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# MAMA TENGA

MY AFRICAN LIFE



**READING SAMPLE**  
**Chapter 6**

*Ouagadougou, one way*

I am sitting outside my little house in Zogona, a somewhat mixed suburb of Ouagadougou. Shabby mud huts stand next to villas covered with tiles of bright pink or sky blue. Donkey carts are parked alongside posh cars, rich peoples' daughters ride their own mopeds to school, the next-door neighbour, a shoe-shine boy, sets off on the road barefoot.

At home in the hammock lies little Panam with a slight temperature. He has already survived two years as a street kid, so I'm not particularly worried, but I always have to keep a watchful eye open. Death comes quickly in Burkina Faso.

A year after I took the decision on the beach in Côte d'Ivoire I arrived here literally with a plate, a spoon, a few clothes and twenty books. The most difficult thing about the entire move was the choice of books I would allow myself. They weigh the heaviest not only in terms of content but also in mass and I only brought classics that I would continue to cherish for a long time: Melville, Heine, Stendhal, Fontane, Tucholsky, Seneca and Balzac. It took many nights for me to make the choice.

Everything else was treated with a considerably greater degree of nonchalance, since I had already sold half of my goods and chattels for a song at various flea markets. With the sale of each item I heaved a sigh of relief. My twenty favourite possessions, pictures, sculptures had already been given away to friends and my son was free to take anything he wanted. The car, the motor bikes had long since gone when I finally parted from my bookshop – unfortunately to the wrong buyer because she couldn't pay in the end.

The house was already empty, my few bits and pieces together with the huge number of boxes full of medicine and clothes for the street kids were stowed into a minibus inside a container on board a cargo ship sailing somewhere on the high seas between Hamburg and Abidjan. What now?

For the last two months I moved into a tiny room that was once a storeroom above the shop and slept on a mattress until I managed to

sell the bookshop once more. I had already cancelled my health insurance and life insurance. Nearly everyone thought I had lost my marbles!

The other half of my household went to my husband. He thought nothing of my plan to go to Africa and applied for a divorce – how could I become a Muslim? He was against it. To his mind they were all terrorists and sorcerers. And Burkina Faso, such a dirty West African country!

He took what he needed for his own household and moved out. When he asked if I wanted the iron I replied haughtily for the first time, “No thanks! You have the ironing done for you in Africa.” Apart from that I offered no protest and let his anger pass over my head. I really did understand how he felt.

It was much worse for my son, John. I honestly thought he had left the nest, after all he was living with his girlfriend and only came by sometimes at weekends and these were always the most wonderful weekends. All three of us loved each other very much. I truly believed that our secret deal was that he accepted every freedom on my part just as I accepted his. Wrong! He was mad at me and felt abandoned. The joy of my departure was tinged with a drop of bitterness. John is the person I love most in this world. And yet I went ahead with my decision.

I also had strong feelings of guilt towards my parents, because I had always said that if ever anything happened to one of them I would bring the other to live with me. Now I wouldn't be able to keep this promise. I am still struggling with this even today.

Our last Christmas was spent in my almost empty house – nothing but a couch to sleep on, surrounded by a sea of little candles spread out on the floor – amid laughter and tears. Once more I had managed to get my own way and overcome every obstacle – but was I right? My friends prophesied the worst:

“You'll be back within two months, it won't work.” (I'm still here.)

“It's much too dangerous, you won't cope.” (I'm still alive.)

“You don't know anyone there.” (I knew many Africans, but no Whites.)

“You can't help Africa.” (Of course you can.)

My best friend broke off our friendship. She couldn't believe I had left yet another husband and even worse I wished to become a Muslim. It still makes me sad when I think of the many years we had been so close.

And yet there were other good friends who were concerned about me and brought love and best wishes and some money for the chil-

dren in Ouagadougou. Then there was one major sponsor who was also concerned about me but offered his entire support for my plans and believed in me. He even remembered the children in his will. Rolf H., we are eternally grateful!

