

Yalunka Initiative Report January-February 2014

Report on visits to Falvillage and Mamavillage with Troy, Gerri, Ashley, Samba, and Steve Nelson.

We left early Saturday morning the first of February. Two hours east of Kedougou we crossed the border into Mali and continued on the paved road to Kenieba. We have some friends in Kenieba; one is a young man, probably in his mid-30s, who is a very good mechanic. He has been a Christian since 1990 and worships at the Evangelical Protestant church in town. He has helped us many times in the past as we've had car problems from time to time. At the present time, he's storing our vehicles for us that are registered in Mali, and can only come over into Senegal on temporary passes. It was good to chat with him and renew our friendship.

We then continued on the paved road another 30 minutes to Dabia. It's interesting to me to see how much commerce is coming to these towns since the paved road was built from Bamako to Dakar. Many small towns, where there was almost nothing but houses and small markets two years ago, now have modern gas stations, and stores are popping up with a variety of packaged goods and drinks that now arrive from the big cities by truck.

At Dabia we filled our tank with fuel at the new gas station, locked in our hubs for four-wheel drive, and headed off down the dirt road. It's only about 15 minutes to the first creek that has to be forded, but the water was up to only the middle of the wheels. It's the rocks one has to be careful of. Then it was on to the big river that we have to drive through to cross over into Yalunka land. It takes about two hours to get to that point, even though it's really only 20 miles from the paved road. Fortunately, the water was down this year, and only once out in the middle where we hit the low spot did the water come up over the hood of the truck. We kept pressing farther south, winding around the hills, and sometimes climbing them to the plateaus on top. These hills are ancient volcanic laterite rock: very hard, very rough, and not very forgiving. So hard on vehicles, tires, and human bodies. But with a lot of determination and pulling together as a team, we made it to Falea, our first destination. Thank you, Lord!

The welcome in Falvillage was warm, and right away they brought chairs for us to sit in the shade of the huge mango tree in the middle of the chief's compound.

Unfortunately, we found out that Chief Sam**** had been hit by a car while he was riding on a motorcycle two months earlier, and he was recuperating in Bamako, having been injured quite severely. They assured us that he was healing well, but they didn't know when he would be back home. Much to our chagrin we also learned that Chief Kay, who carries the title of Big Chief because he's the chief of the whole larger territory, was also gone for the time being visiting some of his villages. That, too, takes time, and they really didn't know when he would be back, but they kept saying, "Maybe tomorrow."

That evening they brought us water to bathe with, a big bowl of rice and sauce, and they emptied out a hut for us to sleep in. Many of the village men and some of the women came by to greet us and chat a bit. The big chief's younger brother, Senkay, came and spent a good deal of time with us. He and his brother Big Chief Kay had both chosen to follow Jesus a couple years ago, and so there is a greater bond and joy in greeting them as brothers in Christ. Several of the Christ followers came to greet us and sit with us for a little while. There were a lot of women there at the compound, and there was more cooking going than normal. Pretty soon they told us they were preparing for the celebration in the morning. It would be a baby-naming ceremony—a very special occasion in village life. One of Chief Sam****'s younger sons and his wife had had a baby, and Sunday was the eighth day and time to announce the name.

Sunday dawned, and there was excitement in the air. They brought us millet porridge for breakfast, and by 9:30 the community had gathered. People were dressed up, and a ram was brought for the sacrifice. The sacrifice was really more for the celebration and the opportunity for everyone to eat meat with their sauce, but it was slain in front of the gathered group, and the blood spilt on the ground, before the name of the baby was announced. The elders all prayed in M*sl*m tradition for the health and blessing of the baby and the family. Then they took the ram off to the side to butcher it, and brought it back to the women to cook. Then we went farther over in the village to another compound where there was another baby naming ceremony the same day. So we ate well that day, and there was a festive air over the village.

Meanwhile, we did a lot of sitting around in the shade while various ones came to talk. There was a gathering of men around us that came and went at times, but one

of the men was Jean Pierre. Three years earlier, he was the one that came in from his fields late in the night after we had gone to sleep, so they didn't wake us. The next morning they told us about him, and asked if we would wait for them to wake him and bring him to us. He had decided he wanted to put his faith in Christ and follow Jesus, so they had come to tell us that and to ask us to pray with him.

When we first met him, he went by an African name, but now is going by Jean Pierre, so as to be recognized as a Christ follower. This day he had many good questions about his faith. The questions were mostly of practice, and a lot of questions were about what Christians are allowed to do and not allowed to do. That wasn't at all surprising considering the religion he left behind is based on legalism and deeds. The beauty was not only the questions and discussions, but the fact that it all happened in the community. There were seldom fewer than five other men of all ages sitting with us, but often as many as 15 to 20. The others also added questions about the faith. We were careful to always use Scripture to address their questions and let Scripture speak to the issues. A few different times someone told us of a specific issue or need, and we shared Scripture and prayed for their need specifically.

