

Alhamdulillah: The Apparently Accidental Establishment of the Church in Guinea

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As I neared completion of my first assignment with the U.S. State Department, a two-year tour in Rio de Janeiro, the department's personnel officers determined that my two years in Rio would be best balanced by an equal amount of time in Conakry, Guinea. Although I had some interest in Africa, I had never given much thought to doing a tour in Guinea. Like a newly called missionary, I quickly began to study about a country I would later come to love.

A former French colony in West Africa, Guinea is about the size of Oregon. Since achieving independence in 1958, it has had only two presidents. The current president, Lansana Conte, has been in power since 1984. Fortunately for the Guineans, their country has remained an oasis of stability in a very troubled region. Four of the six bordering countries—Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire—have experienced civil wars in the past decade. At times over the past five years Guinea has hosted as many as five hundred thousand refugees, a significant burden for a country with a population of only eight million. Poverty is severe. Per capita gross national income was \$430 in 2003.¹ The government does not allow Guineans all the freedoms we enjoy in the United States, but the authorities generally do not obstruct the practice of religion. Eighty-five percent of the country's population is Muslim.

Prior to beginning my African tour, I knew little about Islam. But after arriving in Conakry, I was soon immersed in Muslim culture. I found most of the people to be very devout. Almost all of my Guinean friends prayed five times a day, fasted each day from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan, went to mosque every Friday, and abstained from alcohol. Beyond the routines of devotion, I noted that my Muslim friends

were much more cognizant of the role of God in their lives, or at least much more overt than my Christian friends in acknowledging it. Two Arabic phrases—*Alhamdulillah* (thanks be to God) and *Inshallah* (God willing)—were the salt and pepper of their conversations. Among the Guinean Muslims, there was clearly a great emphasis on the role of God in life, perhaps because of the fragility of their very existence.² Life expectancy in Guinea is only 46.2 years, and the mortality rate for children under five years old is 16.5 percent.³ “Inshallah” and “Alhamdulillah” were not merely thoughtlessly offered idiomatic expressions. On many occasions, whether the outcome was deemed positive or negative, my Muslim friends would express their willingness to submit to God’s will.

The Prophet Joseph Smith, like the Prophet Mohammed, clearly taught that the Lord’s hand directs events on earth (see D&C 59:21). If there was any doubt as to who was directing the work of the Restoration, the Lord clarified the matter for the Prophet in an 1830 revelation: “And I have given unto [my servant Joseph] the keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed, even things which were from the foundation of the world, and the things which shall come from this time until the time of my coming, if he abide in me, *and if not, another will I plant in his stead*” (D&C 35:18; emphasis added).

In the Wentworth letter, the Prophet Joseph wrote that unhallowed hands could not stop the gospel’s march to every country:

Our missionaries are going forth to different nations, and in Germany, Palestine, New Holland, Australia, the East Indies, and other places, the Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear; till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.⁴

I learned before arriving in Guinea that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not organized or officially recognized in the country. Guinea was included in the West Africa Area, with headquarters in Accra, Ghana. I did not come across any members of the Church and did not feel at home at the interdenominational religious services held at a downtown hotel. So I developed my own Sunday routine, which consisted primarily of watching general conference videos in my living room. I could roll out of bed, lounge on the couch, pop in a video, and watch a conference tape ordered over the Internet and delivered by diplomatic pouch.

I followed this pattern for about fifteen months, accompanied for part of that period by Ron Adams, an American pilot on a short-term contract in Guinea, and by a Guinean Muslim friend, Sheik Oumar Kaba. Then one day, I was talking to one of the embassy guards, a young Liberian named James. James was a refugee who had survived some terrible hardships. His education was limited, but he was a very wise and profoundly spiritual man with a love of Jesus and the Bible. I mentioned to him that I was a Latter-day Saint, and he told me he knew another Liberian refugee named Opy, who was also a member of the LDS Church. He explained that Opy used to meet with a group of Church members in the Petit Simbaya neighborhood of Conakry. I asked whether he could introduce me to Opy. He informed me that Opy had been resettled to Australia. I asked whether he thought the LDS group might still be meeting. He said he was not sure, but we could look.

I was driven primarily by my curiosity. I thought it would be interesting to find this group. My overactive imagination saw members praying to a picture of Ezra Taft Benson or mixing ritual circumcision with ordination to the priesthood. Maybe Primary graduation was accompanied by tribal scarring ceremonies. Maybe they practiced polygamy (which is legal and widely practiced in Guinea). I was fascinated by the thought that some LDS group might be meeting without the knowledge or approval of the Church.

So one Saturday morning James accompanied me to Petit Simbaya, a neighborhood with a large population of Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees. We simply started asking people in the area whether they had heard of a group of Latter-day Saints or Mormons. We went to a couple of churches and inquired. I left my name and phone number with one family in the neighborhood and asked them to call me if they ever heard of this group. We spent an hour or two asking but found nobody who knew anything about the Church.