Once a year for ten days I used to help out on a Mediterranean cruise. It was a music tour for jazz buffs only. I looked after the musicians on behalf of the organizers. Here again there were many sponsors. Of course these were people with plenty of money, but the fact that they were prepared to give it away is something that never fails to surprise me. So much trust! Many of them are still faithful friends today, although the jazz tour has long since ceased to be. What a pity because we always had such a great time, a lot of work, but the music was wonderful and I met so many nice people.

Meanwhile we had founded an association and were able to issue receipts for donations. A friend of mine, Antje K., volunteered to take over this expanding job. We owe her a big thank-you for the work that increased too much over the years for it to be done on a voluntary basis. With an easy mind I left it all in her capable hands and set off.

Having paid all my tax bills I received no more letters from the Inland Revenue. I had no water or electricity bills outstanding and no central heating oil to pay. Heating was now a thing of the past anyway. I had no one on my payroll, no loans to repay and did not owe anyone in the world a single penny. What a feeling! I lived on a shoestring, all my money being earmarked for my new work in Africa.

This was the only time in my life when I had no responsibility, financial or otherwise, towards anyone else.

I left my bookshop and on the way out I took a detective novel from the shelf for the journey. Simenon. Suddenly I panicked. My mother had her own bookshop, my sister still does. What about me? How was I going to survive without all of my books?

I shall never forget the day I went to buy my ticket. The words sounded so good in my ears: "Ouagadougou, one way!" Unlike a tourist or any other European I had no return ticket. I would now be living in the Sahel. Sahel in Arabic means "shore", the shore of the great Sahara just around the corner. And off I went to these foreign shores.

I sit beneath the canopy beside the kitchen door of my little rented house. It is a good place to sit because I can see the gate from here. The few plants I have are pleasing to the eye, bananas, lemon trees,

manioc plants and a small rose, struggling alone against the sun, delights me with little pink blossoms.

The day I moved in there were a few heavy spots of rain, what they call mango rain. From September to June there are only these few spots of rain that open the blossoms of the mango trees. The raindrops fell just to coincide with evening prayers and all my African friends welcomed this as a good omen.

With a feeling of contentment I went to sleep on my mat, since I did not yet have a bed. In fact I had nothing at all because my minibus was held up at customs. Next day Diarra Issa brought me a camping stove and a pot and most important of all, a mosquito net. Diarra was a friend of my son John, who really looked after me and came by every day.

It did not take me long to find out what my next task was. From the very beginning I had always been concerned about the problem of all the street kids. What could I do? I had to learn so much so quickly to be able to grasp the bare minimum.

Diarra Issa accompanied me on my fact-finding missions to learn about the street kids. Even the language was a major barrier, but I badly wanted to find out more. Where did they come from? Why were they here and not at home? What sort of drugs were they taking? How did they survive illness without money? Which gangs belonged together?

All of these boys lived from begging, petty theft and whopping lies. The stories I was told! In the meantime I know when to cast doubt and gradually I have become well-known across half the city. Now I am hardly taken in by anyone and I am skilled at recognizing false information. “C’est faux!”, I call out straight away, “ka sida” – that’s not true, that’s not how I talk to you! Grins all round and a new lie is thought up. But I remain firm, still smiling, I go on my way. The boys know that I check up on everything. I always go back to the villages with the children and look for their relatives. If what I’m told is true and if the boy really wants to change his life, then I will find somewhere for him to sleep and pay for an apprenticeship and his food, subject to constant monitoring. If he is absent just once without an excuse that is the end of our relationship. That’s how strict I am. I have no choice, because there are so many others waiting to be helped. It is not easy to find a master carpenter or a master tailor who is prepared to put up with it all, because all of us know that the boys are often notorious thieves and drugs are cheaper than food.

They sniff glue, they smoke ganja, a sort of local marijuana, and worst of all they inhale solvents, the cheapest option, that attack the brain within a very short time. Then there are medicines past their sell-by date smuggled in from Ghana and sold on the streets. Huge bags of valium they call bleu-bleu and other sedatives and stimulants are for sale on the markets or at traffic lights.

