

ELHADJI KOUMAMA BUILDS A SHOP IN NIAMEY

In the July newsletter I reported that because of the instability in Agadez resulting from the rebellion Elhadji and his family fled to Niamey. There will be no tourists in Agadez this winter and nobody can predict when calm will return to northern Niger. Because of the situation Elhadji is building a small shop in Niamey where he can display his jewelry and also have a place for the silversmiths to work. This is the only way he can stay in contact with his European customers. The shop is in Chateau 1, an area where there are many embassies, headquarters for NGOs and government buildings. He is hoping to increase sales to people who work in the offices there and to connect with ethnic arts and jewelry buyers.



Elhadji's shop in Niamey.

As is typical of most buildings in Niger the shop is constructed of

mud bricks. The walls of his shop are covered with a thin layer of concrete. This is not always done because it is expensive, but it helps to keep the building from collapsing during the rains. Unlike western construction electricity will be one of the last things installed. The electrician will chisel a channel in the mud for the wiring, place the wires and then cover them with more mud. Many shops and houses only have a single florescent tube. I am working with Elhadji on lighting and display ideas to show the beauty of the jewelry. Larry has volunteered to have some of his wonderful photos enlarged and framed to decorate the walls.

CROSS-CULTURAL SUCCESS STORY IN THE VILLAGE OF INABISQUIN

Sometimes people ask me "Just what do you do in Niger for months at a time?" One of my favorite things is to ride with my friend Homidou on his motorbike to the village of Inabisquin, a nomadic "settlement" 14 kilometers south of Agadez on the road to the ancient capital of Zinder. We ride across the

IN THIS ISSUE

Inquiring Minds Want to Know. . .

What religion do the Tuaregs practice?

...continued from page 1



Homidou

desert rather than on the paved road as Homidou is afraid of the military at the checkpoint. Besides, he can't afford

the 750 CFA toll (about \$1.50) on his meager salary as a desk clerk at the



Caravan at Inabisquin

rundown Hotel Air.

Since the main part of the village is beside an ancient caravan route we often see small caravans loaded with salt from Bilma in the eastern Tenere heading south to Nigeria to trade for millet. There are fragments of dinosaur bones and Neolithic pottery shards in the schoolyard. Animals are brought from great distances to be watered at the wells.

This settlement includes both Peul and Tuaregs, something which is quite unusual. During the winter season the Peul tents are close to the communal garden and the wells. The Tuareg families are spread out over several miles in family compounds. Although he is not from the area Homidou is passionate about improving the lives of these people, a project he promised the Sultan of Agadez he would do. He has convinced them to work together to grow vegetables in a community garden, a tough challenge since both tribes are pastoralists who traditionally distained farming. When I first went there in 2004 they had only a six foot deep unlined well that had gone dry and the plants were dying. With a



Inabisquin Garden

little financial help they deepened the well to make it through that year. By the next year they had moved

the garden a little way, installed a sturdy fence to keep the animals from grazing on the crops and had dug a deep concrete lined well. They still pull up the



Boys at school

water by hand as they don't yet have a "garden donkey." Each tribe has a "president" of the garden, a Tuareg woman and a Peul man. The vegetables provide much needed nutrients for these desperately poor people who otherwise subsist on millet and beans cooked in muddy water drawn from the same wells used to water the cows, goats, sheep and camels.

Homidou is determined to see that the village children get an education. He has talked every tourist and aid organization he could into visiting the village to convince them that they should contribute money to the project. By the fall of 2006 they had a one room mud brick school with a very

...continued from page 2

dedicated full time teacher who lives with his family in what was going to be a granary. Children who live less than 10 kilometers from school live at home. Those that live further away stay in the tents of other families during the week and walk home on Fridays. Friends who traveled with me in 2006 contributed money to buy the teacher a desk and chair, cupboards to store school supplies in and some books and tablets. The whole village turned out to celebrate. Each child got a balloon which was quite a hit after the teacher showed them how to blow them up. The greatest excitement, though, was the delivery of two soccer balls. Nobody had to show them how to play that game!

Because of the rebellion it is difficult to find out what is happening in the village. Although Homidou is struggling to keep his own family fed I'm sure he is making his daily journey to Inabisquin. When I was there in late 2006 the village desperately needed a deep sanitary well near the school, toilets and money to pay for food for the boarding students. Their needs are probably even greater now.

INQUIRING MINDS

WHAT RELIGION DO THE TUAREGS PRACTICE?

Tuaregs converted to Islam in the 16th century. However, their pre-Islamic animistic beliefs are still strong and are blended with the Muslim faith. They believe in the evil eye and djinns, spirits of nature. Most Tuaregs wear amulets containing gris gris to protect themselves from the evil spirits. The marabout (holy man) selects



Malim, our marabout

silver. Some bracelets and rings have a grain of sand inside that tinkles when shaken. This, too, scares away evil spirits.

On Christmas Eve 2005 Larry and I were traveling in the Sahara with Tuareg companions. We took our sleeping bags over a dune away from the camp fire and played Christmas music on

our MP3 player. The following morning we discovered that the Tuaregs had spent a sleepless night as they mistook the faint sound of music for voices of the Djinns. They couldn't be convinced that the place was not haunted and were very quick to pack up and break camp that morning.

a passage from the Koran and copies it on a small piece of paper which is then folded and encased in leather or

If you have an "Inquiring Minds" question that you would like for us to answer in a future newsletter, please send us an email at the address below:

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