

August, 2004

This year, my trip was three weeks in length, one week devoted to each of three countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Cameroon. My plan was to visit each of three Fair Trade Certified™ cooperatives: Kavokiva (in Gonate, Côte d'Ivoire); Kuapa Kokoo (in Kumasi, Ghana); and MACEF (in Mamfe, Cameroon).

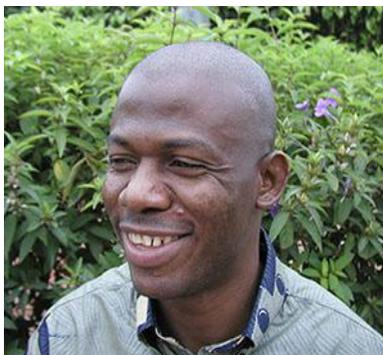
It was on this trip that I met my friend Evariste for the first time at the baggage belt in the Abidjan airport. He was waiting, patiently, to snag an American or European who projected uncertainty about what they were doing. When he asked me about my plans, I told him that I wanted to visit a Fair Trade cooperative near Daloa. He responded, "I'm from that area. I can help you accomplish achieving your goals." So, thanks to Evariste, I was able to visit Kavokiva.



Evariste Plegnon

Evariste arrived at the Novotel Hotel while I was eating breakfast. We took a taxi to the "Plateau", which is the part of the city that has all the high-rise buildings and where the ATMs are located. After withdrawing money, we went to the van station and jammed ourselves into a vehicle bound for Daloa. Evariste was very solicitous of my comfort: I got to sit next to the driver.

The trip was not very comfortable. Because Côte d'Ivoire was at the beginning of a civil war, the police stopped the van at least 30 times just between Abidjan and Yamoussoukro and a trip that should have taken 3 hours became more like 5. And the baggage was often opened and inspected. at every stop. We arrived that evening and we slept at Daloa. The next day, we took another van to travel to Gonate, the location of Kavokiva. Evariste did a great job of introducing himself, me, and what we were hoping to accomplish..



Fulgence N'Guessan
President



Mamadou
Vice President



Georges
Vice President

Kavokiva



George's Village

Because I wanted to visit an Ivoirian Fair Trade village, Georges consented to drive us to his village where he served as chief.



What is remarkable about his village, it's that everyone has built their homes in a circle. Form follows function: since women all work together, doing the laundry, drying cocoa (right) and squash seeds (left) and the children play together, a circle works best. I never found this arrangement anywhere else during 11 years of travel in West Africa. All the homes are built the same: a frame is made from the straight trunks of a leguminous tree which are bound together with palm "rope". These wooden skeletons are then filled with dirt mixed with water to make a mud that dries to form 8 inch thick walls. The roofs are made of palm fronds sewn together to make shingles. This construction keeps people cool and dry, except during hard tropical rains, which explains the black plastic.

The two photos below show a young woman with her pet monkey. These are increasingly rare, as most wild animals have been eaten. In the photo at right, the young woman is carrying water from a cistern in order to wash clothes. The cisterns are filled from the roof. Note the metal roofing: one often sees this on the chief's house or the house of an older farmer who has been able to save enough money over a lifetime to buy the more expensive metal.



Eugénie



After visiting Georges' village, we met Eugénie, who lives in nearby Abekro. She is the vice-president for women and deals with issues such as child labor. She works her farm by herself, as her husband is dead. The quality of her pods shows her attention to detail.

Ernest



After Eugénie, we visited Ernest, another vice president of Kavokiva. When I suggested he smile for the photo, he responded, “There is nothing to smile about.”

Like so many cocoa farmers, Ernest also cultivates rice. In fact, we found him coming back from the rice fields.

Below is a surface well in the rice fields. The water was teeming with bugs.



A cocoa nursery. Often the work of children, who fill the black bags with dirt and then insert a seed and let the rains do their thing.



Wild pineapple plants in among the cocoa trees. It takes 1.5 - 2.5 years before a pineapple forms. Then the mother plant dies. To get more, you replant the suckers.



Above, left: Ernest's rice field. Above, right: a community kitchen in Ernest's hamlet. Women often work together to prepare meals. And kitchens are not part of the house but are outside under a structure such as this--to prevent house fires and to reduce lung problems. Left, typical grill that serves grilled lamb and sausages. Never pork because half the population is Muslim and doesn't want pork juices contaminating the other meats.



Above: after our visits to the village and to the farms, Evariste and I joined Mamadou and Fulgence for lunch at a restaurant (maquis). I ate Kedjenou of Pangolin (right), which is a scaly anteater. This animal is now endangered. But the couple times I've eaten it, I was impressed with its delicate flavor and moist, tender texture. I won't be eating it any more.