There are many crazy people wandering aimlessly around Burkina Faso, many of them former drug addicts. There are no psychiatric hospitals and no security wards. These sick people are left to their own devices and they are countless. The village communities still cannot deal with mental illness. The crazy people in town are often those who have been ostracized from their villages and they are quite literally lost. Some of them are particularly friendly and peaceful and often the people in the neighbourhoods where they sleep somewhere on the streets will give them food.

Among them I have some faithful friends who come running towards me cheerfully to tell me in their own slurring way about their life. Some of them speak excellent French or English and are obviously very well mannered and so you wonder where they have come from. But their initial appearance is always a bit of a shock. They either run around naked or they wear lots of clothes on top of each other, dirty and stinking. Their hair is long and matted, their fingernails several centimetres long. They practically never wash, which protects them from the heat or the cold. Only once did one of them smash the windscreen of my car with a huge manioc masher. It was a bitter loss because there was no windscreen repair shop here at the time.

Otherwise they are very peaceful, each with his own foible. The Ghanaman is always writing. If you give him money he throws it away. But when I give him paper or a pen, he is delighted and sings my praises in wonderful English. Then he sits for hours on end in the dirt without a care in the world. He says he is writing a history of Africa, but his writing is illegible and the sheets of paper are finally blown away by the wind.

There is one old man I am particularly fond of, covered in heaps of amulets, wandering along the streets wearing an old German army helmet. I give him some money and say to him in More: "Buy yourself something to eat." He smiles at me, his teeth sparkling in his greasy beard and he answers with utmost sympathy: "Don't you know how to cook?"

There are also the sad cases. Mentally deranged women are raped and their newborn children are found somewhere, often dead,

brought into the world alone by a woman who does not even know what is happening to her. I have raised one such child myself, a darling girl. Perhaps she has not inherited her mother's illness, perhaps she will be okay.

Some of the fetish magicians look for the hearts or brains of children for their magic potions, so the street is a dangerous place to hang out. Some children simply disappear, many die from drugs, some in gang fights fought with knives.

This poor society deals with theft as it did a thousand years ago. Thieves in town are beaten to death, either by guards or by the people themselves. Anyone who moves beyond the boundaries of society can reckon with the worst possible fate. The worst form of punishment has always been to be cast out of the family or the village. It used to be the same in Europe where people were declared "outlawed", ostracized and outcast. Nearly everyone here has little and so what little they have is important.

Meanwhile we have been cooperating with the police and gendarmerie for some years now to try and put an end to these tragic murders. There are educational plays and films to inform the public, but it still goes on.

The local prison, known as M.A.C.O. does not exactly conform to European standards, to put it mildly. Last year the police made a huge roundup and brought forty-three street kids to the young offenders' jail on charges of vagrancy. Here it often takes months for judgement to be passed and this time is not calculated as part of the sentence. For nearly six months, we, AMPO, and the Médecins sans frontières organization were the only ones who bothered about these children, fourteen of whom were younger than thirteen years old. They were living among thieves and murderers. The prison had no facilities for so many new intakes. There was not enough food, let alone medical care, blankets or pullovers.

I had contacted all the major organizations for human rights and for the rights of the child, all of which are represented in this poor country. But they all said: "No, that is not part of our mandate. We are here to dig wells." Or: "We are only responsible for organization." This is when I realized for the first time how fortunate we are with our Sahel e.V. association that has now been set up, because in such cases we only have to have special permission from the board in Germany and I can react accordingly. In the large organizations here in Burkina Faso there is no place for such emergencies and no item in the budget, everything is done according to the book and they cannot react without moving mountains. Their projects are

planned down to the last detail, so spontaneous help is out of the question. I was flabbergasted, I had no idea.

Down to work! For days on end we drove round the hotels and persuaded the owners to give us leftover food. We asked the wealthy business community for help and organized vitamins, soap and disinfectant. But most of all we went and talked to the children that no one visited and who had long been written off by their families.

Social services who actually should have been looking after them had no money, so they were coming to us for sacks of rice. Some of the bigger boys broke jail and were now on the police wanted list.

