

mbiro, little giant

The Story of Sana na N'Hada

Most of the world first learned about the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau through the incisive speeches and writings of its late leader, Amilcar Cabral. Cabral's strength as a leader was above all rooted in his closeness to his people; his ability to understand and articulate their frustration with colonialism, their aspirations for freedom, their willingness to sacrifice. "Our people are our mountains," Cabral responded when asked how the PAIGC guerrillas of his small flatland nation could challenge the colonial power.

But only a few Guinean people have been able to tell their stories about colonial oppression and the liberation war. Therefore, in early 1975, only a few months after the last Portuguese troops had left the now liberated former colony, LSM members Chantal Sarrazin and Ole Gjerstad visited Guinea-Bissau to



record the people's own history. For three months they criss-crossed the small country by jeep, foot, and canoe; sharing food and housing with the people who still give the Guinean revolution its force.

In collaboration with PAIGC and the government of Guinea-Bissau, LSM Press is preparing to publish the results of this visit. Our forthcoming book, To Live Better and in Peace, contains six autobiographies related to our team. The stories are those of women and men, old and young, educated and illiterate, guerrilla

leaders and peasants.

The following are excerpts from the story of Sana na N'Hada. Born 28 years ago in the village of Enxale, Sana's early life paralleled those of most other poor peasant boys. He was thirteen when the liberation war engulfed the Enxale region. After spending several years in the forest and training as a medic, Sana was sent to Cuba for general education and training as a filmmaker. He returned to his country and filmed the last years of the war. Today he works for the Department of Information in Bissau, the capital city.

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One day soon after the rains started, I came home after locking up the animals. Dad had just arrived from the fields, but his hands were red and swollen. Mom was all upset, crying and wanting to know what had happened.

But Dad was in great pain. "Just get me some salt water, quick." He dipped his hands in the bowl and just sat there for a while. "If you want to know, go and ask the *cipaios*,* I don't know why they beat me."

Apparently some drunken *cipaios* had come by the field while Dad was working and had beaten him with a *palmatoria*†

*Police, generally Africans.

†Paddle with small conical holes which pull in the skin of the palm of the hand causing intense pain.

for no reason at all. It was the first time I had seen my father in a condition like this, and it upset me so much that I cried all night. A week passed before he could work again.

A couple of months later, around the middle of August, I spent the night at Grandpa's hut with a friend. In the middle of the night my friend started shaking me, "Sana, get up, hurry!"

This was no hour for games, so I just turned over. "Go away, let me sleep."

"If you don't get up, we'll leave without you," he insisted.

When I got outside, everyone was ready to go. In the distance I heard gunfire. We walked to the forest with me making up the rear, confused and reluctant. I had no idea what was going on. We stayed in the bush until we heard no more shooting. The tall grass was wet and cold, and I was shivering by the time we got back home.

The following morning the Portuguese sub-lieutenant sent all the *cipaios* in Enxale to gather the elders at the military camp. There were about one hundred families in our village, but only three elders went. "I'm not going," my grandfather said. "I don't know what has happened, but I'm sure it's bad news." My father agreed.

Only later did we hear that a group of guerrillas had at-

tacked the camp during the night. The *tugas*** responded by firing in all directions and shot up many of the nearby *morancas*.†† The people fled to join the guerrillas. Now, the Portuguese wanted revenge; two of the elders who reported to the camp were beaten to death and the third barely managed to escape.

That evening all women and children in our part of the village left for the forest. The men stayed behind to look after our property. The rain had been pouring without stop for several days and the fields were flooded so we had to use the road and the hillside trails. The tall grass and bushes cut deep into my skin. Some older boys checked to see that the road was clear. My mother carried my two year old sister while I helped my little brother along. I still didn't understand why we had to go through all this; I'd much rather sleep in the warm, dry hut.

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We didn't have time to leave [the camp in the forest -ed.] before the next raid came. It was about five in the evening and the women had started to prepare supper when four Fiat

**African term for Portuguese soldiers.

††Living compound of an extended family made up of several huts for sleeping and cooking.

jets appeared. This time they were right on target; the first bombs fell very close. People were screaming and running around. I was terrified from the noise; I still didn't know that planes could kill like that. When the Fiats left, a group of B-26 planes took over. One of our neighbors was running across the open space in our direction when they came in just over the treetops. "Down, down," we shouted, "the pilot will see you." But the first plane had already let go with its guns and dust came up all over.

