

Mali revisited ...

'Where camels are better than cars'

Sarah Snyder

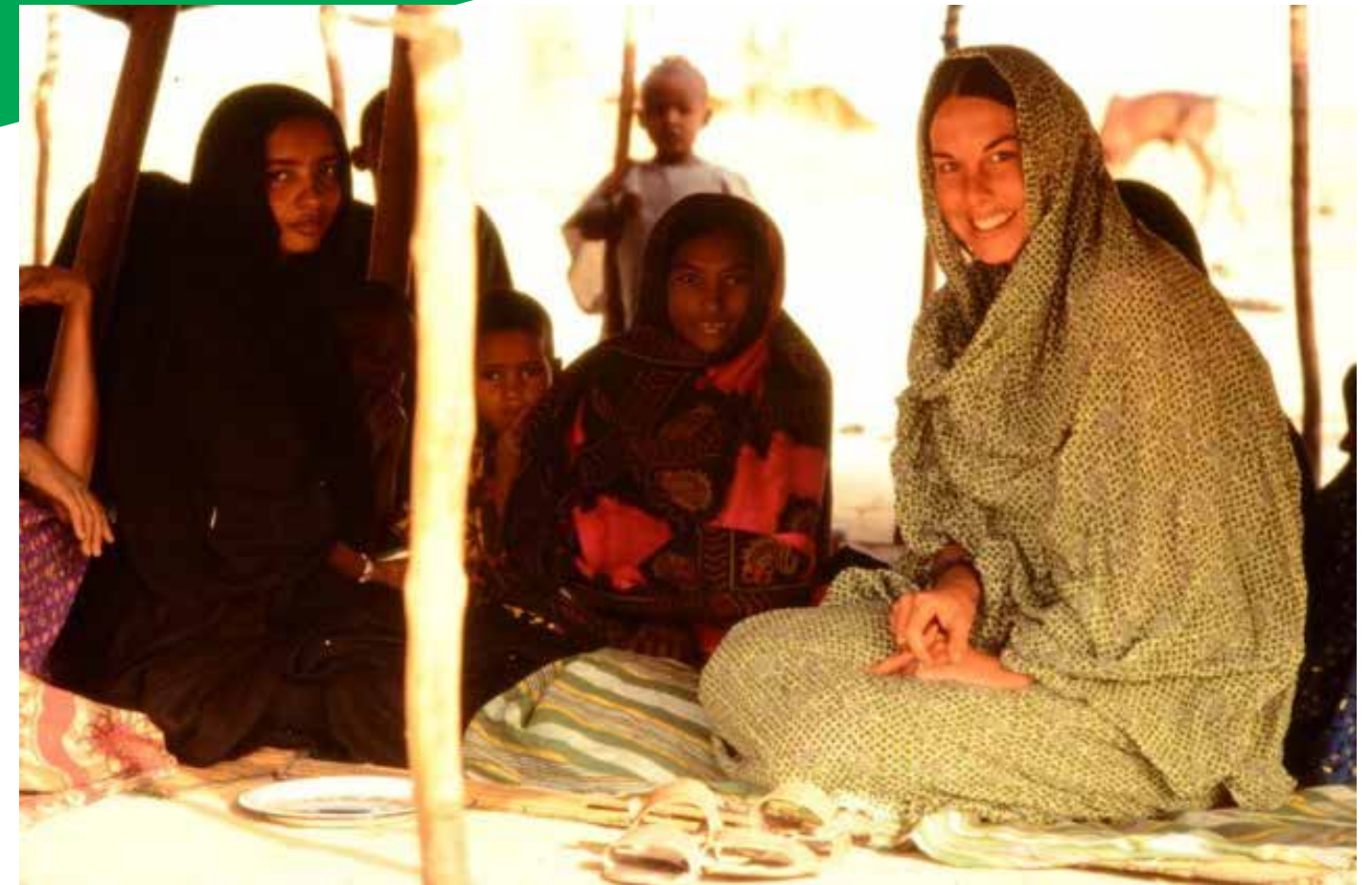
Challenges in Mali and Britain

Living and travelling with the Tuareg nomads in the Sahara isn't exactly everyone's first year of marriage, but that's what John, my husband, and I did in 1989-90. It was not long after Live Aid, when British televisions showed pictures of starving Africans with begging bowls, waiting for our generous donations to relieve their hunger. A story of white helps black, in which white hold the keys to change, the power, and black was, at best, a passive recipient.

This could not have been further from the truth in Mali. Located in The Sahel, whilst environmentally fragile, it is home to vibrant, multi-cultural societies which have much to teach us, including qualities many of us have lost – time, respect, loyalty, resilience, entrepreneurship, story-telling, care for the elderly, to name a few.

We wanted to demonstrate the many gifts Africa has to offer the world, including multi-cultural living, laughter and living so closely attuned to the natural world in a very fragile environment. We focused on the market place in the village of Doentza, about 500 miles west of Bamako, Mali's capital. It was a gathering point for many different people, exemplifying the way in which different economic lifestyles co-exist in vital ways, trading fish for grain, fruit and veg for meat and milk, and so on.

There were, of course, underbellies to this euphoric description. The Tuareg keep slaves, a separate ethnic group called the Bella. After many years of living together, the Bella are now integrated within society, supposedly free to leave, but choosing not to. Yet chores are clearly delineated – Tuareg women do very few menial tasks – and there is



no inter-marriage between the two groups. Local flare ups between pastoralists and agriculturalists, whilst rare at that time, were violent, and medical clinics few and far between. Incidences of baby and child mortality were high, and we witnessed the tragedy of 'unnecessary' young deaths from, for example, diarrhoea-related sickness.

