

MY EXPERIENCE IN DOUALA ON A TRIP TO COLLECT THE WIND TURBINE
BUILT DURING THE 2003 COURSE IN SCORAIG.

(Edited by Dr Lenzemo Yuka Constantine)

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Our university finally resumed a few weeks ago and normalcy is gradually returning to campus. I came into my office which was now a bit dusty due to that long holiday. The politicians had stopped blaming each other and now they are attending to the students' problems. The first thing that came on to my screen as I put it on was the saved copy of the story I started writing of my experience in Douala. I had hurriedly put off the machine when the students went on rampage and were demanding '*campus mort*' (operation ghost campus).

A day before my departure to Douala I had informed you guys that I received a call from Swiss Air informing me of the arrival of a parcel from the Netherlands. I did all that was necessary for me to leave for Douala the next day because I would not want the turbine to stay there for long.

I joined the night bus for the 500km journey and arrived Douala at about 4 am. This was still too early so I decided to check into a hotel for a few hours sleep. When I woke up it was already 8 am a good time to leave for any office in Douala. Douala is very warm and humid with temperatures at this time averaging 35 ° C so I wouldn't take any chances

that could make me spend another night here. There would be serious traffic congestion at the Bonaberi Bridge currently undergoing repairs and I would spend at least 40 minutes in a taxi going over a two km bridge. So I opted to take a bike. These bike are better off in hold ups in Cameroon because they can make their way in between cars in a traffic hold up and occasionally go against traffic regulations just to gain some time. They wouldn't mind passing through your sitting room just to make a meaningful short cut and gain some time. It is difficult for the police to call them up because they easily get back to the queue after each traffic violation.

This worked very well. We made it at the other side of the river in about ten minutes only but then trouble started looming. At the tail of the bridge some rain showers started and neither of us had an umbrella. The bike man continued as if there was nothing happening. When he noticed that I was feeling very uncomfortable and complaining he asked if I would use his raincoat and I accepted. As the bike sped off through the streets of Douala under the heavy down pour, he removed his dark rain coat and gave it to me. It was very small in size and he said we would both use it. One part covered him while the remaining part covered my head and back. The problem was that I could not even see where we were going to. All I heard was the zoom of the bike and one moment after the other we would take sharp bends. I was getting very uncomfortable under the raincoat. I felt like somebody kidnapped, blind folded and being taken to an unknown destination. The rain continued its downpour and this time it was accompanied by strong winds. I struggled under the raincoat like a cat trapped in a bag. Then all of a sudden I could see some light coming from a button hole on the coat. I pulled it over just to place one eye on it and see a little bit what was happening outside. He complained bitterly because the rain was now landing on his chest. I was now a little bit comfortable because I could at least see the outside through the button hole.

It is about 9am and we have just arrived the air port. I decide to move directly to the Swiss Airline office. Here I am told I would have to go to the freight section of the air port about 2 km away. As I get out of the airport the rains have seized and the sun is warming up everywhere. Now I will need to take another bike if I have to finish and

quickly leave this humid Douala in good time. As I drop off the bike at the freight section a gentleman approaches me.

“I am called Pam. Coming to clear your baggage?”

“Yes” I said.

“Then follow me”

As I follow him upstairs I wonder who he is and who he works for. He even has no uniform.

“Which airlines?” he asked.

“Swissair”. I said.

A few minutes later we were at the Swissair office and to my surprise the staff did not know him. Then I moved to the counter to explain my mission while my guide stood aside listening very attentively.

“I have come to collect a parcel that came in from the Netherlands yesterday. I received a call from your office informing me of the arrival of this parcel’. I said handing over my ID to him.

From the look on their faces I could see that they did not call my number. But somebody did and said he was calling from the Swissair office. Who could this person be? As the Swissair agent on the counter was looking for the relevant information from the computer, my cell phone rang out loud again. This was that same number that called me when I was still in Dschang and I stored it in my phone under the name ‘Swissair’.

“Hello Dr Julius this is Swissair office in Doaula. Are you coming for your luggage?”.

“Hello sir I am already at the Swissair office”

“Then just hold on I will be with you in a minute”.

