

Ndode George Epwene's Long Journey toward Love

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In December 1994, Ndode George Epwene met the church in Yaoundé, Cameroon, where he was a student enrolled at the State University of Yaoundé. The following February, he did a seven-day workshop, at the end of which the participants learned they should prepare for a Blessing Ceremony that same year.

In the time before the blessing, George focused on getting all his necessary documents together. Once he had them, the church would provide the funds for him to pay for blood tests at the hospital. George mentioned this to a cousin, a military policeman. "It became a source of persecution for me," he said, "He asked me questions about why we had to give blood to make documents, suggesting this was some kind of arrangement between our church and the hospital. He said that in our church we used to drink blood. He advised

me to withdraw my documents, but I stood my ground."

Having forged ahead despite his cousin's false statements and opposition, on August 25, 1995, holding a photograph of a woman he had not yet met, Charlotte Mowenga Katunda, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, George went through the 360,000-Couple Blessing Ceremony.

All this took place, however, without his parents' knowledge. "My parents were back home, all of my family, so nobody was aware of this. There was no communication, at that time, like we have now," George explained. "I went back home during vacation, and when I informed them, it was in fact terrible. In the end, my father concluded that I was in university; I had already reached the age of majority, so I could decide my own future, but I should not ask him for any involvement. If we needed money or anything, it was my concern."

Official separation ends

Three years passed. George was still in university when those in his blessing group learned they were now free to be together with their spouses. "In that generation, many CARP members were blessed in different countries," George explained. Yet, among ten blessed Cameroonian CARP members, only George chose to suspend his studies to travel to the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter, D. R. Congo) to bring his wife back with him. (He later completed his degree, in History.)

George, however, did not have enough money, so he did a forty-day condition and went to ask his father for it." The day I arrived, I told my father, I have only three days to be at home and I asked him to provide me with \$US 600." His father replied, "Earlier I informed you I am not concerned with this. So, please do what you can yourself." George is not sure what caused it, but his father's heart changed. "The next day, my father left home to meet one of his friends. He came back in the evening and told me, 'OK, tomorrow we are going. This is your third day here. We will leave the house. We will meet one of my friends; you will get the money and then you can return to Yaoundé.'" Unexpectedly, however, George's stepmother became seriously sick. "God be so kind," George commented, "he decided to handle the two issues at the same time. He took my stepmother to the hospital the same day and went to get money for me, but at an interest rate of 100 percent. He had to pay back \$1,200."

Because George had to leave Cameroon two days later, even under those circumstances, he asked his father if he could get the money that same day. He received the money that evening. "From those incidents," George said, "I already felt that God was with me."

The journey begins

About this point in his story, George said, "One thing you should note is that from Cameroon to D. R. Congo, the shortest route is to go from Cameroon straight through the Republic of Congo (hereafter, Congo Brazzaville). Only the River Congo separates Congo Brazzaville from D. R. Congo. By that route, the journey takes about six days, but Congo Brazzaville and D. R. Congo were both in civil war." Another neighbor, the Central African Republic (hereafter, the C.A.R.) had been dealing with a long running

insurgency, but the border was open.

The day after receiving money from his father, George set off to meet Charlotte and bring her back with him to Cameroon. He would be traveling with another man whose wife was likewise in D. R. Congo. "We slept in a town at the border. The next day we entered the first town inside the C.A.R., Gamboula." They had expected to go through a military checkpoint in Gamboula; in fact, they spent the five hours between 9:00 AM and 2:00 PM in the one town, going from checkpoint to checkpoint. "They were afraid of men, thinking that men were coming in as mercenaries...."

Fortunately, before we left Cameroon, an American national messiah, Michael Lamson, gave us official papers, church papers and missionary papers -- everything. Whenever they looked at this, they could trust that, OK. These are religious people."

They had traveled by car over the four hundred kilometers (250 mi.) from Yaoundé to the border of the C.A.R., but from there, they had to try to get rides with others. They caught a ride on a lorry (truck) that carried goods from Cameroon to Central Africa. "You have to climb on top of the goods," he said. "This was not a car; there was no place for passengers."



Their boys are now fourteen and fifteen. Of Charlotte, George said, "My wife is very sharp in languages.

Wherever she lives, the language spoken there, in one month she can already understand and start speaking. She is also very good in creating relationships."

Becoming comedians

As they traveled, they met a Central African who befriended them. "He told us," said George, "that for six years he had been in Cameroon, where he had worked with a comedy theater group. In the C.A.R., he created his own group -- well known, very popular."

