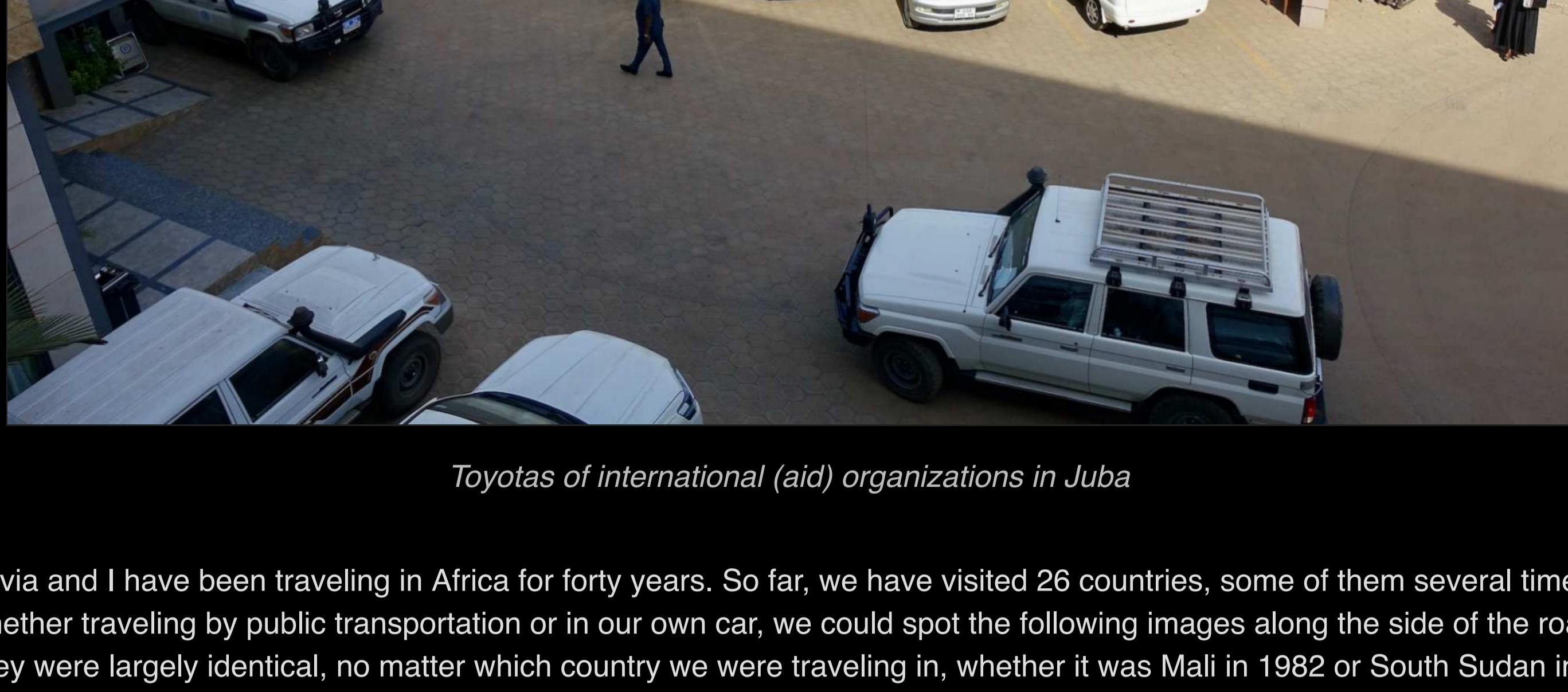


Along African Roads

HOLGER HOFFMANN

Recently, my wife and I were in South Sudan – the youngest state in Africa – to visit the Mundari people. Until we had all the permits together, we spent several days in the hotel in Juba. When I looked out of the window at the parking lot, it was packed with white Toyotas of international (aid) organizations. They are not only present in South Sudan, but for decades all over Africa. Do they bring Africa the aid they promise? This is one of the questions I would like to address in this photo reportage.