I could see some embarrassment on the faces of the Swissair staff. The man at the counter gave me the details of my luggage and where to go to. As we were finishing with him, the door opened and a poorly dressed gentleman moved towards me. Definitely this could not be a Swissair agent or even an airport staff. Whatever job he had could not be a white collar job.

“Are you Dr Julius from Dschang? I am the one who just called you”.

My self imposed guide, Pam became furious. “Why did you call him? You jobless guys in this Doaula when you learn that somebody’s luggage has arrived you take his coordinates and claim to be a clearing agent. How much do you think you will get from the deal?”

“I am the one authorized to deal with Dr Julius and that is why I called him right from Dschang to inform him about the arrival of his luggage. I have been doing that for all the university staff.”

In the next three minutes my two guides were arguing on the top of their voices each one claiming to be the legitimate clearing agent. This continued until there was some intervention from the Swissair agent.

“Gentlemen could you go and settle your problems out of our office? Dr Tangka please move over to the customs department for the necessary directives”.

As I moved out of the office they both followed me quarrelling with each other. I suddenly discovered that these two would follow me every where I went so I better arranged things with them.

“Gentlemen” I said “ We all have a serious task before us today. We have to make sure that my luggage is out of here before closing time because I do not think I can spend another night in this humid town. If we continue quarrelling with each other we might not succeed before closing time. We might need to work as a team”.

This seemed to work very well because they soon calmed down and started listening attentively and when I had finished Pam said sarcastically ;

“I will lead the team because I have a lot of experience in clearing and forwarding. Dr Julius, this fake Swissair agent will assist us.”

“Before we start let me tell you guys that the luggage belongs to the university and this is a zero budget event. If they require large sums of money here I will just abandon it and go away. So you have to be very careful. You might have been dealing with very rich businessmen who will do everything possible to clear their goods. I will like to talk to the director of customs so that he can wave the clearing fee. After all this is a gift from some

very good friends to the university. It is not a market commodity.”

My guides were very embarrassed to hear this. From the look in their faces they were disappointed, but it was necessary to tune their minds.

“Look here doctor, pleading does not work here. Here money talks, If you do not have money then go back to your university and let us attend to better customers”. Said Pam the chief guide.

“Well I did not employ any of you. Allow me then to do me business alone. I never even asked for your services”.

As I moved towards the sign post **Douanes/Customs** they both follow me.

Then one of them said; “Anybody who tries to be clever here ends up spending more money and sometimes losing his luggage but do not worry, if you are unable to pay what they will charge, we shall help you. However you must be prepared to spend at least some money. We have been helping even foreign diplomatic missions to clear their goods”.

This sounded very interesting and I was now a little confused. Perhaps I needed to listen to their advice. Down the corridor I saw a young lady in uniform staring at us. Then I asked the two young men to excuse me for a moment. In the next one minute I was seeking advice from this lady.

“All I can advise you is to work with them or else you will spend a lot of money here. They know all the tricks that you can play here to spend less money on your goods”.

Well, a word to a wise is enough and I decided to work with them. Then I waved my hand calling on them to follow me.

Pam moved towards me with a broad smile:

“We can see that you are now reasoning well. We shall work together. Last week an Ambassador from Europe came here to collect a spare part he ordered for their service car. When the customs officer fed the information into the computer his bill came out to be 1200 Euro. He was embarrassed. Somebody asked him to contact us. We helped him out. By the time he collected his luggage in the evening, he had spent only 400 Euro. He was very happy. We are like lawyers here. We know how to manipulate the text more than the customs officials”.

Our first stop was at the billing Office. Here I paid €20 and the air bill was supplied with the value of the wind turbine. As I tried to negotiate I was told that the fee here is flat. Even if you were sent an office pin from Europe by freight you would still pay the same amount.

Sjang Van Daal had valued it at € 250.

With the receipt and the air bill paid, we are now allowed to go and examine the cargo. We were now in a large room with all types of parcels all having varied airline tags and addresses. Finally the customs officer pointed to large carton which had been packed to look like an arm chair. There was very little I could say here, but from the look of things the wind turbine and the blade were all intact. The customs needed this confirmation if not I would have been asked to make a claim to Swissair.