When the noise finally died down, I got up, still shaking. Somebody was sobbing in the shelter next to ours, and when I went over to look, I found a pregnant woman with a baby in her arms. The woman was dying; the child had been hit in the hand. Another woman had a broken jaw. I ran back to my mother, almost beside myself with fear. Mom, however, didn't give me much comfort. "You, the eldest one," she said with scorn, "the one responsible for the family, and now you are scared."

That night I couldn't eat or sleep. At five a.m. we got up, prepared our food for the day and went to another village. We could see the planes attacking Malafu village once again.

When we returned after dark, our shelters were in ashes. Still, the planes had not finished their work. Just as we

were trying to rebuild some kind of shelter from the remains of the first one, the B-26 came roaring back. This time Mom made no sign to leave. "I'm tired of running; I'm staying right here." She picked up my baby sister and held her close.

But I panicked completely. I saw a woman running for the bush and my little brother followed her instinctively, screaming in terror. I headed in their direction, but the woman chased us away. "Shut up, go some other place."

I looked at her, my eyes wide open. I was at once so angry and afraid that I ceased thinking. I just grabbed my brother around the head and pressed him close to me. We stayed like that during the whole attack; upright and out in the open.

That night brought me no sleep either. I really hated that woman. I could not understand why she had chased us away like that. It was as if all the terrible things happening were her fault.

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During this time [after one year or so in the forest -ed.] Caetano Semedo, our commander, told me to teach the other boys gymnastics. I directed a group of 19 younger boys, and one of my pals had a group of 21. Every day we lined up for exercises. We also learned to handle "weapons" - except that we

had nothing but sticks.

Of course, we really wanted to learn to shoot. Caetano, however, wouldn't let us; we would just be knocked flat, he said. So we kept pestering him. We also wanted to go watch an ambush. "That way," we said, "we'll learn to fight."

"You're crazy," he said. "Go away."

But one day he finally changed his mind. He gave an old, heavy rifle to one of my friends and pointed into the forest. "Fire!" Caetano said. "Shoot all you want."

The shot knocked my friend flat off his feet and the rifle went clanging to the ground. When I saw this, I tried to sneak away - discretely. But Caetano had me by the arm. "Ah, you better try it, too," he laughed. "Today you're going to shoot, my friend."

He gave me a lighter weapon, a G-3 Portuguese automatic, but even that was too much for me. I couldn't hold it still enough to take proper aim, and when I pulled the trigger, I fell backwards into the arms of a guerrilla standing behind me. As we boys trudged away from the place, our heads bent in embarrassment, Caetano knew that he would have peace for a while.

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At the end of 1964 Caetano changed his quarters to another base in the Sara region. He took five of us boys with



Sana with Caetano

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him for "staff." He called us by number. I was number 26, i.e. the 26th man on the base, ranking below all the guerrillas and the adults. One of my friends was number 18, another one 36.

During the day we stood guard outside Caetano's shelter. To get there you had to pass between the other guerrillas' huts to where we blocked the entrance. Anyone who wanted to see Caetano had to tell us the nature of the visit. The boys at the first position would then tell another "little officer" stationed at Caetano's doorway. The reply would re-

turn by the same route. If Caetano said, "Send him in," we would escort the visitor into the hut and stand at attention while the two of them conducted their business. We guarded our assignment with great jealousy.

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In late 1965 I was sent to Mores to become a first aid assistant. When I got there, after a long and dangerous walk through a zone controlled by the Portuguese, I arrived one evening and was taken right away to see Simao Mendes,

the cadre in charge of the first aid course. He carefully read my papers, then looked at me. He was upset. "I asked for a strong man," he said, "for somebody to carry wounded people. But you... you couldn't carry anything! You don't belong here; you're going back."

What he said was true, but I was offended anyway. It was always the same problem; when it came to combat - too small; for nursing - too small. I was tired of hearing that. I was going to answer Simao Mendes, but one of his assistants signalled me to keep my mouth shut.

Simao, of course, had reason to be angry. It was essential that our medics could get the wounded to safety in a hurry; many of the battles were at close range, and when the Portuguese found blood, they tried to follow the track. But at that moment, I didn't want to understand.

Simao's deputy, Joao da Costa, came over. Simao showed him my papers. "What are we going to do with this?" he snorted, pointing my way. "How many wounded do you think that one could carry?"

