

THIRTY FOUR PARAGRAPHS ABOUT AFRICA**Text and photos by João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira**Senior Professor of the Tércio Pacitti Institut
of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*To get lost is to learn the way. African proverb**If you can visit only two continents in your lifetime, visit Africa – twice!*

R. Elliot

1 With its 30.3 million square kilometres (almost three times the size of Europe), the African continent is second only to Asia in size. The same is true of its population, which currently (September 2025) is around 1.6 billion, with an expected figure of four billion by 2100.



Somewhere in Central Africa

2 Africa is the cradle of humanity; our oldest ancestors, seven million years old, were born there. African as well – more precisely Ethiopian, considering today's political boundaries – is “Lucy”, the most famous human fossil of all, discovered in 1974 near the Red Sea.



Ethiopian girls

3 Inhabited for at least the last 5,000 years, the archaeological site of Volubilis, in northern Morocco, almost touching the Iberian Peninsula, maintains its appearance as a Roman city. However, in times before the Roman Empire, the region was integrated into the Carthaginian Empire, of which Africa still holds many memories. How can we forget, for example, Admiral Hanon, who, some 2,500 years ago, with his Carthaginian fleet, circumnavigated a considerable part of the African continent, thus inspiring Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Cabral, and so many other exponents of the Age of Discovery?



Volubilis

4 “Great empires are not maintained by timidity.”, said the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus.



Volubilis

5 “Experience is the teacher of all things.”, said Julius Caesar.



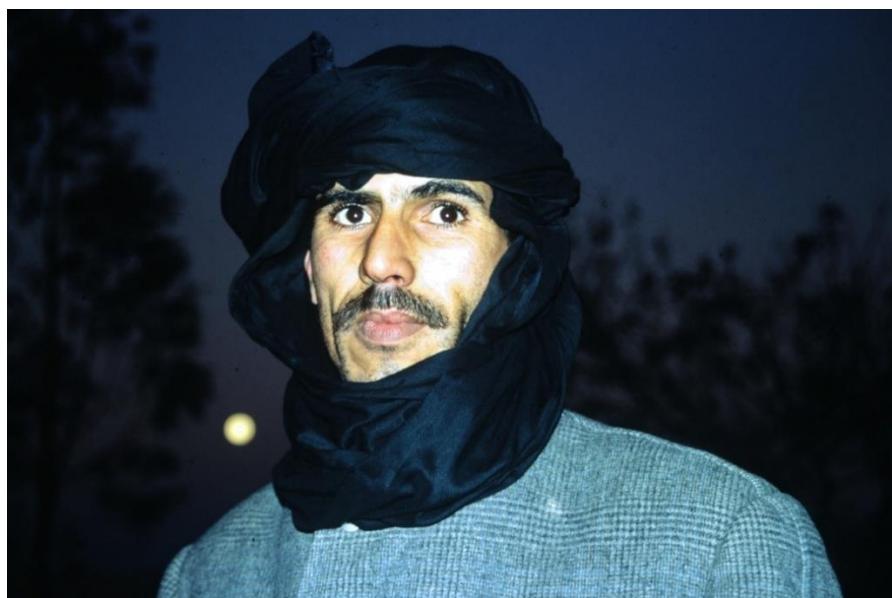
Volubilis

6 As Ryszard Kapuściński points out in one of his books, “The continent is too large to describe. It is a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos. Only with the greatest simplification, for the sake of convenience, can we say ‘Africa’. In reality, except as a geographical appellation, Africa does not exist.”.



Somewhere in North Africa

7 As Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) aptly put it, “Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant. We photographers deal with things that are continually disappearing, and once gone, there is no mechanism in the world capable of bringing them back. We cannot develop or copy memory.”.



A friendly driver I met in North Africa

8 African humans arrived in the Tanzanian archipelago of Zanzibar no less than 20,000 years ago, which, in archaeology and, above all, geology, is very little. It's almost adjacent to the mainland and not far from other African archipelagos, such as the Seychelles and Mauritius, as well as the gigantic Madagascar, the largest in Africa and the fourth largest in the world, behind only Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo.



The Zanzibar coast

9 Like many of his Berber companions, this man does not speak Arabic and is completely unfamiliar with the Indo-European languages. Descended from tribes that inhabited North Africa twelve millennia ago or more, he speaks Tamazigh, the generic name given to Berber languages (e.g., Riffian, Zuwara, Kabyle, etc.).



A Moroccan Berber

10 Ethiopian tradition (more precisely the *Kebrä Nagast*, a book that narrates the Solomonic origin of the emperors of Ethiopia) holds that the Ark of the Covenant is kept in the church of Our Lady of Zion, in the ancient city of Axum, located in northern Ethiopia.



