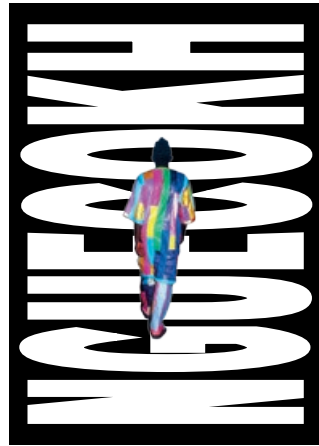


Press release
Nguecokh by Tom Huber

Photographer Tom Huber and designer Christof Nüssli travel to the small Senegalese village of Nguecokh in the Saloum river delta about 200 kilometres South of Dakar. They return with portraits full of mystical and poetic beauty, a rare vision of rural West-African life from a secluded sub saharan settlement – and many questions. For months, they exchange voice messages with their host Mamadou, the village teacher. They discuss climate change, polygamy, and religion. He describes the challenges in the education and health systems and recounts old folktales of trees and woods, and charts Nguecokh's path to the future.

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been making his own art and music as well as working
on various international assignments (photography and
music performance/composition).

TEXT FROM THE BOOK:

N G U E C O K H
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October 2018. After fourteen, fifteen hours of driving, it is already pitch dark, we are bumping across the empty steppe in the Saloum Delta, some 200 kilometres south of Dakar in a Mercedes station wagon that has been converted into a taxi-van. In front the chauffeur, in the back four young men and us two backpackers: shaken up, tired, with sinking feelings about this ride into the black nothingness of the night.

It is around eleven when the taxi stops at a collection of straw and mud huts and the driver laughs: this is Nguecokh. «What are you doing here?» asks a guy who happens to be passing by, with friendly astonishment in his voice. We are asking ourselves the same question, gazing into the dark, sandy emptiness around us. We had assumed that there would surely be a guesthouse at our destination. A bar perhaps, a kiosk, something. We say we have Mamadou's phone number. We had met his brother at a service station back in Dakar. Oh, Mamadou, sure, he knows him, he's the village teacher. It's already late and we've not announced our visit. But what else could I do? I dial the number – and hear a phone ring nearby.

Mamadou steps out of the darkness, greets us like old acquaintances and invites us in. We enter his plot, a small square between three shanties. It is dark, with the TV the only source of light. It is October, the time of the Grand Magal, a kind of Senegalese hajj, a pilgrimage not to Mecca but to Touba, in the west of the country. These are festive days here, like Christmas. That's why everyone is still awake: Mamadou's best friend Laity, Mamadou's three wives and the twelve children aged two to sixteen. Women and children eat from a large bowl on the ground. Of course we are invited. Like the other men, we sit on plastic chairs and eat couscous from plates next to the chairs at our feet. In the background, TV reports from Touba on an Arabic channel. Only thanks to solar panels does the extended family have two hours of television in the evening; the village has no electricity supply at that point.

Mamadou is about the same age as me, around forty, but seems much more grown up. A loving, caring, sober man. He explains a lot, repeats himself, summarises what has been said to make sure that we really understand everything despite our poor French. The teacher, the head of the family, pushes through. Importance lies in his words, he's very correct.

The next morning the place reveals itself: about 1000 people live in Nguecokh, a stretched-out village, surrounded by sand and a few sculptural trees. Scattered everywhere are groups of women and children shelling peanuts. They seem cheerful, keeping up a bantering manner. Among themselves. With the children. And the children among themselves.

The days take their course with conversations and walks. Our existence is soon strangely normal. First, the children ask for photos. Then the adults want to pose too. And soon I am the village photographer. The people are remarkably cool and confident in front of the camera. Their self-presentation is self-confident, but not vain. Proud, but also self-deprecating. Just as accessible as unapproachable. Everything I always look for in portrait photography at home. Here, this emerges as if by itself.

Back in Zurich, when the pictures come out of the lab, I realise that a project has spontaneously emerged. The self-portrayal of the people and my artistic handwriting result in a common language. This interplay grips me.

April 2019. Six months later, I appear before Nguecokh's village council with the publisher Christof Nüssli and the idea of a photobook. The Chef de Village, the village preacher, the medicine man, the king and the two of us sit in a circle. Mamadou makes a formal introduction in Serer, the local language. Then it's up to us to make our request in speech-breaking French: A photobook with my pictures, seeking the balancing act between documentation and art, accompanied by a text, in which the villagers describe the history of Nguecokh and its everyday life.

