



BENIN

# KIDS FOR SALE

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COTONOU, DANTOKPA MARKET. STREET KIDS COLLECTING SMALL METAL  
PIECES AND OLD SHOES. THE SHOES WILL BE BURNED IN ORDER TO  
RECOVER THE METAL PARTS, WHICH LATER WILL BE SOLD AS SCRAP  
IRON FOR AROUND 30 CENTS OF A U.S. DOLLAR PER KILO. THE  
MARKET IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST IN WEST AFRICA AND REGULARLY  
VISITED BY TRAFFICKERS LOOKING FOR EASY-TO-SNATCH STREET KIDS



EVERY YEAR, BETWEEN 100,000 AND 200,000 KIDS ARE ESTIMATED TO BE TRAFFICKED FROM BENIN TO NEARBY NIGERIA. MANY OF THEM ARE STREET KIDS SNATCHED IN BENINESE MARKETS BY PROFESSIONAL TRAFFICKERS, WHO SELL THEM FOR UP TO 100 U.S. DOLLARS EACH. SOME ARE ACTUALLY SOLD TO TRAFFICKERS BY THEIR PARENTS FOR AS LITTLE AS 30 U.S. DOLLARS.

THE MAJORITY OF THE KIDS END UP WORKING IN SLAVERY CONDITIONS FOR A NIGERIAN MASTER, AND NEVER MAKE IT BACK TO THEIR HOMETOWN AND FAMILY. THOSE WHO MANAGE TO ESCAPE ARE REGULARLY ENTRUSTED BY HELPLESS BENINESE AUTHORITIES TO THE DON BOSCO NETWORK OF SHELTERS, SET UP BY THE SALESIANS IN THE MID 1990S AND THE ONLY ORGANIZATION IN THE COUNTRY WHICH ACTIVELY DEALS WITH THE ISSUE.

WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT THEIR YEARS OF SLAVERY, THE RESCUED KIDS TELL CHILLING STORIES, WHICH REGULARLY INCLUDE EPISODES OF PHYSICAL ABUSE AND TORTURE. JULY, A 19-YEAR-OLD KID, RECALLS A RECURRING PUNISHMENT: CUTS WOULD BE OPENED IN HIS FEET SOLES WITH A RAZOR BLADE, AND THE FRESH WOUNDS WOULD THEN BE SPRAYED WITH CHILI POWDER. BUT JULY AND THE MANY OTHERS LIKE HIM MIGHT JUST BE THE LUCKY ONES: SEVERAL OF THE KIDS ARE NOT TAKEN TO NIGERIA TO WORK, BUT, ACCORDING TO ALL GOVERNMENT SOURCES, LIKE THE CHIEF JUDGE OF PORTO-NOVO'S JUVENILE COURT, TO BE SACRIFICED, THEIR HEADS AND HEARTS USED IN TRADITIONAL RITUALS OF BLACK MAGIC.

SÉMÉ-KRAKE. STREET KIDS WHO MAKE A LIVING BY COLLECTING SCRAP IRON TAKE A NAP AT A PLACE BELONGING TO A NIGERIAN BUYER AFTER DELIVERING THE METAL THEY COLLECTED DURING THE MORNING. SCRAP IRON USUALLY FETCHES AROUND 30 CENTS OF A U.S. DOLLAR PER KILO



SÉMÉ-KRAKE, PASSENGERS ON BOARD A COLLECTIVE TAXI IN SERVICE BETWEEN BENIN AND NIGERIA. TRAFFICKERS OFTEN USE TAXIS TO TAKE KIDS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BORDER





SÉMÉ-KRAKE. TWO KIDS WHO WERE ABOUT TO BE TRAFFICKED INTO NIGERIA HAVE BEEN RESCUED AND TAKEN TO THE POLICE. HERE, LOCAL POLICE STATION CHIEF AKODJENOU WAIDI (RIGHT) IS QUESTIONING THEM IN THE PRESENCE OF THOMAS HOUNKANRIN, A DON BOSCO EDUCATOR WHO REGULARLY PATROLS THE AREA TRYING TO PREVENT TRAFFICKING



SÉMÉ-KRAKE, THE BORDER POST BETWEEN BENIN AND NIGERIA. THE BORDER IS EXTREMELY POROUS AND POORLY CONTROLLED BY A CORRUPT POLICE FORCE, WHICH MAKES IT AN EASY PASSAGE FOR TRAFFICKERS ATTEMPTING TO CROSS INTO NIGERIA WITH KIDS

SÉMÉ-KRAKE, A STREET KID IN THE DON BOSCO BARRACK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MARKET. THE SCARS ON HIS HAND MIGHT BE THE RESULT OF HARD WORK OR PHYSICAL ABUSE, AS OFTEN HAPPENS WITH STREET KIDS. THE BARRACK IS OPEN EIGHT HOURS A DAY TO GIVE KIDS TEMPORARY SHELTER



