

ICWA LETTERS

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A River Runs Through Mali

CONAKRY, Guinea

November 23, 1997

By Randi Movich

BY LAND

Tuesday, September 30: Macenta to Kankan

The expedition to Mali starts out in usual Guinean fashion. We are accosted by young men trying to grab our bags while they furiously call out the names of towns where their vehicles are heading. It's almost as if they are trying to sell me a seat to somewhere I have no intention of going. We hand over our bags to the driver going to Kissidougou and the waiting begins. In Guinea the expression "Time is money" has little meaning. Here they say, "Time is time." There are no scheduled departures. When the taxi overflows with an excessive number of passengers, we leave. I have waited 10 minutes and I have waited two days. I quickly learned the futility of being in a hurry. God is the only entity who knows if and when we will leave and if and when we will arrive safely. Seat belts, treaded tires, general vehicle maintenance, speed of travel and road conditions have a very minor role to play in this process.

This time, there is barely long enough to be asked if we want to buy biscuits, candy, toothbrushes or underwear for the journey. Compared to many *gares* (bush-taxi stations), Macenta's is one of relatively low sales pressure. We roll out of the station and make our way to the outskirts of town. We zoom past cut-over hills of yellow, ripening rice fields, visible in a patchwork of secondary forest, coffee and manioc plantations. Although Guinean farmers recognize the value of the forest and appreciate the products they receive from it, rice does not grow well in the forest shade. Our speedy travel comes to a halt when a *barrage*¹ (checkpoint) in the distance forces the chauffeur to slow down. I have witnessed this scene too many times. Sitting under a large mango tree is a rather chubby *douanier* (customs officer). His shiny, black BMW shares the shade and reflects a man with well-polished boots, a neatly ironed uniform and a baguette (French bread) and *brochette* (skewer of meat) in hand. He is supervising the work of his underlings.

Officially the *douaniers*, police, *gendarmes* and military are there to see that taxi drivers have their official papers, no illicit goods are being smuggled, no one is planning a *coup-d'état* and strangers and citizens alike have proper documentation. It is a confusing array of blue, black, khaki, olive-green and camouflage uniforms, with some officials carrying pistols, machine guns or no arms at all. Typically the officials are surprised to see my husband Jeff and me in a crowded public taxi. Some actually greet us with a *Bonjour* or *Bonsoir*, others simply demand identity cards. All are waiting for an infraction of the rules, real or

¹ The President has publicly stated that barrages should be set up only in the frontier areas. A couple of weeks ago President Conté visited the Forest Region and all of these "illegal" barrages disappeared temporarily. On a recent visit to Conakry I passed through 15 barrages. Most of these were nowhere near borders.

imagined. Invariably they are kind enough to impose an on-the-spot fine, and for the right price you can be on your way.

Our passports are in order. But wait, do we have our yellow vaccination cards? Triumphant, I present mine. They unfold the three-foot long card, looking in all directions at the various scratches of doctors' and nurses' signatures. Do they know what they are looking for? Do they know that Yellow Fever is the only required vaccination for entry into Guinea? Do they know how long a Yellow Fever vaccination is valid? I am always handed back the card with an air of disappointment, no questions asked. I have decided that demanding the card is a recent ploy aimed at inexperienced foreigners. Locals are never asked for a record of vaccinations. But this is not enough; they would like to look at the contents of our two small backpacks. Perhaps we are hiding arms or smuggling diamonds. As the *gendarme* pulls out my towel, my underpants and bras fall to the ground. He is not deterred. When he finds nothing illegal, he reluctantly shoves our belongings back into the packs. We are too suspicious. Americans, coming from the richest country in the world, traveling like ordinary folk, carrying dusty backpacks, speaking some local language? There is an expectation that we should act our part, rich and unbothered by local customs.

Our midday arrival in Kissidougou (a transition town marking the border between forest and savannah) finds a taxi half-full for its Kankan destination. This means several hours at the *gare* being approached by vendors trying to sell watches, cigarettes, jewelry, fruit, manioc, clothes, toiletries and other miscellaneous objects. We spend a bit of time with one watch seller who would like us to buy a "James Bond" style, flip-up watch head, revealing a calculator underneath. Given that Jeff's watch is on the fritz, he thinks long and hard on this purchase, yet ultimately decides that it is not practical. Generally the sellers are good-natured, if not persistent. Their first asking price for items is usually three times what we ultimately end up paying. Bargaining is an art-form in Guinea and Jeff thinks it strange that I actually enjoy this kind of economic exchange.

As the afternoon heats up, we continue to wait for one more person to fill a Peugeot 504 with 10 people. (In my world-view, this would be a six-passenger car.) We begin to think that we should buy the extra seat in order not to arrive in an unfamiliar town in the middle of the night. We offer the chauffeur 5,000 Guinean francs (U.S.\$10) to leave the *gare*, agreeing that he may pick up a passenger along the way. He doesn't go for this. We ask the other passengers (several of whom appear wealthier than this ICWA fellow) if they will chip in 500 Guinean francs each to make up the remaining 4,000 (the total fare is 9,000). We are met with stone faces. They want us to pay the entire extra fare. The proposition strikes them as odd, and it takes about 10 minutes of heated discussion in three languages before all understand and finally decline. We

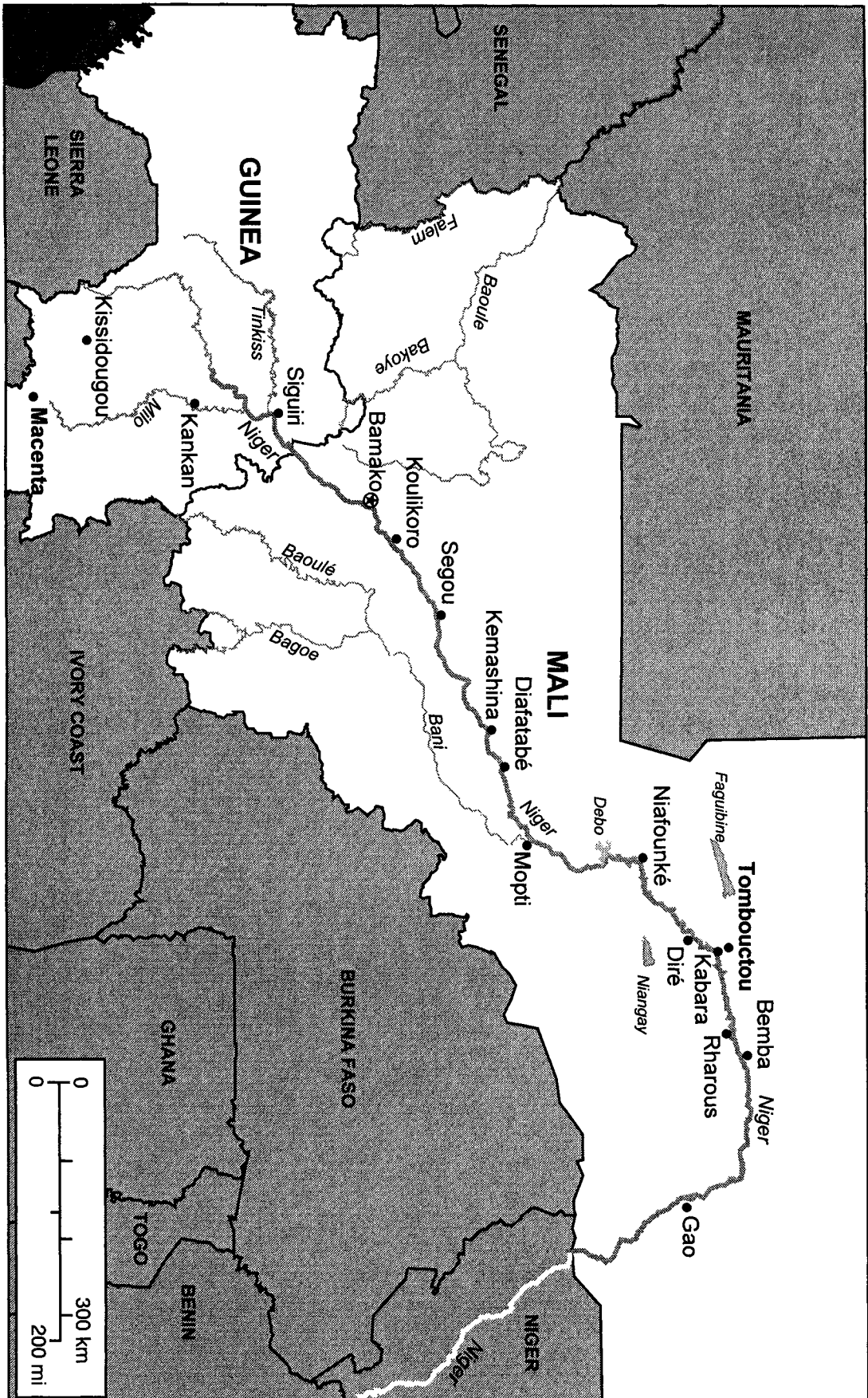
have briefly forgotten that "*time is time.*" A Malian once told Jeff that there are two things that Africa could teach the world. One is patience and the second is laughter. From my vantage point Guineans are experts in both.

