- 9 -

TENTS, TUAREGS AND TEA

The house in Bourg had been the incubator for several ministries into French speaking Africa, notably Niger and Burkina Faso. Pioneer teams were beginning in both of these nations with the goal of reaching out to the unreached peoples who included the nomadic Tuareg and Fulani tribes.

I felt strongly that I should recruit a small team of French people who could go to these two countries to pray and support the ongoing outreach. We managed to get together a team of seven folks (including myself) and we began to meet to prepare the journey. Cheap flights from Paris to Ouagadougou were booked on the infamous 'Le Point' airline (no longer in existence) and visas obtained from the Burkina Faso Embassy. We were aiming to get our Niger visas on the ground in Africa.

The big day came and we crowded into a packed plane. Hours later we looked down at Ouagadougou (the capital of Burkina Faso) airport. The artificial environment of air-conditioned cabins was brutally shattered as we stepped out into the blisteringly hot African runways to make our way through Customs. Bags and cases were unceremoniously loaded off the plane and strewn in a heap to be grabbed by their owners. Porters jostled and almost came to blows for the lucrative possibility of carrying a case or two while hundreds of hands, ranging from those of genuine beggars to opportunistic children, rained in like hungry birds hoping to catch a crumb of charity from the new arrivals - hot, aggressive bedlam! Bags were opened and slowly searched and visas were scrutinised with excessive care. The minutes became hours before everyone finally squeezed out into the animated car park to be greeted by a chorus of eager taxi drivers and another battalion of hungry hands.

As it was my first ever trip to black Africa, I was feeling a bit lost and looking to find refuge in the form of our red-headed, white-faced man on the ground, Tim Morris. He had pioneered the setting up of an outreach base in West Africa (Burkina Faso and Niger) two years previously. I looked as hard as I could but the faces around me were distinctly dark and the crinkled black hair light years away from Tim's Celtic locks.

"There's no-one here to meet us!"

I thought.

I had no plan B, and no idea of where to go in Ouagadougou. The others in the team were exchanging nervous glances as they were also coming to realise that we were on our own.

We made our way to a patch of scrub, made ourselves comfortable and, in spite of the bustling bodies around us, began to pray and ask God to lead us.

Within half an hour a red Peugeot pickup rolled up with Tim and company on board. We all piled in the back and made our way towards a Bible School in the town of Koudougou situated on the outskirts of the city. Darkness set in and we made our journey amidst a chorus of night noises ranging from the croaking of frogs to the shrill cries of numerous animals. The excitement and energy of discovery and adventure mingled with the exhaustion of our bodies as we found a floor at the Bible School, unravelled our sleeping bags and sank into the sweet oblivion of sleep - a first night under African skies.

Awaking early the next day, Africa invaded our senses and captivated our hearts - colours, smiles, smells, abundant overwhelming nature, enthusiasm, strength and dignity.

The Bible School was run by the Assemblies of God church which was experiencing much dynamic growth in the south of the country. They had partnered with the Horizons team to launch 'Project Javelin' which involved two army trucks filled with African evangelists and the *'Jesus Film'* travelling to the unreached Muslim villages of the north of the country. On arrival they would contact the village chief and elders and ask permission to show the film at night and run an evangelistic outreach throughout the day.

Permission granted, the team would then set up the projection equipment (screening the film onto the side of a lorry) using a generator for power. The whole village would turn out for the film and testimonies followed by prayer for the sick. The African evangelists on the project were also in training and willing to serve as pastors for any new churches started.

After a first run of the project, it was estimated that over a thousand from Muslim/Animist backgrounds had accepted the Lord and that several pioneer churches had been planted.

We benefited from the good reputation the team had established and were very warmly welcomed. A wonderful man called Philippe Ouadrago and his wife Josephine showed us around the complex as well as giving us some valuable insights and teaching on African life and culture. Tim also shared about the work he was doing and their heart to reach out further to the Tuareg and Fulani tribes. We spent much time learning about the vision and the African church and praying into the future.

Sunday morning was a fantastic experience as we split into three groups to attend the different church services.

Much is said concerning the poverty of Africa but little is said about its richness. Seeing thousands of smartly dressed folks, bible in hand, thronging enthusiastically to church to offer worship to God is a deep challenge to our Western decadence. Little children, the holy light of innocence reflected on their faces, lift their hands in praise or dance enthusiastically to the worshipful drumbeats. Hours pass in worship and word and yet boredom and disinterest is not to be seen in this precious young generation - the true hope for Africa.

