

# **SORCERERS AND ORANGE PEEL**

**By Ian Mathie**

## **PART 1 – SOUTH WEST MALI**

### **1 - Breakdown**

IT WASN'T A ROCK that ripped the sump out of my Land Rover and brought me to a sudden, lurching halt in a gush of hot oil vapour and smoke, but it was just as hard. Oil from the engine spurted onto the hot exhaust, filling the cab with choking fumes as I slammed the gear into neutral, flung open the door and leapt from my seat. I expected the old vehicle to burst into flames at any moment. Time slipped into slow motion. The cloud of oily blue smoke took an age to disperse, drifting away on a barely discernible current of hot afternoon air. The engine began clicking as it cooled.

Standing ten yards away, gulping in clean air, I stared at the scene in despair. Across the silence of the bush the mournful call of a hoopoe echoed, offering an eerie requiem for my defunct vehicle. I looked around, trying to locate the source of its call, but the bird was as elusive as a dream. I began to wonder if, in the moments of drama, I had imagined it, until it called again.

The previous evening while I was heading towards Sankarani there had been no track for the last hour and I had driven through flat virgin bush. On this side of the river, the country was undulating parkland with a few flat-topped acacia trees standing about thirty feet tall. Scattered across the land were patches of short yellowing grass and numerous glossy leaved bushes that looked like laurels. The Peuhl people of the region

called them *shinga'a*. There were other bushes too, with stubby hardwood skeletons and occasional clumps of thorn scrub. These scratched and screeched along the sides of the Land Rover as I passed between them. It may have been an old vehicle but it was good for the terrain, with large wheels, a powerful six-cylinder engine and four-wheel drive that would pull it out of most difficult spots. Now, however, it was stranded, the front lifting as though it was trying to rear up and do a wheelie. The scene stood frozen in time in an alien landscape, devoid of the trappings of civilisation. In fact, apart from the scrub and the trees with a few gaily coloured birds flitting between them, the land appeared empty.

Yesterday, after passing the last village near the Guinea border, my companion and I had driven for two hours and covered at least twenty-five miles before we reached the Sankarani River, a dark turbid canal fifty feet wide flowing northeast. There we camped by the water and cooked a large fruit rat he had caught for our supper, before settling down to sleep. I awoke this morning to find my guide had gone, melting away before dawn. He had left behind a twisted twig, pointing like a finger post, to show me the direction I must take, leading me onwards into south-west Mali.

Now I was in a wilderness of empty countryside that featured as a blank space on my map. Through this land trickled myriad small watercourses and seasonal channels. These made up the headwaters of the mighty River Niger. It wasn't called that here, of course; it was known as Joliba in the Manding language spoken hereabouts. The name changes many times along the river's four thousand kilometre length as it flows through the territories of different racial and cultural groups, finally to emerge into the Bight of Benin through a vast delta in south-eastern Nigeria. Before that it passes through rich alluvial plains, an inland swampy delta, open desert, rolling savannah, parkland and the remains of once-dense tropical forests. Here, near the source, it was merely a series of trickles and gullies snaking their way northwards out of the eastern Guinea hills.

To the south lay the thorny waste of the Guinea forest, and beyond that Sierra Leone and Liberia, the land of Devils. All three countries were the homes of powerful secret sects, where heavy magic is practised, their territories still barely explored. Few outsiders went there; only a few bold missionaries had ventured in since the late nineteenth century. Those brave souls left behind little to show they had been there and the land remained largely closed to the rest of the world until extensive diamond deposits were discovered in Sierra Leone in the late 1960s. Those became the spark

which triggered a vicious civil war between 1991 and 2002 with unequalled barbarism when the Liberian dictator, Charles Taylor, sought to intervene and take over the Tonga region.

The most prominent westerner to have visited was Graham Green who began in Sierra Leone and walked 450 miles through the thorny forests of Liberia in 1935 accompanied by his cousin Barbara. He wrote about it in his book *Journey Without Maps*. Even travelling on foot, he learned very little about the country or its people and virtually nothing about their secretive cultures.

