

# Creating a New Joyful Community From My Birthplace in Nigeria to a Refugee Camp in Benin to Our New Home in Tucson

*Barinedum Mene-Bie*

## BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Is there a story behind your name? Does your name have a special meaning? Share it!
2. Describe a joyful community you have been a part of.

My name is Barinedum, which means God Gives Life. I am from Nigeria, which is in West Africa. I came to the United States in 1999. I have five boys, all born here in Tucson. For me, what is important in a community is supporting each other. We build a community with love and acceptance. Food and friendship bring a community together.

## Growing up in Nigeria

I grew up in a village called Nweol, in the tribe Ogoni. In Nigeria we have more than 500 different tribes that speak over 1000 dialects. The Ogoni people farm a lot, and they love God. Our major festivals of the year are for the harvest. We have them because everybody grows their own food.

We bring food from our harvest to church to share it with each other.

My family had a nice golden house in Nweol.

The house was

made out of mud-like sand. Everyone in the village works together to build the houses. The women prepare the food for the workers. In our house, we cooked outside on a cast iron stove,



with firewood. We ate beans, cassava, yams, and a lot of fish—all cooked with many spices. All the kids would wash their hands and eat from one dish and drink from one cup. Everybody just helped themselves. When people walked by, if they saw us eating, we would invite them to join in. They washed their hands and joined us to eat.

When I came to the U.S. I thought it was weird that nobody ate together this way. One time in our house in Tucson, we invited friends to din-

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ner, and my husband and I ate from the same bowl and drank from the same cup. Our friends said, “That is very interesting.” But it was normal for us. It brought us closer.

## Marriage

In 1998, my husband’s family heard about me. His mom said they wanted their son to marry me and move to America. In Ogoniland, most weddings take place on a weekend. On the Thursday before the traditional wedding, they slaughter three goats to

honor our ancestors. They bake goat-meat soup, fried rice, *jelof* rice (a special rice of Nigeria), yams made with dried fish. They buy the drinks: cans of Coke and Fanta, and some palm wine.

When we agreed to marry in 1998 my father killed a goat and bought some wine. But we didn’t have a traditional ceremony because at that time there was a war going on in Ogoniland, and we did not have the much money. Instead, in 2012, a traditional wedding was held for us in our town in Nigeria. My sister represented me. It takes a community to celebrate. A family cannot do it by themselves.

## Life in the Refugee Camp

In 1998, my husband’s family paid a small part of the bride price, and I went to live with my husband in a refugee camp in Benin Republic, where he had been living for three years. There were over a thousand people in the camp, most of them from Nigeria. We shared one 10’x10’ room with three single men. I planted a little vegetable garden to make it feel a little bit more like home. I planted spinach and okra, but the okra did not survive. We women used to braid each other’s hair. We used to go to each other’s houses in the



Map of West Africa from <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

afternoon. We would talk and gossip with the ladies. The children played soccer outside.

There was one woman in camp who I went to prayer meeting with, and every morning we went to the water pump together. One morning she told me she wasn’t feeling well, so I went to the pump and got water for her. Because of that one day, she said she always remembered the good deed I did for her.

After we were together in the camp for about six months, we were all ready to come to the United States.

When we were eating our last meal, we all ate together from one bowl. We were friends, and we had become a community.

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## Coming to the United States

We brought only the clothes we had on. It was a long flight. When we got on the plane, I was six months pregnant. I didn’t eat anything—I did not



like the food. It was not what I was used to. It was so plain. We ended up in Tucson. It was crazy hot. A lady named Roha picked us up from the airport and took us to a tiny studio apartment. There was some simple kind of food that I did not like. It was mostly canned.

The people in the church were very kind to our family. Every other Sunday they would invite us to their house for dinner. The food was new to me. I had to smell the food before I would eat it. Macaroni and cheese and mashed potatoes were different to me. In my country, everything was spicy, and here there was no seasoning in the food. I struggled with that. Now, when we get together in my church, people make fun and they

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say “too sweet, too sweet,” because that is what I used to say about every food. Even what they call pepper here is not spicy.

Our first son was born in September 1999. When you have a baby in Nigeria, your family

and neighbors surround you, so you’re never alone. When I had my baby here, there was only my husband, the doctor, and one nurse. There was a lady from our church, too: Doris Williams.

Being a mother for the first time was scary. The baby was tiny. You had to work hard to take care of this little thing. A lady in the church named Tania came to visit. She braided my hair. Another lady in my church, Gwen, held my baby every time I came to church.

### Finding Community

When we came here, our community started with food. I feel bad now that I always had to smell the food. But the people didn’t know that I didn’t like the food. They were loving people. They gave us a warm welcome. They showed me about American culture. They also supported me with my children. We have a saying in Africa: “It takes a village to raise a child.” It took the new community we have built to raise my family.

#### AFTER YOU READ:

1. How does food play a role in the building of community in each place that the author describes – Nigeria, Benin, and Tucson?
2. Read the article on pp. 10-11, also by a writer from western Africa. Compare how both writers talk about food.
3. Write up and share recipes from your home country or that you grew up with in this country. What spices do you use? How much of each ingredient? Explain your cooking techniques. Create a class recipe book with pictures!



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