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Dear Peter,

My first glimpse of Africa was out of an airplane window, approaching Niamey, Niger. The wide Niger river glistened in the late afternoon sun like a silver ribbon, winding its way across the landscape -- savanna with scattered trees, individual dots of green on the red-brown backdrop. As the plane dipped lower, we flew over a small compound consisting of four thatched-roofed, round mud huts surrounded by a fence. It sat by itself in the middle of a barren area, away from any trees. A bit further on, we passed over several one-story, flat-roofed, rectangular buildings of corrugated metal. The contrast, in such close proximity, of the old, traditional dwellings with the more modern buildings surprised me. How typical, I wondered, is this coexistence of the old and the new in Africa?

A romantic image, perhaps -- shaped by my limited knowledge of Africa, gained from books, films, and friends' stories. Now I was going to have to learn what Africa was like with my own eyes.

After leaving Niamey, we flew on to Ouagadougou. When we disembarked at 6:30 PM, we were greeted by soldiers in green fatigues and red berets, carrying Russian guns. Our progress through customs was very slow: by the time we got our receipts for our passports, instructions to pick up our passports the following day at security, and had all our bags searched, it was close to 9 PM. Everyone was quite anxious that we be quickly on our way, so that the airport could be closed and everyone home well before the 11 PM curfew. The next day we picked up our passports with no problems, just another form to fill out.

Later that evening we were quite surprised to hear a BBC broadcast, repeated the following evening on Voice of America, which discussed recent developments in Upper Volta. The report mentioned how the government was concerned over the possible infiltration of white mercenaries hired by those seeking to "destabilize the current regime". Given this concern they had tightened security measures at the airport, thoroughly interrogating all foreigners, searching their luggage, withholding

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their passports overnight, and requiring them to report the next day to the police for further interrogation.

The radio broadcasts painted a much more grim picture of the situation than we ourselves had experienced. Certainly many of our fellow passengers had grown impatient with the lengthy customs process, but we had seen no evidence of anyone being treated roughly or even discourteously. What had really happened? Was it just a question of perception and interpretation, that others had thought it had truly been an ordeal? Or had others really been treated differently than what I had seen or experienced? To what extent did the news report accurately represent the situation?

I began to realize that there was going to be more to experiencing Africa first-hand than merely seeing things with my own eyes. Far more important, perhaps, is the process of interpretation, of assigning meaning and weight to those experiences.

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Our first morning in Ouagadougou, I was amazed by the number of trees lining the streets. In reading about the firewood situation in Africa, Ouagadougou is always cited as an example of an area with severe shortages, with allegedly no firewood available within 50-70 kilometers of the city. While I hadn't exactly expected a desert, the amount of vegetation was a pleasant surprise. From my hotel window I had a good view of a large wooded area, which is named after Paris' "Bois de Boulogne". I could also see a few people going by with loads of wood -- a woman carrying wood on her head, a man with a donkey cart of wood. In the next few weeks I was also to see men driving large trucks full of wood, women and men with loads of wood on the backs of their bicycles and mobyettes (motor scooters), women with donkey carts, and men with wood on their heads. While I haven't seen wood being sold in the center of town, large piles of it can be seen in the outlying residential areas.

The center of Ouagadougou revolves around the Grand Marche. The Marche is a large public market, roughly six square blocks in size, where all sorts of things imaginable are sold. In one corner of the market is a large corrugated metal building, which houses the meat butchers and numerous produce vendors. The butchers work in wooden and metal mesh "cages": some of the local vulture population sits patiently on top of the cages, waiting for scraps. The rest of the market consists of rows of covered stalls. Different sections of the market specialize in different items -- men tailors work away at their sewing machines in one area near the cloth sellers, women and men selling kitchenware in another area, men repairing bicycles and mobyettes somewhere else. Women are most commonly seen vending foods of one sort or another -- beans, fresh peanut butter, locally prepared foods. Sometimes one sees women with bundles of grass, unusual nuts, or mysterious leaves. Where one sees women

children are often close by -- young ones on their backs, older ones playing close by. Children seem to begin to help selling when they are fairly young: little girls walk around with trays of peanuts on their heads, boys are more apt to be selling, or attempting to, tourist souvenirs such as straw hats or sandals. On the outside of the market are several shops which sell leather purses and big, brightly striped straw baskets.

