

Yalunka Initiative Report March 2014

Erèvillage and Mangavillage trip with Troy, Gerri, Ashley, Samba, and Steve Nelson.

More stories of God's goodness that must be told. You'll remember the stories of Mamvillage and Falvillage from the last report. God paves the way and is accomplishing His purpose. This time we headed farther down to the ends of the road in two directions from Fal**. In both cases, to go farther meant to cross the border into Guinea.

Erè ***** is the village we'd visited in March 2012. There they told us they hadn't seen a vehicle since the last election, which at that time, had been seven years. This time, we were the last vehicle they had seen just two years earlier. The truth was confirmed by the condition of the path we arrived on. But the welcome was warm and joyous. I think they were surprised that we really had come back. Last time, Chief Sam***** had shown us his cow's tail fetish and offered to help us with his power if we had trouble anywhere we traveled.

This time, he welcomed us and seemed even more curious to understand the truth of why we had come back. He hasn't given any indication that he wants to or is considering the Jesus road, but offered warm hospitality, fed us well, and gave us his hut to sleep in the two nights we stayed with them. One evening as we sat by their fire after dinner, the elders of the village began to gather around to hear the news and why we had come. We told our story and presented Masters and Ashley. We told them of the journey they're on to learn Yalunka, to come and teach God's Word in their own language. Mostly it was well-received and a hearty welcome was extended to come back and teach. But there was one old man who seemed to go off on a tirade. We couldn't follow what he was saying, but it didn't seem to conform to the other opinions that had been expressed. He was quite animated and seemed to get more agitated as he went on. Personally I couldn't tell if it had anything to do with us and what we had shared or not, but it definitely had to do with his belief system. It wasn't convenient at the time for Samba to translate for us in the midst of it, so we just sat and listened.

When the old man finished, he got up and walked away. Everyone was quiet for a minute, and then another man spoke up and said, "He said he does not want you to

come here and teach us this Jesus road. We are a m*slm people, and we don't want to change our religion. He does not want us to welcome you to teach here. But even though he does not want to hear it, the rest of us do. We want you to come back and teach us all. We need to hear this Word from the Big Creator." The chief and the others agreed with him, and they repeated their welcome and joy for us to return.

The next day the chief had his younger brother take us on a tour of the village. It is a large village, spread out across the top of a plateau. It's very isolated from other villages, and there's plenty of space. The village is made up of many large family compounds fenced in by a variety of stick and bamboo fences, but with paths between and around and through each compound. It really is a huge maze, and it would take me a long time to familiarize myself with all the compounds. So he took us to different compounds to meet the neighbors. We would walk into a compound, greet whomever was there of the family. Often they would find us something to sit on, and we would chat a bit. Then he would take us on to another compound and we would do similarly. Oftentimes they would offer us a cup of water to pass around, or some oranges or something to eat.

Sometimes, these were compounds of some of the elders or villagers who had been at the meeting the night before, but now we could see them in the daylight and meet their family members. One of the families welcomed us and we chatted a bit. He was a very industrious farmer, and we made comments about the many manioc plants he had growing, it seemed, in every open spot of his yard. He was quite proud of his crop, and he picked up a hoe and selected a plant to harvest. Gerri had her camera out and took pictures while he worked. He dug up the entire plant, whacked off all the manioc tubers and brought them back to the foyer where we were sitting. He then presented them to us as a gift. This type is known here as the sweet manioc because even though it isn't exactly sweet, you can pull it up, peel it, and eat it right out of the ground. It's quite crunchy, and it doesn't take long to learn to like it. It has the texture of a fresh carrot (not the taste) and is quite fun to crunch on. It's also very delicious when peeled, boiled with a little oil and salt, and becomes something like a mild sweet potato.

