

# Life in Zambia: Photographing Humanity and Finding God in the Everyday

**What's poppin', people? It's Dante.**

Today, I want to take you through one of the most transformative experiences of my life — my year living in rural Zambia, Africa. These photographs were made between 2019 and 2020, during my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer working in aquaculture, living off the grid amongst the **Bemba tribe** in **Luapula Province**. What I discovered there went far beyond photography — it was about community, faith, simplicity, and the human spirit.

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## Arrival and Adaptation

When you first arrive in Zambia as a Peace Corps Volunteer, you spend three months immersed in the basics — **language training, cultural integration, and survival**. I was placed in a rural village, hosted by a woman named **Doris**, who became my teacher, guide, and friend. My first night sleeping under a mosquito net in a **mud hut**, listening to insects, dogs, and the distant sounds of nature, was surreal. I prayed that I'd wake up safe — and when I did, I knew I was where I was meant to be.

That first morning, I killed a scorpion on my door with a rock — a quick introduction to life in the bush. Doris taught me how to prepare **ubwali (or nshima)**, the Zambian staple — a cornmeal base for nearly every meal. She also showed me how to **kill, pluck, and cook a chicken** by hand, how to fetch water from the **well**, and how to **bathe with a bucket and a cup**. These simple acts became daily rituals of gratitude.

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## Building a Life Among the Bemba

After training, I was assigned my own village near **Lake Benguelu**. My goal was to introduce sustainable fish farming to improve access to protein. Electricity was limited — a small solar setup powered the mills that ground maize into meal — but life flowed beautifully without excess.

Every morning, I'd see **mothers carrying firewood, men building homes, boys shaping bricks from mud, and girls sweeping yards or preparing food**. Everyone had a role. Every hand had purpose. **Life was collaboration.**

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## The Church as the Heart of the Village

The **Seventh-day Adventist Church** was the soul of the community. My host father, **Bob Walia**, was a preacher — a man of deep wisdom and faith. We'd sit under the stars at night, talking about life, God, and purpose. There was no light pollution — only the galaxy above us. Shooting stars were nightly reminders of how vast and interconnected life really is.

The church was where I witnessed the most profound moments of unity. Each **Saturday**, people gathered to worship, sing, and celebrate life. At one church camp, thousands came from across Luapula Province to build makeshift tents and worship under open skies. **For two weeks, we lived outdoors** — praying, singing, and baptizing hundreds in the lake. I entered the water with my camera, waist-deep, capturing the moment a preacher raised his hand as a man emerged from baptism — a gesture of renewal and rebirth.

*“When people come together to make a sacrifice each week — to remember the sacrifice of Christ — they align themselves with the good and the beautiful. That’s what holds these communities together.”*

These villages had **no police, no government**, yet they thrived because of shared faith. It was the **church** that acted as the moral foundation and social structure.

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## Everyday Life and the Rhythm of Simplicity

Life in the village followed the sun. Work began at dawn — **building chicken coops, making bricks, tilling cassava fields, or mashing greens with mortar and pestle.** I loved eating cassava raw — just pulled from the earth, rinsed, and eaten on the spot. It had a sweetness and simplicity that mirrored life there.

At night, I'd sit on **reed mats**, eating with my host family using our hands — ubwali, fish, vegetables, and **ify stashi**, a peanut-based dish that was rich and comforting. Every meal was sacred because it was earned through the labor of the day.

I photographed these moments not as an outsider, but as an **insider within.** I wasn't "taking pictures of" people — I was **living among them**, learning, speaking **Ichibemba**, and documenting life as it unfolded naturally.

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## Photographing Joy, Strength, and Loss

Some of my favorite photographs came from **the markets** and **church gatherings** — children playing in golden light, men crafting bricks, women carrying water with poise and grace. Despite limited material possessions, there was an abundance of **joy, laughter, and resilience.**

The women especially — clothed in **colorful chitenge wraps** — embodied strength. They carried the weight of the community, both literally and spiritually. I even had a few chitenge shirts made for myself — a symbol of gratitude and belonging that I still wear today in Philadelphia.

Funerals were also sacred communal rituals. Whether you knew the deceased or not, you were welcome — **everyone mourned together as one family.** Singing, crying, and praying side by side for days. I made photographs of these moments — the grief, the smoke, the light — all intertwined in ritual and reverence.

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## Adventure, Travel, and Connection

Biking was my lifeline. I had a small **mountain bike** from the Peace Corps, and I'd often ride hours through dirt paths and swamps to neighboring villages. I'd take my host brothers along — **Bob Jr.** on the back rack — and we'd play pool, eat large grilled fish, and enjoy the simplicity of discovery.

One of my closest friends was **Amaz**, a boatman who transported goods across the lake. We'd fish, climb mango trees, and laugh for hours. These friendships became the real story behind my photographs — human connection through curiosity.

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## The Final Days and a Sudden Ending

Toward the end of my service, **rainstorms devastated the village**. Houses collapsed, roofs blew away, and people came together once again to rebuild. Then, in early 2020, **COVID-19 hit** — and all Peace Corps volunteers were evacuated. I had to leave suddenly, saying goodbye to a place that had become home.

My last days were spent by the lake — swimming, reflecting, and photographing the calm before departure. I captured a rainbow one afternoon — a fleeting moment of grace. A dog wandered into the foreground, a woman stood in the distance, and the composition came together in an instant — a reminder that beauty is everywhere if you're present to see it.

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## Reflections on Humanity

Zambia changed me. It taught me how to engage with humanity — **not as an observer, but as a participant**. It taught me that joy doesn't come from possessions, but from purpose. That community isn't built on wealth, but on **faith, family, and daily acts of love**.

*“These experiences, these memories, and these photographs are things I’ll cherish for the rest of my life. My paradigm shifted completely through this year — it opened my mind, my heart, my body, and my soul.”*

To any young traveler or graduate searching for meaning — I highly recommend looking into the **Peace Corps**. It's not just an adventure. It's a calling to connect with humanity, to serve, and to grow.

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### Closing Thoughts

Zambia reminded me that photography isn't about cameras — it's about connection. About **seeing deeply, feeling fear**, and pressing the shutter anyway. The camera became my passport to the soul of the world.

If you enjoyed this reflection, you can visit my other videos and blog posts at **[dantesisofo.com](http://dantesisofo.com)**, where I publish new essays every day on photography, philosophy, and life.

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**Peace.**