

CHAPTER THREE: AUGUST, 2005

Tom arrived in Abidjan toward the end of the month. After spending the night in the Hotel Golden, which my Dad had recommended because it was cheap and also safe (UN personnel stayed there routinely), Tom came to visit us in Port Bouet, which is where we lived. Port Bouët is between the airport and the ocean.

Dad was anxious to show Tom what his contribution had bought—a brand new freezer for Grandma, who lived with Dad, Mom, and my brother and me. Tom's idea was that perhaps solar-powered freezers could be distributed to villages, as they would bring money into the villages. In 2004, Tom had enjoyed purchasing Bissap, which is a frozen sweetened beverage made by boiling water and sugar, then adding hibiscus flowers. These are purple, not red like you see in Mexico, where they make Jamaica.

In the picture you see me in the lower right, Grandma (Therese Peho) proudly standing next to her freezer, and Evariste, my Dad, who has bit off the end of a bissap and is sucking the juice. After Tom sent the money, Grandma had quite a bissap and frozen water business going, and she would sell the beverages along the road.



Tom and Dad left us and picked up a young man whom I never met. His name was Justin Whittaker and he had been travelling through Africa, taking video of farmers. Justin was the son of friends of Tom. At the time, Justin was still going to college.

Dad, Tom, and Justin hired a car and drove Northwest to Bateguedea, a town about 20 Km outside of Daloa. Tom was really anxious to learn about how cacao is purchased and distributed. Bateguedea is right on the main road and the government has blessed it with lots of light although no one has been able to afford the expense of paying for a meter and wires in order to power machinery. This was one of Tom's first chances to learn about village life in Côte d'Ivoire.



Justin connects with the children One of Tom's Favorite Photos

Above is a pile of white stone, used for burial purposes.



In this picture, you see how much wealthier people are who live close to a road. The style of houses says it all. Note the the house in the back-ground is made out of concrete block and stucco walls and sheet metal roof; this construction lasts the longest, as rain will not wash out the walls or penetrate into the interior.

The structure in the foreground is the kitchen, which is shared by several families. It is made from mud, sticks, and leaves.

There is no apparent rhyme or reason to the positioning of the cooking pot. In this case, three stones are put in the direct path, which of course is a hazard to everyone. In the same pot, water

might be boiled at some point to make antimalarial medicine, it might be heated to do the laundry, or a Chicken Kedjenou might be prepared.

Justin sits in a maquis—a restaurant where women sell foods they have prepared.





Poverty. This is what it looks like in Bateguedea. Not only is the house made of the traditional materials used for the past 4,000 years, but it's obvious that something has happened to prevent the family from maintaining their property. The mud walls have all washed away, leaving no privacy.

Meanwhile, the mother is obviously drying some foodstuffs. But the yard is a bit of a mess, and the roof is barely able to keep rain out of the house's interior.



Young man doing the dishes in the kitchen. Note the little stool, used by adults to reduce wear-and-tear on their backs. Note also the metal basin, the light blue plastic bucket and the dark blue bucket, probably used for doing the laundry



(Above) Young mother or older sister? Who knows? Note the state of her clothes.

(Right) Learning to carry--just a few plantains.





Beauty. Tom talks a lot about the elegant simplicity of village buildings. The forest peoples of Southern Côte d'Ivoire construct their homes of totally local materials. For example, this house shows the typical cross-hatching of very straight trunks of a young leguminous tree. The cross-hatching is then filled in with dirt, called *laterite* by local geologists.

Note the whimsical window, the use of bushes and flowers



A house in the process of construction. The roof framework and the main supporting members are in place first. A house like this has minimal cost but the cellulosic portion is often rapidly devoured by termites.