There is lots of informal trading in the streets outside the market as well. People walk around with everything from wrist watches and jewelry to pillows and used clothing for sale. Produce vendors camp out on numerous street corners, in heavily travelled areas. Tuareg warriors swoop down upon you, pulling their swords and knives out from under their robes, trying to entice you to buy. Their wares are quite elaborate, with the blades made out of scrap metal such as old car springs, with elegantly etched designs on both sides, the handles and sheaths in carved camel's leather, stained red.

Gradually, as one walks around the town, one comes to realize that there is much that is available, if one knows where to look. If one doesn't know, someone on the street is usually willing to find out where to get whatever it is that you might want. There are some Western-style stores, selling imported clothing, groceries, books, stationary supplies, electronics. Some imported goods are quite expensive, others comparable to prices found in the States.

There is a variety in people as well. The most numerous people are the Mossi, but numerous other groups are represented from other parts of Upper Volta and West Africa. Most distinctive are the Tuareg men, in their robes and veils, and the Fulani women and children. The latter are particularly noticeable, as they are the only healthy young women that one sees begging in town. There is also a sizeable population of non-African expatriates -- French, other Europeans, Americans, Chinese.

Given the range in ethnic and cultural backgrounds, there is considerable range in people's dress. Men are most commonly seen in Western-style pants and shirts, but often in tunics and pants or robes. Women, however, are most commonly seen in more traditional dress, consisting of long shirts and tops, often with head scarves and baby wrappings. Voltaic women are less often seen in short, Western-style dresses, rarely in pants or shorts. Most people wear sandals.

These days there are also signs of the "revolution" in people's dress. It is quite common to see men and boys in red or other colored berets, and Thomas SANKARA or CNR T-shirts. An orange fabric with the "Conseil National de la Revolution" (CNR) logo is also quite popular, and people have it made up into long dresses, shirts, or tunics and pants. Lots of men wear military fatigues -- green, beige, or camouflage: they are so common, in fact, that I have a hard time telling if they are military, police, or just revolutionary enthusiasts.

The current government in Upper Volta came into power only four months ago, with a coup on August 4th. Given that the coup was staged by a small number of commandos supporting Captain Thomas Sankara, the government has had to build popular support. There seems to be quite a lot of enthusiasm in Ouagadougou, particularly among the younger people.

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Given that the country is quite preoccupied these days with revolutionary and developmental concerns, I have been wondering how important are questions of forestry and trees. Although I have not yet been out of Ouagadougou, I have already exposed to some of the forestry issues.

The Comité de la Recherche Forestière (the national Committee on Forestry Research) had its annual meeting in Ouagadougou November 23rd to 25th. I was invited to attend the sessions. The conference gave me a good overview of current forestry activities and concerns in Upper Volta, as well as a chance to meet people working in this area. The meetings were attended by over forty individuals, representing a number of "official" groups working on forestry research and forestry-related management. The committee has been meeting annually since 1981, so that researchers and managers can be better informed of each other's activities and share their findings. The one group of organizations not yet represented in the committee are the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The government would like to learn more about the forestry activities of the NGOs, to share information about what has succeeded and what has failed, to enhance the probabilities for successful NGO projects.

The first day's sessions were opened by the Directeur Général of the Conseil National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique (National Council of Scientific and Technological Research), who stressed the importance of forestry research for the country's overall development efforts. The rest of the first day was devoted to reports on past and current forestry activities, such as the "Bois de Village" (village woodlot) programs being undertaken by the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office.

