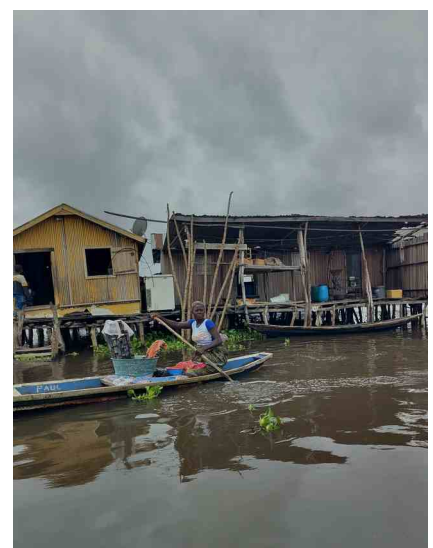


Report for September

Arrival and everyday life in Benin

Since my arrival in Benin almost one month has passed. I can hardly believe how quickly time flies! It feels like I only arrived at the airport in Cotonou yesterday, heavily loaded with luggage and completely overwhelmed by the realization that I would be living in this, at this point, unfamiliar country for a year. Fortunately, a welcoming committee from "Actions de Solitarité" was already waiting for me at the airport and gave me a truly warm welcome. I immediately felt at ease with Mr. Christian, the NGO's driver, Mr. Marcel, the VIA coordinator, and Michée, a young man from the NGO's mentoring program. And so, even on my first drive to Astrid's house, I was amazed by the streets of Cotonou. Even at 11 p.m., the traffic is still heavy, and at first glance, it seems as if everything is descending into chaos. Cars, motorcycles, and trucks drive every which way, and horns are constantly blaring. But over time, a system begins to emerge. To overtake, the horn is used to signal "Attention, here I come!" This warns the other side, creating a kind of conversation on the road, only instead of voices, you hear a variety of sounds. However, the driving style of most people here is quite daring and takes some getting used to, especially when you're riding on a motorcycle taxi, a "Zem." The first few times, I clung on tightly to the back and just shook my head at everyone else, some of whom were crammed three or four people onto the motorcycle. But gradually, I did get used to the fast ride.

Overall, I was particularly struck in the first few days by how open and welcoming the people here are. I've been warmly introduced to everyday life in Benin, and so I've already visited various tourist attractions, such as the water city of Ganvié in Calavi and the large market "Dantokpa" in Cotonou. Each time, I've been accompanied by Michée, who immediately agreed to show me his country.



The visit to Dantokpa Market was particularly exciting. It's the largest market in West Africa, and you can buy practically anything there, from clothes and fabrics to accessories and toiletries, as well as all sorts of fruits and vegetables. It takes a while, though, to find what you're looking for. The market is the size of an entire neighborhood and is laid out like a labyrinth. With its narrow aisles and constant hustle and bustle, there's hardly any time to look around properly. After a while, I felt quite confined, because as soon as I stopped, three or four vendors would approach me, trying to sell me their wares. Some even followed me after I declined, refusing to let go. This kind of persistence was completely new to me and repeatedly made me feel uneasy. I was really relieved to have Michée with me for support.



Another thing, that initially puzzled me, was the habit of sweeping the house and surroundings daily and with great diligence. In the schools, a major cleaning session is held every morning, where the children thoroughly clean the classrooms and the schoolyard with brooms. People here take the time to tidy up their homes before breakfast.

Time plays a completely different role here than, for example, in Germany. Hectic activity is by no means the norm. On the contrary, people take their time on the streets to greet everyone thoroughly, whether it's a neighbor or a complete stranger. It can easily happen that a five-minute walk takes half an hour because another conversation awaits at every corner.

Negotiating prices at the markets was also new to me. The first time, I walked with Dassi, the third person living in the house, to the nearest market in Golo-Djigbé. It was about a 20-minute walk. When I arrived, I felt quite overwhelmed at first. The various stalls offered a wide selection of fruits and vegetables, selling both traditional and new varieties from all over the world. So, alongside cassava and crincrin, you could also find carrots and potatoes. When shopping, you either had to agree on a price or move on to the next stall and try your luck there. I've been shopping alone several times now, but I still find it difficult to accurately judge prices and negotiate with the vendors.

I also have difficulty dealing with people's frequent curiosity about me. In addition, men can be very pushy, and marriage proposals from both young and older people appear out of nowhere.

What I find particularly delightful, however, are the many different traditional dishes of Benin. The food is generally very carbohydrate-rich and, for European palates, perhaps a bit too chili-heavy. Nevertheless, I've already fallen in love with Beninese cuisine and enjoy eating the various types of *pâte*. They're best with fried cheese or fish and a peanut sauce. When buying food at street stalls or in restaurants, portions are served according to the price. So you can ask for different portion sizes depending on your appetite and, if you like, get second helpings.

My first meeting with the team of the NGO "Actions de Solidarité" took place during the first week after my arrival. In the office, I was able to meet the entire team, including the three young interns Kazimir, Précieuse, and Tchaidath, who were now working with the more experienced animators Richard and Aristide in Dassa and Ouaké to implement environmental projects and raise awareness at two different schools.