Immediately after we've failed with a negotiation for departure, the final passenger arrives. Our driver takes off nervously, hunched over while continuously tapping on the steering wheel. With each mud-filled pot-hole we hit, he flinches, jerking the wheel back and forth, searching for the nonexistent smooth spots. Each jolt reminds me that only one of my cheeks is actually on the seat. The three-hour roller coaster ride comes to a brief rest in the taxi-stop town of Iukono. Here awaits the regional specialty of *agouti* (bush-rat) soup and rice. The woman selling the food is surprised by my request for soup with no meat chunks. I am still not used to the texture of *agouti*. On a more positive note, I am genuinely impressed by the cemented latrine I find behind the rice-bar. It is rare to find a latrine in taxi-stop towns, and even rarer to find one that is clean. The cry of "*Montez! Montez!*" (get in) from the driver signals that it is time to continue our journey.

The next leg begins much the same as the first. This is until the clouds swirl and rapidly accumulate. As dusk approaches the distant sky becomes one intimidating dark-gray mass. Our driver speeds and I wonder if he thinks he can beat the rain. He frantically searches for a screwdriver so that we can roll up the windows. The torrent of wet and eerie darkness descends. Our daytime roller coaster has now turned to a real Space Mountain. Only one wiper graces the windshield. The rain is so heavy that we can not hear the thunder. Pink lightning flashes constantly in the distance and provides the only source of illumination for the slippery, water-logged road. Now, all the passengers are hunched forward. The sound of shallow, fearful breaths fills the taxi. We are all relieved when the driver says he must pull over and stop because the road has become a river and he can't see even the largest potholes. Drained, he rests his head on the wheel. I have never seen a driver pull over because of rain in Guinea, and I am equally surprised by the support he receives from the passengers. I am strangely comforted by the fact that everyone thought it was as dangerous as I did. Bonds come in very strange forms.

Wednesday, October 1: Kankan

We rise with a new feeling of heat in Guinea's second largest city, also referred to as *la deuxième capitale*. Today's mission is to try and find out if there is a boat we can take to Bamako, Mali. Walking toward the port the surface differences between Kankan and Macenta appear. First of all we have left the wet-tropical forest for savannah and the town exhibits much more of its colonial past. The boulevards are wide and tree-lined. There are no kids screaming *toubabou, toubabou* (roughly, "white person"); many people are greeting us, and we are not being stared at like ghosts. This is a welcome change and we breathe openly. Unfortunately, we have missed the boat, literally, which



won't be returning for another week from Bamako.

Once again we prepare ourselves for the long bush-taxi ride to Siguiri and then to Bamako. I do not like the prospect of being crammed into a tiny space for two more days. But the Niger calls and I am propelled through the dust and sweat with the thought of flowing water and open sky.

Thursday, October 2: Kankan to Bamako

We stop in Siguiri in order to visit a friend who happens to be a *gendarme*. It is a mistake. We spend two nights in a mosquito-infested motel room, have passports taken from us by the local police and are threatened with being returned to Kankan after we had already traveled 30 kilometers toward Bamako.

Even though our taxi looks as if it will come apart at the slightest bump, I happily get in after waiting two days. I wave good-bye to Siguiri like a bad dream..... Six hours later we arrive at the Malian border, but before we leave Guinea we are hassled one more time and ordered to empty our bags. Rudely, the authorities pull everything out and we are left with clothes strewn on the ground. I am having difficulty maintaining my cheerfulness with the ill-mannered Guinean officials. I appease myself by looking at the border. It will only be a matter of minutes before we reach the "other side."

On the Malian side we are greeted by a *friendly* customs official. He simply asks if we have anything to declare, and then cheerfully wishes us a pleasant journey. Jeff and I look at each other with amazement.....

BY RIVER

Day 1: Koulikoro to Segou

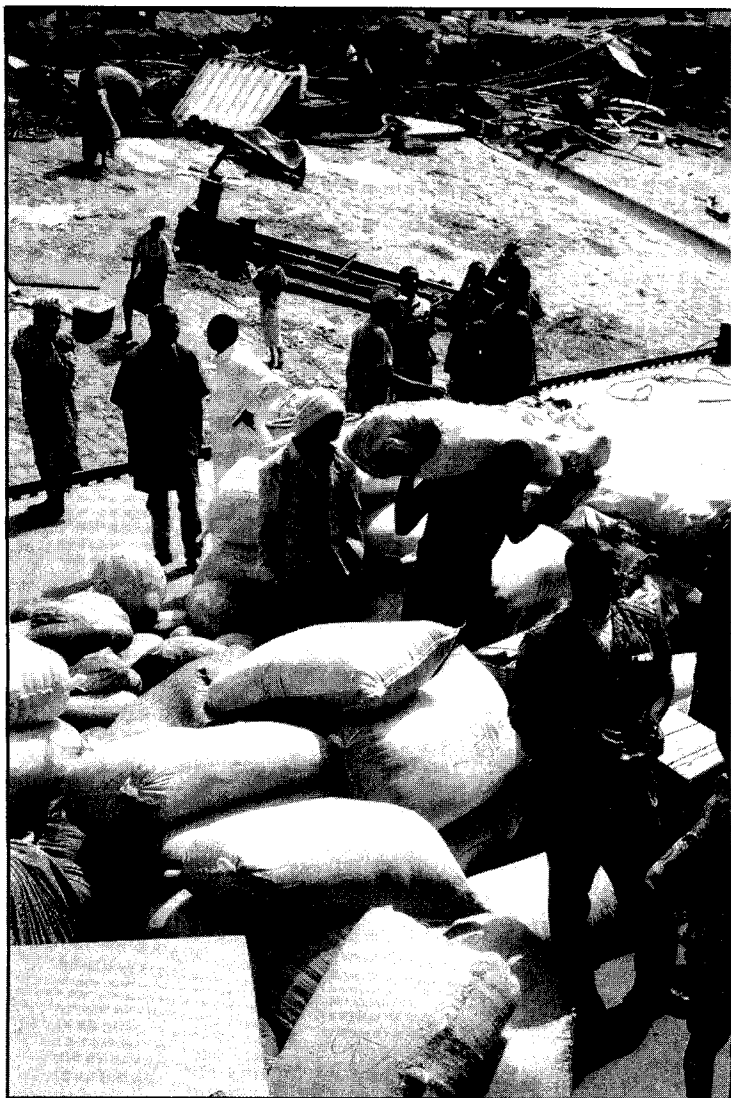
As we walk on the railroad track through the darkness, a light in the distance leads us toward the river port of Koulikoro, a 65-kilometer *bachée* (public transport in the form of a pickup truck or mini-bus) ride from Bamako. Tonight we begin our 1,300-kilometer voyage on West Africa's longest river, the Niger. For the first time in many days my lungs fill with relatively clean air. This is in contrast to the pollution and dust we have left behind in Mali's million-plus capital city of Bamako. The river's enormity and importance as a life source for a huge region of Africa calls us to embark on this five-day voyage.

