

The Life of a Servant

The Life of a Servant by Dorothy Forsberg, SIM Benin

27 July 2009

Abraham dreamed ... a vivid dream. He saw a bright light. He saw all of the Christians that he knew ... they were following their Leader into heaven. But an angel came and threatened Abraham with a sword ... he was standing on a great precipice ... he closed his eyes and waited. He felt the swish of the angel's sword above his head and he heard a voice saying, 'You! You have escaped!' Startled, he awoke ... and he realized that it was only a dream.



The West African country of Benin is known for being 'the home of voodoo', and practising voodoo is the Yom tradition into which Abraham was born. As a child, he was known as Sidi. His family made regular sacrifices to the gods and visited witch doctors for healing when they were ill. Abraham didn't know about Jesus. In fact, the first reports that he heard about Christians came from a neighbouring village and were less than flattering.

One day a group of Bible school students came to share about Jesus in his village. They distributed pictures and taught them a simple song recounting the Gospel:

God loves mankind and is merciful to them. Alleluia, Alleluia! He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, Savior. Alleluia, Alleluia! Jesus Christ, God, came to the world to save. He died for us all to forgive our sins. I came to Jesus Christ, he is my protector. He shed his blood for me, he will receive me in heaven. This Jesus will come back to take his people. Since he saved me like that, I will rejoice in him forever. Alleluia, Alleluia!

The song stuck with him, but he wasn't convinced. He had been seeing a witch doctor for some time because of his health issues, and he was afraid that this man would kill him if he turned away from voodoo. The witch doctor had become Abraham's 'master'.

It wasn't until after his dream that he became convinced enough to take action. The next morning, he gathered together all his talismans and all his other occult paraphernalia and destroyed them. But for two months he did not go to church.

And then one day there was a death in the village where the Christians were meeting. Abraham accompanied a relative to visit the bereaved. In this village they came across a group of Christians who were meeting in the village chief's big entrance hut. Abraham joined them and experienced a rush of joy. From then on, every Sunday he got ready and set off, walking the two miles to 'church.' When he was baptised ... he changed his name from Sidi to Abraham.

Abraham answers the call ...

In the late 1970s, SIM needed to enlist three men to be a part of the final revision team for the Yom New Testament. They needed two men who could read French, and one who was fluent in reading Yom.

As a new believer, Abraham had learned to read Yom. A pastor approached him to join the work, but by that time Abraham was doing well in his farming. He had built one part of his house and was getting ready to build the next. He had three hectares (nearly 7.5 acres) of cashew plantation (a good cash crop), yam fields, rabbits ... he couldn't leave all that! 'There are good Christian readers in other villages,' he said. 'Ask them.'

Later the pastor came back to him. He hadn't found anyone else who could go. Abraham considered the consequences. If he didn't go ... there would be no Bible. He had to go. He relinquished all that he had worked so hard to achieve and went to a far away place outside the Yom area. There he joined SIM missionary translator, Gordon Beacham, and the two other members of the team. They started work in 1980.

By 1985, they had finished the revision, read and reread the manuscript, and worked through the word lists and the lists of names. Making sure that the work was as consistent as possible, the team was excited for Mr. and Mrs. Beacham to deliver the disks to the USA for type-setting.

During the time they were away, Abraham visited his village. Almost everything he had left had disappeared. His house had been used, but without benefit to Abraham.

But what rejoicing when the New Testament arrived in 1986! The dedication coincided with the dedication of a new, big church in Djougou, the main town of the Yom area.

So when the team for the translation of the Old Testament was formed back in Djougou, Abraham became an indispensable part of it. His lack of formal education actually served as a check on the others, who unconsciously followed the language patterns of French, the language of Beninese educators. His knowledge of and 'feel' for the language made him the best person on the team to check the 'naturalness' of the translated texts.

Over the years, Abraham learned to use the typewriter and then the computer, on which he would record entire books of the Old Testament. He also contributed to a growing body of Yom literature by writing down traditional tales and small brochures.

After 29 years of service to SIM, to the Yom people, and to the Lord, Abraham retired on Saturday 9 May, 2009. His colleagues in the UEEB (Union des Eglises Evangéliques du Bénin) Linguistics and translation department, SIM co-labourers and friends, and a group of delegates from all of the Yom churches were among those present at the celebration.

Being true to the motivation behind his 29 years of translation work, Abraham invited family and friends that have not yet placed their faith in Jesus so that they could hear the Good News once again.

Urgent prayer need

Pray for those affected by the devastating floods in Pakistan, and for those who are seeking to help them.