It is deemed positive to be able to make one's voice heard. In particular, it would be an opportunity to tell the Islamic world about the local place of pilgrimage, a forest with spirits that one can ask for rain. It would also be good to use the book to apply for funds for various projects: the renovation of the school, electricity for the village. In the end, they all think: Mais oui!

So I set about taking pictures, 500, that is the limit I set myself. Two to four per person portrayed, very reduced. I wander through the village and the fields and photograph my acquaintances. Word of our project spreads, people come invite me to take their pictures, and I approach others. Some of the photos come about in quiet moments between the portrayed and me, others accompanied by a crowd of children, onlookers and spontaneous assistants. After a week,

**all the Velvia slide films are exposed with my Fujifilm
6x9cm camera.**

Once again, after returning to Switzerland, I am fascinated by the joy of self-expression that speaks from the pictures. But as much as I rejoice in this presence, I distrust my interpretation. I sense the danger of a romanticised, kitsch-infested portrayal of Africa by a clueless white Westerner.

I wonder what the people in Nguecokh will say about the pictures. And about how they organise their society. How they cut a path through the present from deeply-rooted traditions that seems so wonderful to me – but into what kind of future? What are the people striving for? How does their concept of happiness differ from mine? What will happen when everyone there is hooked on the internet too? Will all the customs and myths, the legends about the trees and forests in and around the village disappear?

It is along these lines that a North-South long-distance dialogue between Zurich and Nguecokh ensues for several months. My old friend Tapha, a Senegalese who has lived in Switzerland for a long time, comes to my aid as a translator – linguistically as well as culturally. Sometimes the mobile phone connection lasts long enough for a conversation. Mostly, though, we send voice messages back and forth. Almost always we communicate with Mamadou, occasionally he gets additional statements for us.

These voices from Nguecokh now accompany my pictures from the south of Senegal in this volume. If there is one thing that will stay with me forever from these statements, of my time in Nguecokh, it is this: Here in the West, we care so much about the I and so little about the we. Merci, Nguecokh, et au revoir!

Tom Huber, June 2021

When you come to Nguecokh, you won't know who lives in which house.

We eat, talk, laugh together. We live together, all of us, not even in groups. The older ones discuss with the young ones, the men with the women. We belong together and we live these relationships every day. We help each other. If the neighbouring family has nothing to eat, you share everything you have. If a family has a bad harvest, you will share your food with them. Our parents tell us that in the past there were only common granaries. Nobody knew who contributed how much grain. To this day, we take care of each other. We live this solidarity every day. We are poor, it's true, but guarding our dignity is more important to us. During the winter months, we organise events so that people can get to know each other. When we are faced with a problem, we organise an event to solve it. We have an arena for parties. Everyone goes there, we sing, dance, laugh. It's crazy! Despite the poverty, despite everything! If you are poor and you don't try to overcome that poverty, you just create problems for yourself.

Voice message, 8.2.2020

Our young people also use mobile phones! They spend all their time on it! You can say that it is a worldwide phenomenon!

People have bought smart phones to be able to surf the internet. This has influenced the way of life of the inhabitants. Through the use of the internet, they have been able to access other types of information and knowledge. The problem here is that there is almost no electricity. Sometimes you have to walk half a mile to the next socket. Network coverage is also a problem. Most of the time we have very bad reception.

We now see the young people of the internet generation saying they want to travel, unlike the older generations. Our weapon against the bad influences of the internet is education, awareness, attitude. Our aspirations will always remain modest, because we learn not to aspire to something we cannot achieve anyway. The young may be curious, but not really willing to sacrifice their lives to get to Europe by any means possible.

And since this village has existed, I think there has only been one citizen who has gone to live in Europe. One! We believe that we can succeed here. There are young people who are confident about the future. We are not thinking of leaving Senegal to work elsewhere. We think that we can transform our village and develop it in the right direction.

Voice message, 18.2.2020

Hello, this is Ngor Senghor. I believe that the internet is very important for the advancement of Sererians¹, in general and at the village level. In our generation, communication was difficult. When someone died, we would go on horseback, on bicycles or even on foot to the surrounding villages to inform people of the death. That was the job of young healthy men. Often we also used the tam-tam², and from the sound of it we could tell if it was a death, a drowning, a misfortune or even good luck. Especially for the young, the internet is a blessing. We used to miss occasions because we received the invitation too late. Now communication has developed. The internet has fundamentally improved people's lives. Whether in Dakar or in Nguecokh, I believe that everyone benefits from the internet.

