

Lesson 1 Fact sheet Setting the scene of the series of lessons and the aim of the grant.

WORKING TITLE: Mud and Magic in Mali: The sand-diggers of the River Niger and the mud masons of Djenné

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SECTION 1: SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Location: The expedition took place in Mali, West Africa. I began my journey in the capital Bamako, before heading out to Koulikouro, about an hour north. Then on into the desert to Djenné, an eight hour drive through the savannah. Djenné is on the southern edge of the Sahara desert – the next town along is Timbuktu.

Summary of documentary: North of Bamako, amid the treacherous currents of the River Niger, groups of men work beneath the hot sun to dredge sand from the river. They are gaunt and tired; they work in hazardous conditions for small amounts of money. Sand has become an increasingly valuable commodity here. The reason? There is a building boom in Mali at the moment as Malians in Bamako replace mud houses – which simply crumble during the rainy season – with concrete housing.

I followed the trail of the great River Niger and its sand, from the bottom of the river through the mud villages on its banks to the brave new world of Bamako, where concrete rules and “city-slickers” reside in new concrete housing. I wanted to find out how this urbanisation process is affecting Mali's century-old traditions? Its mud architecture, its traditional skill-base, its population and their livelihoods, even its environment – as people digging sand desecrate the banks of the river.

Through interviews with villagers, mud masons and traditional fishermen; sand diggers, concrete builders and Bamako city dwellers, we see the drama unfold; traditional versus modern, those seeking to keep the old ways alive, versus those chasing a new dawn of Africa.

Diary extracts from the trip relevant to the resource:

Week one:

“I arrived in Bamako last Sunday at 03.30 am with terrible flu and a fever. Vaguely shocked at the heat (pushing 32 degrees even at that time in the morning – imagine that with a temperature...!), I collapsed beneath my mosquito net and woke up dreaming of ice cubes. It's around 39 degrees here at midday, and since Mali's completely land-locked, there's no sea breeze to cool it down. When the wind blows through the car window it's like a thousand hairdryers blowing at you, full whack, with an extra helping of red dust just to make you cough.

It has been an unusual week. Various activities have included nearly getting arrested in the visa office; turning 35 in a mud town in the Savannah; riding a variety of decrepid wooden fishing boats across the Niger (I know, I know, I read the risk assessment, but guys, what can you do... :); getting relationship advice from a sand fisherman, sand diggers and a host of other wise Africans; discovering why pert-breasted mermaids are a particular asset of Malian folklore; acquiring a Malian

name (Jane-aba Jerre) and nearly acquiring a Malian husband (donkey cart rider); finding a Calvin Klein-esque supermodel in the form of a gravel diver; causing a rumpus by giving my goggles to the sand diggers. Also, finding unbridled hilarity amongst the female sand-diggers. On the boat ride back, one buxom lady was laughing so much, she fell out of the boat. It took three of us to hoist her back in...

In Koulikouro I found biblical scenes. There is one spot on the banks of the river where thousands of sand-diggers work to collect sand and gravel from the river bed. I can only describe it as resembling something out of ancient Egypt. And not just because the river Niger, flat and broad and glittering in the morning or evening light, could be the Nile.

Men, women, children and babies are everywhere, rushing about industriously, shovelling sand, bent double in pools of water, tending donkeys, digging, sweating. There is chattering (in Bambara), shouting, hammering; the sound of metal spade against earth, the sound of a man whacking his donkeys as they strain to pull the cart full of sand out of the mud...

Girls (who can't be much more than age 12 or 13) scoop sand from the water into buckets, then lift the buckets onto their heads and walk slowly up the bank. Teenage boys carry huge sieves of sand, two by two, to other men who shovel it into piles. Muscular men, their skin shiny with heat and sweat and water, shovel great loads of sand into bigger and bigger mounds. Women, their *boubous* hitched up around their waists, bend at the waist and shake sand through smaller sieves – as we might sieve flour for a Victoria sponge cake. Everywhere there are big mounds of sand, many of them topped with a sandcastle made with a child's bucket to mark that they are finished. On top of one of them, a woman in a brightly coloured headscarf breastfeeds a baby. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the pyramids might rise from these mounds, so strange and exotic is this scene.

