

# Column

## Midnight in Africa

Ton van der Lee



Midnight in Africa. I wake up. Someone is pounding at the door. There must be some real emergency. The people here are afraid to go out at night, there are spirits about, good ones, but mainly evil ones. The ghosts of the ancestors roam these dry plains at night. The living stay at home.

The pounding stops. Silence.

I get out of bed, push away the mosquito netting, pull on some shorts and go downstairs. I open the door and see three scared looking women from the small fishing village by the river near my house. They are supporting a young girl who is shaking and sweating.

It's Kadja, a girl of about seventeen, who is very far gone with child. She suddenly convulses and wails in pain.

*It's her time, Niama, the oldest woman, says. We have been up all night with her. But something is wrong. The baby won't come out. Help us.*

I run upstairs, get my jeans and shirt on and find my car keys. I am the only person with a car within a hundred miles at least. Unfortunately, I am not a doctor. We'll have to drive to the nearest health post, about ten miles from here. There is a Cuban doctor who works there. We'll have to wake her up.

I start my car, a Toyota four wheel drive. The roads in this part of Mali are bumpy dirt tracks. Khadja is hardly able to get into the front seat. We have to lift and push. She grits her teeth but now and then she cries. She is wearing an old dress; the bottom part is soaked with blood. I start out on the bumpy ride. There are large potholes in the road. At every bump, Khadja is in pain. The older woman tries to comfort her.

Ten miles is a long way. I concentrate on the road and hope for the best. Khadja cries and sobs rhythmically.

### I am the only person with a car within a hundred miles at least

*Hurry!* The old woman cries. I go a little faster. A deep pothole. I am going too fast and there is a heavy jolt.

Suddenly, my right leg is hot and wet. I touch my trousers and feel they are soaked. My fingers are dripping. Khadja cries out, and again, and again, and as I shift gear, there is another cry. It is thin and it is tentative, but it is there. There is a new sound in the African night, the voice of a newborn baby.

Ton van der Lee is a writer and documentary filmmaker. He has lived and worked in Africa for twelve years and published six books on Africa. Visit: [www.tonvanderlee.nl](http://www.tonvanderlee.nl)