The Stories Behind Mali

Trista Straube

Western Michigan University

When you are in college, there is a lot of pressure on deciding who you want to be. This doesn’t mean we are going to be in a soul-searching expedition, it means we have to spend our time deciding what occupation we will have in the future. We have to make multiple decisions and base those off of our potential occupation and how it will help us achieve our goals. But one thing no one ever told us was that we had to do all this within the first few years, that way you graduate at a reasonable time. What I am still trying to grasp the concept of is, how can we go from having to ask to use the bathroom at eighteen, to having to plan our whole future? Most college students have no idea what they want to be stepping into the university, some change majors multiple times, and some are even still undecided after year two. There is no easy way to figure out what you want to be, some are lucky and find it so quickly, but for others, they are left to decide on a whim and hope it turns out okay.

While I was finishing my fall semester in the major of Biomedical Sciences, I ran across an issue. I had fallen in love with a whole other subject, and I had no idea how to approach changing majors. I sought help from my Literary Interpretation professor, and then she had later referred me to a man named Dr. Allen Webb. He agreed to meet with me and discuss what routes I could take while approaching this situation. In this meeting I had retained an overwhelming amount of information and I believe Dr. Allen could tell. He had given me my first step to take, and even his phone number if I had any questions. While given this first step, which was to see a College of Education advisor, I quickly acted on it and got started as soon as I left our meeting. I walked over to Sangren, signed into the waiting list in the CEHD office and patiently waited to meet an advisor. Once my name was called, I headed to the back where I had met a woman named Roxie, and this is the exact moment I had changed my life.

Sitting in that office was probably the most stressful thing I have experienced. After planning to be a doctor for ten years, and telling everyone that is what you want, there are many expectations that follow. I couldn’t get myself to agree on anything, nothing in my head made sense, but I knew if I just followed through with my decision, life would make more sense. I scheduled my classes for Spring 2016, and once she hit submit, I became a major in Secondary English Education. I had no idea what to expect from my classes, I kind of just glanced at degree works and picked at random. Little did I know, I signed up for a class with Dr. Allen, and to greater surprise, this class had changed me into a completely different person.

Walking into African Literature 3140, I expected nothing more than to learn history. I thought it would at least enlighten me on past events that we never got the chance to learn and we would just read books about it as we went along. I can now tell you, I clearly underestimated everything about this class. I had not only learned history, like The Scramble for Africa, but I also learned culture, tradition, compassion, hope, love and so much more. This class taught me about how society in Africa functions compared to America, their traditions they held before in tribes and now in communities, their love for each other, and their compassion they hold for others. But, as if that wasn’t enough, this class also let me live through the eyes of African culture myself. Dr. Allen is so in depth with his teaching that he had come up with “investigations”. With these investigations, we are encouraged to go out, in our own community and beyond, and experience things from the African world. In this, I have interviewed African students, tried their typical cuisine (more than once), listened to their music, observed their art, and even learned about linguistics. Not only has all of this helped me understand other cultures better, but it also helped me understand more things about what it meant to be human. I feel as if, to me, being in this class was heaven sent.

I am typically a very open minded person, unlike most people in my family. I give everyone multiple chances, no one is ever a bad person unless they prove that to me, and I am always there to help if someone needs it. With this class, it has only added on more traits to me. I am able to grasp a complex conflict like racism and violence on a specific culture, I am able to see a side of people that others don’t give the slightest chance to understand, and I try to spread awareness of what I learn to as many people as possible. What we learn in this class isn’t only a lecture, it is full of life lessons, and because of this, I have started many things to help people realize the true beauty behind being different. I have started telling almost everyone I know what I have learned in this class. What The Scramble has done to so many people, how it affected their lives, and what we could do to help. I have a blog about everything I learn, and make it a point to bring awareness to others. But I feel as if I can do so much more to help.

Recently, the class was assigned to read a book called *Monique and the Mango Rains*. In this book we read about a woman, named Kris Holloway, and her journey throughout Mali. We read about her experiences, the people she meets, the way she got her new name in the village, and her thoughts throughout her two years there. In all of this we also had a glimpse of what it is like to be in the Peace Corps, and this is where my I-Search paper topic has come about. As previously stated before, I had often jumped around when it came to trying to figure out what I wanted to be. And reading this book, had definitely just added to some of that pressure yet again, but this way is very different than before.

