



Asmae - Association Sœur Emmanuelle
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MALI: Log book of Valérie Robin, site volunteer at Easter

Recently established in Mali, Asmae organised at Easter its first solidarity site with the AMALDEME, an association for the fight against mental retardation. The aim was to participate in changing the way the country views this handicap. Valérie, one of three volunteers on this site, takes us step by step through her Malian adventure.

Bamako: part one, initial discoveries

Mamadou and Seydou are at the airport to greet us and are in charge of looking after us and ensuring the mission's success. Their enthusiasm and joy in welcoming us made us immediately comfortable. It was with genuine emotion that we finally discovered the Centre. It was 11:00 p.m., so Mamadou showed us our room and brought us a tray covered with rice and grilled chicken, with no utensils. He wished us good night and left us, slightly perplexed, before this enormous platter which we ineptly dove into with our respective right hands (very important)...

(Editor's note: In Islam, the left hand is impure).

First meeting with the children

The next morning, we awoke at dawn. It was 7:00 a.m. and already the temperature was around 30°C... After a quick breakfast, we left to meet the team and the children.

Souleymane, the director of the AMALDEME, served as our guide. The centre consists of a school with "normal" children and a specialised school for mentally retarded children, some of whom were integrated into ordinary classes.

The "special" classes have fewer children. The children are placed around round tables or sit on woven mats. Some games lie here and there on the ground. There are no drawings on the walls, as here paper and pencils are rare commodities...



At each of our arrivals at a class, we were greeted with joyous shouts of "Good morning, Sir, Good morning, Ma'am" yelled proudly by children with a cheeky, happy look in their eyes.

A few days of tourism: Ségou, Djenné and the Dogon country

Mopti is 600 km from Bamako. We left a few days before the children to prepare the camp and discover the region.

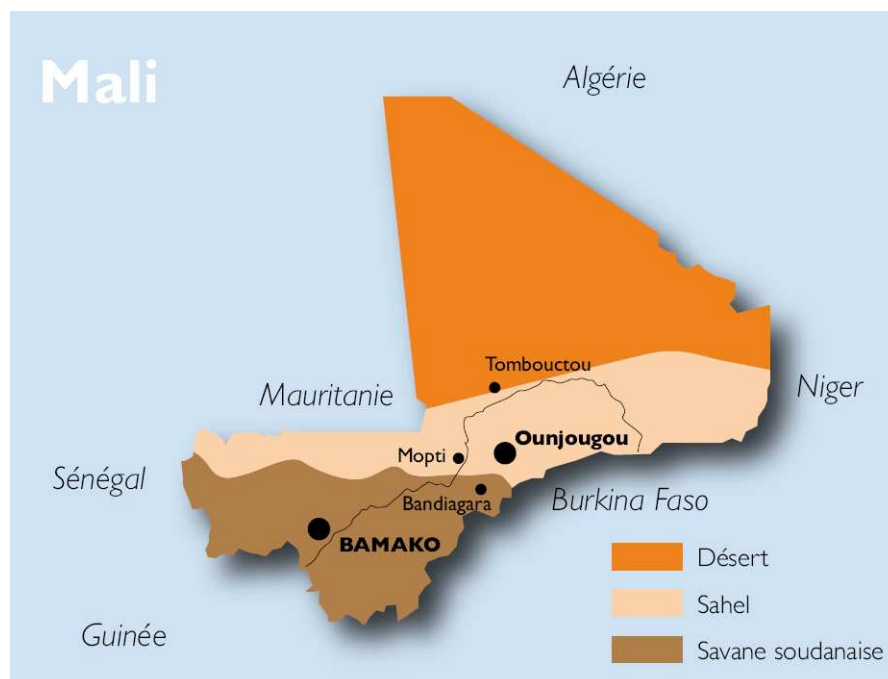
After a stop in Ségou, we decided to visit Djenné, a city famous for its incomparable architecture. We jumped into a bush taxi, a unique experience that must be lived: seven of us squashed in a Peugeot station wagon with no starter or headlamps. We prayed for the car not to stall and that we arrive before nightfall. After two hours of intense internal tension, we finally arrived safe and sound. Djenné is magnificent and we savoured the moment.

