

These girls from the Maradi region, which has the highest rate of child marriages in Niger, have gathered to celebrate the wedding of a 13-year-old friend.

CHILD BRIDES

ALL OVER THE WORLD, GIRLS AS YOUNG AS 10 ARE GIVEN AWAY IN MARRIAGE TO MEN SEVERAL TIMES THEIR AGE. IN DEVELOPING NATIONS WHERE SURVIVAL IS A STRUGGLE, THE REASONS ARE LARGELY ECONOMIC. JEANNINE AMBER TRAVELS TO NIGER FOR A LOOK AT THE TRUE COSTS OF THE PRACTICE—AND THE LITTLE GIRLS WHO PAY THE PRICE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA VICK

To get from Niamey, the capital city of Niger in West Africa, to the rural villages in the east you must travel ten hours over a dusty road that is so barren in places, it feels as if you've landed on the moon. For miles there is nothing but rolling hills of sand pockmarked with a few dried bushes. When a strong wind blows, the sand whips up into a fine mist, reducing the landscape to a sheet of white. This is one of the main thoroughfares through the landlocked country, and yet there are no signs of industry: no factories, no cities, no billboards, no buildings. In Niger, one of the least developed countries in the world, the average family lives on just a dollar a day, and most residents survive on subsistence

the outcry, in countries from Afghanistan to Zambia, arranged marriages between girls as young as 7 and adult men are commonplace. But nowhere is this arrangement as prevalent as it is here in Maradi region, where most girls are wives by age 15.

“The job of a wife is to obey her husband”

Halima and Alia, now sitting on woven chairs in the cool shade of a neighbor's hut, seem to know little of what it means to be a wife, or maybe they're just too embarrassed to say. “The job of a wife is to obey her husband,” offers Halima, whose husband-to-be is 40. “And to pound the millet for dinner.” Alia says nothing. Suddenly there's the sound of children giggling outside the hut. The girls look up to see Zali, 13, Tchima, 12, and Zanabou, 13, poking their heads into the doorway. These friends have all recently become wives, and are here to visit with Halima on the eve of her

PARENTS MIGHT HAVE THEIR DAUGHTER
BUT SHE MIGHT NOT GO LIVE WITH HER

agriculture. Even so, for miles there is nothing that even resembles a farm. The only thing here is sand.

In Magadi village, in the region of Maradi, the children are covered in it: the toddlers happily chasing goats, the boys who run around and between the mud huts, and the young girls who are gathered in a small clearing to dance and sing and talk with their friend Halima.

Halima, a striking girl with a wide smile, almond eyes and high-set cheeks, is getting married the next day. She is so excited she keeps cupping her hands to her mouth to keep from giggling. Sitting by her side is her friend Alia, who will also be wed this week. Unlike Halima, Alia, a shy girl with a round face and a disarmingly serious look in her eye, has no interest in marriage. While Halima bounces in her seat, Alia stares at the ground, sullen and detached. Alia, who has the flat chest of a girl not yet in puberty, says she's too young to be wed. She has other things she would like to do with her life. But the girls know they have no choice. Their marriages have been planned by their families and will take place whether they like it or not.

Arranged unions are nothing new: In Niger, they are a tradition that has endured for centuries. “Parents might promise the girl at birth and have her married by 9, but she might not live with her husband until she is 12,” explains Ramatou Salifou, a no-nonsense Nigerien woman who works for international child welfare organization World Vision as a gender adviser. Groups such as hers are getting involved because of the age of the brides. Halima is 13 years old and Alia is only 12.

Tradition or not, children have no business getting married, especially to men three times their age, the activists insist. The issue, which has become the focus of organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children, has reached all the way to the United States House of Representatives. “When young girls become wives, it is socially sanctioned sexual abuse,” argues Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-MN), who introduced legislation in 2007 seeking to reduce the incidence of child marriage worldwide. Despite

wedding. Zali tells Halima it's important for a wife to take water to her husband when he is working in the fields and to welcome him when he comes home. “Give him a good seat,” she says. “And at night show him to his bed.”

Alia's head sinks even lower. “I don't want to have a baby. No one is listening to me. Instead of getting married, I could make cakes and sell them in the town. Please,” Alia says, looking up at Salifou, who has been translating, “can you speak to my parents and make them stop the wedding?”

