PJW-8 INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Glimpses of Bobo Village Life

Bobo-Dioulasso, Haute-Volta
1 July 1984

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

In recent months, I have visited several villages around Bobo-Dioulasso. Each visit has had a character of its own and given me a chance to glimpse different aspects of village life.

On one trip I accompanied a Peace Corps volunteer, Janet Miller, to visit a village located roughly twenty kilometers (twelve miles) outside of Bobo-Dioulasso. The village is situated near the "forêt classée" (classified national forest) of Dienderesso. Janet is currently conducting research on how villagers and urban dwellers around the Dienderesso forest are using various forest resources. This information is being gathered for the development of a management plan for the Dienderesso forest. A US Agency for International Development project is developing this management plan, in conjunction with the regional Voltaic forest service office. A second component of the USAID project consists of activities to strengthen the training of forest (field) agents at the National Forestry School, located within the Dienderesso forest. Janet had recently started working with the USAID project, and plans to devote the last six months of her two-year Peace Corps contract to this research.

We got a ride out to the village with the current class of about twenty forestry students. The students were going to the village to conduct the third in a series of three social surveys on villagers' attitudes towards, and uses of, the forest. This surveying exercise has a double function. First, it is being used to give students rudimentary training in techniques of social surveying, to enhance their future ability to work as extension agents. Second, it also provides another means of gathering information for the Dienderesso management plan. As such, the surveying exercise is a beginning step towards improving dialogue between local residents and the forest service over uses of the forest. Also on the trip were Michael Whiteman, the forestry extension instructor, Sina Traore, a forest agent working with the project, and LeRoy Duvall, my forester husband.

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The village we visited is considered to be a Bobo village, although members of other ethnic groups also live in the village. It is a fairly sizeable village; the most recent census, in 1975, registered over 1300 inhabitants. The villagers generally speak Bobo. Members of other ethnic groups, however speak their respective local languages: for example, the immigrant Mossi farmers speak Moré and the Fulani (Peul) herders speak Fulfade. Many of the local inhabitants, particularly the men, speak Dioula[1], the regional trading language. Few villagers speak much French, the official national language.

When we arrived at the village, we noticed some women selling mangoes along the side of the tarred main road. Rather than parking there, however, the driver drove the large Mercedes-Benz bus into the center of the village. Narrowly squeezing between the mud houses, we attracted a lot of attention from the villagers. The driver parked the bus in a large cleared area, next to a small mud mosque.

The visit had been prearranged with the villagers, and the chief was waiting to meet us. Other villagers wandered over, to see what was happening.

After everyone piled out of the bus, Mike reminded his students of their instructions -- they were to try to work in small groups, to find people who spoke their languages, and to seek out whatever group of villagers -- men, women, or youths -- they had not interviewed in their two previous visits. The students dispersed into small groups of two to four, and wandered off.

The rest of us went over to talk to the village chief and other village elders, all men. There was an open-sided thatched-roof shelter -- to provide some shade from the sun -- under which we sat on wood benches. Mike then began to talk with the chief and elders, exchanging greetings and once again discussing the purpose of the students' visits. As the chief did not speak much French, Sina served as an interpreter, translating Mike's French into Dioula.

After listening to their conversation for five minutes or so, Janet told me that she wanted to go off to talk to some of the women she had met on a previous visit. I replied that I'd like to come with her, so we discretely got up and left the meeting.

As we wandered around the village, trailed by a group of curious, giggling children, Janet exchanged greetings with a number of women in Dioula. Some of the women did not know Dioula, so either responded to us in Bobo or merely shook hands, nodded, and smiled. Most were busy with their morning work, such as cleaning their houses or cooking.

I noticed a number of unusual objects and asked Janet about them. One of the first things we walked past was a pot, perched up about seven feet in the air on a wood post. Janet explained that it was a "fetish" and contained some plants that give the owner of the fetish certain spiritual powers. However, she warned me, it was not considered socially-acceptable to even notice such fetishes, let alone to ask people about them.

