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In Dogon Country

by Veena Gokhale

Trying to find a cab in Ottawa one the day after a snowstorm is pure hell. We are in some suspense on December 12, 2000, as to whether we will catch our Swiss Air Montreal-Paris flight, which would allow us to proceed, on Air Afrique, to our real destination - Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. (Ouagadougou is the capital of Burkina Faso - a, small landlocked West African country.) Luckily, Ottawa Transit comes to our rescue, and we manage to get the bus to Montreal airport in time.

We are going to Ouaga (pronounced Waga) and from there to Dogon country, in neighbouring Mali. The first "culture shock" is Ouaga airport, which comprises of a couple of small, low buildings, reminiscent of a modest-sized Indian train station. The other noticeable aspect, as our hosts drive us home, is the low voltage lighting in shops and houses, the absence of street lights on smaller streets, and of paved roads!

Ouaga has a small town feel. Though there are some multi-stored buildings downtown, much of the city consists of dusty lanes flanked by one-stored, buildings - either a family home or small business. There are very few large, interconnecting, paved roads. There are no hoardings. The poorer houses are made from banco, a mixture of mud and water, often fortified with straw. Typically, people have to repair their homes every other year, before the beginning of the rainy season, in May.

The first clear, blue sky we see in this *harmattan* season is on our 8th day in Ouaga, as we are leaving for Mali, by road. (Harmattan is the hot, dry wind that flows in from the Sahara desert). We are going on a pre-arranged, conducted tour. At our disposal are a four-wheel drive jeep and a driver - a man named Louis.

The landscape displays every shade of brown and ochre under the sun. Dust is a permanent companion; keeping surfaces dust free for more than a couple of hours, well nigh impossible. Dust coats the trees and plants, so that they appear a dull green. At 35 C, with not a drop of moisture in the air, it is almost unbearably dry. Breathing feels different here; it takes some time to acclimatize.

We pass many small villages with the increasingly familiar clusters of huts and granaries, sometimes with a small, unpretentious church or mosque. The most striking elements are the Baobab trees that loom large from a distance, looking like creatures from another planet. In African folklore, the baobab was among the first trees to appear on the land. As other trees were created, the baobab became envious and started complaining. The gods became angry at the tree and pulled it up by its roots, then replanted it upside-down to keep it quiet.

Baobab trees are widespread in East Africa, and are easy to recognize because of their huge, bottle shaped trunk, which store large amounts of water. Despite its soft, pithy wood, this is one of the longest living trees on earth. Most of the trees with trunk diameters of 17 feet are around 1,000 years old, and the very large specimens may be 3,000 years old. Baobabs provide a home for nocturnal animals. Because of the activity around a baobab at night, many Africans believe it is home to spirits.

As we approach the Burkina Mali border, we see camels and camel riders. The camels here are white, unlike the sandy coloured ones I'm used to, in India. The ground also turns sandier. The camels left alone have their front feet loosely tied together to keep them from escaping. We see some colourful birds, easy to spot against the ochre landscape. As we enter Mali, we see cows, as the Dogon, the ethnic group that forms the majority here, herd them. Goats are much more common, as they can handle the hardy conditions better. We also see donkeys being used as beasts of burden.

So arid a land supports a surprising number of trees - mango, shea (that yields shea butter) some thorny trees and bushes, the baobab. It certainly makes one admire their tenacity even as one salutes the persistence of the people who manage to make a life in such an inhospitable seeming environment, at least to the foreign eye.

Soon after we cross over into Mali, we start seeing beautiful banco mosques, distinguished by their pointed spires. We are headed for Dogon country, literally *le pays Dogon* in French. Surprisingly well known for a tribal people, the Dogon are industrious farmers who coax the parched soil to grow a number of crops, among them onion and a grain called mil. The latter is their cash crop, the former provides year round sustenance. They have a sophisticated cosmology centered on one god - Amma. Many Dogon names therefore have that prefix. Our Dogon guide, whom we meet later, is called Amassagou.

Dogon arts and crafts, their rituals and masked dances are world famous. Part of their fame results from the fact that they have opened their homes to visitors. A trek through the escarpment, where the Dogon live, is popular among visitors to Mali, particularly among the French and European tourists.

As we drive on, we pass through villages predominantly populated by the Dogon. The landscape gets more arid and soon we are in a white, bleached "savanna" with long grasses and few trees, till, at last, we spy the 100 km long escarpment - the wild, rocky, and wonderful heart of Dogon country. As we approach, we can just about make out the outlines of huts, nestled into the cliff side, that form the many villages that dot the escarpment. The ochre-brown of the banco provides a camouflage of sorts against the similar-coloured rock.

Our hardy jeep climbs a broad dirt road, with stretches that have been paved, that winds up the escarpment, providing stunning views of the plains. Suddenly, we are at a patch of jade green fields that dazzle and shock the eye, given the prolonged exposure to the typical parched landscape of Burkina and Mali.

These are at the onion fields of Sanga, a cluster of Dogon villages, which the French occupied in 1893, establishing dominion here in 1920. A little later, a French anthropologist named Marcel Griaule came here to study Dogon traditions, the guidebook tells me. He helped the Dogon build dams nearby, one reason they can grow onion here, and brought some respectability to the complex Dogon culture, long dismissed by Muslim and Christian invaders as "primitive."

