

THE MIRACLE MERCHANTS Series: THE MIRACLE MERCHANTS. Special report. First of two parts.: [CHICAGOLAND FINAL Edition]

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Korotoumou Kone was the eldest of five children Kotio Traore had with her farmer husband, Ali Kone. Although SCF omitted the fact from its dossier on the child, her family, like many Muslim families in Mali, is polygamous. Traore is Ali's first wife. With his second wife, he has one child. With his third wife, he has none.

Myths of child sponsorship. Sponsor a child and save a life. That emotional appeal has become a refrain of American charity. In reality, a few coins a day is rarely enough to transform the lives of impoverished boys and girls whose tear-stained faces drive some of the most powerful marketing campaigns ever devised.

The road had long since petered out from a narrow ribbon of rutted red earth to a grassy track no wider than a goat path. Eventually, even that disappeared into a scrubby tangle of brush.

The search for N'goufien, a tiny village somewhere on the savanna near the border with the Ivory Coast, had been harrowing.

No map showed it. No one in Bamako, the dusty Malian capital astride the Niger River, seemed ever to have heard of it. Not the interpreter, an engaging and knowledgeable man who appeared to have a friend or relative at every stop. Not our driver, who piloted his Peugeot with skill and patience.

Finally the battered gray sedan slammed through the brambles and into a clearing. There, in a shimmering haze of heat and dust, lay the village.

Fringed by tall diala trees and surrounded by high mud walls, N'goufien had an ancient, timeless look. Silent in the searing midday sun, its collection of small mud huts with conical thatched roofs rose like a dun-colored island from the parched spring landscape.

It had taken us three days to find N'goufien. It took us about three minutes to find out we had come too late.

Outside the village walls, Bakary Kone, a thin man dressed in a tattered white shirt, khaki shorts and a ragged straw hat, lounged in the shade of a mango tree. After engaging in the lengthy traditional exchange of greetings, our interpreter asked him if he knew a little girl named Korotoumou (pronounced Korotoomoo) Kone.

Through Save the Children Federation Inc. of Westport, Conn., I had begun sponsoring Korotoumou under my full name, Lisa Anderson Ober, in May 1995. Two years later, without alerting SCF, I came to Mali to find out whether my sponsorship had "helped change her life and make it better," as the agency promised it would.

In return for an annual donation of \$240, Save the Children had sent me a picture of the 12-year-old girl and a brief dossier describing her family and their lives in this farming village of about 150 people.

The interpreter showed Bakary Kone the photograph of Korotoumou, a doleful-looking child with big brown eyes and a short cap of dark hair. Kone glanced sharply at me. He lowered his voice and began speaking rapidly in Bambara, the lilting language of Mali's predominant tribal group.

The interpreter listened solemnly for what seemed a long time, nodding steadily. Then he delivered the news: Korotoumou was dead--and had been for nearly two years.

She had not lived beyond her 12th birthday, but Save the Children had never given me an indication that anything was amiss.

Indeed, monthly billing statements, always imprinted with Korotoumou's name, had arrived from SCF like clockwork, one just a week earlier.

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There was no reason to doubt that I was sending that card to a living child.

An early death for many

Death, particularly among the very young, is a constant presence in Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world. Measles, diarrhea, tuberculosis and malaria are just some of the ailments that kill one out of every four Malian children under the age of 5.

Mali is a landlocked nation of 9 million people, tucked into the large, elephant ear-shaped bulge of West Africa. It was ruled by the French from 1883 until independence in 1960. After nearly three decades of socialist dictatorship, a fragile democracy took root in 1992 with the first multiparty elections.

Poverty continues to exist in the country, where less than a third of all adults are literate. Particularly in rural areas, where the majority of the population lives, electricity, running water and ready access to education and medical care remain rare. These are the problems that a number of aid organizations, such as SCF, strive to address.

In the region that Korotoumou called home, scrubby savanna stretches for miles, its arid flatness relieved by occasional stands of stately banyan trees, hulking baobabs, royal palms and the ubiquitous mangoes. Troops of long-tailed monkeys lope through the bush, dodging giant, bizarrely sculptured termite mounds that tower like baroque sand castles.

