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Overseas Assignment in Africa

By James J. Grace

The United States General Accounting Office on occasion requests that its professional staff participate in overseas assignments. During the autumn of 1965, I participated in an overseas assignment in West Africa which involved the economic assistance programs in Mali and Dahomey.

The Republic of Mali, formerly the French Sudan, is a land-locked country bounded on the north by Algeria; on the east by Niger; on the south by Upper Volta, Ivory Coast and Guinea; and on the west by Senegal and Mauritania. The population of Mali is approximately 4.5 million, and its capital city is Bamako. The Sahara Desert extends over about one half of Mali, and the climate is thus generally hot and dry. Most of the country is covered by semiarid scrub, but there are grasslands in the more moist southern part.

The majority of the people in Mali are Moslem. The economy of Mali is based chiefly on agriculture, but there is some fishing. Rice, cotton, fruits, vegetables, millets and corn, and sesame are cultivated. Peanuts are grown for export, and small quantities of cattle, cotton, hides, and shea nuts are also exported. Industry developed after World War II, but it is restricted to processing of raw materials, chiefly in Bamako. Gold and salt are mined, and iron is extracted for local use. The highways of Mali are not well developed, and caravan routes connect with Algeria and Mauritania. During the rainy season the Niger river is navigable for small craft. The Mali Federation, which was composed of former French Sudan and Senegal, gained its independence in June 1960, but the alliance ended in August 1960. French Sudan assumed the name of

Mr. Grace is a supervisory auditor in the New York regional office. He has been with GAO since 1961 with the exception of 2 years military service. He is a graduate of the University of Scranton where he received a B.S. degree in accounting.



Mali and became an independent republic in September 1960.

The Republic of Dahomey borders on the Atlantic Ocean in the south and is bounded by Niger on the north, Nigeria on the east, and Togo and Upper Volta on the west. The population of Dahomey is approximately 1.6 million, the majority of whom are Moslem. Dahomey extends in a narrow strip from the Niger River in the north to the coast, a distance of about 450 miles. The coast, which is about 70 miles in length, is flat and bounded by lagoons and swamps. The average year-round temperature in the south is 80° F., and the average annual rainfall varies from 30 inches in the north to 50 inches in the south.

The economy of Dahomey is based on agriculture. Forest products, particularly palm kernels and palm oil, are important. The main economic crops are cotton, peanuts, shea nuts, and coffee. Subsistence food crops of corn and yams are grown throughout the area and raising livestock is a major occupation in the north. The capital of Dahomey is Porto-Novo, but the city of Cotonou is the major port and the economic center of the country. French conquest of Dahomey began in 1894, but the people resisted French rule until 1904 when the area was made part of French West Africa. Dahomey joined the French Community in 1958 and became an independent republic in August 1960.

Since Mali and Dahomey received their independence from France, the United States had been giving them assistance under the direction of the Agency for International Development (AID). From several discussions

with AID representatives, it was learned that France still contributes a significant amount of assistance to both countries in the form of budget support. France also sends teachers to many of its former colonies where they can teach for 2 years in lieu of military service. Russia and Communist China also contribute aid to Mali and Dahomey.

U.S. assistance has taken primarily two forms: roadbuilding and improvement and vehicles for use by the law enforcement agencies and public health agencies. Since the economy of both Mali and Dahomey is based primarily on agriculture, the United States decided to provide them with roadbuilding equipment to build new roads and improve existing roads so that people who lived in remote and distant sections of the country would be able to transport their products to a market. The law enforcement agencies, in order to effectively carry out their responsibilities, needed vehicles to provide better police coverage of the country, which was virtually impossible with the equipment they had prior to United States assistance. Also the public health agencies required more vehicles to treat those people who lived in remote sections of the country and to effectively combat disease.

One problem I encountered while in Mali and Dahomey was my inability to speak or understand French, the official language of both countries. This lack complicated our communications problems not only in living and moving about but also in our audit work when we were required to interview local government officials. I believe that when the GAO sends

an audit team to a foreign country, it will be to our advantage, whenever possible, to have at least one member who is knowledgeable in the country's official language.

I experienced a new way of life during my stay in Mali and Dahomey. Each day presented new problems and new adventures. I found getting through the customs officials of the two countries to be complicated. It wasn't altogether the language problem, since representatives of the United States Embassy or AID Mission met us at the airport. Even with their assistance, passports, visas, health certificates, and luggage were examined at length. Because we were exhausted from the long trip and the heat of day, it seemed that an eternity had passed before we were officially allowed to enter the country. This procedure was repeated upon our departure from each country.

During my stay in Mali and Dahomey the embassy provided us with transportation to and from work. However, on occasion a taxi was the only means of transportation available to get to a desired location. The similarity between taxi drivers in Mali and Dahomey and taxi drivers in New York is remarkable; they both drive with the accelerator on the floor, one hand on the horn, and a disregard for anyone or anything who may be in front of them. This situation is more tense in Mali and Dahomey, since their streets are narrower and usually more crowded with pedestrians. Because of the language barrier I would always determine in advance some standard location which I hoped would be known by the driver. If this did not work then I relied on

hand signals which usually proved to be effective.

