

# My professional Adventures

By Robi Auscher

## Africa



What I enjoyed most and liked in Africa is its huge panoramic sky ornated with a most fascinating play of clouds. On the background of its reddish loess soils, the myriad cloud shapes and colors are so very different from what you see in other continents. The sky is much bigger and wider and the clouds, much richer. Under this wonderful canopy, you find a wide array of unusual human looks and customs.

Since I worked with agricultural producers all over the world, the main conclusion of my encounter with growers, Africa included, is that farmers are smart. They could be toothless, very young or drooping, barefoot, wearing funny turbans on their heads, unshaved and clad in rags, but have to take daily decisions under changing environmental conditions, faced with crop losses inflicted by pests and diseases, fluctuating markets, unfriendly regulations and credit. Under these pressures, anyone who isn't smart is out of business in no time.

Years back in India, we promoted upland rice cultivation on raised beds instead of the traditional flooded paddies. Had discussions with growers in the fields about the two systems. The traditional one they were used to for generations and the new technical message. Debating the pros and cons of both, growers were able to come up with 9-10 arguments for each of the two techniques. Leading the same discussions with the faculty of the regional university, the professors brought up just 5 or 6.

Africa's fields are tilled by women. You follow their streams parading back home from the fields in the late afternoon, carrying in rhythmic almost dance motions a toddler on their back, a basket on their head, and tools in their hands. When you get closer to them, a bulging upper arm, revealing shaped muscles is what hits you most. This gene bank explains the sensational success story of black sportswomen and -men all over the world. The African farmer woman is an admirable blend of brain and brawn. The men take care of the livestock and lead a nomad life searching for grazing fields for their herds and market places to sell and buy their stock. Throughout the day you see them under the shade of trees, chatting and sipping their drinks.



*Rice cultivation on raised beds in India*



*Flooded rice paddy in India*



*Men in charge of livestock*



*Women developing the dairy industry in Senegal*

The first country where I worked was the Ivory Coast in western Africa in the mid '90s. It used to be the pearl of Africa, a well-managed country by an authoritarian French-educated president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny. The country's cash crops such as cotton, pineapples, sugarcane, citrus were managed by Commodity Production and Marketing Boards. Their president used to be a local person while his deputy a Frenchman, relic of the colonial system, the kingpin of a successful power transition. A large group of French researchers and technicians could be found on the ground even in remote places deep in the jungle. They were deployed by the Ministry of Overseas and used to spend frequent vacations in France. You could see them in Abidjan or in Conakry filling the town's French restaurants. Wining and dining at lunch time with family. It isn't an easy task to rush back to work afterwards, so they usually cut it short going home. Nowadays, both the Ivory Coast in western Africa and Kenya in the East, two countries with once reliable power and water supply as well as other government services reached the lowest common denominator of many other African countries as far as quality of life is concerned. Kenya ousted its former British civil servants and the downfall came into sight.

Many of the local managers were talented and devoted. They usually came from the villages and their natural intelligence was enhanced by the French education system. We've been on a World Bank mission and we tried to promote the "Training and Visit" (T&V) extension-advisory system in the country in the framework of an identification mission. The French researchers and advisors resisted the attempt. In fact they didn't want to expose their turf to a system which doesn't come from a French source. We moved from one research station to another and I had a hard time presenting the system and argue with them in my then rudimentary French. Finally we got a pilot project area for a demonstration. At the end of our lengthy visit, the senior Bank officials moved back from the field to Abidjan by car to continue discussions, while I the junior,

had to take a flight from Bouake reaching the capital comfortably and ahead of time. The French left behind not only their language and manners but also their food. In every god-forgotten village you could always find fresh baguettes and in the smallest restaurants - avocat vinaigrette and other goodies of the French cuisine.

Next step was to train local farm advisors on T&V principles and mechanism. Another Israeli colleague, who grew up in Canada, and spoke French joined me as well as an arrogant but rookie Frenchman who worked for the Bank. My French was sort of a correct textbook language but I lacked many of the technical terms. I lectured and the audience complained to the Frenchman that they don't fully understand me. Instead of helping me out as a teammate should, he sort of lectured me. Didn't hide my dislike of his attitude. Requesting that we sit down with patience and let's go through my missing terms. Basically, we the two Israelis were the experts on extension advisory systems while he was new to the topic. Just didn't have yet the support of computer-assisted presentations all in French as in Burkina Faso some ten years later but talks improvised with chalk and blackboard. He gave in and we had daily sessions to upgrade my capabilities to save face and the workshop. What a difference from another Frenchman, a teammate while on a mission at Bamako in Mali. I had my computerized slide shows with French captions but without the five accents and all punctuations and orthographic signs which make French so unique and unmanageable. This teammate volunteered to take care of all my punctuations. He sat down with me in front of the laptop and corrected what had to be redressed for four hours. Apparently, accents are a matter of national pride. While in Paraguay, our team leader who spoke and wrote impeccable Spanish, didn't have Spanish accents on his machine. We submitted to the Ministry an important document. It was rejected with the request that it should be first fully accented.