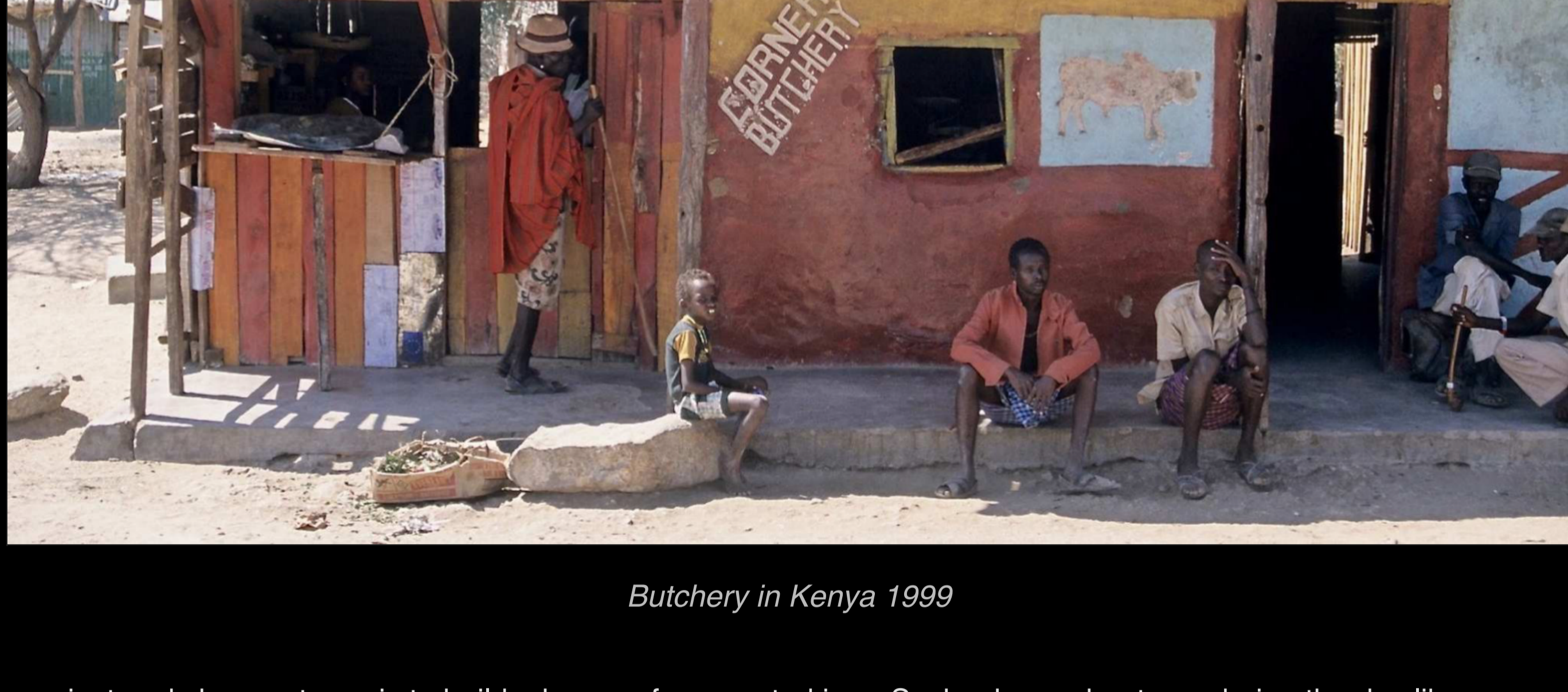


Toyotas of international (aid) organizations in Juba

Sylvia and I have been traveling in Africa for forty years. So far, we have visited 26 countries, some of them several times. Whether traveling by public transportation or in our own car, we could spot the following images along the side of the road. They were largely identical, no matter which country we were traveling in, whether it was Mali in 1982 or South Sudan in 2022. All photos shown here were taken from the same perspective, showing the rural roadsides. They have the same 9:4-format to draw the viewer's eye to what is happening there. They are colorful, the sun is shining with all its might, and there is usually a bustle of activity. We see corrugated iron shacks, stores, restaurants, markets and litter.

