



The 'biblical' scene on the banks of the River Niger in Koulikoro, where hundreds of men, women and children dig for sand. Donkeys heave carts of sand away after it has been dug by hand from the riverbed

# WE STARVE, OR WE DIG SAND

On the banks of the River Niger in Mali, family men come from far and wide to dive and dig for sand – and survival. The work is exhausting, dangerous and controversial. But with Mali's capital booming and concrete at a premium, there's money in sand. **Jane Labous** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS by JANE LABOUS

**A** strong wind is blowing at 11.30am in Koulikoro, Mali, and I'm knee-deep in the great River Niger, the fierce West African river that flows from Guinea, across this tropical landlocked country, and towards the Atlantic. Renowned for its crocodiles (the name of Mali's capital, Bamako, means 'crocodile river'), it's the largest body of water in Mali, an otherwise arid place whose northern region consists of a triangular slice of the Sahara.

Suddenly a man's head shoots out from beneath the water with a great blast of breath and river. He opens bloodshot eyes, pinches his nose and shakes his head, creating a halo of sparkling droplets in the bright white light. His muscular chest heaves with effort. 'If you aren't physically strong, you

can't do this job,' pants Bengé, grinning a male-model smile and lighting up a cigarette. 'It's exhausting.'

In Bambara, the local language, Bengé is one of the *chen chen boula*; in French, they are *les exploitants de sables* – 'the sand diggers'. They are powerful and muscular because every day, from 7am until 5pm, they dive a few metres to the bottom of the Niger to dredge gravel, which they sift into different grades and sell for about £5 a mound to the lorries that rumble onto the banks here at all hours of the day and night, ready to take it to Bamako, where it will be used to make concrete.

Sidou, a tall, cheerful 40-year-old, co-ordinates this small group of men, who've banded together to work as a team. Sidou has brought his young wife, their several children, his mother-in-law and various other members of the extended

family from Mopti, 400 kilometres to the northeast, to live here in a mud compound on the riverbank. His colleague Ibrahim is from Kayes, a town 320 kilometres northwest of here, near the Senegalese border, and has two wives to support. The others are from Koulikoro.

'We move from spot to spot depending on where the gravel is,' Sidou explains. 'We do it because there are no jobs here. In Koulikoro, the soap factory has shut down, so either you starve or you dig sand. Some of us have been to school and have certificates, but our education is useless. We've no other choice – otherwise we would be begging. Sometimes we go home with 300 or 400 CFA [Communauté Financière Africaine francs: about £0.50] and sometimes we go home with nothing, because some days there are no customers for the sand. We do this to survive.'

### CONSTRUCTION BOOM

Sand digging didn't exist in Mali a few years ago. It's an activity born of change and the brave new world of Africa, in which young people study for degrees, save up for pastel-coloured, Chinese-made mopeds and invest in new concrete houses.

Bamako is experiencing a construction boom. Once a sleepy village of a few thousand inhabitants, the Malian capital is now home to two million people – 12 per cent of the country's population. The annual urban growth rate stands at 5.4 per cent, the highest in Africa and the sixth highest in the world, and projections suggest that by 2020, three million people will call Bamako home.

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While many of the city's sandy streets are still unlit and unpaved, new business districts are springing up at an incredible speed, masons trained in mud architecture in the provinces are teetering on wooden scaffolds, hammering away at half-

built concrete buildings. Roads are being built, and a new bridge across the river is nearly finished.

On the city's outskirts, new housing estates are spreading like wildfire. Some of these homes will be bought by the new generation of young wage earners, but most will be snapped up by families who apply to the over-subscribed government housing scheme.

On the roads out of Bamako, flashy billboards populated by white-toothed African models advertise the domestic ideals of these smooth, grey concrete houses, their sturdy walls, glazed windows and appliance-crammed interiors, a generation away from the mud huts and turreted grain houses that cluster beneath the mango trees on the road out to Koulikoro.

