

ICWA LETTERS

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SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

Randi Movich is a John Miller Musser Fellow of the Institute spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health.

A Reintroduction

MACENTA, Guinea

May 27, 1997

By Randi Movich

HOMEcoming

The naked dunes spread out endlessly below me, their size masked by the altitude of our flight. I feel an uneasiness with the silence and desolation of the desert. In this dusty, untouchable vastness there is no water in sight, no trees; only patterns of wind live in the sand. This is what I see from the plane flying over the Sahara, my first view of Africa in seven years. Approaching Bamako, Mali, signs of life — in the form of scattered baobab trees — appear. Although I am protected by the shelter of the plane, I can not help but feel vulnerable in the scorching Sahelian heat. I swallow thirstily and wonder if I have made the right decision to return to Guinea.

Passing over eastern Mali, I think about Guinea's other neighbors; Guinea-

In applying for a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellowship, Randi Movich summed it up: "I would like to spend two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying the forest products that women use in reproductive health."

When we called one of her advanced-degree advisers for a reference check, the adviser exclaimed, "Oh, good! Randi wanted to do her Master's thesis on that, but everyone thought it was too open-sided, and would take too long."

Now Randi has her chance. With a B.A. in Biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master-of-Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is returning to a remote, forested part of Guinea where she spent two years in 1988-90 with the Peace Corps, and where "my mornings were filled with the sound of women pounding rice, and the cries of children wanting to be fed. I enjoyed the rhythm of daily life, the walk to the well and my clumsy return to the village with half the water in a container on my head and half of it lost from an involuntary shower..."

"My initial assignment as an agroforestry extension agent slowly evolved from change agent into student. I realized that before I was to suggest changes in an agricultural system that had been developed over hundreds of years I first needed to understand that system... I also came to realize the importance of focusing on women's knowledge because they were often the last members of communities to



receive benefits from these projects...

"I left Guinea with conflicting emotions. Was simply learning about the way another culture utilized their resources enough? Did I have any role to play in this context? I wanted to stay in order to further my understanding of women's forestry and agricultural knowledge. I hoped that one day I would return."

Now, with her husband Jeff Fields beside her, Randi's hopes have come true

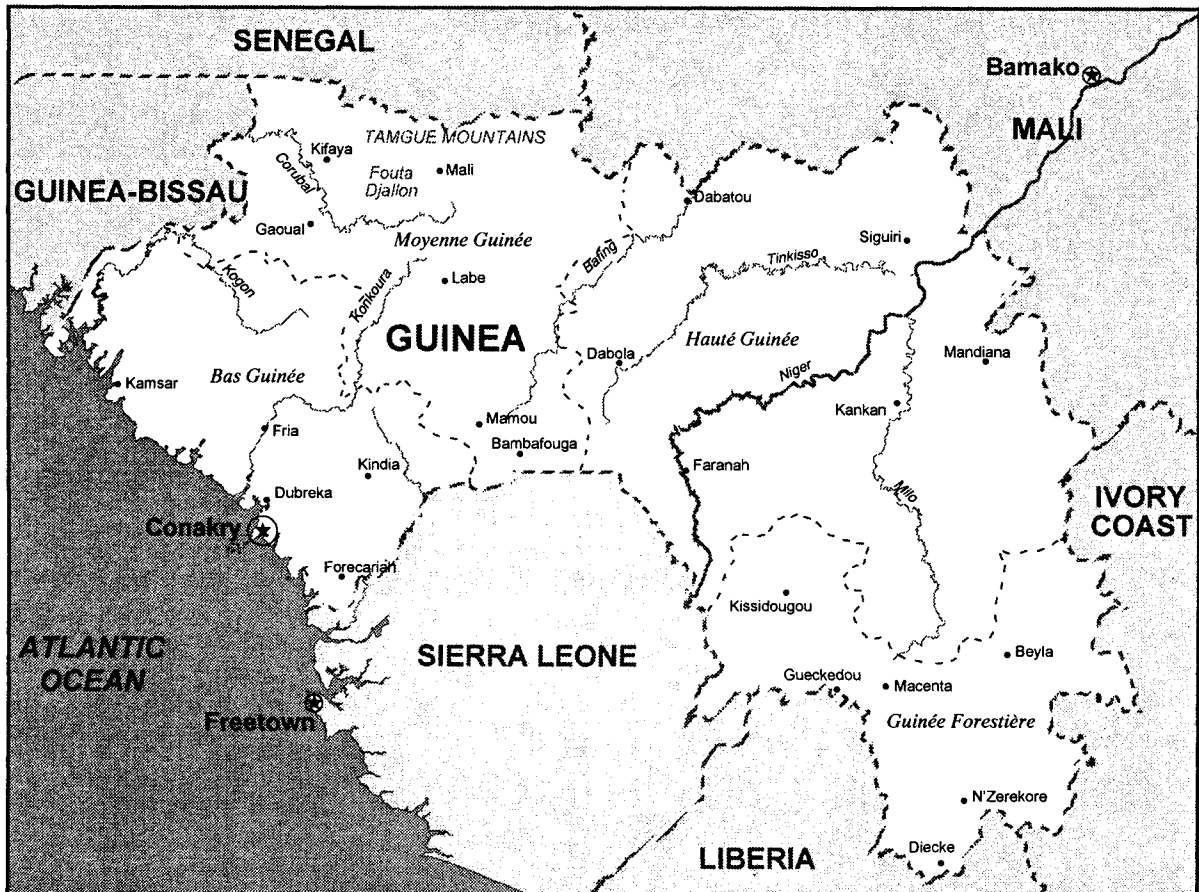
Bissau, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Guinea shares both culture and geography with each of them. Maps show discrete boundaries, but the history of empires, ethnic groups and family ties blurs these lines. The dry, flat Savannah below tells me we are flying over a part of the once-powerful empire of Mali. This area is now known as *Haute Guinée* (High Guinea), one of four geographical and administrative regions that make up Guinea's 246,000 square kilometers of land. I am surprised by the glistening reflection of water in this largely rainless region. This is the Niger river, bordered by the last remaining strips of gallery forests, winding its way toward Mali, Niger, and finally spilling out to sea in Nigeria.