To the north of me was the sparsely populated region of south-western Mali, beyond which lay the cultivated lands where the burgeoning River Niger brought life to the dark interior. It was a region unknown to the outside world until a young Scottish doctor ventured there more than a hundred and fifty years ago. His name was Mungo Park and he came to search for the River Niger. Since then, as there were no readily exploitable natural resources, nobody seemed inclined to come and do anything constructive here. Even the colonising French had largely ignored it.

AS I STOOD LOOKING at my broken vehicle, the hoopoe called again. Its haunting 'hoo-poo-poo' refrain was insistent, beckoning. I turned slowly, scanning the bushes, trying to locate the source of its call but seeing nothing. The call came again and then, as I turned my head towards where I thought it came from, I caught a brief pink flash in the edge of my vision. It was the bird taking flight, floating floppily from one bush to another.

It called again, asking me to go to it and I took the first step towards where that fleeting image had been. Again it called and again I glimpsed it float from its perch to another bush. The first step was followed by another and then another as I followed it onwards.

"This is ridiculous," I said aloud after walking a few yards. "I've heard all the tales about *sokago* and now here I am in thrall to it myself. It's only a bird, and I have a bust sump to mend."

I stopped and turned back.

In doing so, my eyes swept the surrounding bush and I became aware of a small hut, half hidden by bushes and a clump of elephant grass, only a few yards further on.

Had the hoopoe been leading me towards the hut? The idea seemed absurd and yet completely logical. After all, this bird is known to lead onwards those who are searching. But it doesn't normally lead them towards any worthwhile destination. That's what *sokago* is all about. It's called the wandering sickness. People who suffer from *sokago* experience an overbearing compulsion to answer the call, travelling ever on towards a destination they cannot define, yet feeling drawn forwards by the most powerful force. The hoopoe, that mysterious deceiver of the bush, is merely the hypnotic bait to entice the wanderer onward.

Well, there was no harm in having a look at the hut, I supposed. It was only a few yards further. As I walked towards it, I saw the hoopoe settle on the rough thatched roof. It cocked its crested head and looked at me as if to say, "You made the right decision." It stayed there as I approached and only when I scraped my shin on a branch sticking out from a gnarled bush was my reverie broken. I looked down to see where I was walking.

As I reached the hut, I was surprised to see the bird was still on the roof. These are normally shy, secretive birds and I was puzzled: why had it permitted me to get so close in the open like this? It wasn't normal.

It must have decided its task was fulfilled. Opening its wings, it displayed a curve of beautiful black and pink bars as it swooped from the roof and its floppy, casual flight carried it away into the scrub.

The hut was a crude structure, a framework of sticks to which dried sorghum stalks had been bound with grass string to form thin rudimentary walls. The roof had once been well thatched but now appeared badly in need of repair. The hut seemed too dilapidated to be in use but had an air about it that suggested otherwise. Although the ash was cold, a strong smell of smoke told me the fireplace outside the door had held hot coals quite recently. Even so, the place was silent and looked deserted as I made a circuit of the outside.

Coming round to the door, I heard a rustling sound from within, followed by what sounded like a cough. As I moved toward the open doorway, I noticed a crude fetish tied to one of the uprights and paused on the threshold. Without an invitation from its owner, one does not casually enter any hut protected in this way. Nevertheless, I was curious.

The cough came again so I clapped my hands to announce my presence and leaned forward to peer inside, calling out a soft greeting. It was not as dark inside as I expected. Bright bars of sunlight streamed through the rough walls illuminating a heap of dirty rags beside an old man who sat huddled in a foetal position, his arms wrapped around his shins. His head had sunk onto his knees and his eyes were closed. Only the movement of a single finger, flicking languidly at his foot to chase away a pestering fly, showed he was alive.