Sewing together the roof shingles, which are bright green when fresh and which rapidly dry and turn tan. The roof shingles are perfect for the tropics. Unlike metal roofs, they don't keep you awake at night what with all the banging caused by large raindrops turning a metal roof into a drum. Also, they breathe, so the house stays cool





The village bath (left) is a patch of ground lined with pebbles, surrounded by a structure made of the fronds of some sort of palm. In the middle are flat rocks on which one stands. To use the bath, you wear something really basic, including plastic flip-flops, and you carry a bucket of cold water, a bar of soap, a piece of plastic netting that doubles as a scrubber, and a towel. You stand naked on the flat rock and you begin by pouring part of the bucket of water over yourself. This causes quite an exhalation; the experience is quite bracing. But you don't shiver because it's the tropics, after all. Then you suds yourself down, using the plastic netting to remove dead skin, and you wash your hair. Then you pour the remaining bucket over yourself, taking care to rinse away all the soap and detergent.

Evariste introduced Tom to the village chief, Augustin and explained to him how Tom wanted to meet a cocoa farmer and a pisteur. After all, pisteurs are often blamed for taking money from the farmers, and Tom wanted to add a human touch.

The word, pisteur, refers to the middlemen who are commissioned by traitants to purchase and haul the cocoa beans. The pisteur gets his name from the fact that he drives off the main road, following a "piste" or path. Mr Bandre is a Muslim. You can tell by the patterns on the shirt that he is wearing. It is often the case that the cocoa farmers are Christian and the traitants and pisteurs are Muslim. But not always. In fact, President Houphouët-Boigny encouraged Malians and Burkinabe to move south in order to provide labor in the cocoa sector. Many stayed and bought land from Christian farmers. In fact, after the 80's, one-fourth of all Ivoirians had moved from Burkina Faso. An equivalent would be if the U.S. population were to go from 0% Mexican to 25% Mexican in 10 years!



Augustin, Chief of Bateguedea



Karim Bandre, Pisteur

At the same time, the Southerners (Bété and Baoulé to name two important groups) began to resent the presence of Northerners. However, Bateguedea is a village where both Northerners and Southerners coexist. What happened during the civil war, when passions were high, is a good question.

Tom wanted to see a typical farmer's home and a cocoa farm. They walked to a hamlet near Bateguedea.



The picture on the above left shows a drying area for cocoa beans. This hamlet or campement has invested a lot of money in the drying area, as it's made with cement powder mixed with mud and sand, making it quite durable and long-lasting. Very few cocoa farmers are willing to make such a long-term investment, especially when the cocoa bean market vacillates so much.



The picture to the left is of the wife of Diabate Chiaka. She is standing next to her home, which is better built than most because the walls are made of concrete block finished with stucco. The roof, on the other hand, is made of dried palm fronds. The shed behind her is used for storing wood for cooking. The roof of the shed is covered with black plastic to keep the wood extra dry.

Below is Diabate Chiaka, a Dioula cocoa farmer who lives in the campement. Mr. Chiaka is standing in front of the drying area and also the dining room, where people from the campement eat together. Houses in the country are mainly for sleeping. Eating, showering, etc. are reserved for separate buildings, and these are shared with others in the community.



After visiting the campement, Tom and Dad followed a path in the woods to visit several farmers. The first farmer was Augustin Nekpato Seri. We found him and his wife, Marguerite Kipre, working in the rice field. It is very common for farmers to grow any or all of these crops: cacao, coffee, rice, palm wine or palm oil, corn, sweet potatoes, African yams, plantains, bananas, or okra. The rice is used or sold locally as it is an important part of their diet.

When they happened upon the pair, Augustin was cutting weeds near his rice farm. Tom, Dad, and Justin told him they wanted to learn more about cocoa farming. Augustin dropped his rake and became quite enthusiastic: it's not every day that someone from "outside" asks a cocoa farmer about his livelihood.

Tom asked Augustin to compare his feelings toward the traitant-pisteur system vs. cooperatives. Augustin's responded, "They're all crooks. Everyone makes his living on the back of the farmer."



Augustin Nekpato Seri



Marguerite Kipre



A typical West African rice farm, established in a low spot in the forest. Note the grass hut in the middle. This is where children shoot pebbles at birds using a slingshot.



While they walked from one farm to the other, they came across this spider, a species of *Australocantha*, known for its spikes and bright colors. Although frightening to behold, it is actually harmless to humans.