Activists argue that child marriage violates two basic human rights: the right to choose when and whom you'll marry and the right to sexual consent. “There is no such thing as consent when a girl is 12,” insists Maria Gabriella De Vita, a UNICEF child protection project officer. What's more, the practice poses serious societal, economic and health risks for the girls, who are often pulled out of school when they are wed and impregnated before their bodies are fully developed.

But life in Niger can be harsh. And mulling over concepts like autonomy and reproductive choice is a luxury afforded neither young girls nor their parents, whose primary goal is keeping their children fed. In rural Niger the threat of starvation is constant and real. In 2005 the country was struck by a food crisis that affected more than 2 million people. Finding an older, established husband for their daughter is as close to a guarantee as some parents have that she will be provided for.

Halima's friend Tchima says she knows how to write her name. But give her a pencil and she holds it hovering over the paper and smiles sheepishly. She scribbles the first two letters and hands the pencil back. Her parents, she states, only sent her brothers to school. And without school on their side, these girls have only one destiny. “If a girl does not go to school, she must get married,” insists the village chief, Assouman Gigi, a regal, thin-faced man with a gentle smile. “Unless a woman is a wife she is benefiting no one; she is useless in society. She should be taking care of the home and having children. That is the most important thing.” But >

With 85 percent of the land in Niger too dry for farming, famine is a constant threat.

GLOBAL
HOT
SPOTS:
CHILD MARRIAGE

COUNTRY	PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS MARRIED BEFORE 18
Niger	82
Bangladesh	75
Chad	73
Yemen	64
Mali	63
Nepal	63
Mozambique	59
Ethiopia	57
India	57
Uganda	50

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN REPORT

MARRY AT 9 OR 10,
HUSBAND UNTIL SHE'S 12.”

Clockwise from bottom left: A 15-year-old bride with her 34-year-old husband and their first child; a 40-year-old villager and his 13-year-old wife; Halima and her friend Alia (in red scarf)—both will be married by week's end; girls decorate their hands with henna in preparation for a wedding.



SPECIAL INVESTIGATION: CHILD BRIDES

the chief's matter-of-fact account of gender roles does little to illustrate the extent of wives' subservience, which, by Western standards, is hard to fathom. According to Salifou, once a girl is married she has virtually no say over her daily life. "She won't be able to leave the house, see her family, attend any ceremonies, or use birth control without her husband's permission," says Salifou, who traveled from the capital city to visit this village. "She must obey what he wants in bed. If she is not compliant, some husbands are not patient. They might argue with their wives or even hit them."

And so here they are, Halima and Alia, poised on the brink of marriage, and about to be consigned to a life of spiritual, financial and physical submission. Many young girls have broken under the strain.

"We need to help these girls"

Mariama Abdou sits quietly in a small office in Niamey National Hospital. Mariama, a nurse's aide, is well aware of the horror a young bride may face. When she was 15, she was married to a middle-aged farmer she had only just met. "Before the wedding, when I heard people in the village calling out, 'Here comes the bride,' I felt my heart would break," she says. "My husband wasn't cruel, but he was ugly." At night, when he would lie down next to her, Mariama would slip out of bed and sleep on the floor. This went on for months. Mariama's mother was beside herself. She knew if her daughter kept this up, the husband would put Mariama out of the house. Her mother implored her child to stay in the bed, but Mariama refused. Desperate, her family called for a shaman to work his magic and get Mariama to comply.

"People don't believe that shamans work, but they do," says Mariama, now 34. The shaman wrote something on a piece of paper, dissolved it in a millet drink and handed it to her to

swallow. With that, Mariama says, her husband seemed less repulsive. She lay down in his bed and soon she was pregnant.

As an adult, Mariama would grow to be tall and buxom. But as a girl of 15, she was small and slow to develop. When she conceived, she was just over 5 feet tall and slim through the hips, and had only recently begun to menstruate. The pregnancy terrified her.