My two guides next led me to the evaluation office. Here I was asked to pay about € 60 for the evaluation to be done. Here again the fee is flat no matter what you want to clear. At one moment I was standing out of the office but not too far away to see my guides fidgeting with one of the officers. After that there was a computer printout. Then my two guides came out of the office with a bill of €600.

“Gentlemen, I told you that I had no money for this wind turbine. This machine is meant for teaching and it is a gift and not a market commodity.” I said

“How much did you bring with you for this trip”? Asked my first guide Pam.

“One Hundred Euro”

“Make it three hundred and we have a deal”.

“Anything I pay here is supposed to go to the state, but I am surprised you speak as if the money will go into your pocket” I said.

“Well decide on what you want to do because we have other clients to attend to”.

The amount of € 300 would not be too bad but I was not willing to show that I had the money. So I gave them € 250 and promised I would call on a friend to come from town to bring the remaining 50.

By midday my two consultants were moving from office to office getting my documents signed. At one time one of them even hired a taxi to town. I later on learned that he went to town to produce another copy of the document Sjang sent to me titled “*Vrachtbrief Landa Renewables Luchtvracht Cameroon*”. The new one was exactly the same except that the new value of the turbine was now only € 50. Then they asked me to suggest various terminologies that could be used to describe my package. Then I suggested the word ‘ventilateur’ meaning ‘fan’. Then they rushed into the room and after some time they came out and said if we called it a fan, then the computer would give us a larger bill to pay. We kept on testing various words and each time they would feed the information into the computer and ask for the correct tax. We tested the following words, wind turbine, Plywood, ceiling fan, didactic block, and finally the word ‘model fan’ seemed to have played the trick. My guides did not bother to tell me what the new tax rating was. They just printed the value and took it away. This show was now getting very interesting and I was a little bit excited.

At about 2pm I was still standing on the corridors wondering whether I would take home the turbine or not. Also I wondered whether my consultants would ask me to pay them at the end of the day. By 3 pm they came to me and said they had made considerable progress with my work and that I needed pay the remaining balance so that they would continue without any further hitches. I did that without any further hesitation.

Then one of them came back a few minutes later and said to me;

“You cannot be standing on the corridors like this. Please follow me and we shall take you to a good place where you can have some rest”.

We went down the staircase and behind a few blocks and finally to a very good Snack Bar. He asked me to sit down.

“But this is a snack bar” I said

“Yes sit down and take a drink” he said.

I was becoming very uncomfortable because I knew somebody had to pay for this drink and it wouldn’t even matter who paid for it. The only thing that I was sure of was that it would be my money that would be used for the drink. A good beer in Cameroon costs about € 0.8 for a 70 cl volume bottle but in a Snack Bar like this one a beer wouldn’t cost

anything less than € 2.0. As I took a beer he sat by me and also took one. In the next few minutes his friend also joined us and took another beer. He informed us that he we were now waiting for the Chief of Customs to come back and sign the final document that we would take to the baggage hall room. Being a Moslem he had gone to the mosque on a Friday afternoon for prayers.

Thirty minutes later my friends left saying nothing about the bill. The bills was brought to me and it read € 7.50. I would have liked to offer them a beer after the turbine would have been claimed from this complex and not before. I settled the bill and feeling a bit hungry I looked at the menu board and noticed my favorite.

In the next few minutes I was served some boiled potatoes with a large tilapia head in a well spiced soup. I called on the waiter ordered for more beer. It would take me at least one hour to disassemble the tilapia head and suck up all the juicy stuff and the meat from it. That would also keep me busy while my consultants are doing all to get my parcel. By this time I had decided that if I ever got the turbine I would give these guys € 50 for the job well done. No matter what I would not give them more.

By 4.30 pm I left the snack bar satisfied after a heavy meal and 2 bottles of cold beer. As I went up stairs another gentleman ran to me and asked;

“My name is Olivier, are you from the university of Dschang Sir?”