As we near the boat, the relative tranquillity of the night turns into a full-fledged bustling market. *Brochettes*, bread, fruit and toiletries are plentiful, yet I am more interested in finding our cabin. We make our way through the mass of people toward the narrow gangplank. I wait for passengers and merchants to disembark. The longer I wait, the more people from behind force their way onto the boat through the opposing flow. My hesitation in pushing through the hordes is heightened by the nearby, mucky, trash-filled water below. Ultimately, impatience overcomes fear and I begin to push my way through people, packages and beds. Being polite in these circumstances gains few rewards.

I have no idea where to go or who to talk to. But this indecision is resolved as Jeff and I are literally swept up by the throng of people heading to the second deck. I spot a semiofficial-looking man behind a desk. *Et voilà!* He is



Entrance to the Herboristerie Traditionale, Bamako



Loading goods at Segou port

giving out keys. Calling out my name above the noise, I am having difficulty maintaining my stance behind the desk. People are pouring and pushing through the narrow hallways. I try and move to a corner for some air. As he shuffles through a mass of keys, he informs me that he is unable to find one for our cabin. He tells us to meet him at the cabin, where he will join us *toute de suite* (immediately), an expression that has lost all original meaning in Guinea and Mali.

Our key is found and we settle into our "first-class" cabin, consisting of a bunk bed, small sink (no water) and a closet. Given the stifling heat, Jeff and I stand outside against the railing watching small children, local teens and vendors making their way along the narrow corridors. The sounding of the departure horn is accompanied by a mixture of panicked screams and squeals as people who *are* voyaging desperately trying to struggle their way onto the boat, and those who *aren't* rush toward the dock.

The second sounding of the horn means we are off,

albeit slowly. We slip into the middle of the river while a white-haired man begins to turn the metal handle, which turns the pulley, which brings up the gangplank. This is a slow and excruciating process; each energetic turn brings only a minute upward movement. The remainder of the night is restless and sweat-filled, my intermittent dreams flowing with a stream of conversation arising and fading outside our door.

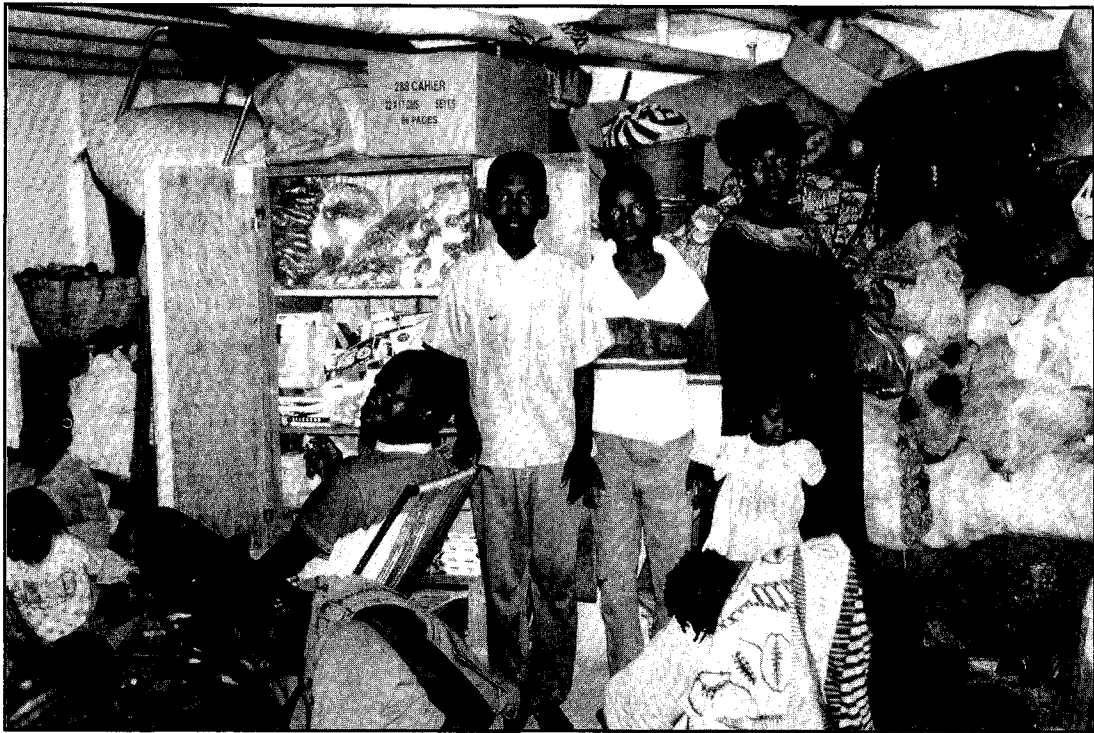
The majority of Mali's 9.5 million inhabitants live on or near the banks of the Niger. With a total length of 4,183 kilometers, it is West Africa's longest river and takes third place in all of Africa behind the Nile and the Congo. The Niger finds its source in Guinea, moves north through Mali, then heads south through Niger and Nigeria, finally spilling out into the Niger Delta. The majority of Mali's population are subsistence farmers and herders; water is therefore like gold in this country, where the GNP per capita is \$250. Mali ranks as one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. Crops grown for home consumption include millet, sorghum, corn and rice. Cotton is Mali's largest export crop and depends heavily on irrigation from the Niger. Local agricultural production does not meet Mali's food needs and in times of drought the line between survival and starvation is thin.

The statistics tell only part of the story; the Sahara is moving southward, encroaching on agricultural lands. The Harmattan wind from the desert fills the sky with fine dust, choking anything and everything in sight. Women

travel farther and farther each day in search of scarce fuelwood. The soil is depleted. Etc. Etc. Looking at men and women dressed in bright, beautiful, *grands boubous* (traditional dress), seeing children laughing and splashing in the water and young men and women flirting, it is hard to believe that these people exist under conditions where a few inches of rain can make the difference between life and death.

Day 2 and 3: Segou to Diafatabé

Five-thirty a.m. A small group of people at river's edge wait in the darkness, with no town or buildings in sight. The boat moves as close as it can to the shore, the gangplank edges down and a few passengers disembark. With a rumble from the motors, slowly we pull back into the current. The darkness fades to light yellow, bringing the sounds and silhouettes of kingfishers, egrets and herons searching for their morning meal. The "village" on the boat awakens with the bustle of brushing teeth, blowing noses, crying children, crowing chickens and the clanking of pots and pans. Nighttime sleeping quarters quickly transform into kitchens. The smell of frying sweet



Passengers with baggage in Kankou Moussa's fourth class

potatoes and plantains wafts upward to the third deck. The smells encourage me to move down to the first deck (fourth-class), where I find myself in the middle of an animated mass of people and baggage. Women are preparing food, breast-feeding, arranging business deals and chatting with their neighbors. Children are playing hide-and-seek. Vendors are selling sugar, cigarettes and aspirin. All of this activity takes place in a crowded space interspersed with refrigerators, stoves, bicycles, grain sacks, suitcases, mattresses, chairs, bags of cement and baskets of fruits and vegetables.

