow vegetables and poultry, and to improve vegetable production for the town market. The details seem a little lost at this point. We didn't create the revolution that we had envisioned.

The Peace Corps, the Guineans, and an international group in Macenta added to my education and broadened my views of life. That was the major outcome of my volunteer experience. In my case, it also became part of the foundation for my career in overseas development with USAID (The United States Agency for International Development).

At the operational and social level in Macenta, there was a small, diverse, international group of interesting people. A Chinese team was introducing the production, harvesting and processing of tea. Russians worked with the forestry office and as teachers. There were Lebanese merchants, French teachers, and an American Missionary family. In the early months of our assignment, the Guinean office personnel sometimes just grouped us collectively as the foreigners. We were leaving the Agricultural Office one day, and a Guinean rushed out the door indicating that he had some mail for us. It was in Chinese. We must have looked a little confused, and he said with a confused look in his face, "You are the Chinese, aren't you?"

On one occasion, the Governor (Macenta district) and senior Guinean officials invited foreign guests to an evening dinner outdoors. They were gracious hosts, and it was a good evening. At the end of the evening and after most people were gone, we three PVCs, the missionary couple, and six to eight Russians were all sitting at the same table enjoying a good conversation in some mix of English and French. We enjoyed the evening together.

Macenta is in a mountainous, high rainfall area of southeastern Guinea. The dry season was December and January during which time it also rained a few times. The rainforest is a paradise of nature! I and two other volunteers lived on an old French research farm several kilometers outside of Macenta. One just learned to live with nature and its plants and animals. Some of our adventures always involved animals.

In addition to the three of us on the farm, a PCV English teacher lived in Macenta. We had a cat as a pet, but he opted for a monkey. At some point, the monkey and a dog got into a fight. The monkey was wounded. She didn't heal well, and we took her out to the farm. Her health continued to decline. After several weeks, we took a blood sample and sent it to Conakry for testing. It turns out that the dog that attacked her had rabies, and she was now in a relatively advanced state of the disease. We had to have her put away. We each feared for our own condition, but we were all OK.

There were chimpanzees in some rural areas at that time. A volunteer teacher decided that her pet should be a young chimp. We went through her town one day, had a nice lunch together, and then spent some interesting time with the chimp. It lived in the house. It was not in a cage. As far as the chimp was concerned, we were all one family as near as I could tell. For me, it was a little disconcerting. That chimp was somewhat like next of kin. The Peace Corps staff learned of her pet and insisted that she find a new home for it.

Islam and Christianity were fairly strong. The traditional practices and beliefs were also strong, especially in rural areas. When talking about traditional beliefs, the subject of witch craft, and whether it was real, often came up. Some volunteers, including me, scoffed at the idea. I was talking with the missionary one day and started to convey my opinion. He immediately interrupted me. He said that I should always have respect for it. I asked what he meant and if he had any good examples or proof. He hesitated a bit and then simply, firmly repeated what he had said, "Always have respect for it."

Many times I felt separated from my own culture. Guinea was rural. Mail exchange from up-country with family here in the States took about six weeks. A three minute telephone call, if you could make it happen at the post office, was about seventy dollars for three minutes. Even communicating with PC staff in Conakry was difficult. Having spent time during my last year in college reading national newspapers, it was a necessity to continue that to maintain contact with the outside world. Listening to BBC and Voice of America Radio was not satisfactory for me. The only solution I could come up with was to order a weekly summary of the New York Times. It was a good element of my stay. I remember listening for the incoming plane, estimating when the mail would be delivered and put in the mail box, getting the paper, going out as far as the steps, and reading the thing until the Post Office closed for lunch, everyone had gone home, the streets were quite, the sun was hot, and until I had finished.

In summary, the time as a Peace Corps Volunteer broadened my horizons and helped shape both my professional and family life. I will always give my many thanks to the Peace Corps, the gracious Guineans, and to the international community in Macenta, Guinea.

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