

# Corruption was way of life, volunteer says

By CATHEEN BREIDENBACH

the poverty and problems of the tribal majority.

The coup may have come as a surprise, but the seeds of rebellion have been obvious for years. We saw our students chase over militia drills. Liberian law required all boys over 16 to join the militia and drill with their company several times each year.

Our students resented having to buy militia uniforms at their own expense and having to travel at their own expense to militia musters. The government expected everyone to attend, but the men received no pay. Our students were poor tribal boys and this patriotism demanded that they sacrifice reluctantly or run for the bush as soldiers knocked on their doors to round up delinquent militiamen.

Resentments against the government have been accumulating for years. On April 12, they erupted in a coup led by enlisted men in the Liberian army.

SAMUEL DOE, a young sergeant who is now president, says the country won't return to the old one-party democracy ruled by an elite upper class.

In Liberia, the same small group of affluent black families have ruled with an iron fist since Liberia became the second independent African nation in 1847.

This elite class descended from freed American slaves who returned to Africa in the early 1800s with financial

backing from the American Colonization Society.

They settled in Monrovia, Liberia's capital named after U.S. President James Monroe. After a few skirmishes with indigenous people, they gained the upper hand and began to control the tribal people who outnumbered them.

These Americo-Liberians, called AL's, speak a dialect that evolved from the English spoken in the southern states in the early 19th century. AL's wear western clothing and belong to protestant churches, particularly Methodist, and they hold political and financial power in the country.

IN THE LATE '60s, when my husband and I taught school in Liberia, William Tubman was president, well along in his 28-year reign. He was a witty AL who held his grip on power by saying that any criticism was seditious and would be severely punished.

William Tolbert, the recently murdered president, was vice president, then. He learned democratic tyranny from "old man Tubman." With fear and fondness, Liberians called Tubman "old man."

He kept the peace, gave token recognition to tribal people with his Unification Policy and kept American aid money flowing into the country.

At that time, Liberia received more American aid per capita than any other country in the world. When Tubman died in 1971, William Tolbert took office and continued policies of political repression.

We taught school in an uncourty tribal town where most people grow rice and vegetables on their small farms and lived in mud block houses with corrugated metal roofs.

They made little money, ate one main meal each day and travelled from town to town in crowded taxis or in open vans called moneybuses.

THE TRIBAL people are cheerful and outgoing. They live simply with unassuming dignity.

In contrast, many AL's flaunt their importance and their expensive cars and houses. The army took over because the government was corrupt, ostentatious and unresponsive to the needs of the common people.

Samuel Doe, the new president, decried the "rampant corruption of the government."

It's true. Blatant conflict of interest, nepotism, embezzlement of public funds and bribery abound, but it's difficult to make moral judgements of another culture.

Such corruption is part of the culture and the new government won't stop it. In Liberia, activities that an American would consider unequivocally corrupt are questionably ambiguous.

Take "eating money." Embezzling public funds is called "eating money" in Liberia. Many Liberians believe "eating money" is a requisite that goes with influential office and they regard it as an almost legitimate executive privilege. It ties in with the system of social support.

THERE IS NO unemployment insurance, no ADC, no social security in Liberia.

Less fortunate people depend on the generosity of successful men and on support from their extended families.

A successful man is expected to support many members of his family. To do this, he may indulge in what we might call nepotism, or show conflict of interest in business deals, or he may "eat a little money" to support his relatives and friends.

This benevolent corruption is common practice in many West African countries and it didn't drive peaceful Liberians to break out in angry rebellion.

They rebelled against repression and against being ruled by a selfish, ineffectual minority.

I wish them well and hope that by some grace Liberia can avoid tyranny by a different name and under different rulers.

## Malitz recognized at convocation

David Malitz was recognized for his outstanding academic achievements in the College of Literature Science during University of Michigan's 57th annual

Honors Convocation. The pre-medical student is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Morton Malitz of Farmington Hills.

## Senior named 1980 finalist

Cecilia Black, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Myron Black of West Bloomfield, is one of 1,000 students named a 1980 finalist in the Presidential Scholars Program, which annually identifies the most distinguished and accomplished graduating high school seniors in the nation.

Cecilia is a senior at Harrison High School in Farmington Hills.

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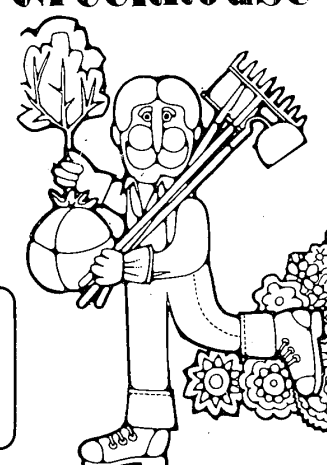
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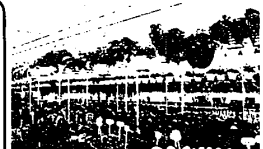
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