

**Mali - Desertification changes nomadic lifestyle in Mali - DW
Desertification Series
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Lead:

When the ground dries out and hills of sand form, life - as we know it - is no longer possible. Desertification, a process in which large sand dunes swallow up the greenery and with it essentially the hopes of farmers living there, has particularly affected the West African country of Mali. Practically two-thirds of the land is desert from the Sahara or adjoining Sahel region. The desert is advancing farther and farther south, slowly but surely. Klaudia Pape was in Northern Mali, an area completely changed by desertification and brought back this report.

Text:

Normally, Elkassim Ag Hade is difficult to rattle - but here, on the edge of Timbuktu, he's stunned - he learned to swim here. For him, it was a paradise:

1. O-Ton Hade

"That's all over. Everything's changed here now. Not only was there water here, but also forests. For example, we're standing right now in an old riverbed, a branch of the Niger river that used to flow through Timbuktu. Traditional sailboats used to sail these waters. As young boys, we used to fish with the fisherman. And the house on the river, with its lovely garden, used to be the most beautiful house in the entire neighborhood. We used to jump the hedges and steal fruits and vegetables, eventually chased away by guards. That used to be my life. Look at this area today - it's appalling."

Crumbling clay buildings stand on one side of the former riverbed, sand and brush on the other, reaching as far as the eye can see.

2. Atmo: Timbuktu

Dawn breaks over Timbuktu. Men in wide robes build wood crates, women balance clay pots on their heads, carrying them to the nearby market, and countless children tag along behind strangers, begging them for money or gifts. The smell of rotting meat mixes with the stench of sewage trickling through dusty alleyways. Sand blows through the streets, creeping into every crack and pore, even baked into the bread. Elkassim has wrapped himself in an indigo-blue robe for protection against the sand, leaving only his eyes uncovered. He points at the large sand dunes outside the city:

3. O-Ton Hade

"The dunes have become a real threat since desertification. I feel like they are moving in to swallow the city whole. It wasn't always like this. The sand dunes used to be a few kilometers away from Timbuktu. There used to be forests here as well, but now it's 100 percent sand dunes."

The Malian government is now feverishly working with its citizens and relief organisations to halt the erosion of the dunes. They plan to build walls against

erosion, plant robust trees, and affix hedges and grass to the dunes to block wind and sand.

It's a race against time: the Sahara is spreading southwards, swallowing up more and more farm and grassland each year. Climate change is also a contributing factor, as it doesn't rain as often or as regular as before. Some farmers aggravate the problem by allowing cattle to graze all over, cutting down too many trees, and pumping out groundwater. It's no wonder, as Mali has always been a harsh land, forcing the people to relentlessly exploit its scarce resources.

This exploitation has severe consequences, however. 1000 years ago, Timbuktu lay surrounded by green countryside; 40 years ago, directly on the Niger River; and today, in the middle of the desert. Every year heaps of sand from the belly of the Sahara press their way into the city, sanding off the once-beautiful facades of the buildings. Timbuktu today is merely an echo of the once-splendid metropole.

4. Atmo: Haidara zitiert aus Manuskript

Librarian Abdelkader Haidara reads from an Arabic manuscript from the 15th century. At that time, Timbuktu was not just a flourishing emporium where caravans from the north swapped salt for gold and slaves from the south. Timbuktu, the most northern city on the mighty Niger River, also used to be the main center for Islamic scholarship. Historian Salem Houdj el Hadj reminisces about his university's former excellent reputation among Muslims:

5. O-Ton el Hadj:

"The students studied mostly theology, but also philosophy, geometry, astronomy, pharmacology, and music. We have a Sudanese phrase for intellectual pursuit that says, 'Salt comes from the north, gold comes from the south, but the treasures of wisdom come only from Timbuktu.'"

UNESCO has borrowed and cataloged only a few of these "treasures." Thousands of precious, ancient manuscripts are said to still be stored somewhere in old chests and storerooms, in constant danger of damage by sun, heat, sand, dust, and poverty.

6. Atmo: Timbuktu

Squalid huts lie on the edge of Timbuktu, among heaps of sand and trash. Here live the poorest of the poor, as Elkassim Ag Hade explains:

7. O-Ton Hade

"It's the Tuaregs, people who've left the desert because of drought. Now they're considered Timbuktu's poor, people who leave their huts each morning to go to their unskilled jobs, where they probably only earn 30 cents a day. They eat only once a day, if at all. They live from day to day!"

Elkassim would never have imagined the proud, nomad Tuareg would ever have to lead such difficult lives. He's a Tuareg himself who has had to more or less settle down. But he's been lucky - he comes from a wealthy family. His father sent him to

school to study. Today Elkassim, strong and full of charming laughter, lives in Timbuktu, working for international organisations. He was born, however, in Tintelout, one of the first real Tuareg villages in the area.

Tintelout is located 20 kilometers away from Timbuktu, in the middle of the desert and surrounded by an enormous clay wall. A yard for camels lies in front of it.

8. Atmo: Kamele

A Tuareg and his camel, laughs Elkassim. At least this relationship has remained relatively unchanged.