The shallowness of the instant satisfaction - via screen or sound bite, offered by the rich materialistic West, pales in comparison to the deep contentment and Godly glow which rests on Africa's vulnerability. We have everything in the West… and lack the essential.

I felt embarrassed to be asked to speak in church, feeling I was very much the learner, but gave in under pressure and preached my first clumsy sermon in Africa. Little could I guess how the future would open up thousands more such opportunities.

As the days passed our hearts became knitted to this land-locked land in French speaking Africa. Today we have multi-national teams in several parts of the land, notably in Gorom-Gorom and Markoye where the prayer for the Tuareg and Fulani peoples has been more than answered by pioneers working amongst these peoples. Some of our folk, totally identified with the local inhabitants in language, life and culture, have translated the scriptures into the Tuareg's Tamachek language. I praise God for the small part our prayers had in laying a foundation for this ongoing ministry.

The time came for us to travel on to Niamey, the capital of Niger. This involved a long journey in the faithful Peugeot pick up. Tim had pioneered the work in Muslim Niger. He had courageously launched out on his own and his first team was himself and two others. They had practically nothing to start with and Tim told me how, unlike most missionaries who arrive with some sort of vehicle, he had walked the dusty streets of Niamey under the heat , carrying his furniture , beds and mattresses as he set up the first team house. We were grateful for the recent acquisition of the Peugeot truck which facilitated our travels as we headed for the team house in Niamey.

Border crossings are never easy in Africa and the border between Burkina Faso and Niger on the road from Ouagadougou to Niamey was no exception. We arrived mid-afternoon but ended up camping overnight under the stars as the paper work and visa issue took longer than expected. Armed soldiers patrolled both sides of the border.

The next morning we finally managed to cross and found ourselves at the Niger border just as the flag raising ceremony was going on. Flag raising is an important issue in many African nations proud of their identity and independence from past colonial powers. We needed to stop our vehicle and stand to dutiful attention while the national colours of Niger were lifted up to the sky. Unfortunately one guy in our team had the habit of keeping his hands in his pockets and the soldiers saw this as an affront to their flag. Several of them shouted crossly and raised their rifles with menace in the direction of my absent minded friend. He was lost in his own world and didn't realise that the soldiers were shouting at him and he began to look around for what could be causing the problem, his hands still faithfully locked into his pockets. The soldiers thought he was disobeying them on purpose and became more and more agitated with one even gently squeezing the trigger of his gun.

"Get your hands out of your pockets!"

we shouted over to him.

He finally understood and went pale as he saw the rifles raised in his direction. His hands rapidly left his pockets and he put on his politest and most respectful look as he saluted the flag. The soldiers made sure he spent a long time standing in respect and we managed to apologise and convince them that it had simply been a misunderstanding. They let us travel on and we were pleased to leave the volatile situation behind us wondering how many deaths and skirmishes in Africa might have had their roots in simple misunderstandings. It would surely be a shame to die for simply having your hands in your pockets !

The journey was breathtakingly beautiful and we followed some of the Niger river watching fisherman in their dug out canoes gracefully reeling in succulent fresh water fish. We were grateful to arrive at the team house where we settled in and began to pray for the land of Niger and the next phase of our journey.

We got involved in some low key outreach and visiting in Niamey itself. A number of nomadic Tuareg people had brought their tents to the outskirts and shanty towns of the city where they had set up camp. It was the Muslim festival of 'Tabaski' which involved the killing of a lamb. We were invited to an evening celebration. A magnificent Tuareg man, dressed in his turban and richly dyed cloaks, warmly took me by the hand and walked with me. My Western culture was deeply embarrassed by the hand holding, quite normal in the Arab culture, and it was just one of the many cultural lessons I needed to learn. The Tuareg men sang and danced their traditional dances. A number of them spoke French so we were able to share with them how we also honoured the killing of a lamb. The Lamb of God, Jesus Christ – a greater Son of Abraham than Isaac or Ishmael, who had shed his blood on the cross as a redemptive sacrifice for the sin of mankind.

We were also invited into their tents to share in the drinking of their strong green tea. Each habitual gesture is measured elegance as sugar and leaves are poured into an artistic tea-pot. Hot water boiled over a charcoal fire is then poured over it all.

The pot is then skilfully lifted high and the sweet tea poured artistically into several glasses. It is said that the tea gives the Tuareg the endurance needed to live in the deserts

The Tuareg are traditionally Muslim and only a handful have come to know Jesus as their Saviour. We were particularly fortunate to have a young Tuareg man on the team with us. He was linked to Tim's team and was quietly developing his faith. It was encouraging to hear his testimony and listen to his prayers in his tamachek language.