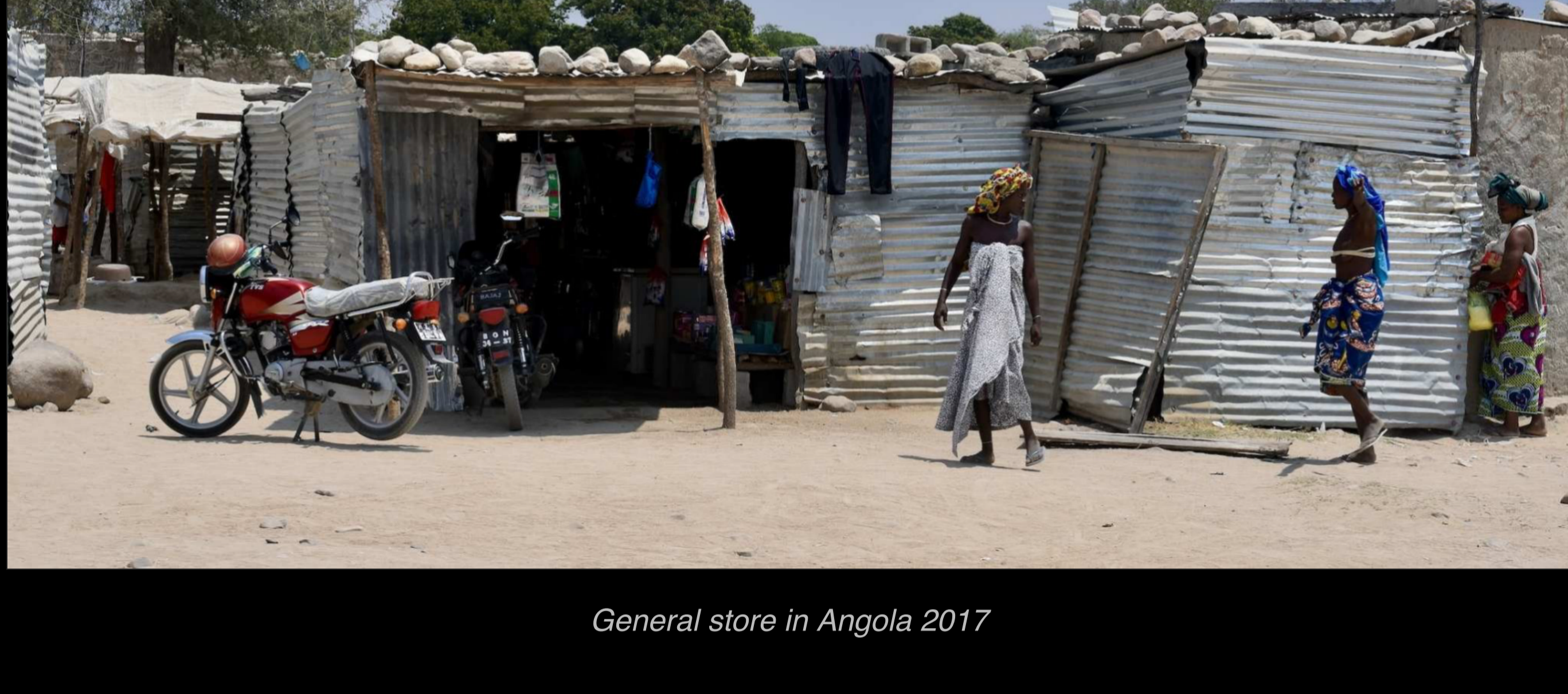


"Baraka Hotel" in Kenya 2015



Butchery in Kenya 1999

The easiest and cheapest way is to build a house of corrugated iron. Such a house heats up during the day like an oven, its walls begin to glow, which is why no one stays in the house from dawn until dusk. Life takes place on the road. If the houses are built of concrete, often the money is not enough to have them completed. Over time they become advancing ruins. A roadside market with its street vendors is a treasure trove of junk and trash. Here it becomes clear that Africa is flooded with cheapness and worthless stuff that is not even worth properly dispose of after use. This all makes my pictures look similar, as if they were taken in the same place and at the same time. At first glance, they look nice and ordinary. But they were taken in eight different African countries over more than 20 years. This makes them tragic at a second glance.