The second day began with people coming around with special prayer requests, even before we had our breakfast porridge. That continued throughout the day. We tried to keep track of each of their names and requests, but couldn't keep up with them, as sometimes several came together. We asked each one if they were coming to us as Christ followers or M*sl*m. Usually it was the latter, and they wanted us to pray a blessing over them for protection, or good luck, or material wealth, etc. So each time we would share Scripture with them and share with them how the Word of God can literally set them free for eternity. We would explain to them that instead of asking for good luck, we would pray for God to open their eyes to His Truth, draw near to them, and help them find the Truth that would set them free. They were always very accepting of that and would listen intently as Samba would translate the message and Scripture into Yalunka for them. Then we would pray for them and they would go. What a great opportunity to share the Gospel.

Neither of the chiefs came by the third day, so I didn't feel it was appropriate to make the formal introduction of Masters and Ashley, although we had informally shared with our hosts who they were and why we had come. But we had come to

present them to the chief, and I didn't want to steal the moment or impact by taking a shortcut. We will practice patience and come again. I'm sure God has a good reason, and even the experience we just had will work together for future good, in God's time. Just for the record, the days were very warm as is typical, but the nights were very cold. Colder by far than I've experienced so far in this part of Africa. Falea is on top of a small mountain, so that contributes, but even inside the hut at night, it was downright cold. It may have reached 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and we each had only a lightweight blanket to put over us.

So the third day we said our goodbyes, prayed for them all, and wished them well. We spent most of that day crossing over to Mamavillage, where again we were warmly welcomed in the home of the head elder of the village, SeKay. He's a Yalunka man, and we had stayed with his family before. His compound is right in the center of the village. There was much joy and interest in our arrival and the arrival again of our translator, Samba. Joy and laughter, much chit chat, and a very good bowl of rice were shared. They sent word out to the chief that we had arrived, and asked if he would receive us the next day. He sent word back that he would be waiting to receive us the next morning.

Day two in Mamavillage: It was very cold again last night, "cold" being a relative term. One of the nice things about this village is that they make small fires in the morning with dried bamboo for us to sit around and warm up. They also made us hot millet porridge, and there was no hurry to getting around to the work of the day. So by mid-morning elder SeKay was ready to take us out to the chief's compound. Mamavillage is a rather large village built on the banks of the big river. There's a lot of gold being found throughout the area, and the town had nearly doubled in size since I was there last. The chief's compound is approximately a mile out along the river, and really sort of like a village of its own, with probably 50 to 100 huts and several sub-compounds. Chief Dug** was ready to receive us, and we had a very warm and joyful welcome and many greetings.

Finally we all sat down, and the chief told Samba he was ready to hear our message. So first I thanked them for receiving and welcoming us. I told them how happy we were and being well taken care of by elder Keita and his family. I reminded them of our first visit in January 2011, how they had heard our story, and then called the elders of the village to all gather and hear our story. I reminded

them how they had heard it well, and that each one of them had invited us to come back to Mamavillage to share the Word from the Big Creator. (I use the term Big Creator to be very clear who I am talking about instead of using their word for God, just to be sure.) This whole process was being translated sentence by sentence into their heart language, and they were all agreeing with each sentence. We also reminded them that I had promised that we would find people willing to come back and learn their language to teach them God's Word.

I then told them the story of how when I left Africa to go back home, on the airplane I was very aware of the promise I had made, and that I didn't have even one person at that point who was willing or interested in coming back to learn their language and teach God's Word. I told them how I prayed on the airplane home that if this was the time for the Yalunka of Mali to be reached, then it was up to the Big Creator to raise up missionaries willing and called to do this work.

Then I introduced Masters and Ashley and related how God had spoken to each of them individually, and how they had come forward and volunteered to leave their homes and families to learn two new languages so they could communicate well in teaching God's Word to the Yalunka villages. I told them these were the people that God has raised up to come back here. I told them that they had been working hard to learn French, and that they were living in Kedougou, in a Yalunka community, learning the heart language of the Yalunka people. I told them that soon they will be making trips out to the Yalunka villages of Mali to share the stories of God's Word. I told them that God has also provided another young family that's now living in Dakar and studying French before moving to Kedougou to learn Yalunka in the months ahead. I told them this is how God has answered our prayers.

The chief had a few of his family and village members sitting there with him listening to all of this. There was also a man I didn't recognize or remember at all. When I had finished my presentation, chief Dug** expressed his great joy and happiness that we had come back. He warmly welcomed Troy, Gerri, and Ashley and thanked them for coming and for learning their language. He expressed the joy for the whole village and reiterated that we were all welcome to come back and teach them God's Word. Then he introduced the man sitting next to him, whom we hadn't met yet, as the chief of another Yalunka village. His name was Fag**Kay of Bosvillage not too far away. So we made his acquaintance, and he said we were

welcome to come to his village to teach as well. It was a great morning, and we left with much joy. Everywhere we went it brought such fun and surprise when Troy, Gerri, and Ashley would greet people and return their greetings properly in their own language and practice their Yalunka vocabulary with them.

