

Review of *Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali* by Kris Holloway and John Bidwell, Consulting Editor (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2007).

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Monique and the Mango Rains narrates a friendship that develops between the author, Kris Holloway, and a local health care worker in the village of Nampossela, Mali, during the author's two-year Peace Corps assignment there, from 1989 to 1991. Any reader interested in women's health care, West Africa, or friendships that cross linguistic and cultural borders will find this book rewarding. Kris Holloway, trained to "give health demonstrations, repair wells, build fuel-conserving stoves, plant trees, and protect the shoots" (p. 11), assists Monique Dembele in her struggle to improve health care for the women of this village and surrounding areas. Monique, having apprenticed for two years as a midwife, and studied for nine months in a health services program, is the state-sponsored health officer of the village. With her ever-present baby Basil strapped to her back, she performs prenatal consultations, gives health demonstrations, births babies, administers vaccinations, solves the health problems she can treat (based on limited training and available supplies) and is forced to accept the fate of those who suffer from more serious illnesses and have no access to further medical care.

Monique and the Mango Rains is divided into ten chapters, each one subdivided into thematic sections. It includes a brief introduction, a postscript, and a four-page bibliography of recommended reading featuring articles, books, and websites related to women's health in Mali. Ms. Holloway has toiled with the raw material of her experience, a fact to which she testifies in the acknowledgments, noting that, with the assistance of a women's writing group, she went through thirty-four drafts of the first chapter alone. The result is a well-written book. Ms. Holloway knows how to establish a scene, concentrating on details that reveal the character and concerns of a given person, and she knows how to focus on emotional moments in such a way that the story remains compelling. Ms. Holloway contextualizes her experience for the reader, and informs the story with important facts. For example, in the first chapter we learn of the "sobering statistic that placed a Malian woman's lifetime risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth at one in twelve, compared to a U.S woman's risk of over one in three thousand" (p. 8). While the narrative is informed by historical, ethnographic, and scientific research, at no time does the telling seem distant or coldly academic. This is a warm, human story, full of the warmth of bodies, the stifling heat of the birthing house, the sun on cracked fields, and the full force of the rains when they finally come.

Throughout *Monique and the Mango Rains*, the reader discovers how the villagers eat, farm, socialize, and celebrate. Yet the driving focus is women's health. Ms. Holloway (Kris) seeks to assist Monique in the daily operation of the health clinic and sets about securing the funding necessary to repair and refurbish the birthing house. In attempting to achieve these objectives, Kris becomes keenly aware of the obstacles that Monique faces. First, Monique works incessantly but receives little pay, recognition, or time off. The administrative and social system of the village is such that she receives only a portion, or sometimes none, of the money she earned through her work. Second, Monique is trapped in an arranged marriage to a man who offers her no support, and gives her little credit for the work she does at home and at the clinic. Furthermore, should she divorce him, Monique would have no rights to keep her child. Third, Monique herself has no access to proper medical or dental care as she suffers from terrible pain in her mouth. Larger economic and socio-political issues compound these problems. During this time in Mali, there is a coup d'état, as well as war in neighboring Liberia that causes the death of someone very dear to Monique. Just as Kris has observed countless women rise from difficult births to continue with their incessant work, Monique, upon learning this crushing news, collect herself and continue with her own work. "I longed for her to lie fallow, to gain strength" (p. 155), reports the author.

In addition, Kris becomes an activist for women's health, advocating for a cross-cultural discussion about societal norms that endanger women. However, in picking her health care battles, Kris must act wisely, with self-reflection and awareness of the local culture. She takes on two principle issues, reproductive rights and genital cutting. Monique already takes birth control pills, but does so secretly so that the villagers will not view her as a prostitute. Monique and Kris work together to change attitudes and make birth control available to the women of Namposella, where the specter of AIDS looms large. Kris observes the effects of genital cutting on women during childbirth and introduces information to Monique which leads to frank discussions between the two women, furthering their friendship. The book emphasizes that a true and honest relationship with people from another culture must precede the attempts of outsiders to step in and improve their lot.

Kris is able to lobby an administrator on Monique's behalf, assuring—after a long struggle—that Monique will receive her full pay. With the help of her colleague and future husband, John, Kris is also able to arrange for the refurbishing of the birthing house. As the one chapter title states, "The work is good." But in the end, Kris does not celebrate these small victories as much as she meditates upon the death of Monique, who (and I reveal this here only because it is revealed in the introduction to the book) dies eight years after Kris and John's departure from Mali. During the 1990s, Monique visited Kris and John in the United States, and they maintained a strong friendship through correspondence. In the end, however, Monique dies—tragically and ironically—due to complications during childbirth, and Kris and John visit Mali once again in an attempt to understand her death and to assure that her children will receive

the education that Monique desired them to have. The epilogue, written in Massachusetts (where the couple now resides), discusses the achievements of various members of Monique's family in the health care field, as well as her children's education.

The title of this book refers, as Monique says, to "the small rains that come, in February and March... to make the mangoes sweet" (p. 78). Ms. Holloway remembers these as "the brief rains that came when I least expected them" (p. 78). For me, the title recalls Monique's role as the deliverer of children and hope to the women of Namposella. I am also reminded of Monique's resilience and playfulness, as when she uses stones to knock down mangoes for a group of boys. The book includes many photos, but the most gripping one is certainly the color photo of Monique on the front cover. This book is a fitting tribute to the young woman who dedicated her short life to the care of other women. *Monique and the Mango Rains* is an excellent contribution to the study of health care in West Africa, and a translation into French would make this story available to Francophone readers interested in this region.