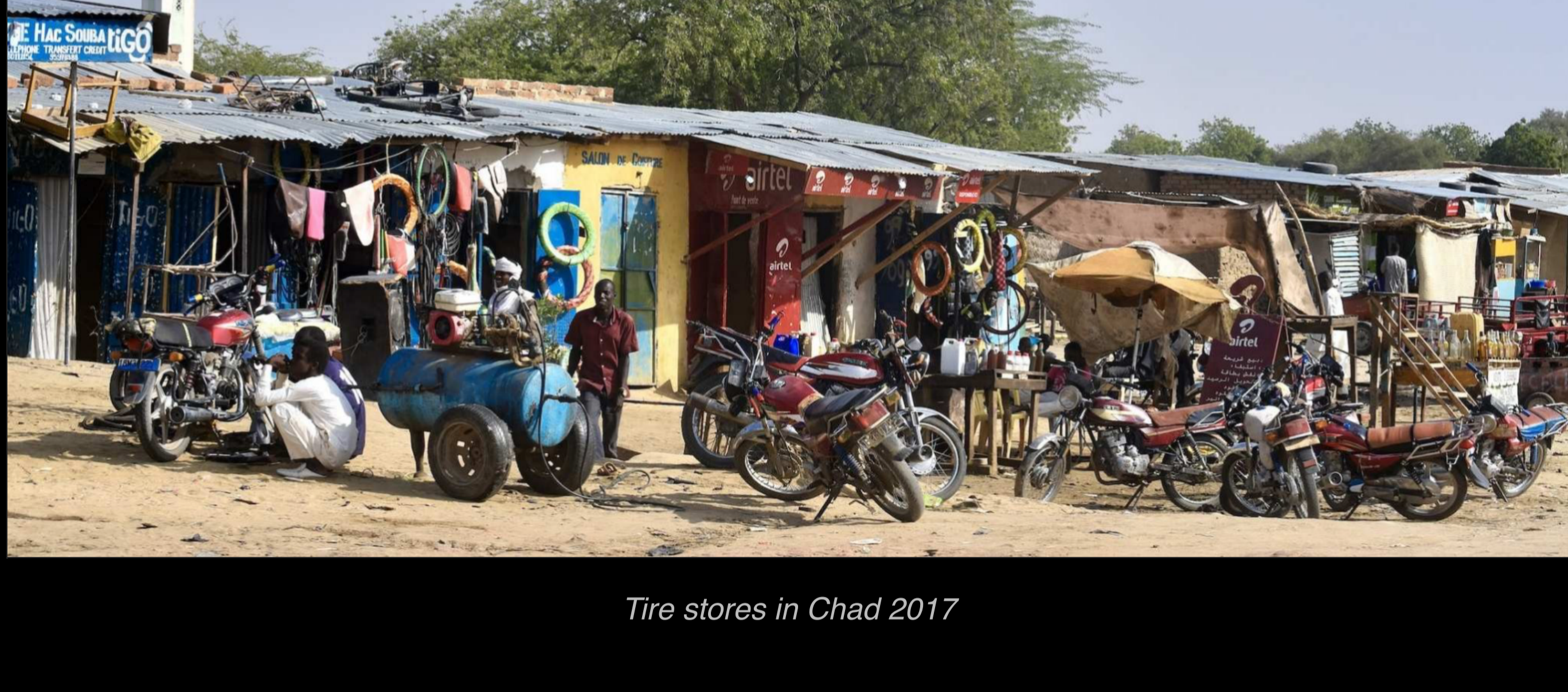


General store in Angola 2017

In contrast to our seven trips to China, where we each time had the impression that the streetscape had changed tremendously within two years, in Africa everything seemed to stand still, as for example on our three visits to Chad. In Sudan, we even noticed a regression. Paul Theroux, in his travelogue *Dark Star Safari*, comes to virtually the same conclusion when he returns to Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi after forty years: *"The strong impression I had was not that the places I knew were worse off but that they had not changed at all. ... Nothing was new except that there were many more people, grubbier buildings, more litter, fewer trees, more poachers, less game."* (p. 258) ... and more cell phones, we would add.



