

## Forcible Return to Bamako

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The elderly yellow taxi zigzags at full speed through the packed streets of Bamako. Mahamadou casts an anxious eye at his watch. Flight Air France 796 is scheduled to land in twenty minutes. The sun has already gone down but the capital is still shrouded in an acrid fog. Bamako-Sénou airport is a long drive away yet, through the sprawling southern suburbs. The passengers that Mahamadou is on his way to meet are not relatives. They are not friends either. Mahamadou neither knows what they look like nor what they are called. They are unregistered Malian immigrants who have been deported from France.

Two years ago, Mahamadou Keita, 36, a sinewy figure in western clothes, was also expelled from Paris to Bamako. He is only too aware of the deportees' distress on their return to Mali. *"When they get here, they don't want to talk to anyone, least of all their family. They feel ashamed."* Their nearest and dearest are seldom aware of these sudden, unforeseen returns. It is a Malian police officer who lets Mahamadou know they're on their way. Sometimes, after several years abroad, the unregistered Malian immigrants have lost touch with their home country. They frequently land in Bamako without a cent to their name.

Tied up and handcuffed, flanked by three policemen who would not let him out of their sight *"even to go to the washroom"*, Mahamadou has a clear memory of his deportation. *"Sometimes the police use chloroform to keep you quiet. By the time they arrive in Bamako, the deportees' hands are swollen from the handcuffs."* The French police drop the deportees in the arrivals hall and immediately board the same plane back to Paris. The Malian police have no particular facilities to cater for the deportees. Only group arrivals on chartered flights are followed up by the local authorities. Unlike Spain, France no longer charters entire flights to Bamako and now prefers to deport by degrees, with seldom more than four clandestine immigrants per plane.

*"People arrive every day. We registered 475 Malians who were deported from Europe last year, 173 of them from Paris"*, explains Mahamadou, as the taxi emerges from the dimly-lit lanes of the working-class Faladié district. *"In Mali, few people have really grasped the truth behind these deportations. Young people aren't aware of the dangers of immigration, particularly for those who risk their lives crossing the Sahara."*

To provide aid for the clandestine immigrants on their return to Bamako, Mahamadou has founded the Association for Malian Deportees (known as AME in French). A tiny office in the heart of Bamako. One computer, a desk and a cupboard. Even the small number of active members – volunteers – can hardly fit into the room. They often have to hitch a lift to the airport. Depending on funds, the association also sometimes manages to cover the cost of the journey back to the deportee's village. The AME does try to stay in touch with them but they have a tendency to disappear: *"Sometimes they suspect us of being in league with France."* The volunteers try to keep a written track of the migrants' progress.

Mahamadou has also kept the account of his deportation. His testimony starts like this:

*"My name is Keita Mahamadou. I was born on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1971 in Kourounikoto in the Kita circle. I left for France when I was 18, through the official, legal channels..."*

For fourteen years, Mahamadou worked in the Paris area in the clothing, events and restaurant industries. He rented an apartment for “567 euros a month” and paid income tax. “*Every three months I had to go to the police headquarters to renew my visa.*” It was there that he was arrested. “*On Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2005*” he recalls precisely. Mahamadou, with no family in France, did not have a valid resident’s permit.

When Mahamadou landed in Bamako, a female Malian passenger gave him 10 euros for a taxi to the center of town. It was then that he came up with the idea of launching an association to greet Malian deportees at the airport and provide information regarding the problems of emigration. “*On their return, the deportees have lost their dignity and have no one to talk to*”, sighs Mahamadou. “*They remain in Bamako until a solution can be found.*” More often than not, the clandestine immigrants have only one idea in mind when their feet touch the tarmac: to go straight back again.

Mahamadou is finding it difficult to adjust to his new life in Bamako. He has no diplomas and jobs are few and far between. “*I feel like a foreigner, like a fish out of water. I seem to have been holding my breath for the last two years. And yet I do my best to adapt. But there are days when I can’t cope... Here, when you’re a deportee, people point accusing fingers at you. I get called ‘Frenchman! Frenchman!’ or else ‘Toubab’... When I speak Bambara, people make fun of me; I’ve got a French accent and Malian Bambara has moved on since I left.*”

All around the airport, illicit street vendors play cat and mouse with the police. A number of minibuses belonging to Bamako’s elegant hotels shuttle back and forth. People pray on rugs splayed out in the car park. A handful of youths hassle the tourists who have just landed, offering to serve as their guide for a few CFA francs. Mahamadou makes his way towards the arrivals board. He spots two men leaning against the twisted trunk of a mango tree. Following a five-minute exchange, he returns to the airport car park accompanied by a man of about forty, dressed in a thick white sweater and denim jacket. There were four deportees on the flight that evening. Three of them have already disappeared into thin air. That leaves Sagui Sissoko, who has accepted Mahamadou’s help. He seems totally lost, with his glazed look and stumbling gait.

Mahamadou takes him by the arm and guides him toward the taxi, which is parked at the far end of the car park, well away from the hurly-burly of the airport and its over-zealous policemen. Sagui, dehydrated, noisily drains a small bottle of cold water, its plastic contracting with a crackling sound as he sucks it dry. Sitting on the car hood, he drags on a cigarette, his eyes lost in the spirals of smoke. Sagui spent seven years in Paris, with no legal papers, working on a building site in the rue du Sentier in Paris. A police check and all the unregistered workers were placed under arrest. Sagui found himself in the Versailles detention center. He was forbidden to return to his room. No one was informed of his arrest. One week later he found himself aboard a flight bound for Bamako. His mind elsewhere and his pockets empty. Disoriented, desperate, he brandishes a bunch of keys: “*This is the key to my room in Paris, in the hostel. I’ve left everything there*”, murmurs Sagui, his eyes misting over. In the pocket of his worn jeans are a loyalty card from a Parisian supermarket and a two-euro coin. Not even enough to take a taxi to the center of Bamako.

The loudspeakers in the airport announce the take-off of the Air France flight back to Paris. Sagui frowns. He becomes agitated. He mumbles in Bambara that he must at all costs get his room key to his brother, who lives in Paris. An opportunity to get hold of some of his personal

effects but above all his money – he won't consider facing his family without it. A female acquaintance from Bamako just happens to be taking a flight to Paris tonight. A friend who was due to bring him a letter and knew nothing of his arrest... But the plane is already soaring up into the night sky. Sagui will have to wait.

It is 10 p.m. Sagui finally decides to get into the taxi with Mahamadou. No one knows he is back. They make for the northern suburbs, where Sagui has some cousins with whom he has reluctantly agreed to spend the night. It takes over three-quarters of an hour to cross the capital. His eyes like saucers, his jaw set, Sagui looks as though he hails from another planet. The air is stifling. It is still 35 degrees. Every so often, silhouettes can be made out lying on the uneven sidewalks in a vain attempt to find some sleep. The taxi weaves in between the shining Japanese motorcycles tearing along the boulevards. Bamako has changed a lot in the last seven years. Sagui has lost his bearings. As the taxi delves deeper into the northern areas of the town, the street lights dwindle and the asphalt disappears as though swallowed up in the ochre dust of these city outskirts. On the brow of a hill, the chauffeur turns off the engine, shakes his head resignedly and sighs. The road is no longer passable. He lowers the window and asks a passer-by for directions. Sagui will have to make his own way from now on. With 1000 CFAs in his pocket (1.50 euros), he turns northwards and fades into the distance. Alone. Within a few seconds he has disappeared into the night.