Another object of interest was the stove for brewing "dolo", the local millet beer. The stove consisted of four pots, enclosed in a clay shell. There were three pots arranged around the fire, and the fourth was balanced on top of the three, over the center of the fire. The stove is designed to take maximum advantage of the heat, since the dolo must be brewed for over twenty-four hours and thus consumes a lot of firewood.[2]

We saw a variety of bundles of leaves and bark. Janet stopped to ask one woman what a bundle of leaf strips was used for. The woman explained that the leaves were placed in the dolo, to "clean" it (of impurities ?) as it was brewed. When Janet asked her the name of the tree from which she had obtained the leaves, the woman responded that she didn't know the name in Dioula -- only in Bobo. But she suggested that perhaps some day Janet could go with her when she went to collect some leaves. Janet thanked her, saying she'd very much like to accompany her on a future trip.

Finally we arrived at the home of some of the women with whom Janet had talked on an earlier trip. As we walked up, Janet noticed that they were eating, so suggested that maybe we should leave and come back later when they were done. But the women spotted us, and insisted that we come inside their house and join them.

The inside of the mud house was dark and cool. The flat-roofed house, like many others in the village, consisted of a series of connected rectangular rooms. The first room had a mud sink in one corner, used for storing water. A doorway to the left led into another room, where a pot was cooking over an open fire. Light was streaming into that room through another doorway to the exterior. To the right, another doorway led to a room with a big bed.

Two little wooden stools were produced for us, and we sat down, maybe six inches off the ground. Two women, perhaps in their late twenties, and three young girls were sitting on stools or on the ground, eating their morning meal of "tao" and sauce. One of the women was wearing a fairly traditional outfit, consisting of a sleeveless top and long skirt, both made out of a local printed fabric. The other had a sleeveless striped synthetic shirt and printed skirt. The girls were wearing either knee-length dresses or tops and skirts. All five had their hair braided in various styles, with numerous small braids all over their heads.

We were given a calabash of water, so we could wash off our right hands before joining them in eating. The tao they were eating was spongy white millet porridge. Tao is the staple food in Upper Volta. To make tao , millet seeds are pounded into a fine flour using a large wooden mortar and pestle. The pounding is long, hard work, to which women and girls devote several hours a day. The resulting millet flour is cooked with water to make tao .

As I had never eaten tao before, I copied Janet's example. With her right hand, she reached into the bowl of tao , scooped up a small bit of it, rolled it into a ball the size of a walnut, used it to dip up some sauce, and then put it into her mouth. I found that it was a bit difficult to make the tao into a ball, as it is very sticky, and thus, tends to stick to one's fingers. No one seemed to mind much, however, but just licked their fingers clean.

There were two different sauces served with the tao . One was very spicy, containing the fruit of a local plant called "da"(sorrel of Guinea), onions, tomatoes, and hot peppers. The other sauce was a rather bland puree of eggplant. The taste of the tao itself is nondescript, definitely improved upon with the addition of sauce. There are an innumerable variety of sauces served with tao -- occasionally made with meat or fish, using garden vegetables if available, or based upon leaves collected in the bush, such as baobab (Adansonia digitata) or tamarind (Tamarindus indica) leaves. These sauces not only provide a variety in taste, but are also important sources of proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals not found in the starchy staple.

I was a bit reticient in my eating and the women urged me to eat more. Janet explained that I wasn't very hungry, as I had already eaten at home. (This explanation was true, as it was only 9:30 AM and I had eaten my breakfast at 7 AM. I was also trying to be considerate and not eat too much of their meal, as we had shown up unexpectedly. I got the distinct impression, however, that one is expected to eat a respectable amount, in order to be a gracious guest.)

There were lots of questions for Janet about me, since Janet and I looked a lot alike. We're similar in height and both have brown, shoulder-length hair, although hers is more auburn and curlier. That day we were both wearing our hair back in ponytails, and both had plastic-rimmed eyeglasses, hoop earrings, short-sleeved shirts, and skirts below our knees. So Janet was asked if I was her bigger sister (she said I was). When she was asked why I didn't speak Dioula, Janet explained that I lived in Ouagadougou. The women easily accepted that explanation, for they know that the people from the Ouaga region primarily speak Moré, not Dioula.

