

Based on letters home, journal entries, and trip notes, this memoir explores seven years of working and living in West and East Africa while raising two children in the 1980s.

Seven Years in Africa: A Memoir of Sahel and Savannah

By Jan Hogle and Bruce Slater

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SEVEN YEARS IN AFRICA

A MEMOIR OF SAHEL AND SAVANNAH

Jan Hogle and Bruce Slater



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that my language skills would improve since I was now living in a country where I'd need to speak French daily.

"Only about ten or fifteen percent of the population speaks French," explained Barbara, "even though they study it in school. It's required, but of course not all children are in school."

"How are things with the volunteers right now?" asked Bruce.

"As a matter of fact, I want to take you to the French hospital right now. One of our volunteers is getting an appendectomy as we speak. I'd like you to see how that's going." David seemed anxious.

"And before you go, Bruce, one last thing. Do you play softball?" Carlos grinned as he asked his question. Bruce said yes.

"Great, you can play on our team on Saturday. We play softball every week at the Ambassador's compound."

Bruce left with David in a Peace Corps vehicle, and I continued with Barbara and Carlos in their car with our baggage. Driving through Niamey's dusty brown neighborhoods, children chased our vehicle calling out "*Anasara! Cadeau!*"

"Barbara, what are they saying?"

"*Anasara* means foreigner and *cadeau* is French for 'gift.' They want a handout. You'll hear it constantly. You should ignore them whenever you go into town."

The high solid walls surrounding our compound looked like New Mexican adobe walls. An enormous metal gate creaked open in response to Barbara's clapping her hands three times to announce our arrival.

“Here we are!” Barbara sounded upbeat. “We live just around the corner. This is called a *concession* in French—the compound around your house.” Metal bars protected all the windows and doors. A covered patio in front of the house contained a low table and several metal chairs painted white.

Doubou greeted us at the door. Barefoot and short, he smiled broadly and welcomed us in understandable French. We walked into an open room with a dining table at one end and a living space with sofas at the other end. A narrow hallway to the left led past multiple bedrooms and bathrooms. Air conditioner units loudly blasted icy air in each room. The tile floor felt cool under my bare feet as I kicked off my sandals.

“The Peace Corps doctor allows sick volunteers to stay at his house, if necessary. That’s why there are so many bedrooms,” said Barbara on the house tour.

“Where’s the kitchen?” I asked.

Barbara showed us the tiny kitchen behind a door leading off the dining room. It wasn’t air-conditioned. There was a fridge, small gas stove, and water filtering apparatus.

“Don’t drink the tap water, and don’t brush your teeth in it,” cautioned Barbara, “but you probably already know that. Doubou knows how to process drinking water. What do you think? Will you hire him?”

I wanted to verify with Bruce but figured he’d agree anyway. I said, “Well, sure, I guess so.” Barbara explained in rapid French that we had agreed to hire him. No discussion of salary or hours. We’d figure that out.

“What will his job involve?” I hadn’t even opened a suitcase or sat down on the sofa in my living room, but already we were negotiating the duties of employed household help.

“He’ll do the shopping, cooking, clean up, laundry, and house cleaning,” explained Barbara. “After he makes dinner, he leaves unless you want him to serve at a dinner party, but you have to pay him overtime.”

“Is it necessary to employ people in your home?” I already knew the answer to that one but asked anyway. I’d heard the term “houseboy” but didn’t like it. As it turned out, Doubou was roughly ten years younger than we were, but still.

“Oh yes, you don’t want to do all that yourself. It’s quite affordable. Besides, employing people in your home contributes to the local economy. It would look bad if you didn’t hire help.”

“Who’s the guy outside with the stick?” I had noticed a man in a turban and long robes walking around the compound holding a long staff.

“He’s the *gardien*—the day guard. Peace Corps pays him. You’ll pay Doubou yourself. There’s a different *gardien* at night. Mousa is the day *gardien* here. The *gardiens* don’t speak French, only Hausa and Zarma. But if you need to tell him anything, Doubou can help you.”

Hungry and fatigued, I was beginning to tire of the information overload.

“Doubou made a spaghetti dinner. Hope that’s okay. He knows how to make lots of American dishes, because he’s worked for several

Peace Corps doctors over the years. There are eggs and bread for tomorrow, and coffee.”