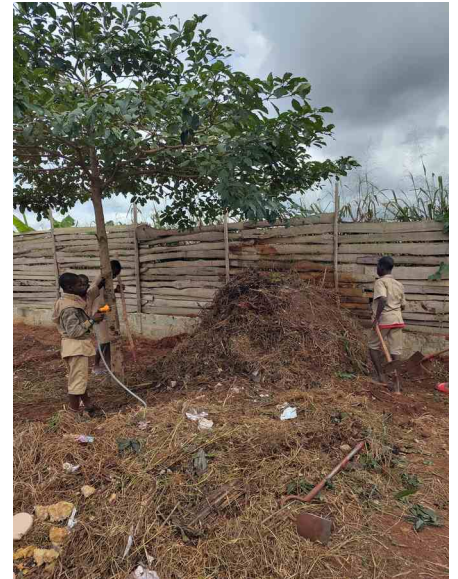
On the first Tuesday, I immediately traveled with Astrid to Ouinhi, a town in southeastern Benin, about four hours from Calavi. The meeting focused on a potential project involving local hot springs. Upon arrival, our first stop was the office of the mayor of Ouinhi. I felt a bit out of place, surrounded by all those important people. I didn't understand much of what was said; my French wasn't quite up to par. Of course, we took the obligatory photo at the end. At midday, we all went to one of the springs. The water there was wonderfully warm, perfect for bathing and relaxing. One idea was to develop a spa resort. However, the water quality would first need to be tested. All of this was discussed over lunch at a small roadside restaurant to which the mayor had invited us.



The first two weeks, however, were spent at the office. Initially, I was a little confused that most of the time was spent working in the office and little happened outside. However, the environmental projects at the schools hadn't even started yet. Everyone was simply waiting for the start of the school year after the summer holidays. When it finally arrived and we visited the two schools here in Calavi for the first time, the real work began for me as well. During the previous weeks in the office, I hadn't had much to do most of the time and, consequently, wasn't challenged much. The environmental projects at the Golo-Djigbé and Yekon-Do primary schools include raising awareness about waste separation as well as producing compost for the school garden. They also address the issue of buying hot food in plastic bags, which the children often pick up from the street. During the first week of the awareness campaign, the team—Léones, Antione, and I—visited the classrooms to teach the children the importance of sustainable environmental practices and the dangers of buying food in plastic bags. We also organized meetings with the teaching staff in both Golo-Djigbé and Yekon-Do schools to collect further ideas for implementing the project. Unfortunately, the meetings were only attended with lukewarm interest at both schools, with some teachers primarily occupied with their mobile phones during the discussions. At the Yekon-Do primary school, we also had difficulties reaching an agreement with the headmaster regarding the garden project. The plan is to grow vegetables for the school cafeteria to improve the students' lunches. It was made clear that the gardening work should only begin in collaboration with us, the NPO, to introduce the students to proper gardening practices. However, this decision has been disregarded several times by the school administration, which has started implanting the garden beds on its own. And even after several discussions with the principle, no visible improvement has occurred.

The teaching staff at the school in Golo-Gjibé, on the other hand, seemed to be more cooperative. We are greeted warmly in the schoolyard every day and the headteachers of the three groups, A, B, and C often visit the garden. However, there were some complications here as well regarding the use of the vegetables. Since the school doesn't have its own cafeteria, the plan is to sell the vegetables, with the proceeds going to the school. This strategy had to be discussed several times before the school administration was willing to accept it. Now the garden project has started at both schools, and we spend our mornings preparing the beds and compost together with the children. The work is strenuous, and the heat quickly makes it unpleasant, but the results are impressive. However, in Yekon-Do, there is a difficulty in releasing the children from school for gardening during class time. This issue should be discussed with the headteacher as soon as possible to avoid any misunderstandings.





Another part of my duties as a volunteer with the association is, attending German classes at the Secondary School of Gbetagbo to support the German teacher, Mr. Parfait, in his work. I will also be leading the weekly German club, which focuses on introducing students to life in Germany with its traditions and customs. However, this club hasn't yet taken place due to a lack of suitable space. I have, however, been able to attend the German classes several times. What's particularly striking is the emphasis on traditional, teacher-centered instruction. Group work is practically nonexistent, and questions are rarely asked. Adding to the challenge is the class size, with up to 50 children, making it difficult to engage with each student. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of curiosity about me, and I am frequently bombarded with questions. The absence of a religion, however, causes considerable confusion. I have come to know Mr. Parfait as an open and warm person who enjoys joking with his students and is highly respected among them. I am very much looking forward to leading the German club in his presence and bringing a piece of German life to Benin.

Overall, I've slowly gotten used to the unfamiliar way of life in this country, which also means that the journey home from school is getting longer and longer, as I'm naturally getting to know people in the neighborhood. And I no longer object to the morning cleaning ritual, even if it does delay breakfast a bit. Gradually, I've also started to venture into learning a few words of the local language, Fon. Even a simple "Good morning" in Fon as a greeting brings a smile to people's faces.