Voice message, 18.2.2020

We buy medicines together.

In a village of 1000, there is always someone who has a health problem. We don't have a pharmacy, only a health centre, where we can treat minor ailments. For more serious problems, we go to Djilor, our capital. But people don't necessarily have the means. It is expensive to get treatment there. Because everything is paid for there. The fees are so high... We also use traditional medicine, but it can be dangerous. Some people use the wrong dosage.

It's a problem in Nguecokh if someone gets sick at night. To go to Djilor, you have to call a car. And if the illness is serious, you can imagine ... People have died because we didn't have the means to give them medical care in time.

We have an association in the village, the health committee, which I chair. The association has a fund that we sometimes release to buy medicines for the people. But this fund does not have much money. We scrape together enough to buy medicines like paracetamol and basic health care items. We organise solidarity events to raise money. Once a year for example, the wrestling show. Senegalese wrestling, «la lutte», is a traditional activity in Senegal, which has now evolved into a very popular national sport.

When we practise it, we know why.

Voice message, 20.2.2020

In Nguecokh, the first classroom was built in 1997 by the villagers.

Before 1997, the children had a very long way to go to school, they had to go to Djilor. So the people decided to build a classroom. We filed an application with the National Education Inspectorate and were granted permission. The following year, the Inspectorate built two classrooms for us and then for six years, every year, they added another. Now they've stopped. The state has withdrawn. Except

sometimes they send us teachers. There are so many of them. But everything else is done by the parents, they buy the supplies, everything.

There is also what we call basic education. In my opinion, one of the reasons for this education is that before, there were no French schools, or even Koranic schools. This is why our elders applied this form of education and it continues to this day. When the boys are old enough, depending on each child, it may be six, seven or up to twelve years of age, we take the children into the bush for one or two weeks.

In the past, it used to be at least a month.

During this stage of their lives, the children learn from their elders how to live together, that is, the values of Serer society, namely honesty, bravery, solidarity, and respect for one's neighbour, the laws and regulations of community life. All this is taught. Once back at home, we consider the child to be free, it can play, independent of adults. We will not intervene. But if there is work to do, the child will have to stop playing and will be guided by an adult.

For the boys, this education includes circumcision, which must necessarily take place after the basic training in the bush. After two weeks or a month, a feast was organised. Each parent would have to kill a goat or a sheep or even a cow for their young circumcised child. The children have to come to the palaver tree and surround it seven times. The villagers dance and sing. This ceremony is ritually practised to this day.

Voice message, 18.11.2020

The palaver tree³ stands in the middle of the village.

The girls too make the rounds of the trees when they get married. Before a new bride enters her husband's house, she will have to make three rounds of the palaver tree, instead of seven. Here too, we believe that she will now move on to the next stage; she will now be at the level of married women. She will adopt a new behaviour towards her husband, towards her new home. For this, people gather under the tree until dawn. All generations go there, it is a place of worship.

The brave warrior Diegane Ni Ni Senghor who founded the village in 1731 came here to look for a new home. He chose this spot because, on the way, he met two small animals, and they were soaked. So he thought that if he dug a well here, he could find water. There were also bushes, two small bushes. One of these bushes has become the big tree of the village, another one is behind the house of the village chief. These are the oldest trees in Nguecokh.

Nobody would dare to cut them down.

The same goes for the sacred forest nearby. It started to grow long before I was born! When I was small, we

still knew what we call Pangool⁴. We went to this forest to make sacrifices. The people from the surrounding villages also came to pray, to talk to the invisible beings there. In times of drought, they asked for rain – and they got it! This really is a deeply sacred forest! It has been around for a long, long time. And it has an interesting story, the legend of Dialane. It is said that there are mystical beings, mostly invisible, only a few initiates can see them. These beings collect the water and hold it back. If the village was threatened by drought, there was a ritual, to the sound of the tam-tam, with dances. The initiates would address the beings, lamenting the lack of water, calling for rain.

And often it rained a few hours later.

To this day, the people of Nguecokh depend on the rain, because the tap water is very hard. We can only drink the collected rainwater. Hauling it in is hard work that requires a lot of strength. But we have to do it.

