



West Africa Travel 1968 & 2014

ANSOLE Regional Meeting results in bio-gas scholarship for Ghanaian community activist

by Kate Showers, 24 July 2014

After agreeing to an invitation by the ANSOLE Coordinator, Dr. Daniel Egbe, to present a paper at the ANSOLE Regional Meeting in West Africa (ARMWA 2014), 25th -26th April at The Energy Centre, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi (KNUST), I also made arrangements with the Activists and Academia Programme at the Centre for World Environmental History, Sussex University, Brighton, UK to meet with local affiliates in Accra. It was my first time back in West Africa – my professional work had concentrated on central and Southern Africa. When Dr. Egbe learned that I had actually traveled from Ghana to Nigeria as a student, he asked that I write a descriptive, comparative article for the ANSOLE newsletter.

My initial response was to decline, since I am not interested in telling adventure tales to glamorize myself. However, the condition of youth is universal. People in their twenties have a wonderful openness and determination that should not be dampened by the fears of people who 'know better'. Perhaps my stories might prompt others to be bold and push themselves beyond what is familiar and expected. The details and context of my past trip could remind today's youth of their historical heritage, while a comparison with my recent experiences could help others to understand the depth of changes that have occurred, as well as the constancy of profoundly important social values. My life has been full of adventure, because that is what I wished for as a young girl. If my stories encourage others to follow their dreams, then they are worth telling. In that spirit, I offer the following paragraphs.

In 1968, I went to West Africa as a foreign student. I was 19, and this was the first time that I would travel not just far from home, but far from my country - and continent. The only border I had ever crossed was the land border with Canada, a country that shares my language and most of my customs. In those days, telephone contact was expensive and international calls difficult to make; people sent telexes in emergencies, and letters to stay in touch. I would only be able to communicate with family and friends by the post which would take between two and a half and four weeks for delivery. I was a student at Kalamazoo College, in Kalamazoo Michigan, USA. A foreign study program for all students had been in place for three years. Believing that international study would make future wars less likely because it promoted understanding of other cultures, a philanthropist had endowed the college with funds to create a program in which third year students could study abroad. Kalamazoo was the first – and for a long time, the only - American institution of higher education to send students to the African continent. The first destinations were Kenya's University College Nairobi and Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College.

Both of these African universities were products of British colonialism. The University College Nairobi had begun its existence in 1956 as a Royal Technical College, became University College Nairobi in 1964 as a constituent of the University of East Africa, and prepared students for degrees from the University of London. In 1970 it became the independent University of Nairobi. In contrast, Fourah Bay College (FBC) had been established in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society of England, and in 1876 entered a formal relationship with the British University of Durham. At Sierra Leone's independence in 1960, the Durham University Senate granted FBC the status of "Fourah Bay College, The University of Sierra Leone", and dual degrees were issued. Seven years later, the University of Sierra Leone was reconfigured. The new agriculturally oriented Njala University College (NUL) was combined with FBC to create an autonomous University of Sierra Leone. Located in the rural Moyamba District, NUL was the result of a collaborative project between Sierra Leonians and faculty of the University of Illinois, USA which was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Starting in 1964, its purpose was to train middle level agricultural extension officers and agriculture education teachers for secondary schools. Graduates were issued dual degrees. With the university's reorganization, FBC and NUL became equal campuses, and graduates were granted degrees issued solely by the independent University of Sierra Leone. Kalamazoo College responded to the University of Sierra Leone's reconfiguration by expanding its foreign student program to include the Njala campus.



In the following year, sixteen students were accepted by the Foreign Study program to attend African Universities. Four had elected to go to the University College Nairobi, two were to go to the University of Ghana at Legon (founded in 1948 as the University College of the Gold Coast with linkages to the University of London, becoming the independent University of Ghana in 1961), and ten were accepted for Fourah Bay College. When the 1968 summer orientation program began, those destined for Sierra Leone were offered a choice of campuses: FBC or NUL. They were told that the NUL campus was up-country, the Kalamazoo Foreign Study Director had not been there, and the curriculum was unknown, but students who elected to go there would be given full credit for anything they studied. Three chose Njala, and I was one of them.

We were all completely naive, and trusted in the goodness of most people. We didn't have any appreciation of what it meant to be in Africa so soon after the end of colonialism, nor did we have any understanding of what civil war meant. We had only known peace time in our lives, and our relatives' experience of war had been before we were born on another continent. It was not something any of us thought about - except to protest the US war on Vietnam.

The students going to Africa were eager to learn. We had campaigned the year before for a course in African literature. When told there was no such thing, we constructed a bibliography to demonstrate the contrary, and our syllabus persuaded a senior English professor to teach what became his signature course. The African history professor was excellent, with close connections to the pioneering History Department at the University of Wisconsin which was producing ground-breaking research on African history. Kalamazoo College had begun its path to becoming an undergraduate center of excellence in African Studies, and renowned for its internationally sophisticated graduates.

