

The journey Back to Yalogo
by
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The Air France flight landed in Ouagadougou about 15 minutes behind schedule. An open air ramp is rolled out to the plane, and the other passengers and I walk out into the warm tropical air, muggy from the passing storm which delayed our landing. The noise, smells and sights of this busheling city, the capital of Burkina Faso - hit me like a slap in the face.

It's been 30 years since I was here as a Peace Corps volunteer. Then, I was a young man, on a great adventure to the wilds of Africa, on an adventure that would change my life. Then the country was called "Upper Volta," the name given to it by its French colonial masters. Now, the county has a different name - what other changes, I wonder.

The airport terminal is undergoing major reconstruction, and we are herded into a small, ground-level reception hall. Numerous ceiling fans turn frantically, but the hall is hot and sticky. There is a crush of bodies to get through the two check points where health officers check our yellow fever vaccination cards. The passengers then spread out into three orderly lines for immigrations. I pick a longer line which is under a series of swirling ceiling fans. But the line moves surprisedly fast; soon I find myself back in the stifling heat, standing in front of the conveyor belt, waiting impatiently for my bags to appear.

The Assignment

The US government through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is funding an agricultural development project in the Sourou Valley in far Western Burkina which will include the construction of a new irrigation scheme. The project will be implemented though the Sourou Valley Development Authority (abbreviated as *AMVS* in French), a Burkina government agency created 24 years ago. But the MCC is having doubts about *AMVS*' capability to successfully implement the project. So, I'm part of a 6-person team here for the next 2 ½ weeks to conduct a "water management audit" of the authority.



MVS is headquartered in *New Ouaga* - a part of town that didn't exist when I was here before - a vast expanse of land southeast of the airport where the government is building a new capital. In *New Ouaga*, widely spaced construction cranes mark the locations of the many ministries, office buildings, and upscale housing that are slowly sprouting from the African savanna.

It's a 30 minute drive from my hotel to *New Ouaga*. Small shops and open air stales crowd the side of the streets, and vendors spill out into the street, trying to catch the attention of the throngs of bike and motorcycle riders passing by. It could be any city in the Third World. I don't recognize much of the city on the daily commute. But then again, as a volunteer, I never spent much time in Ouaga, just an occasional trip in for supplies, and a night out for food and drinks with fellow volunteers.



The first week slowly drags by - one meeting after another with government bureaucrats - during which me and the rest of the team try to make sense of the dysfunctional organization that the AMVS has degenerated into. It doesn't take us long to conclude that MCC's concerns are well founded. Major changes are needed in AMVS if this project is going to be successful.

“C’est Afrique, quad!”

Finally, the work week comes to an end - and Saturday arrives, my free day, and the main reason I accepted this assignment. Today is the day I am going back to my part of Burkina Faso, back to the village where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer.

I hire a car and a driver for the day at 60,000 CFA (~\$120) plus gas. My driver’s name is Ouatera (“*wa tare ra*”), and he arrives at the hotel right on time to pick me up. However, Ouatera seems nervous. “*There is a noise in the front wheel*” he tells me in French, “*I must take the car to the garage before we leave.*” As we drive to the garage, I hear the noise - definitely a bad bearing in the front right wheel.

“*This is definitely Africa*” I tell myself. The garage is down an alley, on a small, dirt lot, packed with broken down cars. We park in the alleyway, and Ouatera talks to the mechanic in the local language, More’. It’s obvious that the shop is too busy today to work on our car...they talk...Ouatera points at me...they talk...a phone call is made... the garage owner shows up...they talk...more phone calls... Finally, the car is pushed from the alley and into shop area.





I sit on a metal chair in the shade and wait. After a while, a mechanic removes the wheel and pries out the bad bearings. Then he's off on his bicycle with the bearings in-hand. I watch him ride down the alley and out into the street.

I sit and wait. The radio is playing African pop music called "*high life*" - upbeat and highly infectious. The underlying rhythms remind me of the drummers of my village, famous at the time who would occasionally travel on behalf of the government to represent the country at state-events.

I reminisce about all the fantastic festivals I experienced. Traditional festivals of celebration - held during the cool season following harvest. The women and men dancing and singing in long, snaking lines; drums, masked men, dolo (the traditional beer made with red sorghum), and whole villages partying into the night.

I was the first and only white man to ever live in my village. No electricity, no running water, no housing. The Chef of the village gave me some land to build a house on. A prime spot near the Chef's compound, near the only well, and on the edge of the village with a vista of fields and huts far into the distance.

It just took \$40 to cover the costs of the mud bricks. I had a compound constructed that consisted of three huts with thatched roofs. I made significant improvements to the traditional materials and design. Each hut had a tin door and two tin windows. I lined the interior mud walls with cement and had concrete poured for the floors and for a large patio between the three huts covered by a large thatched roof. Deluxe accommodations by local standards: one hut for my bedroom, one guest hut, and the kitchen hut. In the markets of Ouagadougou, I found a kerosene refrigerator that was, surprisingly manufactured in Sweden, a propane gas stove with a small oven, and everything else I needed to set-up house keeping for two years of life in the bush.

I was a well digger. I was given an ample supply of concrete, rebar, steel molds, pulleys and hand tools, brought up by transport trucks. I organized the men of villages to construct large diameter (1 1/5 m wide) water wells. Most were the first and only permanent well in that village. A concrete lined well which would not cave-in during the rainy season. The village women were happy - no more long treks to find water in the streams, mud ponds or lakes that

often dry up during the long dry season. A safe drinking water supply free of the parasites and bacteria common in the surface waters in this part of the world.