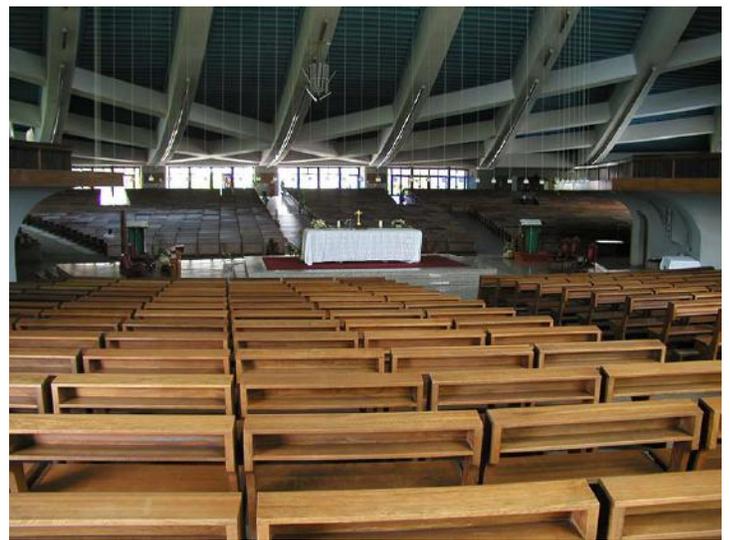
The next day, we set out on our return voyage. On the way, I bought a few things to eat. Top, left: Freshwater shrimp. Top right: kola nuts which used to be added to Coca-Cola because of their high caffeine contents, which makes them very bitter. One buys kola nuts before visiting someone-- much as one purchases flowers in the US. Left, donuts purchased en route from sellers alongside the road. The doughnuts are made from mixes to which one simply adds water, mixes, and drops the batter into fat heated over the fire. The fat is most often made in the village from palm kernels. Right, a truck carrying wood from a sawmill; following it set my nerves on edge.



The next day, we visited Saint Paul's Cathedral, located on the plateau in Abidjan. Designed by the Italian architect Aldo Spirito, one sees St. Paul at the left embracing the people of Côte d'Ivoire and linked to him is the Church--physically and metaphorically. It's probably not controversial to say that such architecture is very expensive. But this is the big cathedral and it was built at a time when Côte d'Ivoire was awash in cash from the sales of cacao beans.



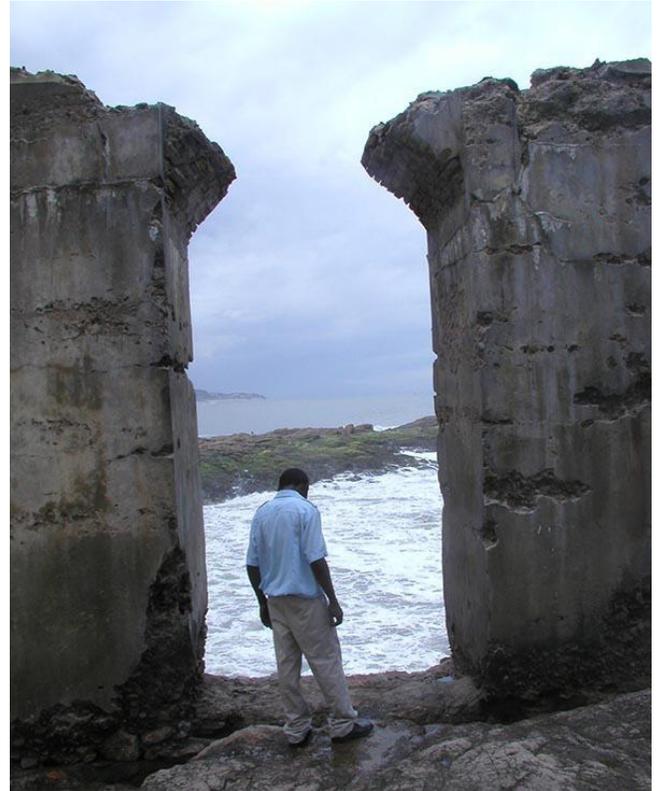
Along one wall, one sees a stained glass window of perhaps 50 meters (150 feet) in length. Just about the center, one sees a boat and two missionaries, who are debarking in order to minister to the African natives. The first European contacts were the Portuguese at the beginning of the 17th century. The first French missionaries arrived in 1637, but two more centuries passed before the Roman Catholic missionaries tried again--in 1844.



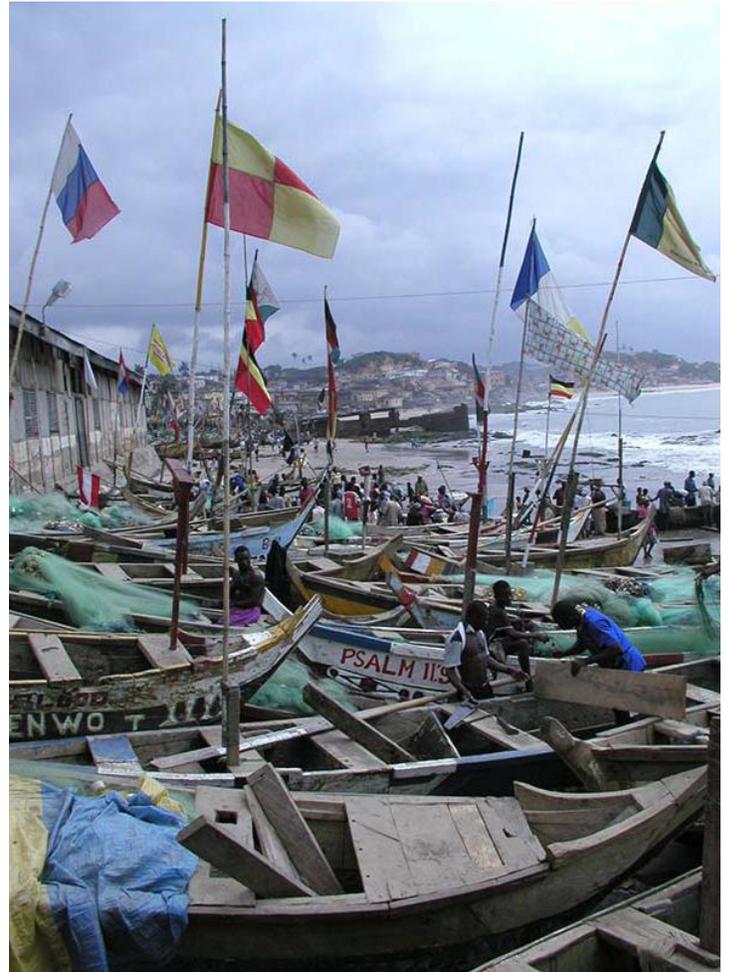
Left, the “three” crosses on Golgotha. Right, the seven ceiling beams correspond to the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholics are: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and holy orders.