In contrast to the dryness of *Haut Guinée*, directly to the south lies a wet, forested and mountainous landscape. This area is known as *Guinée Forestière* (Forest Guinea) where it rains eight months of the year. Continuing our flight west toward Conakry, the isolated spots of green amid brown turn to a heavily freckled leguminous forest. We are now flying over the region known as *Moyenne Guinée* (Middle Guinea). Forested mountains emerge, and rocky cliffs lined with pencil-thin waterfalls dot the earth. The northern part of this region is called the Fouta Djallon highlands, which form the major watershed for

West Africa's longest river, the Niger.

Descending from the mountains, I see rivers twisting among the muddy banks of mangroves. These peopleless, ocean borders tell me we are nearing our destination of *Bas Guinée* (Lower Guinea). The uninhabited suddenly transforms into the outskirts of the million-plus city of Conakry. Houses and mango trees are scattered everywhere; no grid patterns are visible. Approaching the runway, I see a few wingless and wheelless planes lining the sides. I am not comforted. As we come to a smooth landing I am relieved. I look out the window and smile. I am back.

It has been 10 years since I first came to Guinea. Leaving the plane, my first step is greeted with a wall of humidity and waves of hard sunshine. The smell of sea wind and waving palms tell me I am far from home, yet I sense the familiar. My heart is pounding as Jeff and I walk toward customs. I am anxious because we have been told at the Paris airport that the Guinean authorities will be asking for our return tickets before they let us enter the country. We do not have them. The problem with this rule is that I have not seen it written down anywhere. As a foreigner, I am subject to a completely different set of rules than Guineans. Although the idea of foreigners



being subjected to different rules is not new in many countries, the problem here is that the rules are unwritten and change according to what official is standing in front of the gate. In other words, there is no way to learn the rules, yet I am expected to play the game.

Anticipation swirls in my head as we file into one of the two lines that has formed in front of the glass-and-wood booths that make the entrance to the main hall of the airport. The left line of people holding maroon-colored passports moves quickly as they are welcomed by the shouts and handshakes of familiar faces. These are the people that have grown up in this system and know the rules. Or more accurately, they are the minority of Guineans with money and powerful family ties. Already I sense that I am at a disadvantage; there is no friend of a friend to greet me and then guide me through the maze of baggage checks and customs. Jeff and I set down our passports and port-of-entry cards. I feel a loss of control and I anticipate being asked for a bribe. I am relieved when I hear the double click of the ink stamp and the passports are handed back. Next an agent asks to see our Yellow Fever certificate, supposedly a requirement of entry. She seems almost disappointed to see that we have the documentation. Several Guineans pass her by and she makes no effort to ask for their cards. I feel fortunate to have witnessed public-health policy in action.