Joao da Costa was looking at me. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Seventeen," I lied. If I told them I was fifteen, I would be sent back for sure.

"You're not telling the truth," da Costa said sternly. "How far did you go in school?"

"Third year of primary."

"Hmmm. We'll see tomorrow," he finally said. He probably would have to wait to convince Simao.

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There were so many wounded. The fighting at Mores was getting worse and worse. At the end of every day, after seeing nothing but blood and wounded and dying people, I sat in my little shelter and wondered what I was doing in this place. I didn't like to treat people when they were yelling and screaming all the time. I lost my appetite - though there wasn't much to eat anyway. For a week I cried every day. I didn't know anybody here at Mores. Caetano was far away and so was my family. And all the other medic students were older than I. So I sat in my hut, feeling abandoned and crying with loneliness.

After ten days or so Osvaldo Vieira arrived at the base. He was the chief commander of the Northern Front and we had met one year earlier in Sara. At that time he promised to send me to Conakry to flying school, but he must have forgotten.

He was surprised to see how much I had grown. He could hardly believe it was me. After that, we spent much time together; we talked about all kinds of things. Finally I had someone I knew.

At the end of our six-week

course, we had examinations. I came out with the highest marks despite the fact that I had arrived two weeks into the course. That day, Joao da Costa was very pleased with me. Chico Mendes, too, the chief political commissar of the North, was all smiles. He called me *mbiro* - the invincible man, a little giant. This made me very happy. Now I had three friends: Osvaldo, Joao da Costa, and Chico Mendes.

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Three Cuban doctors had arrived to work with us. The bombings were heavy now, and every day there were many wounded and killed. After one raid on Iracunda, a woman was brought to us. She had been cut up by shrapnel and her intestines were hanging out.

The Cuban whom I was working with decided to operate on the spot. "If we send her to the border, she'll die on the way," he said. "These aren't the best of conditions, but we have no choice."

This was the first time I took part in an operation. Before I had always watched from a distance. I was very curious to see what the doctor would do.

I started to set up the operating table under a big tree so that we would be covered in case of a raid. But the doctor protested. "We have to be in the open or we'll get

dirt all over," he said. Even when I tried to explain, he insisted. He had never been in a raid, this doctor.

Well, he had just opened the woman's belly completely when the Fiats arrived and started bombing all over. The patient was under anesthesia. A woman nurse and I cut the ropes that held the stretcher to the table and carried the stretcher off into the thicket. The doctor held a sheet over the exposed stomach to prevent leaves and dirt from falling into the wound. Our white sheets and the silvery table were as visible as snow. I was sure all the planes would aim their bombs straight at us.

Fortunately the raid lasted only half an hour, and we managed to finish the operation before the anesthesia wore off. But during the night, the woman got delirious and fought to get up. I had to call a friend to help me keep her down. The doctor wanted to do another incision, then move the patient, but for four straight days the planes never gave us a break. On the fourth day the woman finally gave up and died.

We all felt very depressed about this, especially the Cuban comrade. In a way, I felt responsible for his problems here - all the bombings, the impossible working conditions, the lack of food. He was a foreigner and yet he shared all our suffering and privations. I think we all felt that way about the doctors

who came to work with us.

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In 1970 [in Cuba -ed.] all the students went to the countryside to take part in the Ten Million Ton Harvest. We lived with the Cuban cane workers. We also met the Venceremos Brigade, the second contingent of young Americans who came to work in Cuba. It seems to me I talked non-stop for the four days we spent with them. They asked a thousand questions, and I talked, talked, talked - about the struggle in Guine, about our history, about the problems of Africa.

I still remember Duncan McQuichan from Philadelphia; there were comrades from New York, Oregon, and Arizona. Some were Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Then there was a girl whose father worked in the armaments industry.

When she told me that her father wanted the Americans to fight in Vietnam because his job depended on it, I was shocked. I began to understand something new at that point, but the fact that simple working people could want war to save their jobs - this was very difficult for me to cope with. There must absolutely be another way of making a living than by manufacturing arms.

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Ivan, one of the Vietnamese

students, became my best friend in Cuba. Ivan was only his *nom de guerre*, but nobody ever called him by his real name. I don't know whether he was from the South or the North, because the Vietnamese never made that distinction; they always insisted there is only one Vietnam.

