

## The Bicycle Riding Toubop - A Unification Church Missionary

September 1976

Vicki Tatz, editor



Here, it's a quiet life, except when the neighborhood donkeys are quarreling. There are birds in the trees, cows in the back yard, goats in the front yard, and sheep in-between. The whole feeling is different. The people live in mud houses with straw roofs, or in houses that are completely made of straw. They are primarily blacks here from any of five different tribes (and languages). They live simple lives for the most part. Some have jobs somewhere. Most just try to live.

Even so there is an immense kindness and hospitality, a social ritual rivaling any I have ever heard of. People who have little if anything will bring me into their homes and extend their hands. There are naturally exceptions, but compared to the cold harshness in the big city it is like a breath of fresh air. Sure, the people are leery of me, a white man or "toubop," and are even more leery because I am one of those horrible Americans they hear so much about, but still there is a connection. I brought the bicycle down so I would have a way to go to and from town and that has caused all sorts of disturbance... a bicycle riding "toubop"?

Today I went for a walk on the dike. The Morego, which is the flood plain, is now just beginning to fill up. It is like a green swatch across an otherwise barren area. There are small farms, bushes and trees. The trees are a dense mass of thorns. All of them are. With water so scarce the trees protect the precious essence running in their veins. The thorns are horrid. My bicycle tires will testify to that. I was told that the same type of scraggly, twisted thorn tree was used to make the crown of thorns that Jesus wore.

As I walked along the dike I tried to place myself here with the same state of mind I once had walking along a small Iowa riverbed many years ago. I tried not to think that this is Africa, and that this is a strange land, and all of the other misconceptions one has in a "foreign" place. It really caught me something.

Walking along one finds many interesting things. There were birds and even an eagle watching me. The little lizards and squirrels would scurry away into their holes. There are big lizards that sleep quite contentedly in the sun. It is fun to try to sneak up on them. They are about six feet long, so they have a difficult time running fast, but if you go against the wind very slowly you can startle them and they will run away as fast as they can peddle. They look like a boat that is going real fast skipping across the waves because of their big legs and flopping tail behind them.

I am afraid I didn't do any good in the public relations department though. Being white, I always seem to upset any situation I stumble across. I decided to climb a particularly inviting tree that leaned way out over the riverbed. While I was arranging myself in my perch I happened to be noticed by what I think was a teenage girl and a young boy. I say I think because they were a long ways off yet. They had been quietly strolling along the riverbed apparently fishing or something. Then suddenly the older of the two noticed me and ran over to the other. They sort of stared for several moments as if they were trying to be sure that what they saw was real, and then they finally decided and took to their heels, heading in the other direction. They then situated themselves about 200 yards further away. I couldn't really tell what they were doing. Finally I decided to continue my walk and I climbed down from my roost. When they saw me starting in their direction (though I must have been a good third of a mile away) they dropped everything and took off running and kept running until I couldn't see them anymore.

That sort of thing happens all the time. I went for a ride on my bicycle and saw an unusual tree I wanted to photograph. I left the track and headed across the bush dodging thorn bushes and sand holes. When I finally arrived at the tree I realized it was also a well where the women from the village half a mile away did their laundry. A wave of surprise greeted me at the well. At first I wasn't sure if they were going to all run away or run at me and attack me. It's strange enough to have a man out touring around the bush on laundry day but a "toubop" on a bicycle? I knew I would start a riot if I tried to take their picture so I positioned myself as conspicuously as possible in the other direction, took the picture and exchanged a polite salutation in their language and proceeded to pedal back into the bush from which I came. It's no wonder they think white people are crazy.

Many such things have happened here and it always is somehow enlightening for those on both sides. I know I have learned to really love these black people. So much so that I am really ashamed at the tradition which has caused so many of the abuses and misunderstandings and then the subsequent strangling of a rich and deep culture. They have survived, though they bear the scars which swings the pendulum back the other way in their bitterness.