“Thanks, Barbara. I need to sleep for a while and eat later when Bruce comes back. I don’t even know what time it is.”

“*Merci, Doubou. À demain.*” Thanks, Doubou. See you tomorrow. That much, I could say.

On my first day, I walked around our house and compound, observing through the fatigued eyes of major jetlag. Later, I learned that residential areas for expatriates, civil servants, and wealthy Nigerien businesspeople were not so different from what we were familiar with. The house-building techniques were solidly French colonial—houses stood on smallish plots bordered by high walls and metal gates. Unarmed guards watched over each property night and day. Windows of heavy glass in thick metal frames opened inward, allowing the external metal gridwork to prevent forced entry. The fortress-like security measures gave me a sense of safety. Plus, the Embassy had equipped the house with radios. I couldn’t imagine how anyone could break into these homes.

While Bruce drove off to *Clinique Gamkalley* to see the volunteer undergoing abdominal surgery, I unpacked suitcases and arranged our belongings in drawers. All the rooms had white walls, window air conditioners, ceiling fans, and concrete floors. Each bedroom was small, furnished with a bed and a nightstand. Our slightly larger bedroom had a queen-size bed with a mattress on a platform frame. It was firm and comfortable. I slept for a while.

Today, August 31st, was my thirty-second birthday.

After my nap, I felt a bit lost and weary, not sure what to do while Bruce was sucked into the crisis. I still wasn't sure what time it was. Then I heard three claps at the front door and Barbara's voice.

"Hi, I just wanted to see how you're settling in."

"I've unpacked but there's not much to do now. I'm just waiting for Bruce to come back. Do you know how long he might be?"

"No clue, but I wanted to tell you some of the ways you might meet people. We have quite an active American community."

Barbara pulled a sheet of paper from her bag as we sat at the dining room table.

"Here are some activities you'll want to know about. Friday night is always a barbeque at the Marine House. The Embassy has five Marines. They host dinner and games, and everyone comes—Peace Corps staff and volunteers, USAID people, and State Department employees. Carlos mentioned the softball game on Saturday afternoon at the Ambassador's field. Those of us who don't play sit in the bleachers, drink beer, and watch the game. You'll meet a lot of people there."

I watched as my weekend social calendar overflowed.

"Next week, I'd like you to go over to USAID and meet the director. He knows about your background and wants to talk to you about possible work."

My ears perked.

"But I suggest you jump into French language training with the volunteers. It starts soon. I'll get you the schedule. You need to get

fluent fast, and the Peace Corps immersion program is the way to do it. It's six hours a day, six days a week for six weeks."

Whoa.

"Let me think what else to tell you now. Oh, tomorrow, I can take you around and show you the *marché*—the market—and the museum. You'll want to take at least half a day at the museum. It's exceptionally well done. The *marché* is huge and there's a lot to see. You'll want to get familiar with which sections sell which stuff. And also, the French store gets imported food from France like cheeses and apples—things you can't get anywhere else. That's all I can think of for the moment. You look like you need to rest more."

My head was spinning and probably my eyes were closing. Although the air conditioners were running full blast and the ceiling fans were spinning fast, the air felt warm. Looking up at the ceiling, I saw a tin roof without insulation. Outside in the bare sandy yard, I nodded to the *gardien* padding by in his sandals. He smiled and nodded back. The air smelled dusty and dry.

I learned later that we lived in a neighborhood called *quartier Poudriere*. Peace Corps staff like us lived in houses across town from the expatriate neighborhoods that housed USAID employees and Embassy staff. Nigerien families lived in compounds on either side of ours. I could hear children calling to each other and the thud of pestles in mortars as women pounded millet into powder.

Bruce eventually returned. He said he'd need to accompany the volunteer back to the States once she was stable enough to travel.

The delicious dinner was meat sauce on recognizable spaghetti noodles with buttered baguettes. The sauce was heavy on finely ground beef and light on tomato sauce but tasted familiar.

“Barbara said not to eat the lettuce until it’s washed. She said Doubou knows what to use to rinse it.” Bruce already knew about washing fresh vegetables in iodine water.

“Happy birthday,” he said smiling.

