

# Healed: Blind African Man Receives Sight, Becomes Bible Translator

Rafael Coli grew up in the rural village of Arame at the end of a long, rutted road in northwestern Guinea-Bissau, Africa. During the rainy season, the road becomes impassable; it's safe to say Google "Street View" doesn't zoom in here.

As a boy, Rafael helped harvest his family's cashew crop. A former Portuguese colony, his country is, after all, the world's fifth largest producer of cashew nuts, behind India, Ivory Coast, Vietnam and Brazil. The pear-shaped "false fruit" that the cashew tree produces contains a yellowish juice, a substance that is reminiscent of the days before the gospel took root in Rafael's heart—before God fitted his feet for bringing the gospel of peace to his people in a form they could truly understand.

"I had a spiritual battle," says Rafael, whose squinting, bloodshot eyes are a telltale sign he's had trouble with his sight. "I dreamed during the night, and when I [woke up] in the morning I couldn't see. Tears ran from my face and fell onto my shirt and it stained my shirt like cashew stains," he adds. "After I became a Christian that ended."

Rafael, 34, spent 11 long years in the army, specializing in topography for field artillery. "During that time when I was in the army I felt Satan's oppression," recalls Rafael.

His eye sickness began in 1998 from an unknown cause, and the debilitating disease, fraught with nightmares, seemed to flare up every payday. His military salary couldn't satisfy the appetite of his medical expenses.

"My problem was that I always felt shame," he says. "Sometimes

I stayed in my room from morning until evening.”

### **Looking for God**

It wasn't until he left the army, started attending an evangelical church in 2009 and surrendered his life to Jesus, that Rafael's life began to improve spiritually, socially and economically. In his dreams he began to see a person holding an open Bible, warding off the evil presence that afflicted him in his nightmares. His illness stopped and he is now in recovery. His paycheques don't have to be spent at the pharmacy any longer. He credits all of this to his belief in Jesus Christ.

“At the evangelical church ... I had the experience of looking for God,” says Rafael. “When I was learning to look for God, then I started to find freedom. This transformed my life completely.”

Today he is husband to Damiana and father of their three children. Since October 2010, he has also been one of five Guinean team members who are translating the Bible into the language of Jola-Bayote on behalf of approximately 3,000 speakers. The book of Mark is now completed, along with Luke and chapters one to 24 of Acts.

“Because Satan knew that [the translation project] was going to be here tomorrow, that is why I had that battle,” says a now victorious Rafael.

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It is Sunday, Nov. 13, 2011, and the village of Arame's first-ever church service for Bayote-speaking Christians is underway. A tin roof is no barrier to the memorized, a cappella words—formed on the lips of those unable to read or write their own language—that are being sent heavenward this morning. “Jesus is the Person who God sent,” they sing. “He died for us.”

Morning light filters in through honeycomb-like windows. The stiff, inanimate cement structure is temporarily brought to life as the worshipers sway to the rhythm of the music they are making: "My brothers, I will show you who saves. Jesus saves."

Women dressed in colourful, traditional garb take turns dancing up the aisles. As they do, they are spurred on by the intensifying, rhythmic clapping of their fellow believers.

"I invite my brothers to come and follow Jesus." More words begin their journey toward heaven, though the maps of Guinea-Bissau on the walls and the words themselves are reminders that their message will eventually reach the worshipers' fellow countrymen.

The church service is only a one-time event—for now. Its purpose is to rally the community around the Jola-Bayote language project, and to cover the village in prayer.

### **They Cannot Steal It**

The rest of the service is spent encouraging the audience to take ownership of and be inspired by the Bible translation and literacy project that is happening in their heart language.

Estevão Bezerra is a missionary from Brazil, where Portuguese is the official language just as it is in Guinea-Bissau, a former colony of Portugal. Being a Portuguese speaker, Estevão has come to Guinea-Bissau to oversee the Jola-Bayote language project along with eight others. He is invited to the front to speak.