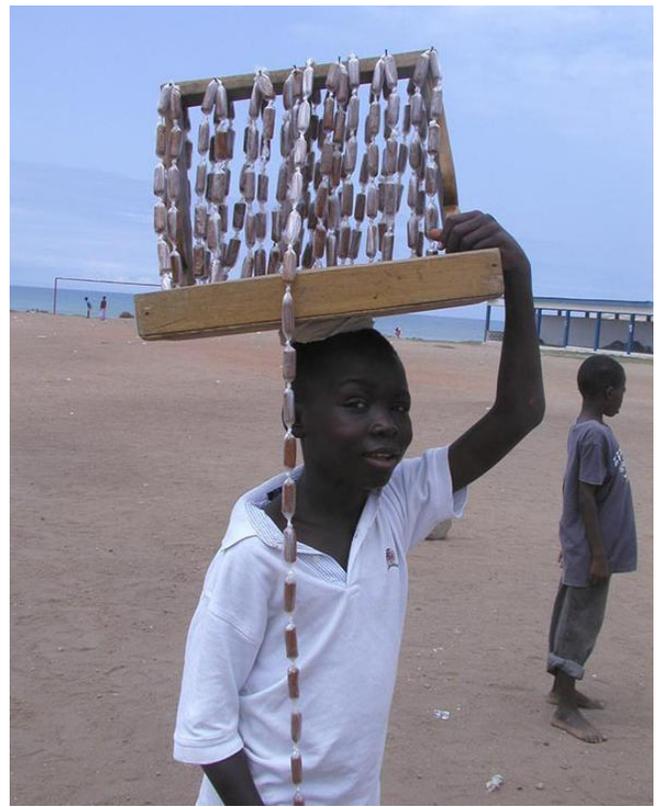
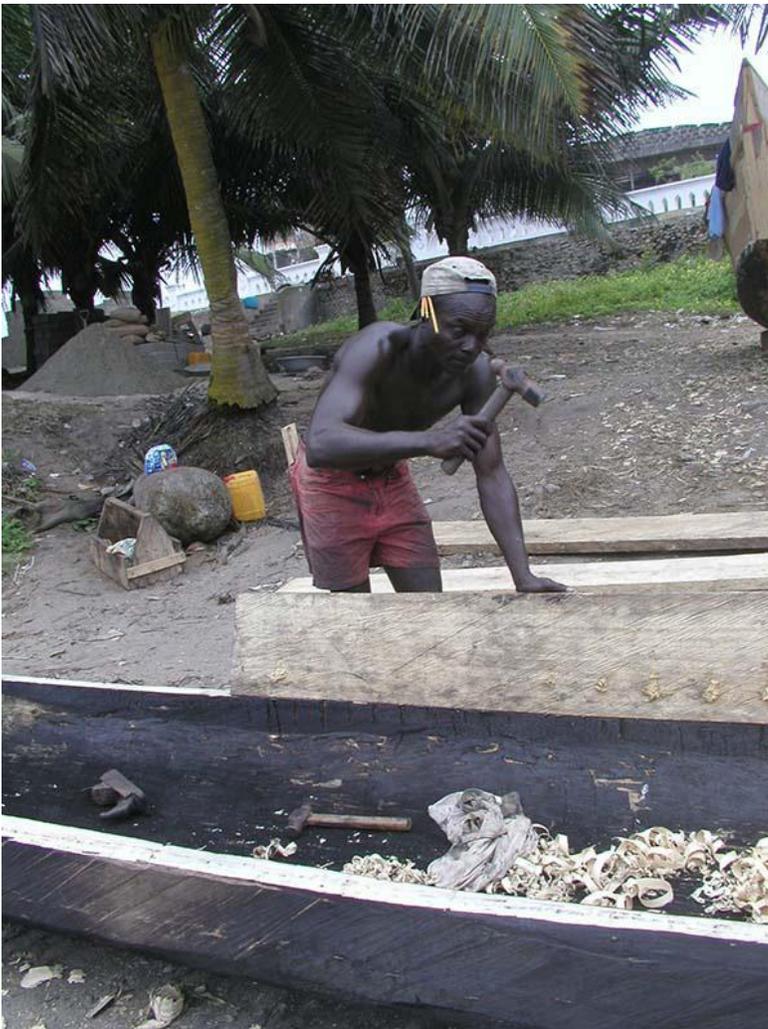
The second week, I visited for the second time my friend Peter Sewornoo, whom I met in 2003. He was an economics student at the University of Cape Coast.



Above, left: the Cape Coast fort. To the right is the exterior portal through which passed the slaves. Below, left, a cutie in Cape Coast. And to the right, the fort from the beach on the north side. The tide is about 5 feet.



Next to the fort is a beach that extends to the North and South. Top, left: the South beach; a single fishing boat is going out to sea. Top, right: the fishing boats have all put in for the evening. Middle, left, more fishing boats. Bottom left, a boat that never got finished and that is being used to dry small fish, which are used to flavor soups. Bottom right: fish smoking.



