

Messages from our Unification Church Missionaries in Africa

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Last week a few of us ventured a long and very bumpy road to the village to visit the parents of a new member. It was worth every cough and drop of perspiration as his folks seemed quite happy to meet us. They gathered their friends and everyone's children and offered us a connoisseur's delight: palm wine served in coconut bowls! Going to the village is always such a nice change from the hustle and bustle of city life. As we were sitting there, a plane flew overhead - such a contrast! One of the men who spoke a little French commented that it was surely a miracle, repeating this in his own dialect. They all agreed, saying "How can something so heavy get off the ground?" When we told them that man had even been to the moon, that was absolutely too much! They all had a good laugh and thought that I had cracked a joke. Truly, it is like stepping back in time thousands of years. Their life is pretty much the same as their ancestors and their ancestors' ancestors.

Coming home, we met two wild cows sleeping along the road. For a moment we almost forgot this space-age steel city, Abidjan, where we live. Of course, we are so fortunate to live in such a progressive city, but it is nice to sometimes experience the true life of 95% of the Africans.

We gave them a photo of all of us together along with a tableau of an African woman. Later Pierre (an African member) told me that this was not so wise as they often perform witchcraft with such a photo. Maybe the fact that we are all happy together could provoke some jealousy. We are discovering more and more how profound this feeling is in most of the people. Jealousy dominates so many of their decisions and actions, so much of their life. I believe that this may be one of the major reasons for a lack of great advancement in some underdeveloped nations. It is found in every aspect of life -- in every level from the family to the grade school to the government. In school, for instance, a student may never try to excel for fear of what his peers will do to him. In work, one finds the same. Recently, our neighbor who was an administrator for the ministry of social affairs was lowered in rank because the director saw her working hard and was afraid she would excel him. Not long ago, a friend was telling me of an incident that happened at her father's factory. Many people suddenly became ill one afternoon at work. Of course, the situation was investigated. They found that one of the ladies who sells food to the workers had put poison in her competitor's food because she felt that he was receiving undeserved patronage. As you see, it runs very deep here.

The women here have so many difficulties with marriage. Often they have enough children and too much responsibility and are already beginning to grow old. Often the husbands have several girlfriends. The wife is considered to be a good wife if she does not complain about this situation and does not make any trouble about it. Sometimes, the husband decides he would prefer a different wife, so he leaves the first wife with the responsibility of all the children. Since most of the women have little education or training, the only way they can provide for their children is peddling goods, becoming a seamstress, or opening a small concessions stand, or a stand where you can buy cokes and beer, on the street. There are many of these stands in Cameroun and Nigeria. The African women often seem to be lonely and overburdened. The churches are filled with women and small children, not so many men. I think that the women must turn to God out of frustration and desperation. They are very interested in becoming friends with foreigners...



Sometimes I feel as if I am watching the emergence of a Communist nation, right before my very eyes. It's hard to tell exactly what is going on here, but everyone can feel the crisis. The political-economic situation is crumbling daily. The immediate problem is that there is not enough food to feed the people. The reasons for this are numerous and hidden -- poor rainfall last year, most of the young people moving to the cities to seek for jobs (which aren't there) leaving the farming to the old, the government ban on importing foreign goods into the country, but on the other hand heavy exporting of produce and foodstuffs from this country to other countries in order to gain much-needed foreign exchange. Also, there is a lot of hoarding, smuggling, and other malpractices. Many low-income workers and students buy their meals from "market mommies" who sell such things as hot rice, beans and fried fish in the markets. We have such a small market near our center, and the other evening I was there around 5:00 p.m. Many students that we know were there, milling around and looking for food to buy -- but there was absolutely nothing to buy, so they ended up eating bread for dinner.

Our trip to our southern neighbors was very satisfying with many unusual adventures. We left in our VW bus and arrived, intact, 16 hours later at the center in the capital city of the other country. When we arrived, we sat up trading tales until late in the evening. Travelling overland in Africa can be very exciting, although also hazardous at times. Bad roads, unfriendly police, and wild animals are just a few of the obstacles we encountered.

Just about one and a half hours outside our city, we ran into -- not literally, but almost -- a small family of elephants eating their breakfast by the side of the road. We were so excited, like a bunch of little kids: "Real elephants, just imagine, in the bush!" So we stopped the car and took some photos. The elephants lifted their heads up and down -- probably to get a good look at the humans on the road. Our sister insisted that they were waving to us with their trunks. Anyway, they soon turned and left... and so did we. The elephants left us with such a good feeling that we just couldn't stop talking about them until just as we approached the border. Then an enormous dazzling orange monkey dashed across the road in front of our car, running into the bush. We came to a screeching halt and tried to pursue him with our cameras, but he was too fast. I have heard that in the Orient, monkeys are a sign of good luck, so I took it to be a good omen at the beginning of our long journey. At the border we went through the usual procedures. As we were preparing to depart, a border guard came running up to our car and asked us if we could give him a ride to a certain city. At first, we were a bit uneasy at the prospect of taking him with us, wondering what manner of person this was whom we would be inviting into our car for the next 15 hours, with his own gun, no less. On the other hand, we didn't know the roads or the country. So we thought that it might just be a good idea to take him along; in fact, it might just be a blessing in disguise. He was so happy that he became just like a little boy running around and collecting his things.



Anyway, he in fact was very helpful -- guiding us to the right roads and helping us quickly through the police control on the road. From the border to the city, a distance of some 600 miles, there are no fewer than 20 police checks. Since there is a terrible smuggling problem, the police can really give a good grilling to motorists. As for us, the officer in charge would come up to the window and ask where we were going and to see our papers. They were generally very gruff and gave me the impression that if they were in the wrong mood, they could take our car apart to the very screws before letting us through. But as soon as they saw our important passenger, they became all smiles. "Oh, Olumba, how is it going? Are these people taking you to the city: Oh wonderful! Have a nice trip." With that, they would give back my papers, often without even looking at them, and wave us through.

The trip seemed so especially rich in symbols to me. The journey through a strange land, the dangers on the road, and our guardian angel border guard all reminded me of our mission in symbolic form. The moral seems to be that God is travelling with us and is especially present in dangerous and difficult times, protecting and guarding us in a very personal way.