Walking to class one afternoon I was prepared to discuss our most recent text, little did I know I was about to have a great surprise. Dr. Allen planned a Skype Q &A with Kris Holloway for a hefty portion of our class time. In this, we were in open discussion with Kris and were able to ask her anything we desired. Many people had asked about situations she was in, how she lived now compared to before, and so much more! After our time with Kris she had given us her email to contact her as we pleased with questions. I thought this was cool and all, but I wanted to take it one step further. After the discussion, I messaged Kris on Facebook, and within the same day, I received a message back! We had a pretty lengthy conversation about her time in college, how she came to join the Peace Corps, her time in Mali, and after she returned back home. I couldn’t have been more excited to be given this opportunity, but due to her busy schedule, she had to leave but let me know that we could talk whenever I pleased.

Now at this point you may be asking what all of this has to do with one another. Long story short, Kris and I started the exact same way when it came to approaching life and schooling. We both loved to be active in our community, were hard workers and leaders, but we both also jumped around a lot in education and deciding what we wanted to do. Kris had told me her major finally turned out to be Environmental Studies, but once she received her degree, she didn’t know what to do after for her occupation. She didn’t want to go on after school not knowing and so after some searching, she came across an answer. She applied to be a part of the Peace Corps so that she had time to do it after college. Because of her experiences, I have been considering joining the Peace Corps as well, but I came across the issue of the two-year dedication. She had told me not to worry because they can put you into job specific locations and it would still be very beneficial for your future once you came back.

After hearing this, I jumped onto the Peace Corps website and got to looking at potential opportunities. If you log onto their site, <http://www.peacecorps.gov>, click on ‘volunteer programs’, go to ‘Peace Corps Volunteers’, scroll down to ‘volunteer openings’ and it will forward you to a part of the website where you can click on your field you want to help in and the country you desire to go to. Being a Secondary English Education major, I clicked on the education tab and clicked on ‘Anywhere’ for my location. The results were shocking and intriguing. 18 results had shown for various education opportunities, 11 of which I would be eligible for in my major. Also, having most of my family living in Colombia, I found an opportunity that is in a city only 8 hours away from my family! Actually just finding out this information is making me lean way more toward the Peace Corps route. Granted, in some of these locations there are specific requirements to meet, and others not so much. If you click on a desired location, you will see all the requirements on the left hand side along with a map and a description of what you will be doing there.

Seeing that Kris was so helpful on the information of the Peace Corps, I thought I would message her and ask her about her experience yet again. She had been telling me about how life in Mali was and what it was like to walk into a village as an outsider. Intrigued by her information, I looked further into the Mali program, as well as, where she was located and the life within the village. I didn’t find any work available in the Peace Corps for Mali anymore so I decided to dig a little deeper. I had gotten onto the Western Michigan University Library database and began looking for anything related to Mali. I had come across one book, *Culture and Customs in Mali by* Dorothea Schulz, and two Government Documents; *Family Planning in Mali* by André Laplante, Faran Samaké, and George Brown, and *The Peace Corps in Mali* by United States Action. Starting with these three sources I have found a great deal of information, not to mention the use of *Monique and the Mango Rains* by Kris Holloway.

While looking at *The Peace Corps in Mali*, I have learned a great deal about the history of Mali in itself. It was said “since the spring of 1971, Peace Corps volunteers have worked with the people of Mali on projects related to the government development priorities” (4). Many of the volunteers that came to Mali had taught English in the training colleges, worked to help with their livestock and agriculture, development of rural communities, and health in rural areas. Volunteers were actually the first people to help the people of Mali use silos to store food. While digging a bit deeper, I found many challenges for the volunteers coming to Mali, some of which Kris had explained to me as well. According to this piece, “volunteers in Mali quickly come face-to-face with a series of adjustments to food, language, living conditions, and a vastly different culture” (5). With only a life expectancy of 37 years and infant mortality at a high, Mali soon became a hard place for volunteers to work. They had slow technological development which was a good change in pace but also very frustrating. In Kris’s case we get a glimpse of the frustration when she is trying to help Monique in the birthing center without proper equipment and medicine. This slowly became a reoccurring pattern; this is why people like Kris fought so hard to help those who needed it.

I had tried to understand some of the ways family planning took place in Mali, but honestly speaking, how far behind they are makes me cringe. They are so economically declined that they don’t have simple things to help with family planning. It was in 1971 where a Pilot Plan was made in order to gather data necessary for the formation of a family planning program. It was established in the capital, Bamako, and had four branches in the city. This was the first government sponsored experiment conducted in a French speaking country in its own region. The program took off in three years and began the questioning of family planning in the whole region. In the clinics, they helped polygamous and monogamous clients, which was strange considering we saw in *Dilemma of the Ghost*, that “family planning” was frowned upon. Once married, it was expected of the couple to have children as soon as they can in order to be prosperous. In these clinics, limited help was provided for the amount of people, and considering they were only in the capital, there was not much help for rural areas.

