

Finishing Lines

By Philip Saunders

Life and bustle had returned to the Abidjan streets in recent months. Jay-walkers strolled across the carriage-ways as usual. The disturbing pictures we had seen of lines of ordinary folk hurrying to escape the mortar-bombs and bullets, hands and white flags above their heads, were a thing of the past. Only the tell-tale blackened wounds on the tarmac, or the burnt out shell of a car gave any clue to the fierce battles that had waged on the city's streets when the New Forces army had arrived in the capital. The next day would be Wednesday 21 March, 2012, the day that the Kouya New Testaments were finally going to be dedicated in the Kouya area.

As we were packing our bags into the car the day before the event, dripping with perspiration in the Abidjan heat and humidity, we wondered what would lie before us in the hours to come, and for the remainder of the week.

How much would the country have changed during the eleven difficult years since we had last been up in the Vavoua area? There were stories of lawlessness up North and West. Would the celebration event take place? Would the authorities overrule it for some reason? It was with a sense of anticipation certainly, but with an optimism tempered by cautious apprehension, that we set out.

Turbulence within Ivory Coast had meant that a large upcountry celebration had only recently become possible - ten years after the Kouya New Testaments had arrived in the port in Abidjan. A mini-dedication had taken place on 5 November 2005 in the capital city, held in the Assemblies of God church in Yopougon, a northern suburb of Abidjan. Up to one hundred had been able to attend, the number including many who were not Kouya, but other interested friends based in the capital. As had become customary by now, proceedings were in Kouya, translated into the national language, French. There were readings, preaching and scripture in song, all in Kouya. A limited number of Kouya New Testaments were given out, so that at least every Kouya village would have some copies for use in the churches; these had later been taken up to the Vavoua area during times of relative calm.

Much fervent prayer went up that these New Testaments would reach their destination safely, and be quickly put to good use. On that November Saturday, messages sent by Arthurs in England, and Saunders in Ireland

were read out and translator Didier told us after the mini-event: “God be praised, because everything went very well.”

Then, a couple of years later, Kalou Ambroise sent us some pictures by email from his home village of Bassam. We studied them eagerly. Imagine our joy to see one of a Kouya man standing to read out from his Kouya New Testament in the village church! A shaft of sunlight fell from an adjacent window on to the well-thumbed pages, red with village dust. So we realised that the New Testaments were gathering dust, but through constant use, not through being kept on shelves!

Now, though, seven years had elapsed since that mini-dedication, and at long last we were back to see for ourselves. We were stopped at the city limits by stern policemen dressed in black. They demanded to see our papers. This car had only recently been bought, and the previous owner’s name was on some of the documents. No, none of us knew this person. Tension was mounting, until our national colleagues drove up hastily to explain. We were allowed to proceed, but as we pulled on to the motorway, we realised how on edge we were.

Knowing that many were praying for this journey was a great solace. It seemed there was so much that could go wrong. But for the moment, we relaxed on a good road out of town, happy to note the thriving rubber trees, the stretches of banana plantations, the odd farmer wending his way to his fields with his wife, machete in hand and dog in tow. Normal life, life as we had known it, continuing on in the Ivory Coast.

“This is a great road!” exclaimed Laurel, our American colleague and driver for the day. We had all heard about the potholes an hour or two ahead of us, but for now it was plain sailing.

It was funny how now, in context, memories of landmarks came back. We remembered that there was this village here, that pit-stop there, that soon the road would rise to present us with a beautiful panoramic view. Villagers or hunters hurried out to the roadside to try to tempt us to buy bush-rats, strings of mushrooms, even a long snake which looked like a python. Idly I patted my coffee flask, thought of the sandwiches and mangoes we had prepared, and said to myself yet again: “Let’s just keep it safe and simple this week!”

If the countryside seemed fairly deserted, the towns were buzzing. It was as if folk had concluded there was safety in numbers, in extremity they wanted to be together. Goods and merchandise were plentiful, piles of yams, pineapples and tomatoes showed that the ground had not ceased to produce, in spite of what violent men had tried to do to wreck things.

