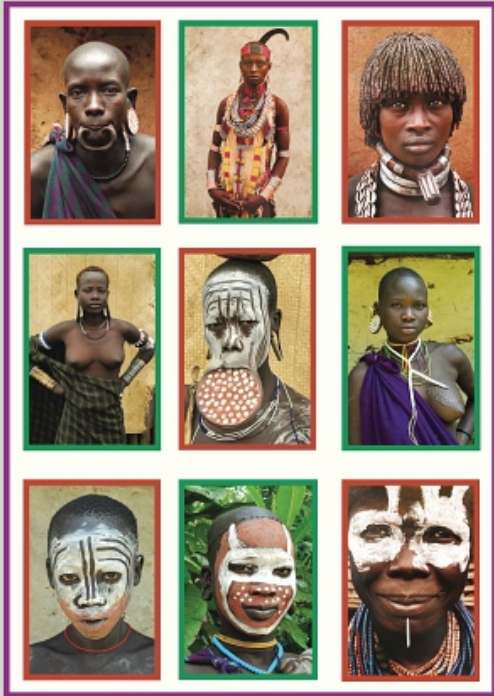


A BAKER'S DOZEN

STORIES OF AFRICA



THOMAS R MILLER

A Baker's Dozen follows Frank, a photographer, as he travels the vast African continent. It begins in East Africa where he's settled, then follows him backwards through time and through dozens of tribal cultures to a dozen locales.

A Baker's Dozen: Stories of Africa

By Thomas R Miller

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THOMAS R MILLER

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First Edition

We all make mistakes. It's likely I've made a number of them in this book. If you see any, please e-mail me at trmlandphoto@yahoo.com and tell me what and where they are in the text. Many thanks.

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The Pearl

Frank settles just north of the Equator on the shore of Nalubaale, the great lake. Half a day east, bubbling out of its waters, is the source of the White Nile, itself the source of human history's most prodigious beginnings. A long day's journey west are the Mountains of the Moon. He's in Uganda, the part of East Africa that Henry Morton Stanley, then Winston Churchill, called the "Pearl of Africa."

He's worked elsewhere on this vast continent, mostly photographing tribal people in the great emptiness that is the Sahara. Here all is opposite to those desert lands, lush, full, fecund. Fruits abound. Passionfruit, mango, avocado, papaya, pineapple, jackfruit, custard apple, and others he doesn't know. A host of afflictions flourish too, AIDS, Ebola, malaria, yellow fever, typhoid, cholera, river blindness, sleeping sickness, jiggers and others.

Birdlife runs riot. Mornings see dun ibises probe persistent with scimitar beaks in dewy grass. If startled, these refugees from the old Mesozoic world fly off awkward on green-chevrons wings, squawking raucous. Evenings black and white hornbills flash shrieking tree to tree, then dine on fruits they crush in their huge yellow beaks. Midday gyres of marabou storks turn high above the lake.

These last are vile to behold on land, old men in gray waistcoats with heavy beaks and bald heads, standing stilt legged and filthy, dining on carrion. In the air, they're grace itself, soaring for hours on barely a wingbeat.

Below the storks, fish eagles circle, piping their shrill cry and scanning the waves for prey. Pairs of these raptors often fight territorial battles, bound together in close combat, falling in tight spirals toward the lake, then parting before they reach it. Below the eagles, kites hang motionless on thermals, watching and waiting.

A multitude of smaller avifauna live in the scant remains of what, a century back, was dense multilayered equatorial rainforest that stretched horizon to horizon and far beyond. Most notable are the bright-hued little bee-eaters that sit motionless, waiting to snatch flying insects as they pass. On the vast expanse of savannah to the east, not so long ago, elephants, rhinoceroses, cape buffaloes, giraffes, and big cats roamed free. Now, these are in game parks or zoos and most Africans have only seen them on television.

The blues that traveled with Frank from America leave him, banished by this new world.

He takes a room in a hostel on a hill high above the lake. Its owner and his landlord, Godfrey, is short, bandy legged, barrel chested, and very black. He's lost an eye to some tropical malevolence. Centered within this dead white orb is a remnant of iris. It's faded blue and sports a spot of glimmer that suggests sight where there is none. Godfrey is a person of local repute, a retired engineer who supervised the construction of a score of tall buildings in the capital. A small brown notebook protrudes from his hip pocket. It contains a list of buildings he won't enter for fear they'll collapse on him. *Do these include some whose construction he oversaw?* Frank doesn't ask.

Godfrey's a Buddhist who devoutly follows the eightfold path his religion prescribes, but for a few rules he takes issue with. These he ignores or bends to suit himself. One is the Buddha's ban on killing. This he says he cannot obey, because mosquitos must be killed to reduce the spread of malaria. His criticisms of local Christians are harsh. He says they are holier-than-thou hypocrites who spend their days praying to God and Jesus to get, rather than to give. All the while, he says, they cheat on their wives, steal from their neighbors, lie to all they meet, and do unto others as they would not want themselves done unto.

Godfrey's four adult sons live in the hostel with their father. Most days they can be found watching football on the television in the restaurant. Godfrey goes there frequently at breakfast, when both guests and sons are present, to deliver a lecture on how lazy and useless his boys are, how industrious he is and how, when he leaves this world, this place he's worked so hard to create will fall to ruin because of their idle ways.

The road that fronts the hostel once had a tarmac surface. Only small pieces of this remain, little gray islands in a long river of red, rutted soil. A road with more holes than road. Frank asks Godfrey when it was last paved. "By the British at the beginning of World War II," the African replies.

They're living in the old capital of Entebbe, a townscape planned by the British, laid out in squares and rectangles, ordered, tidy, residential. Independence shifted the capital to Kampala, twenty miles north.

Kampala grew like Topsy in the years that followed and is now a city of millions that, according to Godfrey, has no planning or building regulations. A dozen radial roads with a paucity of ring roads and bypasses connecting them end at a big taxi park in the heart of the city. It's called the "Old Taxi Park" and consists of a big pit of red earth that's hammered into a big red swamp by the roof-rattling tropical rainstorms that come during the two rainy seasons. There's a constant traffic bottleneck in and around it during both wet and dry seasons.

Hundreds of "shared taxis," vans that carry a dozen passengers, wait here to fill, day and night. Mornings and evenings the commute between the Old Taxi Park and Entebbe takes hours. Africans here call this "the jam." At its worst, it stops traffic entirely. When this happens, the roadway becomes an open-air market where vendors hawk their wares car to car, food, drink, sunglasses, clothing and traditional medicine. Thieves work this market too, snatching what they can from unwary riders seated by open windows.

This land has two leaders. Political matters are the province of the president. Cultural matters are overseen by the Kabaka, the king and heir to the ancient kingdom of the Muganda, the largest and most influential tribe here. A young woman in the Kabaka's family is to marry a young man in the President's. It's the day of the wedding. Frank watches the two leaders travel the same route on their way to the ceremony.

First comes the Kabaka.

He walks alone in front of three cars that appear to carry family members, waving greetings to subjects who throng his path. They cheer, throw flowers, and prostrate themselves in the roadway. No bodyguards are visible, though some are likely hidden in the cars or in the jubilant crowd that lines the red earth road he travels.

Soon thereafter comes the president.

The crowd is much diminished. The big man can't be seen through the blackened windows of his long black sedan. A dozen black-clad, gun-toting security men ring his car, eyeballing the crowd. Following just behind his car is an armored van clad shiny in stainless-steel checker plate, his personal toilet, an appendage meant to protect his life and avoid the shame he and the nation would suffer should their president be popped while he poops.

This African president's story mirrors that of many others. He gained power as the result of a military coup, then was elected president. His election owed much to his campaign promise to establish term limits that would restrict his and future presidents' tenure in office to two terms, ten years in all. Shortly after his election, he abolished these constraints. This meant he could now be president for life, if he could fiddle future elections and control the army. During the nation's last "free and fair" election, he ran for his seventh consecutive five-year term. Election day saw rioting in the streets of the capital. His response was to put his only real rival under house arrest to "keep the peace" and, while this man relaxed in homey comfort, the president's family counted the votes.

“Mzungu” is a Swahili word whose original meaning was “One who wanders about without purpose.”

It was coined to describe the missionaries, explorers, and adventurers who began to appear in Africa in the latter half of the 19th century. What the Africans didn’t see was that these wanderers wandered, knowingly or not, to serve a very definite purpose. They paved the way for the European powers to invade and colonize Africa and begin extracting the immense wealth they found there. Now the word “Mzungu” means “white person,” and is edged with mistrust. Frank also wanders without purpose but seeks one.

He must get a work permit to stay here, but to get this, he must get a job. Henry, an African sculptor he meets, suggests that, since his photographs have been published internationally, he should apply for a position as a lecturer at the art schools of several nearby universities.

