

*Remembering the Peace Corps:*  
*Haute Volta, 1975–1977*  
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AS ONE FIRST SAW IT on the main trail going north, from a high point of these mostly flat lands, Zéguédéguin was spread out, tan and brown compounds well spaced, almost picturesque, on the opposite rise above a seasonal stream, or *marigot*. You are probably wondering how the name is pronounced: accent on the first syllable, falling swiftly through the next two and rising slightly on the last, like SAY-it-again. The *marigot* ran through a shallow valley, or *bas-fond*, that filled with water and cut the village off from all but foot traffic in the middle of the rainy season, *seogo*, but gradually dried out completely during the months from September to April, *sipalogo*. As it dried, bone-jarring cattle hoof prints, hard as rock, pocked trail and *marigot*, forcing one to walk one's bike or moped through the final approach to the village, until it finally wore down to a smooth, dusty, ocher path.

Along the southern border of the village on the banks of the *bas-fond* grew a couple of thin stands of tall kapoks and mahoganies, alternating with three small groves of lime, guava, and mango trees ranging from west to east. Perched just above the valley's edge, a small family compound huddled behind the kapoks—four round mud huts with conical roofs made of millet stalks, and a rectangular one with a flat roof of sticks, straw, and mud supported by beams made of straight tree limbs stripped of their bark. This was thought of as the chief's "garden" compound—a place he ceremonially retreated to once each year in the dry season in remembrance of a hostile raid generations before. Two of the chief's sons with their wives and small children lived there, and then I moved in by order of the chief. I was the *boul-tuda* (in Mooré), *puisatier* (in French), or well digger.

Forty-five years ago, metropolitan Zéguédéguin's human population numbered about two thousand. It was a mosaic of small family compounds like the one I lived in, each surrounded by the fields on which families grew their food. A perimeter wall of mud bricks or thick mats woven of millet stalks joined the huts together, forming a large oval around a central courtyard of hard earth that was always swept clean. Within that space, sections of the compound, depending on the size of the family, would be divided by other partitions, leaving a central courtyard for receiving guests. In the courtyard people ate, men separately from women and children; the women pounded grain in large wooden mortars; people visited one another and on some market days drank together the millet beer called *dam* in Mooré or *dolo* in French, brewed by the women for sale from the grain we grew.

There, too, the cocks chased the hens, tried with some success to fuck them, and fought their serial battles with each other for dominance, sometimes to near death before a young cock gave up to one older and stronger—until the younger grew stronger and the older weak with age. We saved whichever was losing from death in battle so we could eat him before it was too late. We—the men, that is—would observe and comment on the cockfights, though we never started or encouraged them.

My male companions were chiefly Benewende Dabilgou, his younger brother Felix, and Mark, a man about my age (twenty-one), who lived in a compound to the north and was a hereditary servant to Benewende and Felix's extended family, for they were sons of the village chief. Although slavery had been legally abolished, Mark, a bachelor, could be ordered to do things by the chief and generally helped the family with planting and harvesting. He lived with his own parents and siblings while mixing socially—though deferentially—with the children of the chief's line to which he was bound. He could have easily gone off to make a life elsewhere, and a visitor from abroad would not have been able to tell that he was of a different caste from others in the village. He had Mossi facial scars, was generally free to do as he pleased, and regarded Benewende, who was no wealthier than himself except for having two wives, as his elder friend.

Benewende's two wives were Bangba and Pesgo. With Bangba he had a young girl and a baby boy, Hadowé and Pascal, and with Pesgo a baby girl named Tenère. Felix was married to Amei, with a two-year-old boy, Manu (for Emmanuel). I felt closest to Amei until she and Felix moved away in my second year, when Felix began study to become a Catholic catechist near the capital of Ouagadougou, and Amei converted, taking the name Cidonnie.