With much squirming and maneuvering I reach a woman selling *brochettes*. In exchange for 200 francs CFA (U.S.40¢) she hands me four steaming, meat-filled skewers. As I make my way back up toward our cabin, I laugh; I used to be a vegetarian, and now I am eating grilled beef at seven in the morning. I remind myself about the importance of adaptability and the fact that vegetables are scarce in these parts. Soon after we've chewed on the last piece of meat, the breakfast bell for the first-class passengers rings. In the dining room, which also serves as a bar and disco, we are served stale baguettes and *café au lait* on painted china. The heat forces the diners back out to the

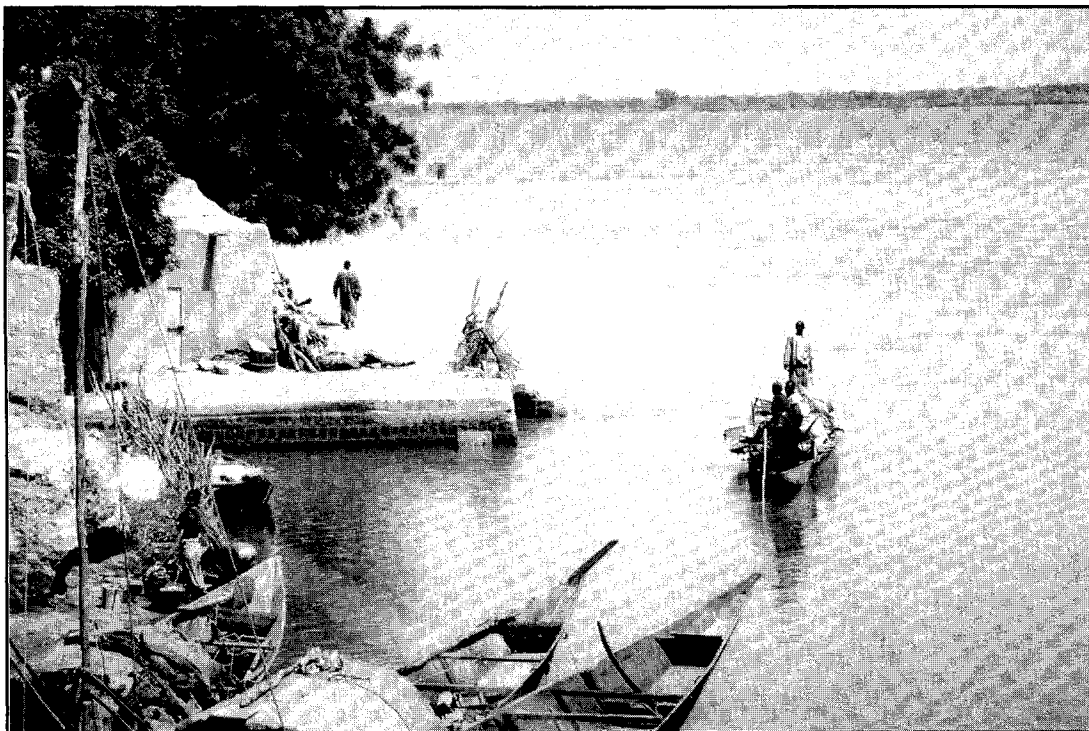
decks, where at least a small breeze blows away some of the heat.

Class is an interesting concept on the good ship *Kankou Moussa*.² In fourth class (first deck), the atmosphere is decidedly like that of a lively West African village. The passengers here adapt readily, setting up house with mattresses, sheets and cooking utensils. As one moves upward in deck and class, the hustle and bustle diminishes, the conversations are less animated and a feeling of austerity and formality reaches its peak on the third deck.

Passengers come from all regions of Mali and walks of life. There are *commerçants* (business people), students, tourists, accountants, professors and military personnel. For many in fourth class the boat is simply their place of business. Some have made hundreds of voyages. This is the case with Kadijatou, an eleventh-grade student who spends her summer vacations selling bananas, peanuts and coconuts at each village stop. When she arrives in Gao, the cash she has earned goes to buy foam mattresses imported from Nigeria, which she then sells in Bamako.

² Mansa Kankou Moussa, King of Mali (1312-1337). "A flamboyant leader and world figure, Mansa Moussa distinguished himself as a man who did everything on a grand scale. An accomplished business man, he managed vast resources to benefit his entire kingdom. He was also a scholar, and imported noteworthy artists to heighten the cultural awareness of his people.

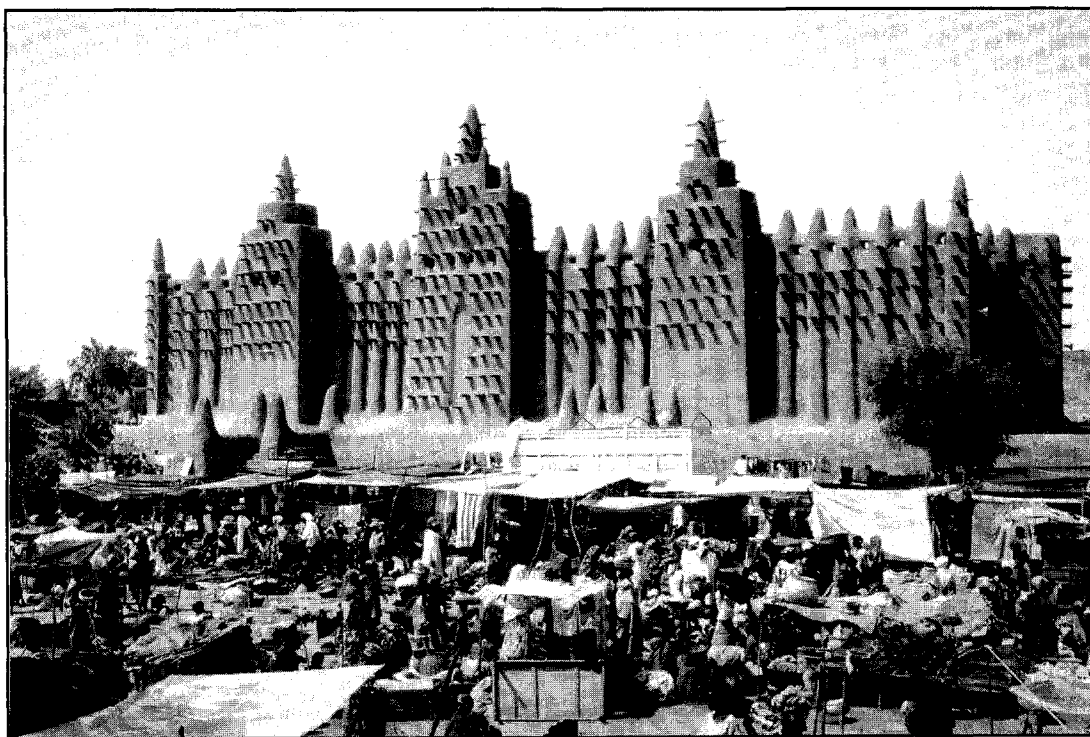
"In 1324 he led his people on the Hadj, a holy pilgrimage from Tombouctou to Mecca. His caravan consisted of 72,000 people whom he led safely across the Sahara Desert and back, a total distance of 6,496 miles. So spectacular was this event, that Mansa Moussa gained the respect of scholars and traders throughout Europe and won international prestige for Mali as one of the world's largest and wealthiest empires." (Text accompanying No.3 of a series of prints created by noted black artists, in this case Higgins Bond, especially for the brewers of Budweiser.) This illustration was displayed in the bar/first-class dining room aboard the *Kankou Moussa*.