Meanwhile, on the water, hundreds of wooden *pirogues* punt up and down, each one manned by a crew of five or six men. The light is so bright that all I can see against the white hot African sky is the thin black curve of the canoes, low on the water, and the thin black figures of the men, balancing up and down as they push on the punting poles. More boats are clustered at the bank, their punting poles stuck in the mud, poking upwards. I have not yet seen a crocodile – nor a hippo – but I live in hope of seeing the local river demon, *bafaro*...

The adventure goes on. I leave for Segou on Tuesday. I am gradually getting used to heat, although obsessed with iced drinks, ice cubes and icy baths (not available, but I dream of them...)."

SECTION 2: BIOGRAPHY AND INSPIRATION

I'm a freelance journalist, age 34, and have been writing about Africa and travel / development topics for eight years. I read English and French at Jesus College, Oxford and from there worked on a range of magazines and newspapers to get experience. I didn't train as a journalist – simply made my way with the power of my pen (or something like that)! Writing and making radio is a passion – as is finding out people's stories and telling them in a compelling way. People fascinate me. Covering stories of people doing amazing things in a very small way is very satisfying – being able to present their world and how it relates to the wider context.

I travelled to Mali while a student living in Dakar, up north in Senegal, on the middle year of my French degree. I set out with my friend Laura, the daughter of the English Ambassador in Senegal. We trekked out to Djenné, which back then wasn't a dangerous place – this was pre 9/11 and, being students, we didn't even consider that it might be unsafe. However, I managed to eat a dodgy yoghurt in the bus station in Bamako and by the time I arrived in the mud town, I was very ill with dysentery. I lay there on a roof top for a week, and nearly died. Laura got me back but I had always been rankled by the fact that I didn't get to understand the town properly – or explore the huge, mysterious mud mosque in its centre.

Passionate? Africa has a raw energy that draws me back every time. Travelling and working out there is tough on many levels – the environment is often hostile, the heat, dust; practical stuff is difficult; negotiating interviews, transport and general stuff takes hours and hours and can be complicated; communications are often dire, with no internet or phone connection (although mobile coverage now is widespread, which makes things a lot easier). If you lose something, you're stuffed. I scoured Bamako for half a day looking for a new camera battery – eventually I found one, but only after some guys in an electronics stall in the middle of the Grande Marché had gone off on their motorbikes, looking for one! However, I guess to an extent this is exactly the challenge – when you get the story it is original and comes from the heart. To get to know a group of sand-diggers in the middle of Mali, to be invited into their homes and welcomed as a friend, is pretty special.

Life in Mali is tough. It was particularly hot in March when I went – 40 degrees and upwards every day – and even the Malians were complaining. It means you can often only think about the heat – you become entirely preoccupied with how hot you are, how much water you need to drink, how hot you are... It can be difficult to keep going in these conditions. I was also ill for the first week of the trip – I had terrible flu and simply had to keep going. I was advised by Amadou that I needed to take a preparation of crushed lizards for my cold!

Sometimes I felt frustrated; Amadou was a typical Malian man, knew what he thought was right and wasn't used to a woman telling him what to do! We had a few battles about the timetable and what and how we should be doing things. I also managed to acquire an entourage wherever I went – so Amadou brought along his cousin on the trip to Koulikouro and out to Djenne. In Djenné I was having to feed the guide and his family as well as Amadou and Haroun (his cousin). It is a very African way – everyone benefits a little and I guess you just have to accept this.

I got so much out of it personally. Courage. Determination. Being in these places helps you put things in perspective, and makes you realise that we are so privileged and lucky to simply be born in England with all that comes with that. I think it teaches anyone that education is so valuable – these people would kill for even a hint of what we take for granted every day. I also obviously learnt a lot about making a radio documentary – this was my first one and I would do many things differently next time! But it gave me the confidence to think, I can do this – and I am now planning another radio piece on a story in Senegal, and one out in Thailand.

