

August 13, 2003

Mali

Meet Moussa. He was our guide in [Bamako](#), the capital of Mali. I asked him to go with me to check out this women's cooperative called La Paysanne where we heard that they sold good quality women's fashions in batik and bogalan (mud cloth). It was very tough to find. We walked over half of Bamako. We stopped every so often to ask directions. As is usual with Africans, if they don't know the answer, they'll act as if they do. We finally found it - a little 20' by 20' shop run by two women. Turns out that they know Maria, Moussa's boss at IEP, and Debbie Fredo, who is Maria's partner and who also comes from my hometown of Elmira, NY. Well, we all professed our amazement at the "small world syndrome". I reported back to Anzie that La Paysanne was a great place -- nice styles, good workmanship, and fair prices.

Saturday morning we arrived at the shop. It was open, which wasn't the case the evening before when we arrived 30 minutes after they had closed. We're there about 15 minutes when three other toubabs (white folk) show up: a couple and a single woman. The single woman is on crutches with one leg noticeably shorter than the other. The other woman calls her "Hannah". Anzie exclaims, "Wait a minute. Are you Hannah Baldwin?" Hannah replies in the affirmative. "I'm Anne Dodge!" Hugs and kisses follow. The connection? Hanna's husband, Filipe, hired Anzie to work in Mali at Peace Corps. Hannah introduces us to Carol Hart and her partner, Mack. Anzie exclaims, "Carol Hart, didn't you work with Sylvia Vreisendorp at MSH?" Carol responds, "Are you Anne Dodge?" Hugs and kisses follow. Turns out that Carol went to the funeral of Pape Syr in Dakar with Sylvia, one of our very best friends, one month before when Sylvia stayed at our house. She was invited to our house for dinner, but had other plans.

Mack and I looked at each other. We had no connection whatsoever -- not in this life anyway. Mack, a former professor of African languages, was raised in Mali by missionary parents. He now operates a lodge in Dogon country, which is way-y-y the hell out there.

At any rate, the lightning of the "small world syndrome" had struck twice in the same shop. We all planned to meet for dinner that night. Anzie proceeded to buy enough cloth to support a village for six months.

That night it rained cats and dogs, crocodiles and kitchen sinks. Byron Battle, Peace Corps Country Director, picked us up at our hotel. We proceeded to hydro-plane over to the restaurant, **San Toro**, where we had dinner with Byron, Hannah, Carol and Mack. The next time you visit Bamako, San Toro is a "don't miss". The proprietor is the former Minister of Cultural Affairs. She is also reputed to be an attractive, outspoken, fun woman - according to Byron. The restaurant serves "Malian specialties". No alcohol is served, but they do serve a

variety of delicious juices. The food is worth the wait, and is reasonably priced. The surroundings are exquisite with gorgeous cloths and sculpture decorating the walls. An attached gallery sells fine art and crafts. Dinner is accompanied by live *kora* music - a harp-like instrument.

Hannah's is an interesting story of survival. Anne met her through her husband, Philippe, when she worked at Peace Corps - Bamako in 1987. At that time Hanna began having pains in her hip. She finally went stateside, where the diagnosis was bone cancer. Philippe gave up his job to join his wife in the U.S. The last Anne had heard, the prognosis was not good, as is usually the case with bone cancer. Anne remembers talking to Philippe once in D.C. in 1990. She remembers him commenting rather sadly that Hannah was not doing well. It hit home with me, because I remember Anne and I living like that during Anne's cancer "adventure".

That phone call back in the late '80's was the last time Anne had heard from either of them until this serendipitous meeting. Here's Hannah, not only alive but walking around - albeit on crutches - and working as an independent contractor in West Africa, which is by no means state-of-the-art, medically speaking. She just began a new project in democratization with USAID - Bamako a month before. Before that she worked for four years in Conakry, Guinea, which she described as much more primitive than Bamako. Philippe is finishing up a contract in Ghana.

Hannah would make the perfect poster-person for The American Cancer Society. From beneath her attractive exterior shines a determination and optimism that she must have put to good use during her battle.

So, back to the beginning. The reason we're in Bamako is that Anzie has a two-week training stint with Peace Corps. I'm there for ten days in my role as "dependant", carrying bags, reconnoitering the local scene, attending to details, eating bon-bons, watching soaps and preparing myself for Anzie's nightly sexual onslaughts (in my dreams).

I expected Mali to be much like Mauritania - brown desert. It is, after all, the home of Timbuctu, which must be Hollywood's idea of a desert outpost. Much to my pleasant surprise, we fly into a verdant landscape at Bamako. Reason? It's the rainy season. Before we left Dakar, Anzie asked me if we should pack an umbrella. She parroted my reply every day thereafter: " Umbrella? In Mali? Honey, it's the desert out there!" It rained, hard, every day we were there. Only the main roads are paved. After the rain the side roads turned to quagmires of mud. The mud was a warm shade of red - more of a raw sienna. Since we did a lot of walking, our clothes inevitably became stained with this mud. Try as we might, we could not remove the stains with regular soap and water. We then realized that this is the very same mud that the Malians use to make mud cloth. It

wasn't until we returned home to our supply of OxyClean and Amadou that our clothes came clean. Yo, OxyClean, you want a testimonial?

We stayed at the **Plaza Hotel**, which was walking distance to Peace Corps. The hotel is run by Lebanese. Lebanese seem to run many of the businesses in Bamako. They are everywhere. All of the personnel were very accommodating, in spite of all the problems. Every day something didn't work: the elevator, the hot water, the cold water (so the toilets didn't flush). We must keep telling ourselves: Hey, this is West Africa!