Pirogues at Kemashina

Kadijatou's mother started making river trips 15 years ago, and her daughter has continued in her footsteps. With a smile, Kadijatou tells me she is recently engaged to a doctor, but will wait to be married until after she passes the 'bac' (*baccalauréat*, the culmination exam for the *lycée*). She plans to continue making voyages on the boat. I ask her if she has any plans to attend a trade-school or university. She hesitates, explaining that it is difficult for

girls to go to university because it is simply too long to spend in school. She adds that boys can spend this time. Inside my western mind I am disappointed by her statement. Education has provided me with many personal and professional opportunities and I explain this to her. Immediately I regret this. There are so many constraints barring her from a university education; how can I flaunt my opportunities so unfeelingly? After a few moments of



The Grand Mosque and main market at Djenne

silence, she says that she has thought about going to school to be a *sage-femme* (midwife). I wonder if this is truly her desire, or a way to appease me.

Unlike most of the women and teenagers with whom she shares the first deck, Kadijatou has made it to the eleventh grade. This makes her a rarity among the many girls who face boy-preference for education, pregnancy (it is common for teachers to have students as "girlfriends") and a social system that makes motherhood and homemaking a top priority.

As one moves up toward *Kankou Moussa's* first class, the percentage of women passengers decreases. This is not surprising, considering that first-class passengers tend to be either "professionals" or tourists. It is easy for me, and I think other westerners, to view Malian women as marginalized. After all, they do most of the work around the home, which includes food production, animal care, gathering fire wood, collecting water, washing, cooking and childcare. Add to this the Islamic belief that "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior over the other..... Good women are obedient..... As for those whom you fear disobedience, admonish them..... and beat them."³ In addition, Malian women suffer some of the highest rates of female genital mutilation in the world and are 500 times more likely to die from complications related to childbirth than European or American women.⁴ These facts — the key cause being poverty and male domination — anger me. Yet even in the face of these extraordinary hardships, Malian women soar with inner dignity. They proudly display their beauty in all shapes and sizes with brightly colored outfits accompanied by smiles, laughter and assured speech. Even though some parts of the world might paint Malian women as victims, their inner strength and sense of self tells me that they do not agree.

Day 4: Mopti

When we pulled into Mopti almost 24 hours ago, the *commissaire* (purser) told us that mechanical problems would keep the *Kankou Moussa* from continuing to its final destination. Jeff and I were disappointed, yet since that was the way it was, we were prepared to continue our journey by other means. These were not the feelings of our fellow passengers. They would not stand for it. They threatened to burn the boat if we did not continue. After all, we had made it *this* far with only one of the three engines working. When daybreak came, negotiations



Women selling milk and yoghurt in Djafatabe

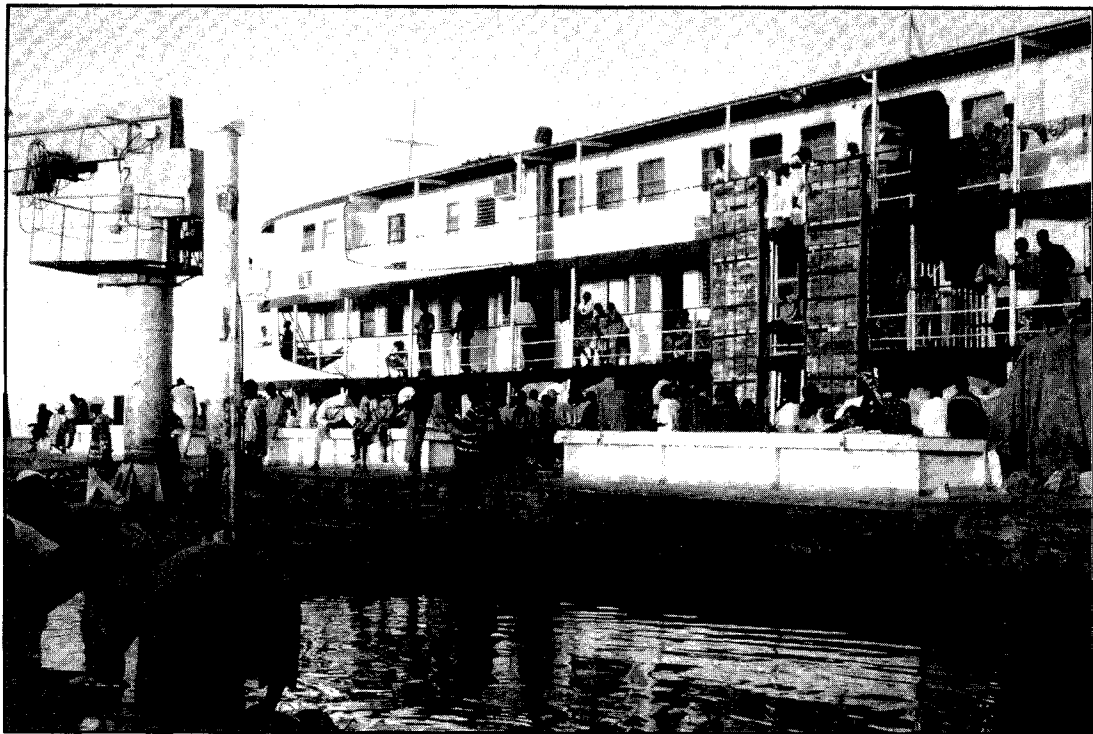
between a passenger committee and the boat company began. Jeff and I took the opportunity to visit the town of Mopti, which is a commercial and agricultural crossroads for Mali.

I visited Mopti nine years ago. The major surface difference I observe today is an increase in pollution and people. Conceivably it has something to do with the midmorning sun, but all I see is heat, dust and filth. Perhaps Mopti reminds me too much of the humanity that is always present in West Africa. Human shit, discarded packaging, rotting food. What comes in, goes out, with no effort to hide it. This openness is sometimes too much for me, coming from a society where everything (shitting, cooking, garbage disposal) is hidden or disguised.

I begin to acclimatize to the grit as we work our way through the *commerçants'* stalls. Millet and meat are the

³ The Koran with a parallel Arabic text (pg. 83). Translated with notes by N.J. Dawood. 1993. Penguin Books, Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England.

⁴ *La grosseur qui tue* (pg. 32). Jeune Afrique n. 1917 du 1er au 7 Octobre 1997



The good ship Kankou Moussa docked at Mopti

most predominant items for sale. Each corner we turn, and each street we walk, ends in water. Mopti is almost an island, with dikes connecting it to the outside world. Much of the transport around the city and to outlying villages is by narrow, gondola-like, black pirogues. One is "parked" at every street end, with sacks of grain being loaded or unloaded. Along the Niger, these small wooden boats often provide the only form of transport away from the main road and towns.

Jeff and I just finish commenting on the number and variety of boats, when we come across — you guessed it — a wood shop that supplies boat builders. Huge planks of wood that have been cut the full length and diameter of the tree trunk, with bark still attached, are stacked 20 high. Until recently the Ivory Coast was Mali's source for this species, locally called *Jula* (*Khayer senegalensis*), but it has largely disappeared from there. What little of the species is left comes from southern Mali. I ask the proprietor where he will turn when the Malian supply runs out. He says Guinea. An average size pirogue will use 200,000 CFA worth of this wood and the price mounts steadily each year as the import distance grows longer.