He was gifting us enough manioc to feed a large group. What a warm welcome and huge gift. The man talked to Samba quite a bit while we were there, and due to the

seating arrangement, it wasn't convenient to translate. As we were walking away, Samba told me that this was the elder who had defended us the night before. He had spoken out first after the other elder had said we weren't welcome there. He also told me that this man is not a Yalunka man. He is Jahanka, and there are several Jahanka families in this village. This man said he has been thinking about the Jesus road since the last time we had come. He said knows the Jesus road is the Truth and he's waiting for us to come back to teach them how to follow Jesus. When we were again sitting with chief Sam****, I asked him about the Jahanka of his village. He said, "Oh, yes, we have many Jahanka living in our village. "In fact, there are probably as many or more Jahanka here than Yalunka." I was really surprised by that.

That alone is powerful and touching. But there's a hidden treasure there that holds even greater intrigue and significance. That was the first time I had knowingly met a Jahanka family. So now let me tell you a secret. I have been praying circles around the Jahanka since early 2010 (and before I even knew what prayer circles were). Let me tell you why.

In the fall of 2009, in preparation for the Yalunka Prayer Summit we held in Dakar with other ministries involved or interested in reaching the Yalunka, we hired the services of Global Mapping International to locate and map out the various language groups in our particular area of interest in Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. On one of the rough drafts they sent, I saw a couple areas of Jahanka near and overlapping Yalunka areas. I hadn't heard of that people group and wondered if it was another spelling or pronunciation of Yalunka/Jalonke (because there are a few). As we investigated, I found out that the Jahanka are definitely a different and unique language group. Related to and perhaps descended from the Malinke people groups, they claim they are the first and most ancient people group to introduce I*L*am to the whole region of West Africa. They take much pride in that, and more than once I was told they are hardcore resistant to the Gospel and do not welcome outsiders, especially anyone who does not follow I*L*am.

Those kinds of statements really touched my heart, and I couldn't shake it because I believe completely in Jesus' words in Mt. 24:14, and I believe Paul's words in Acts 17:26. And so we know they are only resistant to the point that God says it is "your time." Most of the Jahanka land is the desert foothills just to the east of the

Yalunka of Mali. So I began to pray that God will show us when and how to take this same message to the Jahanka of Mali. I've been praying for the Jahanka just like I've prayed for the Yalunka of Mali, for God to show us the key that opens the doors. I'm determined to stay out of God's way and to *not* bang on any doors that He doesn't clearly open for us or lead us to specifically. Now you begin to see the significance playing out in meeting this Jahanka family in Eré Madina, and the man's stating that he's waiting for us to show him the Jesus road. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Stay with me.

We left Erévillage on the third day and drove back north toward Falvillage, then turned east toward the Guinea border to the village of Mangavillage. Here we also had visited two years prior. It was here that Chief Dem** told us their village was closely related to Falvillage, that there were many marriages between the two villages, and they had already heard word of our visits to Falvillage. They had heard that we were bringing the Word from the Big Creator, and he assured us that we were welcome. He said, "The same thing you teach there, you come here and teach us as well." That was in 2012, and we had promised to come back.

This time we came to stay for a few days and to get to know them. It turns out that chief Dem** is a quiet and humble man. Soft spoken, and respected by his people, he appears to be a man of wisdom and kind heart.

He welcomed us and provide for our needs. He gave us a place to stay and had his family draw water for us to bathe and prepare all our meals. The next day one of the elders (we found out is also a Jahanka man) went hunting and brought back a quail. He cleaned it and presented it to us. He was a fun man to talk to, had a good sense of humor, and he sure seemed to enjoy our company. (We found out there are also many Jahanka families living in this village. Not as surprising because this village borders Guinea on the eastern side of Yalunka land looking toward the Jahanka region —but it was news to me.) That night they brought us a bowl of rice and specifically brought us a bowl with the cooked quail so it was all for us. Of course, we shared it, and it was really delicious, but the sentiment was not wasted.