We found a pretty good bar/dining room close by - **Le Compagnard**. The atmosphere reminded us of Rick's Cafe of "Casablanca" fame. A varied cast of characters from all over the world populated the bar. We expected to see a modern day version of Sidney Greenstreet or Peter Lorre plunk themselves down on a barstool. The only item missing to make the scene complete was a tinkling piano. "Sam" was played by a young Lebanese, who sat at a little makeshift office behind the bar. Men would come into the bar, enter into a short business meeting with "Sam" across the bar, and then leave. Within a short time another man would enter, and another meeting took place. Perhaps the visitors were only ordering "take-out", but in Chuck's imaginings the possibilities just had to be more unseemly. Chuck was surprised that the bartender had never heard of a martini. He coached the man, but he insisted on adding too much vermouth.

On our first Saturday we were invited to lunch with Maria, Debbie Fredo's partner at Institut d'Education Populaire (IEP), and her husband, Ibrahim, who works at the Ministry of Education. Maria and Debbie began an experimental elementary school some years back. It is experimental in that their teaching methods are different. Instead of the "rote" learning and corporal punishment that is so prevalent, they introduce thinking and decision-making to the students, along with lots of positive feedback. They must be doing something right, because this year 100% of their 6th grade students passed the standardized tests, which is unheard of. As a result, the Malian government has asked them to instruct teachers in 150 other schools in their methods.

Of course, both Debbie and Maria's concern is where to get trainers. Up comes Anzie with the solution: why not use Peace Corps volunteers? Anzie runs it by Byron and other PC staff, and receives a positive, but cautious, response.

Maria and Ibrahim gave us a brief tour of the city. It appeared to be one huge market. A good bit of construction was happening, but construction takes a long time here. I remarked on a new hotel under construction on the bank of the Niger River. Since it had a crane mounted on the top floor, it appeared to be active. Ibrahim explained that it had been under construction since 1989.

We arranged with Maria that Moussa, her computer specialist, would serve as our guide the next day.

Moussa met us the next day at our hotel. We took a cab to the **Marché Artisanal**. This market is humongous! As soon as we got out of the taxi we were accosted by vendors selling wood masks, sculpture, what have you. As we entered we discovered that the crafts are separated. Wood masks and sculpture, jewelry, fabric, metal crafts, leather goods -- they were all being made right there. Animal and snake skins were dried and tanned on planks. Weavers operated looms. Goldsmiths pumped bellows on their tiny casting furnaces. Woodworkers carved masks and such. Then they stained them with shoe polish and "antiqued" them.

We were on a mission. We were looking for mud cloth to use as drapes in our bedroom. Moussa took us to a booth and introduced us to Abdoulaye Traore. Funny ... Moussa's last name is Traore, too. But Traore is a very popular name in Mali. We found a design we like, but Abdoulaye had only one of. However, he could have a duplicate made up within two days. We made a deal. Then we spied these beautiful, hand-woven, mud cloth scarves. I had been looking for material from which to have custom-made African dresses for my three nieces - Maeve, Tessa and Bevin - for their school graduations. My concern was how I could select materials and design that they would like enough to wear the dresses more than once. These scarves were the perfect solution. One size fits all and they go with just about anything. [Note to Kate and Carol: Please don't tell them before they get them.]

On the way out of the market we passed by the fetish stalls. On sale were monkey paws, snake heads, bird talons, assorted bones of unknown origin and other unidentifiable but disgusting body parts to be worn as talismen or else to be used in animist rituals. One booth was operated by a young man who was constantly on his cell phone. Talk about the old world meeting the new...

We also visited the National Museum, a lovely building complex, reported to be the best in West Africa. Alas it was closed until October.

Chuck had to fly back to Dakar on Sunday for - guess what - job interviews. He had a 5 ½ hour interview with the Dean of Suffolk University - Dakar. They got along very well, and Chuck is very interested. The only drawback is that they can't fit him into the fall schedule. It's too late. Suffolk flies faculty into Dakar from Boston for the three-week long semesters. So he couldn't begin teaching until January. He then talked to the head of their English Language Program. He is very interested in having Chuck teach Intermediate English to professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.) who want to read in their profession and converse with their English-speaking counterparts. This would begin in October. Not as much money as teaching Business, but it would give Chuck the chance to familiarize himself with the "Suffolk Way".

Chuck also interviewed at the International School for a Substitute Teacher position. Again he received very positive feedback. Only one problem: school starts August 25th. Looks like we're going to be in South Africa Sept. 16-30!!

Anzie has a Regional Peace Corps meeting scheduled in Johannesburg. We hope to rent a car, and visit Kruger National Park and Capetown. It will be Spring there in September. So Chuck has a big decision to make -- work or go to South Africa. Wonder what he'll do.

We threw an old fashioned American picnic last Saturday -- hot dogs, hamburgers, potato salad, cole slaw and ice cream. Had a mix of nationalities represented: Senegalese, Germans, French, Americans -- lots of kids. It was a great time. Cole slaw wasn't a hit. We've been eating it ever since.

Remember Mamadou and Satou, the wonderful couple who had us over for dinner? Thursday we're going with them to Mamadou's village to attend a three-day festival. The village lies northeast of Dakar on the Senegal River, right across from Mauritania. It's a 400 mile journey, about 8 hours by car. Fatou McPhee is back from China, and she plans to join us. It so happens, that she was born just five miles from Mamadou's village. Anne plans to meet up with some PC volunteers in the area to assuage her guilt at missing one day of work.

A la prochaine,

Chuck

P.S. - Anne promises to write a letter about her work life next week when she's got some time. She's busy but happy, and has been a success wherever she's gone.