When the little ones were released after some months and with the help of Lawyers without Borders, we took each of them home and talked to their families. A few weeks later I found some of them back in their usual haunts in the area most notorious for street kids. I yelled at them so much they all ran off. One of them, only fourteen years old, died of his wounds shortly afterwards. He had been caught stealing. I was with him by his hospital bed when he died.

Next to me Panam stirs in his sleep in the hammock. Tété is just arriving back from the market. She has brought small cucumbers and sweet potatoes, the gate squeaks, she is carrying her purchases on her head. Tété is one of eleven children of a family that lives in two tiny rooms on the other side of the property and she is employed as caretaker by the owner.

Something is wrong. She is excited and drops her shopping. “Man toto,” she cries, “kien rogo wa!” – “Maman, come quickly!”, and off she runs.

I don’t stop to ask. Grabbing Panam, I rush indoors and shut the door. It doesn’t help because the metal doors are louvred for ventilation. Seconds later the house is enshrouded in dust. I can barely see my hand in front of me.

Panam gapes and says, “Maman, your hair has gone white!”

“Yours too, mon cher, and you’re much too young for that!”

And I had just done the cleaning this morning. That was a typical European reaction. Tété and her family don’t know whether this is just a cloud of dust or maybe a magic spell after all. There are large families of one tribe with magical powers who are able to travel from one place to another in a cloud of dust known as njonjossé. If you get in their way you will die ten days later.

Some time later Tété’s mother sits on the steps in front of her room, exhausted. How can we placate the magician? What do we

need in the way of sacrifices? Maybe a white chicken? I'll sacrifice one just to make sure.

The caretaker's family is modest and polite, their friends come and go and they spend their evenings sitting together chatting quietly around the small fire. It is good to have them there, because the mother now cooks for the eight street kids who have been living with me for months. In the beginning I had put them up in another compound but the neighbours of course didn't want this wild bunch of street kids and thieves, there were always problems, and although I always paid the rent on time, the landlord never stopped complaining. So one day I simply moved the entire bunch to my place, along with their blackboard, benches and their teacher. The large front room became their classroom and most of the kids slept on the terrace in front.

Oddly enough they seem to proliferate. Some people collect seashells. I somehow collect street kids and I don't have far to look. I find them in the most appalling situations and I simply cannot walk by. There is a saying here in Africa which goes: "Finding is not prohibited."

I had started with a homogeneous gang of boys. It was at the start of the rainy season and almost all of them were sick. They slept in the pouring rain under the shoemakers' stalls in Zogona. They promised to stop taking drugs and to learn to read and write and in return I gave them a roof over their heads, fed them and provided them with medicine. It was my first experiment. I am only glad it worked out more or less well, because at the time I was unable to distinguish between the differences in character and I made many mistakes. I didn't know enough about their background, about the ethnic issues and about how people live together in general in Burkina Faso.

It took me a long time to learn, but today I can read the signs and can assess the situation better. I see the dark shadows under the eyes of mothers who are much too thin, their veils frayed and worn from having been washed too often, their bony wrists indicating that they have given their food to their children, I see the state of their feet telling me of their long trek in search of food and aid, usually in vain. With the street kids the stains on their shirts tell of the drugs they take, the white of their eyes is red, rough voices and fidgety movements are symptomatic of their condition, even when they are sober. Considering age, ethnic group, origin and the propensity for lying, I am able to put together a picture of the person before me. I'm often right, much to the surprise of my colleagues and myself. I put it down to intuition.

But it took me a long time to get there. There were many nights of bitter and tearful disappointment. I couldn't accept that I was trying to please everyone and in the end one of them made off with the money we had put aside to buy food.

It just had to be Evariste, the brightest of them all, who did it and I caught him at it. I went to his blind father and asked him what I should do. "Throw him out! The kid's a loser!", he said. What I hadn't reckoned with, however, was the combined force of the rest of the group. They all appeared together in front of my kitchen door asking me to forgive him, he himself weeping heart-rending tears. What else could I do? So I gave Evariste another chance. He started his apprenticeship as a tailor and he actually went to work. One or two minor setbacks later and he became the children's spokesman at AMPO. Today he can fend for himself. It was a long road, but he made the most of the chance I gave him back then.