Bruce

Notes on yellow fever in Fada. As an American physician, I consulted at a meeting with the Ambassador to help address a yellow fever crisis. The small town of Fada, twenty miles north of Niamey, spiked a yellow fever surge that involved our local Peace Corps office. Our volunteers and staff were all safe because yellow fever vaccination was required. However, during some civil unrest, the airport skipped checking the World Health Organization vaccination cards (referred to as WHO cards or Yellow Cards), so a few State Department people slipped through. The Embassy flew in yellow fever vaccines from France for them. The French were sending home French dependents less than one year old, while the American community started vaccinations at six months old.

Kitty Rabies. Two words couldn’t be more diametrically opposed. Sweet, soft, cute, and cuddly baby kittens. Foaming, drooling mouth, snarling, and aggressive spasmodic killer felines. Rabies in animals presents with foaming when the animal’s throat spasms if it tries to

drink. Since saliva can't be swallowed, it foams and drools from the mouth. The painful spasms cause animals to avoid water, thus the historical name *Hydrophobia*. The rabies virus, carried in the saliva, affects the brain in an evolutionarily influenced manner to eliminate carnivores' inhibitions about attacking any living thing around it, thus injecting virus-laden saliva into the next victim.

I might have saved a volunteer from death by rabies. Rabies in humans is as hideous as you might imagine based on its presentation in animals. We recommended volunteers avoid feral cats living around volunteer homes since they're good rabies vectors. One Peace Corps Volunteer would have ignored her cat's changed behavior when it scratched her and ran away. A normal cat would not run away from food and attention, so this behavior was immediately suspicious. Because during health training, I'd told a gruesome story about a recent volunteer who died from rabies, she decided to report the exposure. What followed was an urgent shipment of vaccine for the volunteer and some case follow-up with other people who had been exposed to her cat. Crisis averted. We never learned what had happened to the cat.

September 1983: Settling In

Jan

While Bruce spent long days at the Peace Corps office, I collected stacks of paper from various sources at Peace Corps and USAID. I met with the USAID mission director who passed along hundreds of pages of reports to familiarize me with their projects in Niger. We talked about developing a research project proposal. Naïvely, I continued to

think about applying my research skills to the perceived needs of local beneficiaries. However, I soon realized the diversity of meanings of “perceived needs.” The Government of Niger (GON) had its priorities; USAID had theirs; the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) and NGOs had theirs; the United Nations had theirs. Everyone thinks they know what a country needs. Then there are the rural citizens of Niger who live *en brousse*—out in the bush—making up eighty percent of the country’s population. Likely they have their own ideas about their families’ and communities’ needs.

The new USAID director wondered if Peace Corps Volunteers might be useful as research project assistants, but he commented to me: “Well, those volunteers are just a bunch of kids out there in the sticks doing their thing. They’re not interested in cooperating on research.”

In a letter home, I reflected on my progress in navigating employment prospects: “My job, for the time being, is to collect all the info I can on everybody’s agendas, put all that data into my computer brain, and pop out a strategy for getting someone to pay me to do something. The USAID health officer and her boss are both brand-new here. They’re the people I’d be working with and they’re still settling into their jobs. I want to be useful, but all this stuff takes time. New Mexico may be the land of *mañana*, but Africa is the land of next week.” Or perhaps next month or next year?

Bruce

In a letter to my sister Ellen, I apologized for sending a photocopy of a hand-written letter.

“Sorry for the Xerox format, but that was the only way to get letters to everybody since our computer is still somewhere in Belgium. I enjoy playing softball on Saturdays. I started in right field, but now I’m playing infield or wherever needed. I coach Jan on Sunday mornings so she will eventually play. Our field has several disadvantages. One is cram-crams (sand spurs) in left field and the other is the ‘Niamey bounce’ of the infield. When fielding a ball, you have to remember it’s the last bounce that counts.”

During what became our ritual Saturday softball games, the occasional gigantic land tortoise appeared. They thought they could dig burrows in any sandy spot that suited them. If we came out to play and discovered one of the tortoises blocking part of our diamond, several guys would have to move the heavy beast off the playing field. This was never easy, but tripping over a tortoise in a frantic lunge to catch a high ball seemed risky.