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I sit and wait, and listen to the radio, and watch the mechanics work on the cars at the garage as the sky darkens with clouds heavy with rain. Finally, the bicyclist returns with the new bearings in-hand, and 45 minutes later the wheel is back on the car and finally we're off! Just half the day gone, perhaps there will still be enough time to complete my journey today.

Is it the Journey or the Destination?

"So what am I looking for today? Is it the journey or the destination," I wonder as we head northeast out of Ouagadougou. The Journey is to the village of my Peace Corps days, the remote village of Yalogo. However, the Destination for today is the present day village of Yalgo, as it is now called.



I do not expect to find *Yalogo* today. In my mind, *Yalogo* is almost a mythical place; the ancient village on the edge of the Mossi empire, located in the southern fringes of the Sahel. *Yalogo*, the village where three tribal groups meet and co-exist, the Mossi, the Gourmache, and the semi-nomadic Fulani.

Yalogo: a place where an occasional camel caravan would appear during the long dry season, in search of water from the lake that never dries up. A place where the dark, wild and exotic-looking Bella women would come and camp during the dry season while their men drove cattle to the African coast. Dressed in black, endowed with an amazing number of silver bracelets and necklaces, they would tempt me and invite me into their tents whenever I walked by.

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The road to Yalgo is now paved. Just outside of Ouaga, we stop and pay the round-trip toll of \$2.50. Three power lines are strung along poles that parallel the road. We speed pass villages and towns that I recognize, surprisingly little changed from my memories. In places, the old road is still visible - the dirt road built during the French colonial days - lined with what are now magnificent trees. Narrow, rough, dangerous, I have many memories of breakdowns, flat tires, and choking on dust when the large trucks would pass me by - what was once a 6-hour, back-breaking journey to my village, today will take us just a couple of hours on the toll road..



Yalgo

I assume that the name of the village was changed from *Yalogo* to Yalgo at the same time the nation changed its name to Burkina Faso. I have the driver pull over a couple of k's outside of Yalgo, so I can climb up to the top of what I called "*Mount Yalogo*". Not really a mountain, but the highest point for miles around with dramatic vistas of the savanna and the lake that never dries up.

The land is spectacularly green from the abundant rain which has fallen during this usually wet rainy season. The lush vegetation masks the stalkness that will slowly descend upon the landscape during the long dry season to come. The grass will first turn brown, then slowly deteriorate and blow away. The soil will turn a silty-grey color as the sun and heat bakes it into a hard crust.



The toll road which will loop around Yalgo is still under construction. The pavement ends and the route takes us into town on the old road which passes over the deteriorating barrage built during colonial days.





The main road into the village has changed. Stalls and shops now crowd every inch along both sides, a testimony I suppose to the increased commerce that the paved road has brought. Sadly for me, these shops make the place seem unfamiliar, and block the once grand view of the village stretching down the hill.

I peer through the stalls, looking for my old bar. Then, the only bar in town, a tiny mud building with a single table. I became friends with the bartender, Tongande who kept the beer and bottles of soda cool by storing them in clay pots filled with water. In the hot season, my kerosene refrigerator could produce a small tray of ice each day. In the evenings, I would take the tray of ice up the hill to the bar where Tongande would pour a bottle of lukewarm beer into two glasses of ice.

Suddenly, my thoughts are jarred back to the present moment by the sight of a large diameter, concrete water well. Amazingly, there it is! One of my wells! Incredible - it is still in use after 30 years!



I constructed 44 wells like this one during the two years I lived here. While greatly appreciated by the locals, these wells also changed my life. They inspired me to become a water engineer and led me to an amazing career and many grand adventures. Water wells like this one started me down a road that has now come full circle and brought me back home to *Yalogo*!

La maison n'est pas tombe

Due to our late start out of Ouaga, time is now short. The driver insists that we must head back by sunset. No time to look for old friends on this day. I take a quick walk through the village, looking for the place where I had built my compound of three mud huts. But things have changed; road construction, compounds and houses now crowd the part of the village where I once lived.

People are friendly; small children run from me, as they did when I was here so many years ago. Here, the boogie man is a white man, and the children run in fear. It's all very familiar and feels very natural to be walking on the dirt paths that wind through the compounds of mud huts where the people continue to live as they have for generations. "*Ne ye beogo*" the More' language greeting naturally rolls off my tongue without thinking as I walk through the village.

Out of time, I head back to the road. As I'm about to get back into the car, a man asks me what I am looking for. "*J'ai cheschez ma masion,*" I say in French, "*mai elle est tombe*" (which is to say, more or less: "*I was looking for my house, but it has fallen down*").

The driver explains that I once lived here, built my house here, and constructed many water wells in the region. "*Votre maison n'est pa tombe!*" the man says with enthusiasm and points towards the way I came... "*Elle est toujours la*" (*your house isn't gone, it is still there*). When I come back, he says that he will show me my house!

Reluctantly, I get back into the car, and we head southwest back towards Ouagadougou. I ask the driver what he thinks, is it possible that my house still exists after all of these years. We laugh and repeat what the man had said "*Votre masion n'est pas tombe; elle est toujours la*"...

I think that is's unlikely that my house still exists in Yalgo, but I am sure that I will always have a home in *Yalogo*.