“Yes” I said

“I was a support staff at the University of Dschang before I resigned and joined the clearing and forwarding business. I have been monitoring you and those two guys since morning. Be careful do not let them dupe you. In fact I will help you through” he said.

“But I already have two guys working for me and I do not even have the money to pay them”

“Don’t worry, I know that your luggage is going to a university in my village. I will make sure that they do not dupe you”.

“How much have you given them since morning?”

“Three hundred Euro” I said.

“What? From now hence forth make sure you do not give them any more money. It was

in my brothers office that they signed the customs declaration and your papers show that you have spent only € 50 since you came here”

At this I was really annoyed that I had been taken for a ride the whole day. All the same all that mattered was whether I would collect the wind turbine or not. My third consultant now took me to his brother the Assistant Chief of Customs and explained to him that this was a university lecturer who came to collect a laboratory material sent to him from Europe by his friends but unfortunately he had been duped. The man looked so indifferent and made no remark on the complaint. We went out of the office and as we were moving towards the baggage section, my two guides rushed to me.

“We have completed all the paper work for you to take out your turbine now. All you need to do is to give us € 40 to settle the remaining officers and then you can take your turbine”.

Had I not met the third consultant, Olivier I would have just given out the money knowing that the turbine was around the corner. Then Olivier stepped in:

“My friends I think enough is enough. Do you think this man is a business man? Why all this extortion? Can’t you consider that he is coming from the university? I will report you to the police if you ask him for money again.”

As the three of them were still arguing, one pot belly customs officer came out of his office and called for me. My three Guides all followed but he asked them to stay outside. As I entered his office he showed me his chair and bolted the door. He requested for my papers and I showed him. After all the stamp duty and all the taxes my papers were now about 14 sheets all stapled together. I told him the story of how I had attended a course on homebuilt wind turbines in Scotland and unfortunately I could not raise the money to bring back the turbine. Then some very good European friends had all contributed to buy and send it to me for teaching purpose at the university.

“Now tell me how much you have given to those guys because I will raise a case against them now. I overheard Olivier complain to his brother that you have been duped. Your papers show that you have spent only € 50 since morning”.

There was the wind turbine very close to me but yet too far again. It was already getting dark at about 6pm. If I said I had given them € 300 then a case could be raised against

them, which would mean more days for me in Douala and probably without the wind turbine. It would be kept as court exhibit. Such a case in Cameroon can take even a year or more to be judged. So was I to speak the truth and let the snail procedure justice take its course or to tell a lie and have my turbine in the next minute? I opted for a lie.

“They asked me that they would clear the turbine and I would settle them later” I said.

“Fine. Go sign and collect your turbine and do not give them more than €50” he said putting the final stamp on each page of the 14 sheet bunch of papers I had.

Before I came out my former two guides had disappeared leaving only Olivier waiting. The turbine had also been brought to the entrance and I signed and collected it. Olivier’s friend had a car and he offered to give us a lift. The exit from the freight section of the air port was like the borders between two hostile nations. To leave the freight area we passed through fourteen control check points and at each point I had to narrate the story starting from Scoraig 2003. By the time we had successfully gone through the 1km fourteen checkpoint exit, we met my former two consultants waiting.

“Anything for us Doctor?” They shouted smiling scornfully”.

“Next time”. I said

“OK have a safe trip to Dschang and when next you have a parcel coming in by freight do not forget us”.

“ I will not” I said as we drove off.

I was now filled with joy. The fact that they had made away with € 250 was no more any problem to me. After all they were just smart guys trying to survive. Without them I might have had to pay the € 600 that the computer printed out in the morning or was that part of their trick? They were happy and I was happier; only the poor nation was duped and that is why she will remain poor because of guys like these who push you to the corner for their selfish aims.

As I left Olivier that evening I gave him some € 10 for his beer and he was very grateful. I rushed first to the transport agency to keep the turbine and book for the first bus next morning to Dschang and then decided to drop a note to Sjang and friends before going for another cold beer.