Francis Kpokpa shows off one of his Robusta coffee trees. There are two commercially important varieties of coffee: *Robusta* and *Arabica*. Robusta thrives in a high humidity environment, typical of the former jungles of West Africa.

Côte d'Ivoire is globally number 4 in tonnage of coffee beans, and most of *Nescafé*, the instant coffee beverage, is made from Ivoirian beans.

Coffee aficionados consider Robusta to be inferior in flavor to Arabica, citing the fact that it is acidic and has a twiggy flavor.

However, Robusta contains more caffeine and therefore has more bang for the buck. Also, when mixed with condensed milk, it's actually pretty good. Most breakfasts served in West Africa include a cup of hot water, powdered milk, sugar, and a tube of Nescafé.



This is Francis Kpokpa, a cocoa farmer and neighbor of Seri Augustin. He is standing in front of his cocoa grove. Note the size of the leaves and how the trees drop their leaves and prevent other plants from competing with them for moisture and nutrients. Notice the ripe pod hanging on the tree next to his right arm. This pod demonstrates what happens when you don't aggressively remove failed pods. It just hangs there and competes for water and nutrients with other pods on the tree, effectively cutting into the tree's yield.



This is Ouedrago, a Burkinabe cocoa farmer who worked as an indentured servant, tending a local Bété farm until he could purchase some of the land. Originally from the arid North, he came South, looking for a better life. In the North, people are much poorer than cocoa farmers because crop yields are low due to insufficient rainfall. The many thousands of Burkinabe (from Burkina Faso) who came South provided the muscle to grow the Ivoirian economy right when the price of cacao was very high. The rapid economic growth was referred to as "The Ivoirian Miracle," and president Houphouët-Boigny gets the credit for that.



My Dad, Evariste, is watching Mr. Kpokpa open a ripe cocoa pod. This belongs to the *Amelonado* variety, which is the African version of the Forastero. The Amelonado (or, "like a melon") is bulbous and short, with heavy ribs. Mr. Kpokpa makes a cut at each end, and then connects them with two cuts down the sides.

The machete (called "cutlass" in English-speaking countries like Ghana) costs about \$6. People keep it razor sharp by grinding it on a rock held firmly on the ground by pounding sticks into the dirt--as you would hold a diamond in its setting.

Eventually every machete ends its life as a thin facsimile.



There are about 40 seeds or cocoa beans in a pod. The beans are surrounded by a mucilaginous material that tastes sweet, sour, and very fruity. In order to remove the material clinging to the beans--it's called "placental tissue" -- you have to ferment it off.

As the bean ferments, pectinases, enzymes that split pectin molecules into smaller molecules, are secreted by bacteria and fungi naturally found on the surface of the bean. Pectins are basically cell wall glues, and as they split, the cell walls fall apart, causing the placental tissue to liquefy.

Tom is biting into the pod. He's just doing this for the photo, as it's much smarter to pull the beans out and suck on them individually. The inside of a Forastero bean is intensely purple due to the polyphenols called "anthocyanins" or blue flowers. Anthocyanins are quite bitter, so it's better not to chew on the raw bean.



This is how they grow the African yam, also called *Dioscorea*. It is not related to the orange sweet potato which Americans call "yams"

This picture shows how West Africans in the forested areas do agriculture. Instead of cutting everything down, they clear small areas. This system has the advantage of reducing farm run-off, reducing the need for insecticides and fungicides

as the farmers practice polyculture, not monoculture.

The *Poisonwood Bible* describes what happens when an American Baptist preacher decides to ignore the advice of one of his parishioners and plants in rows: Georgia-style. The entire crop washes away after a heavy, tropical rain. Without saying it, the book shows how farmers following thousands of years of experience can survive a disaster whereas the farmers following modern methods may not thrive.



On the typical farm, the family lives in the village or hamlet and its land possessions may be several miles away from their home in the village. In the morning, the husband might walk or bicycle out to the farm and the wife might follow several hours later with the children. Typically, she carries a baby on her back and a pot on her head, containing ingredients for lunch. When she arrives, she makes a fire (left).

Someone made this fire right next to a pile of old pods, which are left in a pile to rot. These could be composted and re-applied to the soil, but most farmers don't bother.