

Commerce and priorities on the streets, in the hearts of Kissidougou

By Tony Ends

CORRESPONDENT

Anyone who's ever tried to sell anything understands that look in their eyes.

Who's going to buy all these things I value so, product of my loved ones' hand or need? Must I return to my family at day's end — empty-handed?

A pile of used shirts draped upon his back as he heads toward the public market in the morning. A metal bowl of freshly harvested, bound spinach bundles, filled just shy of overflowing upon her head.

Handmade, useful things of wood or fiber. Cakes of peanut butter sweetened with raw sugar. Tiny, knotted plastic bags of fried banana slices. A hundred pairs of sunglasses on a black cloth-covered board reflecting a street's, a nation's sundrenched humanity and its every hope and aspiration.

A third of Guinea's citizens can be found on foot or in the street at any moment of daylight, selling all one needs or thinks one needs.

From a wooden bench in the shaded terrace of a row of shops and educational offerings, I watch Kissidougou's colorful commercial kaleidoscope churning, swirling in and out of view.

I've a purpose here, of course, beyond passively watching West African life in a sub-regional capital on a Saturday off work.

I've been waiting all morning for a young fellow to open up a library. I'm hoping mightily I can persuade him to sell me paperback novels, such as I recall devouring in spare moments of my first Peace Corps experience 40 years ago in Senegal.

A young French military doctor in the sleepy, hot town where we both served back then, kindly shared those books with me. I read them alone, aloud at night, practicing French, discovering in them a rich African literature, thought and feeling of which I'd been sorely ignorant.

I persuade the missing book attendant's neighbor, himself a professed instructor in computer skills, to beckon the librarian by phone.

As the instructor is also waiting for prospective clients just as elusive, he's more than happy to chat with an old white guy who asks lots of questions. He's pleased, too, that this foreigner doesn't seem to mind his youthful flirting with yet more neighbors at a little beauty school.

I ask how MS Word and Excel instruction is going. He complains



Three women in Kissidougou, Guinea, head home from a Saturday market with unsold shoes.

TONY ENDS PHOTO The Independent-Register

it's hard to get as many as three Guineans willing to pay for sessions. I ask him how much he's paid for his motorcycle, parked inches from the open veranda.

I note that tens of thousands of Kissidougou's residents of all ages seem to be buzzing up and down every street on such motorcycles. What's the cost? Where did they get this money? Again, what did he pay for his motorcycle?

A dawning awareness of expensive priorities forces a smiling confession — 7 million Guinean francs he spent on the bike 3 years ago would not buy a comparable motorcycle, worth 9 million today.

I calculate this amount's equivalent mentally at 9,000 francs to the dollar. I observe aloud that there doesn't seem to be a lot of income generated from this transportation compared to the initial outlay. How does it ever outpace motorbike fuel selling at 9,000 francs a liter?

I ask of him and others nearby how it so many people seem entirely willing to trade so much in

speed, but not invest in their own training or advancement. No one's going there with me in search of an explanation.

Yet the library-keeper finally arrives, opening up the heavy metal doors to neat wooden shelves lining three walls of a single room. With only a single level of the shelves displaying any books at all, some of Africa's best writers and most famous titles internationally, face forward out of darkness into the light of day.

Guinea's own Camara Laye. Senegal's Mariama Ba. Dozens of others I do not recognize.

Gently, very firmly the young keeper of these books, however, refuses my every attempt to persuade him to sell even a single book. An Italian priest has entrusted the books to him for borrowing and use in group discussion only.

I finally explain my predicament and the reason I need to buy these books over the next 6 months. It has to do with my laundry.

I'm not above taking a washboard and heavy bar of soap, to

scrub my articles of clothing by hand, one at a time and wring them out to hang upon a clothesline. Yet I'd rather pay someone who needs the money to do it and divert my weekends to making solar food driers, drawing lessons translated into French on flip charts and visiting cooperative farms to foster school gardens.

My host family, from whom I rent lodging, has five children. The eldest readily consented to do my laundry. She refused repeatedly, however, to accept pay.

As an elder family member of the compound now, my Guinean host family explained, it is my "right" to ask for help, their children's obligation to comply.

I gave up, finally, trying to persuade this strong-willed teenage girl to accept monetary compensation and turned to quizzing her about her interest in school. When geography, French and English topped the list, I pulled out two French-English dictionaries, which I persuaded her I obviously didn't need.

When she beamed approval at the gift, I knew I'd hit on a plan for laundry payment worth more than money. I set out looking for Kissidougou, Guinea's, Barnes and Nobles. As I tried to explain to the librarian, I must now find a steady supply of books worth more than money to pay for my laundry.

Unmoved, the young librarian says there's only one solution to my dilemma in this regional capital.

While the library is only for borrowing, and Kissidougou has not even one bookstore of any size, there is a roving bookseller.

He passed by the library only a day previous, the librarian tells me. He's probably this moment somewhere in the streets of Kissidougou, like that one in every three other residents of most ages living here.

He's looking without realizing it, for me — and certainly trying not to be run over by motorcycles more popular than educational advancement, and more plentiful than books.

Gov.'s executive order hastens school response time to records requests

By Libby Sobicand Tom Kamenick
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State law makes nearly all governmental records open to inspection and copying, and requires custodians to release records "as soon as possible and without delay."

So how are they doing?

Recently, the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty conducted an experiment to see how well school districts are complying with the state's Open Records Law.

We asked the state's 20 largest school districts for records from the last two years relating to their compliance procedures and how quickly they fulfilled requests. The results were tabulated in a recent report. Here are some highlights.

The good

Of the 12 school districts that fulfilled our request without charging a fee, six of them (Appleton, Green Bay, Janesville, Racine, Waukesha and West Allis-West Milwaukee)

reported response times, on average, of 10 business days or fewer.

Gov. Scott Walker, in his 2016 executive order, required state agencies to respond to "small and straightforward requests within 10 business days of receipt." The order doesn't bind school districts, but we are happy to see many school districts meeting that deadline anyway.

Three other school districts (Fond du Lac, Stevens Point and Sun Prairie) were not far behind, fulfilling requests, on average, within 15 business days.

The bad

Not all districts were so prompt. Middleton-Cross Plains, for example, even though it received only 13 requests over the two-year period, took 16.8 business days, on average, to comply. Oshkosh received only 25 requests, but took almost 20 business days.

Worst of all was Milwaukee Public Schools, with an average response time of

30 business days. While MPS is far larger and receives far more requests than any other school district, the Department of Natural Resources, despite receiving almost 8,000 requests, is able to respond in about 10 business days. The Department of Public Instruction, which has as large a budget as MPS, responds in about 13 business days.

MPS spends over a billion taxpayer dollars every year; it needs to devote more resources to complying with the Open Records Law.

The ugly: Of the 20 largest school districts, seven (Eau Claire, Elm Brook, Kenosha, Madison, Sheboygan, Wausau and Wauwatosa) would not fulfill our requests without payment. The fees ranged from \$15 to, in Madison's case, more than \$1,000.

According to the Madison Metropolitan School District's attorney, the district does not have a system for tracking open records requests, hence its extremely high fee in this

case.

While records custodians are allowed to charge for locating records, school districts that need so much time to locate records are apparently not doing a good job of tracking requests. It should not be so hard to find out how well any government entity complies with the law.

The takeaway

Walker's executive order led to measurable improvements in the response time of state agencies. School districts and other local governments can use the same processes, including better training and tracking systems, to achieve similar improvements.

Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (www.wisfoic.org), a group dedicated to open government. Tom Kamenick is deputy counsel with the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty. Libby Sobic is an associate counsel at the firm.