The man explained to them that the experience they had had in Gamboula would happen to them repeatedly before they reached Bangui, the capital and the largest city in the C.A.R. "I can assure you that all your money will all be gone," the man predicted. "I am going to help you by listing you as my theatre members. We are going to perform in Bangui." George and his companion felt that this would make it easier for them. The theater group head would have to pay some money at the checkpoints, so they would have to pay some portion of it. They agreed on an amount.

The next day the man went to a police station, where he obtained a permit to perform in Bangui. The names he put down for George and his companion he had changed into Central African names. "In the C.A.R., they have a common dialect, they call *Sango*. They can easily know if you are not one of them if you are not convincing when talking to them," George explained. "Also, in order for us to appear to be in his theatre group, he had to dress us up.

He gave me an old Army uniform, which I wore with an army bar and a cap, on which they wrote 'Commander.' The man wore his own uniform, on which they had written 'General.' He gave my Cameroonian brother a mask of an old person to wear." When asked if it wasn't dangerous to go through a country in civil war wearing military uniforms, George responded with verve, "That's what I am saying!

This was madness! And the language barrier was there."

Fortunately, their newfound friend knew what he was doing. "We didn't feel any sense of danger. They did not ask anything. We were just accepted. God be so kind!" They had to pass individually through each checkpoint but the theater company manager simply showed the guards a paper listing who was with him. At each checkpoint, one of the comedians would get out in a mask and people would come with their children. They entertained people all along the way and had no trouble from checkpoint officials.

Reaching Bangui

The city of Bangui is just on the border of D. R. Congo. Traveling there took them three days and four nights. "When we reached Bangui we paid the person that accompanied us the amount we had agreed on," George explained. "We reached the church center, where the national leader received us." The following day, they went to the river port in Bangui to ask when they might board a boat headed to Brazzaville. This was in the month of January. They learned it was the dry season; the river was low, making navigation difficult, so it was the slow time of the year for river traffic. High tide would not come until March.

"They advised us to return to Cameroon and come back later," George said. "We said there is no point to returning to Cameroon. We are going to wait." Each day they returned to the port, asking the same question. The port personnel were becoming irritated. "What is so pressing that you are so eager to go?" they asked.

Finally, they learned that businessmen from the Republic of Chad were eager to transport a thousand head of cattle to Brazzaville. Port personnel told them to return the next day and bring their own food and water for what they said was to be an eight-day journey.

As it happened, the food and water they brought with them lasted only three days. George and his companion took this in their stride. After all, they were church members and their journey would end in three or four days; they could fast. They went without food for the fourth and fifth days of their journey, while everyone around them was eating lots of food.

It was a cargo boat, so everyone remained on deck, eating in the open air. Rather than allow a cow to die onboard, whenever a cow appeared weak, the Chadians would give it to their fellow passengers to kill in exchange for a bit of money. They had not contributed money and had no pot to cook the meat in. His fellow Cameroonian pressed George to ask for food. "I told him to wait three days," George said. "After three days, maybe God would intervene, and he accepted that."

On the seventh day of their journey, after three days of fasting, a woman approached his companion. Having seen them read Hoon Dok Hae in the morning and evening, she took them to be religious. She said to him, "You pastors don't eat." As George recalls, "My brother answered, 'Because we don't have food on this the fourth day now. That is why we are not eating.'" Going four days without food is not a common occurrence. The woman was astonished and told her younger sister to cook for the pastors.

"Thank God," thought George, "God sent these two sisters to give us food."

Estimated time of arrival

The distance from Bangui to Kinshasa is roughly 1,030 kilometers (640 mi.). When they set off, they expected the trip to take eight days. After eight days, they had not even reached the halfway point. The temperature during the day was 28°–33° C (82.4°–91.4° F). The boat did not go to shore at night, so they were sleeping in the open air on a steel deck. It was very cold and they had not brought sleeping bags.

Even on the river, they had to go through checkpoints. Every time they went through a checkpoint, some official would stamp their passports. George described one incident, "My Cameroonian brother got angry and told them, 'Very soon, our passports will be full. Why do you do all this?' He spoke in a harsh tone. When we left, I told him that talking to military people like that was not good. He said, 'No this is my right. I have to explain this to them.' I said, 'No. We are in a very tense period. If you speak in a harsh way, they may become brutal.' He answered, 'No. You are just a younger brother in the church and you do not know many things. Let me explain it to you: This is what we are supposed to do because we are in the subject position.' I felt, OK, if you say so."

At the next checkpoint, George's Cameroonian companion spoke in the same tone he'd used earlier. The officers told the boatmen that they had better all go to their office to check there. As soon as they arrived, among the two hundred passengers on the boat, the singled out George's companion and locked him in a cell. They told George to get more money because they were about to increase the fee they had already paid. George paid the extra fee and they freed his companion. "When we returned to the boat," George said, "he had to confess to me. He said, 'OK. From now on, you are my leader. I'm going to listen to you now.' He had been the one keeping all our money, but he took the money and he gave it to me."

