

In Gabon my spiritual son, his younger brother, and I took a trip to visit his wife

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A small village in Gabon

My spiritual son, his younger brother, and I took a trip of about 120 kilometers to visit his wife. It's the custom here to send the wife away for three months after she's had a baby-for purification purposes. They believe a woman who has given birth is impure and must be isolated with her new child for three months-where she doesn't do any work, but her family serves her. Actually it seems a very good custom-from a Principled point of view, that she is impure, as the child certainly isn't sinful.

Secondly, those first three months are perhaps the most crucial ones for the mother and child to establish the needed bond of trust and love, for the child to continue to develop. If that bond is not established during this time, many difficulties occur. It's a time when the mother must be free to relax with her new child and learn to give love to it, etc.

So, his wife was in a little village about five hours' drive from Libreville. We left early Saturday afternoon, hoping to reach the village by night. But we got a flat tire on the road and ended up missing the last ferryboat of the night, which was needed to get us across the river to reach her village. (They are in the process of building a bridge, but until it's finished, all traffic leaving Libreville for anywhere else in Gabon must cross the river by ferryboat, and sometimes people have to wait in line all day to get across.)

We secured the car and our belongings and went searching for a place to sleep, ending up in an African-style hotel-no running water, cots for beds, rats underfoot, goats clambering all night on the roof, but at

least it was a place to rest, and the owner really tried hard to serve us.

We made it across on the first boat the next morning but it was already 10, and found her around 11. We certainly threw the family into a tizzy. As is often the case when we go visiting, we were the first white people to visit their house, and they worried that we weren't well enough served-that the chairs weren't nice, that we wouldn't like the food, or that we were bored. But their worries passed as they saw how relaxed and happy we were just to be there and share a part of their life with them.

We brought medicines, and I had a somewhat heart-breaking session, cleaning up sores on the children's heads and feet, caused by a nasty little baby mosquito, which bites and causes unbearable itching. Plus they had chiggers in their feet. Here, it's like a tick that bores into the skin and then lives there, off your blood. And one little girl had this evil-smelling pus coming out of both her ears. I cleaned it up, but it kept coming and I really had nothing to give her. Apparently she's always been a strange child, never talking, and I fear she's deaf or that there's some brain damage. She had the smell of death around her.

That session was heart breaking because I couldn't really do anything to cure them. Their problem is poverty and ignorance- too poor to buy shoes to prevent the chiggers and other parasites from entering the feet, ignorant in the ways of cleanliness and nutrition and proper health habits. And it was sad, too, because my spiritual son kept saying not to use so much alcohol and band aids, that it didn't matter anyway.

My mother sent me a book, *Return to Laughter*, about an anthropologist's experiences with another African tribe, in Nigeria. Some of her experiences helped me to understand such experiences as mentioned above, how the African often seems coldhearted and insensitive in the face of infants dying or ugly debilitating diseases, and other human suffering. It made me realize again what a rich spiritual heritage we have acquired as Americans or Westerners raised in a caring, Christian society, where suffering is minimized by advanced technology, but where suffering is also treated in a more sensitive, understanding way. It's hard to explain, but it's definitely an advancement due to Christianity.