There is a saying in Niger that a pregnant woman is "on the edge of death," and like many aphorisms, it is grounded in reality. According to Save the Children, which last year deemed Niger to be the worst country out of 146 nations in which to become a mother, one in seven Nigerien women dies during pregnancy or childbirth, compared with one in 4,800 in the United States. The situation is even more dire for young brides who conceive between the ages of 10 and 14: They have a maternal mortality rate five times higher than women in their twenties. "We need to help these girls," says urogynecologist Karolynn Echols, an African-American who has visited Niger six times as part of a volunteer medical team. "In Niger, 12- and 13-year-old girls go into labor without qualified help. When things go wrong, nobody knows to get them to a hospital. Or the hospital might be 500 miles away. Or there might not be any doctors available once they get there." Indeed, doctors are a scarce commodity in Niger; there are fewer than 500 to serve the population of over 13 million.

“MARIAMA'S CONTRACTION



This page, (left to right): Barbara A. Margolies holds the child of a patient; the hospital courtyard is home to scores of women with obstetric fistula, a pregnancy complication; Mariama Abdou, 34, gets ready for a date with her fiancé. Opposite: Nurse Njoki Ng'ang'a and Abdou in the operating room; Dr. Idrissa Abdoulaye visits women in the courtyard; patient being comforted during surgery.



TINY BODY SHOOK VIOLENTLY WITH EACH UNTIL SHE LOST CONSCIOUSNESS."



“I HAD TO HELP”

After I read about a group of female surgeons volunteering to repair fistulas, I thought, *This is how I can get involved.* The day I arrived in Niger, I met a girl who had undergone surgery, then returned to her village and enrolled in school. Anafghat, who told us she wanted to become a doctor, had come back to the hospital to show off her workbooks. She was a light of hope. The girls can have such different lives if given the opportunity. Helping these women has become my life's work. It's given me a sense of purpose as a woman, as a nurse, as a human being.

—NEW JERSEY NURSE

NJOKI NG'ANG'A (FAR LEFT), 29, AS TOLD TO JEANNINE AMBER



When Mariama felt the first pains of labor, she took to her mother's hut and a midwife was called. Mariama's tiny body shook violently with each contraction. Several times she lost consciousness. For days, she suffered through an agony the likes of which she had never known, and still the child didn't come.

The baby, a boy, had his head wedged in Mariama's pelvis. He was too large to pass through. For five days her uterus contracted to push the baby out, his head pressing mercilessly against her pubic bone, damaging the nerves of her pelvis, legs and feet and squeezing her bladder flatter than a coin. On the fifth day, her son was born—dead for days, his tiny body decomposing in Mariama's womb until his shriveled corpse was small enough to pass.

There was a lot of blood, and the family began to panic. They loaded the semiconscious Mariama onto a cow cart and took her to the health clinic. For two weeks she received the minimal care they had to offer. As she lay on her cot, Mariama felt down between her legs and knew something was very, very wrong. The prolonged pressure of the baby's head against her bladder had caused some of the organ to die. A rupture had formed between her bladder and vaginal wall. Urine leaked day and night, soaking her bedclothes and the thin mattress beneath her.

Mariama had suffered an obstetric fistula. In the United States, where women rarely labor more than 24 hours without medical intervention, fistulas are uncommon but easily repaired by surgery. But in Niger, where there are only a handful of doctors trained to perform the operation, a girl with a fistula is doomed.

Nothing she can do will stop the leaking, which may affect the bowels as well as the bladder. No one in her village will want to be near her. Her husband will likely kick her out and end the marriage (fistulas are a common cause of divorce in the country). In a society where respect is conferred on a woman based on her status as a wife and mother, a girl with a fistula can expect nothing but loneliness and shame.

"It's impossible for people in the West to really understand the social impact of having a fistula. Some of these women are treated like lepers," says Barbara A. Margolies of Long Island, New York, who was introduced to the plight of "fistula women" while working in Niger as a teacher in 2003. Since then, she has taken it upon herself to organize teams of American medical volunteers to travel to Niger and repair fistulas through her nonprofit International Organization for Women and Development. "I just couldn't walk away from these women," says Margolies, who has visited the country 23 times. "How could I live with myself?"

"When your stomach is hungry..."

In Magadi, the village where Halima and Alia live, the women have all heard of fistulas. Like many villagers in Maradi region, they've undergone what is known as sensitization, the process by which groups such as World Vision and UNICEF organize their staff, tribal leaders and village volunteers to spread the message about the harmful effects of early marriage. Many activists make note of the myriad social hardships endured by child brides, >

including reduced access to education, increased risk of domestic violence and lack of decision-making ability within the relationship, but fistulas, with their graphic consequences, make the best cautionary tale.