Cell phone store in Chad 2012



Tire stores in Chad 2017

We are not talking about African cities, which with very a few exceptions, such as Asmara, are becoming increasingly chaotic, run-down, dirty and slummy, but about rural areas. We are fond of Africa, otherwise we would not travel there again and again. However, this does not mean we romanticize the situation and are happy when we find more or less the same picture on our next trip as we did on the last. The fact that time stands still may be interesting for us travelers, but what does it mean for the people in Africa? An encounter with a not-so-young man in the east of the former Zaire made us very thoughtful:

We were traveling with him and a dozen other people on a truck loaded with stinking and prickly stockfish. There was no other public transportation. The roads were in such a desolate condition that it took the truck a day and a half to cover 50 miles. After a short "night's rest" in the end, he said to us "For you, this may be an adventure because you are lucky enough to leave all this behind at the ditch of your vacation. For me, however, this is daily life. I am sentenced to life in Zaire simply because I will never have enough money to leave this country."



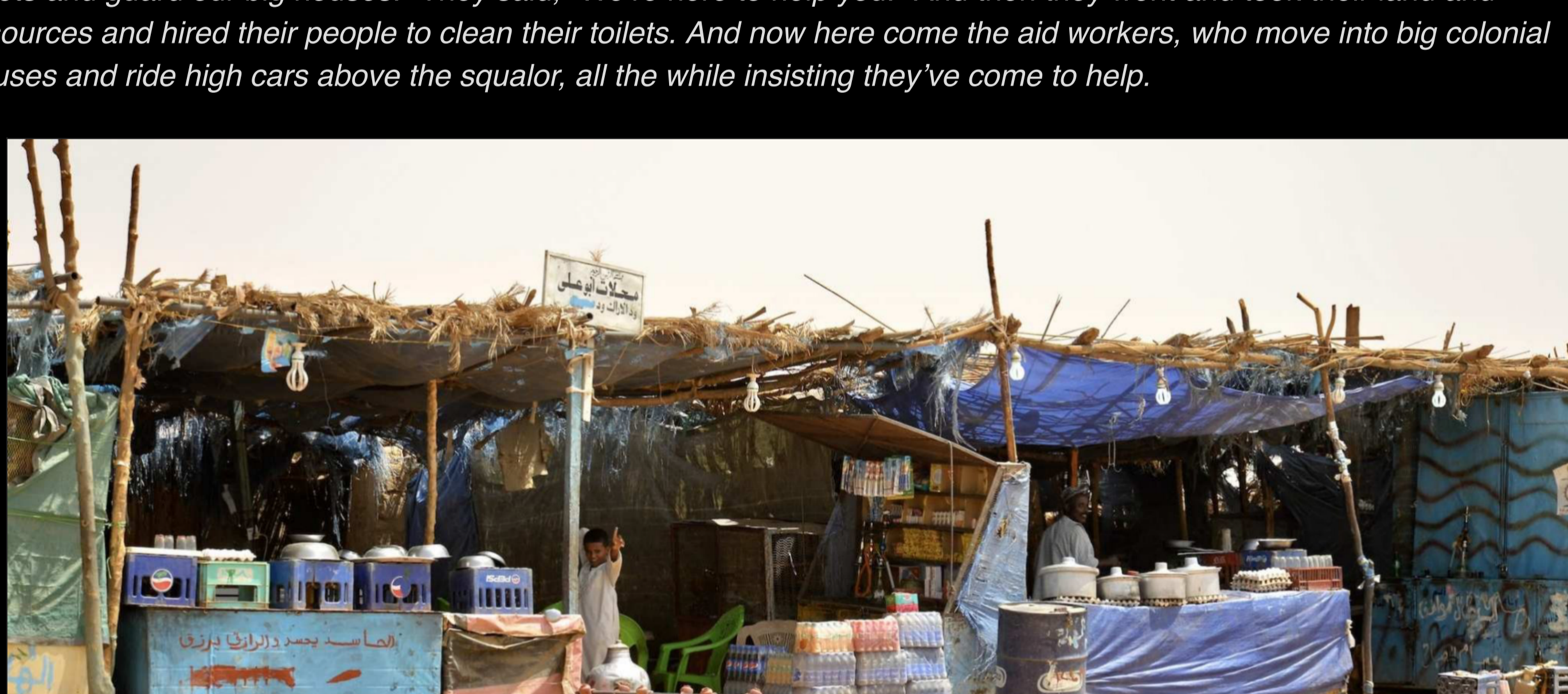
Fruit and vegetable store in Egypt 2021

As Western travelers, we are allowed to observe and photograph daily life in Africa, but we are not allowed to pass judgment on what the reasons are for the lack of change in daily life along Africa's roads. At best, we may ask questions that others have asked. Is it due to the mentality of the African people and their traditions, their social structures, their historical past or due to the climatic, economic and political conditions characterized by autocratic leaders, clan thinking and corruption, or does development aid, which has been proliferating since decolonization, prevent African people from taking responsibility for their own future?



VIP cafeteria in South Sudan 2012

In his book *The Road to Hell – The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* Michael Maren states: *"Like most people in the United States and Western Europe, I've heard the pleas of aid organizations and boasts of their accomplishments in the Third World, but the Africa I know today is in much worse shape than it was when I first arrived. ... In Africa, the people who are supposed to benefit from aid see what is happening. They hear foreigners talking about development, but they know development was a colonial policy. Development was a policy of subjugation. When colonialists came ashore, they didn't say, 'We're here to steal your land and take your resources and employ your people to clean our toilets and guard our big houses.' They said, 'We're here to help you.' And then they went and took their land and resources and hired their people to clean their toilets. And now here come the aid workers, who move into big colonial houses and ride high cars above the squalor, all the while insisting they've come to help."*