In those days, long air tickets were written with unlimited stops, as long as one traveled in a straight line. We had been advised to have our tickets written to Accra, Ghana, but to get off in Freetown, Sierra Leone for our studies. Then, at Christmas break, we could fly from Freetown to Accra and back to further explore West Africa. We were able to stop in Europe on the way over, as well as add more African and European destinations while traveling home. Most Kalamazoo students studied in European universities, and traveled there by ship. Those of us going to Africa simply had long air tickets, and those going to Sierra Leone had only one restriction: meet in Rome, Italy on a certain date to travel as a group to Freetown. I flew to London, England and Florence, Italy en route to Rome with a friend. After the normality of the heterogeneity and multi-cultural/multi-ethnic New York City of my birth, I thought London very dull. My impression was of white buildings that all looked the same, white people all speaking the same language, and really bad food. I was happy to go hiking in rural Wales (adjoining England in the UK), and then was enchanted by the art of Florence, before meeting the others in Rome.

The flight to Freetown was long, and I was tired. I remember passing out from heat and exhaustion when the plane stopped in Bathurst, The Gambia. Our arrival in Sierra Leone was dramatic – the airport was out at the tip of a peninsula, so we had a beautiful view of coastal mountains and expansive, uninterrupted and unpopulated, white sandy beaches as we traveled into the city. But it was very hot and very humid. We were taken through Freetown and up the winding road to the top of Mount Aureol where Fourah Bay College was located. The seven who would remain there were assigned rooms and room mates. The three of us traveling on to Njala had to wait a day for transport to be organized.

Most of our subsequent trips between Njala and Freetown were in the back of a truck, sitting on bags of things such as cassava or yam roots. I cannot remember how we went that first time, but I am certain it was in a vehicle with seats facing in the direction of travel. Perhaps a Land Rover? The newly paved road was narrow, barely 2 lanes wide, with shoulders of red soil. Passing could, therefore, be a frightening experience as faster vehicles overtook the slower ones which were crowded with passengers and had roofs piled high with bags, boxes and an occasional goat. Chickens were commonly held on people's laps – either in a bag or with legs tied together and a cloth over the head. After about four hours we reached the end of the paved road, the vehicle dropped off into the red dust of a hard earth road, and we entered the NUL campus.

The buildings were very basic, older, one-story structures with thin walls and metal roofs – the campus had once been a rice research experiment station. The female dormitory was a string of rooms one story



high, with a bathroom in the center and a narrow screened porch along the front connecting the rooms' doors. My room was simply furnished – a bed, a bed net, a cupboard with a bar on which clothes could be hung, a small table and chair. At the end of our building was a two-roomed apartment in which lived a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer, who was the librarian. Although some instructors were Africans (the biology professor was a South African refugee), others had been supplied by various international aid programs. The library was a new, small, single-story cement building that had two or three rooms. In order to preserve the books, there was an air conditioning system – the only one on campus. I found it much too cold to stay for long, and the librarian had to wear a cardigan sweater to work, when it was normally between 21C-31C outside. The students who spent the most time in the library were those most likely to be sick.

The other two students with me were biology students; I was studying anthropology. So while they found courses related to flora and fauna, I signed up for Community Development and African geography, as well as a third course that I cannot remember at all. I had never heard of 'international development', 'development assistance' or 'community development', but I had a strong idea of community organizing, and thought this might be what the course would be about. The United States we had left was in enormous social upheaval. Opposition to the Viet Nam war was building, and street demonstrations were increasingly large. Angry radical black and white students occupied different universities' buildings to protest war, police violence and/or racism. Black leaders had begun to call themselves African-Americans to celebrate their cultural heritage, and many – male and female – let their hair grow, did not straighten it, and combed their curls into 'afro' hair styles using 'Afro' combs. In the spring of 1968 both Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King had been assassinated; the Poor People's March on Washington had occupied central Washington DC for weeks by creating an encampment on public land, and the long and bloody struggles of the Civil Rights movement had resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act which officially ended racial segregation.

During that time, I had what would now be called an internship, working with an indigenous YMCA program created by Sioux Indians on an Indian Reservation in the central Great Plains region of the United States. My 'boss' was a young clergyman who had graduated from the activist University of Chicago Divinity School; Jesse Jackson, the vibrant African- American community organizer, had been one of his classmates. The advice and guidance I was provided with about entering and living in a very different culture have guided my entire life. After a tour of possibilities, I was asked to select the village in which I would live and work. This would ensure, I was told, that when I felt lonely, afraid or sad, I could not blame anyone but myself, and would simply have to take responsibility and action. Once decided, my 'boss' drove me out to the small village with tiny houses scattered across a vast grassy area. He and his Indian colleague said they couldn't see anyone, but they knew there must be a house for me somewhere. However, they couldn't stay to help me find it because the sun was setting and they wanted to be off the road before dark. They would leave me in the 1-room YMCA building, and, to make me comfortable, build a fire in the woodstove and pull the ping pong (table tennis) table in front of it for me to sleep on. Then they left, saying they would be back in two weeks, but I would probably find someone in the morning who could show me my house. I woke up hungry and thirsty, and was forced to leave the relative security of the building to search for someone who could help me. Thus began three months among wonderfully kind, but extremely poor and discriminated against, people, as well as observations of projects by a range of government and private agencies and organizations that operated in the belief that Indian lives could be 'improved' without addressing the root causes of poverty and systemic racism.