The currency of each country also presented some problems. In Mali, the Malian franc is the acceptable currency and it is only good for use within Mali. Dahomey uses the C.F.A. (central franc area) franc which is acceptable in many West African countries. The exchange rate for both countries was approximately 245 francs to the United States dollar. Every time I made a purchase I would automatically convert francs to cents usually by multiplying by four and pointing off three decimal places which approximated the dollar and cents equivalent.

Visitors to such countries as Mali and Dahomey must recognize, as they would in most foreign lands, that their systems may not be tolerant of native food and its preparation or of the local water supply. The reason for this is that these countries usually do not have Federal or other inspection groups that concern themselves with the quality and standards of hygiene and sanitation that we have come to recognize as routine. Therefore, along with most other visitors, I found it advisable to have meat well cooked and to buy bottled water. The term for "well done" soon became an important part of my French vocabulary. Also I soon learned that water is an expensive commodity in both Mali and Dahomey.

One of the more difficult things to become accustomed to was the French dining customs, which prevailed in the restaurants of Mali and Dahomey. The evening meal was usually served from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. and consisted of wine, bread, soup, appetizer, a

main course, salad, cheese, dessert, and coffee in that order. I broke all tradition by dining at 7 p.m. and by only eating about a third of the above meal.

For a visitor, the cost of living in Mali and Dahomey is very high and, I believe, higher than in most parts of the United States. This is surprising because the average income of a native of Mali or Dahomey is about \$100 to \$200 a year. In Mali I paid almost \$20 a day in what would be considered a second-rate hotel by U.S. standards. Laundry bills for one week amounted to anywhere between \$6 and \$8. A bottle of water cost \$1.20 and a pack of United States cigarettes cost 80 cents, when obtainable. However, per diem rates of \$32 and \$25 in Mali and Dahomey, respectively, adequately covered our expenses.

American newspapers were not available in Mali. However, news-magazines such as Time and Newsweek could be obtained, but they were usually a week late. We were able to buy newspapers in Dahomey but also about 1 week late.

One thing which impressed me was the popularity of the late President Kennedy. I noted that, in a local village which I visited, a street had been named in his honor. I also learned from an American working in Africa for a relief agency that many villagers in remote parts of the country have pictures of the late President on the walls of their huts. Along a similar vein, Dahomey has commemorative stamps honoring Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

In Dahomey we stayed in a motel which was located approximately 100

yards from the Atlantic Ocean. Dahomey, because of its 70 miles of coastline and natural beach, has potential for becoming an outstanding resort country. I could not help making a comparison of the beaches in Dahomey where I could look for miles without seeing another person with the beaches in the United States where millions of people congregate during the summer months. Visitors to Dahomey should make a point to visit the "Village on Stilts" which is located over a lagoon about 10 miles north of the city of Cotonou. History has it that these people built their village over a lagoon to defend themselves against a rival enemy tribe. The canoe is their chief means of transportation. Tourists are most welcome to visit the village, and motorboats are available to transport visitors to this unusual site for about \$1. One might refer to this village as the Venice of Africa. Two highlights of this visit were stops at a local restaurant where refreshments and souvenirs could be purchased for a nominal fee and at the hut of the village chief who welcomed us to his village and was insulted if we did not purchase something from him.

In Mali, a place everyone must visit is the town of Timbuktu which I am sure everyone has heard of at one time or another. Timbuktu is located in central Mali and is the great caravan center of the west central Sahara. Timbuktu has European-type streets, schools, churches, and other buildings. An American tourist visiting Africa told us that when she purchased her tickets from a travel agency in the United States she was informed by the agent that she was the



agency to buy a ticket to Timbuktu even though that same agency used Timbuktu as part of its advertising campaign. As a result, her picture appeared in the local newspaper.

Another interesting aspect of my trip to Africa was the number of merchants in both Mali and Dahomey who travel the streets of the larger cities selling African art to tourists. It seemed that everywhere I turned a merchant was always there whether I was eating in a restaurant or relaxing on the beach. These natives loved to bargain over the price of their goods, and even though most of them could not speak English they understood such phrases as 1 dollar, 5 dollars, 10 dollars, too much, or too little. I

and procedure was to take half the asking price and divide by two in order to arrive at a reasonable price. I learned that, once I stated what I was willing to pay, the merchant would usually agree to that price even though at times it took almost an hour for him to agree.

My experiences on this assignment in West Africa not only were rewarding and valuable in themselves but also led me to a better appreciation of life in the United States, something most of us take for granted. For anyone in the GAO who has the opportunity to travel overseas on an assignment such as this, I would strongly recommend it as a memorable experience.