I had found some facts in *Culture and Customs in Mali,* I found many statistics on how families function and what is expected of them. Families are expected to be 20 to 40 people for countryside, or tribal, families. It isn’t normal for contraceptives to be used in any way and they are expected to be pregnant. When a couple is found out to be infertile, the tribes usual preform many rituals to help a baby be made and create fertility. According to African Folk Medicine, by Pascal Imperato, “There are a number of traditional remedies for presumed female infertility” (109). Most of these women who seek infertility help do so by means of sorcery or witchcraft. The way to fix fertility with a practitioner is a series of treatments until they are helped, sadly, most are just declared sterile. Some of these rituals I found are kind of strange. There is a mix of bark, fruit and porridge made from millet and drunk daily for four days. Second is roots of ndanga, which are crushed with toro and made into a powder to have in your food daily. The third one I found was dried placenta of sheep being crushed and the powder is mixed with bark goro ngua. This is added in small quantities to porridge of millet and taken daily. On top of these rituals, the tribal African life is also a firm believer in virilocality, which means that after marriage, a woman will move to and reside in her husband’s parental courtyard. “These courtyards are usually composed of different houses with two or three rooms built by the husband to provide separate accommodations for each of his wives” (Schulz 111-112).

After reading all of this text about the clinics, how fertility was dealt with and how volunteers helped in Mali, I decided to search to see why the Peace Corps resided from Mali. Of course, I got onto Proquest on the Western Michigan University library database, but oddly, I hadn’t found anything after searching multiple times. My second resort was to search online and hope for the best. The first thing to pop up was the Peace Corps home page on Mali. It had stated that they had started volunteering there in 1971, which makes sense since that’s when the clinics started coming about. Since 1971, they have had 2,645 volunteers in Mali, up until they got rid of the program in December of 2015. After some more digging, I had found an article on the resigning of Peace Corps in Mali.

The Peace Corps today (2015) announced the temporary suspension of its program in Mali due to escalating security concerns. All Peace Corps volunteers have departed the country and the agency will continue to monitor the security environment in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy in Bamako to determine if and when volunteers can return.

Obviously it was thought provoking to see what security concerns these were, so back to hunting for information. I searched on “security concerns in Mali in 2015” and the first thing to pop up was a issued warning by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affaris page.

On November 20, 2015, heavily armed assailants stormed the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako using gunfire and grenades.  One U.S. citizen and 19 other foreigners were murdered in the attack.  Violent extremist and militant elements, including al-Qa'ida in the Lands of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Murabitoun, have claimed responsibility for the attack on the Radisson Blu. (2015)

On top of this attack, there were two others, strictly targeted towards foreigners. So, for safety protocol, they had recalled the volunteer program. But this makes you think, what did foreigners do to upset them?

Further research happened and I found out that Al-Qaeda had played a major role in the Malian Evacuation. There was racial tension for them having white visitors in “their nation”. Foreign policy and French lawmakers had a lot to do with this and their views. Because of the recent influx of volunteers and civil soldiers in Mali, that is how they became their target. Thanks to quick thinking, we had gotten most of them out, but there was a death of 19 civilians and 21 elite soldiers. It was a sad loss, but much better than losing everyone we have positioned in Mali. In all of this chaos, there was serious violation of human rights, which we have seen in many books we have read, especially War in the Land of Egypt. I wish I could say things have gotten better, but it is far from that. When things started too cool down in Mali, there were some crisis volunteers sent over to assess the situation and later were brought back due to a gunmen attack at the EU missions headquarters.

“The U.S. Embassy is aware of small arms fire" in the neighborhood, the embassy posted on Facebook. “American citizens should avoid this area until further notice and shelter in place. The Embassy compound is in duck and cover status.” Monday's assault comes about four months after an attack on the Radisson Blu hotel here, killing 20 people. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for that attack, saying it was their first joint attack since al-Mourabitoun joined al-Qaeda’s North Africa branch in 2015.

With all that has been going on, there has been lack of volunteers in the area and Americans are asked to stay indoors and on high alert.

Throughout the I-search paper, I was granted the opportunity to learn so much about Mali. The journey through Kris’s life and how she got to Mali, and then to how Mali is today. There is so much more of a story to be told about Mali, and looking at their culture and traditions you are able to see that. I think that while researching Mali I had benefitted a great deal, and with Kris and Monique’s children’s help, I was able to get appropriate information and help that I needed. This paper was definitely a journey with taking.