The second day and the morning of the third were spent discussing the theme of the conference, the problem of "Feux en Brousse" (Fire in the Bush). Four different aspects of the problem were considered -- legislative aspects, preliminary fire research results from the US Agency for International Development's natural forest management project at Dienderesso, problems of rural management with particular reference to the widespread use of fire by pastoralists and farmers, and the usefulness of remote sensing in fire research. Another topic, the sociological aspects of the fire problem, was set aside and reserved for a special follow-up meeting to be held within a couple of months.

The committee concluded its meetings by affirming the

position that fire has generally negative effects on ecosystems. Although many participants were eager to begin programs of "sensibilisation" of the population regarding this problem, they recognized the need for more analytical studies before more specific recommendations could be formulated. The hope was expressed that proposals on "sensibilisation" would be formulated at the forthcoming meeting. In discussing possibilities for the discussion theme of next year's meeting, several other concerns were mentioned: research on natural forest management, the need for better understanding of sylvo-pastoral systems, and the extent to which "reboisement"(reforestation activities) could be commercialized.

The discussions at the research committee meeting demonstrated a broad appreciation for forestry research needed for the management and development of the country's resources. However, the question remains as to how much of the needed research can actually be carried out.

Before the conference, I had met with the Directeur of the Institut de la Recherche Biologique et Ecologique Tropicale (Institute of Tropical Biological and Ecological Research). This unit is part of the research council, CNRST, and has jurisdiction over forestry research. The Directeur of IRBET explained that although they had agreed on research priorities in forestry, they had an extremely small staff of their own. Thus their research goals were more optimistic than realistic. While they would like to conduct inventories of uses of "non-woody forest produce", for example, they recognize that it would probably take at least ten years to get basic descriptive research done in all regions of the country. But he was hopeful that they might be able to at least get studies done in a few areas in the next two years. Such research might begin to indicate, for example, what sorts of resources are used for medicinal purposes, as foods, or for spiritual events, what resources make their way into the local markets and into women's kitchens. Having such data would facilitate analysis of the social trade-offs involved in various management alternatives.

In thinking about forestry management and research in Africa, I pondered the contradictions -- there are such large problems and needs, yet little money or staff to devote to forestry. How successful will the Conseil National de la Revolution be able to be in "sensibilizing" the population to control fires, when fire is such an important tool for rural peoples, and the country lacks the resources for massive fire-fighting efforts? Is this a problem that can be addressed on a grass-roots level? How applicable, for example, is a Smokey Bear-style campaign for raising public awareness (and what sort of animal or other image would grasp the Voltaic imagination)? How would such a program fit in with other programs? Given, for example, the government's recent emphasis on local languages, radio transmissions would need to be in at least four languages.

Examination of uses of non-woody forest produce will also be challenging. Given, for example, that many of these resources are used by women, women will need to participate in the research. Yet, at the forestry research committee meetings, only five of the over forty participants were women, of whom only two were Voltaic. As is true elsewhere in the world, in Upper Volta women have only very recently begun to study forestry and work in this area. So perhaps the forestry researchers will need to collaborate with extension workers, sociologists, or those in other disciplines to include women on the research teams.

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There is certainly much for me to learn here, to see, to interpret. As I look out of my balcony, I see the crescents and stars on the spires of the Grand Mosque across the street, and hear the evening call to prayer. The sun is beginning to set and the sky is a pink-yellow haze -- full of dust. The temperature is cooling a bit. There's a slight breeze now, but the harmattan winds off the Sahara Desert have not yet arrived. Soon people will begin to light fires along the edges of the streets. Although we find the temperatures pleasant, this is considered to be the cold season, and many Voltaics wear jackets and even wool hats in the evenings and early mornings. Perhaps I will better comprehend after I have spent a year in Africa, and know what the hot season in April and May is like.

Hope this finds you enjoying the holidays, the New England snows and the conifers. With blue skies overhead, red-brown dust underneath, and tropical trees lining the streets, this will be my warmest Christmas yet.

Cheers and best wishes,

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