Because barely any of the women in the villages can read, UNICEF uses illustrated placards. The story they tell is this: If you give your daughter to a man in marriage and she gets a fistula, her husband won't want her, she will suffer greatly, and it will cost the family much money to have her fistula repaired. Instead, the message continues, send your daughter to school. To that end, World Vision supports an elementary school in Magadi, which currently enrolls 33 girls and 68 boys. "When we first started working in this village, there were classes with no girls at all," says Jean Cachalo, World Vision child sponsorship manager.

But Jean Lieby, head of the child protection section of UNICEF Niger, points out the often unspoken reason for resistance to educating girls: "The more educated a woman is, the less disciplined she is in a traditional way; she knows her rights and wants to implement them." Lieby notes that Niger is a largely Muslim, polygamous society. A man may have more than one wife, and with a national birth rate of 7.5 children per woman, there may be scores of children. "That family needs to be managed," says Lieby. "The wives' role is to be obedient." To illustrate the power imbalance, Lieby recalls that during the food crisis in 2005, men left the country in search of work. Unable to contact their spouses for permission, many wives refused to take grain from their husbands' silos, even as they watched their children starve to death.

Still, the relief organizations press on. One afternoon the women in Magadi gather for a meeting. Dutifully, they parrot the message they've been taught by the World Vision staff. One woman calls out, "Eighteen is a good age for marriage." Another adds, "Or 20!" But when asked to show, with raised hands, how many of their adolescent daughters are in school, almost no one responds. "We have a problem," says a woman dressed in bright yellow. Speaking all at once, the women explain that to get into secondary school, the children must take a very difficult test, which very few girls in the village have passed. "We want our girls to learn something," say the women, "a skill or a trade. But there are no schools here."

"All that's available for them is to roam the village and get into trouble," adds Gigi, the village chief. And by "trouble," he means getting pregnant out of wedlock, thereby casting shame not only on the girls' family but also on the entire village. "Rumors will go from village to village," he insists. "They will say, 'Those children are not controlled!'"

A woman points to a girl in the crowd. The child, who stands barely 5 feet tall and has plump cheeks and twinkling eyes, smiles and looks away. "That girl is 13," the woman says. "She was married last week." Then she points to a 40-year-old villager who volunteers with World Vision, the same organization that condemns this practice. "That is her husband." The husband,

grinning broadly, shrugs when asked about his wife. "In this village you can't find any girl who is 18 and not married," he says. "Once they grow breasts, they are ready."

Souleymane Issoufou, Niger's national director for protection of children, nods in recognition when he hears the story. "There is the law and there is the reality of the village," he explains. "While we are currently trying to improve legislation and change the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18, the reality is that until we have 100 percent of children in school, we will have early marriage." Asked when universal education might be possible, Issoufou leans back in his chair and turns his palms to the sky. "That is a dream!" he says. "It is simply not possible. We are a very poor country. Even though nobody wants a fistula girl in the family, families are obliged to get rid of their daughters for the dowry it will bring. People here have big families, with no resources to feed them. When someone is ready to take one of the children, you seize the opportunity. We are trying to sensitize people to the problems of early marriage by working with traditional leaders who go into the rural villages and spread information. But there has been little result because of poverty. When your stomach is hungry, your ears cannot hear."

"Their pain is my pain"

When Mariama returned from the hospital, the nerve damage to her leg was so bad the only way she could get around was to crawl on her hands and knees, all the while leaking urine. Disgusted, her husband kicked her out of the house, telling her she could come back only when she was dry. Mariama's mother took her in. Every day she washed and rewashed her daughter's clothes and doused her with inexpensive perfume.

Months passed, and while her leg eventually healed, the leaking did not. One night, while Mariama lay awake in bed, she put her hands under her hips. Her nightclothes and the mattress were soaked through. *How have I come to this?* she thought in despair. Quietly, she rose from her bed, pulled on a clean skirt and left her mother's hut. There was a well in the middle of the village. Mariama had decided to throw herself in. But before she reached her destination, her mother discovered she was gone and pulled her back inside. From that day on, Mariama's mother didn't let her out of her sight.

