

West African Perspectives

Prologue

Aid for Africa is much in the news these days through *G8, Live 8, Darfur, Make Poverty History* or whatever. The debate rages back and forth between extreme viewpoints: for example, the moral duty of the affluent overfed West to help our impoverished brothers and sisters in Africa but what is the point when there is all the corruption, disorganization and HIV/AIDS from which they are all going to die from anyway? At the heart of the problem seems to be what has been referred to as 'the criminal incompetence of Africa's post-colonial black elites who have shown little interest in helping their people meet the challenges of the modern World – only in enriching themselves and staying in power.

This is in contrast to South Korea in Asia where a similar situation existed in the mid 1960's; the GDP is now at least 40x that of most West African countries because the Government there decided to invest heavily in education.

Statistics, particularly medical, are terrible. For example the Maternal Mortality (this term belies the associated human anguish) in parts of West Africa approaches 10%, this is a factor of almost 1000 times worse than that in the UK. The main causes of death are haemorrhage, infection, eclampsia and poverty; the latter is graphically illustrated by my friend Catherine Conteh who I asked to write about the last 14 years of her life, from the poverty trap in Sierra Leone (the World's poorest country) to the opportunities of Australia.

A life in West Africa

By

Catherine Conteh

Introduction

As a teenager in the early 1990s in Freetown, life did not really have any meaning simply because there was no hope of what one could become in the future.

One may wonder what I really mean. Well the human eye can act as a scale to weigh up things or situations in both happy and difficult times. The cause of our problems at that time, I realize, was a thing called poverty. My mother was the only breadwinner in our house, a common situation in many African homes. Sometimes she earned so little and things got so bad that we didn't know when or what would be for our next meal. I remember going to school with an empty lunchbox and holes in my shoes.

Education

As the oldest of my mom's six children, (two girls and four boys) I only had one more year left to finish Senior Secondary School when the school authorities realized that I never paid my fees on time, and in fact was always the last student in the year group to pay my fees. As such, I was often 'sacked' several times before my mom was able to save enough money from the vegetables she sold or managed to borrow money from someone else to pay the fees. Those who have experienced being suspended from school for not paying their fees I believe will understand that it's one of the most embarrassing situations a student can face, especially when he/she is willing to learn but there is no financial support.

For those who didn't experience it I want to say, they were very fortunate. I remember returning home one day from school, and asking my mom whether she will be able to get my final year fees; she burst into tears and told me that she really wanted me to continue with my education because she believes I am intelligent and willing to learn but she cannot raise the amount of money needed in the time available. I realized there was only one option for me which was to meet my school director and explain things to her. I was deeply shocked when, after my explanation, she told me that she is sorry but neither the school nor she could help me and I should leave immediately. Well, that was the last day I was in school. I later told my mom that there was no support from the school, she felt very sad. A few weeks later, the national exams for Senior Secondary School were written but I was not permitted to do them, I was only able to see my friends' question papers afterwards.

A new relationship

After I realized my education had finished, I decided to help my mother with her business growing and selling vegetables. But after a year, I met a young man called Augustine and fell in love for the first time. Meeting him brought a change in my family circumstances because he had a very good job in one of the most popular hotels in Freetown and was kindly able to help me with money and other things that I needed as a young lady. I in turn helped my mom with money for food for my younger siblings.

We decided to have a traditional marriage which made my mom and both our families very happy. The day after our wedding, my mom decided I should stay with her for sometime before I moved in with my husband but naturally I didn't accept this idea because I did not fancy the idea of continuing to sleep on the floor with all my younger siblings which I had done for too many years. So that very day, I moved into my husband's well equipped self-contained apartment. This was a challenge because most of the facilities in Augustine's home were new to me but he soon taught me how to use all the modern accessories but not, of course, how to cook or clean!

