

BYU Professor to Spend Christmas on African Aid Mission

BY PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

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For Warner Woodworth, spending the Christmas holidays with Muslims in Mali is like a return to ancient Bethlehem.

No shopping malls, blinking lights or department-store Santas. In Mali, one of West Africa's poorest nations, no parents fight over trendy toys.

In the villages Woodworth is visiting this month the only sounds are the braying of donkeys, the lowing of cattle and the bleating of goats in stables. Women draw water from wells and children play in the dirt.

Woodworth, a professor of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University, is leading a group of students from BYU, Harvard and the University of Utah on a humanitarian tour. As part of a project called Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance, the group will help dig wells, build schools and establish small-business cooperatives.

Woodworth's team witnessed firsthand "the probable harshness of Jesus' birth," he said in a written report to *The Salt Lake Tribune*. "The 90-mile route Joseph and Mary traversed from Nazareth to Bethlehem was a difficult trek, not unlike the dusty trails of sub-Saharan Africa to-

day."

Harsh weather, wild desert beasts and vicious bandits have always threatened poor travelers. And like the ancients, many of today's Third World babies will not survive.

"That Jesus in his day and poor African babies today even survive birth is itself a miracle," Woodworth says. In contemporary Mali, some 40 percent of all children die before the age of 5.

"The reality of Jesus' birth may not have been the sweet, serene scenario depicted in the song, 'Away in a Manger,' "

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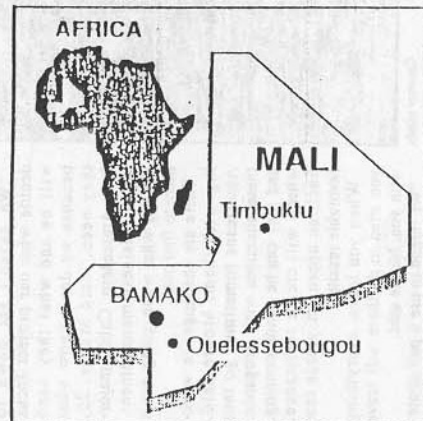
Professor On Aid Mission To West Africa

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he says. "It might have been more akin to the desperate poverty and daily struggle to survive today's harsh life in West Africa."

More than a decade ago, Utahn Keith Whisenant was among the founders of the Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance. At the time, the world's attention was riveted on the droughts of East Africa and many felt helpless as powerful images of starving people became routine on the nightly news.

As head of Salt Lake City's Community Services Council, Whisenant responded to suggestions that the city establish Ouelessebougou, in southern Mali, as a "sister city." In the past 10 years the group has raised



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more than a million dollars in private donations, mostly from Salt Lake City residents, some businesses, and schoolchildren.

The Alliance has built 22 elementary schools with 40 new teachers. It has helped to plant 19 miniforests and dig 74 new wells. The next step, says Woodworth, is "moving the Malian people toward self-reliance through micro-enterprise creation of jobs."

Each year the Alliance sponsors three expeditions of volunteers from Utah, who go at their own

expense to offer their time and expertise. Among the volunteers have been doctors, lawyers, business executives, nurses, secretaries and students.

"Everyone who goes comes back in awe of what is happening and how they feel," says Whisenant. "They get in touch with new feelings."

Whisenant has been there numerous times.

"I felt so grateful and sometimes a little embarrassed that we have so much," he says.

Though he, too, has been to Mali more than once, Woodworth reports that this trip will live forever in his memory.

"The sheer joy of walking the dusty streets of Ouelessebougou has made Christmas 1996 a unique experience," he says. "Smiles of joy and gratitude were evident in each village as Utahns distributed soccer balls and handed educational supplies to teachers. Villagers responded with traditional dances, music and rituals of gratitude and happiness."

Mali is largely a Muslim nation



Warner Woodworth

A woman of Ouelessebougou cooks dinner in the open air.

in which Christmas is not celebrated or even recognized, Woodworth says, but the feelings of good will transcended any particular religious expression.