

San Miguel Congregation

Benin

Another culture and permaculture

Andrea Abbott
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This past January my husband and I spent two weeks in Benin. This came about because after church one Sunday our church treasurer, who has led tours for international education, approached us and said, "I want you to come to Benin. It will change your life." If Benin is interested in developing a tourist industry, this wouldn't be a bad slogan. "Come to Benin and change your life." And, unlike many advertising slogans, it just might be true.

Who could resist that offer? San Miguel had whetted my appetite to see a different culture. I wanted a different angle on life, a new slant from which to see our shared world. My knowledge of any African country was woefully inadequate, so I went with few preconceptions. We went to a series of classes before the trip which filled in some of my ignorance but I found it hard to imagine Benin in advance. I found it disquieting that I was so ignorant not only about Benin but about Africa in general. This says volumes about what was or maybe still is considered important in this country. So, just in case I am not the only person who was not familiar with Benin, let me tell you a few things about it.

Benin is a small country located between Nigeria and Togo. It is long and thin with one foot in the Atlantic Ocean in the south and the other foot almost in the Sahara Desert area in the north. The north and south of the country are

different areas from each other with different ways of life, economies, and ethnic groups. I think over thirty languages are spoken in this small area. It was a Portuguese colony until it was ceded to the French in the late 1800's. For this reason, French is the official language, the language of the government. It is taught in the schools so children must try to master the curriculum taught in a strange language as they are trying to learn that language.

In the 1960's the French simply walked out, without providing any preparation for self-government. Despite this, Benin is the only democratic country in the region. The democracy as it is practiced there has been often corrupt, often consisting of a small group of strong men who use their power for their own good not to help the country. If we are shocked at this, or feel we could teach the Beninois how to run their country, perhaps we might find we do not have as much to say as we might have hoped. If it is not textbook democracy, neither is ours and, unlike many countries in the region, so far Benin has avoided violent military coups. And so far, they have continued to keep the country intact and in some form functioning with very few resources and very little practical help from the U.S. or Europe.

We arrived late at night and, as we stepped off the plane, the first thing that hit us was the heat. It was like a physical force, a moist, hot wall pressing against us. Though I adjusted somewhat to it, it was amazing to me that people are able to move at all, let alone do the kind of intensely physical work that we saw all around us.

The second element that engulfed me was the dirt, the fine, sandy red dirt that covered everything. It was in my hair, eyes, nose, mouth. I thought we should have some kind of breathing apparatus, or maybe grow a new set of lungs, to cope with it. And yet, every morning the goods displayed in the little stalls that lined every inch of the road were clean and shiny. Most of the people were clean as well and each morning women were out, sweeping the road in front of their booths. Of course this meant that all the dirt and garbage was displaced from their shops to any common space that existed. Garbage was everywhere in these areas, piles of dirt and paper and plastic bags. The tiny goats and chickens and dogs, helped by an occasional pig, foraged through these piles, functioning as a kind of recycling department.

Small stalls were everywhere. They filled the space between more substantial buildings and the roads or they perched in vacant lots or in front of shacks made

of pieces of corrugated tin, shacks about the size of a modest living room, so that, almost invisible behind the stalls, were the palaces of the wealthy and the hovels of the poor.

Late at night, when they were empty, the stalls looked like a random collection of sticks and palm thatch, barely able to hold the weight of an egg, but by day they were heaped with huge amounts of everything, bolts of beautifully colored cloth, beads and trinkets, household goods, cleaning supplies, fish, meat, bread, tires and even gasoline. The gasoline, which came from Nigeria, don't ask, was sold in glass wine globes, small ones to huge amphora, five gallon size at least. Filling up involved pulling over to one of the stalls and watching as the service attendant put a piece of cloth across a funnel and poured the fuel into the gas tank. Did I mention that everyone smoked?

This is how the everyday buying and selling in Benin took place, in the stalls along the sides of the road or in the densely packed markets. Most of the stalls were run by women with their children by them, women dressed as most women in Benin were dressed, in the colorful cloth dresses and head wraps that made every place a vibrant garden.

On the morning of the next day, we crossed over one intersection filled with mopeds and cars and people that seemed bent on a race to destruction, horns tooting, people yelling, all aiming for the same small space of road. By some miraculous intervention, we crossed that intersection and went through a gate and entered the Garden of Eden. We came to Songhai.