Life goes wrong again

Life started to become happy and enjoyable but I did not know that this happiness would only last for a short time. Four months after I become pregnant things started going bad as there was a sudden change of government brought about by a military *coup d'état*, and at the same time the conflict with rebel groups, initially restricted to the provinces, was rapidly approaching the capital, Freetown. It was not surprising when one morning we awoke to the sound of heavy gunfire. When this situation arises most Western countries evacuate their citizens and close their embassies. Of course many businesses also closed down including the St. Michel Hotel where Augustine was working as a purchasing manager. We had to move out of our rented flat and live separately. I went to stay with some cousins of my husband, in spite of doing chores around their house almost all day and being pregnant I had to sleep on the floor.

Onset of labour

So hardship and suffering had started again some weeks before my baby was due. When my labour pains started at 2 am on the 13th of March 1993, as a naïve 18-year-old I had no idea what was the cause so I tried to get some pain-killer (paracetamol) thinking it was just a minor pain. After some hours, the pain became more serious and Augustine together with an elderly woman friend took me to a nearby midwife who was pleased to help for the rest of the night. At day break when I had not progressed, she advised I should be taken to the hospital but because there was no money we decided to try another local midwife. After several more hours in labour she also advised strongly that my condition was getting so serious I should be taken immediately to hospital.

Maternity Hospital admission

On Sunday morning 14th of March, I arrived at the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown. I was admitted immediately, and necessary medical measures were applied but still there was no good news. I still remember the first treatment they gave me at the hospital was an injection, which really intensified my labour pain with more frequent contractions. The nurses kept on repeating this injection every day, sadly it never helped but only increased the level of pain. I must admit I could not sleep and cried throughout the day and night.

Friends, through it all I knew for sure that there was a God, and though there was no more hope and everything was failing, I knew the God I know is capable of making a way where there seems to be no way.

With all the plans of the devil who comes to steal, to destroy and to kill I believe I was saved because of the little faith I demonstrated by believing and refusing to go to the sorcerer's shrine which was demanded as a last resort by my mom.

Well, I am proud to say that when you trust in the Lord he shall never forsake you, and he will always meet you right at the point of your need as he did for me those twelve years ago.

Delivery

It was in the afternoon of the fifth day of my labour pains, 17th March 1993, when all my family's hopes had vanished and they were just waiting to see whether I would die that day or the next, because there was no money to pay for the Caesarean operation I needed. Well, for God it was not over because he had already by then touched the heart of his servant from the Mercy Ship *Anastasis* docked a few kilometres from the hospital where I should have died. He was on a visit to the hospital when God gave him the opportunity to save my life and that of my unborn child. He humbly followed the command when he was lead by the Holy Spirit right into my labour room. Having got the explanation of my situation from the nurses he immediately asked to be allowed to pay for the operation.

Friends, before 7pm my operation was done with me awake but pain free under spinal anaesthesia and both lives were saved. I was delighted to learn that at the end of my struggles, some nurses at the Maternity block who knew about my story came to know the Lord Jesus Christ that he saves and he is a miracle working God. In my family, my mother, who was so touched, had no option but to give her life to the Lord who had saved both her daughter and grand daughter's life.

Husband Augustine's Memories

My wife's labour pains commenced at 2am on Saturday 13th March 1993. Due to my financial predicament, I took her to a nearby midwife where she passed the day in continuous pain. At 8pm, the midwife asked me to take her to a doctor but as I could not afford the medical fees I asked for assistance from a trained nurse who was a member of my local church. Catherine passed the night there in severe pain. When I arrived on Sunday morning, the nurse advised me to take her to the maternity hospital because her case was complicated by obstructed labour.

At the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital she was admitted to the labour ward under the care of a gynaecologist, Dr. Ghassama. She spent the day wallowing in pain. There was no store of medication in the hospital I was told to go out and buy drugs needed to hasten the delivery of the baby. Every now and then, I was given a prescription to buy more medicine but I got angry with the nurses when I learnt that they didn't treat my wife with all the medicines I provided. They had hoarded some for their private patients outside the hospital. The doctor had to intervene and warn them.

The day we arrived at the hospital, we met a Liberian refugee who had miscarried due to complications during delivery.