Top, left: a mud oven used to smoke fish. Top, right, the children of fishermen. Behind them are more fish-smoking ovens. Below, left, a boat builder. He starts by burning and hollowing out a trunk, then he planes the sides and drives long nails through a plank into the sides--every 5 inches. Lower right, a young man sells homemade caramels (what British call toffee) on the beach.

Elmina Castle (Fort d'Elmina)

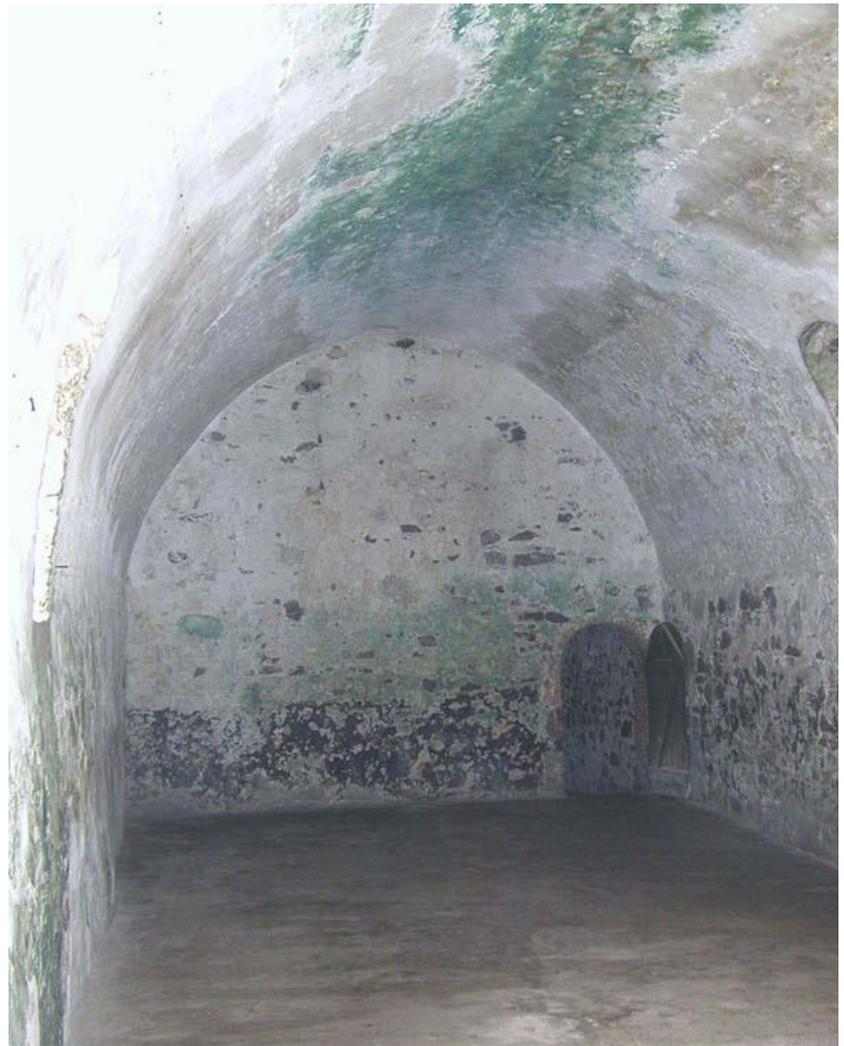
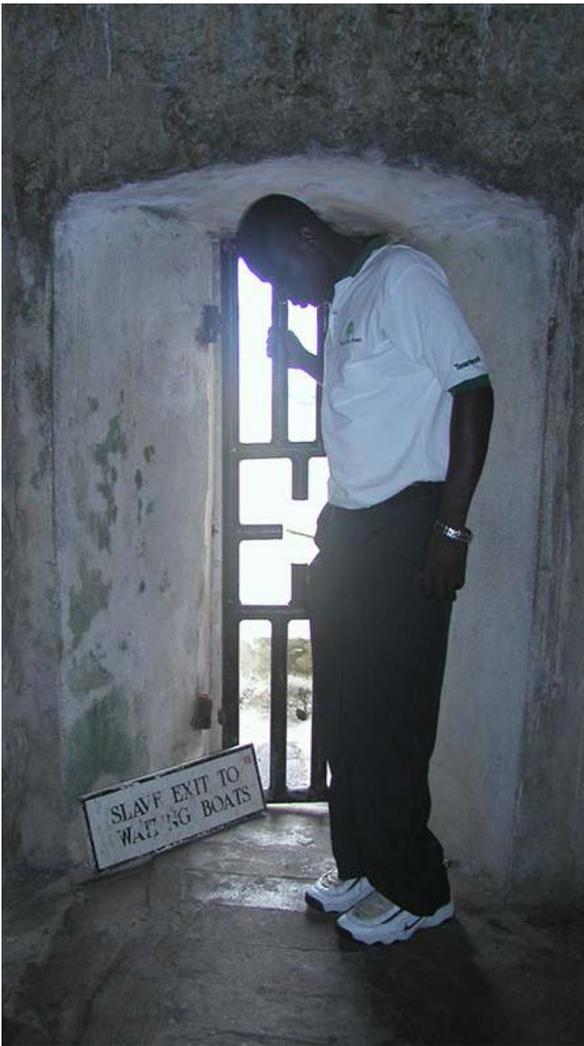


The history of Elmina starts in 1380 with the Normands, specifically the Dieppois, known for their navigational skills. They built a castle here in order to conduct commerce in ivory and jewels, but then they abandoned it. A century later, the Elmina castle as it currently stands was built by the Portuguese. It is called El Mina because there was a nearby gold mine.