The journey from Douala to Dschang was equally an interesting one. For some time now I had not traveled by public transport. That morning I hired a hand pushed two wheeled truck for about 0.5 Euro. A young man was to convey the turbine to the bus terminal. Here, there is no order. The workers of each transport agency wait by the road side and fight for passengers. If you are not careful they can tear your bag into pieces as they fight for you to travel by their agency. They will promise you a nice ride, good music on board, careful driving etc. This is exactly what happened. It was not easy for us to finally settle for one agency. The price was about 5 Euros for the over 400 km journey.

As the bus was just about to leave the station, a middle aged man opened the door and stood in front of the passengers and addressed them. He had two big bags hanging on each shoulder and a few drugs on both hands.

“Ladies and gentlemen: You are welcomed on board this travel agency. As you leave this humid town to Dschang today, count your selves lucky that you met me today. I have been sent by the almighty God to present some products to you. The first product I want to present to you today is called AFRICA PANAXIA. Made out of natural products. It is capable of curing more than twenty diseases including malaria, back ache, tooth ache, all sexually transmissible diseases, prenatal labor pains, etc. Some of you like to assume that you are in good health without knowing that you have so many problems in your system. I will just site a few examples. There many of you who cannot smile in public. When anything is interesting to you, you giggle like convent girls making sure you cover your brown teeth already in a terrible state of decay. When you accidentally take ice cold water you react like somebody swallowing a hot piece of metal. The answer lies in Africa Panaxia. Use it and you will notice the difference. When you use it avoid laughing in public because the brightness of your teeth will make anybody who looks at them blind and we shall be charged to court”. The bus was at top speed and he continued:

“Some of you cannot play a whole match at home without asking for a substitution”.

At this time all the passengers were already laughing out their lungs and the driver was at high speed at the outskirts of Doaula city. Then he turned to those behind him.

“Who should first score a goal in the home match, the man or the woman?”

The bus was divided in their response. Then he continued:

“In a normal match the woman should score before the man. The man should then equalize a few minutes later and after that, score the winning goal. But there are some men when they return tired in the evening, they dose off on the chair. The woman prepares the stadium for the match. As soon as the woman starts making a warm up, the man scores and goes to sleep. These types of goals cannot be counted because they are scored from the off side position. Before you know it the woman is going to your neighbor everyday because he can play a full match and go in for prolongation. The long term result is that your children resemble those of your neighbor and you think it is because they grow in the same environment”.

The laughter in the bus increased and I could see tears coming flowing down the cheeks of some passengers .

“Women are not left out in this illness” He continued. “ There are some who will be very busy reading a news paper when a man is sweating in the stadium. They have lost all their sensitivity and are worthless in the field. Some men even score goals out of the stadium. As this bus moving, when the driver takes a sharp bend and some men touch the ladies besides them they would score a goal. I tell you my people the answer to all these illnesses lie in AFRICA PANAXIA. Get a bottle today and you will notice the as effects tomorrow”.

At this moment I was already wondering where this man was heading to. He had not paid for a seat and he had none in the bus. Was he going to make the over 400km just standing and talking? Then he continued:

‘Some of you have serious digestive problems. When you sit near them you might think that there is some fifty gun man salute taking place in their stomach. When they mess the air cockroaches die instantaneously. In those days these men were used to settle tribal disputes. It was just enough to bring one of them to a place where some neighbors were quarrelling. Once they messed up the air, you would not need the police to disperse the crowd. Ladies and gentlemen take home a bottle of Panaxia with you, carefully and read the dosage for each of the over twenty deceases and you will surely come back for more”.

At this moment there was an interruption from somebody at the back.

“What is the expiring date of your drug? If I take it and I have complicated side effects

where would I see you. Do you remember that the minister of health has banned the sales and advertisement of drugs in public places?” The voice from the back of the bus queried.

“Don’t worry gentleman. The drug is a concoction from some very natural stuffs like barks and roots of trees, Aloe Vera, honey, Bitter kola, paw paw etc. They won’t harm you even if you take an over dose. Do not mind the Minister. They tell us to take the white man’s drugs which have a lot of chemicals with serious side effects. Sometimes when they have complicated cases that cannot be treated by the white man in Europe they came back to us and we treat them”.