In contrast, going to Africa as part of a group to attend a university was easy. All I had to do was figure out what courses to take. The long list of technical agriculture courses interested me, but I did not have enough background to sign up for any of them. The community development course seemed an obvious choice. It was led by a recent University of Illinois graduate we called Mama W. There were about seven females in the class from all over Sierra Leone. Since the only language everyone understood was English, and since the culture of the local Mende people was unknown to the urban Creole speakers from Freetown as well as to classmates from other parts of the country, I was not alone in wondering about everything around me and in need of explanation. Once a week we climbed into a land rover and visited villages where Mama W. had her project. I can remember being astonished that she wore a wig – since African-Americans, embracing their blackness and cultural heritage, were wearing 'Afro' styles. Mama W. didn't seem to know what an Afro was. She did, however, seem to have two major concerns: maintaining a standard of decency, and raising living standards. Decency meant that women had to put tops on in order to come to class. It was hot and humid, so rural women often just wore long skirts, and nursed their



babies when sitting down. Raised living standards seemed to be related to replacing kitchen gardens around the house - particularly at the front - with flowers.

It was apparent to me that the attraction of Mama W.'s visits to the villages was the meat she sold from the back of the land rover. The University of Illinois aid staff at Njala raised the largest pigs I had ever seen as part of a research project on hog nutrition under tropical conditions. These enormous creatures were butchered, and the Americans and other faculty bought high quality cuts of meat at extremely low prices, but the entrails were taken to the villagers and sold – to people who had no obvious source of cash income. It seemed wrong to me, and worse that the villagers were largely Muslim and had not been told that the meat was from pigs. This was my introduction to international aid projects, long before I knew the vocabulary and theories of development assistance. Together with my experiences on the Indian Reservation, I witnessed the recipients' version of top-down development projects. None of it seemed honourable or effective to me. But at the time, I was simply observing – I had no systematic thoughts about what I was seeing, other than a growing sense of injustice.

I was also astonished that we were served white parboiled rice called 'Carolina Rice' in the dining hall, imported from the United States. I did not know then that international aid was tied to promoting the products of the donor country. When we traveled to the villages, and once on an overnight trip inland to Kabala with the biologists, we were offered the most delicious rice I had ever eaten. It was brown. For years afterwards I tried every brand of brown rice I could find in the United States, but could never duplicate what I had eaten in Sierra Leone. It was decades before I learned that Sierra Leone was one of the centers of origins of African upland rice, and had an enormous diversity of varieties – many of which have now been lost in the face of massive imports of polished white rice and the disruptions of war.

In the Njala dining hall, not far from a major international rice research station, white rice or fufu made of cassava was served with a very hot sauce containing beef chunks or chicken. Sometimes the stew was vegetarian, made of leaves and/or okra. One of the students jokingly told me that if I learned to eat hot sauce, I would be able to speak Creole, the language of Freetown and the urban elite. I learned to eat – and like - hot sauce, but I only learned a few phrases in Creole, one of which I remember as "Ah dey go nah librie" (I am going to the library). Upon my return home, I cooked some wonderful West African stew for my father, with some brown rice a relative had found in a specialty store in New York City. Although I had reduced the pepper considerably, it burned his mouth, and the rice was, to me, awful. My father was not impressed by West African food!

Pleasant memories of Njala include wonderfully friendly people; the first time I ever tasted a grapefruit just picked from a tree, still warm from the sun; and butterflies and other beautiful insects of all colors and shapes flying up when I walked down the path in the forest. I liked insects, and at Njala was amazed by the large, hard-shelled rhinoceros beetles which, if they flew into you, could hurt, but were so strong that I could stand on one and afterwards it would fly away. They and the four inch long (10 cm) cockroaches became my 'friends', as they had to be scooped out of the bathtub each morning before use. I also loved the see-through, lizards on the walls. Although I wasn't studying biology at the time, I was always interested in amphibians and insects, never afraid. I did worry, occasionally, about snakes, which limited my exploration of the paths through the dense rain forest wearing only plastic flip-flops.

I was also introduced to the serious sport of table tennis for the first time – it did not at all resemble the children's game of ping pong with which I was familiar. I became good friends with a student named Doris, whose boyfriend was a Ghanaian named Piety. Once Doris and I went to Freetown together. She was from up-country, but invited me to visit her at her boyfriend's relative's house. His uncle was the Ghanaian High Commissioner. After being told that "we eat plantains in so many ways in Ghana", I was served baked, boiled and fried plantains. I had to be polite and eat them all, even though I was not fond of plantain. The hospitality was overwhelming, and brought out my best manners. I smiled and ate more when offered. I remember lots of laughter and good cheer in that house, and felt privileged to have been invited. None of the other American students had been invited to someone's house.