We lived with four of the groups co-existing in the Doentza market and surrounding desert:

- ◆ Dogon farmers,
- ◆ Bozo fishermen,
- ◆ Tuareg pastoralists,
- ◆ Songhai horticulturalists.

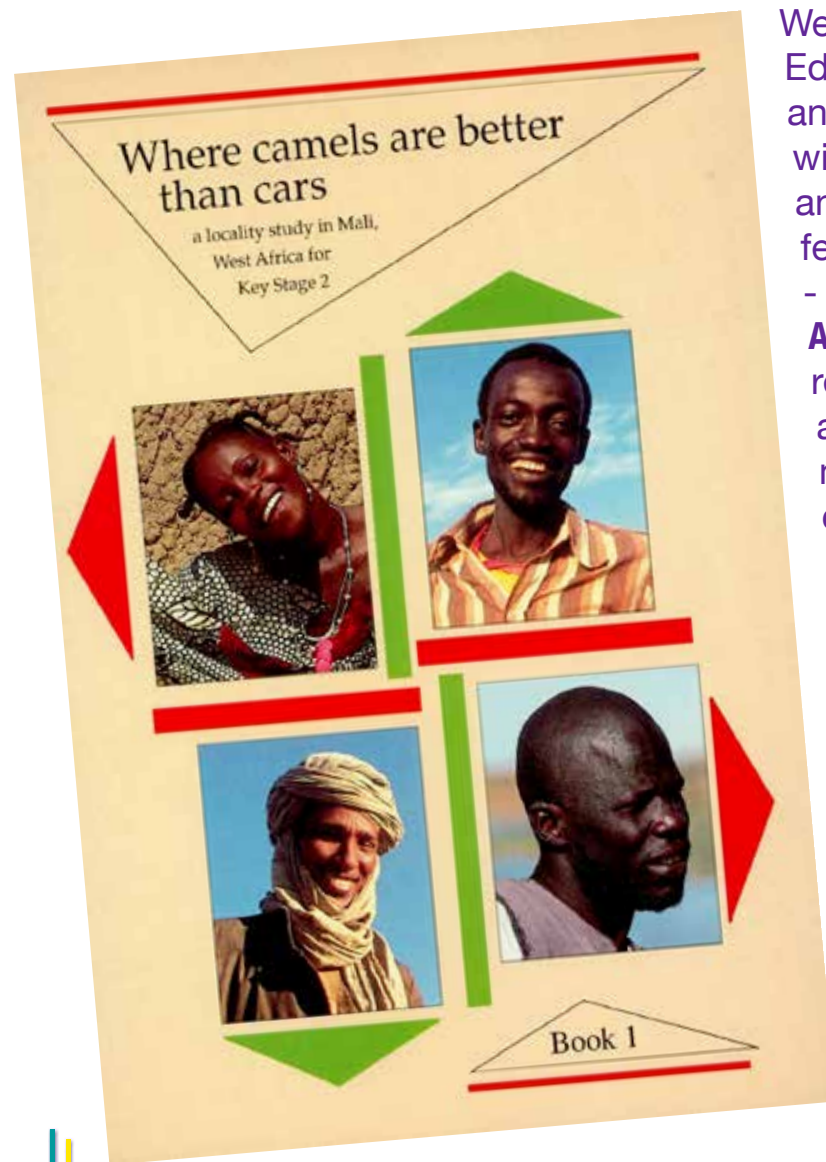
We experienced the symbiosis of their multi-cultural, "multi-economic" lifestyle. On our return from Mali, we wanted to capture that and share it.



Sarah Snyder is Founding Director Rose Castle Foundation and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Special Adviser for Reconciliation.

She reflects on challenges from her experiences in Mali as an anthropologist, working with DEC and how that connects to what she is doing now.





We approached the Development Education Centre in Birmingham and ended up setting up a project with a group of teachers to produce an educational resource pack. It featured the lives of four people - **Fatime (Songhrai), Moktar (Dogon), Amadou (Bozo) and El Malud (Tuareg)** - representing four diverse ethnicities and economies. They met in the market place – noisy, crowded centres in which relationships mattered more than transactions, though the latter enabled a functioning economy where everyone has a part to play. The ‘car park’ was for camels and donkeys, not vehicles. In fact the only cars in the region were owned by international NGOs, Toyota land cruisers that frequently broke down and waited weeks for new parts to arrive. Hence the pack title: **‘Where camels are better than cars’.**

Both Books 1 & 2 and the photographs are available to review or download

We hoped to introduce positive images and stories of diversity and coexistence to the classroom, and to engage young people in the real colourful stories of individuals living in a part of the world that might otherwise seem very remote, very challenging and very different to their own.

Today - my challenges lie in two, overlapping areas.

Firstly - I lead the [Rose Castle Foundation](#) which is committed to equipping the next generation and their teachers to cross the divides within their spheres of influence, and **understand ways to disagree more healthily.**

We are not teaching unnecessary compromise, but rather a recognition that respecting our differences is part and parcel of living and working well together. We need to find ways of working shoulder to shoulder rather than back to back.

Much of the work I do now emanates from that experience in Mali.

We witnessed first hand the religious dimension of life in that part of the world, in which one’s ideology permeates every aspect of life.

It is not just a private affair on a Sunday (or Friday or any other day) like here in the UK. We also witnessed the symbiotic nature of living in a fragile environment, in which one group’s productivity can support another’s in very mutual ways.

We recognised and hugely valued the very different lenses through which we experienced life there.

For example, the way in which the Tuareg have 100 different names for grains of sand, and the humour of the women as they observe and sometimes ridicule the behaviour of their menfolk. They are a matrilineal society, so the women have, for example, a significant hereditary role.