Outside the compound, close by the perimeter, we grew maize, which needed more nutrients than millet or sorghum but ripened earlier, and so provided a staple in the last weeks before the millet and sorghum could be harvested. The nutrients came from the droppings of chickens and a couple of sheep that in the daytime mostly scavenged outside the compound for food, the hens staying close to the walls to protect their chicks from hawks above.

Planted just beyond the maize, and taking up most of the two or three acres around the compound, we grew sorghum and millet, with beans, peanuts, and tobacco planted between the rows closer to the compound. Down in the *bas-fond*, which became a shallow lake in the middle of the rainy season, we would plant a few rows of yams and manioc, hard to get in that region and needing longer periods of moisture than the grains that ripened later. We had two pigs—until we slaughtered one of them—that rooted around mostly behind the compound under the kapok trees, where it was cool and moist until about November. They ate anything in sight, even feces, including my own—peering at me hungrily at eye level as I squatted and then gobbling them up as soon as I was done. Sometimes they would wander farther to the margin of the well to wallow in mud and spilled water until the women shooed them away. In the evening, they would come in to sleep in the compound, close to the entrance. Of all this we were made.

The chickens roosted at night on the compound walls, awakening us before dawn with their rustling, cackling, and then crowing at break of dawn. Then came the sunrise crescendo: the shuffling of the sheep, the barking of the dogs as the horizon brightened, the grunting of the pigs, and finally the reverberant eeeee-haawwww of

the donkey, tied just outside the compound's broad threshold, which broke our hold on the last remnants of sleep and dream. We all started rustling around, emerged from our huts, gently shook hands and greeted one another in the soft familiar tones of polite people living together. Thus each day began during the dry season, *sipalogo*—starting in September and often lasting into May. This was the season for digging wells.

In most cases, someone—usually a grown man with some authority from his village chief—would appear at the entrance to our compound, clapping his hands in the customary way of announcing oneself, often on a market day (which came every three days). He'd be holding a chicken bound by the feet and wings usually. After we exchanged greetings—a long process that involved inquiring about each other's health, the well-being of our families, of our villages, how the day was going, how his trip to Zéguédéguin had been. . . all the while gently moving loosely clasped hands to the rhythm of our voices—he would hand me the chicken, then request help digging a well in his village, which might be anywhere from two to twenty kilometers away. We would set the chicken free, and it would shake out its wings and feathers, stalk timidly about, take stock of its new situation. Then I would ask about the village: How many family compounds were there? How many able-bodied men? How far to the nearest reliable well? We would decide on a day for me to come have a look, and then he would head back home on foot or bicycle—sometimes half a day distant.

I'd set out a day or two later on my moped. Getting to know the trails took trial and error, learning which trail at which fork led to which village. The only way to know was to ask, after following one until I knew I was lost and coming upon a fellow traveler, who would give me directions in a language I could, at first, barely understand. I learned to understand, because I had to. I would seek out the chief's compound, where I would be received with another long series of greetings back and forth as the chief and I shook hands, with family members or some of the chief's ministers looking on. We would then discuss the water situation and the number of men whom we could depend on to work on the well over several months.

We'd go to a likely spot for it, usually in a low-lying area where traditional wells had been in the past, now caved-in sinks in an old gully, maybe, where goats still scavenged on the last green bushes. It might have been five years since one of their wells bore water past February or March, at which point the women would have to walk to another village with a good well. When the distance got great—ten kilometers in some cases—men would load clay pots on the back of their bikes (if they had bikes) and ride. Some families might move away.

A traditional well was simply one that someone had dug in the bare earth with a short-handled hoe, or *daba*, until they hit water. If they hit rock first, they had to give up. This sort of well was small in diameter, just large enough for a man to dig. And since they had no materials with which to build a solid wall, such a well typically caved in each rainy season. This kind of well also had no lip, or *margelle*, around its mouth to keep out detritus from the surface, including animal waste, and to guard against children or animals falling in.