Elmina was the first fort built in the Gulf of Guinea. In fact, it's the oldest European construction south of the Sahara. In 1637, the Dutch captured it from the Portuguese, and within 5 years, the Dutch controlled the entire Gulf of Guinea. In the early 19th century, the castle was traded to the British who owned it until independence.

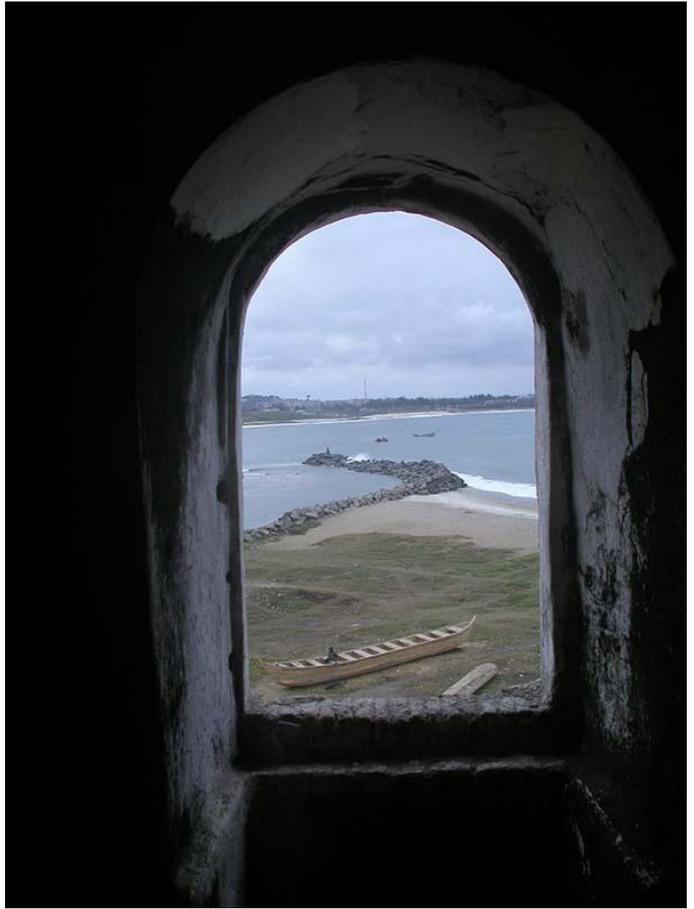
Above, left, the road to Elmina, which is only 12 km west of Cape Coast. Below, the church built by the Portuguese that was later converted into a trading house by the Dutch. To the right, the entryway that was rebuilt in 1990.

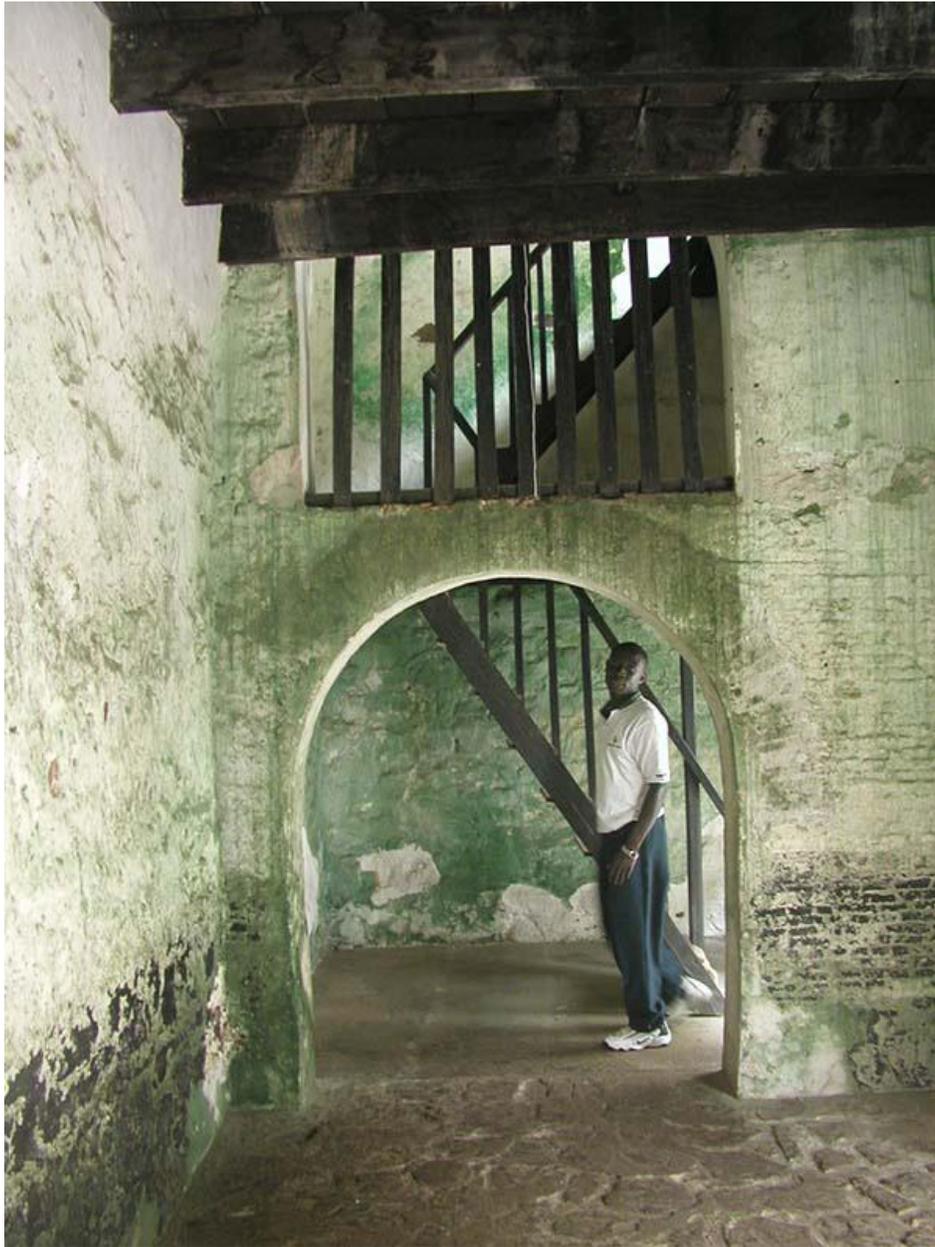
Following page, top left: Peter stands in the doorway leading out to the loading dock for slaves. Above, right, a room for slaves who sat, crouched, for up to three months. There was never enough room to lie down and the floor was filthy with excrement, which was about 3 feet deep in some places. There was no water for washing oneself either. As one might expect, mortality rates were high and bodies were thrown over the walls to the waiting sharks and crabs.