He does so and gets two offers. The first is at the big, old government university in the capital. Here he’s told that, because of red tape, he won’t be paid for a year. The second is at a smaller, private university near where he stays. Here they say he will be paid monthly. He takes the second offer, but still needs the permit. Africans he knows tell him that work permits are most easily obtained if one has a contact inside the Department of Immigration. They also say that no matter how long negotiations for this permit drag on, he must always be extremely polite and, above all, never lose his temper. To show temper, they say, is to lose all hope of getting what he wants.

Every evening, a well-spoken African who says he's a chemistry professor comes to Godfrey's and drinks himself into oblivion. One night, during a brief attack of sobriety, he tells Frank that he has an ex-student, one Marshall Marchant, who works at Immigration and can help him get the permit. Monday morning, Frank rises in darkness and taxis into the early jam. Two hours later he reaches the Department of Immigration. It's just opened.

Marchant, a tall, well-built African turning to flab, sits behind a large mahogany desk littered with papers. He wears a tan suit of finely woven linen, a white shirt, a silk tie woven in a bright floral pattern, black horn-rimmed specs and shiny black shoes. All are of high quality. The perimeter of his office is packed tight with Africans, all ages, both genders, and impoverished. Frank approaches the immigration official's desk, introduces himself, and drops the professor's name. It falls to the floor like a stone. They shake hands, and he states his business. Marchant asks if he can't see the long queue ahead of him. Frank replies that he can and that he's not trying to jump it but to join it. In response he gets a barely perceptible lift of the eyebrows and a weak gesture toward the only empty chair in the room. Here he sits the day through.

During this day, he sees papers shuffled and reshuffled and two cases processed. At day's end, he's told to return on the morrow. He walks to the Old Taxi Park, rides through heavy jam, and arrives home well after dark. Next morning Marchant arrives late, shuffles papers till midday, speaks to no one and leaves. At closing time, he returns and tells all still present to return the following day.

Frank waits till they're alone to say that he has better things to do than sit all day in the jam and in this office, so he'll return the following week, adding that he hopes his permit will be ready by then. Marchant gives his brows a lesser lift than yesterday's, says nothing, reveals nothing.

"Bribe" is a word rarely heard here. The preferred euphemism is "facilitation." Godfrey tells him this is what this immigration official wants and is the engine that drives his tactic of delay. But, he says, Frank shouldn't offer it because to do so is technically a crime and, if Marchant fingers him, he'll pay a very big facilitation with much of it going to the police. They also say that Mr. Marchant is afraid to ask him for this sweetener because he's unsure how a newly arrived Mzungu will react to such a request and, if his bosses hear he's been "facilitated," they'll all want a cut, and this will be very expensive for him. These complications, all say, emphasize the need for Frank to be patient and remain calm.

Weeks slide by uncounted. Centered within each is Frank's visit to the Department of Immigration. Little of substance distinguishes one of these from the other. Another midweek morning. Frank waits again and, again, the office is full, and his permit's not been processed. Marchant tells him it won't be processed on this day either because, once again, too many are ahead of him in the queue.

Frank's a graybeard, an old man by all the world's reckoning. But somehow, in this instant of that world, he doesn't feel his years. He steps up to Marchant's desk.

Then he rests his palms upon the papers that cover its top, lowers himself till he locks eyes with the man, pauses, then shouts in his face.

"I've seen some motherfuckers in my time, but you, Marshall Marchant, are the worst of the lot. You're a motherfucker from hell and a thief!"

The immigration officer stiffens in his chair and stares out the window. Motionless. Mute. The other Africans too are stunned to silence. It feels as if all the air has been sucked out of the room. For to speak angrily in public is considered extremely rude in this country and to do so to one who wields power over your life is considered extremely stupid.

Still, Frank continues.

"Lots of us here aren't even mothers, but you're fucking us just the same! How much fucking facilitation do you want from me?! From them?! Speak!!!"

The office is filled with a silence absolute.

Lastly, he leans close to Marshall Marchant and whispers in his ear. "Okay. I'll be back this afternoon. If my work permit isn't in my passport by then, I'll be back tomorrow, and I'll use that fancy necktie of yours to drag your sorry ass across the way to the Head of Immigration and, if we can't settle this there, I'll beat the fucking permit out of you." This said, he strides through the open door, through a sunbaked courtyard and out of this complex of buildings that houses Uganda's Department of Immigration.

Across the road an open-air restaurant sits in a grove of acacia trees. Frank sits in the restaurant for the remains of the day, drinking beer after beer, and abusing himself for what he's done. All protocol has he shattered and, with it, all chances of getting permission to stay in this country.

Now he'll have to return to an America adrift in media brainwash, jingoism, superstition, consumerism, celebrity worship, and the Circus Maximus of professional sport. He muses upon his return and flirts with despair.

During his hours of self-abuse, he crafts an apology to Marchant, a nauseating sycophancy that he knows the man will never accept.

He returns to the immigration office at closing time. The door is open. The room's empty but for the female immigration officer who works for Marshall Marchant as a gofer. She looks up from her desk as he approaches and hands him his passport. Stamped inside is his work permit. Marchant's signature is scrawled across it.

Soungalo

Frank's searching for a subject, a quest that begins with a few days in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital. These few are enough. Lifeless parks rest at its center, grass burnt the color of ripe wheat. Midday comes a heat he can only liken to what he's felt come out of pottery kilns. This, combined with the massive blocks of Cold-War-era Soviet-style architecture that languish in squalor here, makes what was meant to be the jewel in the capital's crown, a place of little promise, photographic or otherwise.

Bobo-Dioulasso, a smaller city a day west is said to be more welcoming than Ouaga. He takes a bus there. It's indeed cooler, greener, and of a more human scale. He takes a room in a small hotel in the town center. Several mornings later, he's leaving through its courtyard, when a young man approaches. Soungalo Traore. His manner is quiet, respectful. He asks Frank if he needs a guide. Wary and weary of street touts who claim to be guides when all they are is unemployed, he says perhaps, adding that on this day, he'll explore the town alone. Next morning the African is at the hotel again with the same question. Frank says he isn't sure he needs a guide because he's not sure where he's going. A lie. He wants to travel north to Mopti, a Malian port on the Niger River from where he hopes to ride the river east to Timbuktu, then south to Gao and from there to travel overland to Niamey, Niger, then northward to Agadez, an old trans-Saharan trading town. They take tea. Soungalo says he's the twelfth and last son of a witch doctor. Frank asks him how his father earns money.

"Many ways," says the African. "Mostly he sells amulets to protect soldiers going to fight in Liberia and Cote de Ivoire. Amulets protect them from bullets, knives, or evil spells."

"What's his price for these?"

"One thousand dollars each."

"Can a multi-purpose one be had that covers all three dangers for something like one thousand five hundred?"

"No."

"Why?"

"That would weaken the amulet's power against each danger."

"So, the amulet's power is driven by money?"

"Yes."

Soungalo speaks French, Mossi, Bambara, Bobo, Fulani, and broken English, though this last is not so badly fractured as Frank's French. Most useful would be the Bambara and Fulani. Soungalo says that his father paid for his eleven elder brothers' educations, then set them up in trades and professions. But by the time Soungalo reached his third year in high school, his father was old and poor. So, his schooling ended there. Now he's struggling to earn a living as a guide in a town teeming with guides. Frank meets Soungalo's eldest brother, an English teacher. He arranges to have lunch with this man on the morrow, so he can compare the two brothers' stories.

Their tales are similar, though this could be the result of some clever collaboration.

Sougalo takes Frank to meet his father at the family home, a modest structure of timber and grass thatch on the western edge of Bobo. The witch doctor lies on a narrow cot in the dark. His son makes the introduction. The old man offers Frank his hand but does not leave his bed. His grip is very weak. He's near death.

They walk back to the city center. Sougalo says that if Frank hires him as his guide, he'll never regret it. They come to terms. Frank asks when they can leave. Sougalo says a "taxi," a van carrying 12 people, is leaving at five from the east end of town bound for Mopti. They agree to meet at the taxi park at four.

The taxi isn't there at four. Car, driver, and mechanic arrive an hour later. They buy tickets from the driver and ask when they'll reach Mopti. Midnight. Another hour passes. Frank asks Sougalo to ask the driver why they aren't leaving. The man replies that some people who bought tickets haven't arrived, so he's waiting for them. Comes darkness. The driver announces that all the passengers have arrived. They sit. Again, Sougalo inquires. The driver says he's waiting for the Muslims to finish praying. And yes, seated in the darkness outside they make out white forms, upper halves bent eastward. By eight, all are back in the taxi save one very old man. Sougalo knows him. This man, he says, has done many bad things in his life and has a very large family, so he must pray longer and harder than most.

The old man joins them an hour later.