In Abidjan we stayed in one of the capital's best hotels. It accommodated a vast casino on its ground floor. Here and there we popped in after work to watch the action. Customers were both foreigners and locals. Quite a few black women among them. Middle-aged, middle-class, still good-looking, clad in colorful local gowns. They were addicted gamblers who spent their time in the casino on a daily basis. When short of cash or broke, they would duck out with someone to one of the hotel's rooms. After some time they were back again at the green roulette table betting on the red or the black, or on figures from 0 to 36, with well-earned cash in their wallets.

We travelled from Abidjan, the capital to Yamoussoukro, the future one where Houphouët-Boigny was born. A large part of Yamoussoukro and its infrastructure were built by Solel Bone, an Israeli construction firm. The center piece of their work was a huge Roman-Catholic cathedral. Solel Bone employed French-speaking Israelis from the planning, construction and roads branches. Most of staff were either Romania or Morocco-born. Who else is francophone in

Israel? Some of the Romanian engineers were newcomers to Israel who found a lucrative job with Solel Bone in Africa. Often their Hebrew was almost non-existent. When asked in Hebrew whom do you work for, they could merely say: Solel Bone, in the heaviest Romanian accent on earth. It was a most impressive sight to see a modern and vast concrete town hatching from the jungle. The new town became the country's political capital but very few government offices and firms left Abidjan. Nowadays Yamoussoukro is being reclaimed by the same jungle.



*Basilica of our Lady of Peace, Yamoussoukro. Côte d'Ivoire. The largest Christian church of the world. Larger than St Peter's basilica in Rome*



*With The Guinea team and Jim Dean*

While in Burkina Faso we were invited to a meal in a village. The stew wasn't bad. Didn't worry then about the sort of the meat it was made of. It turned out that "agouti" is in fact a cane rat, playing an important role in the local diet.

In Conakry, Guinea have also worked on a World Bank financed agricultural extension-advisory system contracted by Tahal Consulting Engs., an Israeli consulting firm. A young American anthropologist, Jim Dean, was my counterpart. Not to be confused with the James Dean. Jim grew up in France, spoke superb French and was deeply dedicated and in love with Africa. He lived in Africa all his mature life. He didn't work for an international organization but consulted for local governments. Often he moved for jobs from one country to another. Subsequently his remuneration was modest. He was married to a black Jamaican woman who preferred to live in the US rather than in Africa with him. There were no cellphones at that time. Jim used to call his wife once a week from the Post Office to check, "whether he is still married"? We travelled and worked together all the time. At the end of the mission he wrote his report in French. I wrote mine in English and Jim translated it into French. He dealt with the social aspects of the project while I with the strengthening of the advisory system. We had a wrap-up meeting with the Director General of the Ministry of Agriculture and his team. I reported first and been commended for my work and help. Jim who lived in Guinea, knew the ground better than anyone else, was the next speaker. The bosses asked him nasty questions, his report was badly criticized almost rejected. Have asked the Israeli Tahal project leader, what's hiding behind this show? There is a regulation in Guinea that upon the departure of government-employed consultants, their furniture and apartment content passes to the government. And the Director General was after his furniture. The devoted work of a foreign specialist who regarded his activity in Guinea as his life's mission was at the bottom of his stack. Jim bit the bullet. He had a nice rented apartment. Its main furniture being a long table refrigerator, the one used in supermarkets, where he kept his huge supply of beer. To supplement his earnings, he used to send containers of African wood carvings to his wife in the US, who marketed them at a nice price. We finished our field trip at the far end of the country at N'Zerenkore. The way back to Conakry had to be made by air. The only active plane on the line was a Russian propeller-driven machine. It had four Russian crew members. Watched with fear the eroded tyres that forgot how grooves looked like. We took off from a bumpy field strip. Basically, a domestic flight between two towns of the same country, Guinea. We landed first in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. A country under chronical emergency and martial law. As we landed the four Russian pilots took out their rifles and surrounded the plane. Passengers left the aircraft with their baskets, sacks, bags and chicken. Others began to board with more or less the same load. We remained seated on

the plane trying to keep a cool head while watching the spooky patrolling of armed soldiers all over the airport. The pilots climbed back into the cockpit and stored their rifles. We took off relieved for Conakry.

On a free and sunny morning in Conakry grabbed my camera just for a walk through the town. Took a few snaps. Suddenly a heavy arm grabs me with force. The guard shouts at me, don't you see that picture taking is strictly prohibited here? And he starts to drag me to a checkpoint. It turns out that I photographed the state radio station. Horrible. Only after a lengthy explanation that I am a consultant working for the Ministry of Agriculture, did they release the spy.