PORTO-NOVO, CATCHI NEIGHBORHOOD. STREET KIDS IN THE DON BOSCO SHELTER. THE STRUCTURE SHELTERS AROUND 60 SO-CALLED "FIRST PHASE" KIDS, THOSE WHO HAVE ACCEPTED TO LEAVE THE STREET AND TRY TO GET BACK TO A NORMAL LIFE. MOST OF THEM HAVE BEEN ABUSED AND SHOW DEEP PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES





SÉMÉ-KRAKE, A STREET KID IN THE MARKET A FEW HUNDRED METERS FROM THE NIGERIAN BORDER



COTONOU, STREET KIDS IN THE DON BOSCO SHELTER. THE STRUCTURE SHELTERS AROUND 90 KIDS, PROVIDING THEM WITH FOOD AND A PLACE TO SLEEP AT NIGHT. THE NEXT DAY, THEY ARE FREE TO GO BACK TO THE STREET, WHERE THEY WOULD MAKE A LIVING BY WORKING OR STEALING. THIS IS A PRELIMINARY PHASE CONCEIVED TO GRADUALLY WIN THEIR TRUST, AND EVENTUALLY CONVINCING THEM TO LEAVE THE STREET FOR GOOD. MOST OF THESE KIDS HAVE BEEN ABUSED AND SHOW DEEP PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES



PORTO-NOVO. THOMAS KOOWAKANOU, 16, AND HIS FATHER EZECHIEL, 53, IN THE MAKESHIFT CHURCH OF THEIR NATIVE VILLAGE IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY. THE FATHER SOLD THOMAS TWICE TO A TRAFFICKER WHO BROUGHT HIM TO NIGERIA AND FORCED HIM TO WORK IN SLAVERY CONDITIONS



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COTONOU. JOEL DOUANGO, 26, HAS BEEN THE LEADER OF A CRIMINAL GANG SPECIALIZED IN SNATCHING AND TRAFFICKING KIDS INTO NIGERIA FOR AT LEAST FIVE YEARS. HE QUIT IN 2013, AFTER HIS FIRST SON WAS BORN. HE SAYS THAT AT LEAST TWO BENINESE POLICEMEN WERE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE GANG'S OPERATIONS





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COTONOU, DANTOKPA MARKET. A STREET KID HOLDS ON TO CHRISTOPHE DOSSA, ONE OF THE TWO DON BOSCO EDUCATORS ASSIGNED TO THE MARKET. DANTOKPA IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MARKETS IN WEST AFRICA AND REGULARLY VISITED BY TRAFFICKERS LOOKING FOR EASY-TO-SNATCH STREET KIDS. DOSSA OFTEN PATROLS IT AND SPEAKS TO THE KIDS, TO SENSITIZE THEM ABOUT THE RISKS OF BEING TRAFFICKED TO NIGERIA

COTONOU, STREET KIDS WORKING FOR A MECHANIC IN  
SEMI-SLAVERY CONDITIONS WASH A MOTORCYCLE





COTONOU, STREET VENDORS SHELTERED UNDER A PLASTIC SHEET ON A DAY OF HEAVY RAINS IN DANTOKPA MARKET. DANTOKPA IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MARKETS IN WEST AFRICA AND REGULARLY VISITED BY TRAFFICKERS LOOKING FOR EASY-TO-SNATCH STREET KIDS

SÉMÉ-KRAKE. KIDS BRING ASHORE JERRYCANS HALF FULL WITH GASOLINE SMUGGLED FROM NEARBY NIGERIA, AND DROPPED BY THE SMUGGLERS A FEW HUNDRED METERS FROM LAND, SINCE THE HEAVILY LOADED BOATS COULD NOT MAKE IT BACK TO SHORE THROUGH THE BIG SWELL. GASOLINE SMUGGLING FROM NIGERIA IS A WIDESPREAD ACTIVITY IN THIS BORDER TOWN. STREET KIDS ARE WIDELY USED TO RECOVER THE JERRYCANS, ONE OF THEM DROWNING EVERY NOW AND AGAIN. SMUGGLERS PAY THEM FOUR CENTS OF A U.S. DOLLAR PER RECOVERED JERRYCAN





SÉMÉ-KRAKE. STREET KIDS WHO MAKE A LIVING BY COLLECTING SCRAP IRON HAVE COME TO DELIVER THE METAL AT A PLACE BELONGING TO A NIGERIAN BUYER, WHERE IT IS WEIGHED. SCRAP IRON USUALLY FETCHES AROUND 30 CENTS OF A U.S. DOLLAR PER KILO



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