Yamoussoukro appeared, with its wide roads, its grand Basilica, impressive street lights. Trappings of a not so distant affluence. The *Hôtel du Président* rose majestically to our left, and we wondered whether it was open for business? It was. Our two cars stopped outside, and we entered the marble airconditioning, feeling ever so slightly shabby. Still, we enjoyed the plush bathrooms, and the cool drinks in the foyer. It was café au lait for me, for old time's sake. For lunch we repaired downmarket for a *shawarma*, to a nice Lebanese place, within view of the presidential palace.

Yamoussouko was about half way to Vavoua, but usually only an hour and forty minutes from Daloa, where we had arranged to stay overnight, at the Protestant Mission guesthouse. However, it very soon became clear that this part of the journey would be slow. It was hot by now, the airconditioning in the car was only working sporadically, and some of the ruts and potholes in the tarmac were enormous. We crept westwards towards our destination.

There was time to think in between the bumps. My mind started down a check-list of arrangements for D-day (D for dedication and distribution). We had sent up the New Testaments in advance, a few packets at a time. Each box held either twenty or forty copies. They were sent by public transport, and the bus or taxi would stop off each time at Dema to offload to the local Christians. Since Emile had recently acquired a working mobile phone, we knew that the New Testaments had been getting through. Well, we surmised, if the New Testaments are there, and the Kouyas have not run away, a dedication of some sort can be held! Even if the guests and dignitaries from elsewhere don't make it! This was a comfort. We motored on.

Bai Emile had been busy for weeks with arrangements on the ground in the Kouya area: making sure everybody was informed, going in person round the villages, inviting chiefs, providing transport money for some of the widows and other people we wanted there but who could not afford it. He also delivered last-minute letters to the local secular authorities, who needed to be kept informed, whether they attended or not.

Then there were the huge open-sided shelters covered by tarpaulins, to provide shade for the guests. These had to be ordered, and erected closer to the time. A sound-system had to be organised, along with hundreds of seats, and covered armchairs for the VIPs. A cow would be killed close to the big day, and rice and cooking-pots got ready. The singing groups and dancing troupes would have their last-minute practices. Emile had a lot to think about.

Happily he would have some additional assistance, as well as that of the local Christians. Two good men – Touali Martin and Kalou Ambroise – would be there already, having come up to help from Abidjan a few days early. Touali had come to give Megavoice training: one or two from each village would be learning how to operate and run listening groups for the Megavoice players. These little machines were solar-powered, and played back recorded Scripture. As well as this, Touali would be organising some folk to read out Scripture passages from the Kouya New Testament during the dedication ceremony. I really looked forward to these readings.

Then Kalou Ambroise, the intended Master of Ceremonies, had travelled up in advance with his wife Ruth. We had heard, though, that he had fallen sick, and was flat out in recovery mode! Much prayer was being mobilised for him.

All of a sudden I was jolted back to reality! Our vehicle screeched to a halt and stopped on the brink of a particularly nasty-looking pothole stretched across the road. Some of us were confident, others dubious. In the end, discretion won the day, and we backed off, and took the by-pass.

As we worked up through the gears yet again, I peered through the dusty rear window of our companions' car. It was comforting to see the piles of special white celebration tee-shirts in the boot. We had bought four hundred of these, and one car would be taking them on to Dema that night. It would have been better to have sent them up earlier, but they had not been ready. On the front of the shirt, beside a picture of the New Testament, was Hebrews 4 verse 12 in the Kouya language: "God's Word is alive, and powerful", and underneath, in large letters in French – "Dieu parle Kouya!" – "God speaks Kouya!" On the back were these words: "Dédicace du Nouveau Testament Kouya. Dema, 21 mars 2012."

This reminded me that there were speeches to be given tomorrow. The Dema chief would start off, he should be already there in the village. Emile would be next up, and he was also in Dema. Then would come Didier, he was in the car in front. Next would be Sue, she was right behind me in the car. And last would be myself, as possibly the oldest in the group. A “veteran missionary”, I had been introduced as in a church service not so long ago. “What a cheek!” I had reacted, but then later on I had looked in the mirror, and wondered. I recalled a recent visit to the hairdresser’s. When you start not to believe the colour of your hair on the barber’s floor, you are definitely in denial!