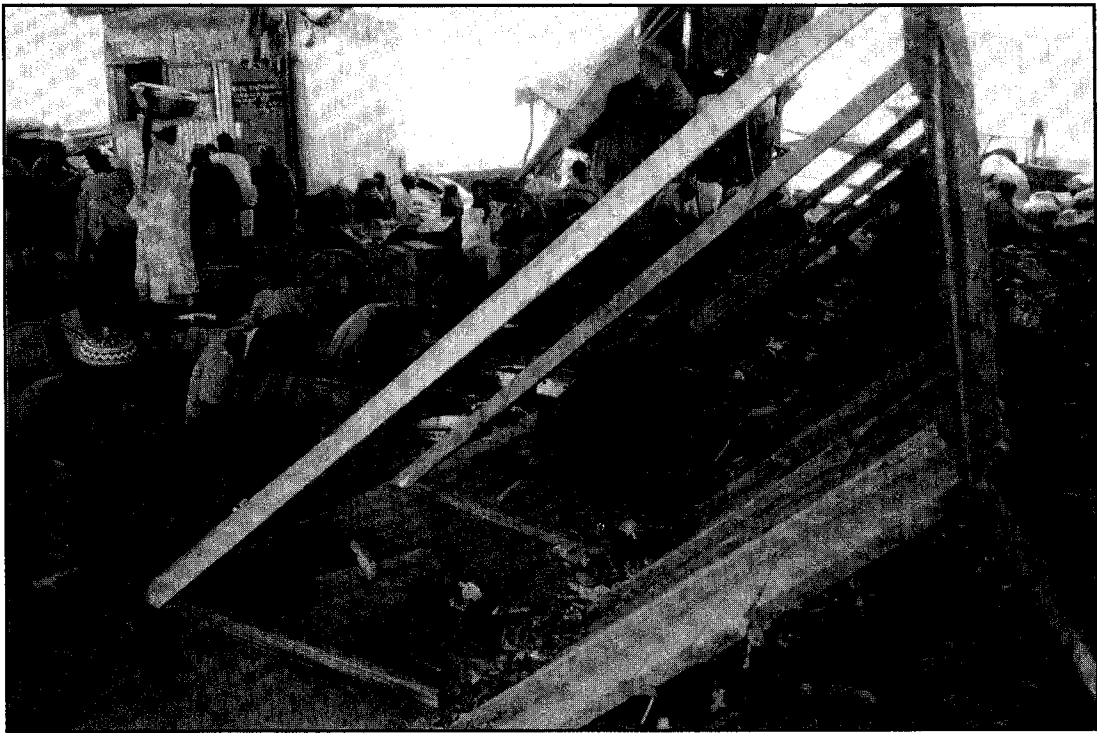
Continuing our meander, we head toward the boat-building center, where planks are assembled in jigsaw-puzzle fashion and held together with forged nails. The boats are planed and sanded by hand. Just as I am about to ask to take a photo, a horde of tourists walks in front of us snapping pictures left and right, leaving almost as quickly as it has come. Briefly I am embarrassed by my tourist status. In the end, I do ask permission for

a photo and have a small discussion with one of the boat builders.

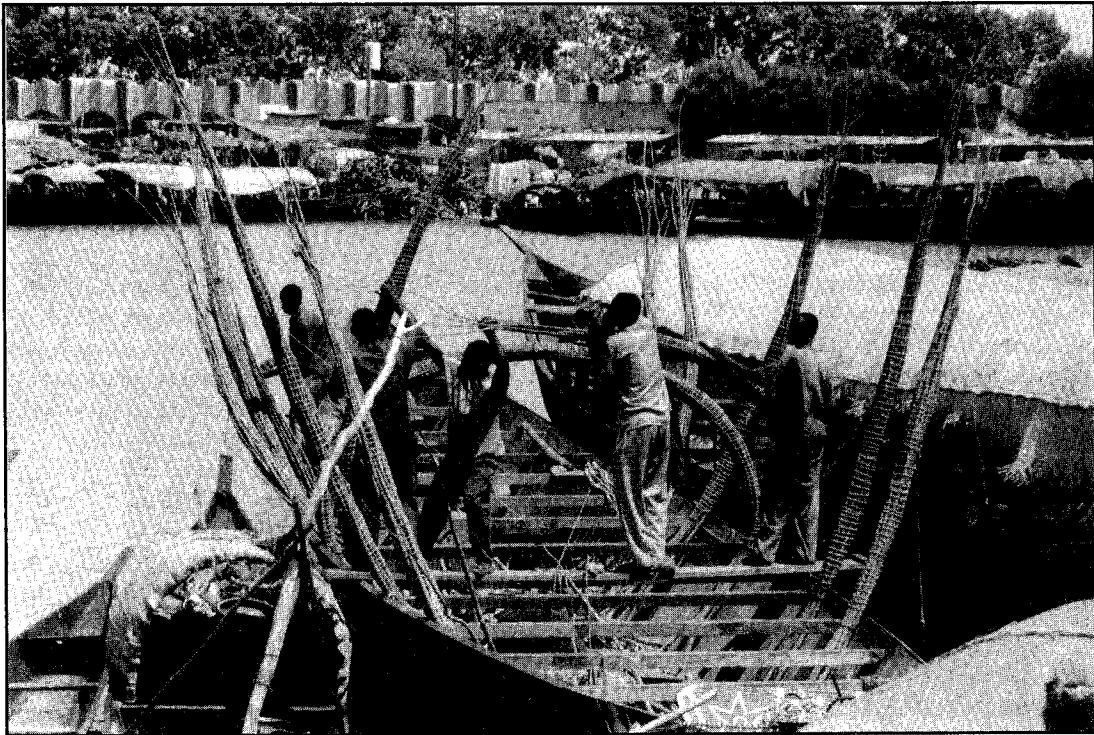
Another turn down a narrow road leads us to what foreigners endearingly call the "dead *toubabou* market." This is an open-air mass of used clothing imported from the States. Every town in West Africa that I have visited has a market like this, and I always feel like a treasure hunter as I pick through the T-shirts and caps. I never know when I might come across a shirt that says "Slugs Forever" (University of Santa Cruz) or an item that I donated to GoodWill Industries five years ago. Although Americans give a lot of lip-service to the concept of "reduce, re-use, recycle," West Africans live it.

We make our way back to the boat through piles of dried fish, dried gumbo, spices and powdered henna (used by women to dye intricate patterns on their feet and hands). We come across a man selling plant medicine for stomach aches. Much of the landscape we have recently passed through is relatively tree-less. I ask him where he collects his medicine and he tells me, in Dogon country, where many more species of trees are found. Given my lack of local language, our conversation is cut short.

When we return to the boat around 2 p.m., the sun is beyond intense. I have drunk several juices and an entire bottle of mineral water and am still dehydrated. It doesn't look as if anyone has unloaded any baggage from the boat. We find shade, and at 4 o'clock a large cheer wells up from the passengers. We will be continuing our river trip. With



Boat-building at Mopti



this announcement, the barge that sits between the *Kankou Moussa* and the shore comes alive with activity. One by one, hundreds of bags of cement are being loaded by men now covered in gray dust. After the barge's interior is filled with the heavier baggage, more boxes, bags, grain sacks, chairs, bed frames, foam mattresses, metal trunks, pots, pans, bicycles, carts, goats, chickens, pigeons and, finally, a car is loaded. When all the baggage is loaded people converge, trying to stake a claim for the

spot where their families will set up house for a few days. Little disputes break out over territories, but in the end everyone seems to have a place.

