COLLECTING STUFF

Readers who have experienced parenting will know that if you give a young child, say a three-year-old, a box of small objects, such as little dolls, ornaments, or toy cars, the child will, without any help, arrange them in rows, in sets by colour or type, or perhaps in order of size. Children don't need instruction in this; they just do it. Organizing and classifying stuff is inherent in the make-up of humans – it's something we do. As grown-ups we build great museums, in which we arrange all sorts of stuff, in all manner of sets, and if the stuff is an artefact, we often arrange it by its supposed age. In the world of *Elements*, we arrange mineral stuff by structure and chemistry, and the IMA provides us with a Commission on New Minerals and Mineral Nomenclature to make sure we do it just right.

Twenty years ago to the day on which I'm writing this piece (rather spookily, I've just discovered this from my old field notebook!), I was in the Aïr region in Niger, plumb centre of the Sahara, visiting an anorthosite and gabbro ring complex near an oasis called Taguei, with a French party. The mountainous Aïr contains 28 igneous ring complexes – from space they are some of the most strikingly regular topographic features on Earth, and they figured previously as a Parting Shot in *Elements* (v3n1, 2007). Taguei is the smallest ring intrusion, a mere 1 km across, with an outer ring of quartz monzonite, a zone of leucogabbro, and a core of monzo-anorthosite, a peculiar rock composed of large (several centimetres) euhedral plagioclase crystals, zoned from calcic labradorite to sodic oligoclase, in a fine-grained matrix of essentially granitic composition. More or less the whole of igneous evolution captured in one hand specimen!*

A Taureg woman waters her goats at a rare waterhole.

Niger, twice the size of France, is 80% desert, and the mountains of the Aïr form the western edge of an immense sand-sea, the Ténéré, which extends for 800 km to the Tibesti massif in northern Chad. It is one of the poorest, emptiest countries in the world, and the UN's Human Development Index, which has Norway at the top, places Niger three from the bottom of a list of 168 countries. The hardship of life for the inhabitants of this appallingly hot, arid land, on the feather edge of human existence, leaves memories that will never, ever, leave you.

A Taureg couple on the move

Mineral men

The central Sahara is the land of the nomadic Taureg people. Many now live in settled communities, but they still range the desert on magnificent camels, indifferent to national boundaries. The men wear the indigo tagelmust, a sort of combined turban and veil which covers almost the whole face, but, unusually for a muslim people, the women do not wear a veil. There is grandeur in the lifestyle of my Taureg couple in the photo, and if the UN had a Human Achievement Index, I think I would put them near the top.

In Taguei we were befriended by two little boys, dirty, jolly, and irrepressible. Little boys often pop up out of nowhere in Africa. You can see in the photo that one is carrying somebody's geological hammer, and, sad to say, a packet of a well-known brand of American cigarette. Welcome to Marlboro country! They indicated we should follow them into the baking heart of the ring complex. Running barefoot across rocks too hot to pick up, they brought us to the centre, a heavily jointed inselberg, where there was a deep inclined cleft. Underneath, shaded from the ferocious sun, they had built themselves their own little geological museum – local rocks, calcite, and amethyst all neatly arranged in rows – as far as it is possible to be from the great museums of Central Park and South Kensington, but a museum nonetheless. And, when we were leaving, they insisted we each take a little sample back to the mysterious land from which we had come.

Even after twenty years, I find myself deeply moved by the memory of those little boys and their collection. Museums are not just nice places in which to arrange stuff. They satisfy a deep part of the human character.

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* Moreau C, Brown WL, Karche J-P (1987) Contributions to Mineralogy and Petrology 95: 32-43