But on the subject of the legend of Dialane, I'd like to ask my brother for comment. He knows much more about all these stories than me.

Voice message, 12.12.2019

Hello, this is Mamadou's brother, Ngor Snghor. The history of the sacred forest is explained by the way of life of the Serer people. Their life is closely linked to nature. Whatever problems they face, in the home, in health or economic worries, they have turned to nature. The legend of Dialane, the small forest near Nguecokh, speaks to this. According to it, there was a great drought, not only here, but in the whole country. Everywhere, the initiates were called upon to help. Two of these wise men came to Nguecokh. One was a woman from Ndorong Sérère, she had a vision of a forest in this area, where all the rain came from. The other initiate was from Sine and he too had a vision of a small grove. They decided to do something. Both were saltigués, high priests, the religious masters of ceremony of the Serer people. They have the ability to speak with the supreme universal deity, Kooh. In the end, four saltigués came to Nguecokh and hunted down the invisible beings that stopped the rain.

Voice message, 12.12.2019

It's strange. Many things are changing, especially the soils. We have found: they are getting salinated. Where we used to farm, the salt has moved in.⁵ And the trees! There is a forest in Nguecokh that is threatened by the salinization of the soil. You could say that all this is a consequence of climate change, and Nguecokh is not spared. It is the sea that is advancing because of global warming. There is an arm of the sea nearby that is taking up a lot of surface area now. Yes, it is becoming a danger for our country, for our village.

There is a photo that you have sent, of trees on which is mounted a woman who is collecting the leaves of the baobab. You know, the leaves of the baobab are very important in the preparation of couscous, which is a popular traditional meal. Those leaves contain a lot of vitamins, they are very good for us.

Really, our habitat is changing. The termite mounds, for example, a refuge also for other animals, for snakes or bees. I remember very well how we used to climb these mounds as children to look for honey.

But now, with soil erosion, they have become rare. What we are doing at our level are reforestation campaigns.⁶ This year, we reforested a lot of fields. This is the type of action we are doing with the modest means we have at our disposal. We have specialists who come every year to raise awareness among the population. This awareness can help us to reforest. Beyond that, it makes us aware that this is a national and international phenomenon.

It doesn't rain often and only so many manage to farm successfully. The lack of means is a blockage. We dig wells for gardening, but it is expensive. Sometimes you dig a well and the water is salty. We organised ourselves in associations. We have set up collective centres; the young people have created the Development Association. The government sometimes gives funding, but getting it is a problem. You have to get into politics to get it. Here we don't have a political leader. We don't have politicians, we only know how to work.

Voice message, 20.11.2020

A man with two or three wives has more hands for agricultural work.

We live from agriculture and working the fields requires a lot of resources. The more hands you have, the more work gets done. The more work gets done, the more you produce. It is this mentality that has led us to be polygamous.

The first wife is usually a gift from the parents. They choose her and arrange the marriage with the bride's parents. You have to marry that woman; it's a matter of respect. We can't refuse that. The next wife, the man chooses himself, someone you love.

When you get married, you stay with her for two or three years before you take a second wife. The first one will not be surprised, they are aware of that. Now the man has to be fair. You spend two days with one, then two days with the other. If you give 10,000 francs to one, you also give 10,000 to the other. Everything you do for one, you will also do for the other. You live in a community together. We eat together. For two days, one cooks and the other does nothing. Then it's the other way round. Two days I am with one, two with the other. That's how I live with them.

However, polygamy is disappearing with the younger generations. Intellectual circles in the cities disapprove of polygamy. Maybe it is because they are in contact with other cultures. But here in Nguecokh, this traditional way of life is not yet controversial. For us, polygamy is not a problem. It is natural for those who practise it.

Voice message, 18.11.2020

Good evening, my name is Oumy Diop, I am a teacher at the Nguecokh school. I am happy to answer your question, because I am a polygamist. Currently, I have two co-wives. I base everything on Islam, because it is Islam that imposes this on us. In the past, there were several wives in the home and we did not distinguish between co-wives, one took the other's child. Today though, there is more jealousy among the women. I am not against polygamy.

Voice message, 20.11.2020

We are all Muslims in Nguecokh. It is a religion that values work.

It is not a religion that imprisons people. We are free to do what we want to develop Senegal ... the village. Religion remains a driving force for us. It encourages us and strengthens us in our activities. This is how we practise prayer and work. After the prayer, we start working for our community.

