

Mythical Ménaka

At SNV's request, writer Mariët Meester visited one of the poorest countries in the world, Mali, in West Africa. Here, one of the projects she visited was the Ménaka project where 'Mr. and Mrs Kèss', with other local and Dutch SNV workers, work to improve the position of the Touareg under extreme conditions. This ultimately led to the slim volume **Het mythische Ménaka** (Mythical Ménaka). An interview with Mariët about this unique project.

Why does a novelist write a book entitled 'Het mythische Ménaka' for an organisation like SNV and what was your response to this assignment?

"Last year my publisher, Meulenhoff in Amsterdam, asked me if I'd like to write a short book for SNV. This meant visiting a project in an African country to be decided at a later stage. My report would be published in a large edition and sent to Vice Versa subscribers. 'You have to do it!' said friends when I told them about the assignment. 'You've never been to Africa, this is your chance!'

But I had other ideas. In everything I do, I try always to put my integrity first. What if I encountered a project that I didn't think much of? Money-wasting development workers, wells that would never be used, completely dependent Africans - you hear far more negative than positive tales. And I was expected to produce an enthusiastic book - purely because SNV wanted to make a good impression?

I hadn't decided what to do, but in any case let SNV know that I was interested in nomadic peoples. And might also be interested in a project involving animals.

It wasn't long before I received a phone call. 'What do you think of going to West Africa - to Mali? We're working there with the Touareg, cattle farming nomads living in the area between the Sahara and the Sahel.' 'That sounds interesting,' was my level-headed response - but inside I was overjoyed. The Touareg! The mysterious blue-veiled figures! Desert! And camels!

SNV sent me a number of papers. They seemed to concern an ambitious decentralisation project. I understood that Mali comprises a northern and southern region that more or less form two opposite triangles. The capital, Bamako, is in the south while the Touareg live in the north. They have felt disadvantaged for decades which ultimately led to their revolt some seven years ago. This in turn escalated into a civil war between north and south and with this between red -as the Touareg see their own skin colour - and black. After four years of strife, peace was concluded. President Alpha Oumar Konaré promised that local elections would be held, so that in the future the northern peoples would have more influence over the regions in which they lived. So far, the elections have been continuously postponed, but interim municipal councils were set up to which members are not elected but appointed. Which gives the Touareg in North Mali a degree of power.

As I understood it, what SNV does is support these interim municipal councils. You can of course appoint good council members, but when they don't have a chance to put their decisions into practice, the people aren't going to sit back and take it for long. SNV offers money and expertise, and with this contributes to the stability of the area.

I decided to accept the assignment. My report would be all the more convincing if I took a critical view, otherwise SNV could just as easily have hired an advertising agency. Moreover if I discovered that the wonderful theories fell flat in practice, I could always decide to abandon the book.”

Could you tell us about your journey?

“I flew to Bamako accompanied by my partner, Jaap de Ruig. From there, it was a long car journey to Ménaka in North Mali. You could make the trip in two days but we took three. The landscape became sparser. The last stage was particularly difficult. We drove through a sandy, desolate region. Paved roads had long petered out and the driver had to negotiate a bumpy path full of potholes. The heat was almost unbearable. We didn’t see another living being for hours at a time and no cars at all. Ménaka, a small town with a few thousand inhabitants, was the centre of a region twice the size of Holland but far less densely populated: not even one person per square kilometre. There was no drinking water system, no electricity, no telephone, no public transport, no television, no paper, no café, no advertising. And there’s almost nothing to buy - no fruit or vegetables. The houses are made of clay. Men are veiled - all you see of their faces are their eyes and nose. I thought that the conditions under which the SNV workers live and work were very extreme. In the month of May, temperatures in Ménaka can reach fifty degrees. I was there in September and not a day went by when temperatures dropped below forty. Nights were only a little cooler.”

What were your impressions of the work and lives of the SNV staff in Ménaka?

“I nosed around in all SNV’s affairs in Ménaka for about two weeks. It was too brief to be able to fully understand how things worked but long enough to form an impression. Four interim municipal councils are active in the area around Ménaka. Eighty five percent of their members is illiterate and SNV offers them courses in reading and writing. They meet once a month. I didn’t attend a meeting but I was told that discussions can be heated. Which I wholeheartedly believe. I talked to many Touareg and was constantly surprised about the assertiveness and clarity of the people. One clan leader who led a nomadic life wanted me to tell all I knew about ‘mad cow disease’. He’d heard about it on a small transistor radio and had discussed it in a meeting with other leaders. They wanted to plan a strategy in case the disease should spread to Africa.

I spent several days at the SNV office. Malinese were always in and out to discuss projects they had conceived. Sometimes they were municipal council members, sometimes executive members of local foundations. There were already about eighty projects up and running with SNV supporting implementation. Schools and a hospital had been renovated and a new cattle market was in the pipeline. There were also plans for a women’s house and a professional radio station.

One of the SNV workers was specialised in tribal peoples. In collaboration with the Africa Study Centre, she was conducting an experiment in which a sedentary farmer and a nomadic cattle farmer had each been given then thousand guilders. How these people dealt with their money was tracked from month to month: how they invested it, the problems they faced, how they increased their capital. The results of this research could be important in investigating prospects for the people of this region.

I asked about fifteen Malinese, mainly Touareg, what they thought of SNV. Without exception, they said: 'SNV is the first organisation that asked us what we wanted - SNV listens to us.' There's also a religiously-inspired American organisation in Ménaka - World Vision or Vision Mondiale as it's called in Mali. The European Union is also involved in activities that aren't entirely clear. Over which people were far less positive. Of course, everyone knew I'd been asked to come to Mali by SNV so perhaps people always told me what they thought I wanted to hear. But I also noticed other things that testify to people's great appreciation of SNV: the way in which the Malinese treated the Dutch, the open way in which I was approached. Naturally, I could be mistaken but I had the impression that the psychological effect of SNV's presence was just as important as the effect of various projects."

In the book, you return several times to the black-white antithesis, the large number of SNV staff, the drivers. Did you really have to resort to these clichés?

"It was my first trip to Africa and although I knew in theory how black-white relations are, it was quite an impact to see and experience them in the flesh. I travel quite a lot, and in poor countries in particular, I'm used to getting into a rickety old bus and arriving and going to an equally rickety hotel. Now I was picked up by a black driver in a nice suit in a big expensive car and taken to a comfortable hotel. Given that I'd decided to write just what I saw, I also mentioned these kind of things in the book. I think that any other outsider would have had the same experience. On the last day, we went to an expensive restaurant full of well-to-do whites served by black waiters wearing sandals. Which isn't a harmonious situation really - is it?"

From: Nethwork, SNV, february 1999

Mythical Ménaka has become part of Mariët Meesters collection of travel stories *De verdwaalde nomade*.