Others were not quite so wise. Again and again there were boys who came back home high on drugs and it got to the stage where I had to throw one of them out. They had decided to avoid the places where the street kids met, but their former friends stood right in front of our door with drugs in their pockets quite frequently. They were jealous of their friends who were now being looked after and did everything in their power to drag them once more into the gutter where they hung out. How could my boys resist the temptation? I tried with repeated discussions, talking to them for hours and with new attempts.

Later I was to become much stricter when it came to drugs. They really are the curse of the city. The drug dealers don't realize the harm they are doing. The fact that many children die of drugs is only one aspect. I've seen some of our former boys breaking in and stealing or threatening their own brothers. Apprentices high on drugs attacked their master tailors with machetes, some of them got their friends to beat up our tutors on their way home. Nearly all stabbings are drug-related and they are often fatal. As if there weren't enough people dying in this country already!

Afterwards everyone is very sorry, they cannot understand how such things can happen and they say: "It wasn't the real me." Who else?

This reaction taught me a lesson in upbringing. Everyone has to bear responsibility, even the children. These kids have first to learn what responsibility is. Since they didn't even want to look after themselves, they had to learn to be there for someone else. If they could be responsible for something or someone, this would slowly be

transferred back to themselves and they would learn that they too matter. This was my plan.

At that time I came across Sam Thomas. He was eight years old and backward in every respect. His mother was one of the mad people who wandered naked through the streets pelting people with stones. His uncle was crazy too. After the death of the father he sold the doors and windows to their hut along with all of Sam Thomas' clothes. I found him sick and half naked lying on a piece of cardboard. Without saying anything I took him home with me.

When I got back I handed him over to Abdul, the biggest of my hoodlums with a big mouth and tattoos and I told him in no uncertain terms that from now on this was his little brother. He had to wash him, feed him, sleep beside him and look after him in every way. I told him I had to go off on a trip and so I had chosen him to take on this responsibility. I said I'd considered all of the others carefully, but I knew that he was the only one who could take on this difficult job.

I entrusted him with the life of Sam Thomas and returned three days later, having spent the time in the village feeling very uneasy of course. And what do you think? Abdul, who had always been so cheeky and only came when he wanted something, turned up every evening with Sam Thomas, freshly washed, to say goodnight. He shared his food with him and carefully tucked him up in bed.

Obviously it made him think, because a few weeks later I found him sitting at my own sewing machine. He was secretly trying to work out this sewing business. We grinned at each other and both of us knew the score. Two days later Abdul started his apprenticeship and he now makes his living as a tailor in Abidjan.

And it didn't stop there. It almost came to fisticuffs over little Panam who came to us later. Suddenly everyone wanted to be a big brother. Even Dicko, the son of a blind beggar who came from a different tribe, the Rimaybe who had once been Fulbe slaves, was immediately monopolized.

Inoussa thought if Maman entrusts me with Dicko, I must be pretty good in her eyes, so I am somebody after all! I am capable. And if I am somebody, I can also learn to be a real man. I'll start an apprenticeship.

This was how their self-confidence grew, supported by hours of discussion and dealing with various setbacks. These setbacks were almost always drug-related.

At the end of the year I was living in my little house with seventeen boys between six and nineteen years old. Of them four are still

at school with AMPO, three left us last year and have formed a successful group of puppeteers, seven have been working regularly for years now as trained tailors, carpenters and mechanics.

Three of them didn't make it. They are in and out of jail and are still on the streets. They turn up at my door now and then and I give them a little money for food or for their fare home, but that's it. You cannot help everyone. It's sad, but true.

The eBook „Mama Tenga - My African Life“ is available in various formats and other languages, you'll find further information and more fine books at [www.nieswandverlag.de](http://www.nieswandverlag.de)

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