Songhai, the place where we had come to learn about permaculture. The place where we came to learn a different way to live on the earth. Here the streets were leveled and laid out in grids. Green trees and plants were everywhere and a hushed and ordered calm settled over us.

Songhai was begun from the vision of one man, a priest originally from Benin who was educated as a microbiologist who, after years of teaching in the U.S., decided to return to Africa and begin farming according to permaculture principles. The basis of permaculture is that nothing is wasted; everything is recycled and so the system achieves balance. And so it does. Over a period of days we were taken to every part of the farm, from the chicken and quail coops to the trees that provide nuts and palm oil, from the foundry in which machines and their parts are fabricated to the methane gas bottling area which turns much of the waste into energy to run the system. Throughout, we crossed over concrete

channels that funneled all water used into beds of water hyacinth which purified it so it could be returned to the drip irrigation system which kept Songhai a green oasis in the dry season. The canals were also filled with carp. And everywhere we saw young people working, digging, weeding, chipping waste into much to further retain water. We dodged wheelbarrows of this or that being energetically wheeled from one place to another carrying waste from one area to be put to good use in another area. The wheelbarrow drivers wore the uniform of the trainees, youth from all over Benin and from other countries as well, often sponsored by their villages to come and learn these techniques and to return home to farm this way themselves. The priest who had begun the project had always seen Songhai as a place for education, a place to give purpose and meaning to young lives, to give Africa a new way, a way that came from within Africa, not from outside.

This was the essence of permaculture, the understanding that what is taken out must be restored. It is an understanding that taking alone, never giving back, is the way to disaster. And how fitting that this should be happening in an African country, since Africa has been the victim of Europeans and Americans taking and never giving back for hundreds of years. Africa has furnished the raw materials of industry. Africa's metals and cotton and lumber fueled the industrial revolution

and the need for those materials fueled colonialism, fueled the taking out and never giving back that is the essence of extractive industry. And, when the raw materials were used up or came at too high a price, the colonialists left.

The greatest example of an extractive industry, of an industry that took and never gave back, was, of course, slavery. Benin was a big supplier of slaves for the U.S. and the Caribbean. We were taken to see the Gate of No Return, a monument that stands at the edge of the Atlantic, a monument to the two million or so people who were taken in chains to the waiting slave ships, never to see their homes again. Indeed, as we know, death took many before they left Africa and many more on the slave ships. They were taken and how could there be any return, any giving back of human lives? What could slave owning governments have given in return for the youth of this place, snatched away? What could we, and all the other countries who benefitted from the labor forced from these people possibly give in return? And so the scales remain unbalanced. We remain in debt.

But our debts were not mentioned. When we visited schools, where we brought donated school supplies, we were overwhelmed by the hospitality shown us. Children, parents and teachers came to one school on Saturday to meet us, to

tell us of their hopes and dreams, to dance and sing for us. Our supplies were most welcome; every pen and pencil and piece of chalk would be used. There were no computers in the classrooms, no whiteboards or learning stations. There were crowded classrooms and eager children with their hands in the air asking to be called on. Lessons were written on the blackboard and memorized, workbooks shared with those who didn't have them, paper used to its last inch. Teachers had their student's attention to a degree that our educators might well envy. But what will happen to these eager children, I wondered, when school is done? What kind of future awaits them? And what of the many children we saw in the streets during the day, many working at construction sites or in the market, doing the jobs of adults, helping feed their families, those who cannot pay the fees or buy the uniforms that would let them go to school. What will their lives be like? What anger is built into them, so aware of the limits of their lives at such a young age?

Haiti was one place where many slaves from this area went and Haitian culture and indigenous religions reflect this. We went to see a voodoo ceremony and we visited the Sacred Grove and other places in which the religion is still alive and practiced. Our guide, Remy, was emphatic that we know the difference between the Hollywood version of voodoo, from the real religion which, he

stressed was a way of understanding our relationship to the forces of nature. Or, as we say, the interdependent web of all existence. At the heart of the voodoo religion is the idea of sacrifice, the literal sacrifice of an animal as a symbol of the returning to the earth, of replenishment, a visible, physical sign that understand we cannot always be takers, never giving back.