Because the husband could not pay the hospital bills, the lady was retained there with the foetus next to her in a plastic bag. They were not released until the husband got money from somewhere to clear the bill. That gentleman's terrible experience pulled my nerves and made my heart pound abnormally even though I was already worried about my plight.

Labour – day 4

On Tuesday 16th, I arrived at the hospital very early as usual. But this time I saw something that nearly exhausted my breath. From the entrance of the gate, I saw the two porters wheeling away on a trolley a dead body, which looked like that of a pregnant woman. I quickly ran to the ward where my wife was admitted, lo and behold I heard her weak voice still gnashing her teeth with pain. I was not allowed to go and see her because there were other women in ward the nurses told me. This made me more worried. During that day, the nurses were saying to one another that there is a young lady in the labour ward whose condition is quite critical. They said they were worried that neither mother or baby would survive. I knew they were referring to my wife. But I could not do anything in my power to save her and our unborn baby except by praying for God to intervene. I was reading Psalm 51 both night and day. Whenever I left home to come to the hospital every morning, I came with mixed feelings – so many questions in mind. How did she pass the night? Was she able to sleep? Has she delivered? When is she going to deliver? Who is responsible for all this? Or did she die overnight? Where did I go wrong? Am I the worst sinner? Why me? Nevertheless, I was always expecting God to do something. I could not imagine my wife or the unborn baby being dead. I was always hoping to take them home with me but I could not tell how.

Sorcerers and evil spirits

Things became unusual as we were then in the fourth incredible day of agonizing labour. My mother-in-law could not wait to see her first child and only daughter die in giving birth therefore she sought the help of another sorcerer. The first one she met the day before gave her a concoction to give my wife to drink and bathe her stomach. The man told my mother-in-law that after the performance, her daughter would give birth normally. But my wife did not accept it because she said it was demonic and she believes that the Lord Jesus Christ has done everything possible for her. Her mother was not happy and tried to narrate what another sorcerer said. According to the sorcerer, my wife was having an evil spirit following her. Because she travelled out of the country for sometime and now that she has returned with pregnancy, the evil spirit is standing by her in the labour ward. So far as the evil spirit is there she would not be able to give birth. Therefore, the mother should bring her to his shrine where the evil spirit cannot dare to enter. But my decisive wife even though in pain replied, "I will not go anywhere. If I should die, let me die here not in the shrine of a sorcerer".

Her mother gave up on her and said resentfully "if you have bewitched somebody and the person has died, then this is your turn to die". Now every effort has been exhausted and we were now waiting to see what the hospital could do to save my wife and the unborn baby. Miraculously, the baby was still alive in the womb.

Serious situation

On Wednesday, 17th March 1993 at about 11am, Dr. Ghassama discussed with me how long this drama might last. He started by giving me a long prescription of medicines after telling me "all efforts to make your wife deliver normally have been exhausted therefore, go and find these things so that we can perform a caesarean operation before 6pm otherwise your wife will not survive the next day". Right there I pleaded with him if he could go ahead and do the operation and I will pay him later. He replied that there is no way. I left to look for someone to lend me some money but time was running out. Nobody would give me a helping hand even my wife's uncle who had the means to lend the money to either me or Catherine's mother (his sister) turned us down. He told my mother-in-law that the money in his possession was to pay school fees for his daughter. Finally, we returned empty handed to the hospital. But we were struggling to roll the stone away by ourselves, the Lord was preparing his messenger to do so to his glory.

I thought my only hope now was to plead with Dr. Ghassama. In this entire dilemma, I was all by myself. As I approached the labour ward, I met the doctor in the corridor as he was going for his 4pm prayers in the hospital mosque. Before I could utter a word he asked me "how much do you have"? I frankly told him that I got nothing and was about to continue pleading on my knees when he told me over his shoulder "you are lucky, a stranger is going to help with the operation". I was astounded and could not fathom what he meant.

Our baby is born!