IN EVERLASTING MEMORY
 OF THE ANGUISH OF OUR ANCESTORS
 MAY THOSE WHO DIED REST IN PEACE
 MAY THOSE WHO RETURN FIND THEIR ROOTS
 MAY HUMANITY NEVER AGAIN PERPETRATE
 SUCH INJUSTICE AGAINST HUMANITY.
 WE, THE LIVING- VOW TO UPHOLD THIS,

VAN VEEREMITS CADERS BEWINTHEBBER
 DER GEOTROYERDE WEST-INDISCHE
 COMPAGNIE TER KAMERE ZEELANDT
 ENDE LAAST DIRECTEUR GENERAL
 OVER DEN NOORDEN ZUYDKUST VAN AFICA
 ACHIER AANGEKOMEN OP DEN 16 JANUARI
 1758 EN OVERLEEDEN DEN 12 MAART
 DESSELVEN JAARS OUD SYNDE 41 JAREN
 GRAFSCHRIFT
*Tels hier naauw geland of doodt
 waer in 1757 als in 1758 schoot
 van de Reche van de Godd' heil
 dedeugd waerdeert den 6 mei of
 hoorn van Geyrn knut geboerne
 u hem dit graf g'geleent
 A. Andriessen
 Predikant te Veere*



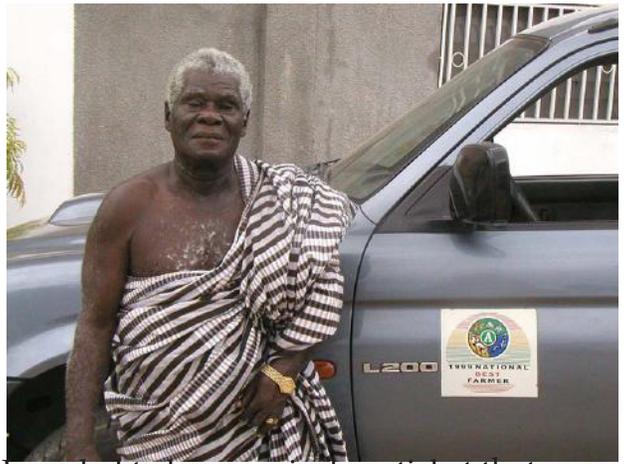


Opposite page--top, left, the cell where a “bad apple” would be put to die of hunger, thirst, or asphyxia. The cries of suffering would of course function to scare other prisoners, causing them to think twice about causing trouble. Top, right: a view of the port.

Middle: the central court. The balcony belongs to the prison director; from it, he looked down on the courtyard where female prisoners would be displayed for him and from which he selected his nightly companion. If a woman were to refuse his desires, she would be attached to the stone ball and left to die, during which birds would come and eat out her eyes in front of the other women. The purpose of course was to terrify the women so they would be passive and docile.

On this page: the private entryway to the director’s apartment.

After my visits of the two forts, I took the bus to Kumasi in order to revisit Kuapa Kokoo. This time, I took with me a check for \$1,500 that I had earned by selling chocolate assortments at the Mission in San Luis Obispo. I offered it to J.R. Mensah (right) and he responded: "Well, this isn't much, but I'll divvy it up among my farmers." I was of course much chagrined by his comment, because I had worked so hard to make that money! But this was just a test of will, because I have never done this work in order to be appreciated.



I returned to Accra. In order to go to Douala, Cameroon, I needed to buy an airplane ticket that would cost \$950. When I presented my cash at the counter, I was told that they didn't accept old bills. So I spent an entire day in Accra at Barclays on High Street. I changed the \$950 in filthy, wrinkly old cedis. At that time, one dollar equalled 10,000 cedis and the bank only had 5,000 cedi notes, so I left the bank with a garbage bag full of old bills--enough to nourish 5 families for a month. Standing on the street corner looking like Santa Claus is generally not advisable; fortunately, a taxi arrived quickly.