After choosing a spot for the well, I'd pound an eight-to-twelve-inch length of rebar into the ground, attach a three-quarter-meter length of sturdy string to it, tie on another piece of rebar or a stick at the other end, and stretch the string out to full length, then bend down and walk backward, inscribing a circle in the dirt to mark the perimeter of the well. Then I'd take a strip of wood lathing two meters long with a hole in the center and on each end, and stake it into the ground with a foot-long length of rebar through the end holes so the empty center hole would be right at the middle of the circle. Someday a plummet line would ride down that hole to where water was, if there was water. I'd pick up the lathing but leave the rebar stakes in place, and then we'd put rocks around them so people wouldn't trip on them or pull them out. Then I'd mark out the circumference more deeply with a short-handled hoe.

I'd measure out a couple of feet from the circle to indicate where the forks, *fourchettes*, would be planted a couple of feet deep to hold the heavy crossbeam that would bear the pulley. I asked them to cut the *fourchettes* and beam from thick straight trees or branches at least half a foot in diameter, strong enough to safely bear a grown man's

weight. We'd often look around at the nearby trees to spot candidates. They should cut and plant the *fourchettes* and the beam before I or one of the masons I worked with—Korego Roger or Daogo Kirsi—returned to begin the digging. I then handed the piece of lathing to the chief along with the plumb line and a meter-and-a-half length of rebar, explaining that this is how they would keep the well straight—as they dug, they would periodically tie the rebar in the middle to a string hung from the center of the lathing at the top of the well and rotate the rebar in a circle to make sure the well was going down plumb.

Finally, I would ask them to send someone to Zéguédéguin to pick up materials and—if they had no donkey and cart of their own—one of my donkey carts, along with a donkey, for hauling, a pick, two shovels, a pulley, a bucket, twenty-five to fifty yards of rope, and a couple of hardhats (*casques*). We would settle on a day, often a market day, when they could come for the materials, so I would be sure to be there to open the storage building next to the agricultural agent's house and help load the materials.

Soon after, Korego, Kirsi, or I would return to the village and demonstrate how to proceed. For the first few weeks, even months in some cases, this would involve digging with picks and shovels, which the men always did as a team, some standing around observing and commenting while one man dug. They would spell each other, with Kirsi, Korego, or me pitching in when we were there. (We traveled from well to well to help, encourage, and keep tabs on the progress.) When a well got too deep to climb out of, we used a length of rebar to attach a pulley to the crossbeam atop the *fourchettes*, winding the rebar several times around the beam. Then we ran a rope through the pulley and tied a strong stick about the length and thickness of a child's forearm to one end of the rope as a seat for raising and lowering a man.

It was a communal effort, with plenty of conversation about how the work was going and what the ground was like. One would dig while the others looked on until they decided he had done enough, and someone replaced him. Rarely did they wait for a man to say he

was too tired to continue; they would insist on replacing him before he wore himself out. We never knew if or when the hard earth would give way to lateritic rock, slowing progress to only a foot or two a day. In a couple of wells we ran into granite bedrock.

In a deep well—say over sixteen meters—the sun shines only at noon, and not for long. When you look up you see a circle of faces peering down silhouetted by the sky, and the crossbeam holding the pulley straight over your head. The air is damp and cool even on a hot day as you bear the pick down hard, shovel the clumps of dirt or rock into the bucket, then pull the rope to signal that it's ready to be raised. You'd keep an eye on the walls of the well for cracks or signs of disintegration.

At a certain point, usually, one could feel on the footsoles and even smell a dampness in the bottom, maybe a softening in the earth. And then a definite seeping of water could be felt, finally a puddle, until one had to bail the water out to continue digging, always a big moment. We'd bail it out by the bucket and keep digging to get as far down as we could before we'd have to stop to keep the walls from collapsing as the water seeped in. Meanwhile, other men and boys would be gathering sand from dried-out streambeds and gravel from low hilltops, using the donkey and cart. We'd mix a little of it with a sack of cement to make a concrete pad for mixing more concrete to pour into the circular mold to line the well. We inserted a grid of rebar in between the mold and the well wall and then poured in the concrete, bucket by bucket, to make a *buse*. We called this *busing* (*be-using*) the well, creating a four-inch thick (or more) concrete cylinder.

