

## **AFRICA – A JOURNEY OF THE SOUL AND SPIRIT**

I was in Niger's Sahara Desert attending the Gerewol, a male beauty contest of the Wodaabe tribe in which women are the judges. Two young men approached and spoke to my interpreter:

“Where is she from?”

“America,” my interpreter replied.

“Is that near Nigeria?”

“No, it is a large country far away, with an ocean on either side,” he told them.

The two young men looked puzzled.

“So it is an island, then?”

This incident, from one of my journals, describes why Africa beckons me time and again. In this age of globalization and computerization, one can still find members of the human race untainted by Facebook, YouTube and other effluvia of technology. Nowhere else on earth has man formed such a symbiotic relationship with both natural and supernatural forces. Africa's natural environment, with its powerful animals and harsh climates, must be revered and respected. It has taught me to take nothing for granted, not a breeze of wind, nor sip of cool water. When I discover shards of human bone desiccating in desert sun, I realize vast African landscapes are not mere scenic byways for sightseeing, but sovereigns capable of extinguishing life.

African rituals, lore, and spirituality give sail to the imagination. Few of life's events, birth, death, sexuality, politics, AIDS or other manifestations of disease are not rooted in the spiritual world. For the African possesses a soul, and relates to the world of the spirit in a manner as richly patterned, textured, and colorful as the textiles he wears. Coming from a society as complex as Western civilization has become, I find solace in, or perhaps envy, the African's interpretation of the world, his ability to explain the inexplicable, and make sense out of life's chaos.

## **J. THALIA CUNNINGHAM, MD, FACEP**

**J. Thalia Cunningham, MD, FACEP, is an emergency physician, travel writer, photographer and playwright. Named for Thalia, the muse of drama in Greek mythology, she grew up in a theatrical family.**

**Cunningham has traveled to 115 of the “official” destinations of the Traveler's Century Club, an international organization for people who have visited at least 100 countries, and an organization she has no intention of joining. Her experiences include trekking with mujhahideen in Tora Bora, Afghanistan, after sneaking over the Khyber Pass shrouded in a burqa and disguised as an Afghan woman. She has participated in West African voodoo rituals, visited Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon squired by friendly Hez'bollah, and talked her way out of an arrest (erroneous) for prostitution in the tribal area of Northern Pakistan, while Pakistani soldiers aimed the nostrils of their AK-47s at her own.**

**Cunningham’s predilection for spending time with insurgents – both in the emergency department and abroad - has proffered continuous opportunities to enter intimate worlds and thoughts of a diverse array of the human race. Her first-hand knowledge of people in crisis situations influences her work as both writer and photographer, allowing her to explore and confront some of society’s most painful issues and to serve as catalyst for further reflection and discussion.**