

I was a 1975 Unification Church Missionary to Benin (Dahomey), Nigeria, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire

Monika Dearing Selig
December 2023



"Do you really know what you're doing, young lady? Going to a country that adheres to Marxism-Leninism – of all places? What do you know about the country, and why do you want to go to Dahomey right now? Do you really dare to do so?"

Confused, I looked at the German businessman sitting next to me on the plane. 'What does he mean?' was my thought, but I did not dare ask. Now I truly felt intimidated and insecure, even more so when I saw the pure bewilderment in his face. The enthusiasm with which I had just told him about my interest in Africa dissolved into fear and concern. By then I knew that it was dangerous to enter this country, and even more so as a missionary. But what should I do? Flying back home was out of the question. And so, I landed at a tiny airport in Cotonou, the capital city of Dahomey, where the hot equatorial sun took

my breath away.

Suddenly a man stood in front of me, reached for my suitcase, pointed to an adventurous-looking vehicle and said, "Taxi." Somehow, I had to get to the hotel whose address I had and where I would meet the other missionaries. So I got into the taxi. I am sure that I paid the driver far too much, because I was unfamiliar with the currency, my knowledge of French was inadequate, and I was pretty frightened.

The hotel was located close to the beach. Once there, I glanced at the astonished faces of the hotel staff and thought, 'They are going to ask me what I'm doing here.' After freshening up and eating something, I sat down at a table in the hotel's garden and thought about how I should proceed. When I finally ventured outside, everything seemed so unfamiliar. I had hoped to meet other Europeans here with whom I could talk – but I seemed to be the only guest and certainly the only foreigner.

When I had composed myself somewhat, I explored the city. I was practically the only white person, and soldiers patrolled the streets. Now I slowly understood what my fellow passenger on the plane meant, and I suddenly realized that I was in an unsafe situation because there had recently been a coup d'état.

Back in the hotel, I thought, 'How am I to do missionary work here, under the eyes of the communist regime and the vigilant eyes of the soldiers?' It would be too dangerous to witness in the street, lest I drew the soldiers' attention to me. In addition, I was unfamiliar with the French language and had only basic knowledge of English.

I felt very lonely and at a loss, hoping that the other two missionaries would arrive soon. As the days passed, I grew more concerned about my financial situation. The hotel on the beach was too expensive, and I had to find a cheaper place to stay. I inquired at the reception and found a hotel in the center of town, not very far from the open African market.

Our Underground Mission

I left my new address at the hotel and moved. It would have been better to have waited, because the American sister, Kathy, arrived a week later, looking for me in every hotel. From then on, of course, I felt relieved.

We put our finances together and thought about our next move. I could not have dealt with this situation on my own. I was far too young and inexperienced and not brave enough, but things improved right away with my elder American sister's presence. First, she made sure that, because of the riots, we could rent a house guarded by a night watchman. Soon after that, we established a Holy Ground: On the beach of Cotonou, we found two huge boulders where we prayed regularly.

Every day we went to the market to buy vegetables and fruit, which were very cheap. Imported food was expensive, yet fresh fish was always available. The African markets are very colorful and lively. From all sides, you are directly accosted, "Please try this, buy it." Many hands stretched out to offer us fruit and goods for sale. Even if we bargained down to half the price, the market women and traders were still getting a good deal.

Now and then, we took a shared taxi to the city. We learned many things from our fellow passengers. We

heard that the police were ubiquitous, there were curfews in the evening, and non-compliance resulted in immediate arrest and confiscation of one's ID or passport.

Very few Europeans lived here – some worked for the airlines and embassies. There were also a few Catholic nuns. Kathy had come to Dahomey as a representative of a ginseng company. We wanted to establish a ginseng business together, but that did not work because the people were far too poor to buy our products.

Our big problem was that we could not openly witness in a country under a communist government. So, we had to think about how to deal with the situation. In the meantime, we had befriended our neighbors, a family with three children.

The mother was Norwegian, the father from Dahomey. They were open to listen to the Divine Principle. But how could we witness in this city? We came up with the idea of using the taxi journeys to make acquaintances whom we could later recontact.

Rescue at Sea and Our First New Member

We found our first member, however, in an unusual way. As the city was situated at the Atlantic Ocean, we enjoyed taking walks along the coast. The beautiful blue of the water magically attracted me, and I wanted so much to go for a swim. Kathy stayed on the beach, but I swam far out.