Few cars traverse the sunbaked dirt roads. More common are small children driving donkey carts, men riding rickety bicycles and barefoot women balancing enormous bundles of firewood or cans of water on their heads and carrying tiny babies on their backs.

Most Malians share a handful of family names, such as Kone and Traore. And many first names, such as Korotoumou, are extremely common. It was easy to hope there had been some mistake concerning Korotoumou's death. So I asked to see her parents.

I was traveling with Hugh Delliou, the Tribune's Africa correspondent. The guide led us through a twisting maze of mud walls that wound past dozens of windowless, single-room huts. At midday N'goufien seemed deserted, with the exception of a few goats and scruffy dogs. Most of the villagers were working in the fields, planting the ruddy soil with millet, sorghum, corn and cotton.

Ears of seed corn festooned many doors and wood smoke from cooking fires scented the air. By Western standards, the village was primitive and poor. But its tidy paths and neatly kept huts projected an air of orderliness and sufficiency, markedly at odds with the sodden, garbage-strewn landscapes typically shown in Save the Children commercials aired in America

I found Korotoumou's mother, Kotio Traore, standing in a small, well-swept square that surrounded a guele, a large, raised platform of logs covered by a thatched roof. A traditional gathering place in Malian villages, the guele provides a shady spot where people can talk or rest with some respite from the sun and unrelenting 100-plus degree heat.

A slim, weary-looking woman with a leathery face and work-roughened hands, Traore said she was about 30 years old. Like most rural Malians, she knows only the year of her birth, not the date.

Three shallow diagonal slashes on each of her cheeks marked her as a member of the Senoufo tribe, a clan based around the southern Malian city of Sikasso.

Dressed in a Western-style black and red polka-dot blouse and a print skirt, her head wrapped in a bright bandanna and her ears adorned with earrings, Traore listened quietly as I explained through an interpreter that I had come in search of Korotoumou.

Delliou and I hesitated to show her the picture of Korotoumou that Save the Children had sent me. Photographs are rare in Mali, and we had no idea how she would react. She had never seen a photo of Korotoumou.

When I produced the three-by-five snapshot, Traore winced. "No doubt. Oh, that's my child," she said, looking away. She leaned forward and laid her head in her hands on the edge of the guele.

A much older, bare-breasted woman wearing a maroon sarong lumbered into the square from a nearby hut where she was tending a gaggle of toddlers. She was M'Pele Traore, Kotio's mother. Looking at the photo of Korotoumou, she put her hand to her head and said, "God's will fell on her."

Leaning heavily against the logs of the guele, Korotoumou's mother nodded, her eyes cast down. "She was struck by lightning. It was the will of God. She was cultivating rice on the riverside," Kotio Traore said.

She indicated that her daughter died in August 1995, just three months after my sponsorship began.

Not only had SCF failed to inform me of her death, it had readily accepted another \$240 in December 1996 to specifically sponsor Korotoumou when I reinstated my sponsorship after a lapse.

In an earlier end-of-year letter to sponsors around Christmas 1995, SCF President Charles MacCormack wrote: "As I look back at 1995, I see faces of children like your sponsored child in Mali. Faces that--thanks to supporters like you--now hold smiles, a healthy glow and lively eyes."

By then, Korotoumou had been dead four months.

Korotoumou's life

Korotoumou Kone was the eldest of five children Kotio Traore had with her farmer husband, Ali Kone. Although SCF omitted the fact from its dossier on the child, her family, like many Muslim families in Mali, is polygamous. Traore is Ali's first wife. With his second wife, he has one child. With his third wife, he has none.

Following tradition, all of Ali Kone's wives maintain their own homes with their children, visiting the house of their husband in rotation. Korotoumou had lived with her

mother and four younger siblings in a one-room mud hut, where they shared a large bed. Inside, baskets and a few small wooden craft decorations brightened the white-washed walls. Outside the door, the hearth of a beehive-shaped earthen stove brimmed with wood ash, a testament to many meals cooked.

Korotoumou was a good cook, recalled Traore, who like most Malian mothers had coached her daughter in the preparation of traditional meals, like rice dishes flavored with pungent peanut and garlic sauces.

Even at a young age, Malian children routinely do some work at home, such as herding goats or gathering firewood. Parents, particularly those in rural areas, tend to describe their children in practical terms, focusing on what they do, rather than their personality traits.

