Six Days in the Fields

Mark Canavera '99

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The harsh reality of life for millions of Africans hits home for a Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso, the third-poorest country in the world.

By Mark Canavera

DAY 1 En brousse

The sun is falling fast. I pedal faster and harder to beat time as the sky takes on its sunset hues of oranges, pinks, purples. Strapped to the back of my bicycle are the week’s essentials: the plastic mat on which I will sleep; a 20-liter jug of potable water; a set or two of beat-up clothes; and my kerosene lamp, by which I will eat my meals, play cards, read and even write.

My destination is a small group of mud huts, organized in a circular formation and surrounded by thorny branches meant to ward off wandering livestock. By the time I arrive, clouds have gathered and rain is imminent. As I wait for my host, I unroll the pink and green plastic mat and sit down. A woman — wrinkle-etched, toothless and rag-strewn — emerges from one of the huts and greets me in guttural tones. I am able, just barely, to greet her back. She begins preparing the evening meal, which she must finish before the rain creeps in. Silhouetted against a now-ominous sky of magenta and violet, she hobbles between large iron pots which sit upon stones, hovering over slight branches of burning wood. As she begins to stir laboriously, I cannot help but conjure thoughts of Macbeth’s witches over their eerie and primitive cauldrons. The woman is Yendié’s mother.

Yendié soon arrives from the fields to welcome me. He is my student at the middle school five kilometers away, in the large village of Piela. We are in the Eastern region of Burkina Faso, a small landlocked country in the heart of francophone West Africa. I am a Peace Corps volunteer, teaching English in a secondary school, but at this moment teaching and students are the last things on my mind. I am worried about the impending rain and, more generally, about the six days that await me. Yendié has invited me to come to his family’s fields to cultivate crops in the traditional method. The offer is kind and generous. Possessed of a keen interest in experiencing village life at its edgiest, its poorest, its most brutal and extreme, I have accepted the invitation. His family, the Tindano family, has built a thatched-roof mud hut for me to sleep in for the week.

It is before this mud hut that I now sit as Yendié’s mother brings me my first meal — in fact, the only meal available — en brousse (“in the bush”). The food is tô, a gelatinous paste made of corn or millet meal boiled in tamarind juice. Relatively harmless, tô is also tasteless, its flavor embellished only by the sauce into which you dip the handful you have scooped and formed into a ball. It is, sadly enough, the national dish of Burkina Faso, nutrient- and calorie-free. Yendié and I manage to get in only a few bites of tô dipped in baobab leaf sauce before rain begins to pelt us. We move inside the hut to finish our meal, my stomach heaving at each swallow, my gag reflex working overtime. No one ever said this would be easy.

As I prepare for bed on my first night en brousse, I inadvertently think of how much my life has changed. One year ago, I was graduating from Furman, that
“Just guide the plow, don’t push on it.” At the young age of 15, Yendié Tindano is experienced in the labor-intensive art of plowing. Yendié and his family are residents of Gnagna, the poorest province in poverty-stricken Burkina Faso. They are fortunate to have a donkey and a plow to assist them as they practice the most basic form of subsistence farming.

microcosmic paradise nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians like a well-set jewel. Now I am sleeping in a mud hut on a plastic mat on a dirt floor. The rain is dripping through the straw, and it is cold; any complex thoughts have been banished by the circumstances.

The moment finds me in Burkina, currently the third-poorest country in the world, and more specifically, in Gnagna province, the poorest province of this forgotten country. Burkina’s pathetic statistics can overwhelm — highest infant mortality rate in the world, lowest literacy rate — but they are not the thoughts I am focusing on now.

For the moment, my concern is how wet I will get in this old, makeshift hut. And how badly I will sleep on this dirt floor. And how hungry I will be this week, with just a little millet mush in my stomach for each meal. And, ever so fleetingly, of the eight-and-a-half million cultivators in Burkina who have never known another life than this one.

DAY 2 Cultivating

I wake up to cocks crowing and sunlight penetrating every available crack and slit in the hut’s thatch. My back hurts and my body is covered with insect bites — spiders and ants and mosquitoes, but luckily no scorpions. Everything has a musty, damp feel after the night’s rain.

