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LIFE IN A REMOTE AFRICAN VILLAGE

Moving into our Village Home

There were no streets in the village, so we had to weave among the houses to get to ours on the opposite side of the village from where the road ended. Most houses were built so close together that a vehicle would not fit between them.

It was a strange feeling to move into an African village of about 200 people where we knew no one and we were the only white people. We had no telephone or other means of communication with anyone outside the village for several weeks. It was scary at first, but God gave us the courage and strength to accept the situation for what it was, and to focus on helping the people with their many needs.

When we first arrived at our village house, I put up curtains I had sewn. Our curtain “rods” were strands of wash line strung above each window opening. We also hung a world map on the wall to show the people where we lived before we moved there.

About an hour or two after dark, it quieted down throughout the village. There was no electricity, so no one had a television. (TV’s were even rare in Monrovia which had the only station in the entire country that broadcast just two hours a day.) Most people sat around their fires and told stories after dark. We could easily hear our neighbors talking next door since many houses were only a few feet apart. Since they were tired from working in the hot sun all day, the villagers usually went to bed early. We occasionally listened to our battery-powered, short-wave radio that received only two stations. We also liked to read in bed before going to sleep but the heat of the kerosene lantern made that period very brief.

There was a torrential rainstorm our first night in the village, and we heard something screeching throughout the night that sounded like a large animal right outside our bedroom window.

The next day we learned that it was a small animal that lived in a tree in the jungle surrounding our village.

When a baby died a few days later, several women wailed during the night for three solid hours. We barely slept at all the entire first week because of all the strange noises. We could even hear people talking outside, but we couldn't understand what they were saying in the Gola language. There were no windowpanes to close out the sounds. Only a curtain and screen separated us from the outside noises. We had wood shutters, but since it was so hot, we only closed them for security whenever we left the village.

Besides strange noises we had to cope with mosquitoes. The small, black mosquitoes that came out in the evenings carried malaria or yellow fever. In addition to the preventive pill that we took every week to suppress malaria, we sprayed our bedroom with insect repellent and we burned a mosquito coil every night. The coil burned like incense and served as a mosquito repellent. Even though we had screens on our windows and used a mosquito net over our bed at night, I had malaria five times during our first year and a half in Liberia. The doctor originally prescribed a mild preventive pill which would not harm a fetus in case I became pregnant, but after I had malaria several times, he added another pill. Despite these measures, I still had malaria several more times while we were there.

The malaria parasite gets into the blood system, settles in the liver, and destroys the red blood cells. After a while, the liver cannot replenish enough red blood cells, so the person becomes anemic and jaundiced. The symptoms were fairly routine: eight hours of vomiting, high fever and hallucinations, followed by eight hours of diarrhea and chills, followed by eight hours of feeling fairly normal again. After 24 hours, the cycle repeated itself with more intensity. It felt like a combination of the worst head cold and the flu. The medicine intensified the symptoms, so every time I began the treatment I wondered if I would live

through it. It was nearly a week after I began treatment before I would begin to feel fairly normal again.

Small, translucent lizards came inside our house every evening and sat on the walls near the ceiling, waiting for bugs to eat. Huge spiders, with a leg-span almost the size of my open hand, also found a way in at night and made themselves at home on our walls. The design on their backs resembled a huge eyeball, which may be why the Gola people called them “big eye.” The spiders supposedly ate mosquitoes, but I killed them anyway, because I was afraid they would show up in our bed, clothing or shoes.



A large spider,
similar to the kind we often found on our walls, but not as fuzzy

Our “Dirt and Stick” House

All the houses in our village were constructed in essentially the same way. The people gathered long sticks about 4” in diameter from the jungle and placed them vertically in a row about 5” apart to form the walls. They then cut off the sticks where they placed window and door frames made of rough wood. They tied strips of bamboo horizontally about 5” apart on both sides of the vertical sticks to form a grid. They moistened brown dirt and packed it into the stick walls to make them solid. After a few weeks, when this dirt was dry, they moistened and applied a

smoother texture of dirt to both sides of the walls. Some people used black, white, gray and orange dirt for the exterior but the most common was brown. When completed, the walls were about 6" thick, and an average house was about 20' square.



Aerial view of a typical village



Packing mud into walls

The roofs consisted of stick rafters covered by thatch (palm branches) or tin, which had to be purchased in Monrovia. The traditional houses were round, but ours and many others were rectangular. Most of the houses had dirt floors, but ours and a few others had concrete floors. There was only one concrete company in Liberia, so bags of concrete had to be transported from Monrovia and manually mixed with sand and water. None of the houses in our village had glass windowpanes, but most had wood shutters for privacy and security. I think ours was the only house in the village that had screens to keep mosquitoes and other insects out.



Traditional round house

A single house with several rooms often accommodated several families since each family usually only needed a single room for sleeping. Many people couldn't afford beds so they slept on the dirt or concrete floor on thin, reed mats.

While our house had a separate room where we cooked on a propane stove, most villagers cooked outside over an open fire. The previous missionary family had installed an indoor toilet, sink and bathtub in our first village house, which none of the