We felt hat it would be good to travel up to Agadez to pray and support a French local Mission work which was established there. The team had created strong links with this work ever since breaking down in their vicinity while on a missions trip which crossed the Sahara.

The journey was long and dusty as we travelled on the desert roads meeting a variety of characters and scenery. We had our share of punctures and engine problems in

the heat but, thanks to a gifted French mechanic who was on our team, we managed to keep the vehicle going.

Agadez greeted us with its sights and sounds. One of its more famous sights is an ancient mud-built mosque supported with wooden beams, and its sounds range from the many tongues of nomadic peoples who meet at this strategic desert crossroads to the braying of donkeys as they pull their carts through the bustle of busy streets.

The French mission base welcomed us with traditional French flair and good food! This work had been pioneered by a dear friend called Claude Moser. He told me how he had built up the base from practically nothing risking life, limb and family to see a school and church established. He shared how the local snake-charmers of the town had sent their poisonous snakes after him one market day. Instead of giving into fear at seeing theses hideous reptiles sliding in his direction he commanded them to stop in the name of Jesus and they turned around in an instant and ended up chasing the snake-charmers themselves who had to flee!

We were able to share in the local church and get involved in visiting various folks in the town. Mandy – an English lady on Tim's team had been building links with a nomadic Tuareg clan in this area and she invited us to join her on a visit. This was an amazing trip which led us into the heart of the bush and scrub. In the middle of nowhere a wonderful leather Tuareg tent stood. The tents looked much more noble here than in the shanty towns which received them in their migration to the city.

The extended Tuareg family warmly welcomed us and pressed us to stay the night and eat with them. They specifically chose a young goat from their flock to slaughter later that evening. During the day a few of us got together to put on a 'drama' to communicate the death and resurrection of Christ. We were able to perform this before the whole clan, many of whom responded very warmly. Others sang and gave their testimonies as well as they could with the limited translation skills available.

Later that night the bleating goat was led away to have its throat slit. The blood soaked into the sand, and it was then skinned and boiled in a huge pot. For my Western eyes used to seeing meat coming neatly packaged in plastic from Tesco's it was all a bit too real! We then sat down to a wonderful meal together under the generous desert heaven.

As the night wore on the Tuaregs silently slipped into the big tent leaving us to sleep around the fire in our sleeping bags. However, there was a sudden thunderclap, clouds filled the night sky and it began to pour down with torrential rain.

Everyone scrambled for the tent to find a place of refuge. It was a real squash and a number of us were pleasantly surprised when we found an unused space strangely free of bodies. I quickly unrolled my sleeping bag and stretched out under the shelter of the tent enjoying my new-found territory. I couldn't help noticing however the smile on a number of the Tuareg men's faces. Later on however I realise why the space was free. I woke up with a goat weeing on me! Several other goats had installed themselves around

me and I realised that I was sleeping in the animals quarter! My sleeping bag has never been the same since! The rain was still gushing down outside but I was confronted with a more noxious liquid drowning my romantic dreams of tent life with the Tuaregs!

The next day we had the dubious privilege of living through a sand storm before finally making our way back to base at Agadez.

One of the French missionaries had pioneered a work amongst the Fulani and we were able to join him in one of his visits to a camp. The Fulani are nomadic cattle herders and we were able to spend two nights with them listening to their traditional stories and sharing our own testimonies. Again the nights were eventful times as poisonous scorpions regularly found their way into our shoes!

The work in Western Africa has since flourished and it is most encouraging to see a whole new generation of Brazilian missionaries from our mission now linking with the growing work amongst the Tuareg and Fulani in Agadez, Niger, and Gorom Gorom, Burkina Faso. Our little French expedition came to an end as we journeyed back to Ouagadougou airport and boarded the plane homewards but we were encouraged to know that our prayers and contacts would continue on. Our eyes had been challenged by the visions of beauty Africa provided but also by the poverty and insecurity. Our news media back home are often very quick to report on some new catastrophe or war hitting the continent. However as we winged our way back to France a proverb learned from the lips of a simple cattle herder who drew on the wealth of Africa's collective wisdom, came back to my mind.

> "L'arbre tombe à grands bruits,
> Mais personne n'entend la forêt qui pousse…"

> "The tree falls with a big crash,
> But no one hears the forest that grows…"

I silently prayed that we may have sown some small seed to help the future growth of a nation.