In Nguecokh, the mosques are full. Islam came to us to reinforce good behaviour, good behaviour that we already had. At the time of prayer, everyone joins us. We greet each other, we show solidarity, we behave well. After the prayer, everyone is free. Religion is not there to divide us, but to strengthen us. All I can say is that what Europeans perceive of Islam, we do not live here in Nguecokh.⁷

Voice message, 23.11.2020

1

The Serer are the third largest ethnic group in Senegal after the Wolof and Pulaar, with a share of about 15%. They speak Serer, a Niger-Congo language. Today, most members also speak Wolof, which is predominant in the cities. Their society is matrilineal and characterised by strictly separated castes: nobles, warriors, citizens, slaves, as well as craftsmen (e.g. blacksmiths) and artists (e.g. griots). Today, only two classes are generally distinguished: peasants and landowners.

2

The tam-tam is a drum instrument (formerly: bush drum) with a message function. In Africa, New Guinea and tropical America, people have used drum telegraphy for centuries to communicate with each other at a distance. When European explorers arrived in the jungle, they found that news of their arrival had already spread far and wide. Such a message can be transmitted at a speed of 100 miles an hour. The drums of West Africa spread them to the Americas and the Caribbean during the slave trade. There they were banned because they were used by slaves to communicate over long distances in a code unknown to the slaveholders. (Wikipedia, Ernest Davis: «Information, from drums to Wikipedia»)

3

The palaver tree is a traditional gathering place where people talk about social life, village problems and politics in its shade. It is also a place where children come to listen to a village elder tell stories. Palaver, says the French philosopher Vincent Cespedes, was the art of discussing with

a certain rhetoric. «It is an oral art, so it is connected to the body. It is not based on reflection, on writing and institutions, in short: the brain, but on orality. And at the end of a discussion, everyone has to agree, everyone. Not 51 per cent, but 100 per cent. A palaver can last weeks or months, and at the end everyone has to say: we all reached the decision with 100 per cent unanimity. That would be something we could discover.» (www.deutschlandfunk.de/afrikanisches-denken-die-kunst-des-palavers.1184.de.html?dram:article_id=310909)

4

Pangool (var : Fangool and Fangol are the ancient saints and ancestral spirits of the Serer people of Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania. They act as intercessionaries between the living world and the supreme being Roog or Koox. In a historical sense, the ancient Serer village and town founders called Lamanes were believed to be accompanied by a group of Pangool as they travelled in search of land to exploit.

5

Nguecokh lies on the edge of the Saloum estuary delta in the shallow coastal zone, where the tidal current reaching far inland has created a widely ramified amphibious system. The sandbanks and shallow water zones off the delta, which extend for kilometres into the sea, as well as the Forêt classée de Farthalam on the border with Gambia, form the Delta du Saloum National Park, the second-largest national park in Senegal, which has been designated a biosphere reserve by UNESCO.

6

Reforestation is an African UN project. «The Great Green Wall», which stretches from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east, aims to create a forest belt 7750 km long and 15 km wide. Eleven African countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan) want to stop the Sahara from expanding. To this end, trees that grow particularly well there are planted in the traditional way and the development of agricultural land is encouraged. This green wall is one of the most important climate change mitigation activities worldwide, as it creates large carbon sinks and restores livelihoods to local people. In Ethiopia, 15 million hectares of degraded land have been restored, and in Nigeria, five million hectares. In Senegal, over 11 million trees have been planted, restoring fertility to 25,000 hectares of land. Elsewhere, due to the general security situation in these countries, progress is slower: in Mali, for example, or in Burkina Faso. (www.greatgreenwall.com, www.dw.com/de/klimaexperte-afrika-braucht-grüne-mauer/a-39213545)

7

In Senegal, Sufism has interwoven with African traditions over the centuries, becoming very Senegalese. Here, for the most part, Islam is very tolerant. And so, things are possible in Senegal that would be unthinkable elsewhere. A Muslim community worships its founder as the Senegalese reincarnation of the Prophet. In addition to the Koran, it also honours the Bible, and some the Torah too. In another community, men sometimes turn to female spiritual leaders. Christians traditionally celebrate the Feast of Sacrifice with their Muslim fellow citizens, and Muslims also like to put a Christmas tree in their living room at Christmas. Some marabouts are Islamic clerics and sorcerers at the same time. For the rituals that the magicians perform in the stadium, they sometimes also use Koranic verses.