The next day the chief presented us with a live chicken as a gift from his family. (Meat in the sauce again tonight!) He has two wives and 16 children, although he used to have four wives. He has abandoned two of his wives for being unfaithful to

him. His family and the village kept bringing us gifts of oranges, manioc, peanuts, etc. We spent two days sitting on the chief's porch sharing stories and scripture as village life went on around us. We shared with him the first day about the Proclaimers and asked if he would be interested in listening to God's Word in this way. We presented one to him, and he was quite happy with it. From then on we watched him carry it with him everywhere he went. Whenever there was a lull in conversation, he would get it out of the cover and turn it on, quite content to listen to it. Several times he and Samba would get into a great discussion about a passage they were listening to. Many of the village people would come around and sit or stand and just listen to God's Word being played.

I asked the chief to introduce us to the teacher/director of the local M*sQ**. He sent word for him to come meet us. A friendly and kind man, he welcomed us. We told him why we were there, and he said he wasn't against it; he was for it. He said as he sees it, all paths lead to the Big Creator, and one path may suit some people, and another path suits others. So he thinks it is good for us to teach them this Word from the Big Creator so they can all choose which path they want to follow.

The first day we were there in Mangavillage, I asked Samba to share his testimony of how a few years ago, God healed him from his sickness, revealed Himself to him in a dream, and transformed his life completely. Chief Dem** was totally intrigued and touched. He thanked Samba for sharing, and he commented on how amazed he was at God's healing. That made me think that maybe I should share mine as well. I slept on it and prayed about it. I had not yet shared my testimony in French before. I wasn't confident I could come up with enough "vocab" to express some of the deeper parts of it. But God gave me courage, and I felt sure I should give it a try. So with God's help and my pocket dictionary, I asked Chief Dem** the next day if he would like to hear my story. He was interested, and I made it through. It went fairly well, with help from our teammates when I got stuck on vocab. Both the chief and Samba spoke well of it and expressed appreciation. So that was that, or so it seemed. Little did I know what was really happening or the purpose for that prompting?

On the third day we packed and loaded to take to the road. In such a short time we had bonded well with chief Dem**, and the villagers had been so kind. In our goodbyes, chief Dem** said something on the order of, "Thank you for coming.

You are welcome here. Please come back often and teach us God's Word. We will be waiting for you."

I, in turn, said something like, "You have welcomed us well. We are touched by your hospitality and look forward to coming back again. We want to share God's Word with you. But you must understand that there are many villages that want to hear God's Word, and it will take time for our team to learn this language. Please be patient with us." At this point God did one of the things that God does. Out of the blue and completely unexpectedly, the chief said this to me in response:

"Yesterday you told us the story of how you grew up in the family of a pastor, and as a young boy, you heard in your heart God call you to take His message to us here in Africa. You were afraid and you rebelled against God, but God was patient with you and didn't let go of you. Even while you were rebelling against Him, He was preparing you to come here to bring us His Word. When you were an adult you chose to stop running from Him and committed your life to come to Africa. You left your family, your home, and all the good life of Americans to come here and find us. This tells us that this Word is true, that the Big Creator is bringing this message to us, and that we must hear it well. You don't need to worry. We will be patient."

My dear friends and supporters, at that point, I didn't really know what to say. I was just struggling to believe what I had just heard and experienced. It was an emotional moment, and three weeks later I'm still trying to absorb it. My prayer now is that chief Dem**'s words will ignite and excite all of us to hear a higher calling. Because wherever we are, *"Zion is calling us to a higher place of praise, to stand up on the mountain, and to magnify His name. To tell all the people, in every nation that He lives! Zion is calling us to a higher place of praise."* (That's verse from a chorus I learned years ago, and it encourages me often.). Not sure who wrote it. But isn't it true? Wherever we are in life, God is calling us to a higher place. To live in tune with the bigger picture. It's not about us as individuals, but it is about us and where we fit in eternity. Our life is but a breeze, but it can be very meaningful where there is none.

Sincerely,

Steve Nelson

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