We returned to elder SeKay's compound, and he took us for a long walk through the village and to the river bank where there are many people digging for gold and pounding rocks with hammer mills. It's a very dirty job and hard, hard work from dawn until dusk. Men, wives, children, teenagers, babies — everyone seems to have a job in the hot sun digging, panning, or washing the dirt bowl by bowl in search of the precious little flakes they are so hungry for. Later that evening as we sat and chatted with SeKay, he told us his brother SaKay is the chief of yet another Yalunka village he would like us to visit: Khorvillage, which I hadn't yet heard of and hadn't seen on a map. So God just opened yet another unexpected door.

We relaxed and enjoyed another very good meal. There was meat in the sauce that night, and it seemed like the meals kept getting better the longer we stayed. Certainly the fellowship kept getting better, too, as we had many conversations, and the women folk and children particularly began to warm up to Gerri and Ashley, making them feel welcome. Late that evening Troy and I were sitting in Keita's open-walled shelter they refer to as their "foyer." Samba and Keita were getting into a discussion and conversation that didn't seem to involve Troy and me, as Samba wasn't taking time to translate into French for us. So Troy and I were having our own conversation about the day's events. Little by little I could catch enough of their words and references to know it was a spiritual conversation and was getting fairly intense.

About an hour later they slowed down, and Samba addressed us. He said that we'd probably noticed that SeKay and he had been having a serious conversation. He said SeKay asked him, "What will it mean if I and my family decide to follow Jesus and turn away from I*lam? How will it change our lives, and what will it mean to me and my family?" Samba, then began to explain to us the explanation he had given him and the Scripture he had shared with him, as SeKay followed and agreed with him. When they finished and waited for my response, I expressed my joy and complimented Samba on his sharing. Then I asked SeKay if he was ready to accept Christ and make this change. He and Samba both smiled and held up

their hands. "Patience," they said, "Patience."

SeKay replied, "He has given me much truth and many things to think about. Let me have time to process this. I will be considering all these things in the days ahead. Come back and teach us more." I agreed that sounded like a wise plan, while in my heart I was asking God the same thing. God, please give him time and let him think this through, but keep it fresh on his mind and heart. Let him talk about it with his wives, sons, little ones, and grandchildren, but keep him healthy and strong until he is ready to make this decision.

The next morning we woke up, packed up, enjoyed their fire and breakfast, then loaded the truck and said goodbyes. It's amazing how close one can become to a family like that in three short days—a family that has very little of the world's material wealth, but a lot of love, kindness and hospitality in its own way. While we were waiting for breakfast, elder SeKay began talking to Samba and then asked Samba to translate his message to us. He said something like this: "We know you have to go, and we know you will come back, and you are very welcome to come here. This has been a good visit. Here, we are sitting here together and sharing stories. Our skin is black, and your skin is white, and yet, you come here and eat our food out of the same bowls we eat from. You sleep in our huts without fear, and you sit with us in our foyers. Here in our town we have many language groups because of the gold. But it doesn't matter if you have black, brown, white, or blue skin (Was he referring to the very deep, dark black skin some have?), there is no prejudice here. You are welcome here and we are happy to share our home with you."

Wow, thank you, God, for that kind of confirmation and blessing. He didn't need to say that, but he wanted to. I believe they were words inspired by God. We're already looking forward to our next visit to Mamadouya, even though we don't know when that will be. God does.

It was a long, hard, four-hour bumpy ride back out to the paved road, and then almost three more hours on pavement by the time we did the border crossing and made it home to Kedougou. Oh. how nice to come home to dinner ready, a nice shower, and sleeping on a bed. But, in actuality, it represents a great mix of emotions. Those trips are physically hard, but there's great joy in seeing the power

of God's Word at work in people's lives right in front of your eyes that wouldn't be worth trading for a thousand showers or soft beds. We're ready for the next trip out!

Let's praise God together. I think I've told Pat a dozen times or more how nice it is to have her along this time. How great to have someone share the load and help me through it all. During this trip out to the villages, Pat moved down to the Master's house to stay with the two girls, so our trip wouldn't interrupt their schooling. That way Tiffany could keep teaching, and the girls wouldn't miss a beat. And what joy it was to anticipate coming home to a clean house and dinner ready for the whole team. It was fun sharing the stories and adventures from both sides. Following God's path, the rewards outweigh the sacrifice!

May God add His blessing to all our paths. Keep praying for the Yalunka and beyond!

Sincerely,

Steve Nelson
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