We were standing by a little electronics repair booth by a main road, ready to get in my pickup and go home, when I asked a worker there whether he had heard about a group of Mormons in the area. He had not. But a woman standing beside the booth overheard me and said, in English, "Oh, there's no branch here." Of course the word "branch" was a clear signal to me that she knew something about the Church. She explained that her brother, Oscar Quiah, was a returned missionary and former branch president in Liberia who was living as a refugee in Conakry. That evening, James and I attended a Liberian wedding at which Oscar was present. Oscar told us he knew of another former branch president and returned missionary, a Sierra Leonean refugee named Abu-Hassan Conteh, who

was also living in Conakry. When I asked Oscar about Opy, he said, “I know Opy. He was resettled to Australia. But he’s not LDS.” Thus my whole premise for going on the LDS search was a false one. Abu-Hassan knew other members in the city, including a former Relief Society president from Sierra Leone. About fifteen members of the Church knew each other, but they had never felt authorized to meet and worship as a group. Many of them were regularly attending other Christian churches.

I invited Oscar and his friends to watch conference videos with me at my house that Sunday. Within six weeks, fifteen to twenty people were showing up at my house on Sunday mornings. We started having lessons based on the Gospel Essentials manual. A short time later, I received an email from the Area President’s office informing me that a Guinean who had lived in France for many years and who had been a branch president there was moving back to Guinea with his family. We welcomed Edouard



A remarkable series of apparently accidental circumstances brought this group of Latter-day Saints in Guinea together. Photo courtesy of Kendall Moss.

and Blandine Kpogomou and their children to our group a short time later and learned that Edouard was following his patriarchal blessing's admonition to return to his homeland to build the Kingdom. We developed a regular Sunday program with hymns, a Primary class, talks, and lessons. Sheik and another Muslim friend, Ibrahima Dioubate, served as translators at many of our meetings.

To borrow a phrase from Oliver Cowdery, "These were days never to be forgotten."⁵ It was, frankly, the most fun I have ever had in the Church. It was a pleasure to see members excited about attending church meetings. They wanted to take the sacrament, and the Area President authorized us to administer it. We broke, blessed, and shared *tapalapa*, a traditional bread of the Fullah ethnic group, in what was perhaps the first administration of the sacrament in Guinea. The refugees' membership in the Church was clearly a key element of their identity, as it is of mine. One refugee, who had moved from his native Congo to Côte d'Ivoire and then to Guinea, with wars pushing him around the continent, showed me his missionary nametag, which he had somehow managed to salvage. Another refugee had miraculously arrived in Guinea with a framed Mormon Ad.

My tour in Guinea ended about eight months after I found the African Mormons. The members continue to meet each Sunday. I stay in touch with the group by email and occasional phone calls.

I have reflected on my experience in Guinea and the "coincidences" involved: that the State Department sent me to Guinea, that James thought he knew a Mormon named Opy, that Oscar's sister happened to overhear me mention the Church, that Oscar—the hub of the Mormon community in Conakry—was still in Guinea when I set out to find the lost Mormons (he was resettled as a refugee to Australia a few weeks after I met him), that at least three returned missionaries were living in the country, and that the Kpogomou family decided to return to Guinea at the same time as the Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugee saints began coming to my home for Sunday services.

A traditional Christian view might be that we all performed a good work and deserve some reward in heaven for our service. But I know that the truth in this case is closer to the view I learned to appreciate in Guinea, the view the Prophet Joseph and the Prophet Mohammed taught. God's will was done. God knew that the hodgepodge of members living in Guinea was imperfect and lacking in experience. But he also knew—even before he directed the creation of the earth—that I would be in Guinea in January 2003, that I would have a VCR and a living room large enough for twenty people, and that I would be naturally curious about other members in the country. He knew that Edouard Kpogomou, like a modern Lehi,

would be moved by the Spirit to take his family out of the comforts of life in the developed world to establish the Church in another land. He knew that the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia would drive Abu-Hassan and other faithful members to Conakry. He knew that James, a diligent seeker of truth, would be working as a guard at the U.S. Embassy in Conakry.

But in carrying out his plan to take the gospel to every nation, God did not manipulate us as an imperfect human might manipulate another. He used us to accomplish his purposes—that the standard of truth would be erected in every country. But God loves us, and he knew that by using us we would become better people. In my own case, I appreciate the Church structure and the sacrament more, and my awe of God’s knowledge and power has increased. And so the Church has a toehold in Guinea, and I have a small group of LDS friends in Africa that I think of daily and love as brothers and sisters. Alhamdulillah. Thanks be to God.

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1. The World Bank Group, *2005 World Development Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2005), 22.

2. I am reminded of the handcart survivor’s testimony: “Every one of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.” Francis Webster, quoted in Gordon B. Hinckley, “Our Mission of Saving,” *Ensign* 21 (November 1991): 54.

3. World Bank Group, *2005 World Development Indicators*, 120.

4. Joseph Smith Jr., as quoted in “Gospel Classics: The Wentworth Letter,” *Ensign* 32 (July 2002): 31.

5. Oliver Cowdery, “O. Cowdery to W. W. Phelps,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14–16.