

## **Alimou's story and his journey to France**

The students participating in the Erasmus project were able to meet Alimou during their visit to Valbonne in March 2022. Alimou is a former minor migrant from Guinea who has obtained refugee status in France. He came to Lycée Simone Veil in Valbonne with his adoptive mother in order to tell us his extraordinary story and to be interviewed by our students. The students had prepared questions beforehand which were subsequently translated and asked by one of the teachers, Hilary Deries-Glaister so as to facilitate the interaction. We met in the school auditorium where Alimou sat opposite the students next to his adoptive mother and Hilary Deries-Glaister who translated what Alimou said into English. There was absolute silence in the room when he started to speak.

Alimou was born in Guinea. It was only when his mother remarried after her first husband died that things started to become difficult for Alimou who was just twelve years old. As his stepfather already had several children he threw Alimou out because he felt that there wasn't enough room for him. Alimou's mother tried to find a solution for him with his own biological father but his father's wife wouldn't hear of it and Alimou was mistreated. He went back to his mother but, despite her great distress, she couldn't do anything for him because she was completely subjugated by her husband. For several nights Alimou had to sleep outside in the street near his mother's house. At night his mother would creep out to give him some food. He had a friend who became his fiancée, who helped him a lot at this time of his life and she also brought him food.

One day he realised he could no longer carry on living like that so he decided to go and find work elsewhere. He walked to Guinée Bissau where he found work. He worked at a farm for more than a year and at that time he still intended to go back home to Guinea, but, because of the breakout of the ebola epidemic in 2014, he wasn't allowed to return to his home country. From then on things went from bad to worse for Alimou. He was only 13 or 14 and there was no going back. It was then that he met a boy who urged him to travel to France to find work and a better life because he had no future in Africa. So they left together for Libya to work there in order to pay for their passage by boat to Italy. To reach Libya they had to cross the desert in a lorry with insufficient water for the gruelling journey which lasted several days. He spent almost two years in Libya and his life there was extremely tough. Alimou and other migrants were employed in camps to work to earn enough money to leave Libya but the working conditions were dreadful and they had to work for several years in order to pay the people smugglers.

When Alimou could finally pay for his passage, he described the scene that awaited him. That day there were seven boats waiting for the migrants but of course there was not enough room for everyone. But the migrants didn't have the choice and had to get into the boats even if they were overcrowded. At that moment Alimou realised that his chances of survival were very slim but they had men behind them pointing their guns at their heads who ordered them to board the boats. Only two out of the seven boats arrived at their destination ; the other five sank in the middle of the Mediterranean. Alimou was lucky because he was on one of the boats that made it to Italy.

Alimou was now about sixteen years old. Several months later he tried to reach France by hiding on board a train. But at each attempt he was stopped and taken back to Italy. The seventh time he locked himself in the toilets with a fellow migrant and this time the ticket inspector turned a blind eye and let them into France. When he arrived in Nice he spent several days wandering around the station with no food to eat until a ticket inspector noticed him and took him to a centre for minor migrants. Then he had the chance to be taken in at the hostel for unaccompanied minors at the CIV, an international school in Valbonne. The CIV is the only school in France which provides training for unaccompanied minor migrants teaching them French and a trade. Moreover Alimou was lucky to meet his adoptive mother at the very beginning of his stay in France. His adoptive mother welcomed him into her home for a year and helped him to undertake all the necessary administrative procedures.

After telling us his story for almost one hour and twenty minutes a student asked him if he had ever resented or hated his mother for abandoning him. Alimou's answer surprised some of us because he said that he had never had any feelings of resentment towards his mother. She had always done as much as she could for him.

Thanks to his adoptive mother he was able to return to see his mother in Guinea after so many years, but, shortly after his return to France she passed away. He had tears in his eyes when he told us that because he would have liked her to know that he had succeeded in his life.

Today Alimou has married his fiancée from his home country and has been able to bring her to France. They are living together happily and have found work.



