

Twenty Paragraphs about Africa

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Introduction

To get lost is to learn the way.

African proverb

*If you can visit only two continents
in your lifetime, visit Africa – twice!*

R. Elliot

1. With its 30.3 million square kilometers (almost three times the size of Europe), the African continent is second only to Asia in size Figure 1. The same is true of its population, which currently (September 2025) is around 1.6 billion, with an expected figure of four billion by 2100.



Figure 1: Somewhere in Central Africa.

2. Africa is the cradle of humanity; our oldest ancestors, seven million years old, were born there. African as well – more precisely Ethiopian, considering today's political boundaries – is “Lucy”, the most famous human fossil of all, discovered in 1974 near the Red Sea Figure 2.



Figure 2: Ethiopian girls.

3. Inhabited for at least the last 5,000 years, the archaeological site of Volubilis, in northern Morocco, almost touching the Iberian Peninsula, maintains its appearance as a Roman city Figure 3. However, in times before the Roman Empire, the region was integrated into the Carthaginian Empire, of which Africa still holds many memories. How can we forget, for example, Admiral Hanon, who, some 2,500 years ago, with his Carthaginian fleet, circumnavigated a considerable part of the African continent, thus inspiring Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Cabral, and so many other exponents of the Age of Discovery?



Figure 3: Volubilis.

4. “Great empires are not maintained by timidity,” said the Roman historian, Cornelius Tacitus Figure 4.
5. “Experience is the teacher of all things,” said Julius Caesar Figure 5.



Figure 4: Volubilis.



Figure 5: Volubilis.

6. As Ryszard Kapuściński points out in one of his books, “The continent is too large to describe. It is a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos Figure 6. Only with the greatest simplification, for the sake of convenience, can we say ‘Africa’. In reality, except as a geographical appellation, Africa does not exist.”



Figure 6: Somewhere in North Africa.

7. As Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) aptly put it, “Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant Figure 7. We photographers deal with things that are continually disappearing, and once gone, there is no mechanism in the world capable of bringing them back. We cannot develop or copy memory.”.



Figure 7: A friendly driver I met in North Africa.

8. African humans arrived in the Tanzanian archipelago of Zanzibar no less than 20,000 years ago, which, in archaeology and, above all, geology, is very little. It's almost adjacent to the mainland and not far from other African archipelagos, such as the Seychelles and Mauritius, as well as the gigantic Madagascar, the largest in Africa and the fourth largest in the world, behind only Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo Figure 8.



Figure 8: The Zanzibar coast.

9. Like many of his Berber companions, this man does not speak Arabic and is completely unfamiliar with the Indo-European languages Figure 9. Descended from tribes that inhabited North Africa twelve millennia ago or more, he speaks Tamazigh, the generic name given to Berber languages (e.g., Riffian, Zuwara, Kabyle, etc.).



Figure 9: A Moroccan Berber.

10. Ethiopian tradition (more precisely the Kebra Nagast, a book that narrates the Solomonic origin of the emperors of Ethiopia) holds that the Ark of the Covenant is kept in the church of Our Lady of Zion, in the ancient city of Axum, located in northern Ethiopia Figure 10.



Figure 10: The Ethiopian church of Our Lady of Zion.

11. Situated in the southern foothills of the Atlas Mountains, Ouarzazate is called the “gateway to the desert” because, in that part of Africa, it marks the entrance to the Sahara. In the Berber language, “ouarzazate” means “place without noise” or “place where the earth does not shake”, given the absence of earthquakes Figure 11, which are common in that mountain range which, stretching for over 2,500 kilometers, crosses the northern part of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.



Figure 11: Ouarzazate and its famous kasbah.

12. Nomadic by nature, the Tuareg (who are one of the many variants of the Berber people) inhabit not only the Sahara, but also the Sahel, which is the intermediate belt of about 600 kilometers in average width and circa 5,400 kilometers in length that connects the solitary Saharan sands to the low vegetation of the savannas – with their isolated trees and shrubs, a modest precursor of the exuberance seen in the Congo Equatorial Forest, the second largest in the world, surpassed in size only by the Amazon Rainforest Figure 12.



Figure 12: Surroundings of Timbuktu, Mali.

13. “A photographer is like a cod, which produces a million eggs in order that one may reach maturity,” said George Bernard Shaw Figure 13. I would say photography, as a branch of visual arts, is matter of being in the right place in the right moment with the right point of view and with the right camera in our hands.

14. Here we are in the southern part of the Namibian Desert, more precisely at the salt and clay pan of Sossusvlei and its astonishingly beautiful surrounding high red dunes Figure 14.



Figure 13: Namibia, southwest Africa.



Figure 14: Sossusvlei, Namibia.

15. "I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams...", wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in one of his books. These are words I make my own Figure 15.



Figure 15: Sossusvlei, Namibia.

16. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry saw the desert as an environment where "something shines, something sings in that silence" and also as place that "hides a well" Figure 16. Sometimes, as I could notice, the desert can also hide an invitation to pray and even to talk with God.



Figure 16: Somewhere in the Sahara.

17. According to oral tradition, the Dogon culture has its origins around the Niger River; the main river of West Africa, which runs through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria, with an extension of more than 4.000 kilometres Figure 17. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, they went to southern Mali, fleeing compulsory conversion to Islamism.



Figure 17: A Dogon village, in Mali.

18. Timbuktu is said to be an exotic and mysterious old city. It definitely is Figure 18!



Figure 18: Timbuktu.

19. "A picture is worth a thousand words Figure 19."



Figure 19: The Giza Plateau.

20. "The truth of the desert is the silence.", I read in a religious book I leafed through many years ago in Switzerland Figure 20. The same sentence was written on the wall of a hotel I stayed in North Africa, on the occasion of my first trip in Africa, between 2000 and 2001.



Figure 20: "The truth of the desert is the silence.".



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