

From Arkansas to Africa

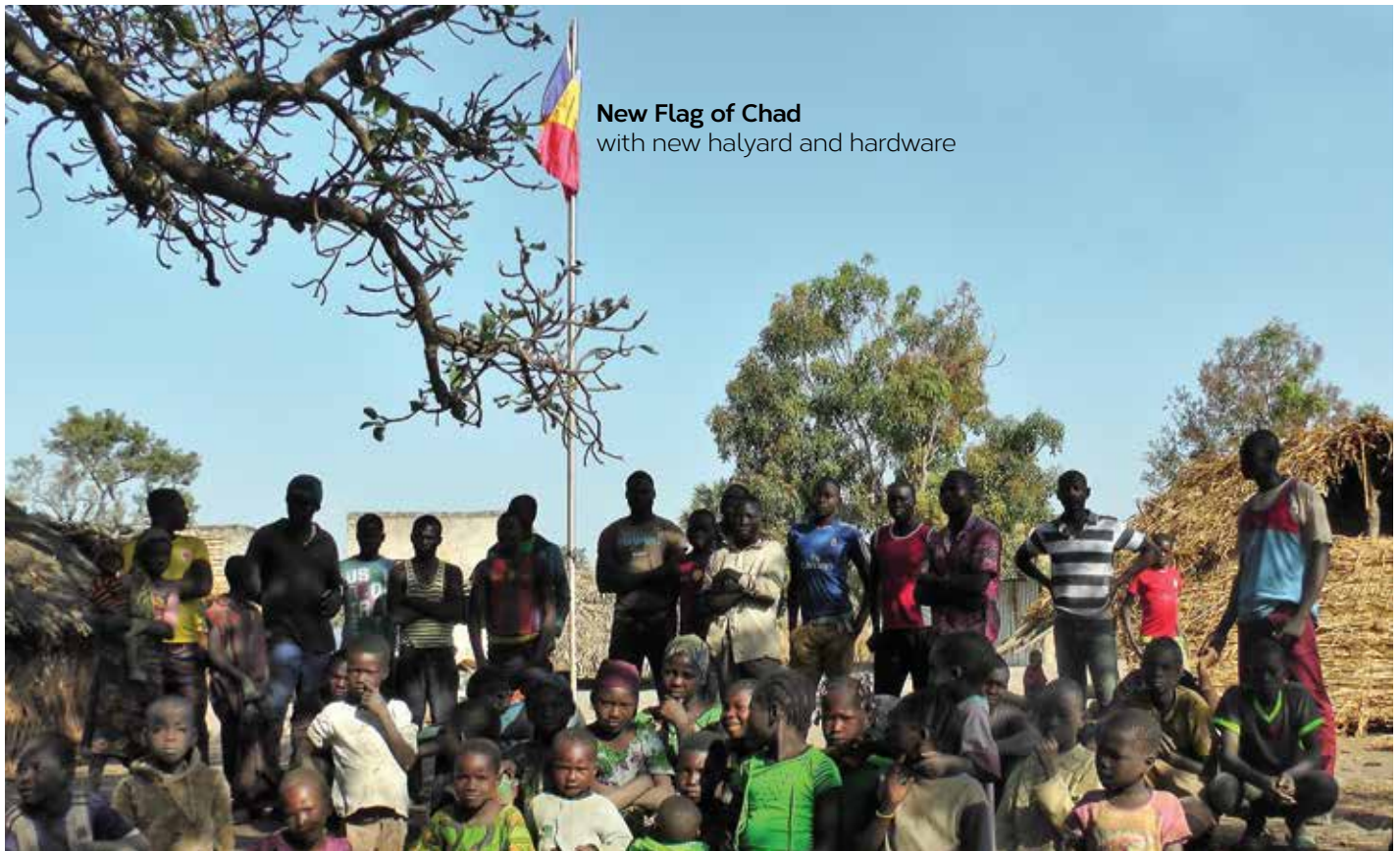
By George Taylor
FlagandBanner.com Customer

I have just returned from my third visit to the small village of Kindiri, in Chad, a large country in central Africa. I go there with my close friend of almost 25 years, Clamra Célestin, who was born in the village in 1966. The story of how he was taken by the Jesuits at the age of six to be educated in a Catholic school in a faraway city, then endured the devastating civil war in

Chad in the early 1980's, and then made his way to France and ultimately the United States, where he is now a citizen, has been chronicled in Clamra's soon-to-be-published memoir, *Fils du Ciel, From Kindiri to Manhattan*.