Ivan had never known peace until he arrived in Cuba. He was born during the war and none of his relatives were alive; his parents, his brothers, his uncles - all had been killed in the war. Ivan himself had been wounded three times.

Every Saturday there was a Vietnamese film at the school and Ivan would take me, but I never learned enough Vietnamese to understand well. We studied Spanish together, and on Sundays we played soccer, ping pong, and chess. When I wrote letters to my family, Ivan always added a few sentences for himself. Every week he asked if I had had an answer. He seemed very worried about my family.

Before I left Cuba, Ivan gave me a gift, a small diary that he had made himself, with his name and mine in Vietnamese. That is a souvenir I want to keep with me for the rest of my life.

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My first solo mission as cameraman [back in Guinea-Bissau -ed.] was to film the attack on the Portuguese bastion of Guidage, near the bor-

der with Senegal, in May 1973. I was stationed with the artillery, and our job was to neutralize the long-range gun at another camp which was part of Guidage's support system.

My assistant - a young boy - and I were heavily loaded with film, batteries, and the camera. We were down in a deep trench, next to the rocket launcher commanded by Samba Limane, who is today Minister for Agriculture and Livestock. Our battery was to begin the attack which was set for midnight.

"Are you ready?" Samba Limane asked. "Here we go."

I began filming as our weapon roared with fire and thunder. The blue smoke made it difficult to get clear pictures. The earth behind the weapon was burned black.

We fired five rounds before the Portuguese caught on. But they needed only a couple of rounds to zero in their deadly 155 millimeter howitzer. One shell landed only ten meters from our trench. We heard it coming and were flat on our stomachs when it exploded. Even so, my mouth, nose, and ears filled with dirt and I was completely deafened. Everybody was shaken up. The enemy dropped four shells like that right on us, and it was a miracle that nobody was hurt. I protected my camera with my body.

Then it was our turn once more. Each of our three rocket-launchers fired 15 rounds,

interrupted by return salvos from the Portuguese. At dawn we were out of ammunition, and Samba Limane gave the order to retreat. The Portuguese kept hitting us as we slowly withdrew. When they fired a round, our group hit the dirt until the shell had exploded. I was totally deafened and could hear nothing, so I watched the others closely; when they went down, I followed; when they got up, so did I.

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On 11 October [1974, after the final agreement for the Portuguese to withdraw -ed.] I arrived in Bissau, the capital of my country, for the first time. There were three of us who were to report to the Information Office. Portuguese troops filled the streets. I felt very tense.

The Information Office was not yet open so we sat down in a sidewalk cafe. The place crawled with Portuguese soldiers. On the floor next to us a shoeshine boy was crying. He had shined the boots of one of the soldiers who, instead of paying, had poured a glass of water over the boy's head. The soldier, a fat guy, was still in his chair, laughing.

One of my friends asked the waiter for a glass of water. When it arrived, he gave it to the boy. "Pour this on his head," my friend said.

The boy, naturally, looked hesitant. But when three of

us got up to back him up, he finally mustered all his courage and threw the water in the fat soldier's face.

The place suddenly went dead quiet. The soldier looked stupefied, his uniform shirt soaking wet and water dripping from his face. Nobody moved. I was perspiring heavily; the revolver, hidden under my shirt, was itching against my skin.

But nothing happened. My comrade quietly told the soldier to pay the boy, who took the money and promptly disappeared. I could feel a hundred pairs of eyes in my back as we, too, walked out of the cafe, close together.

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Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if there had been no PAIGC, no liberation struggle. I would surely have still been at Enxale, growing rice, exploited and mistreated by the colonialists, working without pay and beaten for nothing.

I would have known nothing about politics. How could I? Most of the colonialists themselves knew nothing; even Africans who went to study in Portugal came back knowing nothing about the world situation. If there were no PAIGC, I would not have studied or known anything about filmmaking. What has happened almost seems miraculous. And it is the same for most of our people.

My dream is to become a very good filmmaker. I want to help create films to show the world what has happened in our country - how we lived under colonialism and how we managed to regain our freedom and dignity. Those of us who fought in the struggle already know this, but there are many people in our country who are still not clear on what it all means. And we want to teach our children, too.

In the same way, there are many people in the world who don't know what we have gone through, we and the other peoples of Africa. If we want them to be on our side, if we want to work together, then we must help inform them. This is what I hope to do with my life now that my country is liberated and at peace.