For those who may be a little squeamish about such a sacrifice, perhaps we should remember our roots in the Hebrew scriptures with its exhortation to sacrifice, literal sacrifice, of animals as a necessary return to God, or our roots in Christianity which has at its heart, as well, the necessity of the perfect sacrifice. We, as U-U's, may not celebrate this in the same way as our neighbors, perhaps because the idea of sacrifice has been so routinized, so hidden by ritual and elaborate theology, that we forget its stark beginnings, its original purpose. Whether it's a lamb or one called The Lamb, there is the idea of return, of giving back, of life as a cycle which is broken at our peril.

My favorite voodoo symbol was the image of the snake with its tail in its mouth, a symbol for knowledge in Voodoo. It reminded me of the early symbol of the Unitarian church, one still used in the old churches of Hungary and Romania, the symbol of the globe crowned with a dove and circled by a snake

with its tail in its mouth. It refers to Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

As European Americans, we have not been wise. We are not innocent. We have forgotten that we cannot forever take and never give back. The system at Songhai, the closed system that says for everything taken out there must be a return, is in fact the system of the earth in miniature. We are a closed system.

When we were in Benin, there were days I longed for some luxury item or some comfort or another. But we were there. There was no getting away, no quick escape to Wegman's or Walmart for something more palatable or softer or easier. In the same way, we are on this planet. There is no quick jump to Alpha Centuri if we run out of water or food or bandwidth. We are a closed system. What we take out must be put back. We are learning this. There is Songhai. There are other ventures by other names, NGO's, some here or near San Miguel, whose mission is to see how giving back of resources, including people's lives just might be best accomplished.

This is a short and very inadequate review of our days in Benin. There is much more to be said about what we saw and learned but what I took with me is the

concept that governs Songhai. What is taken out must be replenished. We cannot be forever takers, of resources, of lives.

Those of you who live here, in San Miguel, for part of all of the year, also live within an environment that reminds you of the contrasts between our lives and the lives of those in developing countries. Those of us who only visit, who spend most of our lives in the heart of America, are often able to ignore this fact, have it covered over for us. But even in the heart of the United States, our dependence on the earth, the requirement to give back, is becoming noticeable. We need to learn how to give back in so many ways. Perhaps it was those eager school children who so haunted me. When I see the wasted young lives in the area where we live, the rise of heroin, the rise of homelessness, the aimless, drifting lives of the poor, I remember those young people proudly pushing wheelbarrows and I think that we, too, need a permaculture movement for more than the replenishment of the earth. Lives also need replenishment and nurture.

We met many people in Benin, from government officials to education leaders to teachers and even a local king. Behind each meeting, I felt there were desires and longings. On our hosts part those desires were for development, for better lives for the people of their country, for us to end the cycle of poverty and

neglect. There was a call for allies in the quest to help the children of Benin grow up in a more hopeful world. Tell our story, they begged, don't forget us.

But we learned more than economics, more than development. Our guides wanted us also to learn other systems of thinking, other systems of knowledge. They wanted us to know the fullness of their spiritual life, the fullness of another wisdom. Their hope was for an understanding that transcends the simple giving of things, that transcends charity and patronage, a partnership of equals.

And what on our side? What were our desires and hopes from these meetings. It is usually assumed that we are there to help in some way, to share resources, knowledge, to help the people of Benin from poverty into a western way of life. But I don't think that is why we get on planes and fly to distant lands. I think there is in us the same kind of longing that is in the Beninois, a longing for something better, for something different than our own way of life. When we have taken and not given back we have created a world with its own set of problems, the emptiness of a life spent as passive, insatiable consumers, the scourge of alienation and addiction, the feeling that there is something missing at the center of our busy lives. Amid the waste of our developed life, the waste of resources, the waste of people's potential, we seek a different way. And I think

that is why we go to different places, searching for a different wisdom, perhaps an older wisdom as well as an emerging wisdom, a wisdom that shows us a way out of our current misuse of the earth and of each other, an earth covered with our waste and garbage; a society that throws people away like garbage. We seek a wisdom that brings all people into a circle of meaning and purpose. We seek a wisdom that shows us there is a way for us all to live in harmony with the land and with each other.

That is the dream, for all of us, Beninois or American, the deep dream of everyone, that somehow in these meetings, in these exchanges, we will find the way back to the Garden, the way to a world made whole with all her people one.