The most amazing thing to me is not the activity of the barge but the fact that the barge is being attached to our boat! I am baffled. We have just spent the past 24 hours docked in the name of engine failure, and now we have just added more than 200 tons. I ask a number of the

passengers why this is, but everyone responds with shrugged shoulders. I later find out that a passenger committee has signed an agreement that relieves the boat company of all responsibility if we have a breakdown on the river. This still does not explain our new addition. As night approaches, the small red-glow of charcoal from cooking stoves begins to appear around the barge. Then the clanking of pots, and soon the aroma of home-cooked meals fills the air. As we sluggishly move into the current, I think how African women do not travel far without their kitchens. With this, a sense of the familiar and warmth of the hearth accompanies them wherever they go.

Travel is an important part of life in all of West Africa. People often spend years away from their homes and families, in search of work and education. Many of the passengers on the boat are returning from school vacations, where they have spent months with aunts, uncles and cousins. The concept of extended family continues and there is much pressure for young people to

spend part of their childhood outside their mothers' or fathers' home.

When I explain to people that I have come to Mali simply to experience life and study it, they are surprised. Why would I travel so far from friends and family to learn with no promise of a degree or riches?

Day 5: Niafouké to Diré

The clamor below wakes me at 3:30 a.m. I go to the roof-deck, which is filled with sleeping families, and make my way to an open spot on the corrugated metal. The moon guides us toward the dock, which basically consists of a large concrete slab. The boat hasn't really been able to land completely at any of the village docks. We always hover ten or more meters offshore, which means there are a few meters of water between the landing plank and land. Maneuvering with 50-pound bags of grain between shore and plank is a test of strength and agility.

At 6 a.m. port activity is in full swing, and the endless loading and unloading begins. A rail-thin man carries an enormous sack of millet off the slippery plank. Unbeknownst to him is a small hole in the back of the bag; millet streams from it. He walks past 10 or 20 people and no one says a word. Seeing food lost in this part of the world is difficult for me because it is so hard to grow. Each tiny speck of grain is important, and I am relieved when the boat's baggage supervisor puts his hand over the hole and accompanies the grain carrier to his destination.

Jeff and I have decided that it is for the dawn and dusk that we have endured the long hot days aboard the *Kankou Moussa*. We wait for the special jewels of morning and evening to sift through the ordinary rocks of daytime. The shine of the dusk here carries a tranquil peace, a softness that seeps through the harshness of the heat and glaring sun. It is a time for reflection. A time to ponder how Malians have withstood this seemingly barren land for centuries. A time to look at the faces of others, beautiful with pink glow and slow, satisfied smiles. It is a time when the best of our souls are turned inside out for all the world to see. A time to realize that in industrialized society, we often miss the very best times of day. The sunrise, spent inside sucking down coffee and reading the newspaper or driving on jam-packed roads heading for work. At dusk we once again jump into our cars and watch the sunset haze through dirty windshields, car exhaust filling our lungs. Is this the price we must pay for "development"? There are so many wonderful things and opportunities in the "modern" world. But the sunrise and sunset seem as if they are no longer



A tea-seller — wearing Rich Movich's Cub Scout shirt!

ours to enjoy. When will we find the time to reflect?

Day 6: Diré to Tombouctou

We arrive around seven in the evening in Dire. The port, like the others, is bustling, serving over 80,000 people. This number seems huge, after seeing only tiny villages of 10 or 20 people along the river. Although the port scene is similar to the others, things are a little more intense. There is absolutely nowhere for the disembarking passengers to go. The *commissaire* is trying to intervene by pushing people out of the way. Just as soon as he pushes people to one side of the gangplank, a wave of people merge to the other side. His attempts are futile. The gangplank only has space for one-way traffic, but now the crowd has surged and the scene is ugly.

People are pouring out of the boat with huge mattresses, boxes and heavy sacks of grain. At the same time people are trying to get on the boat to reclaim the luggage they have left on board. There is an impasse. A ball of people is accumulating and some are jumping in the waist-high water, pounds of luggage on their heads. Shorter people are wet to their chests. This near-immobile scene continues for 15 minutes, when suddenly there is a break. A woman, baby on her back, slips on the steel gangplank that joins the wood one attached to our boat. For once there are no cheers and laughter from the crowd. She does not appear to be hurt. As soon as she has made her way to shore, a loud crashing noise ensues. The steel gangplank has fallen off the boat's gangplank, and a man with a heavy metal box is now in waist-deep water. There are a few hecklers.

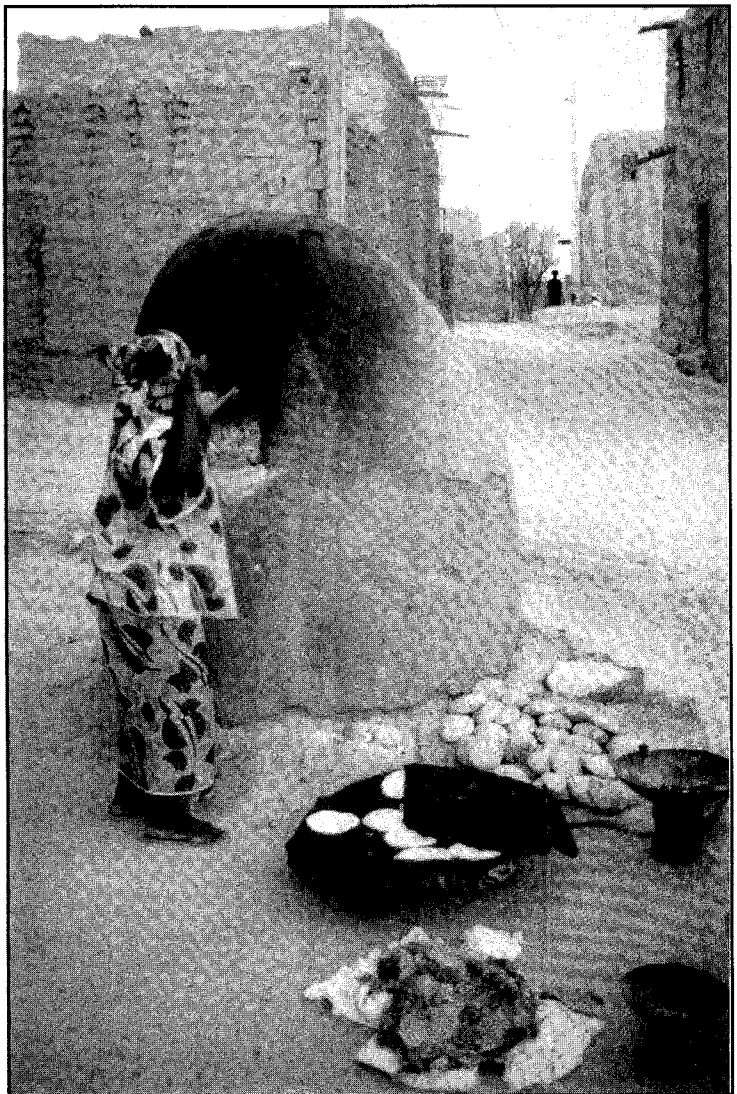
The boat slips from the shore, carried by the current. Are we floating away? The passengers on shore look panicked and start running for the boat, few are willing to plunge into the chest-high water. The little boys take full advantage of the situation by using the gangplank as a diving board. Their squeals of enjoyment are a heavy contrast to the anxious brows of onlookers waiting for the boat to approach the shore. The boat finally reaches the shore and the relieved passengers embark. Moving at about the speed of a running goat, we are on our way to the famed city of Tombouctou.