The rainy season in Burkina begins in June and finishes in September or October; the rest of the year is bone-dry and hot as hell. The rainy season is the crux of village life: not enough rain, and the crops will dry up; too much, and the rains will flood the fields, destroying everything. It’s a delicate balance in this land of extremes.

I come out of the hut into a blazing 7 a.m. sun to find that I am the late riser. The rest of the Tindano family has already taken to the fields. I know that the time has come, that I can no longer put off the inevitable. It’s time to get my hands dirty, to cultivate.

“Cultivating,” as it is called here, is really subsistence farming at its most basic. Families grow large fields of millet and corn to serve as their staples for the year, and they plant small fields of peanuts and beans to sell in order to cover small, basic living expenses.

Cultivating has five phases. The first is plowing, done either by hand or, for villagers with slightly more money, with a donkey and plow. (Luckily for me, the Tindano family was able to purchase a donkey two years ago and a plow last year.) After the soil is plowed, it is “arranged” using a daaba, a small metal tool with an arm-length wooden handle. Arranging consists of breaking up clumps of dirt left behind by the plow so that seeds can take root easily. Step three is sowing the seeds (I will be planting beans, peanuts and poids de terre, similar to chick-peas, this week), followed by several weeks of weeding and maintenance. Finally, in October, if the rains have been steady and kind, the crops will be ready for harvesting.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Today
we’ll begin by plowing three small fields, one for each crop, using Yendié’s donkey.

Resourceful Yendié gears up the donkey with the plow and plows one row for me so that I’ll have an idea of how it’s done. The donkey walks, you hold onto the plow handle, and voilà — you’ve got yourself a plowed row. Looks simple enough. So Yendié hands over the reins of the plow, and off we go, the donkey and I. The donkey pulls much harder than I had anticipated, and it takes all of my effort just to keep the plow in the ground, which I do by pushing it downward. My hands are bleeding within minutes. “No, no!” says Yendié. “Just guide the plow, don’t push on it.” Sure thing, Yendié. No problem.

So I try guiding the plow — and the donkey takes off, trying to flee this forced manual labor. Were Yendié not there to bring him back, the donkey very well may have succeeded. We continue this mockery of plowing until the early afternoon, by which time we have come up with the patterns for three crooked, lopsided fields. The donkey and I are exhausted, but 15-year-old Yendié doesn’t seem affected in the least by what seem to me to be endless hours of back-breaking labor. He tells me that it has been a light day for him, like a little vacation. And I think, no child should be subjected to this.

In the late afternoon, I have to bike back to Piela with my water container to replenish my drinking water supply. When I arrive in Piela, I discover that the previous night’s rain has flooded my house, soaked my personal belongings and ruined a few important documents. But I got off easy. Elsewhere in Piela, two huts collapsed, injuring two mothers and their children. It’s as if even nature selects women for harsh treatment.

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Living in Burkina, where a deeply entrenched patriarchal hierarchy ensures the continued subjugation of women, reminds me that the battle of the sexes roars on in parts of the world. Here, men have all but won. Polygamy, female excision and domestic abuse are the accepted norms rather than the horrifying aberrations. Here, men and women alike proclaim that the female sex is inferior. Women are maids in their own households, burdened with chores from dawn until dark.

In line at the water pump, I see the tableau, exotic and enticing, of women carrying water in large jugs balanced on their heads. I think of the alarmingly small number of girls in my middle school classes. I am glad to be carrying my own water, even if it’s not on my head. And I am proud to be a warrior for these women, even if they remain ignorant to the battles they are losing daily.

DAY 3 Community

Today Yendié’s father has organized a cultivating feast. Villagers from neighboring fields gather at one farmer’s fields to help with his weeding and maintaining. In turn, the host farmer feeds his neighbors in a gesture of gratitude and solidarity.

The crowd that shows up today is composed primarily of Yendié’s friends from school and from the village, with a few older men thrown in for wisdom and for good measure. The atmosphere is jovial, good-hearted, light. Everybody enjoys a cultivating get-together, for you can accomplish a lot in a short time, help out your friends and neighbors, and find yourself in the company of others rather than in the habitual solitude of cultivation. Having been presented by Yendié’s father, I am readily accepted by the group. They are thrilled that an American has chosen to work among them to discover the difficulty of life as an African farmer, and they are tickled that I can speak a few rudimentary sentences of Gourman’tchema, the local language.