The driver brings the car to life, pulls into the street, and drives round the town. Frank asks what's happening. "He must use the ticket money to buy petrol, so he is searching for the best price," says Soungalo. A lengthy tour of the town ensues, before they pull into a large, white-fronted petrol station. The driver hands a sheaf of bills to a man in blue coveralls who begins pumping petrol into the car. They leave Bobo on a dirt road heading north. For an hour they see neither cars nor people, coming or going. Then comes a police post. They stop at the gate. The two men on duty speak to the driver. All are ordered out of the taxi to stand in the road. Their luggage is laid before them. Each identifies what is his and stands beside it. The cops sift meticulously through each bag, item by item. None amongst them, including the police, speaks. In the end each passenger pays a small fee, and the taxi moves on. Frank asks Soungalo what this has been about.

"Money."

"Money for what?"

"Luggage tax."

"Luggage tax?"

"Money for police."

Twice again are they so "taxed" before they reach the Malian border. Here an immigration post sits in deep, moonless, early morning dark, gate closed, guards asleep.

The taxi stops. The driver kills the engine. The passengers get out, spread coats and blankets upon the ground, then spread themselves upon these.

"What?"

"Sleep."

"Can't we just wake the guards and pass through?"

"No."

"Why?"

"The tax for that would be much higher than for luggage."

They sleep. The sky's lightening when the guards wake and open the post. Frank is stopped. He has no entry visa. He asks Sougalo if he can get one here. "No, but that man over there is the immigration chief. He says he can give you a pass to the port of Mopti where you can get a visa at the police station."

Sougalo and the chief converse in Bambara.

"He says you must pay him \$40."

"Tell him I'll pay him \$20."

"He says for \$20 he can give you a pass back to Bobo."

"If he gives me a signed receipt, can I get my money back from the police at the port?"

"He says yes."

They travel on and are making good progress when the sun rises above a line of cloud at the horizon and throws a wash of brilliant African light across the road. In this same instant, as if prompted in some bizarre comedy of errors, the engine quits. The taxi coasts to a stop at roadside. The mechanic gets out, lifts the bonnet, fiddles with the engine. It won't start. He fiddles again, longer. The driver starts the car and drives them to the road's next bend where engine quits again. Again, the mechanic fiddles. The driver grinds the starter.....nothing.

Tea is made. The driver and mechanic finish theirs, then begin taking the engine apart. Its parts they array in the road beside the vehicle.

"We are finished," says Soungalo. "This is just a game to convince the passengers that they've done their best. They don't know what's wrong with the engine and probably won't be able to put it back together either."

"What can we do?"

"Get another taxi."

They shelter themselves under a big tree at roadside with the heat of the day building. Late morning a taxi stops. Greetings are exchanged.

They ask for a lift to the port. The driver says his car's full. Midday, another stops. It's full too. Soungalo speaks to the driver, then says, "He will take us."

"How much?"

"Same as we paid in Bobo."

They force themselves into seats that don't exist and end their journey in the midafternoon swelter of Mopti. On the second floor of a small hotel, they find rooms that overlook the river. Here, they enjoy a riverine cool brought to them by breezes skipping lightly across the water. The Niger's in flood, west to east, its far bank but a thin, wavering, gray line. They take lunch and beer at a restaurant by the hotel, return to their rooms and sleep till morning. After a breakfast on the street, they go to the port police post. Frank shows his pass and receipt and asks the immigration officer at the front desk to stamp his passport with an official visa.

"These papers aren't valid," says the official.

"Why?"

"This border official had no authority to issue you a pass. You should have got your visa from our embassy in the capital."

"Does this mean I have to go there now? It's far."

"No, I can give you the visa."

"How much?"

"The same as you paid at the border."

"Can I get what I paid there refunded here?"

"No, I can only refund valid payments."

"How do I know you aren't lying to me like the other officer?"

"Because I will stamp the visa in your passport here, now."

A short distance down the wharf the Niger enters the town in the guise of small, squarish harbor. This serves to import and export goods and people to and from the market that surrounds it. The market is shaded by a mass of canopies. Beneath one of these, Frank sits and watches. Crowds circulate through the goods stalls, then drift on. Tuareg men, indigo robed with faces covered. Tuareg women, robed colorful with faces bare. Traditional Muslim women, black figures entire with eyes invisible behind vision panels of black gauze. Traditional Muslim men, robed white, bearded, and turbaned. Big-breasted, blue-jeaned, tank-topped city girls from Bamako, shunned by all here but their mates.

He asks Soungalo where these people are from. "Everywhere," the guide replies, "but mostly downriver."

"Can we get a boat that will take us there?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Frank photographs the market, knowing he may never see these people again.

As he works, his companion searches for a boat. Tickets sold for such passage are sold in advance. Most are fakes, pieces of paper with no connection to any watercraft.

The few real ones for sale in the market have had their prices doubled and doubled again by middlemen. Soungalo passes a week in fruitless inquiry. One morning a cement barge docks alongside a stretch of wharf near their digs. Soungalo asks the captain when his boat's leaving. The man says sunset. Soungalo negotiates a price far below what they can get in the market. Frank asks if they can pay cash when they board. "Pas de problem," the captain says. The boat's sixty feet long and eight feet wide across her beam. Two big outboards are clamped onto her stern. If one fails, the other can likely get them into some port. Many boats here have only one. If it fails, there can be hell to pay if this happens near the rapids that punctuate the river's meander south of Gao. They sit on bags of cement. Soon they'll be sleeping on them. So, in what clefts and valleys these provide, they search for some comfort but find none. The outboards come alive as a sun rendered blood orange by atmosphere drops vertical to the horizon. When it vanishes, the boat pulls away from the wharf, aided by a strong slow current. It's dark when they join the swifter, steadier pull of the river's main channel.

As if cued by this merger, Soungalo says, "I don't like fish."

Puzzled, Frank asks, "You mean you don't like to eat fish?"

"No, I don't like fish to eat me."

"How can fish eat you?"

"I fall in this river, drown, sink, and fish eat me."

"Are you telling me you can't swim?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"In Bobo we don't need to."

"This isn't Bobo. This is the middle of the Niger River in flood. What if this boat sinks or you fall overboard?"

"I drown, sink, and fish eat me."

"You knew we'd be on this river. Why didn't you tell me you couldn't swim?"

"I thought if I did you wouldn't hire me."

"Good thinking. You were right."

Frank looks at the gunwales. The river slides by inches below them. Hanging from the two columns that support the canopy that will protect them from the sun are clusters of big plastic bottles, empty and lidded. "No, you won't drown. See those? If this boat goes down, grab one. It'll keep you afloat. And, just in case you go sleepwalking, maybe you'd best sleep with one tied round your neck as well."

On a raised platform in the center of the boat two sisters cook in an open-air kitchen. The girls are Bozo, a tribe of fisherfolk who live on the islands near Mopti. When they aren't cooking, they're bailing so the boat won't sink halfway to Timbuktu, their destination two days hence. Frank's had enough African food and carries his own bread, fruit, and groundnuts.

Soungalo takes his meals from the kitchen, says the occasional rat makes him stronger. During dinner there's much banter between the cooks and the diners.

After dinner, there's naught to hear but the sluice of the river slipping past, the dull hammer of the engines and a radio playing the music of the Suarez people, the strains of which somehow embrace the sound of the river as melody and the drum of the outboards as beat. These sounds combine to create a rare, sublime harmonic order. Frank shuns sleep to prolong it.

They awake to a clear day with puffs of breeze and the glitter of sunlight on the water. Neither bank of the river can be seen, for the Niger's approaching full flood, its breadth great, its movement barely perceptible. It looks and feels more like a great lake or an inland sea than a river. It springs from highlands far to their west near the Atlantic, flows northeast, then doglegs southeast soon after Timbuktu at the "Niger Bend." After this, it holds a straight course till it vanishes into the Gulf of Guinea. During this journey, its waters are much slowed and depleted by dams, irrigation, and constant evaporation into the dry air of the Saharan lands through which it flows.

As they cook, the Bozo sisters flirt with all the male passengers. Frank and his guide's berths bring them face to face with these girls as they work, so by proximity alone they are the focus of much of this flirtation. Soungalo says the sisters want to have sex with them and that they should take the girls up on top the sun canopy that night.

"How can you know they want to have sex with us?"

"I'm an African and, more important, I'm a Burkinabe. We know these things."

After dinner, Soungalo approaches the elder sister with his proposition. She says okay, but that she needs to ask her sister. Regardless, she says she'll come to them when everyone's asleep. Neither sister appears till first light and then only to light the breakfast fire before going back to sleep. During her morning break, the elder sister explains that there were passengers awake all night, so it was too risky to come to them because, if they were discovered, they would lose their jobs. She suggests they all meet in Timbuktu. Late that afternoon they dock at the port of the fabled city. Soungalo and Frank wait in the shade of a supply depot beside the quay. Last off the boat are the sisters. They walk down the ramp, flashing big brazen smiles. These are still flashing when the girls reach its bottom, make a sharp left, board the boat moored beside theirs and start a fire in the kitchen in preparation for their return to Mopti at sunset.