“Ellen, you asked what I do on an average day. There’s no such thing! I haven’t spent five weekdays in a row in Niamey yet! I go to French classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Fridays are staff meetings. Then I have scheduled office hours from ten to noon, then it’s time for lunch followed by *sieste* at home until 3 p.m. (during which I always nap). Then I’m back at the office answering letters from volunteers in the bush until

usually 6:30. We've been busy with social engagements recently, during which I spent a full week in town! We've met the Ambassador. And we saw, to our astonishment, the New Mexico Laguna Pueblo Dancers who visited here courtesy of the United States Information Agency (USIA)."

Jan

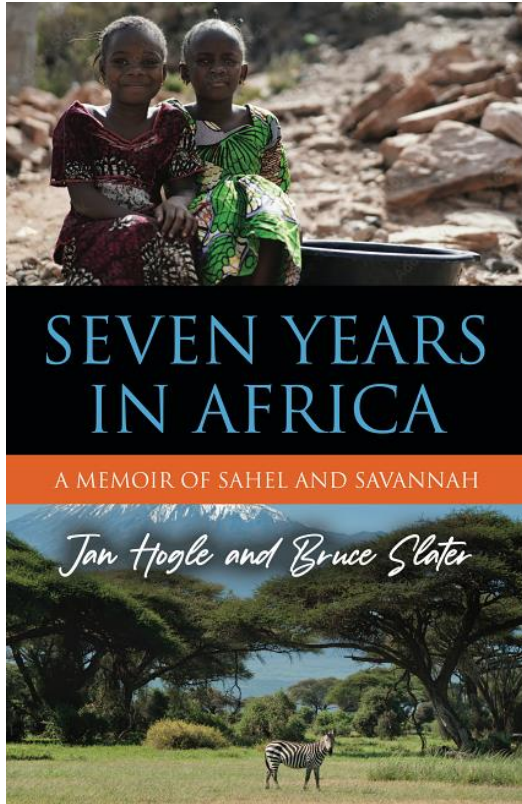
When we heard that the Laguna Pueblo dancers were going to perform in Niamey, I could barely contain my excitement. At the same time, I felt confused about why the USIA would bring dancers from the American Southwest to perform in a land-locked country in West Africa. I had trouble connecting the dots. We were so new in the community that I had no opportunity to ask why the dancers came here. The American community and Nigeriens came to see the outdoor performance at night in an open arena. At the performance, I watched the faces of Nigerien dignitaries sitting near me, wondering about their impressions. I saw no reactions. Their thoughts about the dancing remained well-hidden.

I also couldn't imagine what the dancers themselves thought of their visit to Niger. I didn't know what other countries they were traveling to, where they stayed in Niamey, or what they did before and after their performance. Seeing the dancers, who I'd never seen in New Mexico when we lived there, was a surreal experience—a clash of cultures—in which I was a tangential cultural creature without strong connections to Pueblo dancers, West African citizens, or American expatriates. I was simply there in the stands observing dancing and music, swirls, and swishes of feathers, and stomping of feet, with people calling out in another language I didn't speak.

About the Authors

Jan Hogle was born in Ohio and raised in Upstate New York and South Florida. She studied at the University of Florida in Gainesville and the University of Connecticut in Storrs earning multiple degrees in anthropology, including a doctorate in medical anthropology. For most of her career, she worked as an applied-research anthropologist in international public health, followed by work as a program evaluator at an institute dedicated to improving biomedical research. Now retired with Bruce, she writes, hikes, and photographs in rural Virginia. Her first memoir, *Risking Wreckage: A Memoir of Adventuring Out and Settling In*, was published in 2021. jan@jhogle.com

Bruce Slater was born and raised in Tallahassee, Florida. He attended Florida State University earning a biology degree with a chemistry minor, then went to medical school at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Bruce and Jan moved to Hatch, New Mexico, where Bruce served three years with the National Health Service Corps. From 1983 to 1991, he was the Area Peace Corps Medical Officer in West and East Africa. Returning to the States, he completed a fellowship in primary care and a Master of Public Health at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Beginning in 2003, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, his career focused on medical informatics. He also worked as Chief Medical Information Officer at a Madison hospital, and then for Epic, an electronic health record software company. He retired from Epic and ended his career as a consultant at Cleveland Clinic before retiring with Jan to Virginia. bruceandjan@bruceslater.com



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