

“Patate!”

I definitely know what a sweet potato is!

At least, I thought I did. But my confidence waned as I walked down the rows of women selling vegetables for the third time. Everywhere I looked, I saw yams, yams, yams.



One of the roads through Marché Bantai on a rainy afternoon.

Google Translate had already failed me. The French term for sweet potato was “patate douce” (literally potato sweet), and I’d confidently walked up to the first woman in Marché Bantai (Bantai Market) and said, “Je cherche des patates douces.” She smiled at me and pointed at her grass mat full of yams. “Patate,” she said encouragingly. I looked down at the pile of white-fleshed yams.

OK, so maybe “patate” was a pretty broad term here. I knew that French was not the heart language of most, if any, of the people in this market or even the city. Maybe, like me, they’d memorized the word “patate” but didn’t have good ole Google Translate to feign a second language.

I’d already come across a pile of yellow potatoes, which had given me hope that some tater diversity could be found. I decided that since language was getting me nowhere, I’d use my feet. So off I set.

Thirty winding minutes later, I finally spotted them: a tiny pile of itsy-bitsy reddish-brown sweet potatoes. Relieved, I approached the girl behind the mat and pointed at them excitedly. “Patate!”

Mildly unnerved by my enthusiasm for potatoes, the young girl nodded back. “Patate.”

“I found sweet potatoes,” I shouted to Erin as I walked through the back door into the kitchen, still a little flush with victory. I began to fill the sink with water to give my rhizomes a quick rinse before storage.

“Cameroon isn’t going to be that hard,” I thought as I brushed a little spud with a scrub I’d bought for this occasion. Preparation. Patience. Perseverance. Those were the keys to success. I glanced down to check my progress. The sink was red-brown with the mud I had sloughed off, and a lovely white yam sat in my hand – a little “patate.”

Convinced I knew what I was looking for, I had searched the market and turned down every helpful “Patate!” offer, only to walk away with the smallest and dirtiest “patate” one could have found in Marché Bantai. I must have looked pretty silly.

Later that night, I learned through a text conversation with the Kuhns, missionaries on furlough whose home we are subleasing, that what I thought were yams were indeed sweet potatoes—“patate.” They just had white flesh! If I wanted the sweet potato I was familiar with, I would have to ask for “patate rouge” or red potato.

Dirty, Little Potatoes

Since arriving in Cameroon, I’ve spent the last few weeks choosing a story to share in our first prayer letter from the field. I wanted it to set the right tone for the rest of the next three years and show people just what kind of missionaries they were supporting. I guess it’s the kind that confidently buys dirty, little potatoes.



LBT staff praying over our departure.



Our home of the next year is in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon.

Change is One Thing

Now I don't want to give the impression that I'm beating myself up over this "patate." Frankly, the fact that I got the land cruiser into and out of that market is nothing short of a miracle. That's victory enough for one day. Instead, I'm trying to flesh out the edges of an idea with my silly story.

I have lived and worked in Africa for eighteen years, so I'm familiar with the experience of learning a new culture. I worked for the Peace Corps and went to the Seminary, where they trained me to survey a community. I've spent the last two years talking about, reading, and writing about how to approach people and their language as a learner. Despite all that, I still marched into Marché Bantaï and bought a dirty little potato.

As the blunt line from a recent book I read goes, "Change is one thing, but acceptance is another." I can tell myself that I'm inquisitive and respectful, but my actions show that that isn't always true in the deepest parts of me. This time, it was a potato; it could be someone's heart next time.

By God's grace, I got three things right. I can build on these things as I learn to accept all the culturally sensitive advice I've agreed to. I tried to prepare. When that failed, I tried to learn with my feet. And when that failed, I asked some questions.



Our French teacher, Madame Anne. Through our lessons, we also learn about Cameroonian culture, the city of Ngaoundéré, and one another's lives.



Buying a surge protector from shopkeeper Criston.



Dinner night with new friends Ashild (left) and Mireille (right).

As Erin and I spend the next year struggling through our French lessons, we will do our best to prepare well for our work with the Subula team. But we will augment those language successes and failures with lots of foot learning. Every walk around the camp, every short trip to Bantaï, and every deep dive into the much larger - and ironically named - Petit Marché (little market) is another chance to build relationships with those whom we've come to learn from. As the Holy Spirit strengthens those relationships over the years, we can ask better questions.

Questions about more than just buying the right sweet potato and checking the win box for the day. About more than making use of people. But questions that reflect a sincere interest in, and affection for, those Cameroonians God has placed in our lives to be brothers and sisters in Christ—questions that learn from and celebrate one another.

They say people won't "care about what you know until you show how much you care," so pragmatically, it's a good strategy. But even more importantly, I think it's the way God designed us to live with and toward each other. In a relationship that considers the other before I even consider myself, for instance, I do not assume I already know the answer to the questions I'm asking. Otherwise, I'll spend too much time washing dirty little "patates."

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray for Erin and me as we work to learn and, in my case, relearn the French language. Pray that God will give us supernatural abilities for memory and language and that we will achieve a level of French that surpasses our wildest projections.
- Pray that Erin and I avoid potential illnesses and remain healthy and energetic for the work.
- Pray that our life and relationships here will serve as a witness to Christ and the joy found in a life lived under the grace of the cross.
- Pray for the Subula as they continue to work on their Bible translation. Pray that God will show us the best time to begin making those connections and developing those relationships and that all will happen in His time and not according to our plan.
- Pray that our lives will find a rhythm, and we will start to feel more familiar and less uncertain as the days pass.

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