The two men take a cab into town. Five hundred years back, Timbuktu flourished on a trans-Saharan trade in salt, gold, ivory and slaves. Leo Africanus wrote of its wealth. His words drove many early European explorers into West Africa but reached them long after the city's fortunes had faded. Deepest decline is all they see now. A rich place transformed by time into a town overcome by poverty and overrun by desert. Within, it's a monotone monotony of narrow streets and walls that have forgotten their purpose.

Without, it's much the same. Long buttressed walls relieved by naught but an undistinguished mosque and minaret.

They find a big room with a roof terrace in an old hotel that's abandoned save the lone receptionist who comes there for two hours morning and evening. Walking sand-drifted streets, they're beset by local touts. Frank shoots some portraits, mostly of women, and with their permission, to avoid being accused of "soul stealing."

They're hanging around what's left of the central market on market day, shaded and searching for subjects. Crossing a wide sunlit street before them, is a young Englishman. He's long and lank and fair with long hair dreadlocked African and skin burnt scarlet. He wears a dirty white wife beater, dirtier khaki shorts, and is barefoot. Sougalo seizes on this last. "Look!" he exclaims, "A man who walks with no shoes!" He's astounded that this man who can afford shoes would choose to go without them and walk upon this African earth in which live all manner of maledictions longing to enter his body through the soles of his feet and curse him with sickness.

Sougalo wakes one morning to a headache and fever, says he has malaria. They use a kit from a nearby chemist's shop to test for it. Positive. Sougalo purchases a drug Frank knows nothing of, says he'll dose himself well. The day that follows brings him more fever, joint pain, chills, and a heavy, aching head. He stays in bed, worries because he can't work. Frank says he can easily take street portraits on his own and that, if Sougalo is to be of any use to him later, he should rest and recover fully.

Next day, he's hellish hot with fever and shaking violently with chills, his body covered with beads of sweat through which run rivers of the same. Frank worries that he's dying and says they should call a doctor. Soungalo flatly forbids this, says he's had malaria many times and will recover soon. In a voice weakened by this parasite, he asks for yet another drug, writes its name on a small piece of paper. Frank goes to four chemists before he finds it and returns to a dark, silent room. The African's conscious, but just. Frank mixes the white powder into a big glass of water. Soungalo drinks it down and falls asleep for two days. On the eve of the second he gets out of bed and dresses. Frank helps him down the stairs and up the street for still another drug.

By morning, he's better. On the morning that follows, he's fully recovered. Frank reckons that, if he'd had this disease, it would've killed him.

They work in the tedium that is Timbuktu. Frank makes portraits of both men and women. The women are the carriers of these tribal cultures and thus have more facial markings, tattoos, and scarifications than the men. Ideally these are placed symmetrically with an eye for proportion and executed with an eye for beauty. Both men and women often have a crescent-shaped scar just below one cheekbone or the other.

These, he's told, are the result of cuts made during infancy in order to introduce traditional medicine into the bloodstreams of children living in the bush where there were no syringes. A small crescent means a healthy childhood. A large one means the opposite.

At the port they book passage downriver. The craft on which they will travel is an old river steamer, a big piece of steel filigree painted white and bound for Gao. First class accommodation consists of two big apartments that sit on the top deck, have a view over the bow, air-conditioning, feather beds, and meals catered from the kitchen. Both cost the same as a room at the Savoy, and both are occupied by wealthy German tourists "roughing it" round Africa. Third class passengers sleep in cool night air on the open deck outside these lodgings and pay pennies. Second class rooms number a dozen and are below deck and are fully furnished with heat and noise, courtesy of the kitchen and engine room that flank them. These rooms are taken by passengers for whom the status of a private room is so important that they are willing to spend their nights on board bathed in sweat and sleepless and to pay a price inflated beyond all reason to do so.

They carve out sleeping space for themselves on the deck. Soungalo inspects their neighbors, then whispers to Frank, "There are many thieves here."

They cast off as a red sun drops perpendicular into the river at the horizon. As the day dusks to dark, the Germans creep quietly from their apartments to sleep on the deck. Their air-conditioning broke down in the afternoon, and the African sun turned their steel-clad rooms to furnaces.

A Venetian magician also lodges on the deck, a fat jolly fellow accompanied by his wife, who acts as his assistant. These two will ply their ancient art from Timbuktu to Gao, two days down the river.

They entertain the children on board, enticing them to look in the wrong places at the right times, so none can fathom their trickery. The magician tells Soungalo and Frank that he works in an auto plant near Venice. His wife is an artist, a painter. He says that, though he assembles cars for money, magic and his wife are the passions of his life. He also says he believes that a life without magic is no life at all, adding that there are many kinds, not just his. Then he winks and says in a low voice, "But those Germans have none of it."

Since Timbuktu, they've seen neither bank of the river. At the Niger Bend, their course changes to southeast when the captain executes a right turn through a wide arc of ninety degrees so artfully that none of his passengers is aware he's done it. Throughout their journey, they call at islands to load and unload goods and people. During these stops, Soungalo guards their packs, while Frank watches, and occasionally photographs, people coming and going. He makes photographic portraits, sometimes drawn to extraordinary faces, other times to faces decorated extraordinarily. He muses, *Perhaps the best subject for me to photograph in Africa is Africans.*

The end of their second day on board. They're approaching Gao. Soungalo announces proudly that he's kept their possessions safe from the multitude of thieves that he says surrounds them. Night is falling when the boat parallels the river's eastern shore and anchors off Gao to await the day and the ferry that will take them into the port. Both Soungalo and Frank sleep the night through. When they awake, their shoes are missing.

Centuries back, Gao was the capital of the great Songhai Empire. Now it's a filthy, dusty, flyblown waste of a place. They find a hotel with clean floors and little else. The town is makeshift and consists mostly of low, domed structures fashioned from sticks and plastic sheet. Living in these are refugees from all over West Africa, fleeing all manner of malevolence, some natural, most manmade. All they own they carry. They are running a long gauntlet through the Sahara, west to east, then north to the Mediterranean, which they hope to cross to Europe. En route, they're harassed constant by police, thieves, human traffickers, and the like. All these are the same to them, as all rob them, coin by coin, of the life savings they carry. And, if fortune fails these refugees entirely, they will lose their lives. Most will never see the Mediterranean. Those who do will be charged extortionate fees for passage on vessels that may never reach Europe. If they do, it's most likely their human cargo will be sent back to Africa.

A market run by and for these people has sprung up in this town of transients. Here they meet a young man and his wife from Cote d'Ivoire. Both wear their hair short-cropped and bleached blond. He's a footballer who dreams of playing on a European team. She's a nurse who dreams of peace. They tell of their lives, of the civil war they're running from, and of what they hope they're running to. A shop in this market has a fridge. The husband buys four cold beers there, passes them round, and flatly refuses Frank's persistent pleas to pay.

Frank and Sougalo get seats on a bus to Niamey, the capital of Niger from where they hope to reach Agadez.

Their bus slithers and slides on roads of drifted sand to the Nigerien border crossing where they see as many refugees as they saw in Gao. Here the bus stops, and all aboard pull their bags outside and stand by them. Piece by piece the luggage is inspected, then each traveler is sent inside to submit travel papers. Several hours later, all but Soungalo are back on board. Soon they are joined by an immigration officer who asks Frank if he and Soungalo Traore are together. Yes. The man says that Soungalo's identification is invalid and for Frank to follow him into the immigration hall. Here, Soungalo stands by a desk in a far corner, surrounded by five big immigration officers. As Frank approaches them, the largest, a man resplendent in a black and white uniform festooned with gold braid, steps forward and hands him the document in question. Frank examines it. The picture is Soungalo's and the ID hasn't expired. "The problem?" he asks.

"This," the immigration official says, pointing to a faint line running diagonally through the upper left quadrant of the card. "This ID is invalid. It is creased."

Frank bends the card, reverses the offending furrow, and renders it all but invisible. He asks if it's now valid. "Yes," says the man. "Valid for ten thousand Central African Francs." Counteroffers are countered and re-counterred. Finally, this figure settles where all present know it will. At the price of two beers for each of the five immigration men. Frank pays up and they walk to the bus.

They enter Niamey from the north, then ride to a bus park near the river where all the big, expensive hotels are.

The streets of this city are not safe. Least safe are those near these hotels. For their guests carry big money, and the thieves all know this, so they wait patiently nearby for the pigeons to leave the roost.