About a couple of hours later, I saw a group of whites accompanied by an African. After the consent form had been signed my wife was taken to the operating theatre at 6pm. Fifteen minutes later; a nurse came pushing a baby in a cart. She asked, "Whose wife was taken to the theatre? Like in a 'hot mental' where the first pupil who knows the answer should say it, I stood up and raise my hands up and answered "it's me". "Come and see your daughter," said the nurse. To my greatest amazement I was able to touch and raise the hand of my daughter. It was like everybody was against me including my family and friends but the Lord had vindicated me.

I felt much relieved and loved afterwards. Less than an hour later, my wife was admitted to the ward for the more affluent, which we had never dreamt to happen. Since that night, I started seeing clearly and able to remember things again.

1993 - Contehs
with nurse Gina



A God-sent Good Samaritan working with Mercy Ships *Anastasis* by the name of Dr. Keith paid for the survival of my wife and daughter when nobody was willing to help including the hospital, Catherine's uncle and my relatives. I believe even if there were a fund to rescue such a situation, the partiality, selfishness and wickedness of those in control would have still allowed preventable loss of lives as in the situation of my wife.

This kind of ordeal was not unique to me alone. I can say that I was blessed in my own case for the fact that I survived it. In some cases, they lost one family member and others both and still others were so terrified and desert their families. The government had nothing in place to save such innocent lives.

This act of the Dr. Keith is still making an impact on my family as well as other families. Some of the nurses who were in the labour ward rededicated their lives to the Lord or gave them to Christ for the first time. To them Catherine's difficult situation denied medical facts. Medically, it is unusual for obstructed labour to last for five days and for both mother and baby to survive. My mother-in-law later gave her life to Christ and today she is a staunch member of her local church in Freetown. Many of our friends and relatives have been blessed today and proud because one man listened to the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit and spared his \$100 to save the live of poor and hopeless Catherine and her unborn baby Regina from a premature death.

Catherine's story continues

You may be wondering what happened next. The Good Samaritan never forgot about these lives he saved, because he believes in maintaining relationships. Eighteen months later he attempted to locate us through a nursing friend of his who was visiting Sierra Leone with a group from her church in Maidenhead (UK) to work with Jeess Ministries in the Lumley area of Freetown. God being so good, the first person this lady asked whether they knew us was our Pastor, Kai Manyeh! He simply told her 'they are members of my congregation.' I believe this was another miracle. We got pictures, gifts and financial support from our Good Samaritan and his family, delivered by Mo Burt his friend.

Fleeing to Guinea

As security problems were getting out of hand in Sierra Leone, we become very worried. The only option was to flee to the next door country Guinea as refugees. I am grateful to say this trip was also funded by our Good Samaritan. We traveled during the night in a dilapidated wooden boat packed with many other desperate people and we finally safely reached the shore near Conakry, the capital of Guinea in the early hours of the morning. After so many immigration procedures, we were allowed to be received by friends who were already in the city.

Those who did not have anyone to meet them were taken to a refugee camp far away from the capital. I started a new life, trying to learn both the official language, French, and the main local languages. For Augustine it was not a problem because he could already speak both Susu and French. We settled rapidly as Augustine got a job with a local mission the Christian & Missionaries Alliance (CMA) and I started a small business selling ice blocks and ginger drink which I made at home. Life continued happily enough as a refugee with the continued support of our good Samaritan known as Uncle Keith.

My daughter Regina was now five-years-old and had started at the Sierra Leone refugee school linked to the '*Eglise du Bon Bergere*'. In 1998 my uncle and his wonderful wife Fiona paid us a visit while the Mercy Ship *Anastasis* was docked in Conakry. We gave them a surprise by welcoming them unexpectedly at the airport.

Imprisonment

In early October 2000 the refugee community was severely troubled by the Guinean government as a result of cross border attacks by rebel groups based in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. All refugees were given only seventy-two hours to leave Guinea but as usual in Africa people started taking the law into their own hands.

As soon as President Lansana Conte made the broadcast some citizens started breaking into properties and businesses belonging to refugees and beating up any they found on the streets. Sadly, Augustine was in town on an errand where he was caught in an internet café, robbed of his watch and wallet, thrown into a vehicle with others and transported to a prison where he was put in a cell only 5m cubed with about 50 other male refugees and locked up for several days with no food or water. He was eventually released but only after being severely beaten (the flog option!) by the security staff for not having any money to pay for his own release.