Many bumps and jolts later, Daloa came into sight at last. Daloa. Memories of our last two years as a family in Ivory Coast, fifteen years ago now. Of a final year of concentrated work in that large rented house with its leaks and dodgy electrics. Its lovely garden which the snakes also liked. Memories of the three girls coming home for their long holidays, and of outings to the French club. I would love to explore the town and the old haunts again, but there would be no time for that on this trip.

We turned into the Mission compound. It was familiar, though somewhat overgrown, understandable given what the town and its people had lived through over the past few years. But tall palms and mature trees afforded welcome shade to weary travellers such as ourselves. We felt glad to have decided to spend each of the next three nights in this quiet place.

While we settled in, worked out our water systems for washing, and how much bottled drinking water we would need to buy, the other car left for the Kouya villages, driven by Tiga Ambroise, our faithful now semi-retired services manager and friend from SIL in Abidjan. He was accompanied by Didier. They wanted to check out how arrangements were going for the festivities tomorrow, and would sleep in Gouabafla, Didier’s home village.

The rest of us slept in Daloa that night. Yegbe Antoine, SIL translation coordinator and consultant; Sahi Josias, director of Public Relations for SIL based in Abidjan, who had grown up on this very mission compound; John and Ruth Hamilton from N Ireland who had taught at Vavoua International school for eight years from 1989; Laurel Miller, who had helped with both the Kouya New Testament and the Megavoice project in numerous supportive ways; and Sue Arthur, who had double-teamed with husband Eddie, Heather and myself since their arrival in 1988.

With other work and family commitments, Eddie and Heather could not be with us. But we could count on their prayerful support at every stage of this momentous journey.

We were joined in Daloa by Hans-Martin Werle and Gnaly Kpata. Hans had been the translation facilitator for the Guibéroua Bété New Testament, and had worked during the final stages of that project on this very mission compound. Gnaly was the co-ordinator of the Kru Initiative, overseeing ongoing work in half a dozen Kru languages. The next day Jonathan Hacker, former WEC missionary in Vavoua, was also due to join us in Dema. So it was wonderful to see how the Lord had brought all these folk together, representing so many sides of the translation and church planting work in Ivory Coast, and the Vavoua area in particular.

As I lay quietly on my sponge mattress that night, the crickets setting up their nostalgic refrain just outside my glass-less window, I was full of thankfulness to actually be here, so close after so long to the villages where so much of our lives had been lived. I reflected on how natural it all seemed, a million miles away from the concrete jungles of the Western cities I had passed through to get here. I reflected, though, that the next couple of days would be as intense as any I had ever lived through, as dozens of people would be re-surfacing from the past thirty years. With the adults I should be all right. Faces would be older, yet basically the same. But kids who had grown into adults in ten years, wearing different tee-shirts, how would I recognise them? Would their names come back to me? Would I be overcome with emotion by the immensity of it all? I was glad in those moments that sleep has always been a friend to me, and never too far away at the best and worst of times. I drifted off.

I have never needed an alarm clock in Africa. If it is not the crowing of the cocks, it is the local birds which do the job. It was the bulbuls' chatter that awoke me when daylight came next morning in Daloa. This was finally "it", I thought. The day so long awaited!

It is rare that I give more than two seconds' thought to what I will wear. Blue, grey or black, with the occasional break-out for a party. But for this special occasion, I had asked my wardrobe consultant for advice before leaving Ireland, and she had recommended either the check cotton long-sleeved number, or the short-sleeved black cotton article. Either way,

Tesco's was the winner. Looking at pictures of important events in the Abidjan newspapers had convinced me that the darker the better. So the black number won!

After a quick bite to eat and hastily swallowed coffee, we were off on the road again, heading north from Daloa, and on to the infamous road to Vavoua, now tamed by reasonably smooth tarmac.

