

January 24, 1999

Finding Order Amid the Chaos

By DEAN NELSON

MY recent trip from Switzerland to the Ivory Coast brought back the memory of going from Minneapolis to Manhattan nearly 20 years ago. Back then I was a young, inexperienced magazine writer whose idea of diversity came from listening to Garrison Keillor describe the difference between Lake Wobegon and "The City."

"Do not trust anyone," the airport shuttle driver announced back then as he stopped in front of my hotel. "And welcome to New York City."

"You expect me to live on this?" the bellman said after carrying my light bag a few steps to the desk and inspecting my tip. "Thank you very much for wasting my time."

The cabdriver my first night there drove onto the sidewalk to get around a traffic jam, while pedestrians ducked into doorways for safety. I thought then that this cab was a microcosm of the city. The driver and I didn't understand each other, yet we still went at breakneck speed.

Minneapolis city planners would be good for this town, I thought. Where I come from, we worship the god of order.

All of those feelings came back with a vengeance on the Switzerland-to-Africa trip last summer.

"Have your passports ready," the flight attendant said as we approached Abidjan from Zurich.

"That means hang on to your passport firmly," advised the American passenger next to me.

The moment I stepped into the Abidjan airport someone ripped my passport out of my hand. I pursued him, yanked it back and proceeded to baggage claim, where it happened again with my suitcase.

"Ca va," I said harshly, with a quick wave of my hand. I didn't know what it meant, but I saw others doing it with effective results.

Clutching my suitcase and passport against me, I dashed through the airport and found my cousin, a missionary who has lived in Abidjan for 10 years. He was standing outside, waiting to drive me to a meeting with my university colleagues. In the parking lot, he noticed that his hubcaps had been stolen.

On many streets away from the city center -- with its high-rises and upscale hotels -- I saw pedestrians, goats, cows, sheep and chickens. And I saw drivers ignore traffic signals and glare at those who obeyed them.

In Swiss cities there are video cameras on roadsides to record if you are speeding. The police mail you a ticket, and you dutifully pay. It's like a utility bill. It's orderly.

That day in Abidjan, the police stood on the corner, pointing at motorists and blowing a whistle. "Don't look at them," my cousin said as he drove through an intersection. "That way you don't know if they're blowing the whistle at you."

We rode in silence for several minutes.

"First impressions?" my cousin inquired.

"This place is out of control," I said.

But, as I eventually discovered during my two-week stay, it's not. It's the same progression of thought that I followed when I first visited New York. The order is there, waiting for inhabitants to reveal it, waiting for visitors to discover it.

Whether I was in Abidjan, the business and entertainment capital of West Africa, or in villages so remote that they had no electricity or running water and were accessible only by canoe, people were polite and wanted me to visit. And there is an order to the visiting. When entering a village, for instance, you must seek out the chief's house, who then may or may not allow you to pass through to another village. If he gives you "the whole road," you are free to go and pass through his village on your way back.

If he gives you only half the road, then you are free to pass through, but you must find a different route back.

Here is the procedure for asking permission that I encountered: You greet the chief, and he asks you to sit. If there are no chairs or benches available, someone builds one for you while you wait. Then you bring him "the news" about yourself and your intentions. You both rise and shake hands. You sit again. He brings you the news about his village, himself, and tells you what is on his mind. Then the two of you rise and shake hands again. By now someone has brought drinks, often a syrupy concoction made from hibiscus petals, or opened some coconuts, and most of the village is standing behind the two of you, listening to your conversation.

"A good host is the one who believes that his guest is carrying a promise he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest," Henri J. M. Nouwen, a priest and scholar, wrote in his book "Reaching Out." "Poverty makes a good host."

Many of the people of this country are poor. And good hosts.

Early in the second week, I spent a night in the home of an Ivorian teacher in Abidjan. After dinner (which was very orderly), he presented me with the clay serving bowl used during the meal.

"For your wife," he said, as he offered me the gift to take home. "Next time you visit, we will make her a dress."

This is not to say that the country's hospitality means there is an absence of hostility. Because of high crime in Abidjan, cars may pass through a neighborhood at night only if they are recognized by watchmen, who then raise gates that extend across the streets. Middle- and upper-class homes have their own watchmen who sleep across the driveways in front of thick metal doors. So even the city has a way to grant or deny the road.

Still, as a visitor, I felt like a guest.

ONE of the places I visited was Yamoussoukro, a city that had been given a lavish makeover by a man who was born there and was president from 1960 to 1993, Felix Houphouet-Boigny. It has modern hotels, golf courses, a university, an international peace center and a palace with crocodiles in the surrounding moat. It has one of the

world's largest basilicas, Our Lady Of Peace, built in 1989, despite the fact that only 13.5 percent of the population is Catholic. Adjacent is a house for the Pope and an international airport.

But the city also appeared empty: no one on the golf courses, empty parking lots outside the hotels. I was the only visitor to the palace, and had to wake up the gatekeeper to let me see the crocodiles. At the basilica, a dozen tour guides dozed. The only tour I saw in progress was the one I was in, which had 10 people.

Africa "is always on the point of being made something else," V. S. Naipaul wrote in "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro." "So it arouses hope, ambition, frustration, irritation."

"And then at a place like Yamoussoukro, where the anxiety becomes most acute, it also begins to feel unreal," he wrote.

Yamoussoukro felt unreal because it wasn't part of the country's order. Governments can't create that. Only the inhabitants can.

My return flight (I changed planes in Paris) landed in Los Angeles in the middle of the day. All of us on the shuttle van were part of the group returning from the Ivory Coast. Traffic was inching along I-5. A car plowed into the back of a mail truck next to us, bursting the radiator and sending a geyser skyward. Virtually every driver was talking on a telephone. As crowded as the highway was, we were isolated by metal, glass and phones, oblivious to each other's presence.

"First impressions of being back?" I asked the passenger next to me.

"Everyone is staying in their lanes," he said.

That's funny, I thought, the place looked out of control to me.

DEAN NELSON teaches journalism at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego.