

The Dolls of Birni-n-Konni

A Real-Life Incident - At a West-African Bus Station

Published as a blog intervention in Danish www.u-landsnyt.dk/blog/51/dukkerne-i-birni-n-konni

- Translated into English by Carsten Carstensen

In Africa, we find the town of Birni-n-Konni in the former French colony of Niger which is situated north of the former British colony of Nigeria. To the west, at a distance of 417 km., we find the capital of Niger, viz. Niamey, and if we go east, we find Maradi and Zinder, both of around 200.000 inhabitants. Further to the east lie Maïné Soroa, Diffa and what remains of Lake Tchad.

Some very long roads lead north and north-east through the Sahel landscape to the towns of Tahoua, Agadez, and Arlit and further on through the Sahara desert to Algeria and Libya. But no doubt, the most important one of the roads leading to and from Birni-n-Konni is the short one of 7 km. leading to the Nigerian border.

It goes without saying that Birni-n-Konni is a hectic traffic junction and that its center in particular, where the bus station is located, is the scene of extremely busy business around the clock. Very few just pass through Birni-n-Konni - most of them have some shopping to do. Thousands of people concentrate in a very small area and in this bustle there are a lot more passers-through than there are residents.

Sellers and travelers are close to stumbling over one another - a substantial part of the sale being realized out of tiny shops that are carried around and which represent the size of a table top on its edge.

One is being offered lots of soaps, shampoos, sandals, toys, sweets, cheap tasty bread types, etc. - most of it probably made in or imported through Nigeria. The stop at the station lasts for half an hour or more if you are travelling by the state-owned bus company on your way from Niamey to Agadez or vice-versa. This is also the case if you are going to or coming from Maradi, Maïné Soroa, the Lake Tchad, or somewhere else to the east. One has to stretch one's legs, drink Coca Cola, and first and foremost one has to do one's shopping. After many monotonous kilometres, most of us are happy to arrive at Birni-n-Konni, and commerce is also happy to see you.

One day in August some years ago, I discovered a range of dolls hanging from one of the portable shops and my throat contracted. Every single one of the dolls was of white colour.

Perhaps I could make my daughter happy by bringing a doll with me to Denmark, but precisely not one of European complexion - she has got enough of them as it is.

Consequently, I asked the salesman if, at Birni-n-Konni, it would be possible to buy a doll looking like a Hausa girl.

I got a no - unfortunately, coloured dolls were unobtainable.

The Hausas constitute one of the most numerous ethnic tribes of Africa and they probably number more than 40 million people. The greater part of them live in Nigeria where they make up approximately one fourth of the population. In Niger with a total of 12 million inhabitants, they constitute slightly more than half and are predominant in densely populated regions of the country, e.g. in and around Birni-n-Konni, Maradi, and Zinder.

The name of the town tells you that you have arrived in Hausa core country inasmuch as "birni" in Hausa language means "town". Nevertheless, the dolls being sold by the Hausas at the bus station are of European complexion, have European hair, and they are also wearing European clothes.

In all likelihood, not very many of them are bought by Europeans. On my trip from Niamey to Agadez, there were perhaps a total of fifty passengers on the bus, and all of them of African descent with the exception of one Canadian tourist and me.

This means that millions of African girls - Hausa and others - are buying dolls of European appearance, dolls that they hug, caress, dress and undress, sleep and play with, and all the while admiring the complexion of the doll and deeply regretting fate that decided for them to be of a different colour.

For how long time still?