Surprisingly the passengers bought a few bottles and when he found out that no other person was willing to take a bottle, he jumped down at the next police check point and boarded another bus going back to Douala. As that bus went off, I could see that he was standing up and giving a similar lecture. We had not gone for up to five kilometers before another mobile pharmacist got in and claimed he was sent by God to come and talk to us. I was beginning to enjoy the show and this reminded me of what I had been missing in these public busses. Before we reached Bafoussam that day, we had we had listened to about seven of such pharmacist and each one sold a good number of his products before joining another bus heading in the opposite direction. What surprised me most was the skills and manner with which they carried out their job. Each of them although looking like an illiterate, knew all the scientific names of the plants used in his concoction and at one time they would describe the human anatomy with very high accuracy.

The journey took almost an entire day because of multiple police check points. There was one long stop at Kekem, one popular eating point for travelers. Kekem would be the world head quarters for barbecue. Here you can find every living animal on the grill ranging from antelopes, beef, rabbit, fishes, pork, crocodile meat, and chicken just to name a few. It is against the law to hunt and eat these animals but even the law enforcement officers will forget about the law when they reach Kekem. Roasted meat is

eaten with roasted plantains, plumbs, potatoes or with bread and washed down with the appropriate liquor. This day I was attracted to the greasy antelope barbecue, some roasted plantains and some very cold beer.

We arrived Bafoussam, the Western Provincial headquarters at 6pm. The driver of the bus was informed that there were very many passengers for Doaula. As usual he decided he would transfer the passengers for Dschang to a smaller bus and head back for Doaula. Dschang is off the provincial head quarters and as such many drivers believe it would not be economical to continue to Dschang except they have a full load. This was very inconveniencing. After traveling on a luxurious bus for the whole day, those of us continuing to Dschang now had to be squeezed into a small commuter bus. These buses are very uncomfortable because of over loading. When they come from Japan, they have just twelve seats, but the local people in order to make more money increase the number of seats. The back boot is eliminated and four seats are placed inside. Then, directly behind the driver and on top of the engine some other four seats are improvised using timber and this is usually called 'banc de touche' or reserve bench in English. Passengers sitting on this back the direction of travel and usually pay less. Occasionally they move to the normal seat when the occupant drops at his or her destination. So instead of twelve in the bus, we were twenty one. At the front seat the driver took three passengers. Our wind turbine was tied on the carriage on top of the bus. This very uncomfortable journey took forty minutes and we arrived Dschang at about 9.pm.

Back in the University I had no way to even display the turbine. The students were already preparing for a Nation Wide Strike to protest against conditions of learning. I dismantled the turbine at home and have been using it to correct a few mistakes that I made on the one I started building. Last week I brought it to campus and will be testing it soon.

End.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was successful thanks to the financial and moral contributions from a good number of international friends .

Many thanks to **John Furze** from Finland for his financial contributions, for starting this idea and for driving all the way over 5000 km of bad snow and traffic conditions from Finland to Scotland to bring the turbine to the Netherlands. Our students have also benefited a lot from his donations of his compendium on Renewable Energies.

Stephan Gilbert from Munich in Germany contributed financially and morally to the project; many thanks.

Many thanks to **Sjang Van Daal** of Landa Renewables (The Netherlands) for the financial contributions and for the wonderful structural engineering that ensured safe delivery of the turbine to Douala in Cameroon.

Thanks to **Hugh Piggott** for the wonderful course in Scoraig 2003 and for waving off some of the costs.

I cannot forget the part played by other classmates of Scoriag 2003 **Damian Khan** from Edinburgh, Gussepie from Italy and **Uwe** from Germany who took part in the construction of the wind turbine.

Catherine Cooper of Shanty Griha ensured a healthy vegetarian diet throughout the course period. Many thanks.

I am grateful to the **University of Dschang** for sponsoring my trip to the UK.

I am grateful to **Dr Lenzemo Constantine Yuka** of the University of Benin Nigeria who edited the story.

In all, it was a great exercise by a net work of international friends filled with a lot of enthusiasm.

Many thanks to you all and more grease to your elbows. !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!