Escape to Ghana

We soon realized that it was no longer safe to stay in Guinea especially in what was locally regarded as a refugee area. We thought of returning to Sierra Leone but it would have been a worse option because our family home had been burnt down during the conflict,

and the only place that should have been available for us was the returnee camp – where six or more people had to live in one small tent.

Uncle Keith considering all these things suggested we should go to Ghana where he had contacts, we were very happy with that option. With the help of Tantie Pouponne, a delightful Guinean TV presenter who he knew and whom we had met two years previously, he arranged for us to receive some money and Ghana Airways tickets. We arrived in Accra in October 2000, it was an amazing experience to be on board a plane for the first time in our lives, the first members of our families to have ever flown.

We were met at Kotoka Airport by Mr Yirenkyi, a Ghanaian contact of Dr Keith's who had kindly arranged for us to be accommodated temporarily on the University of Ghana campus at Legon. After six months we moved to the home owned by Mrs Stella Ayiku, a Ghanaian nursing friend of Dr Keith's who lived and worked in England

Life seemed to have settled down again. Regina was happy at the University Primary School situated on the Legon University campus. Augustine started a computer course, while I started private classes to write two 'O' level subjects under the British Council in Accra. The idea was for me to consider training in the future as a nurse. But sadly after finishing my syllabus in a rush, the result was not as good as expected.

My uncle encouraged me to rewrite the subjects again or look for another professional course. I decided to do hospitality studies and with the help of my Ghanaian friend Abigail, who guided me around Accra, I was able to gain a place at a suitable college which was affiliated to one in Michigan State, USA. Uncle Keith was very pleased with this idea and agreed to sponsor me. I started with the seven month foundation level which included a practical attachment in any reputable hotel in Accra but only if a student had passed his/her end-of-course exams.

Fortunately for me, I did well in class, passed the exams and then spent a fascinating six weeks at the four star Golden Tulip Hotel where I worked in the Front Office, House Keeping and Food and Beverage Departments. It was an excellent experience and the college was very happy to enroll me for the advance diploma in hospitality, a twelve module course which lasted for a further three and a half years.

I must say it wasn't easy being a mother and a hard working student. But by the grace of God and the great support of my uncle I was able to graduate as one of the college's most successful students. I achieved good passes in nine subjects and honours in Human Resources, Hospitality Security and International Hotel Management. The papers were all marked in the USA.

I finished my course in the first week of August 2004. In spite of my academic success it would prove very difficult to find a job in Accra because I was a non Ghanaian. In mid August my uncle gave Regina and I an opportunity to fly to Sierra Leone to visit my mother whom I had not seen for over five years. Our trip was a great success though Regina was shocked at the limited facilities compared to Accra. One evening she even suggested we ought to phone the Minister of Power and complain about the poorly working and intermittent electricity supply!

Changing Continents!

Early in November 2004, we learned that some of our Sierra Leonean acquaintances were going to be resettled in either America or Australia. It was something which we had not even considered but luckily on our arrival in Ghana four years previously we had registered with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). A week later we learned more names had been posted, including ours, to attend a first interview in the process of being considered as possible migrants to Australia.

We have now successfully completed all the interviews, medical procedures and orientation about Australia. Hopefully we are expecting to leave Ghana for Australia towards the end of May 2005. I feel delighted to be going to Australia, although I know there will be the challenges of adapting to a new culture awaiting us, but I am happy because I believe my twelve-year-old daughter will be able to get quality secondary education and beyond and that my husband Augustine and I will be able to get well paid jobs to enable us to escape from the 'West African Poverty Trap,' and help support our families back home in Sierra Leone.



Epilogue

The Conteh family left Accra on the 23rd May with 17 other Sierra Leoneans on the British Airways flight to London from where they transferred to a Quantas plane which flew via Singapore to Sydney to begin their new life in Wollongong about two hours drive South. Their only complaint on arrival was the change in temperature from Sub Saharan African to Australian winter!