

JOKING COUSINS

During the drought Bobo the boy came upon Kiko the crocodile dying in the sun. 'Carry me to the water and I will reward you,' Kiko said and as Bobo had little experience with lies he did so.

There can be danger in humor. We RPCVs often cast ourselves as the butts of our own jokes lest we offend foreign ears or cast our kind hosts as quaint characters in our own adventures. It takes some understanding of context to apprehend fully the lives of our foreign friends. But nothing is less funny than a joke one has to explain.

As Kiko took Bobo in his teeth Bobo cried 'Do we reward good deeds with bad?' and Koko said of course. They agreed to ask three friends and see.

Yet humor is an important part of life, especially in West Africa where I served. It can even avert danger. An artful joke can deescalate a stressful situation. The system of cousinage in Mali keeps peace between ethnic groups. Taboos abound in the Sahara. Do not mention a woman's pregnancy lest she miscarry and you be blamed. But if she is your joking cousin, all bets are off. Spit it out, sister, let's roast it. It lets off steam.

Kiko and Bobo came upon cow drinking by the water and asked if bad deeds rewarded good deeds and the cow said yes. He had served humans well all his life with milk. Now he had none he was put out to pasture and die.

The Dogon people lived in the cliffs coaxing food from tiny fields while the Bozo fished the Niger River. When drought came, famine came. The Dogon went down to hunt. He found his friend the Bozo starving and promised to bring back meat. But he found none. The Bozo did not notice the cut on his friend's leg, he only smelled the meat cooking. Empty stomach small eyes, they say. When he was better he realized he had eaten from his friend's leg. They made a pact for all their people to be cousins, banning blood relations between them from that day on: They could not fight and spill each other's blood. Neither could they intermarry. It is said if a Dogon woman bears a Bozo's child it will be born a fish. This story explains the origins and some rules of cousinage.

Next Kiko and Bobo asked donkey drinking by the water the same question and got the same answer. I served humans all my life hauling load after load. Now I am old and cannot carry they beat me and drive me away to die.

Malians like games too. But they serve an important social function. The weirdest game of hide and seek I ever saw involved a marriage. The girl hid out in a barrel while the boys from another village hunted. When they found her she kicked so hard I almost intervened until my friend explained to me that when he had gone up to their village to bring a girl down to marry, the boys beat them with stones and thorns to show how sad they were to lose one of their maidens. Sure enough when the girl got to her mother's hut she started singing and laughing as they tressed her hair. It had all been for show.

Finally Kiko and Bobo asked rabbit chomping water weeds. 'What's the deal?' rabbit asked. A blind man cannot tell you colors. 'What's this about?' When Bobo told him

rabbit did not believe. 'You cannot carry a crocodile!' Bobo wrapped Kiko in a mat again to show how he had done it.

When they told us in training that the creature with backwards feet who jumps over your head to knock you down and steal you peanuts is called the walkaloni I did not believe them until I saw folks carry petrol to ward it off. But could I really believe the best joke they have is YOU EAT BEANS?! (It implies you fart.) One night in front of my host family's yard as I sat with grandpa talking he suddenly pointed his flashlight on an old lady (a taboo thing to do) 'see her?' so I guess he'd say- she's a witch, or something...

Rabbit told Bobo now you have Kiko wrapped up again take him back to the desert to dry out or put him in your pot to eat if crocodile meat is not taboo for your family.

Grandpa said slowly to be sure I'd understand-
A be cho dum.
She eats beans.