Janet chatted for a while with the women about their uses of various tree species. An older woman walked into the hut and exchanged greetings with everyone except me. I was sitting on the edge of the group, so Janet told me that probably the woman just didn't see me, as she is partially blind. In this region of Upper Volta, partial or complete blindness is quite common, particularly among older people, from onchocerciasis (river blindness). (The existence of river blindness is one reason why the more humid southern and western regions of the country -- the valleys of the Volta rivers -- are not more heavily populated. There is, however, a program to spray these regions with pesticides to eradicate the blackfly responsible for spreading the disease.)

A little while later, another woman wandered into the hut and gave Janet a basket of small, "wild" (i.e., not grafted) mangoes. Janet thanked her, put aside two mangoes for us to eat, and placed the rest in her daypack. As we ate our mangoes, one of the women we had been talking to earlier returned to the hut, suggesting that we should follow her, to go to talk to her brother about medicinal uses of plants. So we dashed off...

She introduced us to her brother and then left. We sat down with him and a couple of his male friends. Then someone suggested moving the chairs to a nearby pathway between some houses. We sat there in the sun, and Janet started talking to them. Janet asked the men if we could speak in French, but they said that they prefered to speak in Dioula, as their French wasn't that strong.

Janet explained that she wanted to talk with them about their use of plants for medicinal purposes. Her informant replied that since he was a "child" -- meaning an unmarried person (even though he was in his late twenties)-- she should ask the old people. But, she asked, being herself a "child" as well as a foreigner, would the old people share their knowledge with her? He laughed and then started to tell her about some of the medicinal uses of various species.

As they started this discussion, an older man came up and asked us if we could move, as there was going to be a funeral procession coming down the path. So we got up and moved the metal-frame, cloth sling-back chairs into a nearby house. This was a fairly modern village house, with concrete walls and floor, and a corrugated metal roof. We sat in the outer room, which contained a motorbike and a table piled with an assortment of diverse dishes. As Janet talked with the men, I noticed the interior decor. There were lots of magazine pictures pasted on the walls...the Marlboro cowboy, French fashion pages, a scene from the Monty Python movie "The Life of Brian" (a black-humor take-off on the life of Jesus Christ) showing three men hanging on crucifixes. There was also a rifle hanging on the wall.

During the discussion, various villagers who were walking by stopped at the doorway and exchanged greetings. Several wailing women walked down the nearby path -- the funeral procession. There was no body, just mourners. Janet asked the men about the deceased -- he apparently had died in Abidjan.

After an hour, the men started asking Janet about our husbands. Despite having just told them that she was a "child", Janet said her husband was in Bobo-Dioulasso. (Janet has learned from past experience that if she admits to being single, people want to try to marry her off. If she claims a husband in the United States, that is the same as having no husband at all, since the United States is so far away.) My husband, she explained, was in another part of the village. Janet decided that the conversation had reached the end of its usefulness, so we thanked them and left.

Janet and I then walked off in search of a dolo maker whom Janet had met on an earlier trip. When we arrived at her home, we found the door closed and the owner gone. I noticed large piles of firewood and asked Janet if she knew where the dolo maker had acquired her wood. Janet said that the woman had told her she purchased it. Since dolo making can be a lucrative occupation, the women who engage in this activity on a fairly full-time basis often have the money to buy the wood they need.

Just then, a couple of neighbors walked by. Janet asked the two women if they knew where the dolo maker was. They replied that she was out in the bush, collecting firewood. (So then we knew that one of two things was probably true -- either the woman buys part of her firewood and collects part of it, or else she collects all of it but didn't want to admit this to Janet.) 3

We decided to walk around the village a bit more. We noticed a clump of trees in the middle of a field. They were quite unusual as most of the fields are cleared, and only scattered individual trees tend to be left in fields. Perhaps it was a "sacred grove" of trees, for some reason left untouched by the villagers?