I recognize a few of the kids from the middle school, who still don’t quite believe that their teacher has come to cultivate alongside them. As I consider these kids, I am struck by the lack of a pattern. There is no rhyme or reason to which kids have gotten the opportunity to go to school and which kids haven’t. In the Tindano family, for example, Yendié, the eldest, and Baslaï, the youngest, go to school, but Hamtandi, the middle son, remains uneducated. When asked how the two were chosen, Mr. Tindano responds, “Ah. That’s just how it goes.” And the decision is just that arbitrary: one child goes to school and another does not. Of course, most parents don’t even bother with a luxury such as school; the provincial enrollment rate in secondary schools is below 3 percent of the young population. Education is not a priority. Cultivating — that is, survival — is.

We begin the weeding, a laborious and back-stooped process. Functioning as a
Poverty, hunger and disease are everywhere, and yet people manage to outwit them daily. Life here situates itself on some edge, some brink. As Janis Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” and in that sense, Burkinabè villagers are as free as the Harmattan wind that blows down from the Sahara.

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The marketplace in Piela is a scene of bustling activity and typically features a variety of goods, from fruits and dry goods to clothing and even medicinal cures.
The sense of community is overwhelming. When one person falls behind or stops for a break, his neighbor in the line picks up the pace to fill in for him. I wish the same could be said for Africa itself.

After the soil is plowed, workers “arrange” it using a daaba, a metal tool with an arm-length wooden handle. Seeds take root more easily after the clumps of dirt left behind by the plow are dispersed.

the Tindano household to play cards and gossip — a night of fun, of exchange, of being together.

But this night, my presence has upset the typical balance. I am a novelty item, and on display. Finally, the villagers can pose all of their burning questions about “the West” to a real, live American. Why don’t “white people” like African food? How do Jean-Claude van Damme and Sylvester Stallone manage to drive through New York City with their machine guns set to rapid-fire? The usual. I am reminded of how naive villagers can be of modernity’s trappings, and of how careless America can be with its international image.

But as much as television and video and radio have brought the same nonsense to Africa that they have brought to the developed world, they have also brought a searing knowledge here. In watching “whites” (Americans, Europeans, Brazilians) lounge in posh apartments on their cheaply produced soap operas (“Santa Barbara” among them), many Africans have learned of their own relative poverty.

This knowledge has caused them to develop an inferiority complex. Although certain aspects of African life put Western “civilization” to shame — the emphasis on communal living, the importance of family, the courtesy, which would impress even a seasoned Charlestonian — Africans generally think of themselves as backwards, sorely underdeveloped, pathetically poor. Most sadly, many people here believe that the current state of African affairs is a result of intellectual inferiority.

As Denyogo, one of the villagers, says to me tonight, “We have nothing.” And in some ways, Denyogo is right. Many things are lacking here — not only creature comforts and luxuries, but fundamentals such as viable political, economic, judicial and educational systems. Health care is almost non-existent; infrastructures here do not even merit that name. Poverty, hunger and disease are the by-products, and yet people manage to outwit them daily.

Life here situates itself on some edge, some brink. As Janis Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” and in that sense, Burkinabè villagers are as free as the Harmattan wind that blows down from the Sahara. They live only for the moment, and they try to let that moment be as carefree, loose and open as possible.

This moment is a priceless one. I scan the lamp-lit, card-playing scene, and I listen. I hear laughing and talking — more discussion in five minutes than the typical American family can produce in a month. The talk is about the weather, the new folks in town, tomorrow’s market. Gossip, jokes. And I am jealous. I think, how lucky they are, and how lucky I am to be here among them. Then Denyogo reminds me that things are lacking. Basic, life-supporting things. Food. Medicine. Water. “We have nothing.”

While I am reflecting in this vein, she pops into my head, that icon of African aid: Sally Struthers, with her bona fide, American-style, 23-cents-a-day quick fix.
The women of Burkina Faso are burdened with chores from dawn until dark. The country's entrenched patriarchal society ensures their second-class status.