Now with our loaded baggage cart, we attempt to maneuver through the crowds and make our way through customs. The agent dressed in blue behind the table insists that she needs to open our bags and boxes. Our porter, whose assistance we had reluctantly agreed to, is literally grabbing the bags away from her. As I approach the table, she whispers to me, "*Il faut donner quelque chose au monsieur pour moi.*" (Give something to the man for me). This is how "business" is conducted in Guinea. Nothing is free, and everything is more costly for foreigners. I give her a faint smile, as she puts her chalk insignia on my bag. I have to admit that I am not surprised that a small bribe is one of the first things requested of me.

RENEWED IMPRESSIONS

As we taxi down the grimy streets toward the center of town, I ask myself why I have decided to return to Guinea. To begin with, the taxi driver has charged us an exorbitant fee, he is driving recklessly and I am choking on exhaust fumes. Every rusty metal-roofed building is covered with fine red dust and the smell of rotting fish mixes with that of the open sewers. The streets are packed with brightly dressed women selling everything imaginable carried on their heads and the primary colors of plastic goods imported from China line every inch of the open-air market. Conakry is no tropical coastal paradise. In fact, simple chaos is the first thing that comes to mind.

I catch my first view of someone selling medicinal plants along the road as we zoom by in the taxi. Then I

see another plant seller, and another. My initial feelings of bewilderment and alienation have been tempered slightly, and I am starting to feel very pleased that I have come to Guinea with the intention of studying medicinal plants that women use in reproductive health and traditional medicine systems. I want to stop to talk to some of the sellers but I realize that I need to wait, given that our taxi is full of luggage. We press on toward the hotel.

In my first few days in Conakry, I am struck by contrasts. In the open-air market place, I walk past enormous stereo systems *en route* to medicinal plants. As I talk with the plant sellers in the bright sunshine, I think about the air-conditioned pharmacy I visited earlier. The walls there are white and clean, the boxes neatly stacked, the doses defined in milligrams, the instructions printed neatly, the possible side effects exposed, the expiration date stamped for all to see. A courteous, well-dressed staff is ready to answer my questions and attend to my needs. Confidence, cleanliness and efficacy are exuded. Now I am standing in front of a torn plastic tarp on the sidewalk, covered with small piles of leaves, bark and stems. There are old vodka bottles overflowing with cloudy brown liquids and mayonnaise jars filled with plant powders. There is no mistaking that these products have come from the soil, picked leaf by leaf, branch by branch. The women selling these plants are dressed in stained and torn clothes. Their hands tell a tale of hard work and long hours in the sun. In the pharmacy the base of approximately one-fourth of the pharmaceuticals I have seen come from plants. One could never guess by the neatly stacked white boxes.

Just as there is contrast between the pharmacists and the medicine sellers on the street, there is a great variety of medicine sellers. Some sellers and "*guerrisseurs*" (healers) display beautifully painted signs, graphically portraying sickness and disease. The most common maladies depicted on these large cotton sheets include malaria, venereal disease, jaundice, parasites, stomach pain, worms and fever. I grin when my eye catches the depiction of impotence, which shows a man with an erect penis the size of his arm. I am guessing that this is "after." The medicine sellers I have met with painted signs, tables, umbrellas, a chair and prepared powder remedies have mainly been men from Mali or *Haut Guinée*. The other sellers I have met sit on ground-tarps surrounded by piles of leaves, bark, and twigs. The majority of these are women and they can be found on many streetside corners in Conakry. My initial sense is that the use of plant medicines is alive and well. This is not surprising when one considers that there is one doctor for 50,000 inhabitants and one nurse per 11,600 people. In comparison, it is estimated that there is one traditional healer per 1,083 inhabitants and an unknown number of traditional birth attendants.

I leave behind the leaves, branches and general clutter of the market and walk toward the Ministry of Health. In Guinea it is especially important to respect the chain of

bureaucratic command. I am here to introduce myself to Dr. Pogba Gbanace, the Department Head of Traditional Medicine for twenty years. I am a little nervous because this is my first attempt at describing the John Miller Musser Fellowship and the Institute of Current World Affairs in an official capacity. Dr. Gbanace looks confused. I explain further, and when I assure Dr. Gbanace that I am not here to redo work that his department has already completed, he smiles. It doesn't hurt that we have something in common; he began his work with traditional medicine in Macenta, the town in the Forest Region where I was a Peace Corps Volunteer between 1988 and 1990. I explain to Dr. Gbanace that I am interested in working in the Forest Region. He says that he will have prepared letters of introduction for the *Departement Préfectoral de la Santé* (County Health Department) for three regions in the Forest; Gueckedou, Macenta, and N'Zerekore. Protocol and bureaucratic hierarchy is all-important in Guinea; these stamped letters will be indispensable. When I return a few days later to pick up the introduction letters, Dr. Gbanace is happy to see me and the letters are ready as promised. I sense that Dr. Gbanace is very serious and dedicated to his work, a rare exception from what I've seen in the world of Guinean civil servants. I am pleased to have him as an ally.

