

MOBILE DESERT CINEMA: FILMS, VACCINATIONS & BIRTH REGISTRATION

Braving whirling sandstorms, blazing heat and sudden rain-showers, over 900 Tuareg families rode across forbidding desert sands for distances of up to 100 kms. Galloping regally atop their camels - festooned with intricately embroidered saddles and brightly colored blankets – they came to participate in the annual Adli Desert Festival, at In-Gall, Niger. Within hours of arrival, the men, women and children had constructed a makeshift community of small, igloo-shaped huts with matted-straw walls on the hard, desert floor. Camels, donkeys and the occasional car were parked outside. Fires were lit, mutton cooked and tea shared over conversation amongst friends and strangers. True to their nomadic heritage, for 4 days, this instant community existed and then, as quickly as it appeared, it disappeared into the setting desert sun as the festival drew to an end. Although they rode out into the desert in different directions, they all took home something priceless: with UNICEF support, hundreds of children were vaccinated and also had their births registered during the festival. And, every evening, between the dancing, the games, the music and the conversations, families gathered for the UNICEF-supported, open-air, 'desert cinema'. Each night, a 3x4 meter screen was set up under the stars and, prior to the premiering of that evening's popular African film, a different educational film, averaging 10 minutes in length, was presented on subjects ranging from early child marriage, polio, vaccination, girls' education and HIV/AIDS. Afterwards, a question & answer session was held on key learning points. Prizes for correct answers were given, including impregnated mosquito bed-nets provided by UNICEF. "There is always lively discussion about the theme", says Salimatou, an energetic woman who led the festival's post-screening discussions. "Last night someone wondered if it was really true that children could get infected with HIV/AIDS through a mother's breast-milk. We take time to explain what is true, what is false and why, always with valuable inputs from the audience."



Abambacho, a Tuareg of the Kel Fadey tribe, rode his camel for over 60 kilometers to participate in this year's Adli Desert Festival held at In-Gall village, Agadez Region, Niger. During the Festival, children were vaccinated and had their births registered through UNICEF-supported programs. And, each evening, a short film on topics ranging from early child marriage to polio to vaccinations to HIV/AIDS were broadcast and followed by lively question & answer discussions. Photo: UNICEF WCAR/Kent Page.

The films are presented by 'CNA: Cinema Numérique Ambulant' (Digital Mobile Cinema), in DVD format in French, Hausa, Zarma or Peul, depending on the language of the audience. These mobile desert cinemas not only provide entertainment, but also serve as an effective means of sharing information to large numbers of people in an innovative way, mostly in areas where cinemas simply don't exist. The films also complement social mobilization messages passed in Niger by religious leaders and traditional chiefs. And, with nomadic groups like the Tuareg always widely dispersed and on the move, events like the Adli Desert Festival provide an effective opportunity to reach a maximum audience in a minimum amount of time. With the current nutrition crisis in Niger, UNICEF is exploring ways of producing a film on safe nutritional practices, to be then broadcast by CNA to those populations most affected by the crisis. Since CNA's 2001 debut, the 4 CNA mobile broadcasting units (1 in Niger, 1 in Mali and 2 in Benin), have presented popular African films, preceded by educational films followed with discussion, to over 1.5 million people in Africa.