



Arts & Culture

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Water is life

by Adrian Brune

Ariane Kirtley '01, '04MPH, the daughter of two *National Geographic* photographers, has her own arresting portfolio of images taken far from home. For the past two years, she has focused her intense photographic vision primarily on the people of Azawak, an arid province of Niger. But for Kirtley, the photos are less about art than they are a means to an end: she wants to see to it that the people in those photos can get the water they desperately need. Last fall, Kirtley started the Amman Imman project, to finance the digging of water wells in the mostly nomadic Tuareg communities of Azawak -- the poorest region of the poorest country in the world. (The project is named for a local saying: "Amman imman, ar issudarr" or "Water is life, milk is hope.") To help raise awareness and funds, she exhibited her photos at the New Haven Free Public Library in June.

"These were people who, no matter how little they had, constantly showered me with kindness. They would kill their last goat for me, or give me their last glass of drinking water," says Kirtley, a bright-eyed woman whose own rail-thin body shows the ravages of dysentery, parasites, and other illnesses borne of Niger's unclean water. "Our success is based on achievement; theirs is based on interpersonal relationships."

Kirtley, whose American parents first took her to Niger when she was six months old, returned two years ago after finishing graduate work at Yale's School of Public Health. She had won a Fulbright scholarship to study health behavior and practices among a number of different ethnic groups. When her research assistant, a native of Azawak, told her about the situation in his home province, she decided to go see for herself. She went despite warnings from Niger's government that the area is full of crime, something she found to be completely untrue. (She believes the government spreads the story to justify its inaction in the region.)



What she found, she says, "blew me away. I thought I knew about water problems in Niger. I had no idea." The 50,000 people in the Azawak province, a vast region on the edge of the Sahara, have just two wells for the dry season. Only one works regularly. During the rainy season, families send their young daughters to collect water from ponds -- which are also used

by people and animals for bathing. When the nine-month dry season comes, these young women must travel 35 miles to one of the wells; they can carry back only enough water for their families to drink one glass a day.

"In other regions of Niger, each village has at least two or three wells or more, and many times they will also have a borehole with a hand pump," said Mustapha Alkassoum, Kirtley's research assistant, in a letter about the situation. "It is truly an injustice that my people are dying of thirst because there is so little water in the Azawak."



Tuareg girls gathering contaminated pond water. Stagnant water exists during the 3-month rainy season. The rest of the year there is no water. *Photo by Ariane Alzhara Kirtley*

Kirtley aims to raise \$250,000, the amount needed to hire contractors to dig two borehole wells in regional areas where she knows underground streams exist. To date, she has accumulated about \$122,000 toward her goal through initiatives like her traveling exhibit, talks to civic groups, a website, and grant-writing. After the wells are completed, Kirtley hopes to persuade international humanitarian relief organizations, such as CARE and Oxfam, to work in the Azawak region. She believes that once Niger can meet the basic needs of its own people, these agencies can establish the infrastructure needed to bring more food, education, and dreams to the country.



Tuareg woman drinking water from wooden bowl. *Photo by Ariane Alzhara Kirtley*

"You can't talk to me about schools when the kids spend all their free time fetching water," Kirtley says. "These aren't Africans sitting around waiting for help. They're working to get it and they're not getting any."

Despite the bleak conditions, Kirtley's photos from Niger display the opposite of despair. Her frames show smiling children playfully pulling fleas off each other at the end of their long water searches; young women cradling their babies, who sip assuredly from large bowls of dirty water; and people enthusiastically poised to celebrate tribal festivals. She views her photography as a means to tell stories she finds interesting and important. "Most of all, I want to use my pictures to help the people and places I document," she says.

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