But then – what was that? The undercurrent pulled me farther and farther out into the sea. Now I was petrified! I spotted a man running on the shore with a lifebelt. He waved to me in panic, and I began to pray, 'Heavenly Father, please don't let this be my end!

Help me!' Desperately I tried to swim back to the beach and suddenly felt sand under my feet where there had been nothing before. With God's help, I had found a small sandbank where I stopped, recovered a bit and gained new strength, allowing me to swim through calmer waters back to the beach.

There I was excitedly received by Kathy, the man with the lifebelt, and a young African couple. Next to them was a somewhat strange-looking man who had the appearance of an African medicine man or a hippie. In 'broken French' I said, "How wonderful God is that He saved me!" Since many Africans are committed Christians and have spiritual experiences, we saw this as an opportunity to talk about God. The couple and the strange young man kindly accompanied us home, and we invited them to revisit us.

We never saw the young couple anymore, but instead this man named Pierre, draped with chains and dressed in African garb, who wore jewelry in his ears and had long dreadlocks, often visited us. Using the Divine Principle book in French, we read with him, although we hardly understood anything ourselves.

Kathy and I each had a copy of the Divine Principle in our mother tongue. Although we could barely converse in French, Pierre kept coming and was fascinated by what he was reading. He became our first member and later told us that he had already been associated with the Rosicrucians.

Pierre's frequent visits were not entirely without danger for him, because we, as foreigners, were under observation by the secret police. Pierre also told us about the political situation; people were being arrested. Many spies walked between houses, looking for conspiracy gatherings and listening to conversations that might implicate someone. Arrests were common everywhere, making us even more cautious. Despite it all, Pierre became our first member.

Finally, after six months, another missionary brother arrived. He was a young student coming directly from university. In the beginning we all had difficulties communicating in different languages, being in a French-speaking country. We studied every day and tried our best to avoid misunderstandings. I was grateful to work as a typist at a German foundation for about three months. But then the situation in the country deteriorated further, and in August 1975 the foundation had to dismiss me because foreigners had to leave the country. We were pretty much the last ones to remain, unaware of the danger we were in.

Spies, Interrogation and Expulsion

One day in October, we received a summons from the National Security Office. When we showed up, we had to sit on a bench and wait for hours in a narrow, dark room, squeezed together with several Africans. An armed soldier stood in the doorway. No one answered our questions.

With each passing hour, we felt more fearful and worried. Finally, Kathy had an idea and asked the officers, "Can I give the boy out there the key for our neighbor to close the windows, in case it rains?" It was indeed the rainy season. She wrote a message for our neighbor and gave it to the boy along with the key. The neighbor then called the American and German Embassies, who set everything in motion for our release.

But the National Security Office withheld our passports. Without a passport, we could not move around the city. The embassy staff advised us to pack our belongings quickly and leave the country within a week, which we did. We picked up the passports from the secret police the day before departure, in November 1975. We had been in Dahomey for seven months and flew to neighboring Nigeria.



Nigeria

In Nigeria we met only the American sister, as the German and the missionary brothers had travelled to neighboring Cameroon to renew their visas. We supported her as best we could. Nigeria was not a communist country, so we were free to witness and move around in the capital, Lagos. Often we had guests who heard the Divine Principle and attended our services on weekends. To our great joy, Pierre, our member from Dahomey, arrived soon. He told us that the secret police had planned to interrogate him.

Since no one was allowed to leave the country, he decided to cross the already closed border to Nigeria

during the night, navigating the swamps and rivers with his belongings on his head. Then he continued to Lagos. What an adventure for the sake of learning more about the Divine Principle!

Most of the time I took care of the housework, but now and again went shopping at the market. Cooking was possible only on a kerosene stove. My two American sisters were happy to finally talk in their mother tongue. During this time, I read Father's speeches very often.

The more I read them and the Divine Principle, the more I understood and felt connected to True Father. This helped me to become more fluent in English. In the meantime, the situation in Dahomey had settled down, and Europeans were able to re-enter. We thought about finding new members and decided to go back to Dahomey, but to another city where we were unknown.

Travelling to Neighboring Countries

Together with our former Norwegian neighbor, we made a trip to Abomey, the old royal city in the north of Dahomey, because we wanted to know the country and its people better.