Daloa is Bété, and it was through Bété speaking villages that we first passed. Each one was a reminder to me of journeys past. Had anything at all changed here since I left, I wondered, looking out from the front seat of our car. The familiar luxuriant flame-trees still framed that clump of houses set back a little from the road. Now we were coming to the village where a police motor-bike monitored passing vehicles, but no one ever seemed to come out from the shade to stop them. And then, further on, not far from the giant termite-hill, yes, this was the place where a large green snake once slithered right across the track in front of us.

The memories flooded back. Soon it would be the first Kouya village, Bonoufla. Here Heather and I had slept amid cocoa bags and cockroaches on an overnight visit to the little Kouya church. This was where our WEC friends, Rodney and Hélène Gordon, had shown the *Jesus* film in the schoolyard... yes, the school was still there, with its primary schoolboys dressed in khaki suits, and little girls in their blue and white check dresses.

Why were there so many people here? Of course, it was Wednesday, which was market-day in Bonoufla. Each of the Kouya villages had their markets on different weekdays. The Bonoufla market seemed to have grown enormously, spilling over on to the main Vavoua road, and threatening to cut off the thoroughfare completely. People, noise, and goods on display on every hand. Plenty of smells, but no whiff of a depressed economy here. As we crawled through the crowd, our spirits were lifted to see normal trade clearly in such a vigorous state of health. This augured well for the country.

Leaving Bonoufla, I felt a quiet excitement, mixed with nervousness, for I knew that the next village – ten minutes further on – would be Bahoulifla. This was where we had started out on our Kouya adventure in 1983. Just a few kilometres before the village, where the road traverses an expanse of low wetlands and rice is grown beside the river Dé, we slowed down, and were confronted by a poignant sight. It was a burnt-out armoured personnel

carrier, a remnant, apparently, of the civil war in 2002. That was a year which meant something else to me: it was the year that the Kouya New Testaments were printed in Korea, and transported by ship to the port of Abidjan. Grass was now growing up through the gaps in the shell of the army vehicle in front of us. War brings death and destruction, I mused; the Word of God brings life and peace.

Ten minutes further on, we arrived in Dema. The village lies in a hollow. You reach the brow of a wooded hill known as the “Carrefour”, the Crossroads, where you may turn west again and head for the SIFCI wood factory, and then on down into the forest to the rest of the Kouya villages. So Dema is strategically placed, at the crossroads between the Kouya villages on the main road, and those down in the forest.

From the brow of that hill, we could look down towards Dema. There was no outward sign of anything unusual. But appearances were deceptive: we knew that the dedication event was going to be held in the grounds of the “new” Dema church building, just a little through the village centre on the left hand side of the main road. I had never seen this building in its finished state. Eleven years before I had walked across its foundations, which were in the shape of a cross if viewed from above. Gradually, as the Christians saved up, and as some help came in from other Christians, walls had arisen and the roof had gone on.

Now the church was before us, and now there was activity everywhere. Our car found a place to stop, and it was greetings, greetings and more greetings. A special hug for Emile, whom I hadn’t seen since he had come down to Abidjan two years ago. He looked older, but there was no mistaking the profound joy underneath the wrinkles. I found myself flanked by two young girls, who seemed to want to be in every photo taken of me. It was the same for John, for Ruth, for Sue, and the other new arrivals. Lots of the dedication tee-shirts were on show: how had they managed to sell so many since last night? I knew that this was a day when many, many questions would have to be stored until a later date.

As a group, we were escorted in a slow, dignified march around the outside of the church to the main arena. A natural theatre, set between trees, with long low tents for shade on four sides, full of rows of chairs. Noise grew in intensity as we approached: drumming, dancing, the general hubbub of

people chatting to one another. I took a seat on the soft settee assigned to me, looked to see the others also sitting down, and settled back to look around.

Very quickly I started to relax. There is no awareness on such occasions of the spotlight being on oneself personally. Even though folks are free to look around, and they do, and discuss whom they see, there is in Kouyaland an informality about such occasions, which is at once personal, and yet respectful. Proceedings were yet to begin, so individuals came over to say hello briefly, let us know they were there, and express their joy at seeing us again. The feelings were reciprocal, and I was amazed that the personalities were just as I remembered them, though one or two had grown more frail. But there was no time to go too deeply into their circumstances, just register what I saw. I promised some I would be back the next day to speak at greater length, especially to those I knew had suffered bereavement.