Before we arrive in Tombouctou, rumors float around that we might not be continuing on to Gao. When we arrive we are told that the boat will definitely not continue. The scenario is becoming all too predictable. Could it be engine trouble? It seems that we have made it this far with no trouble. Could it be economics? There are only 40 passengers out of the original 500 with tickets to Gao. The boat company would be losing money on this part of the voyage. The *chef d'escale* (local boat authority) informs me that we

would not even be able to obtain a refund for the remainder of the journey. I am furious, although not altogether surprised by the lies we have been told. Just before arriving in Tombouctou I had asked the *commissaire* if we would be continuing and he said he did not know. Now the *chef d'escale* is telling me that all the passengers were informed in Mopti that the boat would not be going all the way to Gao. He tells me that I have not taken the responsibility of being informed. I am indignant.

At this point, a fellow passenger who happens to be a military officer arrives. He tries his negotiation tactics with the *chef d'escale*. They go back and forth over the issue of being informed about not continuing to Gao. Who is and who is not telling the truth is muddled. They have decided to call the head office in Koulikoro. Jeff and I decide to head to take a walk to the famed Tombouctou.

Hundreds of years ago we would be in a *pirogue* (canoe) making this same journey. Today we are speeding along the Eucalyptus-lined road in a rundown Land



Woman baking traditional flatbread, Tombouctou

Cruiser. Because the Niger has changed course considerably over the centuries, the center of town is now 18 kilometers from the port. Temporary houses in the form of straw-mat tents stand out between the pole-like trees. These are shelter for seasonal Foulani and Touareg workers who have come to tend the irrigated rice fields that are a component of many regional development projects.

Tombouctou is often thought of as the end of the earth. Perhaps 100 years ago it was. Today a two-hour plane ride or a six-day boat trip will get you there without extreme hardship. The town used to be a major trading point between North and sub-Saharan Africa, beginning in the 11th century. Like other Sahelian towns its wealth was based on the trade of gold for salt, which were exchanged pound for pound. By the 15th century it was one of the most important centers of Islamic scholarship in the Muslim world. Starting in the late 1500's the town was captured and pillaged many times by various rulers and kings. Since then, Tombouctou's wealth and prestige as a center of culture and education have declined dramatically. Today it is on the must-see list for most travelers in West Africa. Personally, I don't see why. The streets of sand are filled with trash and sewage. Telephone and electric lines are hung haphazardly throughout the town. The ancient architectural structures have decayed and the biggest tourist attractions appear to be the houses of a few European explorers who passed through Tombouctou over a hundred years ago. The grandeur of its history doesn't seep into my bones.

Perhaps a telling sign of the state of the Sahelian environment is the national forest we pass coming into Tombouctou. There are no trees in this "forest." Mainly what I see is sand, with a few shrubs dispersed throughout the golden landscape. Perhaps things are relative. One thing is true, though; it's the densest vegetation I have seen for several hundred kilometers.

It is hard to work against forces of desertification. Sand is creeping onto the newly paved road. The aid agency signs for CARE, Africare, Evangelical churches, Red Cross and UNHCR are half covered with sand, as are their offices. They are fighting the results of thousands of years of grazing and firewood cutting, in addition to disastrous droughts that have hit Mali in the past 20 years. In the mid-1980s it is estimated that the drought has been responsible for an 80 percent decrease in cattle. This continues to have a tremendous impact on the nomad population, which depends entirely on a pastoral life style.

When I move through the desert, I try to imagine how people can continue their traditional livelihoods. There is simply nothing left for their animals to graze on. They must travel farther and farther to find the seasonal scat-

tered grasses their decimated herds need to survive.

We began this voyage in Macenta, a mountainous, dark-green and lush tropical forest. As we moved north slowly the dense green turned to a scattered savannah, and finally to a treeless desert. Regardless of where we have been, people show an amazing ability to adapt to the climate and conditions they find themselves in. This is made evident in every aspect of their lives, from the food they grow and collect, to the animals they raise, to the houses they build, to the social structures they create. Perhaps the greatest difference that subsistence farmers and herders face here in the Sahel, compared to life in the forest, is the margin of error. The desert is far less forgiving. But still I wonder, as conditions grow harsher, how much more can people adapt?

Day 8: Tamarin to Gao

It turned out to be go for Gao after all, and this morning I awake to a greyish-yellow, blowing, dusty sky. The Harmattan has begun and the small particles of sand are choking. Millions of acres of Saharan sand are trying to find a new resting place. Our final hours aboard the

Kankou Moussa have taken on a whole new ambiance since the majority of passengers disembarked in Tombouctou. It feels a little lonely, like a summer tourist town packing up for the coming fall. I welcome the quiet and it seems to fit our desert surroundings. We pass through dunes for

most of the day; some areas are scattered with shrubby, thorny, drought-resistant trees. On the surface, it is a simple, never-ending landscape, broken only occasionally by patches of bright green islands near the bank. Goats, cows and the occasional camel pick at newly emerged shoots. Do they know the dry season is coming?

Small villages of mud-brick houses line the river banks. Temporary mat-houses are beginning to appear more frequently. The children are always in the river. It is a wonderful escape from the ever-present heat. Despite the amazing contrast of yellow dunes against the blue river, the day has a certain melancholy feel to it. We will be arriving in Gao early next morning and it will be hard to leave the *Kankou Moussa*, which has become our home. For all the little inconveniences, stinky bathrooms and greasy food, I will disembark with fond memories.

The wind has stopped blowing. A muggy stillness pervades. Sand extends halfway up the walls of village houses. It will soon reach the windows. A few trees are scattered throughout, but they don't seem to make much difference. Dunes surround us on either side as we approach the narrow spot between two huge rocks where the *Kankou Moussa* was attacked by government opponents in the early 1990's. The bullet holes in the side of the boat are a reminder of a Tuareg rebellion that almost turned into a full-scale civil war after hundreds were

killed on both sides. Not wishing to fight a guerrilla war, the government negotiated with the Tuaregs, giving in to their demands for increased government spending and greater regional autonomy. We pass through the rock formations with no incidents. For the moment, there is peace in Mali.

* * *

Last night we bathed in the light of the full moon. Pulling into Bemba at 2 a.m., I was surprised to see almost 100 people waiting at the port. The whole town was shining. Although it might be easy to have one town follow another without differences, each has a unique character: Segou, Kemashina, Djafatabé, Acca, Niafouké, Tanka, Diré, Kabara, Tombouctou, Manjokoi, Rharous, Temera, Gao. Some offer huge Sudanese mosques, others planted trees, some have pastoralists moving goats and cows from one green grass patch to the next. Fishermen

pull in nets from small *pirogues*. Farmers stand waist-deep in water in emerald-green rice fields. Huge slabs of salt are transported by camel caravans from quarries hundreds of miles away. Turbaned men look regal with *grands boubous* flowing in the wind. Men and women chew on Neem-tree toothbrush sticks. Horses graze at the water's edge. Children wave and scream exuberantly from tiny, sand-filled villages. This river is a narrow strip of life meandering through the harsh, dry Sahel.

Day 9: Gao

At 6 a.m. we walk down the gangplank of the *Kankou Moussa* for the last time. Our river voyage has ended, and now we must face the dry, dusty desert away from water. This is a daunting prospect. Reluctantly, I place my feet on the sandy shore and move toward the soft morning colors of the rising sun..... □

"I like my shoes dirty. It gives me the feeling that I've been somewhere."

— J. Fields, my husband, explaining why he doesn't want his shoes shined after a 1,300-kilometer voyage on the Niger River.

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