The journey was an adventure through rural Africa on a country road with many potholes. The ground's red clay contrasted beautifully with the green foliage of the trees on both sides of the road and made a great impression on us. The area alternated between small villages and incredible greenery. The bus, which was completely overloaded with people, animals and luggage – people on the roof were a common sight – had an engine breakdown in the jungle and needed to be repaired. All the passengers disembarked.

As it was already getting dark, the Africans, knowing that they were likely to find a nearby village, went to look for a place to sleep. We also set off and discovered a small village near the country road with the help of our bus driver. There we found a few houses with an all-night market selling bread and other food items. Small lanterns on the tables lit up the scene.

By now, the sky was pitch black with millions of stars sparkling above us like diamonds on a velvet cushion. I was stunned. I had never before seen such a magnificent starry sky – the firmament of the tropical nights. I would have loved to look on further, but we had to move on to find accommodation. A friendly African let us use his room and bed while he stayed with friends. We were infinitely grateful and once again experienced the warm hospitality of the Africans, which touched us very much.

The next day, with the bus repaired, we continued to our destination, the old royal city of Abomey. There we learned a lot about the beginnings of the slave trade in Africa. This journey left a deep impression on us. Back in Nigeria, I eventually needed to renew my visa and therefore went to Ghana for a while to support our movement and the brothers and sisters there.

I liked Ghana very much because I found the Christian spirit alive. We often visited the Methodist and Catholic churches, whose services inspired us greatly with their chants and dances and lively manner.

Meanwhile, I was called to Togo to help the German sister, Annerose, and the other missionary brother. Togo also was influenced by communism, making it difficult to witness openly. After a month, I returned to Ghana. I received the news that we three missionaries from Dahomey were to go to Côte d'Ivoire, where we were to learn French and find people from Dahomey. Pierre also came along. Kathy found work at Pan Am airline and I as a secretary for an African businessman with connections to Europe. In

Côte d'Ivoire we witnessed and found members to become part of the 'Benin family'.

Our goal was always to find members, so we decided to make another trip with Pierre via Ghana and Togo to the north of Dahomey. When we arrived in the city of Natitingou, I contracted hepatitis. We rented a small apartment where we stayed for about a month. The disease weakened me a lot. I was sluggish and could only lie on my mat, feeling despair and a lack of enthusiasm. Medication was not available.

Kathy and Pierre were full of energy and found two young men to whom they explained the Divine Principle. Later these two visited us in Côte d'Ivoire, became members and stayed with us. There I also found other spiritual children. The 'Benin family' expanded, and we rented a two-story house where we held seminars with many guests.

England

At the beginning of September 1978, some German missionaries, including me, were called to the Home Church mission in England. It was a culture shock to return to European civilization. In London I met True Father for the first time and had a memorable experience. We foreign missionaries were invited to a special meeting with Father, sitting in rows of five in front of him. I found a place in the front row. True Father came in and sat down on the chair facing us.

He spoke briefly to us and then gave a ginseng root to those sitting in the first row. Everyone should bite off a piece and then pass it on to the person sitting behind. This gesture felt like a reward and a test at the same time. I bit a little piece of the ginseng root and then passed it to those behind me. The root was soaked in honey and had a sweet, intense taste. Very delicious indeed! Father watched us with great amusement and interest.

A further significant experience was the Matching ceremony performed by True Father. Since I had still not fully recovered from hepatitis and my fiancé did not want me to return to Africa, I travelled to Germany to convalesce. In the end, I remained there because Father had plans to establish a machine tool company in Germany and called my fiancé, who was a mechanical engineer, to this mission.

Reflection It has been almost 50 years since my extraordinary time in Africa. I am now 70 years old, and I am writing from memory. I lived in Africa for a total of three and a half years. During this time.

I was a missionary in Dahomey, Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. I was often sick with malaria, hepatitis and more.

Nevertheless, I had many unforgettable experiences. Especially in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, I witnessed many members joining. Africans have a very vibrant and joyful life of faith, with great openness toward each other, although they tend to be reserved with foreigners, especially white people. A relationship of trust must be built first.

My missionary years were a unique and beautiful time, always protected and guided by our Heavenly Parent. I experienced many extraordinary, life-changing events. They were beautiful, enriching and instructive, and I would not have liked to miss them, despite all the difficulties, dangers and suffering. Over the years, many new and wonderful members joined and helped our movement in Dahomey to mature. I am grateful to have been part of this amazing beginning.