Didier had reminded me of the need to publicly acknowledge in my speech the passing of three of our translation team in recent years. These were François and Dibert who had worked with the Arthurs, and Ezékiel, who had worked with us. Kalou now came across to finalise some details of the programme with me: we had worked on this together in Abidjan, but he had come up early after having some announcements made on Christian radio *Fréquence Vie*, and on the national network also. We had wanted to let Kouyas scattered around the country know what was happening, in case they were free to attend. I was pleased to see that Kalou seemed to be reasonably strong today, in spite of his illness, and praised God for that answer to prayer.

All of a sudden there was a problem! The loud speaker system was not working. With Kalou being below par, we desperately needed this to work. We thought quickly, and called Jacques from Dédiafla village over. Now Jacques has a superb voice, and can make it carry many a mile in a Kouya forest. If he could interpret into Kouya, then at least the assembled crowd would hear and understand, even if the French was lost on them. Jacques agreed to help out.

As it happened, they figured out a way to get the sound-system working again. How? – another question for later. But it was still a boon to have Jacques' assistance. Three hours later, as the ceremony was ending, he was still going strong!

There are moments from that day which stand out for me. The public warm welcome from the Dema chief, a man with a humble and sincere spirit. He mentioned how the villagers had always appreciated being taken in our car for a hospital emergency, or for a baby to be born in the Maternité at any hour of day or night! Then there followed Bai Emile's speech, in which he said, through tears, how he had wondered whether he would ever live to see this day. As emotion threatened to overcome him, Kalou and Didier came alongside and supported him, with one of the teenage girls - the "guardian angels" - providing a box of tissues! With their help, he got through.

Didier spoke in his capacity as SIL in-country director. But as well as outlining the work of the organisation, he told of his own personal involvement in the Kouya translation project. He had come to faith while translating the Gospel of John with Sue, and had bowed the knee and recognised Jesus as Lord of his life. To symbolise this, that morning of the Kouya New Testament dedication, he knelt down on the earth in the centre of the arena before the entire company.

Then it was Sue's turn. What a hard language Kouya had been to learn! But what a rich language it was! She underlined God's faithfulness to the Kouya Christians, and to the Arthur family through many ups and downs. They had left family in Britain, but God had given them Kouya brothers and sisters, who had become for them a second, precious family. They could all rejoice together that God speaks Kouya today! Through His written word, He has come close to them. Sue finished with an invitation to all to accept this word, and find true life in Jesus.

Later, Sue was called forward to present a New Testament to several widows. One was Madame Bai Laurent, and it was touching to see her, an old lady now, walk slowly right over to the middle with the courage we had come to associate with her late husband. A Testament was given to representatives of Dibert's family, and to Adèle, François' widow. As Sue put her arm round her, and quietly prayed with her, interpreter Jacques conveyed the deep emotion of those moments to the crowd: "Des mots d'encouragement ... quelle émotion ... que Dieu la soutienne!" I was given the opportunity to pray also with Ezékiel's widow, present her with a New Testament and thank her personally for her husband's wonderful contribution to the translation. We knew Ezékiel as *Mr Style*, because of his way with words.

My own time came to speak. I took the chance to thank the communities of Bahoulifla and Dema for their warmth and acceptance of us as a family so many years ago, and brought greetings from Heather and the three girls. I wanted especially to honour Kalou Williams, our first language helper. I had been delighted to see him again earlier that morning, so I now asked him to stand up and be recognised by all. Then I outlined the history of the project, and important events well before we arrived. Together with the older man Bai Laurent, young Bai Emile had met with the WEC missionaries in Vavoua in 1979 at the time of the Gouro Bible dedication. They had prayed together that a translation into Kouya would soon be started and eventually become available in their language too. Twenty-three years later, their prayers were answered.