After three days in Conakry, I am already tired of small children screaming "*foto, ça va?*" (White person, are you all right?). At times I feel like a caged animal in the zoo and sense that the majority of people do not see me as a real person. More often than not, I seem to have been confused with an ATM. There seems to be no limit to the stories that Guineans will conjure up in order to relieve me of cash. I find that my tolerance level for being singled out is low. I do not want people to take special notice of me, but this is literally impossible in a country where few foreigners walk on the streets. I think people are asking, "Every other American has a Land Cruiser, why don't you?" As I walk through the rain and the mucky, sewer-infested rivers forming in the street this morning, I actually *am* secretly wishing for a Land Cruiser. My wish is partially granted, and I am singled out once again. Someone stops to pick me up as I am being splashed by cars zooming by. I suppose there is a bizarre sense of justice here. At times I feel open hostility directed at me, at other times I am offered first-row seats. For now I am thankful to be riding in the back seat of a nice person's car protected from the downpour.

I am less tolerant than I was seven years ago. I no longer find open sewers, neighborhood trash heaps, rotting fish and heavy exhaust fumes tolerable. I do not know whether Conakry's filth has increased or my perceptions of what is acceptable have changed. Conakry is one of West Africa's fastest growing cities with an estimated population of 1.5 million, and each day this number grows with little new infrastructure to support the increase. No new sewers, no water-supply lines, no trash-disposal facilities, no new hospitals. I estimate there are 10 times as many vehicles as there were seven years ago.

There appears to be a preference for Mercedes and Land Cruisers. There are more imported goods available, and the Lebanese-owned shops are brimming with refrigerators, washing machines, stoves, televisions and stereos. On the outskirts of town, luxury apartment buildings are going up everywhere, their location marked by the presence of huge TV satellite dishes. Although Guinea is supposedly one of the poorest countries in the world, with a GNP per capita of \$ 400 per year, the wealth on display in Conakry does not make me believe these statistics.

I believe it is the sea that saves Conakry from being unlivable. Its waters wash away the muck and create a soft breeze that blows away the bauxite dust and car fumes. Its expanse and riches provide hope as well as a livelihood. I see hope and a future in the eyes and smiles of little girls dancing in the street, hear music for celebrations of weddings and baptisms, and feel a general liveliness and strength coming from people who have survived without all the things we take for granted. If nothing else, Conakry offers a lively ambiance and much variety. After two weeks of this liveliness and chaos, however, I am ready for the relative tranquillity of the forest region.

ON THE ROAD

Getting in the minibus at 7 a.m. was our first mistake. Twelve hours after leaving Conakry Jeff and I had traveled 340 kilometers with 20 other passengers crammed into what should have been twelve spaces. I have made many voyages overland by taxi in Guinea, but this one has been particularly grueling. That evening we spend the night at the Hotel de Niger in the "Burkina Faso" *cas* (hut). The hotel is modeled after a "typical" African village with enormous concrete "huts" built around a central courtyard. The "huts" are furnished with huge, mauve bathroom fixtures, full-length heavy velvet drapes, air conditioners, refrigerators and elaborately carved furniture. It is hard to tell what color the drapes were once upon a time, and the stench from the bathroom indicates that the septic system has not been emptied since 1984. Because there is no electricity in the dry season, the air conditioning doesn't function and we are forced to swelter in the heat with windows closed, listening to the buzz of mosquitoes waiting eagerly for a meal of human blood. The hotel is a testament to a grand ideal, with few resources or perhaps little desire to maintain its longevity.

This hotel has significance in Guinea's recent history because it was originally constructed to house the delegates for the Organization for African Unity Conference in 1984. The conference never took place because Sekou Touré, the president of the last regime, died that year. The hotel, in his natal town, stands as an interesting monument to Sekou Touré's paradoxical and repressive socialist regime, which lasted over 25 years. Sekou Touré was one of the few West African leaders at independence who refused to be tied in any way to the French. He basically

insulted Charles de Gaulle by telling the French he'd prefer to have nothing to do with them. The French reacted vengefully and destroyed as much as they could before their departure. Although Sekou Touré spoke harshly against colonialism, he did not treat his fellow Guineans with any more justice. Although he preached African Unity and Guinean Socialism, he viciously suppressed Guineans who were not of his own ethnic group, and public hangings of his political opponents were commonplace.