We were to stay in Sierra Leone for six months. After a few weeks at Njala, I rode on the back of a truck to Freetown to visit the other Kalamazoo students. There I learned how to bargain in the market for the exceptionally beautiful tie-dyed cloth. My favorite merchants were a couple from Guinea. She had



fourteen dull (not shiny) gold earrings pierced into the outer edge of her ears. I had been taught how to smell the cloth to distinguish plant dyes from chemical ones, and always chose those printed on damask, which has a pattern in its weave. They knew that I liked the really high quality cloths, and would always show me their best, especially if new ones had come in. From them I learned that bargaining was a social transaction that could not be hurried. The day I tried to rush straight to the price we always reached so I could go to the beach, the price stayed high. I had to relax and enter the ritual properly before we came to the accepted price.

The other students and I would take a 'taxi' (mini-bus) to the completely deserted beach to swim - and hoped a woman or girl would come by with a head load of bananas and oranges, because we never took food or water with us. Afterwards, we would go to the Lebanese restaurants where spicy roasted meats were sold, and wonderful music played. On other afternoons, we went to the City Hotel in downtown Freetown, sat under a picture of Queen Elizabeth, and drank gin and tonics in honour of the former British Intelligence officer and author Graham Greene, whose "The Heart of the Matter" reflected his time in Freetown. As Americans, the idea of a photograph of the Queen hanging in a bar was both funny and bizarre. In the evenings on the FBC campus, we often walked to the Botanical Garden to 'watch the sunset'. This was a joke, since the sun just drops into the sea, unlike in Michigan, where there is a lingering twilight with beautiful colors in the sky. We were fascinated by trails of army ants – I was taught to watch for them as we walked along different paths to avoid being bitten.

On one of my (infrequent) weekends in Freetown, plans formulated for the Christmas trip to Accra. Different routes were being considered by clusters of students. Some actually went overland through the bush to Liberia. I decided to travel with two other people, Dan and Carole, to Accra and then along the coast by road to Nigeria. We had all studied West African art and literature, the center of which was Ibadan. Dan had made friends with a Nigerian student from Port Harcourt, and thought we should also go to Biafra. We booked our tickets to Accra, and I returned to Njala. Between our plans and departure date, the mother of Dan's friend issued a stern order to her son: do not bring your American friends to Port Harcourt, there is a war, and it is much too dangerous. And so Dan decided that the best alternative destination would be Kano, in the north, at the edge of the Sahara desert, where we could watch the parade of the Emir's horsemen which, he said, would take place between Christmas and New Year's Day.

Thus I flew to Accra before Christmas in 1968, traveling with 2 other students - a smaller, thinner woman and a very tall, very blonde-haired man. We later learned that people assumed we were proof that missionaries lied: here was a white man with a senior and a junior wife! We had no idea that countries could close their borders at night, and thought we would be able to hitch-hike from Accra to Lagos, and from there to Kano. Hitch-hiking had become popular with students in the US – one stood along the road, held out one's thumb, and waited for someone to stop and offer a ride for free. We had been warned to be careful, because in some places our hitch-hiking sign was a political gesture. We had learned to move our arm up and down to stop a taxi in Sierra Leone. We had no appreciation of the scarcity of private automobiles, petrol shortages or the price of petrol in West Africa in general, and no understanding of the significance of the Biafran War (1967-1970, also referred to now as the Nigerian Civil War), which had started the year before.

I can't remember where we stayed upon our arrival in Accra, but we did take a taxi from the city center out to the University at Legon to visit our friend who was studying there. On the roads in and around Accra, we were delighted by the phrases written on the backs of vehicles. The word Kalamazoo is obscure and slightly amusing in the United States. It was derived from the Potawatami Indian word that means boiling pot – the rapids in the Kalamazoo River. Attending Kalamazoo College was a source of laughter for those who had never heard of it (ie, most people). Imagine our delight at seeing a vehicle whose sign on the back said "Kalamazoo Shake Your Head". We had no idea what that meant, and I still haven't a good idea how Kalamazoo reached Ghana, unless via the 1940s Glen Miller song "I've got a gal in Kalamazoo".

My most vivid memory of Accra is of the men who used very long polls to clean the narrow, deep, open gutters that lined the streets. They scraped along, then lifted the polls up, dripping, to cross the road and clean the other side. We were always in fear of either losing our footing and falling into the gutters (in Freetown as well), or being dripped upon. In Sierra Leone we had become accustomed to eating fufu



made from cassava meal, but in Accra we found kenke, which was fermented corn. Unaccustomed to fermented food, I thought it smelled and tasted terrible. I also loved the bitter leaf sauce that was made in Sierra Leone, but felt betrayed by the leaf sauce in Ghana because it was full of fish, which I rarely ate. In up-country Sierra Leone I had successfully avoided the dried fish.

The next day we wandered around the lorry park until we found a Peugeot truck that was going to the border. It had seats in parallel down the back, so that passenger's knees almost touched, and tall people had to bend their heads because of the low roof. We climbed in, and when the vehicle was full, it departed – later than we had expected. Of course dark comes early and fast. Along the road we would come to places lit by candles where women were selling bread and fruit. The vehicle stopped to discharge or pick up passengers, and as soon as we three white people were spotted, the market ladies would try to sell us things - bread and oranges flooded into the back of the truck, to be retrieved by their owners when we didn't buy anything.