Restaurants in Sudan 2015

As in colonial times, the foreigners employ an elite cadre of locals to carry out their work. The elites are rewarded for their relationships with the foreigners. They enjoy higher pay than most. They have access to foreign goods, education and visas to foreign countries. And, just as in colonial times, the foreigners use this elite as their link to the rest of the population. They are regarded as the voice of the people and employed to speak on their behalf. In reality, however, the elite, with their vested interests in the system, tell the foreigners exactly what they want to hear. The system is good; the system works.

Thus affirmed, the aid establishment moves forward, as the colonial one did, ignorant of the widening rift between them and the supposed recipients of their beneficence." (p. 11)



Water supplier in Ethiopia 2009

On the other hand, in *The Shadow of the Sun* the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski asks himself: *"I worry about whether African societies will be able to assume a self-critical stance, and much depends on this."* Or do we judge Africa only with our Western ethnocentric values? What often appears to be corruption in our Western eyes stems from the African culture of giving and the resulting obligation to repay. Every gift requires a compensation. This requires the honor. Giving and receiving primarily takes place within the family or the clan. There are certainly different aspects that need to be considered. Alas, there is no simple answer to all these questions. And yet, the situation in Africa moves us. Turning away cannot be the solution.



HOLGER HOFFMANN

Holger Hoffmann is a travel photographer. He and his wife Sylvia Furrer have already traveled to over 100 countries. The longer they travel together, the more they are fascinated by the customs and everyday life of the indigenous people who preserve their traditional culture. They have a deep respect for these people who live in remote areas under harsh living conditions such as the extreme cold of Siberia, the hot desert of the Danakil, the humid jungles of West Papua or the high altitude of the Himalayas. Nomadic peoples have become a major focus of their recent travels. They are deeply impressed by how they are coping with the threats of climate change and adapting to the advances and pressures of the modern world. In 2012, they began publishing travelogues to share their impressions with a broader community of travelers. Usually Sylvia is the author and Holger the photographer.

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