

# HEALTH AND WELFARE OVERSEAS

## Health Conditions in Tropical Africa

by Dr. L.L. Palmer

When you first go to Tropical Africa you will have an experience which you will never forget. The experience includes the smells, the bright light of the tropics, the feeling of hot humidity and the excitement which is almost tangible, the rich and uncontrolled growth of plants, insects, lizards, dogs and yes — humans.

The very joy of life, that seems to be a part of the Africans, will impart itself to the visitor and this is why you will never forget your stay in Africa. With this richness of growth and joy of life come certain difficulties which are an integral part of these two conditions.

Richness of growth also means that certain hazards to health are seen. Some diseases are present which do not exist in Canada and others which exist in Canada are much more prevalent in Africa.



Making manioc in Boundiali, The Ivory Coast.  
Photo: Peter Sutherland.

The "joy of life" which is so remarkable as to impart an unexpected difference in the people, brings with it a culture which is vital, interesting and very alive, but which is not easily understood by Canadians. Thus, cross cultural adjustment problems are to be expected.

The difficulties which we encounter in a new culture, whether they are exotic diseases or cultural differences should be welcomed by us. After all, if you want life to be easy and safe, you should not be in the foreign service. You should stay home and seek adventure at Disneyland in the semi-tropical Florida climate.

Keeping healthy in the tropics is not really difficult and is mostly a matter of common sense. In Canada we have professionals who look after us and who protect our health. We are scarcely aware of the people who inspect our sewers, test our water, inspect our cattle herds and meat-sanitary inspectors and government officials who are trying to protect us with obligatory immunizations, constant monitoring of diseases and many other functions.

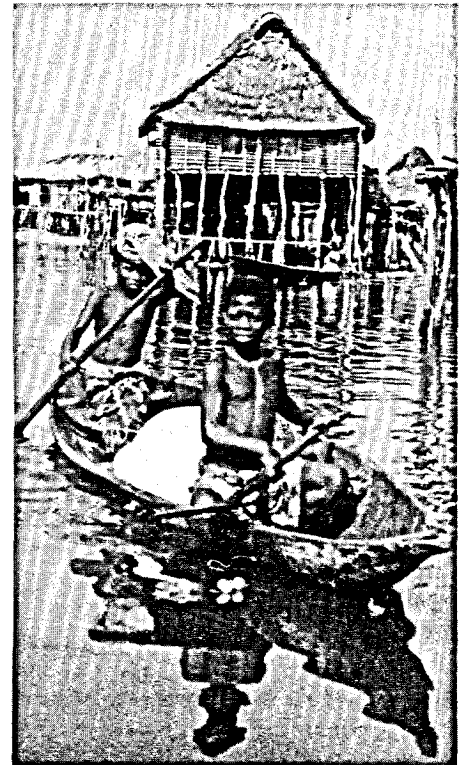
In tropical Africa, public health officials are sometimes not quite so efficient and so we must do the job for ourselves. Consider the following points:

1. We must make sure the water we drink is safe by boiling or adding iodine or chlorine.
2. We must make sure vegetables are cooked, peeled or soaked in iodine.
3. Cook meat well because of parasites.
4. Take precautions against being bitten by mosquitos.
5. Take anti-malarial prophylaxis in malarial areas and continue for six weeks after leaving the area.
6. Avoid swimming in fresh water lakes or slow-flowing rivers.
7. Make sure your immunizations are kept up to date.
8. Refrain from driving in the country at night. Automobile accidents are the number one health hazard in Africa.

The above bits of advice are common knowledge and the details are printed in several pamphlets which Health and Welfare puts out.

It is important for anyone going to the tropics to acquaint themselves with not only these points but a further elaboration of the conditions which are covered by these bits of advice. Space is not available here to give the details.

I always feel that a balance must be struck between taking reasonable precau-



Village on stilts in Ganvié, Bénin, West Africa. Photo: Peter Sutherland.

tions and being so strict that one misses the fun of being in a foreign country. Enjoyment is what it is all about. If you see the Africans as interesting people with a culture as good or better than our own but very different and if you see the country as the continent where the human race evolved, you will have gone a long way toward the understanding and the enjoyment of the continent.

This is not to say that a posting in Africa is not difficult. Most Canadians find it is really very difficult to adjust to and to work in Africa, but once they have done it, it is an experience that they will never forget and never regret.

## MURPHY'S LAWS

- If an hour has been spent amending a sentence, someone will move to delete the paragraph.
- If you keep anything long enough, you can throw it away. If you throw it away, you will need it the next day.
- Once you open a can of worms, the only way to recan them is to use a larger can.
- If you consult enough experts you can confirm any opinion.