The bus enters the park. The driver jockeys it into a berth. When they come to a full stop, there's a rush to get out. Outside there's a mob, touts offering assistance, plus a few scooter and taxi drivers. "There are many thieves here," whispers Sougalo. They force their way through this crush of bodies, sheltering wallets in front pockets, then walk back along the street they rode in on. Far from the big hotels is a junction with a small guesthouse, a bar, and some small shops. They take two rooms in the guesthouse, then go to the bar. Over beers, Sougalo says he'll begin enquiring about passage to Agadez. It's late afternoon and still hot. They stay in the cool of the bar, drink more beer, sleep where they sit, and wake to a bar filling with people. The twilit street is already full.

The bar has a small kitchen, but the food looks bad. Sougalo asks if he should get them some street food.

"Good idea."

"Chicken and rice?"

"Okay, but a nice tender chicken, please. That last one was so tough it could've gone ten rounds with Ali in his prime."

"I will do my best."

"I know."

A story told in this part of Africa is that the chickens are small and tough, because the locals are so hungry that they eat them before they have a chance to grow up. Soungalo returns with a chicken that fits the tale and says there was no other sort. They eat in the bar and stay to watch the action. The place is full two hours after dark. Men are dancing with the waitresses as the girls work the tables. They dance a few such numbers themselves. Just before the witching hour, three pairs of guys begin dancing. Soon, they're dancing back to front, miming buggery. Fueled by this spectacle, the place erupts into several hours of full-blown hysteria. "Qui sais l'avenir?" Literally, "Who knows the future?" is a phrase they hear in the streets and see written everywhere. Its African translation is "live for the moment because that's all you've got," and it's being played out before them. Frank's never seen a public display suggesting homosexuality in Africa. Anytime he's queried Africans on the subject, they've assured him it doesn't exist in Africa. "What's happening?" he asks Soungalo.

"They're just having fun, breaking the rules."

"Are they gay?"

"No."

Most nights Soungalo stays out later than Frank, spending his time in the bar. One of these nights he comes home very late and very drunk, rambling, incoherent. "How many bottles of beer have you drunk?"

"Twelf."

"Why?"

"Medda nuvva guy frum Bobo inthuh bah."

"Did this mean you had to drink enough beer to fill the Niger basin?"

"Weeeeeere frum sem hometown, so ee talk long and wen eeeee talk, eee drink."

"What did you talk about?"

"Bobo."

They learn about Agadez. Guidebooks are of little use, because there's been fighting there recently, and the situation is volatile, and they need to know what's happening on the ground now. Northerners who frequent the bar are their best sources. Agadez is on the southern edge of the Sahara, a long day's journey to the northeast. Like Timbuktu, it was a major trans-Saharan trading town five centuries back. Then trade declined, and it became a Tuareg town.

A dozen years back, haunted by drought, famine, and political repression and driven by the dream of a desert homeland of their own, these old lords of the desert rose in rebellion against the government.

They fought with government troops in Agadez, in the nearby town of Ingall, and in the Air Mountains to the north. Flights to Agadez from France stopped and have not resumed. Peace returned to the town a few years later, but it's a fragile one.

Those who advise them say that occasionally cars carrying foreigners are still attacked in the Air Mountains, but that the town itself is quiet and has few visitors. Undaunted, they queue up in darkness to buy their tickets.

The eastern sky is lightening when their bus, a new Dutch one, completely fitted out and the pride of the bus company, clears the ragged, gritty outskirts of the capital. Light comes to the Sahelian bush through which they travel. All here is sand-scrubbed and thorn-bound with no signs of life but a few vultures and this busload of travelers. In the heat of late morning, the bus breaks down.

Sheltered in the speckled shade of a cluster of thorn trees, they watch the mechanic tinker. He grinds the starter, again and again. No response. This machine is made to high standards in Europe and for Europe. It's complex, computer-controlled, and sealed. To take it apart, never mind to fix it, a mechanic trained in Europe to repair modern engines is needed. Such people don't exist here. This place needs simple machines that can be taken apart with a wrench and pliers, cleared of the sand that will otherwise destroy them, lubricated, and put back together.

They're told another bus is on its way and will reach them by early evening when they'd hoped to be in Agadez. They watch the scant traffic on the road and hope for a lift. Afternoon brings three cars traveling north. None stop. Nightfall. Another new Dutch bus arrives. The passengers sleep in it and wait for daylight. Driving at night risks attack by any rebel holdouts that might be around. A collision with one of the cows that wander this road in daylight and darkness is another risk.

Their new bus is moving at first light and broken down by sunrise. The driver radios for another replacement. The only shade outside is that provided by the bus itself and this is shrinking fast.

It's a tossup whether it's cooler to sit in this or in the bus. They doze in the bus. Midday something big comes shimmering out of the heat waves that rise from the road behind them. It's either a lorry or a bus. They bolt the bus, bags on their backs, and run toward this apparition. A bus. An ancient one but running smoothly. They stand in the road and force it to stop. The driver isn't pleased with this tactic, since it's the same one that bandits use on these remote stretches. Still, he has six empty seats and sells them two. The price is dear. A few minutes later, the bus is full, and he drives on.

Late afternoon they reach Agadez and take rooms in a small hotel near the central market. Its half dozen mudbrick, sand-plastered little rooms surround a sandy courtyard within a walled compound. Separate from the rooms, abutting the perimeter wall, are common toilets, showers, and washbasins. The Hotel Agreboun. Its owner is Hasna, a woman of Turkish ancestry. She has a small office by the gate. Hasna was the internet in Agadez before there was an internet and, for most here, still is.

Morning brings a short, round, brown-skinned man in a blue robe to the hotel courtyard. Mohammed, a Tuareg guide. He's direct, polite, soft-spoken, humorous, and very unlike the other tall, thin Tuareg men they've seen.

He asks how he may assist them. Frank tells him why they're in Agadez, says they can work without a guide in the town, but that they'll need one to work in the desert outside. The Tuareg nods, suggests that they may wish to travel to Ingall, a town inhabited by people who speak a language spoken nowhere else in this world. Lastly, he says when they're ready, they should tell Hasna, and she'll contact him.

One morning, coming from the showers, Frank passes Soungalo going to them. He greets him with a sanguine "good morning." The African looks away, dismissing his greeting with a wave. Later, in the middle of a street breakfast, Frank asks his guide why he did this. "Because it's very bad luck to say 'good morning' before you wash your face."

"I see. What would bring good luck?"

"Accidentally stepping in chicken shit as you leave the house will bring good luck, but it must be an accident and it must be the shit of a chicken."

"What would happen if you did it on purpose?"

"Nothing."

"What if you accidentally stepped in another sort of shit?"

"If it's dog shit, you will have bad luck."

"Human shit?"

"Bad luck, same as dog."

"Okay. What if you accidentally stepped in horse shit?"

"You would have to be stupid to do this. Horse shit is big."

"Yes, but what sort of luck would this bring?"

"None, but your stupidity would eventually bring you bad luck."

"Do all people from Bobo believe these things?"

"No."

"Why do you believe them?"

"My father taught them to me."

"Did he have good luck in his life?"

"Of course. You saw him. He's a hundred years old, twice the age to which most Africans live. If you wish, I will teach you these things and perhaps your luck will improve."

The African has been deadly serious throughout this exchange. But as he makes this last remark, the hint of a smile flickers across his face.

The town center of Agadez is small and dense. Crowding its streets are Tuareg, Fulani, Hausa, Toubou, Wodaabe, Bellah. Ornaments and facial markings once again tell that the women are the carriers of these cultures.

These women wander the central market, gossiping, haggling, posturing, rarely buying. In the animal market they're quiet. It's the province of men, where sheep, goats, camels, horses, and cattle are bought and sold. Most beautiful are the Fulani women, lithe and graceful, skins chocolate, noses straight, lips full, cheek bones high, hair black and curly.

They live by Pulaaku, a moral code that stresses modesty, self-control, respect for others, wisdom, hospitality, courage, and hard work. Thus, are they beautiful, without and within. The origins of this tribe are uncertain. Certain is that they're spread all over West Africa. Their faces may or may not be decorated with patterns of scarification, paint, and tattoo. In English they are Fulani, in French, Peul. Most are now settled, but for the Wodaabe, a branch of the tribe that still lives the old nomadic life, moving with their animals from well to well and pasture to pasture over vast stretches of the Sahara. Even the settled Fulani are, because of their pastoral past, experts in the care of cattle. Other tribes often hire Fulani men to care for their cows, season to season. The animal market is full of these men. The women are more often found in the central market. When Frank asks Fulani women for their permission to take a portrait, some refuse, saying they need their husband's permission for this. Sometimes, this refusal can be reversed through the tactful application of an extra measure of baksheesh, but usually not.

The central mosque sits in a large walled compound. It's constructed of mudbricks plastered over with mud-sand plaster the color of the surrounding desert.