I am eager to leave Sekou Touré's creation after a sleepless night and this morning I am happy to be in a yellow Peugeot 504 bush taxi. This time I am one of four passengers in the back seat and I am basking in the excessive space. I am eager to return to the Forest Region partly because I have been told by many that it has changed dramatically in the past seven years. As we speed down the rutted, half-paved road, the savannah of *Moyenne Guinée* slowly turns to cool forest. Although we are entering what is called the Forest Region, only small pockets of closed forest remain. It is these pockets that provide the source for traditional plant medicines. Much of the forest has been cut and then burned so that people can grow rice, cassava, sweet potatoes, oil palms, okra, black-eyed peas and corn for food, and coffee, bananas, plantains and red-oil palms as cash crops. Although secondary forests return to replace abandoned cropland, they seldom come back with similar diversity. Slash-and-burn agriculture threatens Guinea's last remaining primary forest. Part of this threat is tied directly to the civil wars of Guinea's neighbors.

REFUGEES

The first obvious signs of change are the peculiar-looking villages next to the road. There is something about them that is familiar, yet definitely out of place. Normally one would expect to see round, mud-brick houses with palm-frond roofs, interspersed with a few larger metal-roofed square houses. These particular villages are made up of only square mud houses with bright blue-tarped roofs. It is the tarps that make me take a second look, and I now see "UN High Commission for Refugees" stamped on each tarp. Even more unusual than the blue tarps is the presence of public latrines with air vents, and cemented, hand-pump wells. These are not the kind of refugee camps I am accustomed to seeing on CNN in Ethiopia and Zaire. There are no fences around these "villages," no military vehicles, no European nurses, no starving children. At first glance, a visitor would have no reason to believe that this was a refugee camp. A more in-depth look would show people who have suffered through the tragedy of murdered family members and seven years of civil war.

Estimates from the UN High Commission For Refugees have put the number of refugees in Guinea at 500,000. This number has increased Guinea's total population by almost 9 percent and the population of the Forest Region

by approximately 50 percent. Although the majority of refugees are from Liberia, there are more the 100,000 from the civil war in Sierra Leone. People are starting to return to Liberia, but fighting has begun again in Sierra Leone's capital of Freetown.

THE FOREST

We approach Gueckedou, the town with the largest population of refugees. It is only a few miles from the borders of both Liberia and Sierra Leone. Although the town itself looks familiar to me, the jam-packed streets do not. The taxi slowly forces its way through the crowds. When we stop, we are informed that this is our final destination. We are hoping to meet up with people from the American Refugee Committee and are now wondering how we might find their office. "Hey missus, what you look for?", I hear faintly from the crowd. A woman with a basket on her head approaches. I am thinking we must have that lost look about us. I assume she is a refugee and ask her if she knows the ARC office.

Soon Jeff and I are in pursuit as Daisy leads the way toward the other end of town. I see that her basket is full of bottles of dark brown liquid and I ask about the contents. She quickly pulls down a bottle and begins to explain that it is plant medicine from Ghana. I learn that Daisy has been living in Guinea for almost seven years. In Liberia she worked as a secretary for an industrial rubber company. She explains that there is no work to be had in Guinea. Recently she has been traveling to Ghana, buying medicine and selling it in Gueckedou.

She speaks hurriedly, and I am having a difficult time understanding much of what she says. My ear has yet to be accustomed to Liberian English. I ask her about the contents of the medicine she is selling. She says she does not mix the medicine herself and the plants come from Ghana. The label on the bottle claims to cure everything from ulcers to menstrual disorders. A liquor-bottle of this medicine sells for 2,000 Guinean Francs (Approximately two U.S. dollars). She is also selling "country" soap made from plants. She claims that it will wash away most skin disorders. I decide to buy a small piece as insurance against any future skin condition I may encounter. Unfortunately Daisy is unable to tell me what the plant base is of her medicines. As we arrive at ARC, she suggests that we travel to Ghana together. I make no promises as we say our good-byes.

I am far too anxious to return to Macenta, and we depart from Gueckedou the next morning. I have pictured my "homecoming" to Macenta many times before in both dreams and waking hours. I am waiting for things to begin looking familiar as we approach the outskirts of town, yet nothing does. The boundaries of the town have burst beyond the limits I once knew and people are constructing houses everywhere. When we finally roll into the center of town, at last I know where I am. It is from here that my journeys into the forest will begin... □

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