Upon reaching the border, we were told it was closed. This astonished us and we said “no, we have to keep going, we want to go to Lagos”. People smiled. There was no place to stay. Some large friendly women traders finally gestured to us to follow them. We were impressed by the huge rolls of money that they had tucked into their waistbands and blouses. They chatted and laughed with the border guards, and eventually we crossed into Togo with them - by lamp and candlelight. I don't remember whether or not anyone stamped our passports. When I think back on it now, I realize that these women must have realized that we were someone's children, and so they took care of us. At the time, we were completely confident of the women's authority, and slightly in awe of their power, because we had studied the end of colonialism. I had written a term paper about the 1958 French constitutional referendum and the “non” vote in Guinea under the leadership of Sekou Touré that had so shocked deGaulle – and how the market women had been the unshakeable backbone of resistance that enabled its passage. The so-called Second Wave of Feminism had just barely begun in the United States, so reading about West African market women's strength and determination was my first introduction to a history of women as powerful actors with independent lives and ideas. For this reason, we all felt completely safe in the care of these market women. As we walked away from the border, we somehow found a taxi. The driver decided to take us to the Peace Corps hostel, where we were given a room, despite not being Peace Corps volunteers.

Lomé, was, of course, in French. But the lorry park operated in the same way as the one did in Freetown: we had to identify the vehicles going in the right direction, and then try to guess which one was almost full and closest to departing. As in Sierra Leone, the drivers seemed to pay people to sit in their vehicle to make it look full and attract customers. What I remember most about the Lomé lorry park was the beautiful and different ways in which the women cut the outside layer off the oranges and then stacked them in pyramids for sale – sometimes on the top of an overturned box behind which they sat, sometimes on a tray loaded on their head. Each seller seemed to make a distinctive pattern and, as when choosing tie-dyed cloth, I looked for the most interesting patterns. Upon purchase, the seller would cut off the top so one could squeeze and drink the juice from its natural cup. No one ate the rind – they were just thrown on the ground. We found a vehicle going to the (then) Dahomey border. Between small villages, the coast road was lined with tall palm trees, prompting us to remember Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. We had not yet tasted palm wine.

The Dahomey border crossing was in daylight and uneventful. I don't remember much except that at the Cotonou lorry park there was a patisserie, which I found to be very exotic. I had never been to France, but when studying French, had had a fantasy of going to France to become an apprentice in a patisserie to learn how to make beautiful deserts. We had no time to explore this patisserie. Our completely relaxed passage through West African countries ended at the Nigerian border. Very authoritarian men challenged us about everything, and the customs official told me that I had to leave a deposit for my camera, to be collected when I left the country. I said that this made no sense, since I might be leaving by a different border crossing. My naiveté somehow protected me. I didn't pay any bribes – and didn't even realize that that is what I was refusing to do.

Lagos was unlike any other city we had been in. Sand bags were piled around major buildings, and there were soldiers and police everywhere. Somehow we found a place to sleep, and then transportation to Ibadan. At the university, a kind soul rented us a room. We didn't really explore Lagos – soldiers with guns on every corner didn't encourage casual tourism – nor did we find the shrine in Ibadan made fa-



mous by the participation of Susan Wenger and Uli Beier. The university was not in session, so there was really no one to meet. The most notable event was a pineapple we bought that was the best I had ever tasted – so ripe and juicy that it made a mess of the floor. A bit disappointed, Dan thought we should keep moving north to be able to see the Emir's horsemen. So, we set out in the morning to try to hitch-hike on the road north.

Of course, the idea of hitch-hiking was completely unknown. There were not many automobiles at all, and petrol was expensive and scarce. We turned down taxis going short distances. Finally, some Nigerian soldiers traveling north offered to let us sit in the back of their land rover – on top of their supplies. We climbed in. Carole and I reclined across baskets of fruit, while Dan, whose legs were very long, found a perch on the inside edge of the truck near the tailgate. Between us was a large, 55 gallon oil drum (~ 23 cm x 89 cm) of petrol. As we drove along, red dust swirled into the opening at the back of the truck. When we hit a bump, the petrol drum would jump up, fruit would fall under it, and then the drum would come down, squeezing the fruit and spraying juice. I could dimly see out the back that the vegetation was changing, and at some point we stopped sweating. We had reached the end of the humid rain forest zone. It was mid-afternoon when we stopped at the historic Niger River, about which we had read so much. We emerged, cramped and covered with a paste of fruit juice and red dust.

Goats were grazing along the river bank. I wanted to take a picture of them – and of the river. In fact, we wanted pictures of ourselves at this great river. When I pulled out my camera, the soldiers came over, with guns pointed. It seems that we were not just at the river, but also in front of the only bridge linking the south and the north of Nigeria. They had decided we were Ibo spies! They were torn, because they wanted the money we had agreed to give them if they took us to Kaduna. I tried to explain to them – in English, of course – that I simply wanted to take pictures of the goats for my father, who liked them. This, of course, made no sense. In those days, cameras had either roles of film threaded onto the camera's spools, or plastic cartridges which contained spools and film. My camera's film was inside a plastic cartridge. So, after advancing the film, I opened the camera and showed the cartridge to the soldier, indicating the small bit of film that was visible. He held it up to the light, could see no image, and gave it back to me. Even if I was a spy, I had not taken a picture of the bridge! Guns were put down, but we were unable to take pictures of ourselves in front of the river. We climbed back into the vehicle. I still have a color slide of goats in the grass that is light-fogged on the right hand side...