The minaret is rectangular in plan. Its four tall sides bend inward to end at a small observation platform at the top. Rough logs project from its walls and serve as scaffolding when its plaster surface must be repaired. It resembles less a work of architecture than the spine of some great antediluvian creature risen vertical from the earth.

A few steps from the mosque is "Le Gourmet," the best restaurant in town. Its owner and cook is a man from Togo. Its waitresses are his two comely daughters. Most evenings, Soungalo and Frank take their dinner here. One such evening, they meet Doula. He's a big chief of the Wodaabe, a tribe of millions and the largest group of nomadic people in the world. Doula, a settled Wodaabe with a house but a few doors from the restaurant, is his tribe's spokesman at international conferences on indigenous people. He speaks some French and some English and invites Soungalo and Frank for tea the following afternoon.

They enter Doula's compound in the intense heat that lives till evening here and are escorted to a small table in a deep pool of shadow by the youngest and most recent of the chief's four wives. Hers is a most unusual face. Long, with almond-shaped eyes that slant upward and outward, a long, thin nose that turns up slightly at its end, and a small mouth. Doula joins them. She serves.

Glasses of strong desert tea ease their talk. Their host is gracious and has a quick mind. Frank asks his permission to make a portrait of his new wife before the light fails. The chief nods his assent.

Frank gestures for her to move into open shade with a wall of unadorned plaster behind her to emphasize her features. This is his usual technique, but she's an unusual subject. Exotic, but with something unpleasant about her. Something rodent-like.

Doula says the place to photograph Wodaabe women is in the animal market, when their husbands are buying and selling. Frank comments that he's seen few settled Fulani women there. "Yes," says Doula. "That's true. But this desert is a hard place and the Wodaabe live in it. To survive this, Wodaabe couples live closer together than those of the settled Fulani who've left the old traveling life and live in towns."

A hard place indeed. Late morning to late afternoon they sleep in their rooms. To venture out between these hours is to enter an oven of fine windblown dust and sand that ravages eyes, ears, nose, and throat. Hard is a soft term for a life lived here, particularly a nomadic one.

Immensely vain are the young Wodaabe men, carrying their hand mirrors and primping constant. They're believed to be great witches and, when in town, can be seen lounging about, tossing smelly powders into cooking fires, then inhaling the smoke these drugs produce. And always they look for new and younger wives.

Working the animal market one morning, they see a group of Wodaabe women in a far corner. They approach and Soungalo asks in Fulani if they'll agree to be photographed individually. One of the older women turns her back on them in response.

Two conflicting beliefs coexist in most of Africa, the older one is that a photograph represents the theft and imprisonment of its subject's soul, so it is best not to allow oneself to be photographed. Newer is the notion, spawned by Western culture, that to be photographed is good, because it shows that the maker of the photographs and thus perhaps others think the subject is beautiful.

The Wodaabe women wear typical desert dress, billowing robes that trap air and insulate their bodies from the heat and, when in the sun, a cloth or hood to cover their heads.

By these devices, they achieve a measure of climate control and comply with the dictates of Islam, the religion that arrived here over a thousand years ago, was imposed upon these people and still holds sway. Frank makes his portraits in the shade. For this, most of the women remove their headgear. They wear their hair pulled forward in a big, bouncy "poof" held in place by silver clips. Behind this is either a single braid hanging down their back or two braids, one in front of each ear. Many have wood ash tattoos, one of the least permanent types, on their faces. These have all but vanished from the faces of the older women. A small fee must be negotiated with each subject. The amount varies and seems small to Frank but can travel some distance in the purchase of essentials here.

Many Hausa are in the streets. Their tongue is the lingua franca here, but they are hardly a nomadic people. Centuries back, they settled and transformed themselves into traders, merchants, and public officials. Now, many work at jobs that require them to garb themselves in business suits and ties.

Unique to this tribe is a facial scarification that begins in the corners of the mouth and radiates outward and upward in a pattern that suggests whiskers. Soungalo says that Hausa businessmen look like black cats in suits.

One night, when Soungalo is out on his own, Frank dines alone at "Le Gourmet." Walking home, he sees Doula sitting outside his gate. "Salam Aleikum" is the man's greeting, "Aleikum a Salaam" Frank's response. Doula bids him pass through the gate then closes it. "We can rest here and speak without worrying about hungry ears," the chief says. He gestures toward two chairs in the middle of the courtyard. They sit in silence for a time, little flecks of nothing relative to the star-speckled dome of universe that overhangs them. Then Doula begins to speak of his people and of what he thinks their future may be, emphasizing that they must remain a nomadic, desert people despite the many temptations offered by the West. "If we fail in this, we will forget who we are and lose ourselves, as have so many other peoples in Africa," he says.

Later, he speaks of the big conference on indigenous peoples in Paris that he has just returned from. He says that Western nations don't host these conferences so they can help native peoples, but so they can understand them better in case they need to steal their land to make money. "Thus far, the Wodaabe have been lucky," he says. "No Western countries have yet tried to take our homeland because, to them, it is just a waste of sand and stone. But this could change at any moment, and one day it will."

Again, they sit in silence, enthralled by the night sky.

"Doula, what's it like having four wives?"

A long silence.

"It's a big mistake."

"Why?"

"Because each is jealous of the others, so they're always fighting. And they all want money, the more the better, but I must give each the same amount or there will be still more jealousy and fighting."

"So, why did you take four wives?"

"My culture made me do it."

"Your culture? Didn't your brain and penis play some part?"

"Yes, some."

Unlike the Wodaabe, the Tuareg are Berbers. Several million of them inhabit a huge territory in the heart of the Sahara. They're nomadic pastoralists by tradition though many, like Mohammed, have abandoned this way of life for an easier one. They call themselves "Imuhagh." This translates loosely into "nobility" or "freemen." And they were just that for centuries, renowned in war, respected and feared by other tribes. An army of Tuareg, advancing in a battle line high atop their camels, blue-clad, turbaned, veiled, armed with a combination of swords, lances, assegais, bows and arrows and protected by tough, antelope hide shields, must've been a fearsome sight.

As warriors, the Tuareg were to the western Sahara what the Masai were to the Rift Valley in East Africa. And, like the Masai, they fiercely defended their self-proclaimed right to graze their cows wherever they wished. They also organized caravans and traded far and free across the Sahara, while demanding tribute from competing caravans for safe passage through their territory. As extortionists they were to rival caravans what the Jersey mob was to small businesses in Newark and Jersey City, and their collection technique was simple, effective, and designed to avoid bloodshed. They simply dogged their rivals for days, denying them access to wells and water holes till, desperate and dying of thirst, they paid up.

These desert lords were deposed early in the twentieth century when the French arrived in West Africa with modern weapons. The Tuareg resistance was ferocious.

Much blood was shed on both sides through battles and reprisals. But in the end, spears, swords, and arrows were no match for artillery and Gatling guns.

Had these arms been denied the French, there's small doubt that the outcome would've been reversed. Now, because of their free, nomadic past, the Tuareg have neither land nor nation, but very much want both. Since their defeat by the French, they've been fighting several West African governments and, on occasion, the French themselves, over this issue. But, even with the AK-47s they now possess, it doesn't look like they're going to get what they want. A proud people laid low by empire.

The tribe is matrilineal with Tuareg women enjoying much higher status than do most African and Arab women. They wear the same desert robes as their neighbors but, though also Muslim, they neither wear the veil nor cover their heads except to protect their hair from sun and sand. Tuareg men cover their faces as protection against evil spirits and windblown sand and to conceal their identities in war, the last a hedge against assassination. More women are literate than men. Common property, including livestock, is owned by the women. Personal property is owned by both sexes.

Mohammed tells Soungalo and Frank that all a Tuareg wife must do to divorce her husband is place all his personal property outside the door of her house. Tuareg women's faces are neither scarified, painted, nor tattooed. Subtly different is the beauty of these women from that of other tribal women here. It's the beauty of the free spirit.

Rarely do they see Tuareg women in public, neither in the streets nor the markets. They ask Mohammed why. He says that these "town Tuareg" have servants who shop for them and that they don't come to the animal market, because Tuareg men are responsible for everything having to do with animals, even though the women own them. Frank asks Mohammed where they can see traditional Tuareg women. Laconic comes the guide's reply, "Desert."

The word "Sahara" evolved from Sahra, the Arabic word for desert, and it is into this they travel. Mohammed has his old land rover loaded with jerrycans of water, petrol, and a good supply of food, mostly pasta.

A day out of Agadez they come upon a Tuareg camp. Traditionally, the Tuareg take much pride in the architecture of their tents, cladding them uniformly in black goatskins or woven mats. Those in this camp are clad careless and haphazard with plastic sheet, mismatched mats and tarpaulins.

Scrap.