References

* Imperato, Pascal (1977) *African folk medicine: practices and beliefs of the Bambara and other peoples*. York Press: New York
* Schulz, Dorothea (2012). *Culture and customs of Mali*. Greenwood: Santa Barbara, California.

Laplante, A., Samaké, F., Brown, G. (1975). *Family planning in Mali*. International Development Research Center: Ottawa, Canada

United States Action (1980). *The Peace Corps in Mali*. Washington, D.C.

Holloway, Kris (2006). Monique and the mango rains. Waveland Press, Inc.: Long Grove, Illinois.

Peace Corps-

http://www.peacecorps.gov/media/forpress/press/2612/

Mali Travel Warning- https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/mali-travel-warning.html

Human Rights Watch- https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/maliUSA Today

Soumaila Diarra, Special for USA TODAY - http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/03/21/gunmen-attack-eu-mission-mali-capital-1-attacker-dead/82094864/

Conversation With Kris Holloway

**Kris**: Sure! Glad to chat.

**Me**: I guess I'd just love to hear more about your transitions! How you went through college, to the Peace Corps, got to Mali, and how you committed to the two year travels? I wish I could take the path you have and going to Africa is a dream of mine. I think I'm headed to Senegal next summer. But I have traveled a great deal for my age.

**Kris**: That's awesome! Senegal is wonderful. Like Mali in many ways. In applied to the Peace Corps during the fall of my senior year in college. Got my assignment in April and left right after graduation. I feel like the process kind of guided me rather than vice versa. I was pretty clued out as to what to do after graduation! If I hadn't gotten into the Peace Corps, I was going to go work in Alaska. I studied bald eagle nesting sites there as an undergrad and fell in love with the land there. Happy that didn't work out or I would never have gone to Mali!

**Me**: How was the two-year commitment for you? Was it hard to have that big chunk of your life in another country? And so you took this route because you were at a loss? And I know! I'm really happy things worked out the way they did for you.

**Kris**: No. I took this route bc I wanted to save the world. Small goal. Felt like the best way to do it! Two years away had its hard moment like anything does that is worth committing to. But I gained so much strength from doing it and luckily my family was very supportive. I would do it all over again

**Me**: I completely understand! There is so much I want to do to help better the world; I just don't know where to start. Right now, I have small projects I do; I've been president of many community service projects, awareness blogs, and things like that. I just want to do more. And in travel, my family, or my mother, is very supportive. I've lived in Europe alone months at a time and she does nothing but encourage me to travel I just don't know how I'd appreciate. Or how I'd handle being in a place like Mali compared to the US.

**Kris**: You would be very much who u r now. The great thing about the peace corps process is that they do a good job matching volunteers to projects. They want u to be successful.

**Me**: Do they assign specific for the occupation you desire?

**Kris**: You work on that thru the interview process. But u can apply for specific jobs in specific countries. Teachers are needed. U can check it out at [peacecorps.gov](http://peacecorps.gov/)

**Me**: I will have to do that! Thank you for the quick chat.

**Kris**: You betcha!

**2:28 April 16th**

**Me**: Hello Mrs. Holloway, I was trying finish up my I-search paper for Dr. Allen's class, and I definitely thought I would be able to circle back to the beginning for my close. I was very wrong haha I have reached a bump and I was curious if you could help me. I was discussing the reasons why the Peace Corps no longer went into Mali, after finding the answer and doing some research and finding out why, I wanted to compare that to Mali today. I cannot find any information, and I remember you saying you kept contact with Monique's children. Do you know roughly what it is like there today? I know that war played a major role on the withdrawal from Mali; do you know if it is still as extreme as it was a year ago?

**Kris**: Hi! Things started to calm down since the coup in 2013, but this fall there was a terrorist attack at a major hotel in the Capitol of Bamako. Here is a blog that reviews some recent attacks: <https://bridgesfrombamako.com/2015/08/10/keep-peace-corps-out-of-mali/> Basically peace corps had sent a group of crisis corps volunteers in over the last years to see if they could send in regular volunteers again and then pulled even them out again after the attack last fall. So, things are getting worse rather than better in terms of how world politics is affecting immigration, the flow of goods and services, tourism, etc. I wish I had better news!

**Me**: Thanks so much for the help, and I'm truly sorry to hear that. Everyone you keep contact with is doing okay though, right?

**Kris**: Yep. They worry about me due to all the shootings here in the U.S.!

**Me**: Good to hear! And it is pretty scary with all the shootings here.