The country's first president was Marxist Ahmed Sekou-Toure. "We prefer poverty in liberty to riches in slavery", Toure boldly said in his speech in 1958 when de Gaulle visited Guinea, hinting at his country's relations with France. On the heels of this statement, France withdrew all forms of financial-economic aid and recalled all of its technical and administrative officers in Guinea. In one of the regional research stations that we visited, a French entomologist (insect research) did investigate for years the communication patterns between bees. He filled daily his logbooks with his observations but never published his findings. When the order to leave within 24 hours was given by de Gaulle, he was caught wrong-footed. Unable to take along his records, he used the last 24 hours left to draw on his lab's walls the bees language that he deciphered. Then he walled in the laboratory's windows and doors. Some three decades later, a young American Peace Corps volunteer arrived at the station. He broke into that lab and found to his astonishment the fresco-covered walls. Being raised on a farm and well-versed on bee-keeping he assessed right his finding's significance. He then spent his time decoding the signals and devised a dictionary of the bees communication patterns and language.

My counterpart in Senegal, in the early 2000s was a clever and pretty young woman. She was educated in France and held a PhD in genetics. We visited together first government research stations and one international research group. Their equipment and staff were both impressive. Before leaving for the field trip we needed a car. Rental prices were exorbitant. So, my counterpart asked for my agreement to hire as driver, a relative of hers and a car from another relative, for a reasonable price. The professional driver was OK but in the twilight hours he turned the steering wheel dangerously towards the opposite lane. She was sitting next to the driver. I sat in the back. I jumped panicked two or three times when we veered away to the opposite lane and afraid of a crash, requested my counterpart to take over the steering wheel. She did. I was sure the driver was drowsing after a long day. Removed from the driver's seat, he revealed his story. He broke his glasses some time ago. Had no money to replace them. In urgent need for a job and a fund raising drive. He

was able to manage the car at daytime but was lost at dusk and dark. Following year my well-qualified counterpart left Senegal and settled down in the US. Found a well-paid job in research. Typical Third World brain drain.



*The PhD in genetics counterpart, giving a hand to fix a punctured tyre in Senegal*

I didn't work in Kenya but visited it a few times. Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided that for security reasons, its personnel will fly to the Far East via



Nairobi. Had to run a training course in Thailand. When flying from Tel Aviv to Bangkok you don't need a yellow fever vaccination but coming from an infested area such as Kenya, you do. I stopped over Nairobi for 3 days and an Israeli friend stationed there gave me a good time: safari included. Kenya is even well-known for hosting yellow fever. To be efficient the vaccine needs a two week incubation and I had to leave for Bangkok in 3 days and still haven't got a shot at all. So we go to the Health Office in Nairobi to take a shot but that day's stamp wouldn't suffice. For the first time in life folded a banknote and pushed it through the counter into the clerk's hand to get my medical certificate stamped with the date moved back by a full fortnight. My second time when in need of such a kickback occurred in another third world country, Ceausescu's Romania. That time in my native town, Timisoara. In the early eighties, rented a car in Belgrade and drove the 100 km to Timisoara to spend a couple of days with my uncle. Pulled up at the "Banatul" to look for a room. No vacancies. Miraculously available when a banknote was slipped into the receptionist's hand.

In eastern Africa's Rwanda been recruited for project work in the early 2000s by an Israeli firm that had dozens of economic interests in the country. In fact, our agricultural development program was a bonus offered by the firm to the government. Have visited the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, the capital town. You realize there that in Namibia, which used to be a German colony, genocide was practiced by the colonists between 1904 and 1907. 75000 people perished. It's been called the precursor to the Holocaust, and the "forgotten genocide". The massacre of the Herero and Nama people at the hands of colonialists in Namibia is considered the first genocide of the 20th century. The deep ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda which led in 1994 to the brutal death of around 800.000 people is attributed in the Memorial to the country's colonial past. The Belgian colonists were those who allegedly initiated the registration of ethnic affiliation in all personal identity cards. Seems a simplistic explanation covering up old animosity between the tribes. Travelling around the country you see quite often cohorts of detainees clad in orange prison garb marching on the road. They have been accused of murder, convicted and serve long terms. The heart of the matter, however, is that you feel everywhere in Rwanda a keen desire and commitment to leave conflicts behind and build up a new society and a new country.



*Women always carry a load, men prefer to sit or squat. Kigali, Rwanda.*



*Genocide Memorial, Kigali. Rwanda*

### *A final word*

“Africa’s fast-growing population and markets present important opportunities for business in an environment of slowing global growth. At the same time, greater innovation and investment from business is essential to meet Africa’s unfulfilled demand for goods and services, close the gaps in its infrastructure, create jobs, and decrease poverty”. This quote from Brookings Institute’s 2018 report is one of the numerous evaluation reports that appraise Africa’s potential.” After a slowdown prompted by the shocks of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the collapse of oil prices in 2014, Africa’s growth has recovered and its future prospects look buoyant. Two indicators from the World Bank underline the continent’s promise. First, of the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world in 2018, six were in Africa— with Ghana at the top of the world ranking. Secondly, in the World Bank’s 2019 Doing Business index, five of the 10 most improved countries are in Africa, and one third of all reforms recorded globally were in sub-Saharan Africa”. For my money, corruption is public enemy no.1 in the attempt to draw out Africa’s potential and accelerate the continent’s evolution.