Once the concrete dried, we'd remove the mold, set two iron slats in parallel across the top of the *buse*, and then resituate the mold on top of the slats so it matched up with the *buse* below. We'd set two planks athwart the slats for a man to stand on as buckets full of concrete were lowered down for him to pour. This is how we "*bused* it up."

The last *buse* was above ground, a meter high, to keep people and animals from falling in. With mud bricks we built up a *margelle* around the top. Korego or Kirsi would help lay the *margelle* and finish

it with a troweled layer of cement mortar (*crepussage*) to make it pretty and smooth. We would often add a shallow round trough of concrete, an *abrevoir*, for watering animals, mainly goats and sheep.

The hardest work came after we had reached water and *bused* up the well: deepening. As the water receded in the course of the dry season, we would keep returning to each well to deepen. If there was water in the bottom, but not too much, we'd go back to digging, drawing the water out as we went to try to get as far below the water table as possible before *busing* back up again to the bottom of the *buses* above. When we were done, the water would rise again, maybe a meter or so deep—enough to last a month maybe before we had to come back again. If we were lucky, we might hit an aquifer—a water source below a layer of hard earth or lateritic rock—and the water would rise up two or three meters, forced up by the weight of the rock layer.

Once people started using a well, word spread quickly and more would come to draw from it, from farther and farther away, sometimes bringing livestock as well. The more use a well got, the sooner a depression cone would form—a dip in the water table in the vicinity of the well—so deepening was always a race against time. As the water receded, it was not unusual for women to sleep out by a well overnight waiting for it to refill enough for them to draw a calabash of water at a time. They took turns drawing from it and carrying the water home, single file, in large clay pots balanced on their heads, followed by their daughters of descending height carrying smaller pots.

Toward the end of the dry season, we'd try to deepen each well as far below the water table as we could. Korego, Kirsi, and I would spend some days at one well, then move on to the next, and the next; then start the circuit over again as we kept chasing the water down, hoping to get a full meter or more before the rains started. We rarely did.

When I tried to get the local *sous-préfet* to sustain the program under the supervision of Korego and Kirsi after I left, he listened politely but did nothing. He couldn't get the funding from the government, and they would not trust "peasants" to do such things on their

own and to file the reports documenting their work. Such are bureaucracies. When I left, the wells program ended in that area, though the wells remained and there was still plenty of work to do.

Too many (not all) *fonctionnaires* disdained the common people, adopting, I thought, the attitudes of the former French colonial *fonctionnaires*. (The gendarmes I encountered were much worse—mere thieves.) Yet I came in time to understand the pressures under which the more honest ones worked, including the *sous-préfet* in Boulsa, to whom I reported—and how the legacies of colonialism continued to grip the country. The work magnified my longing for global community. Surely the world, the very earth, could not sustain such massive inconsistency—the enormous imbalance of wealth and power between nations, a lesson we refuse to think about to our peril. The signs proliferate.

I remember going to speak with the chief one November day and finding him in his receiving room, finishing up a prayer with a Muslim *marabout* who had come from afar to visit. I was surprised. I waited till they were done, and then the man left. I told the chief I was confused: I thought he was traditional, practiced the Mossi customs. Then I'd seen him taking part in the Catholic services a while back, despite having at least a dozen wives. Now this. Looking me in the eye, he held up an index finger and said, "There's only one god, right?"

