



AMADE

ASSOCIATION MONDIALE DES AMIS DE L'ENFANCE

PRESIDENT : H.R.H. THE PRINCESS OF HANOVER

Interview with Her Royal Highness The Princess of Hanover **Interview by Jacques Danois** **27 April 2007**

Jacques Danois : Her Royal Highness The Princess of Hanover, President of AMADE, visited Africa, from Northern Niger down to South Africa. The purpose of Her trip was to take a close look at the work that AMADE carries out on that continent. She also wanted to understand the conditions of African children and their needs. Now we will discover the impressions of a safari through the heart, a professional trip in the interest of the child.

Her Royal Highness: A giant's work: we sometimes have the impression of putting plasters on wooden legs. We do not know if what we do will be really useful on the long term, but I think that every smile we put on the face of a child is worth the effort, every child we save from misery, injustice, from that terrible lottery which life is from the moment of birth. Because we do not choose to be born in a country at war, or to lose our parents, or our roots, or not to be able to eat, to be unprotected and vulnerable... we do not choose that. Then, I think that if we save a single child out of a million in need, we have already started to accomplish our duties as a human being.

J. D. : Have You had the impression of seeing Africa through the children, or did You see it through its population as a whole ? Were it the eyes of the children who mainly opened the door to Africa for You?

H.R.H.: Nothing is indivisible; indeed, through AMADE we are an association that endeavours to protect the child, however one needs to understand that a child cannot be disassociated from its mother. And when the mother is not there, we have to try to rebuild the warmth, the nest. My thoughts are particularly with war and AIDS orphans. A protective structure is needed for these children, and in order to protect more children we have to work on the roots of the problem. Take the example of natural disasters and desertification. How can we mitigate the effects of these situations? There we are confronted with adults' problems, and we have to try to find a solution for the problems that affect the parents of the children. If we want to work effectively, we have to educate, provide care and create a safe and viable environment for families.

J. D.: Is the work of AMADE, which is Your work and which You carry out with excellence, the work You want to do in Africa, is it a work of beginning or a work of reconstruction? For example, are You going to help the traditions, customs, civilizations, African cultures, or are You going to try - with the support of people who work with You in the field - to clear the table and start something new from scratch?

H.R.H.: That depends on the places, circumstances and countries... particularly when we are confronted with customs that I would personally find difficult to accept, without trying to show occidental, cultural or medical imperialism. I think for example of female circumcision, which is a painful case. As a European woman, I would like to clear the table of all that. But I do not feel that I have the moral right to attack this problem by myself, I think this is a problem of women in Africa. We can help them and give them the means to carry out their battle, but it has to be them who take the initiative.

And that has already been done: there is a real movement that comes from African women in order to end this practice. In this particular case, I certainly would like to see a cleared table, that this is no longer practiced, but it is not for me or our organization to impose our point of view by saying "you should not do this". When we are confronted with another culture, even if we do not agree, we cannot morally impose ourselves in such a manner.

Leaving this subject aside, there is an incredible energy in tradition, culture, some ancestral practices, their way to dig a well, to fix a river bank, to capture the stream in order to fill up the ground water and thus creating an easier way to access water... We have to use these energies. If we can be the catalyst and provide the means, even financial ones, in order to, in the meantime, allow a community to establish itself in a place, and to help them to make their environment less hostile, then we have to do it. By supporting agriculture, by allowing an agricultural activity, which is an economic one too, we are helping the families and therefore the children.

J. D. : You have spoken of African women. If we divide the population in three sectors, fathers, mothers and children, are women the more solid ones, and the ones where we find the greater hope?

H.R.H.: That also depends on the places. There are countries with a strong Muslim tradition, where women's opinion is not taken into consideration. They have a certain autonomy and decision-making power when it comes to their children's education or accessing health care, but they are prisoners of illiteracy or of certain customs. I think of specific cases, like the existing solutions to severe malnutrition cases, which could often be prevented. But sometimes the imposing weight of their culture and traditions makes women unwilling to follow some of the instructions concerning their children's health.

So the work is more complicated. We need intermediaries, women in the field who can try to convince them to save their children. Thus, with the support of the Princess Grace Foundation, we have financed a midwife school in the saharouis camps, because we know that husbands forbid their wives, and fathers their daughters, to consult male doctors. Then, we are in need of female doctors, or midwives, competent and qualified, while the traditional midwives, who are competent, but do not have the necessary medical training to assist serious cases. These are small projects; however they are particularly useful.

J. D. : You traveled through two regions at war, or at least very troubled ones, Congo and Burundi. Did You experience any fear or was it natural for You to be in that torn and dangerous continent?

H.R.H.: Honestly, I did not really feel that burden. In Burundi, I felt that the country was overwhelmed by an immense sigh of relief, after all those years, and there was a real need to breath, to lick their wounds, and to restart something. We felt this sort of joy, but at the same time tiredness and the fact of all these displaced orphans and populations.

J. D.: What did the Africans see in You ? The Princess, The President of AMADE or a mother?

H.R.H.: That, we would have to ask them (*laughs*).

J. D.: Did You take one of Your children with You?

H.R.H.: Certainly, however since he is taller than me now, I think it really did not impact that much on people (*laughs*).

J. D. : And You, how did You feel ? Princess, President of AMADE or mother?

H.R.H.: Once you are a mother, that is the thing you best identify yourself with, I think every mother feels the same way. Once you become a mother, it is for a lifetime; you cannot decide to be a mother in one moment and not in another moment. We are mothers, before anything else; even if we have other activities we try to perform at our best.

J.D. : A very important encounter happened over there, Your meeting with Mr. Nelson Mandela. I do not mean to be indiscreet, but what were your conversation topics? AIDS, was that one of the important ones?

H.R.H.: I had already had the pleasure of meeting Nelson Mandela on many different occasions before, and it was wonderful to meet him again. He is an extraordinary and warm man, he is benevolent and a great generosity emanates from him. He talked and laughed a lot. We particularly spoke about the countries torn by their internal conflicts; this meeting took place at the end of my trip, he was very interested and he asked me a lot of questions about Burundi and about our projects in Congo and Niger. He was particularly worried and interested by the case of the sickle cell disease, a terrible illness that does not receive attention from many leaders and health organisations.

Regarding the topic of AIDS in Africa, I am not bringing you any new information when I tell you that it is a huge problem, like malaria, which continues to be one of the main mortality causes. However, we can see lots of promising success and hope with the new generation of accessible medicines.

J. D. : Did You find people to be very conscious of the dangers ?

H.R.H.: Yes, I think that nowadays a great glow has come to throw a light on these problems. All the NGOs, media and good-hearted concerned people, all have witnessed the awareness and desire to move things forward.

J. D. : A last question, *Madame*. What do You keep from this trip in your mind, in your ears? The sound of the African crowds in the overpopulated cities and towns, or the singing of the South or the drums of Burundi?

H.R.H.: All those sounds are present indeed, but what I keep is all the work that still needs to be accomplished. And sometimes, also the silence of some hospital wards, where there is such a resignation to distress; those silent mothers in front of their sick baby; those patients waiting for a hospital bed. Perhaps, these are the most frightening things. We still have a long way to go and energies to mobilise.

J. D.: I imagine You saw mothers that had just given birth or were about to. According to You what is the future of that child that you saw being born close to you?

H.R.H.: I see lots of new-born babies, here in Monaco, at the hospitals, everywhere. We can only wish the best for them, there is nothing more moving than a new life in this planet. But knowing what their fate will be, that remains unfathomable.

J. D. : Does it belong to us?

H.R.H.: Nothing belongs to us.