The soldiers dropped us off in front of an expensive looking European hotel, and we had no choice but to go in. As we were standing in the lobby trying to figure out what to do next, some young Lebanese cloth merchants arrived. Dan entered into conversation with them, and it was decided that we would all stay at the hotel. Dan also accepted the invitation to ride north with them to Kano the next day. We set off, and stopped in Zaria for refreshment at a British club that was straight out of a novel. Of course there was a portrait of the Queen on the wall, and an English woman dressed in 1950s-looking clothes. Looking back on it, we had actually entered the last vestiges of colonial lives. I imagine we stopped there not only because it served fruit juice, but also because for the Lebanese, entry was to a once-forbidden place. Unfortunately, the Lebanese traders had no interest in African culture, so were unable to explore any of the historic ancient cities along our route. I remember seeing decorated walls out the car window, but we could not stop and investigate.

Our hosts dropped us off at a hotel in Kano made of adobe/clay bricks. Each room had an attached outdoor, walled area without a roof, which was the cold water shower. The Harmattan winds were blowing, so it was chilly, and taking a shower took an amount of will power. The streets were amazing – it all looked biblical to me – women in robes, heads covered, donkeys, men, all walking through the dim light as the dust blew. The hotel was the first one people would reach after having driven across the desert. We met three car loads of French people who had just made the trip. We were very impressed by them, and I think they were a bit astonished to find us there. Unfortunately, Dan had the dates wrong: there would be no display of horsemen, and we would not see the Emir. But the Lebanese traders invited us to their house for a meal, which turned out to be Christmas Day - which they noted politely. We talked of cloth – their business – and they told stories of how they were practiced in the art of plagiarizing textile designs. They would find a popular print somewhere in the world, alter the design just enough to evade copyright protection, and then print the cloth to sell. This way they did not have to pay for patterns. They also told us how they were making lots of money from the Nigerian government by supplying inferior cloth for uniforms. The uniforms would wear out fast and have to be replaced, thus increasing demand for their



cloth. Again, we were naïve and young, and just listening to what people told us about their lives. They, of course, saw nothing wrong with making money. The food was delicious, and Dan seemed happy enough with the company. But Carole and I were pleased to leave, as we did feel we were being welcomed as equals.

When it was time to return to the coast, we walked to the road going south, and stood, waiting for a vehicle to pass. There really weren't any. We were at the edge of town, near the famous 'Pyramids of Groundnuts' – bags of ground nuts piled high, waiting for shipment. It was very hot, and there was no shelter from the sun. We eventually saw a bus headed south, and decided to buy tickets. I am not sure where we slept, perhaps a hotel in Lagos, and then traveled by lorry in the daylight to Lomé. I do not remember much about this trip, except further unpleasantness at the Nigerian border when leaving. Again, bribes were proposed with preposterous logic by young men holding guns, but we did not pay. We went back to the Peace Corps hostel in Lomé. It was New Year's Eve and the place was full. This was when we learned what our trio meant to observers. The caretaker told us that because Dan was traveling with two wives, he would give us the bridal suite – which was a sloping double bed covered by a torn bed net. There was great discussion about who had to sleep next to Dan! We returned to Accra without incident, and took our flight back to Freetown.

Forty-six years later was my invitation to the ANSOLE Regional Meeting in Kumasi, and week-long stay in Accra. Again I was in Ghana briefly, this time in more formal settings, and treated like a mature woman rather than a youth, so I only had the chance for superficial impressions. The absolute first was the incredible friendliness of Ghanaians. We were greeted with "Welcome to Ghana" and a huge smile as we reached the bottom of the steps from the aircraft. In the next few days I came to understand the sincerity of this statement. Accra is much bigger now, with multi-lane highways, a central core of tall buildings, lots of cars, and a very regulated station for mini-bus taxis, called tro-tro. After a night at the university guest house, I flew to Kumasi. The road in from the airport had a familiar look – small businesses lining the route. There were slogans painted on the back of some vehicles, but almost all were religious, not a hint of Kalamazoo! The extent and beauty of the KNUST campus was impressive. We seemed to drive for a long time before reaching the Energy Centre, passing what, to me, were very typical tropical African buildings.

Not knowing what to expect – and not being an energy technology professional – I was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of papers presented and, most of all, by the enormous good humour that filled the room. Unlike most professional meetings in Europe or North America, where a combination of formality, fear and competition fills the air, this very serious meeting was set in laughter, kindness and eager discussion. There was such a sense of teamwork! Pointing out a mistake in a presentation was not meant to be a personal attack on the presenter, or a chance for humiliation, but, rather, an opportunity to help the presenter think even more clearly about something everyone valued. I'm sure some of the younger presenters were nervous, but not in the state of terror that I had been in when I was their age. Gentleness predominated. Lunchtime meals were excellent, and provided me with a re-introduction to Ghanaian cuisine. Yes, there were some plantains, but I enjoyed them. I am now very interested in fermented foods, and was delighted to taste banku and palava sauce. I even came to terms with fish in the sauce.