"You know, I used to be Muslim," he continued. "I was Muslim for three years," holding up three fingers and looking at me through his coke-bottle eyeglasses. "Before getting *Nam* (the chiefdom), I went to Muslim study. I still remember lots of the prayers." He said some prayers in Arabic to prove it to me, in a low quiet voice, almost a mumble, looking at the ground before his crossed legs. "But then my people told me to stop because I was going crazy, and I would die early if I gave up the Mossi customs. I was first in line for the chiefdom. The people were right. I was losing my mind. The Muslim school was causing my head to get weird and spacy." He acted slightly dizzy, rolling his eyes and making circles with his hands at the side of his head. "I had to give it up."

Then he mentioned the harvest ceremony coming up, the *Kitwaga*. “In three days I’m going to kill two cows and some goats and chickens to give the *ninkeemse*” (his elders).

I asked him, “What *ninkeemse*?”

He said, “My *baramba*,” and then I understood that he meant the ancestors; he talked about them exactly as if they were still living.

Another time, I was in the village of Kournere-Koudeguin to check on a well, having a good time at the chief’s compound. I told a story about a hyena that had eaten a sheep the night before in the *bas-fond* behind our compound, ripping out some of the bowels to avoid the bile and then chomping down the rest. Mark had found the stomach in the morning and brought it over, still dripping, wanting Bangba to cook it for him. (She had looked at him, then me, then him again and wrinkled up her nose with an expression as if to say, maybe that slob Benewende will eat it with you.) This prompted the old men to talk about how lions, not over thirty years ago, used to come down to the *marigot* in Zéguédéguin, right behind our *zaka*, to drink, catch sheep and goats, and eat them in no time.

While we were talking about this, two men from the north approached on camels, something I’d never seen before—very proud and intelligent-looking, sly. They stopped; they made the camels sit down and swung off of them to sit with us. One was Tuareg—light skinned, Arab-looking—and one Bella, dark skinned, most likely the Tuareg’s slave. They looked rich. The Tuareg’s pitch went like this: “My companion has an insatiable appetite; he can eat the food of five concessions. His camel can drink all the water in your wells. If you don’t give us anything, we’re going to sleep here tonight.” The chief gave them twenty-five CFA, West African francs—about twelve cents at the time. Then the two strangers led everyone in a Muslim prayer, which we acted out, although we couldn’t understand a word.

In the past four years, Islamist terrorism linked to ISIS and Al-Qaeda has spread south from Mali into the heart of Burkina Faso. Men on motorcycles—often Tuareg—swoop in suddenly on rural villages and towns to assassinate schoolteachers and take hostages for ransom. In turn, non-Muslims have made retaliatory raids against

Muslim villages. In the north and east of the country, people live in fear of slaughter. Over a million have fled their homes and now live in refugee camps. All of this I find inconceivable. Why are Islamist terrorists in the area today? Is it connected with competition for resources in the Middle East?

Another memory: I'd been asked by the chief of Zandoure to start a well for them. I rode out there, where I was not known. As I rolled up to the entrance of the compound, a little boy, maybe three years old, was standing stock still in the middle of the entrance on locked knees, naked. His mother was sitting in the shade of a wall, her feet straight out before her, shelling peanuts into her lap. As I pulled up, the boy wanted to run but could not. His jaws worked spasmodically, his eyes spitting tears—but no sound at first. And then a piercing wail cut the air, and the boy began peeing involuntarily—the very image of stark craven fear—as his mother scooped up the peanuts from her *pagne* and put them aside, stood up, brushed off her *pagne* and tightened it around her waist, then hurried to him and swooped him up onto her hip. She stood quietly studying me, a little afraid. An old man came out and took charge—the chief—and after exchanging greetings we went out to pick a place to dig a well. When I got home, Bangba, the eldest wife in the family I lived with, told me that it was my long stringy hair, not so much my color, that frightened people. I looked like the Mossi image of a ghost.