For years, Mariama sought the help of traditional healers, who gave her herbs to drink. Getting nowhere, she eventually turned to foreign doctors she remembers as "French." The physicians, who were visiting a local health center, "sewed my vagina," she says quietly. "I got sick with a fever every time my period would come." When she went back to have the surgery repaired, the doctors inexplicably diverted her bowel and gave her a colostomy. According to Margolies, without access to medical supplies, many women who have had colostomies are reduced to using plastic shopping bags to catch their stool. This surgery was the final indignation. Mariama thought she would lose her mind. [continued on page 184]

WHAT YOU CAN DO

CONTACT LAWMAKERS

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-MN) introduced the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2007. This bill, H.R. 3175, and another one in the Senate, S. 1998, would involve the U.S. government in preventing child marriage worldwide. At present it has 62 cosponsors, including Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL), and Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX). To learn more and encourage your state's lawmakers to cosponsor the bill, visit Senate.gov and House.gov (icrw.org offers tips on writing to lawmakers).

SUPPORT RELIEF EFFORTS

These organizations target poverty and offer social programs in countries where child marriage is common:

- UNICEF (212-326-7000, unicef.org)
- The United Nations Population Fund (212-297-5000, unfpa.org)
- The International Center for Research on Women (202-797-0007, icrw.org)
- The International Planned Parenthood Federation (212-248-6400, ippfwhr.org)
- Girls Learn International (212-707-8577, girlslearn.org)
- Save the Children (800-728-3843, savethechildren.org)
- United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (ungei.org)

HELP WOMEN HEAL

The International Organization for Women and Development organizes medical missions on which allied health workers travel to Niger to repair fistulas. To volunteer your medical services (including teaching local personnel) or to donate funds for development of a clinic, contact Barbara A. Margolies at info@nigerfistula.org. —SHERRILL CLARKE

GIRLS TO LEARN SOMETHING, NO SCHOOLS HERE."

Fistula is one of the most common reasons for divorce in Niger. But not every woman is abandoned. Patient Mariama Mahamadou smiles knowing her husband eagerly awaits her return.

“WE HAVE A PROBLEM. WE WANT OUR A SKILL OR A TRADE. BUT THERE ARE

In all, Mariama suffered through eight surgeries over more than a decade, each one leaving her more hopeless. Not knowing what else to do, Mariama took up residence in the rear courtyard of Niamey National Hospital, laying her blue sleeping mat on the concrete and washing her clothes in a communal sink. She was not alone. For more than 30 years, women from all over Niger have come seeking treatment, turning the stone-walled courtyard into a village of castoffs. The women sit and they leak. In the 100-degree heat, the stench is unbearable.

Today, 11 years after Mariama first arrived at the hospital, the squalid courtyard is still filled with hundreds of women sitting on their brightly colored mats. A few of them have come with children, who amuse themselves with water bottles left by the doctors.

The women here all have a story to share: There's Kadidja, 17, who has been leaking urine since she was 11; another Mariama, 17, who was married at 10 and pregnant at 12, labored for five days and lost the baby; and Habi, 16, who arrived at the hospital close to death with a rectal-vaginal fistula, acute nerve damage to her leg and a severely infected wound from a caesarean performed at another health center. They are here waiting for Margolies and her team of American doctors, whose arrival is always heralded by radio announcements from the office of the president of Niger telling fistula women that help is on the way. "We've had girls arrive so weak and infected we couldn't operate on their fistula for months," says Margolies, who is working tirelessly to raise funds to build a freestanding women's health clinic in Niger. "We've had girls who had been told in their villages to sit on hot irons to cure their leaking. They have suffered overwhelming pain and fear."

Margolies, with her urgent manner and endless charm, rallies doctors and nurses from all over the United States to travel to the hospital three or four times a year at their own expense. It was these medical volunteers who finally repaired Mariama Abdou's fistula in 2004. She breaks into a jubilant smile when asked how her life has changed. "I can visit my friends!" she says. And she has a boyfriend, she adds, a security guard at the building beside the hospital; he flirted with Mariama through holes in the courtyard walls. The couple is planning to wed this year. Until then, Mariama still lives at the hospital, comforting the patients, whom she understands better than anyone. "Their pain is my pain," she says. "God willing, they will get better."