Again there was a cough. It emanated from the bundle of rags. I realised there was someone else in the hut, almost completely hidden from view. As I stepped forwards to get a better look, the old man slowly raised his head and gazed at me with tired, faded eyes. He appeared unsurprised by my appearance, showed no alarm at finding a stranger entering his hut uninvited, and merely watched as I reached forward to investigate the coughing bundle of rags.

It crossed my mind that he must be one of the oldest people I had encountered in this part of West Africa, where life expectancy in the villages was seldom more than about forty years for men. This man was well into his seventies, possibly older. His skin was like dark wrinkled parchment that had been folded and unfolded many times, leaving indelible creases. Faded by the years, it was now dusty and cracked, more grey than brown, like tired milk chocolate that has been kept in the fridge improperly sealed. His hands, callused from decades of hard work, had fat knuckles where arthritis had swollen the joints; his feet were encrusted with hard cracked skin, suggesting he had never worn shoes of any sort. His hair, such as remained, was silver and wispy, its once-tight curls now looser and wrapping the back of his skull like a scruffy friar's tonsure. He wore only a faded blue shirt, several sizes too big for him, which barely concealed his emaciated frame within.

*"Lafia bela,"* I said as I entered, hoping he understood my greeting.

He gave a slight lift of his head, indicating his recognition of the greeting and acceptance that I meant no harm, but otherwise offered no response.

I moved forward to look more closely at the pile of rags, from which more coughing was coming. Lifting a fold of the cloth, I saw an old woman's head. Her eyes were closed and she lay on her side. When she coughed again a bubble of spittle formed on her lips, grew and then burst. The pile of rags covering her shivered slightly as her body beneath shuddered from the fit and then became still once more.

Reaching down, I felt the woman's neck for a pulse and found her skin was burning hot. Her pulse was weak and fluttering. It was obvious she had a raging fever. I wondered how long she had been like this. I turned back to the man and held his wrist. His pulse was steady and slow but his skin also felt hotter than it should have been. He too had the fever but it was not as bad as the woman's. Had it already passed the worst or was his only in the early stages?

Either way, I couldn't just walk out and leave them like this. I knew my Land Rover wasn't going anywhere until I had done some extensive repairs, and that would take time. These people needed help now and that need would not wait.

I had pulled a water bottle with me from the Land Rover as I jumped clear. Now I unscrewed the cap and tipped a little water into its cup. Propping the old woman up, I held it to her lips and was pleased when she sucked the liquid into her mouth. I refilled the small cup and gave her more before turning to offer some to the old man.

As I turned from the old woman, I realised there was someone else present. It must have been a subtle shift in the light that made me look toward the doorway. What I saw made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I felt my skin prickle. Every nerve in my body went to red alert as I realised the figure in the doorway was a large spotted hyena. Its head was thrust forward aggressively, eyes fixed on me, its jaws open as it snarled, saliva dripping from its curled lips.

I froze.

My mind froze.

Africa is full of surprises, some of them a little frightening, but I'd never met anything like this. Of course I'd seen hyenas before, some at quite close quarters, but this was entirely different. I was trapped in this cage of rough sticks, completely unarmed, with this monster blocking the only exit. Terror does not begin to describe the emotions that coursed through me at that moment.

The hyena must have been as shocked as I was. It stared at me. I stared back. All the folklore I had ever heard said one should never look an animal like this straight in the eye. It's too much of a challenge and invites attack. But I was trapped; we'd already made eye contact and I couldn't drag my eyes away to look anywhere else.

I stared at those evil eyes and the hyena stared back, a low rumble building in its throat. Time stood still, the two of us locked in this mind-numbing stasis. The old man sat watching through rheumy eyes blurred by fever.

An eruption of coughing from the bundle of rags beside me broke the thrall and drew my eyes downwards to the old woman. I laid my hand on her shoulder, feeling the shuddering of her feeble muscles, wracked by spasms as she coughed. Slowly she became limp again as the fit passed.

Seconds later when I looked back at the doorway, afraid the hyena might be about to launch itself at me, the animal had vanished. Bright sunlight filled the space.

I was confused. Had I been imagining things?