I settled down in my stick chair in the shade with a calabash of water and Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, published in 1968. He bases his notion of African socialism not on Marxism and class conflict, descending from Adam Smith and capitalist relations, but on African village life and the moral claims of kin. Land belongs to the commons (as in Zéguédéguin at the time). Everyone has a right to use it, but none can own it. Socialism is an "attitude of mind." African socialism need not follow in the wake of agrarian and industrial revolutions, as Marx claimed. The foundation would lie in the extended family, but it must now extend to the entire continent. And "Socialism is not Racialism"; it has nothing to do with race. People must not be put into predetermined categories of race or national origin: "We

must accept the oneness of man. . . . And each one of us must fight, in himself, the racist habits of thought which were part of our inheritance from colonialists." African socialism, he says, is incompatible with racialism. What Nyerere had to say about education struck close to home. Schools needed to integrate their instruction with the practical needs of each community. Instead of teaching children to despise their parents as ignorant, they should combine respect for traditional ways of caring for land with new methods, tools, and means of organizing work. Nyerere wanted book learning to be combined with instruction in trades relevant to rural communities, like digging deep-pit latrines and irrigation channels. "Every school should also be a farm." Such was mine.

Zéguédéguin was well-known in the region for its mask performances. Men completely covered in raffia and wearing wooden masks of abstract geometrical design, topped by a cone-shaped crown three feet high, pounded out impossible rhythms with their feet while twirling, crouching, swinging their crowns to the long drums as we stood watching. Representing ancestors of the clan, they performed mostly at funeral ceremonies, which took place in the dry season and involved the entire village in which they took place. For three days, we had to suspend work in any village celebrating a funeral. Art was central to community existence and oriented it. At Zéguédéguin's annual *Soucou* in April, mask clans came from villages all over the area and performed over a period of three days to honor the dead of the past year and give hope for rain in the one to come.

On the morning of a funeral or seasonal holiday, the *bindaré* drummers would be out at sunrise, their solemn low rhythms reverberating far, pervading the air. They sat cross-legged in a line cradling the great gourds, which were covered with goatskin. In the middle of the drumhead was a round circle of thick black wax taken out of the ears of donkeys. Solemn and concentrated, the men beat at times simple, at times complex, rhythms in long repetitive measures that rode out over the village, low and powerful, the very atoms of the air seeming to expand. You felt the throb distinctly on the eardrums—you felt

it almost as much as you heard it—a sober delirium of sound, bringing us all into the same deft patterning of time.

Such was the rhythm of life in those times, vibrating between unexpected learning experiences in the course of work, living, and reflection inflected by reading paperbacks from the Peace Corps library—novels and story collections in English from the Heinemann series of African literature, Césaire and Senghor from *Présence Africaine*, Camara Laye, Sembène Ousmane, Kant, Camus, Sartre, Ellison (*Shadow and Act*), Pound's anthology *From Confucius to Cummings*, volume 1 of the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, William Blake, Milton, Charles Olson (*The Special View of History, Selected Writings*), Gary Snyder (*Regarding Wave*), Fanon (each book in the Grove paperback edition)—followed by food and family conversation.

And through it all the daily rhythm of women pounding millet into flour in the afternoon, fires burning down low under the cooking pots as we conversed after dinner, following the phases of the moon and stars coming out—the Milky Way on a moonless night a wide glowing sash spangled with constellations that wheeled dependably overhead, stately, slow, rising and falling later and later from week to week, along with the moon and planets in their separate tempos, as the weeks passed through the eight-month dry season. We slept outside much of the year and paced our lives to what the sky offered. (The name for the mask clans was, in fact, *Sawadago*—Cloud.) I would fall asleep on my back, looking up.

About once every two months I would travel to Ouagadougou for a weekend well-diggers' meeting—a day-long ride on my moped—and join other volunteers, visit some bars and speak English for a while, maybe go for a swim at the embassy pool. I'd buy things in the Grand Marché for people back “home” (there were many requests) and trade books in the library—where I slept one night for the air conditioning and because I had nowhere else to go.

