

PANOS / SOS SAHEL

— AT THE —
DESERT'S EDGE

ORAL HISTORIES FROM THE SAHEL

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Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker

PREFACE

Obo Koné died in 1991. He was one of the most outspoken and entertaining contributors to *At the Desert's Edge*. Born in 1912 in 'An'bro'ui, Mali, he had seen foreigners come and go and come back again to run development projects, most of which were "an absolute mess". He had, by his own account, been well off. He owned over 100 cattle and for most of the first 60 or so years of his life had enough to feed his family, with grain to spare for his less fortunate neighbours.

He lived in the heart of the Sahel where, although the land is hard to farm and the climate is dry, there was just enough rainfall (350 mm a year or more) to grow rainfed crops and graze animals. He coped with earlier droughts and food shortages, but after the drought of 1984, following a decade of poor rains, he was ruined. "Suddenly the rain lost respect for the old cycle....Today the environment is sick, the soils are poor and hard, and the trees are dead....I believe these changes can be attributed to the fact that we have lost respect for our customs. We have violated old prohibitions to allow room for modernisation and in so doing we have disregarded God's laws."

Everywhere in the world the elderly hold trenchant views about decline and fall. But in the Sahel, where climate change, population growth, and political and economic mismanagement have combined to create one of the toughest inhabited environments in the world, Obo Koné is not exaggerating.

In his youth, there was perhaps just one shirt to share among all the men of the village—borrowed for special occasions including deputations to the colonial authority. There were traditional medicines, but no clinics. It took days to walk to the capital, Bamako; now those with money can arrive in hours. But not all change has been for the best. Today, women take 10 hours to gather fuelwood where it previously took 10 minutes; there are few trees and almost no wild animals. Children go to school, but young people leave the village. The wells are running dry.

Over the last two decades, the annual rains have reached less far north than before. Now, a 150-km swathe of previously fertile land is often too dry to farm. As people leave the drier areas and crowd south on to wetter if still marginal land, new patches of degraded land spread like blight, caused by overgrazing and the expansion of agriculture on to poor soils. This in turn adds to the "albedo" effect—the land, stripped of vegetation,

reflects heat and can inhibit cloud formation; less rain and less soil moisture lead to more loss of vegetative cover and an increase in desertification.

There are plenty of theories about desertification, none of them indisputable. People and animals combine, in ever increasing numbers, to degrade their own environment. But there are larger forces at work. While the causes of climate change are imperfectly understood, it seems possible that the discharge of CO₂ and other pollutants by the industrialised world has contributed to global warming—and the drying of the Sahel. While Obo Koné and his neighbours may cut down too many trees (out of necessity), or graze too many cattle for their own good, they are not responsible for the incremental pollution of the planet—the violation of “God’s laws”.

At the Desert's Edge

The Sahel Oral History Project, which this book summarises, was conceived as a way of enabling Obo Koné, and hundreds of others across Sahelian Africa who had lived through the twentieth century, to inform and enlighten development “experts”. Few in the rural Sahel are literate. What little of their history that exists in print has been recorded by outsiders: priests, colonial officers, anthropologists, and development planners from the ministries or donor agencies.

In 1988, the UK voluntary agency SOS Sahel reviewed its policy towards the elderly. Environmental projects, designed to increase food production through investment in natural resource management, are long-term. Obo Koné would be dead before he could sit under the shade of a newly planted neem tree, or see his children increase their millet production thanks to agroforestry and soil conservation.

Because many of the elderly are frail, they are rarely able to share in the physical activities that underpin conservation and development projects. They are considered marginal to the future; they do not, and apparently cannot, contribute to sustainable development. After systematically interviewing 500 older Sahelians, we can assert with confidence that to be old, in the Sahel, is an achievement, and an achievement well worth recording.

Only the elderly can cast sufficient light to answer the most difficult questions: what was the way of life; what was the land like; how and why has it come to its present pitiful state? And how and why do Sahelian farmers and nomads keep going, in the face of such odds?

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