"If you say, 'We want solar panels,' somebody can steal them," he continues. "Or you can get a generator, but somebody can steal it.

"We want to help you with knowledge, because when knowledge is inside your mind, even if somebody wants to, they cannot steal

it.”

Rafael, who currently resides in the capital city of Bissau 200 kilometres away, has come home for the occasion.

“I knew before I got there that God would do miracles,” he says.

Like the loaves and the fishes, a miracle of multiplication indeed happens. Before the service that day, there were zero Christians living in Arame. Most of the people at the service, like Rafael, are not residents of Arame, but have travelled all the way from Bissau to attend.

Now there are two followers of Jesus in the village.

“I want to become a Christian,” Victor Badji, one of the converts, informs an Evangelical Church deacon, João Manga, following the church service. The young Bayote man, neighbour to Rafael’s family in Arame, explains that he has been looking for “the good way” for some time.

“My heart will be free!” says a joyful Victor after sharing his news with João (who is also the facilitator of the Jola-Bayote Bible translation team for which Rafael works).

João commits to staying a few extra days in Arame in order to begin discipling Victor, and to connect him with a pastor from a neighbouring village. Since the translation into Jola-Bayote is not yet complete, Victor will have to use a Creole Bible for now.

Nevertheless, “That name, I just love it,” Victor says of his newfound Saviour, Jesus.

### **The Church Will Grow**

Back in Bissau, Rafael and team members Luis Manga, Carlitos Sanha and Cloquet Manga are bent over open Bibles. Their eyes are bright and smiles big as they continue translating the book of Acts, or Atos, into Jola-Bayote. A single ceiling fan

rotates furiously above their heads in the small office, flipping over the page of a Bible. One window looks out onto the busy Bissau street, but otherwise the door and second window are shut up to keep the heat out.

Rafael quietly murmurs to himself as he works on translating Acts 23:9, which says: "There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. 'We find nothing wrong with this man,' they said. 'What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?' "

The intricacies of translating this single verse out of the Scriptures in Guinea-Bissau's Creole trade dialect and into Rafael's heart language may be astounding, but so are the benefits once it is complete.

A case study is project facilitator João himself. When he first committed his life to Christ, the Portuguese Bible was all that was available. Without the Word of God in a language the church truly understood, its pastors couldn't teach Scripture in context.

"It created a lot of problems in the church," says João. "When the Bible came in Creole, there was a great change in the church because it's the language we most spoke," he explains. "People could get closer to the Word of God."

For those whose mother tongue is Jola-Bayote, the translation work that João, Rafael and the rest of the team are completing is invaluable.

"People will understand the Bible much more deeply," says João. The team's goal is to have the entire New Testament and portions of the Old Testament translated and available to the public by 2021.

That is when they expect that the majority of Bayote people will be able to read, thanks to the project's literacy component. "Then the church will grow with the Word of God in

their mother tongue,” says João.

### **Admiring Paul**

Since the days when he used to wake up blind, Rafael has grown immensely. It’s evident that his growth has happened in large part thanks to the nourishing Scripture that inspires him daily. The verse he is translating today, Acts 23:9, speaks of Paul, who also experienced blindness and great growth.

“I like the story of Apostle Paul,” says Rafael. “He changed into a person who preached the Word of God. That’s why I admire him so much.”

Rafael also enjoys reading the books of Jeremiah and Jonah simultaneously, in order to contrast their obedient versus disobedient reactions to God’s call on their lives.

“I feel that God has called me, as God called Jeremiah,” Rafael says, “to stand in front of the king, to stand in front of his people, to tell them to repent from their sins.”

Gone are the days of cashew-like stains on Rafael’s shirt. Gone also are the days of scarlet stains on his heart. His Savior, who understands all hearts and all languages, has made them white as snow. And because Rafael and others are faithfully obeying God’s call on their lives to create a Bible in Jola-Bayote, many more hearts will be purified among the Bayote people of Guinea-Bissau.

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