I am in danger of making all this sound too romantic, washed over by nostalgia. The truth is that the life was hard. There was

never enough, and not much one could do about it. In the village of Gnonare, the men worked heroically all year, half of the time through hard rock, and never hit water. I couldn't get my colleague who had a jackhammer team to come help. I had amoebic dysentery most of the time, and, thanks to mosquitoes and flies, infections on every cut, scratch, or burn on my body. We didn't have enough vitamins in our food. Pesgo, the younger wife of Benewende, developed a severe infection in both eyes, and would have gone blind if I hadn't given her, illegally, some leftover tetracycline pills I had. Pascal, the youngest child, came down with a fever and very nearly died after three days unable to eat. They called in a traditional healer, who bathed him in a special liquid and smoked up Bangba's hut with some concoction. We thought Pascal would pass away that night, but the fever finally broke just before dawn and he started nursing.

In the cold nights of February, Mark's mother, Maranga, developed a wicked cough that she couldn't shake. It got so bad she could no longer stand and could barely breathe—pneumonia, I assume—her diaphragm and rib muscles worn out. The village nurse refused to go see her for three days as neighbors gathered in her hut holding vigil. When I protested that they must get the nurse to come, one man responded, "A zweta kum" (he flees death). Finally I managed to talk the nurse into coming; he gave her a shot of penicillin that saved her life.

Girls were universally subjected to clitorrectomy in the traditional fashion. They were considered the property of their fathers and then husbands, who could compel them to have sex. On the night they gave the girls away, mostly aged fifteen to sixteen, we all heard my friend Yipaala screaming near the crossroads, where her husband's friends had gathered to capture her and take her to her new home. I had been visiting at the nurse's house; when I got back, Bangba asked if I had heard her. Seeing that I was upset, she said, "That's the way it is for some of us. She will get used to it. Don't be upset."

I told the chief the next morning what I thought about their system of marriage. He said, "Georges, you don't understand Mooré. It's *kurungu; coutume*. If I don't do this, I'll die. Maybe the children

will be able to change it, but I can't. I took medicine, a mixture in a calabash to drink, when I became chief, and broke a clay pot over the graves of my fathers, understanding that from that time, the medicine would kill me if I broke the custom."

The political system was dominated by the chief of each village and his ministers, largely cut off from the national government, although one nearby village held an election for chief during my last year, apparently mandated by the national government. I went with others to watch as people lined up by family, the male head of family in front followed by wife (or wives) and younger members of voting age. Watching a woman carrying a child on her back disappear into the *secco* voting booth, independent of her husband, made my eyes water and my chest heave, though I knew from the grapevine that people would vote to uphold the traditional custom. One man who had amassed wealth in sheep had been going about trying to bribe people to vote for him, earning nothing but disrespect. Hado, the eldest son of the former chief, won easily.

I can remember a conversation with some friends in which I mentioned "Haute Volta"—the country's name at the time—and Benewende asked, "What is Haute Volta?" His brother Pierre tried to explain its geographical range and all the ethnic groups, and finally said, "It's where the taxes go." Benewende responded, "Oh, Ouagadougou." Benewende's president was not the president of Haute Volta, but the Mogho Naba—emperor of the Mossi.

All of this Thomas Sankara, son of a gendarme, a Marxist-Leninist army officer raised in comparative privilege unconnected with the traditional village cultures that largely comprised Haute Volta, and an admirer of the Cuban Revolution, viewed in Marxist terms as feudalistic. After taking over in a coup a decade after I left, he strove to wipe out the traditional village social hierarchies throughout the country. He fought to liberate women and instituted "committees in defense of the revolution" to take over village politics. He tried to quash the corruption of the *fonctionnaires* and gendarmes. He initiated campaigns to increase literacy and fight desertification without foreign help. The chiefs were stripped of their power. He renamed

the country Burkina Faso—land of the upright people—changed the names and boundaries of various provinces, and sought to end the country's reliance on foreign aid. All laudable initiatives—truly revolutionary. After four years his friend and right-hand man, the one who had orchestrated the coup that had sprung him from jail and raised him to the presidency, had him assassinated.