I would gladly pay up to 23 cents a day if I knew that one child would benefit rather than an office full of aid workers who just bought new Land Cruisers. I wish 23 cents a day would cut it. But any effective remedy to this chaotic system will require decades of vision, leadership, hard work, motivation and goodwill.

**DAY 5 The market**

I return to Piêla after a morning of sowing seeds in the fields with Yendié and his mother. This afternoon I will visit the marketplace, which spins into frenzied action every three days. I will spend the night at my house in Piêla, as my next-door neighbor there has asked me to do. He will be in a neighboring village tonight and is afraid that thieves might take advantage of his absence to rob us both. It is sad to think that someone who makes less than $200 a year is afraid of being robbed. Of course, I oblige.

The market is wonderful today, as usual. Old men, relaxed and toothless, sit under rows of straw awnings, selling just about anything. The meandering shopper will find anything from American T-shirts (courtesy of Goodwill) to bike parts to livestock. Using battery-powered megaphones, traditional healers and charlatans alike promise cures for snake bites, diarrhea, headaches and AIDS. Central to the whole bustling affair is a spreading, shady oak under which the women congregate to buy and sell condiments — spices, powders, peanut butter, oils, fruits — anything to liven up their tô sauces.

I go to the coffee stand and purchase a small baggie of liquid yogurt, which I drink instantly. I buy another and wolf it down as well. I had not realized how hungry I have become. The next stop is a small dry-goods boutique, where I stock up on little packets of cookies, which I
Sometimes it seems that if the West would just take note of the extremity of this Africa, things might start to change. But Europe and America — enclosed, prospering, self-protective — have no reason to notice. This is not their Holocaust. Our worlds exist independently, and until capitalism dictates otherwise, they will continue to do so.

**One man's efforts**

Those who knew Mark Canavera ‘99 at Furman are probably not surprised that his first job is with the Peace Corps. As his close friend, English professor Willard Pate, says, “Mark has a genuine concern for people and has always been interested in issues like race and feminism.”

In the town of Piéla in Burkina Faso, West Africa, Canavera pursues these interests while teaching English to middle- and high-school students. His projects have included distributing scholarships to girls entering middle school, organizing a regional theatre competition to increase AIDS awareness, and developing a summer camp to encourage girls to stay in school.

His sensitivity to women’s issues, combined with the second-class status of women in Burkina Faso, has led him to develop many programs that target girls. He organized a “Women’s Appreciation Day” in which he invited professional women in and around Piéla to speak to his students about career options for women. “With unemployment what it is here, the term ‘career option’ seems like an oxymoron,” he says, “but it seemed a good idea to at least let the girls know what jobs are out there.”

He has also taught a class that focused on women in various cultures, and he invited female health workers in town to the school for a session on female sexuality, which he described as a “smashing success.” In a country where AIDS is rampant and, as he says, “the subject of female sexuality has no real forum,” any effort to educate the populace is worthwhile.

Canavera is pleased with the rapport he has developed with the young people of the area and is working to expand his school, which currently runs through 10th grade, into a full-fledged high school. And although, as his article says, he is often discouraged by the area’s “ignorance, sexism, corruption and poverty,” he is also clearly convinced of the value and the urgency of his work.

— Jim Stewart

To help Mark Canavera with any of his projects, contact the Peace Corps Partnership Program at (202) 606-3406 or through e-mail at pcpp@peacecorps.gov. Canavera, who received the Bradshaw-Feaster Medal as the outstanding male graduate in the Class of ’99, can be reached at bunnio@hotmail.com, but because of his limited access to e-mail it may take a while for him to respond.

Note: The photographs accompanying this article were processed in Africa before being mailed to the States.

**DAY 6 Motivation**

It is my last day in the fields for now, and it’s only half a day at that. In October, once the school year has begun, I will return to harvest the few crops that we have planted, God willing. This afternoon, I will catch the twice-a-week bus to Fada N’Gourma, the regional capital. From there, I will continue to Bobo-Dioulasso, the country’s second-largest city, where I will assist in the training of the newly arrived Peace Corps volunteers. As brief as my tenure en brousse has been, I am glad to be leaving this rugged world. Fatigue, hunger and a desire to escape have overtaken my thought processes.