SECTION 3: WIDER THEMES

How is anywhere supposed to make its way out of poverty when the older generation still believes in black magic? A community living in mud houses that leak during the rainy season. People who rush to rebuild their houses before the rains come because the mud will crumble otherwise. A constant process of building, rebuilding and rebuilding. As much as this town is romantic and pleasing to the eye, all made of mud, the colour of the earth, I'm not sure that living in mud houses will ever move this place into the modern age. I see a collision of Mali's traditions with the necessary requirements of modern life. By preserving Djenne it is asking its people not to progress with the rest of the country.

The older generation wants its children living in mud houses. But adequate housing. Adequate plumbing. Only these can move Mali into a future of health, education and prosperity. Banco is cheap to make and by using it, Djenne is essentially self-sufficient. It doesn't need expensive deliveries of concrete to maintain its houses. Water is supplied from the well. There is scant electricity supply and a non-existent sewerage system. But how do I install electricity sockets in a mud building. So how do my children study at night? Hawa and her son both said they would like to live in a concrete house. How much is a mud house worth after all? It can just crumble to dust if it's left alone. Like the little pig who built his house out of sand...

It is a complicated place. I have seen boys here queuing in the street for food, holding out their bowls like in *Oliver Twist*. But the thing I find hard to get my head around is that those boys are always fed. Their parents have sent them here to Koran school and as part of that they must beg for their food – it is a service that benefits the community and makes them good Muslims. I see abject poverty here – yet Djenne is a richer town than most. Its farmers and fishermen make a living. With tourism bringing money to the town, people have an alternate source of income. Yet all I see is kids in dirty rags and women asking me for money with a desperate look in their eyes. To a large extent we as tourists have caused this. Amadou told me this morning that one American handed out a 5000 CFA note for every portrait he took. He may have ruined this town for a decade with such behaviour.

Even back in Bamako, the masons place enchantments on the foundations of the concrete houses they build. In Mali's capital city, the rituals of the older generation live on amidst the new roads, the social housing and the brand new bridge, the bright young things zooming around on motorbikes and the brand new, booming ACI district with its fancy hotels and business buildings.

The new generation strides forward. Malians dream of owning motorbikes, laptops, mobile phones – and it's happening. A social housing system set up in 1995 allows a select few to apply for new subsidised homes. Young people study and get good jobs. They want concrete houses with backyards and televisions and wifi. Fishermen want boats with electric motors. Sand diggers want to raise capital, run shops and be entrepreneurs. Mali is a country in flux as young people flock to the city for work. Yet they want to preserve their heritage. It surprises me that most still say mud houses are better – cooler in the heat. They may not believe in magic but they believe places like Djenne must be preserved at all costs.

And then there is the mosque and the Aga Khan foundation who are stopping the traditional, annual crepissage – and doing it themselves. This is the other side of the coin. Getting rid of this tradition seems to go against the policy of the authorities that makes everyone live in mud houses.

SECTION 4: KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through my interviews I wanted to bring out the collision of old and new in this ancient town where life been the same for centuries.

Do, for example, kids in Djenné feel the same as kids, say, in remote Cornwall? We tend to see places like Djenné only in vague, clichéd terms – but what do the people there know and think about the wider world, and what does the mosque mean to them?

How is Mali reconciling the differences between the older generation and the new – as young people strive for education and possessions – scooters, concrete houses – and the old generation swear that mud houses are better and the traditional way should stay?

SECTION 5: FIELDWORK SUGGESTIONS

1. I guess this is the whole problem with Djenné – the whole mud town is in a constant process of building and rebuilding their homes because nothing stands up to the rainy season. This is the dilemma that faces Mali really – while people out in the villages live in mud houses and swear that these are better, people in Bamako are building in concrete, with washing machines and televisions. How can the new generation of children progress when electricity and light is limited by living in a mud house?
2. The Malians swear that mud houses are cooler in the heat than concrete houses – they much prefer them, particularly the older generation. Perhaps you could test this somehow by an experiment comparing the two materials? You could test for other properties too – does it affect breathing etc?