

Traveling Guinea's many roads in search of global solutions

By Tony Ends
CORRESPONDENT
After several weeks' orientation in Guinea's sprawling capital of Conakry, I've finally reached my destination and home until next May – Kissidougou.

I've been bicycling to work several days now. The 3-mile distance from my lodging with a Guinean family in the regional capital concludes well beyond Kissidougou's city limits.

Much of the trek runs out through tall savanna grasses that crowd rice paddies along the way and the rough washboard road itself. The exercise to my little office in a UN World Food Programme compound at a tiny airport feels good.

It's quiet, quite isolated from the world. It reminds me how far I've traveled from my home country roads in southern Wisconsin. I feel 5,400 miles from rural Brodhead.

An unfolding panorama of my urban exit from the 1.6-million population center last Wednesday, however, still rushes through my mind.

Stretches of commerce unfolded endlessly as the United Nations Land Rover made its way northeast out of sprawling Conakry.

Piles of leather sandals and flip-flops. Bras dangling round metal frames meant for pop-up tents. Row upon row of wheelbarrows painted bright blue. Colorful plastic buckets, shining metal pots and pans. Wrought iron gates and enormous metal doorways.

Plush, gaudy couches covering the dirt. Strikingly beautiful, hand-crafted bed frames, end tables and shelves, a rainforest transformed, destined for Guinean bedrooms.

Herds of brown hump-backed cattle, flocks of sheep and goats, crowded at road's edge, waiting purchase and consumption.

Human corridors filed to and from foot along mile upon mile of merchandise and commodities in open air. Conakry's throngs gave way only to the wild, weaving traffic.



TONY ENDS PHOTO Brodhead Independent-Register
"My office as a UN World Food Programme Monitoring and Evaluation field officer, is in a compound at a small airbase that looks to me like a scene out of MASH," wrote Ends.

Between the round point intersections, upraised on cement refuges, periodic groups of pedestrians fled through indistinguishable lanes of traffic to and from the throughway's center. Poised for fleeting breaks in the mechanical mayhem, people of all ages suddenly would rush forward like so many human dominoes peeling from the center line ahead or behind our rushing vehicle.

Trucks of every size, make and vintage, all laden with yet more trade. Endlessly swirling movements of yellow taxis, often burdened with bundles as well as people and often belching black exhaust.

Thousands of motorcycles with one or more passengers, wove in and out of the motorized mass. Babies perched on laps often appeared to be driving.

One woman sitting side-saddle in traditional Muslim dress fid-

dled with a Smart Phone. Smiling, legs crossed into traffic, she rocked against the back of her speeding motorcycle driver, keeping her balance, I know not how.

Our driver seemed bent on passing every vehicle and pedestrian blocking the way. A cacophony of horns and drivers' stunning instincts for slowing, swerving, hesitating, or plunging just in time, kept accidents from happening – at least, they did that day we travelled.

During two weeks in Conakry's crush of traffic, I saw repeated spills from motorbikes, heard heart-wrenching smack of arms and legs upon pavement.

I thought how similar the trek from Guinea's coastal center to the countryside was from my previous vehicle trips out of Dakar, Senegal, and Brazzaville, Congo. Those West and Central African nations, where

I've volunteered and worked the past 5 years are still vivid memories.

Ethnicities and cultures so richly different, yet all now seem conforming to urban experience, pressing urban problems. Central cities act as magnets to swelling human populations, weighing them down as they struggle to catch up to modern development.

Everything needed to shelter, clothe, feed Africa's young and old, is still being traded under the brilliant sun. Arrayed before endless rows of metal and wooden boutiques, it sits open to the streets and avenues of major cities.

Fabrication often takes place on the spot or a short distance away from the point of sale. How different from my homeland, where production, marketing and finance have such narrow, specialized human contribution.

In America, our commerce lies increasingly out of view. It lies beyond electronic screens, fences and walls of industrial parks, warehouses, call centers, big box stores.

Chains flowing on affordable fossil fuels keep it all working for our masses – for now. Ores, minerals, natural resources extracted from Africa, Asia, Latin America keep it all in production cheaply – for now.

In the tranquility of Guinea's countryside, 300 miles from Conakry's crush of people and traffic, I worry for our nation's legacy, Guinea's and Africa's legacy. Can we help rural populations become efficient enough at human scales of production to go on feeding our world?

Feet to my Peace Corps-issued pedals, my 63-year-old legs pump a bicycle now daily toward answers I can only hope to find in this nation's and the world's rural schools.

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