The Ethiopian church of Our Lady of Zion

11 Situated in the southern foothills of the Atlas Mountains, Ouarzazate is called the “gateway to the desert” because, in that part of Africa, it marks the entrance to the Sahara. In the Berber language, “ouarzazate” (أُوْرَازَاتْ) means “place without noise” or “place where the earth does not shake”, given the absence of earthquakes, which are common in that mountain range which, stretching for over 2,500 kilometers, crosses the northern part of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.



Ouarzazate and its famous kasbah

12 Nomadic by nature, the Tuareg (who are one of the many variants of the Berber people) inhabit not only the Sahara, but also the Sahel, which is the intermediate belt of about 600 kilometers in average width and circa 5,400 kilometers in length that connects the solitary Saharan sands to the low vegetation of the savannas – with their isolated trees and shrubs, a modest precursor of the exuberance seen in the Congo Equatorial Forest, the second largest in the world, surpassed in size only by the Amazon Rainforest.



Surroundings of Timbuktu, Mali

13 “A photographer is like a cod, which produces a million eggs in order that one may reach maturity.”, said George Bernard Shaw. I would say photography, as a branch of visual arts, is matter of being in the right place in the right moment with the right point of view and with the right camera in our hands.



Namibia, southwest Africa

14 Here we are in the southern part of the Namibian Desert, more precisely at the salt and clay pan of Sossusvlei and its astonishingly beautiful surrounding high red dunes.



Sossusvlei, Namibia

15 “I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams...”, wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in one of his books. These are words I make my own.



Sossusvlei, Namibia

16 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry saw the desert as an environment where “something shines, something sings in that silence” and also as place that “hides a well”. Sometimes, as I could notice, the desert can also hide an invitation to pray and even to talk with God.



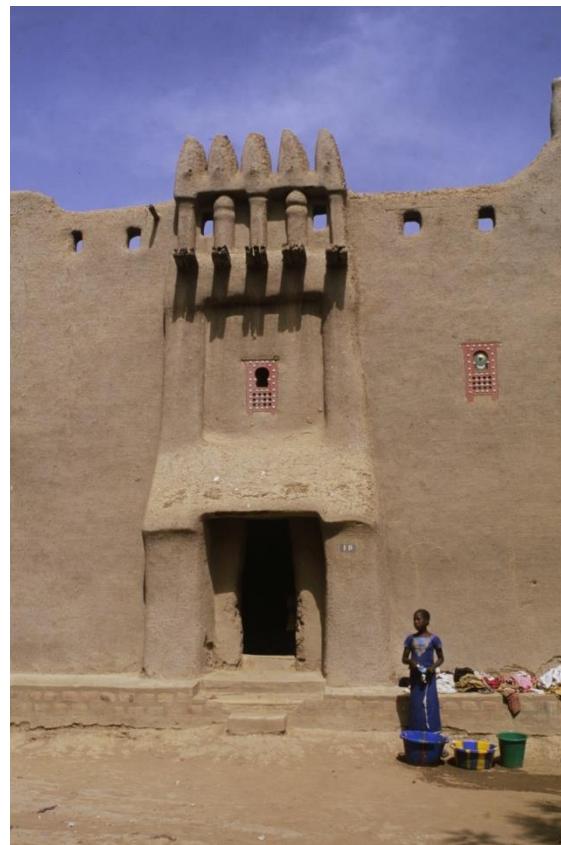
Somewhere in the Sahara

17 According to oral tradition, the Dogon culture has its origins around the Niger River, the main river of West Africa, which runs through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria, with an extension of more than 4.000 kilometres. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, they went to southern Mali, fleeing compulsory conversion to Islamism.



A Dogon village, in Mali

18 Timbuktu is said to be an exotic and mysterious old city. It definitely is!



Timbuktu

19 “A picture is worth a thousand words.”, as the saying goes.



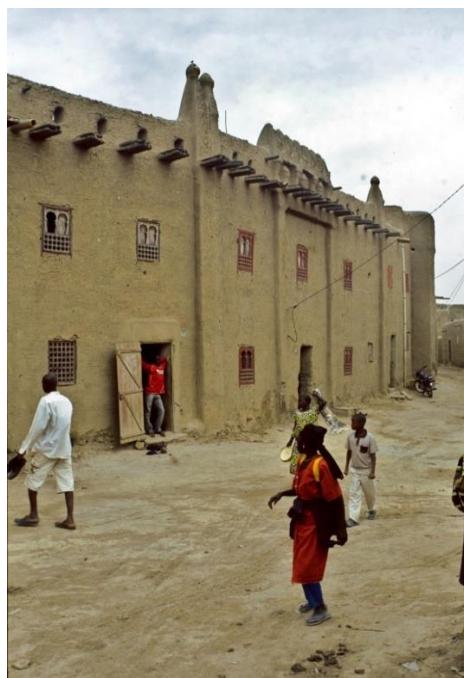
The Giza Plateau

20 “The truth of the desert is the silence.”, I read in a religious book I leafed through many years ago in Switzerland. The same sentence was written on the wall of a hotel I stayed in North Africa, on the occasion of my first trip in Africa, between 2000 and 2001.