You cannot talk about Mali without mentioning the Dogon country. This time it was in a 4x4 that we ventured on the rutted roads that would lead us toward Sangha, the mythical Dogon village at the foot of the cliffs. Here, words do not do justice to this beauty from another age...

Things get serious

We finally arrived at our end destination: Mopti.

AMALDEME's building is made up of four blocks of concrete... empty, with no water, no bedding, and no electricity! Before our perplexed faces, Mamadou and Seydou reassured us with big smiles: "This is no problem! It'll be fine!" In a matter of hours, the mats were purchased, the wood for heating delivered, the power hooked up, and the sole water tap repaired! All that was missing was the children.



Called the Venice of Mali, Mopti is located on banks of the Niger river. The city is a large fishing port, and we felt its heart beat to the rhythm of the comings and goings of boats tirelessly loading and unloading their merchandise.

Ani Sogoma! (Hello in Bambara)

Nothing but smiles and radiant faces. For all the children, going away to camp was a first! Seventy children, two-thirds of whom were mentally retarded, swept into the dormitories and happily settled in. The less autonomous among them were helped by the more resourceful, quite naturally, without the slightest hesitation. Here there was no question of leaving someone else in need or in an awkward situation. The well being of others was EVERYONE'S concern... What a nice lesson!

Varied activities to enliven the camp

We rose to the rhythm of the djembe drum at 6:00 a.m., and breakfast was preceded by waking up our muscles: stretching exercises, a race around the stadium and collective games. During the morning, the children took part in educational activities and tutoring. They also wrote the camp's newspaper. After lunch and a nap (indispensable when it is 40°C in the shade!), we resume the activities: educational games, craft activities and tourist outings. We organized in turn singing, board games, a treasure hunt, origami and painting workshops and outings to visit a museum and a Dogon village. The late afternoon was devoted to sports, most often football for the boys and walks in the village for the girls. Each night, the evening was organized around stories, dancing and singing. After putting the children to bed, we participated in the assessment with the teachers to give our opinions and choose the next day's activities.

Accommodating mentally retarded children

The aims of the camp are to build awareness within the community (parents, children, local authorities) and to be an original political tool for encouraging reflection on new measures for including handicapped children in the country's educational system.

In light of what we were able to experience each day with these children, the challenge has been taken up: opening ceremony with the regional officials, radio broadcasts including not only teachers but also retarded children, an outing together with all the children of the town, a parents' visit to the camp...

We could note a real change in the behaviour of some children: according to the teachers, a true metamorphosis was taking place in these children before their eyes, both on their level of language and degree of autonomy. How can you not be amazed at the courage of little Ibrahim, a Down's Syndrome child who cannot talk, who, proudly standing squarely on his two little legs, decided to do a solo dance demonstration to the beat of the djembe drum?

The end of an adventure... but the beginning of another!

10 April: already three weeks had gone by. The children sensed that we were getting ready to leave and were joined to us at the hip. We too felt a pang in our hearts.

Here our voyage came to an end. In our bags we had many souvenirs, but the most important was imprinted in our hearts: a country of a thousand colours and a thousand different facets.

So as not to leave it at that, we decided to organize a concert. All the earnings would go towards repairing the minibus of the AMALDEME in Mopti so as to be able to go pick up retarded children who are otherwise deprived of all activities. This event is expected to take place in June. To be continued....



The morning of our departure we were up at 5:00 a.m. to take the bus to Bamako. How surprised we were to see all the children and teachers up, their eyes full of sleep and tears to wish us a last good-bye!

Assessment of three intense weeks

In conclusion, after this great adventure, I want to say that handicaps, poverty and all forms of marginality are not inevitabilities, here, in Africa or elsewhere. They are only the reflection of what we care to think about the value of others and their place in the history of humanity. "Because the sole duty of Man is to go and meet the Other". (Albert Jacquard)

Valérie Robin