9. O-Ton Hade

"A Tuareg and his camel - it's a bit like a love affair. One can't live without the other. For a Tuareg, a camel is everything, it's holy. A Tuareg and his camel live out their lives as friends."

Apart from that, almost everything else has changed, Elkassim explains:

10. O-Ton Hade

"In Tamaschek, the language of the Tuareg, Tintelout is called the 'Cow Elephant City.' Now there's only desert, but elephants, lions, and antelope once lived here. All kinds of wildlife imaginable used to live here."

Water and forests were also a part of Timbuktu, until a great drought hit the city in 1973 and changed everything.

11. O-Ton Hade

"Since the drought, it's been like a climatic earthquake in the area. The entire ecosystem has disappeared. For the entire year between 1972 and 1973, we didn't see one drop of rain. All the animals migrated away and all of a sudden we were left with just sand. The people have changed as well; some have gone crazy. I know a man who used to have cattle, sheep, and camels, but not one animal stayed after the drought. It's no surprise he went crazy."

Some go crazy, some arrive at refugee camps weak and half dying of thirst. And there are many, as Elkassim quietly explains, who don't survive at all:

12. O-Ton Hade

"There were many corpses lying around during the drought. I saw them with my own eyes. I still see them when I close my eyes: skeletons, the eyes of dying children. I still see them."

It's calm and hot in Tintelout. The desert wind Harmattan blows around the small clay buildings, a few women and children sit in the shades of their huts and prepare an afternoon meal. Most of the 1000 residents of Tintelout are either still out with their herds or at work in the fields nearby.

The Tuareg, proud nomads with their hearts and souls, have had to adapt. They used to wander through the region with their herds of cattle, always following water paths. But today, as they can no longer count on water sources and adequate rain seasons, many of them have settled down, at least partly, like Ousmane Ag Habi:

13. O-Ton Habi

"It was a big change for us. All of a sudden we had to live our lives differently, which wasn't easy for us. But after awhile we got used to it. Besides, we had no other choice. Now we'll carry on like this. Nomadic life isn't the same as it once was anyway."

Still, as Ousmane admits, every Tuareg longs for nomadic life in the desert, so they opt to live a compromise: one part rancher, breeding only a few cattle, and one part farmer. They divide their time between the desert and the city, as their children now regularly attend school.

14. Atmo: Schule

Learning French at school is also new for the Tuareg children. Soon, the theme of desertification will be added to the curriculum:

15. O-Ton Abdoulaye

"I'm going to bring tree seedlings to school soon and give one to each child. It will be their responsibility to plant and care for them. We live, after all, in the desert, and this will help us fight desertification. If all 68 children in the class plant trees, it won't stop desertification completely, but it'll at least slow it down."

As teacher Alassane Abdoulaye adamantly points out, environmental awareness can never be taught at too young an age - the same goes for French.

16. Atmo: Lied

The Tuareg - learning French, planting trees, and tending fields.

The German GTZ, or Association for Technological Cooperation, has helped nomads and others in northern Mali live in the changed climate, mainly by providing water pumps. The pumps eliminate a dependency on rain seasons. The nomads can then grow rice, wheat, and vegetables along the Niger for their own use year-round.

17. Atmo: Motor-Wasserpumpe

Henner Papendiek from the GTZ would very much like to strengthen irrigation farming along the river:

18. O-Ton Papendiek

"I think the Niger is Mali's only chance. The river is a gift from god. We're busy creating a large belt of green through irrigation, planting, and reforestation. Northern Mali could become a flourishing landscape because of the river. Mali could learn to use the river banks productively, blooming like areas along the Nile river."

Mali is a long way from reaching that goal, but in many areas of the country, life is once again possible, despite over-worked fields and desertification. The people have learned to utilize the flood plains of the Niger, to protect their fields from erosion, to improve soil fertility, to ration the scarce firewood, to plant trees and secure the dunes. The Malian government and communities have also passed new regulations: for example, trees may no longer be cut down without reason, and herds of cattle may only be led along specific paths.

Elkassim finds the changes all well and good, but he's not so sure they provide a long-term solution:

19. O-Ton Hade

"I think a solution must ultimately be a global one. If we can control the dunes 400 to 500 kilometers into the desert, if we can get anything to grow there, if our European partners would provide aircraft so we could artificially water these plants way out in the desert, then maybe we'd be able to see some improvement. Otherwise I fear we'll never see a light at the end of the tunnel."

20. Musik: Ali Farka Toure

Evening falls over Timbuktu, sending a red light over the golden-yellow wall surrounding the city. Families sit in sandy alleys in front of their huts, chatting and laughing, some playing music together. And Elkassim is getting ready to head north.

21. O-Ton Hade

"As soon as I'm done for the day, I head out to the desert. I mean, I live in Timbuktu, I've settled down there, but not in my soul. I'm still a Tuareg at heart, a nomad with a love for the desert. I can't live without it. The desert is a threat, but it's also beautiful!"

22. Musik: Ali Farka Toure

23. O-Ton Hade

"You sit atop the dunes, around a campfire, under the stars. And poof! All your stress and problems melt away. Those are magical moments, moments you only find in the desert."

24. Musik: Ali Farka Toure