They meet the chief, are served tea, and explain their presence. He says that, if he and their subjects get a little money, he's got no objection to photographs being taken. They walk the camp. The men are away with their herds searching for forage and water. Both are scarce. Frank makes a few portraits of the women, but these aren't the desert queens he seeks. They're harried housewives, caring for too many children, cooking, struggling constant to keep sand out of homes and food. Tuareg society has always been hierarchical and these Tuareg are well down the scale from those they saw in Agadez. Romantic notions of the noble Tuareg, lords and ladies of the desert, do not hold here, for these are people gripped by ill fortune.

As they approach the grove of thorn trees in which they'll camp this night, a moonlit jackal leaves it. This grove is surrounded by miles of what Westerners call "nothing." Mohammed boils macaroni, fries up a handful of minced mutton, mixes them together with lots of salt as a hedge against dehydration.

As they eat, they hear the jackal's high-pitched cries. Frank asks if there are any dangerous animals here. Mohammed says there are a few hyenas and builds up the fire.

He says that there are no people about but themselves.

Each day they rise in darkness, take tea and biscuits, then search the day through for Tuareg camps. Mohammed can find these if they haven't moved and they seldom have, for the government pays the Tuareg to stay put. The light's bad by midday, too harsh to make good photos, unless there's shade, and there's little in the open desert they travel. It's a good time to search for camps, for in these there's some shade at all hours. Otherwise, it's a bad time to do anything but sleep. Sougalo and Frank don't sweat, for the dry air drinks it up before it can appear, and they must drink water all day to avoid headaches. When they do find shade, they stay in it to escape the unsparing sun.

Shaded or no, their skin prickles with heat the whole of each day. Mohammed seldom drinks. They ask him why. He says his people have adapted to these conditions. Neither do they feel the heat nor dehydrate so rapidly as those from other climes. The Tuareg also have a sixth sense for desert navigation and can travel long distances without map or compass and without losing their way through what appears to be unmarked terrain.

Daily they suffer the heat for no purpose. More Tuareg camps appear. All shelter people like they saw the first day, exhausted, careworn, diminished. Frank says that such people have been photographed often enough in this world. He doesn't need to do it again. His notion of photographing the noble Tuareg living traditionally in the desert is being exposed as a ridiculous romanticism. He's a hundred years late.

On the last and hottest of their days of searching for the past, they come upon a Tuareg woman and a young boy herding a dozen cattle across a barren stretch of sand. She stops and turns to face them. Mohammed stops the car. They walk toward her through deep sand. The guide asks in Tamashek if she will allow herself to be photographed. "Yes," she says, then asks a high price. Frank accepts. She is of an age indeterminate, wears a robe of black goatskin, its hood pulled over her head. Only her dark, sunburnt face can be seen. It's a beautiful androgenous face with a fine aquiline nose. A beauty neither warm, nor kind, nor tender, nor sexual in any way. It's the beauty of a bird of prey.

Frank photographs her where she stands, lit by desert sun with light harsh and unflattering, for he knows there'll be no preparatory positioning, primping, or preening with this woman. As he and Mohammed walk back to the car, he asks how a Tuareg woman comes to be herding cows in the Sahara.

"Husband dead," Mohammed replies.

The evening meal is macaroni unadorned. Mohammed suggests they restock their food and water on the morrow in the town of Ingall. Here, he says, they will see not only the Ingallese, a unique people who speak a tongue unique to the world, a blend of Arabic, Songhai, Tamashek and Fula, but also the Cure Salle or "Salt Cure." Soungalo and Frank ask what this is. "You will see," he says.

Next morning, they cross a long stretch of sand dappled lightly with thorn bush. Midday there is only sand.

Far ahead, great billows of dust rise into a milk blue sky. Nearing these, they see the herds. Horses, camels, cattle, sheep and goats mill in a great anti-clockwise spiral, munching, licking, and drinking their way across the plain of sparse grasses, salt flats, and pools that surround Ingall. This is the Cure Salle, an annual, autumnal gathering of pastoralists that marks the end of the rains and fortifies their animals for their journey south to rain-richened grasslands. Most here are Tuareg and Wodaabe, and here they trade, exchange news, and renew old friendships. The Wodaabe also sell their potions, curses, and cures. But mostly, this is where traditional marriages are arranged.

The town has the atmosphere of a carnival. Young Tuareg women unsubtly seek the attentions of young Tuareg men whom they hope will choose them for marriage. This brazen behavior occurs amidst camel races, musical performances, dancing, demonstrations of craftsmanship, and storytelling, where these same young men vie with one another to inspire their sisters' seeking.

This ritual is reversed amongst the Wodaabe where the men do the seeking and the women the choosing. The men groom themselves desirable with face painting, costuming, whitening of eyes and teeth, which, along with height, are the women's main criteria. So beautified, they must line dance for seven days in this relentless desert sun and on their toes, alluding to more height than they possess. Many use hallucinogens to boost their stamina. The rite is called the Gerewohl and also includes tests of speed and strength. But, in the end, it's all about beauty.

They stay with Ahmed, a local friend of Mohammed's. Nights, they sit round a fire on his tiny terrace, drink tea, and talk. His wife is Songhai. Their daughter, Amina, will soon start school. She sits by Frank, cuddling close as the air cools. People she knows have no hair on their arms. As they sit, she strokes the hair on his, much as one would stroke a cat. Three small dots are penned between her eyes, test marks for a future tattoo. One morning, with her and her father's permission, Frank asks her to stand beneath the tarp that shades their terrace and makes several portraits. Hers is a soul difficult to steal, charmed and complex.

Back in Agadez they work the animal market. Wodaabe and Tuareg people are plentiful, along with some Bellah and Toubou. The Bellah share history, but not blood. They're former slaves or descendants of slaves and, of all the tribes here, have the lowest status. These women, like Tuareg women, cover neither their hair nor faces but, whereas their Tuareg sisters evoke pride, they evoke shame. Slavery here is now illegal by government decree, though some Tuareg chieftains still keep slaves, and it is said they're not the kindest of masters.

The Toubou are nomadic pastoralists living in a range of desert mountains to the northeast. Toubou men are heads of their households, but in their absence, the women are expected to perform all the husband's tasks, including the herding and pasturing of animals. Working in these hard conditions, Toubou women need to be able to defend themselves. To this end, beneath their robes, sheathed to their inner thighs, they carry sharp knives and know how to use them.

An Irish photojournalist, Kevin, has lived and worked in Agadez for several decades, traveling with Tuareg salt caravans, photographing and writing about them. The Irishman tells a cautionary tale. When he first came to Agadez, he took a photograph of a Toubou woman in the animal market without her permission. An instant after he tripped the shutter, he was pinned to a wall, the woman on his one side, her husband on the other, their knives at his throat. He thought he was finished, just as his assailants hoped he would. They held him fast but paused long enough to allow those around them to raise a racket that brought the police. The rescue that followed was a very expensive one for Kevin, but he says he remembers the afternoon that followed as the happiest of his life.

Frank and Soungalo book seats on a bus to Bobo. Early the next morning, they're at the bus park, but their bus is not. They're told it's broken down and there won't be another till the following day. They sit in shadow. Soungalo says, "Back home in Bobo, I will have no work. What can I do?"

"Don't work as a guide. You're a very good one, far better than all those street kids who say they're guides, but how can tourists know the difference between you and them?"

"I don't know."

Frank's using a small, point and shoot camera to document his work with color slides. It's simple and easy to use.

"Did you see all the photographs outside shops in Bobo and Mopti and Niamey?"

"Yes."

"They're family holiday pictures. People pay photographers to take those pictures. Why don't you do that?"

"How?"

"You can use my small camera. I'll give it to you and teach you how to use it."

"Thank you. But where and when will you teach me? I am on my way home."

"Here, now, while we wait for tomorrow's bus."

"Okay."

"But in the long run, there's something else you should do."

"What?"

"Find a French woman, convince her to marry you, and go to live with her in France."

Two days later, they're in Bobo. They stand together outside the bus. Frank pays Soungalo double what they agreed upon, shields this transfer so none in the crowd that surrounds them can see it. Reluctant are their good-byes. As Frank turns to board the bus that will take him back to Ouaga, the African says, "You are my father."