Some two decades after I left Zéguédéguin, an earthen dam (a dream of the chief's in my time) was built across the *marigot* where the main trail crossed it heading north. This created a large year-round reservoir to the west, now viewable on Google Earth. I'm told it's the third-largest body of water in Burkina Faso. What had been the *bas-fond*, a favorite grazing spot for sheep and goats when it dried out—watched over by young boys and occasional hyenas—is now rimmed by rice paddies and vegetable gardens as inconceivable in the mid-1970s as the Islamist terrorists who now threaten every province in that region. Crocodiles—crocodiles!—and fish now inhabit the water. How they got there is a mystery to me.

The dirt path connecting the village with gravel-paved roads and larger towns to the north and south, now atop the dam, became a road passable by cars and trucks year-round. Trucks and bush taxis regularly pass on the road going north and south. These changes nourished a growing market economy and altered the social dynamics of the village.

I lost contact with the Dabilgou family during Sankara's regime, when my letters started being answered by people I'd never met, as far away as Ivory Coast. (Bangba, Benewende, and Pesgo could not read or write; someone would read and translate my letters from French to Mooré for them.) Well diggers like me are no longer needed. Many years later a couple of volunteers taught English in a junior high school there that didn't exist in my time. One of them told me that traveling from village to village alone had become dangerous. Highway banditry arose after the police in Ouagadougou, in a dispute with the government soldiers, let all the prisoners out. (More than once, I'd been caught out after dark with a flat tire or blown gasket and been invited by a stranger to spend the night with his family. I didn't

worry about bandits; I worried about snakes.) Over a million people in the region have been forced from their homes by Islamist terrorism. I find myself asking, like W. E. B. Du Bois, what is progress?

Over the months and then years after coming back to the United States, I learned to keep quiet about my years in Zéguédéguin. People could neither relate nor understand. American images of do-gooders, explorers of the heart of darkness, or agents of The State—filtered through American racial lenses—distorted everything. The memories fade, the language, the daily rhythms, and many names. Yet the feelings remain, intensified by loss, no doubt altered by distance.

On the sixtieth anniversary of its advent, the Peace Corps, which is always under threat during conservative administrations, is on hiatus, waiting out the pandemic. It's common to hear the Peace Corps equated with neocolonialism, at least in the academic provinces in which I make my living today, but in my experience the work had exactly the opposite effect. I arrived with an unhealthy predilection for early-seventies-style primitivism that was common in elite universities at the time. I soon learned how ignorant this made me. I abandoned the abstractions of my college education and attended to the work at hand, and the people with whom I lived. I have never quite accommodated myself to American culture since—its wastefulness, its worship of money at the expense of the commonwealth, its dearth of community life, its racial etiquette.

Some volunteers, it is true, worked under *fonctionnaires* who had asked for a volunteer apparently for no reason except to make themselves look important by having an American—presumably a white one—working under them. And in the earliest years (before my cohort) the CIA used the service to plant agents in some countries. But Haute Volta had neither resources nor strategic significance the United States could care about, which is why most of the Americans there, by far, were Peace Corps volunteers. Most of us were idealistic: John Lennon's "Imagine" still resounded in the youth culture of the mid-1970s. Its proper counterpoint is "No Justice, No Peace."

But whatever naïveté and narcissism we carried with us could not survive the term of service. The idealism, however tempered,

did. While I became a critic of American culture, many of my former colleagues continued working nationally and internationally for food security, the battle against desertification, public health. I was fortunate to be a *puisatier*; it gave me a durable touchstone, what Thoreau called a point d'appuis, for all my future work. *Kom ka ye, teng ka ye* (no water, no village) was a common proverb. Fela Kuti sang truthfully at the time, "Water no get enemy." One might add Herman Melville's observation, "Meditation and water are wedded forever."