At some point in my speech, there was a commotion several yards away to my left, with people jumping from their seats to hammer the ground with shoes and sticks! It was obviously a snake, and the words were given to me: “Just as they’ve killed that snake, the Devil is a defeated foe too! But today we are celebrating the arrival of the Word of Life, and a *living* Saviour Jesus!” Or words to that effect. Apparently, we heard later, a green mamba had slithered up on to the trouser leg of Didier’s younger brother Fiacre, sitting near a tree. Shocked, he had stood up and shaken it off! After a few frantic seconds, it was struck with a stick, and lay dead.

Even as I spoke and witnessed this, I was impressed by the inner calm the Lord gives at such times. How often significant events in the Kouya New Testament’s coming to birth had been marked by the appearance of a snake. If the danger were not so serious, it would almost be funny. Each time they had been killed, and each time the danger was averted.

The moment the boxes of New Testaments arrived in the arena, a surge of excitement moved through the crowd. The boxes were brought up from the village itself, balanced on the heads of the women singing as they arrived in a large procession. Then they were ceremoniously placed in the centre of the assembly. Heading the procession was a young girl of perhaps ten years old, carrying a large black Bible on her head. Babies swayed as they slept comfortably on some of the carriers’ backs. The song they sang told of the tears with which the seeds of this translation had been sown by Bai Emile, but today he was reaping with joy the fruit of his labour. We knew Emile would not have asked for this recognition, but we were glad on his behalf that his part was being honoured in song in this way.

There were readings from Scripture in Kouya; there were readings from the reading book by women who had never been to school; there was a miming of the Blind Bartimaeus story; the Megavoice players were presented and an extract played over the loudspeakers; a copy of the New Testament was given to a representative from each village – a chief or his deputy; and prayers of dedication were offered by a circle of Christian leaders.

The large Bible carried by the young girl turned out to be a box with a lid, and towards the end of the ceremony, Kalou Ambroise opened it, and pulled out a number of objects. He had everyone's full attention, as he illustrated the power of the Word of God from these objects. This was a lesson for young and old alike: he let money fall from his fingers, he brandished a sword, he held up a tin of milk, a loaf of bread, then a mirror, then a lamp. "God's Word is a treasure," he explained, "it's sharper than any sword, it's like milk and bread – you can feed on it, and it gives you Life. It's a mirror too, and you can see reflected who and what you truly are, and it can be a lamp for your feet and a light for your paths!"

"Be prepared to come forward again!" Emile whispered to Sue and myself. What was this about, we wondered? It turned out that we were to be clothed in beautifully woven *pagnes*. There was so much material in mine, that I had a job keeping it off the ground as I wrapped it round my body. Sue managed hers much better. But as the chief of Dema gave me a final hand-shake, he pronounced me an honorary Kouya chief! I took that comment away with me, determined to milk as much respect from my friends and family as I could in future days. It was fitting therefore, that the Dema chief and I should sit down together to tuck into our rice and steak in the church afterwards: we were equals after all!

The whole event was a kaleidoscope of such moments. "How did it all flow so smoothly?" Jonathan Hacker asked me afterwards. I was sure of one thing: it was the Lord's doing. So much could have gone wrong: yet so much went right on the day.

As we talked things over in Daloa that night, we agreed it had truly been a Kouya event. Led by Kouyas for Kouyas, in a Kouya way. And we rejoiced in the fact that it was not a show put on for outsiders.

Back in bed after a truly momentous day, I thought of the Kouya churches which had sprung up over the years in the villages, where there had been practically no Christian witness before. Back to my mind came the smiling faces of the leaders I had talked to throughout that day, who were still going on well. Séry Laurent from Kouléyo, Gondé Robert from Bassam, Jacques from Dédiafla, Jules from Gatifla, Barthe and his wife Eugénie (of royal descent) from Bouitafla, Emile and Tra Jules from Dema. Then there were Kalou Williams with younger leaders Jules and Magloire from Bahoulifla, and not forgetting Prosper from Bonoufla. These churches were in good hands.

Would I ever live here again? I did not know, but this place and this people group would always be close to my heart and in my prayers. Was this the last chapter? Perhaps yes, in some respects. But not in others. The New Testament has finally been dedicated, properly, in the Kouya area. But this is not the end of its life. It is only the beginning. The Bible is, after all, an *extraordinary* book.