### INVISIBLE PROCESS

I watch as Bengé loosens the sand on the riverbed with a giant sieve. Then, holding a shovel, he dives down for 15 seconds, then surfaces. He does this many times in quick succession, rhythmically, up and down, diving and emerging like a human drill. After 20 dives, he stops.

Sidharé, another *chen chen boula* with a huge smile and a mellifluous Barry White voice, explains the invisible process taking place below the surface. 'This sieve is one metre by one metre,' he says. 'We put it inside the trench, where there's



gravel. You dive with it down there, put a foot inside the net so it doesn't move, then each time you dive, you get a shovel-load of gravel. You have to dive down deep, shovel it into the net, come up and take air, continuously. It's really hard work!

'Every day,' he continues, 'I feel as if I've weightlifted for hours and hours – it requires immense physical strength. At night, my chest, shoulders and stomach ache. And on a Friday, when I relax for a day, I just feel dull because my muscles are worn out. Some of us pass out or get sick – the wind and the cold can give us lung diseases and we often feel ill.'

Next, Sidharé and Bengé lift the sand-filled sieve, shake it back and forth, then hoist it across and empty it onto a nearby mound. The two men take turns to dive. For the entire two hours that I stand there, they don't stop, only looking up to smile and laugh, and explain what they're doing.

'We have charms to protect us against the *bafaro*, the river demon,' Sidou tells me. 'It's a must, because things that live in water far outnumber things that live on land. There are lots of bad spirits in this river. Sometimes you can be doing this job and a spirit touches you and you die. You just become sticky and you can't swim anymore and you just die. During the rainy season, this water gets deep and it's very dangerous. The spirits cast spells on you and you just go.'

### BIBLICAL SCENES

Sidou and his group are here because sand, at the moment, is big business. But I only realise how big when, the following morning, I walk down to the bank north of where Sidou lives to see the other sand diggers at work.

It's a scene that can only be described as 'biblical'. Hundreds of wooden pirogues punt up and down, each with a crew of five or six men. The light is so bright that all I can make out are the black curves of the canoes, low in the water, and the thin black figures of the men, balancing as they push on the punting poles. More boats are clustered at the bank, their poles stuck in the mud.

The river's left bank is being completely desecrated. Amid massive mounds of sand is a scene of hard labour; collective, concentrated industry involving donkeys, carts and sheer muscle. Gusts of wind bring the sounds of chattering, shouting, hammering, spades cleaving earth, a man whacking his donkeys as they strain to pull a cart from the mud.

Girls scoop gravel from the water into buckets, lift them onto their heads and walk, precariously, up the bank. Teenagers hoist huge sieves of sand, two by two, up to older men, who shovel it into piles. Muscular men, their skin shiny with sweat and water, shovel great loads of sand into bigger and bigger mounds, before topping them with a sandcastle to show that they're finished. On top of one, a woman in a brightly coloured headscarf breastfeeds a baby.

### DESECRATED BANKS

Down here on the haphazard, destroyed bank, the sand diggers seem oblivious to the damage they're doing, but the townspeople have begun to protest. They say that the holes created by digging make bathing dangerous for children; the sudden change in depth means they can find themselves trapped in a hole. An eight-year-old boy died in this way last year.



**ABOVE:** hundreds of wooden fishing boats anchor on the shore at Koulikoro, bringing sand in from the River Niger. The long poles are used to punt the boats along the river; **ABOVE RIGHT:** sand diggers (from left to right) Ibrahim, Sidharé and Bengé at work. The diggers dredge sand from the riverbed using the giant sieve that Bengé is holding, before sifting it and dumping it in great mounds on the riverbank

*'We have sons but we don't want them to do this job – never. The reason we're struggling here today is so our children don't have to do the same thing'*

On the third afternoon I spend with the sand diggers, they receive a letter informing them that they can no longer dig in that part of the river, as townsfolk have signed a petition against them. They will have to go further downstream.