According to her mother, Korotoumou had been a healthy young girl. Her family relied on her, as the eldest daughter, to perform such tasks as carrying water for cooking and bathing, pounding millet into a thick grainy paste or grinding corn into a golden-hued meal.

During the SCF school vacation, which deliberately coincides in N'goufien with the planting and harvest period from late May until November, Korotoumou worked in the fields like most villagers old enough to walk.

Known as a good dancer throughout the village, Korotoumou particularly liked doing the tegere tulong, a traditional dance done by young girls, accompanied by festive singing and rhythmic clapping of hands.

Malian society still favors educating boys rather than girls; girls generally are married off by the age of 17. But Korotoumou's parents took obvious pride in sending her to the community school, which Save the Children helped establish in 1994.

Korotoumou never missed a class and loved to learn, said her mother, who was trained by SCF to teach at the school. "She studied hard; she would have been somebody."

Kotio Traore remembered the summer day of her daughter's death vividly. "She got up very early. She pounded the millet and carried water from the pump well.

"She came in and cleaned the dishes. I cooked the food and gave it to Korotoumou," Traore said. "Then, she took the millet for the workers in the fields," balancing it in a plastic container on her head.

Although it would not be eaten until midday, the millet had to be delivered early, so Korotoumou could do her work in a rice paddy nearly 2 miles away.

Later that morning, chores completed at home, the mother would join workers in another field, more than a mile from her daughter.

"The day began sunny," Kotio Traore recalled. "But by about 2 p.m. the sky became cloudy and the day got darker." About an hour later, rain poured from the sky and deadly bolts of lightning electrified the landscape.

One of them struck Korotoumou Kone.

"Somebody came to tell us in the field," Traore said. Villagers raced to the rice paddy.

"When we came, we found her there," recalled Bakary Kone, Korotoumou's uncle. "She was lying down, face skyward. We looked at her and we didn't see anything wrong with her. But she wasn't breathing. At that point, we knew that she was no more."

According to tradition, preparations were made to bury Korotoumou immediately, close to the place where she died. "If it's an older person, we wait until the following day, so relatives can come. But, if it's a child, we bury them right away to spare the parents," the uncle explained.

He recounted how the family collected the traditional white cotton and linen shroud in which the child's body was wrapped. Meanwhile, men and boys, including Korotoumou's father, Ali Kone, went to dig the grave.

Ali Kone, a smooth-faced, bare-chested man in his 30s, who wears a knife strapped to his waist, remembered trying to calm his wife. "Every person has his or her own destiny. If it happens with God, it is fine," he recalled telling her. But Kone was stunned by the tragedy; he had never heard of anybody killed by lightning.

Word of Korotoumou's extraordinary death spread quickly throughout the region,

where SCF has a strong presence. Indeed, the organization every day deploys nearly 100 staff members in the area, who do everything from training teachers to advising on planting techniques. It would have been nearly impossible for them not to have heard about Korotoumou's fate.

Korotoumou's grave, covered by a layer of russet gravel, now sits on a low rise above the bright green rice paddy where she died. No stone marks the spot, but a single wild purple orchid blooms nearby.

Questions

Even though I knew Korotoumou only on paper, the news of her death shocked me. Numerous questions rushed to mind: Did Save the Children know about her death? If so, why hadn't the organization informed me? What happened to the money I sent SCF on her behalf?

The search for answers would take me through a maze of explanations and contradictions that stretched from the sun-bleached savanna of Mali to the affluent New York suburb of Westport, Conn., where SCF has its U.S. headquarters.

Eventually I would learn that I was not the only one who had sponsored a dead child in Mali.

The omissions and misrepresentations, I would learn, had started before my first dollar arrived in Africa. In its initial enrollment materials, SCF had assured me that my sponsorship would make an immediate difference in Korotoumou's life.

"Your sponsored child begins benefiting from your support right away," promised one SCF brochure, "perhaps through nutritious food and clean drinking water . . . education . . . basic health care . . . improved sanitation."

But, as a subsequent Save the Children investigation in Mali confirmed, SCF health and education workers had no idea whether sponsored children were benefiting from their efforts; indeed, they didn't even know which children were sponsored.