Several students came up to talk with me, which was a great honour. I had no desire to impose myself, and so tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible. The students' sincerity, solid commitment to finding ways to make electricity available to all Africans, and utter confidence that they could make a difference was heartening. Many older people in North America and Europe are depressed about the possibility of change because of political and economic constraints. These optimistic youth do have counterparts around the world, and they are the hope for a more ecologically peaceful future. The two days of presentations made the importance of ANSOLE clear to me – it brings together researchers who have, perhaps, been isolated from others by investigating technologies obscure to the mainstream of research which could help ordinary Africans, and it serves as a source of huge encouragement and access to information for students who will make the changes we all want to see happen.

At meal times I was happy to talk not only with some students, but also make the acquaintance of Samuel Adu-Asare, who provided me with a wonderful orientation to the practicalities of expanding solar power to remote rural households. Over the following week, as we came to know each other, I was able



to ask him questions about Ghanaian culture, and he provided me with intellectual guidance that helped me to better understand what was going on around me. Sam's breadth of experience is impressive, and seemed almost unlimited. He could talk about so many things, and with such insight. Sam was also vitally important in helping me to connect with the activist network that was to be my host for the following week.

First he offered to give me a ride back to Accra in his land rover. I happily joined the other two passengers - Prosper Ahmed Amuquandoh, of the Electricity Commission and Daniel Egbe. I wanted to see the landscape between Kumasi and Accra, and thought this would be a transect through the rainforest. Of course I expected that roadside development would have increased from the days of my earlier coastal adventure, but I was not prepared for what I saw. Sam explained that the rainforest had been completely cut down in the last 15 years as a direct result of a change in government policy. It was shocking to me that such a thing could have been sanctioned. A rainforest cannot disappear without someone in power noticing it. How disconnected from the earth and the vital importance of ecosystems are those officials? Sadly, as badly as are those in the USA and Europe – and the international 'experts' and consultants who promote policies without any concern for environmental or social consequences. My level of shock and sorrow cannot be put into words. The other day I came across a photo I took in Sierra Leone of a woman disappearing into the forest with a large bucket or basket on her head. That must have been what the landscape between Kumasi and Accra once looked like.

The actual drive was a mixture of joking good humor, semi-serious conversations in friendly tones, and periods of sleep or quiet. We moved through rainy patches, and Sam demonstrated his excellent driving skills as we negotiated a road whose pavement came and went, often leaving us with only slippery, sloping muddy surfaces to navigate. Then we reached Accra's stretch of four lane highway with parallel access roads, signaling another world and another mentality. I had been unable to make my mobile phone work. Sam was kind enough to use his to call the contact name I had, and drove me to the very expensive hotel where my new set of hosts was to meet me. I was alarmed, thinking that I was expected to stay there. Sam assured me that this was simply a meeting point.

I was warmly welcomed by a young woman named Ama, and soon a young man named Kojo arrived. When Sam assured himself that I was in good hands, he left to take the others to their destinations. He must have been very tired from the rigours of the four hour trip. Ama and Kojo had arranged for me to stay at a guesthouse, and decided to take me there by taxi. At first we stood together at the side of the road, but only very high rates were offered. I suggested that I should stand back from the road and away from them so the price might become more normal. This proved to be a very successful strategy. We drove for a very long time through busy streets lit by street lights. I had no idea how large Accra had become. The route to the guest house, which seemed to me to be across a continuous city was, in fact, across a part of Accra, then through Legon, to the separate suburb of Ashaley Botwe. We must have passed the university I visited long ago, but I could not distinguish a separate town. The guesthouse was very nice and run, it turned out, by Ghanaian Canadians who had lived for many years in a Toronto suburb about 2 hours' drive from the city in which I now own a house. I was, again, in very good hands.

Kojo lives in a village to the east, but as he had recently married, he was staying with his lovely wife at his father-in-law's house in Ashaley Botwe. He had delayed his return to the village so that he would be able to greet me. On Sunday afternoon he came to the guesthouse. We had conversation, and then he took me on a tro-tro and walking tour of the market, ending up at his father-in-law's house. After that orientation, I was able to travel around by myself on foot and by tro-tro. Ama and Kojo had also arranged several trips for me. In Accra I was taken on a tour of the slum, Old Fadama, where I was told about the work community activists are doing to combat the sex trade, provide schools to the resulting children in the hopes of stopping the creation of a perpetually outcast sector of society, and to see the river polluted by things washed downstream - but blamed on the slum dwellers.

Later in the week Sam kindly offered to drive us in his land rover to the east to see a limestone quarry that local people are protesting. It is operated by a subsidiary of the Heidelberg Cement company of Norway and Germany, and is excavating the side of a mountain for rock to be ground up to make cement – for export. On my last day, on the way to the airport, Kojo insisted that we go to the beach at La, where the High Priest is working hard to protect the coast from the development which is being promoted by the Paramount Chief. I met the High Priest briefly when he drove past in his car, then Kojo and I walked to



the beach. The waves were full of the little black plastic bags that are given out by traders with every purchase. Their sheer density in the waves was stunning. No one could swim – let alone fish – in such water. Tourism would have to be based on hotels with swimming pools, not beaches and surf.