“The truth of the desert is the silence.”

21 Africa, as we have seen, is the second biggest continent (Asia is ranked number one), covering 20% of our planet’s land area and 6% of its total surface area. In the year 2021, 1.4 billion people lived in Africa, a figure that accounts for circa 18% of the world’s human population.



Timbuktu, Mali

22 Situated 20 kilometers north of the Niger River, the main fluvial artery of West Africa, the city of Timbuktu is definitely a place involved in a great number of mysteries, legends and myths. One of them is that of being a place incredibly distant, hence the saying, “from here to Timbuktu”. As for me, who visited Timbuktu in 2010, it seemed a really distant place.



Timbuktu, Mali

23 These art the extensive ruins is Dougga, a Roman-Punic town in northern Tunisia. It was set on the crest of a hill from which one can see the olive plantations on the surrounding valleys.



Dougga, Tunis

24 In the past, Dougga must have been an important human settlement, whose urban character is shown by the richness and variety of its remains.



Dougga, Tunis

25 The vast majority of North Africans today profess Islam. Virtually all of them, however, are descendants of Christians who were enslaved by Muslims from Arabia or other forcibly Islamized countries.



Mother and son in Dougga

26 At least “every five minutes a Christian is killed for his faith. The vast majority of these martyrs are being killed in the Islamic world. (...) Although Muslim persecution of Christians is one of the most dramatic stories of our times, it is also one of the least known in the West.” (Raymond Ibrahim *Crucified Again. Exposing Islam’s New War on Christians*, New York/Washington, Gatestone Institute/Regnery, 2013, pp. 7-8).



Nephew and aunt in Dougga

27 Art has always been, is and will be a privileged means of social integration and inclusion for people who are disabled, always remembering that being disabled does not mean being unable.



A disabled Moroccan and the fruits of his art

28 This is Tahara Haïdara. As I wrote in an article, many years ago, “Tahara Haïdara was born in Mali, a country marked by poverty and numerous internal conflicts. She overcame the three challenges Africa imposed on her: poverty, disability, and being a woman. Married, mother of four, and owner of a hotel in Timbuktu, Tahara is also the founder of the Timbuktu Association of Disabled Women, for which she received funding from European philanthropic organizations. Together with her colleagues, she produces soaps and various handcrafted items.” (“Levanta-te e anda: duas palavras sobre o passado, o presente e o futuro dos deficientes na África”, in *Revista Educação Especial*, Santa Maria [Brazil], Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, v. 28, n. 52, May/August 2015).



Tahara Haïdara, in Timbuktu, her home town

29 These are Bill and Jimmy, the Canadian friends I met in my first visit to North Africa, in the year 2001. As Aristotle said, “Those who quickly show the marks of friendship to each other wish to be friends, but are not friends unless they both are lovable and know the fact; for a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not.”.



Ouarzazate, Morocco

30 “The major portion of Ethiopia lies in the Horn of Africa, which is the easternmost part of the African landmass. The territories that have frontiers with Ethiopia are Eritrea to the north and then, moving in a clockwise direction, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan and Sudan. Within Ethiopia is a vast highland complex of mountains and dissected plateaus divided by the Great Rift Valley, which runs generally southwest to northeast and is surrounded by lowlands, steppes, or semi-desert. There is a great diversity of terrain with wide variations in climate, soils, natural vegetation and settlement patterns.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopia#Geography>).



Ethiopia, seen from view from the window of the plane I was in

31 Where are they coming from? Where are they going to? What are they looking for? What are their dreams, their plans, their deeds?



Somewhere in Central Africa

32 Where are they coming from? Where are they going to? What are they looking for? What are their dreams, their plans, their deeds?



Somewhere in Central Africa

33 “The landscape changes. Rocks become increasingly rare. Now we walk on the sand. Two kilometres away are the dunes. In these dunes, small patches of low vegetation. I prefer the sand to the steel armour. Now it’s the blond desert. The Sahara. I think I recognize it.”, said Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in one of his books.



Malian *Sahel*, the geographic transition between the Sahara and the savannas

34 This is Mustafa, an artist I met in Essaouira, a Moroccan city visited by Jimi Hendrix in 1969, which until today is fuelled by the myths that thus emerged.



Mustafa and his mobile atelier