

A mend solution in Sahel

- *This personal opinion was originally written in Danish by Jørgen Olsen, coordinator of the Danish member association of Emmaus, Genvej til Udvikling (= GtU = Short Cut to Development) and member of the World Council for Political Actions and International Solidarity of Emmaus International*
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Natural moderation may serve to reduce a little the mental distance between the partners in the North and the partners in the South.

The first glass is bitter as life, the second one is gentle as death, and the third one is sweet as love. The majority of the villages of the Sahel belt have a common tradition when it comes to the consumption of tea, which involves boiling the water three times using the same leaves, while the sugar's impact on the taste increases as the flavour of the leaves decreases. They brew the tea the second time, when everyone has finished their first glass; the third brewing takes place when everyone has finished their second glass, and it is considered impolite to leave the company before finishing the third glass.

I have been drinking my way through the three glasses several times, in daylight, and at a bonfire and in the light of torches. I enjoyed the torchlight experience in particular, not least in the village Amatal, 137 km southwest of Agadez in Niger. While enjoying the tea, we talked in low voices about our loving families, about politics and development, shared old and new stories from several cultures, while goats and sheep bleated from time to time and the croak of frogs from a river bed nearby sounded monotonously, but not distracting, however.

Unavoidably, I became the centre of attention during the conversations at these tea parties. Both because I was the man with the money, and because you can never let off being considered an exotic feature, when you carry with you an entirely different background compared to that of the others around the bonfire. But fortunately, they were also talking to each other when they needed a break from the eternal translations from Tuareg to French and vice versa.

I understood perfectly, of course, that they needed to talk to each other without my intervention. When a language is nor Germanic nor Latin, I am quite helpless. And when I do not understand what is said, I easily become restless. At a certain point of time, I asked the project coordinator if I could borrow a needle and some thread to mend a hole in a sock, and so I sewed up the sock while the Tuaregs sorted out the world order in their native tongue.

A couple of weeks later, the project coordinator told me that he had been completely taken by surprise by my request. "I have never before seen or heard about a white man who did not throw away everything as soon as the object had a small defect."

Ghabdouane Mohamed has met many white men, both in Niger and during his trips to West African countries as well as to the USA, Canada or France, and his overall opinion of white men is that we have a reckless throw-away attitude to the resources of the planet.

I did not borrow needle and thread to deliberately display my environmental considerations, but because I consider it completely natural to try to preserve objects and functions as long as possible. Maybe because the small farmer's home in the Land of the Cimbrians (Himmerland in the north of Denmark), where I was brought up, had a life standard below average ever since my family arrived there in 1905. Way pass the middle of the 20th century, cauliflower soup and bread pancakes were common dishes. Through several decades, this home had so little to live from, that most children had to earn their living away from home from the age of seven and surely before the age of 14. Moderation was so necessitated, that it felt obvious.

The sock episode took place in 1999. It is my assessment that it contributed to a decrease in the distance between the partner organisations, because the Cooperative of Amatalal began considering my little organisation, GtU, as 'different whites'.