In Brazzaville

They finally reached Brazzaville and disembarked. They had spent nineteen days on the water. They called the church center but could not get through. The church leader in Bangui gave them the name of a member who lived in Brazzaville, just the name. They spoke to some of the men from the boat and surprisingly one knew the brother and knew where he lived. That brother took them to a Cameroonian sister who took them to the church center. They were supposed to cross into D. R. Congo the next day, but every dollar of the \$600 he brought from Cameroon was gone. He sold some gifts he had bought for his father-in-law to get the \$12 needed to cross to the Kinshasa side of the river.

Confrontation at the port

When they crossed the river, during a check at the river port, a police officer told them he knew our church and knew they did not believe in Jesus. He called them "fake pastors" and said they should prove him wrong by showing their Bibles. They did not have a Bible. "You see...! I know you people." He was going to send them back across the river. Then one of his bosses came out. The man wanted his boss to see the "fake Cameroonian pastors." When his boss looked at each of the documents he asked in disbelief, "How is this fake?" When he saw their church papers, he said, "I know this church. No! They are very good people. Why do you keep them here? No. No. No. Don't do this." The man then escorted them out of the port area passing four points at which they would have had to pay fees with money they did not have.

A security officer stops them

The leader in Brazzaville had given them the address of a nearby center where a member could drive them to the main center. Walking there, a security official in plain clothes, walked up to them and spoke in Lingala, which is lingua franca in D. R. Congo. They did not understand. He switched to French, asking for their passports. He saw they were fine and asked where they were going. Looking at the address, he said it was too far to walk. When they said they had no bus money, he saw them aboard a bus, paid their fare and told the driver where to drop them off. That day, it had been thirty-five days since they left Cameroon.

The road back to Cameroon

After arriving at the main church, they were sent to yet another center, where they lodged. Various church leaders were at a meeting. When his wife's pastor returned to his center, he would inform his wife that her husband had arrived. Without his knowing, though, a sister told his wife and she came. Someone told him to go to pray but he did not know why.

"While I was praying," George said, "my wife came in quietly and knelt down beside me, also praying. When I stood up and opened my eyes... Seeing my spouse in front of me was simply amazing! We embraced and all the sisters and brothers came in -- more than twenty. They started singing. It was touching. After that, she went home to inform her parents. They suggested that I stay with them, but since I didn't have money, I declined. I met her older sister, with whom she was living."

Charlotte's story

While separated from her husband, Charlotte had gone through heart-wrenching experiences. When war arrived in Kinshasa, they fled their home, which was near the airport, now a dangerous place. She ended up with a group of people stranded and with little food. Older people pressured the women to make money from the soldiers, but she refused. She insisted that in her church, women do not do that and she is married. When they pressured her further, she had to flee again. She returned home. She was alone when a neighbor, who was in the army, saw her and suggested she stay with his family. She did, but one day, he brought home an army friend and tried to persuade her to be that man's wife. She refused. She told the man that she was married. He told her he knew her husband was in Cameroon.

She insisted she would not sleep with other men. He raged that she was rejecting him for a husband that he knew she had never met. He then threatened to kill her husband if he ever came to DR Congo. Charlotte cried. If she had some way of telling her husband not to come, she would have. On the night of the day that George arrived in Brazzaville, that soldier died in fighting and the army transferred her neighbor to another location.

Return to Cameroon

They needed to earn money for the return trip and this took time -- five months. Just before they were to go, the spouse of the Cameroonian that George had traveled with changed her mind and said she would follow him later. In the time that George had raised money for himself and his wife, this brother had

raised none. George could have left him behind but opted to take him. Four other Congolese women, blessed to Cameroonians, joined them. He thought he had enough money to get to Bangui, but it ran out, so he borrowed from one of the other wives. In Bangui, George wired Cameroon and asked for money.

Three weeks later, it arrived. They had calculated exactly the amount needed and no more, but when the sister George had borrowed from learned that her husband had not contributed to the fund, she turned back for D. R. Congo. Having returned the borrowed money, George had to make the painful decision of leaving his wife behind, even temporarily, in the C.A.R. after all they had gone through to be together.

Charlotte and George finally reunited in September. Today, they are raising their two sons together. Perhaps we can learn from the effort they invested just to be with each other. Let us value one another deeply. Let us be kind to others not knowing what course their lives have taken and what they endured to answer the call from Heaven or to continue to strive forward in their lives of faith.