CAMEROUN

The trip to Douala took about 5 hours because of a stop in Lome, Togo. I spent the night in an Ibis Hotel and my host, Schwarz Agbor, picked me up in the morning in a hefty 4X4 (always the right vehicle for dirt roads and thick jungles). We left at 9 AM and arrived at 2 PM.





The beginning: a well-paved road.



And then, not so well paved!



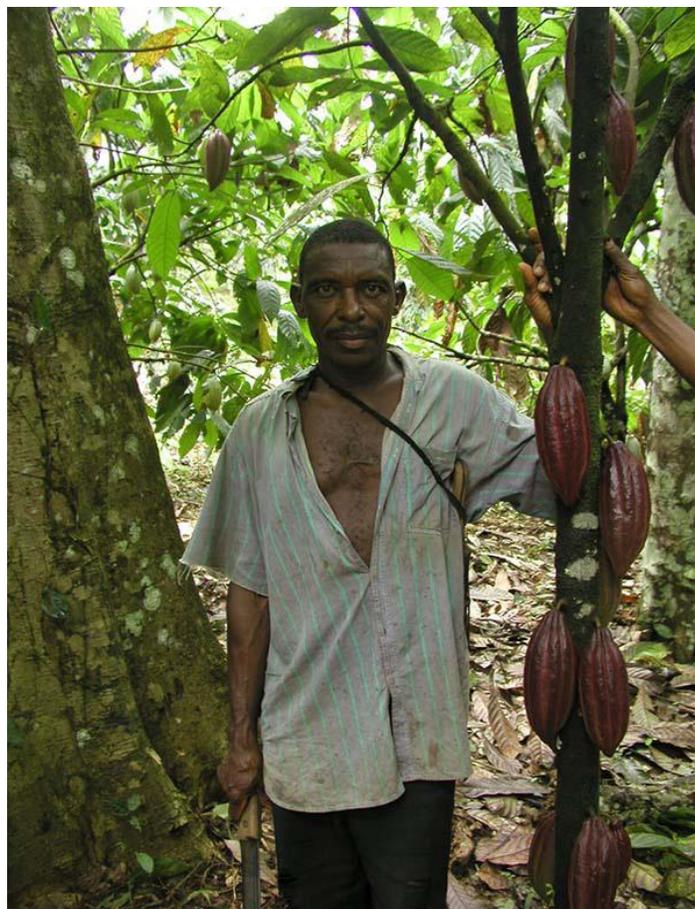
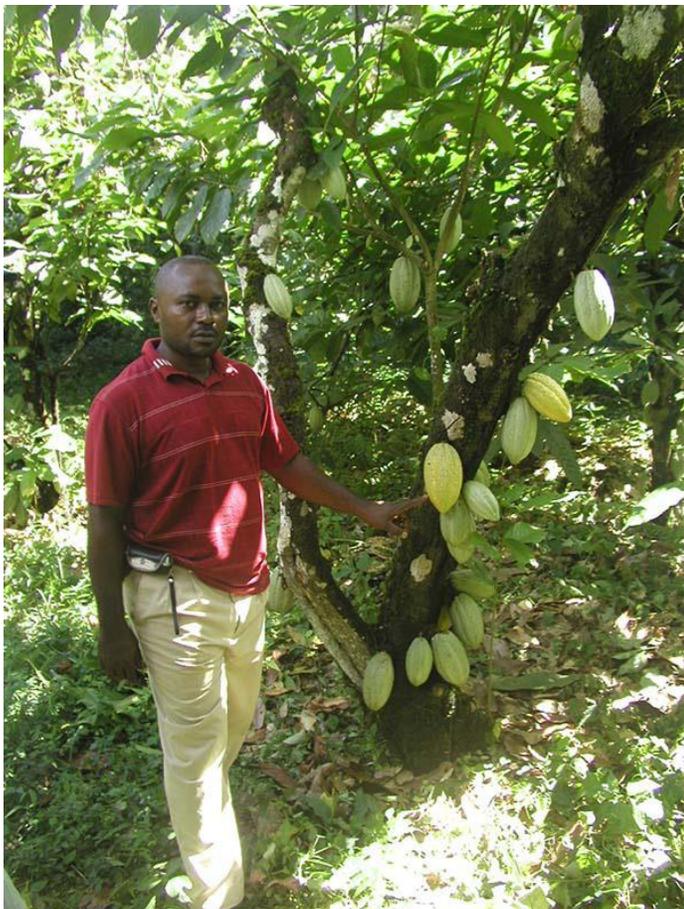
An ocean of mud



Finally we arrive at MACEFCOOP!

During the first half of the trip, the road was good. We passed miles and miles of Del Monte banana plantations. But about halfway there, the road turned west toward Nigeria and we entered into really thick jungle. The road became more than muddy. It became a sea of mud and our tires slipped a lot while the car fishtailed from side to side. On both sides, the forest was a wall of vegetation. Impenetrable.

TRIPS TO COCOA FARMS



During the net days we visited many farms. Top left: Schwarz shows Forestero cocoa pods. To the right, one of the farmers stands next to a Trinitario tree (a hybrid).

Bottom, left: pods disfigured by disease. At the right, a pile of pod shells. Once they compost, the shells contribute a lot of humus and minerals to the ground.



Here is an example of polyculture, where one mimics the natural system. Notice the really high trees (canopy) and the lower trees, which have been planted.



Farmers, members of MACEFCOOP who are standing behind a mat of cocoa beans in the process of drying.