Of all the stories in his memoir, I am most drawn to those of his childhood in the tiny village of Kindiri, where he grew up with his father, the village chief, and many mothers, brothers,

sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins, consorting with diviners, soothsayers, healers, sorcerers and sorceresses, devils, djinns, and gods, not to mention more mundane creatures like cattle, dogs, rats, and snakes – all controlled by the forces of the invisible world. For me, these stories describe the essence of the man I know today. It is from these stories that I have come to understand his sense of devotion to



New Flag of Chad
with new halyard and hardware



< Kinidiri Village Flag of Chad
A flag made from three pieces of colored cotton flew from a crooked pole fashioned from a tree trunk.

family and community, his realistic approach to adverse conditions that might seriously derail many of us Westerners, his respect for the virtue of tolerance, and the reverence for his ancestral past that is his cultural anchor.

For all the progress that has been made since Clamra's childhood years forty years ago, much remains the same. The elders still gather under the shea tree to debate village affairs, adjudicate disputes, and sip sorghum beer and spirits brewed and distilled by the village women. It is a man's world under this ancient tree. Women approach only to bring food or to gracefully move around the circle, crouching in front of each man to shake his hand and offer a softly spoken "bonjour" or the Sara "lapia."

The women's role still is to haul the water from the village well, carry firewood from the countryside on their heads, and tend to their fires, cooking, and babies in a chorus of chores from dawn to dusk.

Children still drive the ox carts early in the morning to deliver food and drink to the workers in the sorghum fields, and they still gently herd cattle into the village confines for the night, human and animal shapes drifting through self-made dust clouds and silhouetted in the sinking sun. But most of all, they still laugh and play. Anything handy becomes a toy, or a piece of athletic equipment, or a musical instrument.

For these reasons, I jumped at the chance to accompany Clamra to Kindiri in December 2011. On that

first visit, its population was around 350. By the time of my third visit in December 2017, it had grown to around 800. New huts and family compounds were springing up like weeds. Although Clamra is not responsible for the population growth per se, he is responsible for many of the village improvements that have made it easier for its inhabitants to survive and develop. The most significant example is Kindiri's school. Six years ago, it consisted of a clearing under the protective branches of a large shea tree. Students sat on poles fashioned from tree branches suspended by forked branches protruding from the ground. They held their writing books and other materials on their knees. Now, there are three grass huts accommodating grades one through four, and a two-room brick-and-mortar building housing grades five and six. And, with help from a financial benefactor in New York, Clamra has just built a school in a neighboring village. It opened on January 1st this year, enabling about 50 kids who had overcrowded Kindiri's school to be taught in their own village.

In addition to opening the new school, we accomplished

two other major projects and several more minor ones on our recent visit. We were able to distribute about 400 pounds of mostly children's clothing that people in my San Francisco neighborhood donated, and we gave Kindiri back its long-lost flag. Six years ago, a battered and tattered flag made from three pieces of colored cotton flew from a crooked pole fashioned from a tree trunk. The flag and pole were gone by the time I returned for my second visit in 2014. Kindiris are very proud of their village and their country, and I was happy to provide

a new flag of Chad and a customized "house" flag for the village. These, along with halyard and hardware, were

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supplied by the good folks at **FlagandBanner.com** in Little Rock. We were able to commission construction of a 7-meter iron flag pole in the nearby town of Koumra. The Chad flag was commissioned and raised in a formal

ceremony January 5, 2018. Our original thought was to fly the Kindiri flag below the national flag on the same pole, but we found out that Chad law prohibits any other flag to be flown from the same pole or at the same or higher height. So, the villagers have decided to erect a shorter pole at the entrance to the village, from which they will let all passers-by know that they are entering the village of Kindiri, the place where ancient meets modern, tradition fears not progress, and life is still filled with wonder and hope. 🇸🇩



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