Nearby lots of women and girls were waiting by the village well to obtain their water. The well is operated by a hand crank that works somewhat like the pedals of a bicycle -- there are two handles, one for each hand, and a woman pushes the two handles in a clockwise rotation to get water out of the pump. The pump had been installed in the village as part of a large wells project in the Bobo-Dioulasso region financed by U S A I D. The water comes out of the pump slowly, meaning a long wait for everyone else needing water. But it was the only well in the village that still had water -- the shallower, hand-dug wells were all dry by this time of the year, several months into the dry season. The wait did not seem to be all bad, as the women and girls were using the time to socialize with one another.

Walking back to the center of the village, we passed a row of houses that had a line of cow dung smeared around the outside. Janet said that this practice was to ward off nocturnal visits of a cow that wanders around in search of its lost, half-human child. Villagers believe that without the line of dung, misfortune may befall the household. According to some accounts, the cow possesses three heads. Elsewhere in the village Janet had earlier seen a house with a picture of a three-headed pink cow on the wall.

Four little boys ran up to us to show us their pet. They had a small lizard, about five inches long, on a leash. They had tied a string around the lizard's middle, right behind his two front legs, so they could lead it around or swing it in the air.

When we got back to the spot where we were to meet the bus, we saw that Mike, Sina, and LeRoy were again talking to the village elders. We sat down and listened for a few minutes. Then Mike thanked everyone and we said goodbye, shaking hands with many of the elders as we left.

I asked LeRoy if they had spent the entire morning talking to the village elders. No, he said, they had walked a couple of kilometers out into a nearby field, to talk with a Fulani herder about his perceptions of bush fire problems.[4] The herder had told them that women set fires to collect karité fruit and that children set fires to hunt rats. LeRoy had asked Mike if they really hunted rats, and Mike had explained that the villagers often use the term "rat" to refer to any rodent. On their way back into the village, they had seen some boys run by carrying a really large rat -- the largest that LeRoy has ever seen -- a "bush rat" the size of a muskrat.

Our trip had been an instructive introduction into the realities of village research. It was far easier for Janet and I to talk with village women individually than it was for Mike, Sina, and LeRoy, or for the forestry students, who are all men. We thus had access to different sets of villagers.

We also wondered how reliable our information on forest resource use was. From my visits to other villages and talks with other researchers here, I know that villagers are often reluctant to discuss their resources use practices candidly with outsiders, for fear that the information may somehow be used against them. Janet was not sure why the dolo maker might have said she bought her firewood, when in fact she collects (at least part of) it. Janet said that since the forest agents have all traditionally been men, villagers don't generally suspect her of being a forester, but usually assume that she is a teacher or a health worker or a religious sister. If they ask, she does explain that she works with the forestry project and says that she is trying to learn what species villagers use, so that the forest

service will be able to manage the vegetation to produce more of what the villagers need. Janet says that the best way for her to build rapport and get reliable information from villagers seems to be to get to know certain individuals well, to visit them over and over again. This is a time-intensive process, a luxury that the forestry students don't have. But such a slow patient approach may be the most useful one for establishing meaningful, two-way dialogue between foresters and the local people whom they are trying to serve.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

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Notes:

1. Dioula is one variant of a West African trading language -- also called Bambara, Malinke, or Manding -- spoken in the southwestern part of Upper Volta, northern part of Ivory Coast, throughout Mali, and into Senegal. There are numerous spellings of Dioula, including Dyula, Djula, and Jula.
2. Researchers at the Voltaic Institute of Energy are currently investigating ways to improve the thermal efficiency of these traditional dolo stoves, to reduce their consumption of firewood. See PJW-6 for a discussion of the firewood consumption problem.
3. Given a history of conflict between forest agents and local populations, it is understandable that villagers might be reluctant to discuss their forest resource use practices with foresters. However, rural development researchers have similar problems finding out about farmers' agricultural practices. An anthropologist doing research in another Bobo village nearby, Mahir Saul, told me that he believes the Bobo people consider knowledge to be power and says that they are reluctant, therefore, to share it with any outsiders. To the degree to which this characteristic may be true, then, efforts to improve forestry management and extension approaches will require a long-term commitment.
4. See PJW-4 for a discussion of perceptions of bush fires.

Received in Hanover 7/13/84