In the time Kojo and I spent together, I came to understand the sincerity and depth of his commitment to protecting the earth and improving people's lives. He had begun in community youth work, and then became an environmentalist. His move to the village east of Accra was, among other things, to help the youth develop incomes by growing specialty crops. But, I learned, his passion was biogas digesters. He had seen one at the Songhai Ecovillage he had visited in Porto Nuovo, Benin (<http://www.songhai.org/>). He had also learned about the possibilities of ecotourism, and wanted to build a similar centre in Ghana as a demonstration project and to be supported by eco-tourism. This made me think of the announcement made at the end of ARMWA 2014 about KNUST's week-long technical training courses, including one on biogas digesters. I consulted with Sam, who knew KNUST and had met Kojo, about whether this would be a good opportunity for Kojo. He said that he thought it would be. I encouraged Kojo to join ANSOLE (which he did) and, in the name of my late husband, Brian Martin Murphy, who had devoted his life as a journalist to trying to empower rural people, believed in the importance of renewable energy technologies, and who was a true friend of Africa, **I offered Kojo a full scholarship - on one condition. That at some point in the future, he not pay me back, but 'pay it forward', which means that he would support someone else to attend a similar course.**

A few weeks ago I received a beautiful note from Kojo, so excited and happy about his training course, full of empowerment and possibility, and firmly committed to sending not one, but two, people on the course in the near future. Kojo has only a high school education. He had wanted to study science, but the priests who ran his school put him in the business track. The KNUST training course seems to have given him a way to move towards the things he wants to do - all of which involve protecting the earth and helping rural Ghanaians have better lives. In this way, my participation in the academic ARMWA had a tangible, beneficial effect, making clear that academia and academics do not have to be – and should not be – separate from activists and action.

What is so wonderful for me is that Kojo seems not to be unique. In my brief visit to Accra I was impressed by the sincerity, dedication and optimism of the young people I met. They are a true gift to humanity. It is their spirit that enriched my trip, and it is the thought of their passion and genuinely loving and open hearts that fills me with joy. This is the same spirit I sensed among the students at the ANSOLE meeting. In Ghana I found so much optimism after the negativity and despair of Europe, UK and North America. I hope and pray that it will not be extinguished, and that because of it, Africa will shine ever brighter – in every sense of the word.



I am American by birth, grew up in the United States and attended university there, but have been associated with universities in the Netherlands and Britain, and have lived and worked in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. I am also a Canadian citizen with a permanent residence in Canada.

Current Position

Senior Research Fellow, Centre for World Environmental History, University of Sussex, UK

Education

PhD, MS Cornell University, USA (Soil Science/Agronomy); BS Michigan State University, USA (Soil Science); BA Kalamazoo College, Michigan, USA (Anthropology).

University Positions

Senior Research Fellow, Centre for World Environmental History and Department of Geography, University of Sussex, UK; Research Fellow, African Studies Center, Boston University, USA; Head, Research Division, Institute of Southern African Studies and Senior Lecturer, National University of Lesotho, Lesotho; Academic Visitor, Social Studies Faculty Centre, Oxford University, UK; Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of Theoretical Production Ecology, Agricultural University, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

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“Pay it Forward”: sponsor a student

by the editorial board

If the story of Kate has touched you, then do the same as she did. As a young female American exchange student in West Africa in 1968, Kate received help from many West Africans, which she “paid forward” in 2014 by sponsoring Kojo, thus giving him access to new opportunities.

Daniel Egbe received in a similar way help for his studies from a German family (Walter and Gisela Werner) upon arrival in Jena, Germany in 1992, which shaped his life positively.

In fact each one of us has received in one way or the other assistance from others (parents, siblings, relatives, friends, philanthropists, institutions, etc.) to advance in our life.

You can act as Kate did by sponsoring young Africans through our various human capacity building programmes:

- Vocational Training and education at various renewable energy skill levels
- Undergraduate and postgraduate studies in renewable energy (Intra-African Exchange (INEX), African-North Exchange (ANEX))
- Scientific events (conferences, workshops, symposia).

Any amount is thankfully accepted and will be used for the purpose it is designated for. ANSOLE bank account information is found below.

Goals and Objectives of ANSOLE

The Network promotes research, education and training in the field of solar energy among Africans as well as non-Africans with a special focus on - and relationships with - Africa.

ANSOLE supports nonprofit activities in the field of development aid and cultural exchange with the aim to strengthen the dialogue between the North and African countries (north-south) and between African countries (south-south) on renewable energy.

It endorses the use of solar energy to the benefit of the social and economic development of Africa as well as the environmental protection through:

- ➔ Education and training of African scientists, experts and students
- ➔ Exchange of students and visiting scientists
- ➔ Workshops, conferences and meetings in Africa
- ➔ Organising and implementing projects on renewable energy
- ➔ Promoting capacity building in the use of renewable energy in Africa for all

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