My notions of the noble farmer living close to the land and in harmony with the earth seem romantic, naive, even ridiculous now. I am glad for their dissipation.

Before I chose to undertake this week in the fields, another volunteer and I had discussed the traditional cultivating life practiced by 85 percent of the population of Burkina. An Indiana farm boy well-versed in modern agricultural methods, he argued that nobody should have to do this kind of work in today’s world, what with the technology, knowledge and materials available. I silently disagreed, envisaging a simple life directed by manual labor and outlined in ignorant contentment or maybe even bliss. Now, looking at my dirty,

I am disappointed in myself — that I could not even make it six days on “village food” without resorting to some back-up. Because now I cannot know their hunger, their desire for something unattainable, their unmet want.

Nevertheless, I will return to the fields at the first hint of dawn to finish my week’s work. I will pretend to understand their hunger, even though I have cheated.
chapped hands and feeling the physical fatigue that awaits you the minute you emerge from sleep, I acquiesce. “We have nothing.” My colleague was correct. In today’s techno-savvy, information-sharing world, nobody should have to do this kind of work.

But people do. Sometimes it seems that if the West would just take note of the extremity of this Africa, things might start to change. (Had you ever heard of Burkina Faso? Neither had I.) But Europe and America — enclosed, prospering, self-protective — have no reason to notice. This is not their Holocaust. Our worlds exist independently, and until capitalism dictates otherwise, they will continue to do so.

For now, ignorance, sexism, corruption and poverty seem to have gained the upper hand. Pessimism fueled by powerlessness overarches daily life, sapping the hope right out of Burkina Faso’s collective worldview.

My work here as an educator, as a human resource, seems a drop in an ocean that just continues to grow. But such work is necessary. I know that I have accomplished something if I have encouraged one woman to stand up for herself. Or taught one teen-ager how to protect himself or herself against the natural and unnatural catastrophe that is AIDS in Africa. Or motivated one kid to enroll or to stay in school. The steps are small and immeasurable, but they are also vital, crucial, pivotal, urgent. As discouraging as life here may become, I remain convinced of the fundamental importance of the time that I am spending here and of the validity of my role as a volunteer.

Today I should be leaving the Tindano family with the requisite list of “lessons learned,” but my mind is a jumble, as it often is here in Burkina. I do, however, know what I will take with me. I will take the warmth and the acceptance of a people who knew only that I wanted to be among them. I leave with the painful awareness of the undesirability of life at its most basic, and dare I say, most primitive. And through this awareness, I have gained renewed motivation — to work harder in my development efforts, to give my all to the people who have offered me a place at a table that is already set for too many. We’ll make do. I do not — I cannot — know what, if anything, I am leaving to the Tindano family or to their neighbors en brousse. Perhaps I do not want to know.

As I ride away, I feel my bloody, cracked and aching hands against the handlebars. I ponder, slowly and carefully, how much more work it will take to improve or maybe even just salvage this hardened life.

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**African encounter: Selected readings**

A rich literary tradition chronicles the American and European encounter with Africa.

According to Robin Visel, Furman English professor, a list of worthy heirs to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* includes such recent works as:

- **Barbara Kingsolver’s Poisonwood Bible** (Harper, 1998). Set in the Congo, this best seller tells of the efforts of a proselytizing Baptist missionary and his family to adapt to their situation amid personal and political upheaval. Dealing with such themes as cultural imperialism, race and gender, it equates the exploitation of Africa by the West with the exploitation of women by men.

- **J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace** (Viking Penguin, 1999). This Booker Prize-winning novel examines the social and political complexities of South Africa through the story of a professor’s attempt to come to grips with personal demons. The New Yorker calls it “an authentically spiritual document, a lament for the soul of a disgraced century.”

- Maria Thomas’ *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage, And Other Stories and Antonia Saw the Oryx First* (both Soho Press, 1987). These books are the late author’s fictionalized accounts of Peace Corps experiences in East Africa. She served in the Corps in Ethiopia during the early seventies.

- **Norman Rush’s Whites: Stories and Mating** (both Vintage, 1992). Both books are set in Botswana. *Whites* is a well-received collection about the lives of expatriates; *Mating*, which earned the National Book Award, is a witty and ambitious love story set against a background of regional politics and societal experimentation.

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