

EXPLODING ANIMALS

Like all of us, I've heard my share of exploding animal stories in Guinea. They aren't pretty. Here are two of them.

The first was told to me by a French friend who lives in Conakry and runs a small private school in Gueckedou. My friend was coming back to Conakry from Gueckedou by bush taxi. As he began his twenty-hour trip in a decaying, over-loaded, shockingly unsafe vehicle along curvy mountain roads, he never guessed that things would later turn unpleasant.

It was night. My friend was sitting in the back seat of the taxi near an open window. After it got past the police check outside of Gueckedou, the taxi started barreling through the night, its headlights casting a yellow glow several feet in front of the car, pieces of rubber flying off the tires.

Suddenly, a cow appeared in front of the taxi. The driver immediately took emergency action, gripping the steering wheel tightly and reciting verses from the Koran. There was a sickening impact as the taxi collided with the head of the cow, killing it (the cow). Taxi and cow continued together some distance down the road before they could stop, the brakes apparently being a non-factor.

The angle of the collision and the point of impact were such that the cow pivoted at the neck and was slammed against the side of the taxi. The impact of the cow against the taxi was so violent that the cow quit this world not with a whimper but a bang, explosively, with much of its mortal remains entering the taxi through the open window and landing on the passengers. The driver and passengers cleaned up as much as possible and continued on to Conakry, but it wasn't a happy trip.

Like I said, these stories are not pretty. The second one at least has a happier ending:

When I first came to Conakry in July 1991, my colleague Mimi and I located the office and started to set up shop. Mimi, who likes animals, took a break from work to find an abandoned dog and rescue it from the brink of death – I forget the details. Mimi named the dog "Rex", which was a silly name since Rex was a female, about nine inches long, and weighed maybe two kilograms soaking wet. Mimi even found a job for Rex as a watchdog at our office. Rex's immediate supervisor was the night guard whom I will call "Mamadou" to protect his identity. Although Rex was small, she was okay as a watchdog since she had a loud, persistent and irritating bark. I called her "Rex the Wonder Dog", which made even less sense than just "Rex". (My daughter Caitlin says that when she asked me why we called Rex "Rex the Wonder Dog", I said it was because everyone wondered why we called her that.)

As Mimi was finishing her contract and getting ready to leave Conakry, she started to worry about Rex's future. Would she be able to take care of a family on a watchdog's salary? What if her puppies needed dental work some day? Mimi decided to get Rex "fixed" and took her to a local veterinarian who did the necessary surgery, sewed Rex up, and sent her back to our office.

While Rex was convalescing, we caught Mamadou the guard stealing diesel fuel. Under the Guinean work code we had to convoke him to a meeting to discuss the alleged offense before we could take any disciplinary action. The time scheduled for

the meeting with Mamadou came and went and he didn't show up. I sent someone to find out where he was and the message came back that he had gone to the veterinarian's because "Rex had exploded".

What had happened was that Mamadou had picked up Rex, apparently to get some moral support before going to the meeting. While he was holding the dog, the thread that was keeping the incision closed disintegrated and Rex sort of came apart in Mamadou's arms. I probably shouldn't say much more than that. Mimi, who was nearby, immediately drove to the veterinarian's office with Mamadou, who was still holding Rex. The vet apologized for using the wrong kind of thread, and to everyone's amazement was able to reassemble Rex, who recovered completely.

Mamadou eventually left our employment, and the last I heard he was living in Matam with his wife, child, and Rex.

Paul Rippey

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