Boubacar Foufanar is a teacher and the son of the chief fisherman. I find him lounging on a mat with a group of men on the riverbank just outside Koulikoro, watching his wife and children to make sure they don't fall into any river holes. Boubacar says the sand diggers mindlessly degrade the river bank – and don't care.

'Sand digging is harming the river,' he says. 'When we were small, there was lots of sand here, and the river was easily accessible; we used to swim all the time. And when the river dried up, you could go with a cart and donkey to get sand. But now that's impossible. People have come from elsewhere and dug trenches indiscriminately. You can't cross the river by foot anymore or even by cart – there are holes everywhere. We can't even allow our kids to go in and refresh themselves because it's too dangerous. The riverbed is completely ruined.'

Financier Mamadou Foufana chips in. 'They're not just holes – they are deep, deep wells in the riverbed,' he says. 'Last year, a friend of mine lost his son when he fell into one. There are demarcated areas for the sand diggers to work in, but they dig where they shouldn't. Before people started digging the bank, it was covered with sand. It was difficult to access the river because the tide used to leave mounds of sand everywhere, but now it has all been taken away.'

'The women here used to make a modest living from collecting sand,' he continues. 'Now, most of these people come from other towns, bringing boats and equipment, and the women here can't get the sand. Without a boat, you're finished. They come and destroy our riverbed and then they go away, and leave us their problems.'

The two men say that the solution is simple; if the sand diggers moved into the deeper part of the river, the holes wouldn't be a problem. 'The main riverbed is full almost all the time, and it's fine to dig there – taking the sand even favours good river flow,' Boubacar says. 'This particular place is full of gravel – but none of them come here

because we have fought them so hard. The local authorities need to do something about it to protect the environment and the community.'

**CONCRETE FUTURE**

Here in Mali, where the average life expectancy is just 49, everyone dreams of a richer future. But only the people with capital can make money, says Sidou, who would prefer to be a shopkeeper, a merchant – or simply a businessman.

'Everything now is business,' he says. 'Those who own the sand trucks are doing business. Those who extract the sand with machines are doing business. With money, you can buy cows and get milk and sell it. But to do any business you need capital to start up.'

Sidou shakes his head when I ask if he wants his children to dig sand. Back at his mud house, he shows me his son's schoolbooks, proudly indicating the neat lines of writing. 'We have sons but we don't want them to do this job – never,' he says. 'The reason we're struggling here today is so our children don't have to do the same thing.'

'Mali's developing and changing – there are many concrete houses in Bamako now, made with sand from here in Koulikoro,' he continues. 'We know that as our country develops, we will get more work, but we won't get rich. In this

industry of sand digging there are many Malians involved – they buy the trucks, and get all the big money because they have the capital to invest. But we hope that as time goes on, things get better for us also.'

When I leave Koulikoro, I give the sand diggers my Adidas goggles; an excited Bengé tries them on and throws himself into the river, whooping with delight as he realises that he can see underwater. Afterwards, the group and I sit under the mango tree at Sidou's house, drinking the three glasses of progressively sweet tea that are traditional in these parts. 'What do you dream of?' I ask Sidou, as his children rush around us.

'Happiness,' he replies. 'But I think this is being with your family, having enough to eat, happy that everything is well, and being in good health. That is the greatest thing you can have.'

When I leave Koulikoro, he gives me his address. Sidou Tangara, it says, above a telephone number. *Exploitant de Sable*. Koulikoro. **G**

**Journey of a lifetime**

The author was the winner of the 2011 Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Journey of a Lifetime Award, a £4,000 grant for an original and inspiring journey anywhere in the world. The winner receives radio and broadcast training from the BBC, and records their journey for a BBC Radio 4 documentary. Jane's documentary is scheduled to be broadcast at 11am on 5 September. The next deadline for applications is 23 September 2011.

In preparation for her trip, Jane attended a Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid course, courtesy of Centurion ([centurionsafety.net](http://centurionsafety.net))