Figure 13 Bozo Girl Cooking

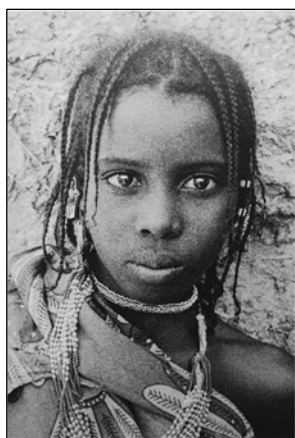


Figure 14 Peul Girl



Figure 15 Fulani Girl



Figure 16 Fulani Vendor



Figure 17 Fulani Woman with Baby



Figure 18 Peul Girl at Wedding



Figure 19 Doula's Fourth Wife

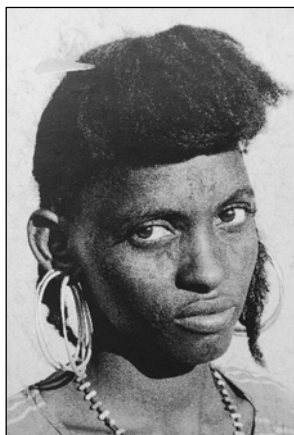


Figure 20 Wodaabe Woman

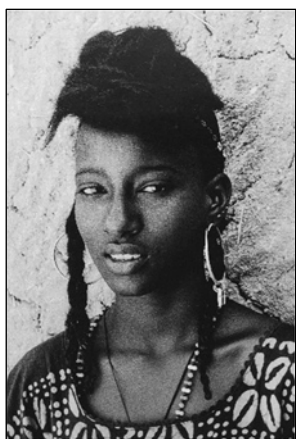


Figure 21 Wodaabe Girl

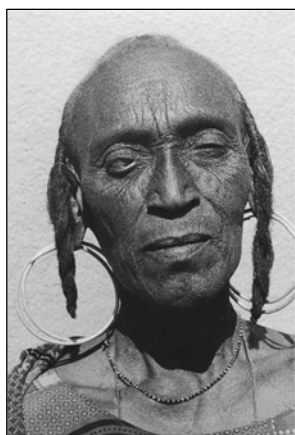


Figure 22 Old Wodaabe Woman



Figure 23 Tuareg Girl

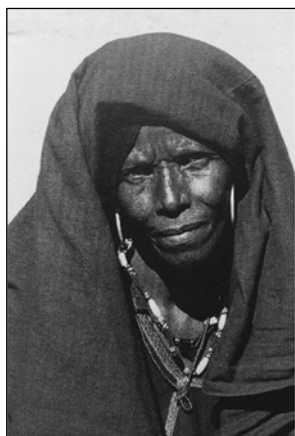


Figure 24 Tuareg Herder

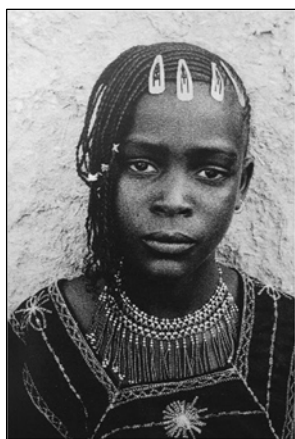


Figure 25 Ingallese Tuareg Girl

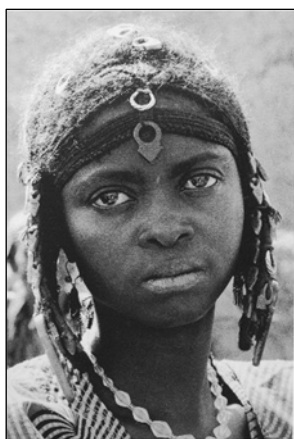


Figure 26 Bellah Girl



Figure 27 Bellah Girl with New
Dress



Figure 28 Toubou Girl



Figure 29 Old Toubou Woman

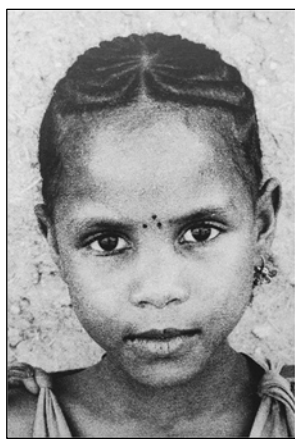


Figure 30 Amina

Dori

Near the southern edge of the West African Sahara, a day's drive north from the Gulf of Guinea, in the northeast corner of Burkina Faso, sits the village of Dori. It's a market town one day a week. Other days it's a place where tribal people find transport to other market towns. They travel here from both the Sahara and the Sahel. Most are Fulani, but there's also a scattering of Tuareg, Songhai, and Hausa. Frank bases himself here for four months during each of two consecutive years. Each year, he has a different guide. The first is a thief. The second, a drunk. Tuesdays, he works the Dori market. Other days he travels to other market towns in the beds of pickups with tribal women, some of whom will be his photographic subjects that day. All, including himself, arrive at the bus park in the gray half-light before sunrise, clean and cleanly clad. The women are beautiful and beautifully clad. He works from morning to late afternoon. When he returns to Dori each evening, he's exhausted, sweat-stained, and filthy. The women look as they did when they left in the morning.

The pickups they travel in are fitted out on two levels. The lower is the bed of the truck. This is for spare tires and people, who often sit on the tires for a bit of comfort. The upper is a grid of closely spaced steel pipes, supported on pipe columns. This level is for goods and animals. One morning, Frank gets a seat on a tire in the bed of one of these. He's surrounded by Africans, including a man sitting before him, also on a tire and naked to the waist. Just short of the day's market, this man is suddenly drenched by a strong stream of water from above.

Frank jumps back instinctively, tries to distance himself from whatever has befallen this fellow. Laughter erupts all round him. The African's only movement has been to use his open hand to squeegee the excess goat pee from his hair and upper body. Then he rides on as before. The outburst of laughter wasn't about the African being pissed on by a goat. It was about a white Man losing his cool.

Nine finely built mud brick mosques stand in a market town south of Dori. Frank works here one market day morning. Comes the midday lull. His guide, the drunk, offers to take him to meet the architect of the mosques, known locally as "the Creator." They climb a long sun-shot slope to the upper town, branch onto a track that disappears, barrel-vaulted, into a hillside. This passage makes a turn then opens into a large, earthen-domed room lit by a single window. Forty men, robed in different hues and turbaned white, sit cross-legged on its floor, eyes fixed upon the new arrivals and flashing with a point of reflected glitter from the window. Facing these forty is a man similarly seated but robed white. The Creator. He turns to face his visitors. He's very old. His features look to be cast from wrinkled ebony. His eyes lock upon Frank's and never waver. They are irised jet black. A host of highlights dance within them. Frank's guide introduces him as an American guest.

The old man gets right to it.

"Pourquoi votre President Bush derange le monde?" (Why is your President Bush disturbing the world?)

George W. Bush is warring with this man's Muslim brothers.

Thus does Frank reckon that this is a time and place for tact and diplomacy, goods he could deliver much better in English if he had that choice. He wonders, *Will my bad French cost me my head here?*

"Il sont beaucoup mal hommes dans notre gouvernement."

(There are many bad men in our government.)

"Sont-ils toutes les Americaines mauvais?"

(Are all the Americans bad?)

"Non."

"Etes-vous un mauvais homme?"

(Are you a bad man?)

"Non, je ne crois pas."

(No, I don't think so.)

Comes a murmur of laughter from the disciples.

"J'aimerais continuer notre conversation concernant votre gouvernement. Avez-vous une adresse e-mail?"

(I would like to continue our conversation concerning your government. Do you have an e-mail address?)

"Oui."

"Quell est-elle?"

(What is it?)

"fmullenphotographer@gmail.com"

"Bon voyage. Salaam aleikum."

(Have a good journey. Peace be with you.)

"Merci. Aleikum a salaam." (Thank you. Peace be with you too.)

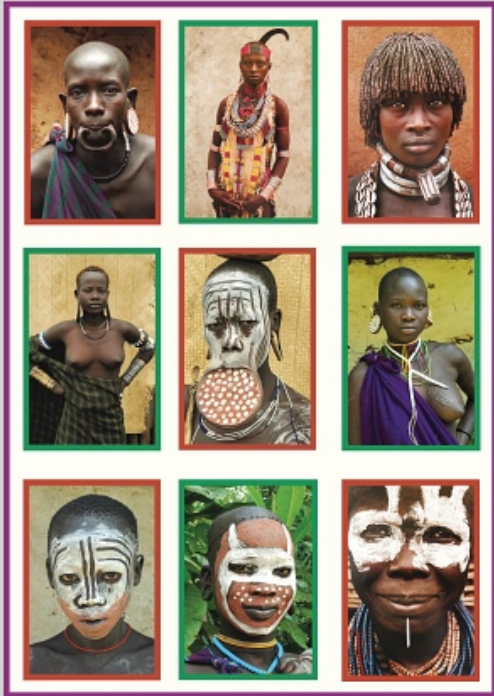
A young disciple escorts them to the door. No more words are spoken. All hands rise in farewell.

Midday has passed, so the cocktail hour has arrived for the guide. Frank reckons he could use a couple stiff ones too.

No e-mail ever arrives from the Creator. But, on the day that follows Frank's meeting with him, one arrives from Soungalo Traore. He and his new wife, a French painter, are living in the south of France and expecting a child.

A BAKER'S DOZEN

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