Cocoa pods, probably mixes of Criollo and Trinitario. Criollo contributes the rugby ball shape. It's called Amerlonado in West Africa because the Portuguese brought the first cocoa to Fernando Po island (Bioko). Just above the pod on the branch is a single flower; only 1% of them form viable pods! Imagine if someone were to develop a variety that yielded 2%! The red color comes from the Trinitario variety.



Top left: the man shows a stem of African yam. To the right are ants; certain species march in straight lines. They're called "army ants" because they don't live in nests but are constantly on the move, foraging.

Middle, left: leaves of coco-yam (taro). To the right is a gong-gong, used to call villagers from their fields for meetings requested by the chief. Attendance mandatory.

Below are Cameroon plums. This isn't at all related to one. The seed is big and the flesh tastes like turpentine and is not sweet. Still, I love it, especially grilled with plantain and served with roasted peanuts. A very nice treat on long car trips.



Above, left: the umbrella tree (as they call it locally). To the right, one of the monsters of the forest. Below, left: a bridge built by the Germans before WWI. Dozens cross it every day, as there are many gardens on the other side which is an island. But you have to stay on the one plank and walk carefully! Otherwise, it's the crocodiles! Yum yum! Below, right, gasoline and diesel for sale. It's sold in glass bottles and probably smuggled in from nearby Nigeria.



Above: a dinner hosted by MACEFCOOP. Smoked, stewed antelope (at 11 o'clock and counter-clockwise), Okonghobong with Egusi, boiled plantain and African yam. Okonghobong is a Cameroonian word. Egusi is a common word for squash seeds. A delicious meal.

Good-bye, my new friends in the Southwest Cameroon!

Schwarz Agbor drove me back. Right as we were leaving the forested region, the road dried out and became hard and undulated, which caused the suspension to vibrate violently. Schwarz drove with alacrity, which put a lot of pressure on certain mechanical elements. Suddenly, as we rounded a curve, the back wheels froze and we started fishtailing. He lost control and the car flipped sideways into the ditch. Fortunately, the tall grasses so typical of much of Africa cushioned the blow and we ended up hanging from our seatbelts. Schwarz opened my side window and crawled out. I followed him and we both stood on the side of the road, thanking our lucky stars.



Our 4X4, a little damaged

Ten minutes passed while several cars passed without even slowing down. Schwarz called it “The Law of the Jungle.” But finally a car full of big men stopped. They quickly righted our vehicle, I payed them for their trouble, and we start back up. Schwarz drove slowly to the next town, where he found a car repair place which, once again is just a patch of bare ground with broked down vehicles sitting here and there. The mechanic worked on the suspension while his son rubbed the outside with a cloth to shine it up (never mind the muddy parts.) We drove back to the hotel and arrived at 9 PM, where we celebrated our successful trip with a very good Cameroonian dinner.



I took the return flight to Accra and then to Abidjan, where I was going to fly out the next day. Evariste met me at the airport and drove me to his place (below). Originally a fishing community, Port Bouët has many concrete homes built on sand.

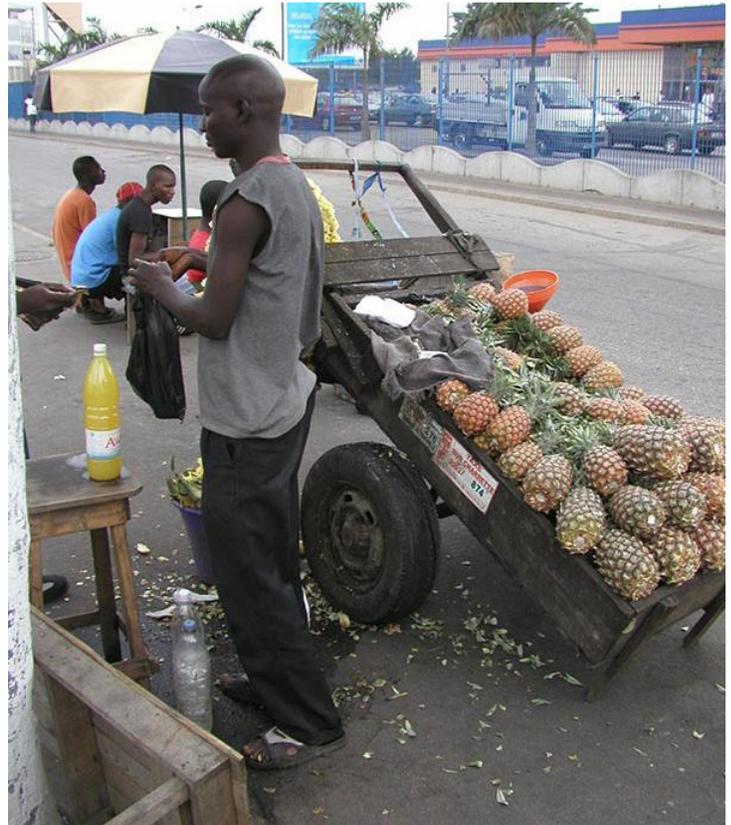


Below, left: Grace. She is now finishing her BS in Sociology at SUNY Purchase (see her picture on the next page). Below, left, Grace. Below, middle, Grace and her mother, Sylvia Blegoregnon. Below, right, Evariste's mother, Thérèse Pého.





Street butcher in Port Bouët



Best pineapple juice in the world -- in Marcory which is part of Abidjan



Grace Plegnon en 2018



After my return to the US, I bought a freezer for Evariste's mother. Here she is loading her cooler with wonder frozen Bissap, which is sweetened hibiscus tea.