"There will be food"

The American doctors operate on as many as 60 patients during their 10-to-12-day stay in Niger. But with up to 200 fistula women in the courtyard at a time, between 100,000 and 300,000 estimated throughout the country, and thousands more occurring each year, the problem is far from solved. Idrissa Abdoulaye, M.D., chief of obstetrical fistula surgery at Niamey National Hospital, one of only six local doctors trained to repair fistulas, insists the real issue here is health care. Almost all fistulas could be avoided if mothers who experienced prolonged labors had their babies delivered via caesarean section, he argues. "This year the government started providing the procedure at no cost. But it's not the culture of women in rural areas to go to a health center, even if it's free. And there is still the problem of transportation. How can the women from the remote villages get to the hospital?"

With only one doctor for every 27,000 residents, the task of making health care available to all seems insurmountable. What's also needed is a cultural shift, says Saifuddin T. Mama, M.D., a New Jersey ob-gyn who has volunteered in Niger. "If Niger's president can convince the tribal leaders that early marriage is wrong, they, in turn, will stop allowing it in their villages," he says. "That will do more to change the plight of these women than all the visiting doctors combined."

Meanwhile, in the villages, the children still get married. The hut in which Halima and her friends have gathered belongs to a 12-year-old girl who was married the month before. Halima glances around with a grin. All four walls of the small front room are lined with waist-high stacks of white enamel pots and pans—

CHILD BRIDES IN AFRICA AND BEYOND

African nations have some of the highest rates of child marriage globally. But in rural parts of South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, girls are married young too. According to a report by the International Center for Research on Women, more than 51 million girls worldwide ages 15 to 19 are promised or married—often to a much older man. But growing awareness within their communities, as well as aid from humanitarian groups, is beginning to change the centuries-old practice. These snapshots from various countries illustrate issues common to many.

Bangladesh

Roots of traditions: Sixty-five percent of girls 15 to 19 are married. Sending a girl to live with her husband eases the economic pressure on her parents. With money for schools and books scarce, parents are more likely to spend it on sons, who may take care of the parents in old age, as opposed to daughters, who will care for in-laws.

Seeds of change: Jobs in the garment industry now provide a chance for some girls to earn a living while delaying marriage, UNICEF reports. A separate program gives girls and their parents a stipend as long as the girls remain single up to tenth standard, which is the equivalent of our high school diploma.

India

Roots of traditions: Forty-eight percent of girls 15 to 19 are married. Dowries of cattle and other goods are given to the bride's family. The early promise of a daughter to a man can sustain a family through economic hard times. A girl newly installed into the home of her husband and in-laws wields little power. She also may not have developed the self-esteem to deny sexual demands or to insist on health services such as prenatal care or protection against HIV/AIDS.

Seeds of change: In the state of Gujarat, girls who complete a certain level in school receive bicycles, giving them the mobility and independence to continue their studies. The government of Uttar Pradesh, another state, denies jobs to citizens who marry before age 18. The Self-Employed Women's Association now includes young married girls in their programs.

Guatemala

Roots of traditions: At least 10.5 percent of girls 15 to 19 years old are married. Families are started early. Limited access to health care contributes to severe complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as high maternal- and infant-mortality rates. These problems become less prevalent as maternal age increases.

Seeds of change: The organization Population Council pairs girls with mentors, provides job training, and addresses the girls' health needs. The New Hope Community Bilingual Institute teaches girls skills to earn a living, increasing the likelihood that they will delay marriage. —s.c.

wedding presents. In a region gripped by poverty, it's the promise of gifts that has Halima especially excited. "I will get pots like these and also a new bed and mattress, some chairs and linoleum for the floor," she rattles off excitedly. She fingers her necklace, a small silver hoop tied around her neck with string, the traditional jewelry for all girls from Maradi. There's another reason she's happy to get married, and she practically bounds out of her seat when she says it: "There will be food!"

It's time for Ramatou Salifou to head back to Niamey. As she climbs into the passenger seat of the white World Vision pickup truck, an older woman from the village approaches, clearly distraught. The two speak for a while, the villager imploring, Salifou firmly shaking her head no. Finally the other woman turns to leave. "She has a 12-year-old daughter who was married last week," Salifou explains. "The girl is frightened to go to her husband, and the mother was asking if we could take her to his village." She sighs heavily and asks the driver to start the truck. As she pulls away, dozens of children covered in white dust run after the vehicle, laughing in the sand. □

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