We spend the night at a rather "posh" hotel, by Malian standards, watching the gardener watering flowerbeds with some dismay. Water is precious here; drought and famine has been predicted for May 2001, unless the government releases large stocks of subsidized grain.

The same evening we are introduced to Amassagou, our tireless and animated guide, a village chief, and a well-informed man. We take a turn around Sanga just before dusk. This is the most commercialized village we will visit, the most exposed to the outside world. Little boys walk beside us offering drawings of Dogon masks they have drawn in their copybooks, for a price. We are hounded for money, sweets, pens, during our walk.

I arouse more curiosity and questions, particularly in Dogon country, compared to my partner - Marc-Antoine - who is white. Brown skin is an oddity here; most people are jet black, a few very white. South Asians are absent and I am therefore "exotic." There are times when the curiosity, particularly that of the children, verges on harassment. At first feel uncomfortable, though I understand why this is happening. As time passes I get used to it.

Our days in Dogon country soon take on a pleasing rhythm. We set out after breakfast to traverse the flat, rocky, sun beaten top of the escarpment, descending through steep, stone edged paths, into villages, clinging tenaciously to the cliff face. If we have spent the night at a village at a lower level, we ascend, the next morning to a village higher up. We see people going about their business, men weaving cloth or baskets, women pounding mil with a wooden

mortar, in twos, or walking with loads on their heads to the market in another village or working the village water pump.

Most villages we visit have a craft display at the centre, the goods not necessarily made in the same village. On sale are indigo cloth, all kinds of wooden sculptures - a recurrent theme being a couple with a child or baby - jewelry, elaborately carved wooden doors and windows, ingenious wooden locks, masks, and some copper sculptures. Sometimes we visit a person's home, and are offered mil beer.

We spend one night in a tent, in the outskirts of a village, watching a beautiful, mellow sun, set over the sand dunes, as the soil is more desert-like here. At dusk the cows and goats return home, women cluster around the village hand pump filling their buckets and washing clothes and boys light bonfires. We have our bonfire too. A bonfire out in the desert in this rustic environment feels very familiar and comforting. Perhaps it rekindles an ancient, ancestral memory deeply embedded in the human psyche.

We spend another night camping outdoors, in the tent, on the terrace of a small restaurant, in the same village. Here we see men sitting out in the open, listening to a local radio station. Though most Dogons follow a traditional way of life, they are not untouched by modernity. Nor do they lack education or knowledge of the outside world. This is truer for the men than the women. More men speak French; many women speak only the Dogon tongue.

Our guide tells us that marriages used to be arranged by families when the offspring were just children. Today there's more choice. There is also divorce.

On the second evening, we hear distant drumming and singing. Marc-Antoine asks our guide to take us to see it. The hut turns out to be surprisingly near. The low-lit conditions here have thrown off my space perception. The first night, at our hotel in Sanga, the generator is switched off at midnight and the dark, lush night seems to invade our small room. The fear of the dark, which I hardly ever experienced as a child, the fear of the unfamiliar, this dark

primeval emotion that I had completely lost touch with, in my city living, surges through me. We leave the door open allowing for more air to circulate. Later, at another hotel in another city, a tourist wordlessly gives us a tea light. I am touched by the simple kindness, realising that my fear cannot be rationalised and wished away, only held at bay.

Inside the hut is a drummer playing a square, tuneful drum. Six girls stand in a semi circle swaying and singing. A young man is seated, at the table with a single lantern that illuminates the room, following their words in a hymnbook. The women sing well, with passion and skill. They are preparing for the upcoming Xmas eve choir. Modern-day Dogons identify as Muslim or Christian, but also practice their pre-colonial religious rituals. The only familiar word the women speak is "hallelujah." We leave with a sense that we have witnessed something simple and profoundly beautiful.

I am struck again by the communality of Dogon life. Most of the work we have seen happens in the village square, in a collective space, with people working together. Work in the fields again is very collective. The long greeting that people exchange when they meet asks after the person's health, that of the family, the wives or wife, children, the father, the mother, pays a salute to "hard work under the sun", ending with a thank you. Clearly the women do a disproportionate amount of the work as we never see them resting or lounging about as we see the men from time to time.

We celebrate Christmas Eve in Sangha. The hotel lays out a feast in the decorated dining table - a long table laden with a cornucopia of fruit, various salads, carved meats and desserts. One of the employees is dressed as Santa - a black Santa! The soup served is of course onion - a lovely, light broth.

On our return route to Burkina, we pass through Bandiagara, a Dogon town down in the plains where we are to halt overnight. We hear that there is a 5-day, Dogon festival taking place a few kilometers away and embark on a bumpy ride to get there. The festival is located outside

a school building where some of the men are changing into the "tall masks" and robes that make up their costume. There are also 2 masked dancers on stilts. While the circular dance by the masked men slowly unfolds, the women dance in their own circle.

The women are mostly dressed in black robes, with headdresses, elaborate braids and colourful bead jewelry. They move around in a circle, and one woman dancer at a time leaps energetically from one end of the circle to the other, touching her feet while they are in midair with her hands. They pull us in and lend us some jewelry and scarves, insisting that we dance as well.

When we leave, we are thankful for this last, wonderful celebration that has brought our unforgettable visit to Dogon country to a satisfying closure.