Sitting in her mud hut, Kotio Traore was unclear about what benefits her daughter had received through her involvement with SCF, aside from classes at the village school. In

fact, Korotoumou had attended those classes for a year before she was sponsored.

SCF officials in Mali are proudest of their community school program, which has resulted in the creation of more than 500 village-run schools in outlying regions like this one, where government schools are sparse.

The village schools are staffed with relatively untrained teachers paid considerably less than those employed by the government. They teach in Bambara, rather than the more difficult French used in government schools, which SCF says has raised attendance and lowered dropout rates.

Save the Children officials and Mali representatives of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the arm of the State Department that provides many foreign aid grants to SCF, boast that the performance of pupils in the village schools in some subjects such as comprehension and language skills now equals or exceeds the achievements of those who attend government-run schools.

But SCF's sponsors had little to do with constructing the schools, which were built from local materials by villagers, who also pay the teachers. Tin for the roofs, desks, tables, blackboards and school supplies throughout Mali are purchased with a \$6.3 million U.S. government grant.

Save the Children also touts its inoculation programs in Mali that "protect children against the scourge of measles" and other childhood diseases, an effort it cites to prospective sponsors as one of the ways their contributions can stop the "suffering of innocent girls and boys."

SCF does not mention in its communications with sponsors that UNICEF provides the vaccines or that the Malian government runs the program, to which SCF contributes refrigeration for the vaccines and gasoline for government nurses' motorbikes. Although Korotoumou did not receive any vaccinations, all of her siblings did.

Ali Kone and his brother Bakary agreed that SCF had given them useful agricultural training. "They taught us to protect the environment and farm the land. They taught us to prevent water run-off. Yes, we profited from it, because if water crosses your field, it washes the fertilizer away," said Ali Kone.

Bakary Kone said the onion crop had benefited from the new techniques. Asked if they grew bigger onions, he smiled and said, "Much bigger. My fist is bigger than the onions, but not much."

SCF first showed up in this tiny farming village in 1992, three years before I started sponsoring Korotoumou. SCF photographers arrived and got blanket permission to select children for pictures from a village chief or elder. Then they started snapping photos.

Their arrival in a place where photographs are rare caused excitement and confusion. For her part, Kotio Traore was uncertain why they took Korotoumou's picture. But her brother-in-law, Bakary Kone, was there the day his niece was photographed and remembered what the SCF workers told the villagers.

"They came and took pictures of all the children," he said, "telling them that if they send the picture to the country of the white man, somebody might see it and maybe want to make him or her their favorite child. The photographers told us this.

"Since it was the first time I heard this, it gave me the impression that we are being taken care of by people from the white man's country. I believe it is a step toward cooperation, so that we're out of the poverty we're in," he said solemnly.

Traore said she had formally notified SCF's local staff members of her daughter's death when they visited the school at the beginning of the academic year in November 1995 and found Korotoumou missing from the classroom.

She recalled that Broulaye Sidibe, SCF's zone coordinator, and another staffer took notes on Korotoumou's death. "They made benedictions and presented their condolences in the classroom with the children."

When Bourama Kone, the master at Korotoumou's school, went to pick up supplies from SCF at the start of the 1995-96 school year, he, too, informed Sidibe of the child's death, Traore said.

That answered one key question: SCF's local office had found out about Korotoumou's death not long after it occurred. As I soon learned, however, answers to my other ques-

tions wouldn't come so easily.

Forgotten news

The next day we found Sidibe, who was responsible for N'goufien. He was sitting under an awning with nine other men in the village of Warakana, about a two-hour drive north of N'goufien. He had come to Warakana, he said, to help one of the men, an SCF teacher, grade final school exams.

Emerging from the shade into the bright morning sun, Sidibe cut an imposing figure. Tall and slender, he wore a crisply pressed, olive-green cotton leisure suit, snappy sunglasses and a magenta baseball cap. A man who carries himself with some importance and authority, he stood out among the rest of the village men, most of whom wore African dress or ragged Western clothes.

An SCF veteran of 10 years, Sidibe coordinates Save the Children activities in N'goufien and 40 other villages in the Kadiana area. He earns about \$200 a month, a considerable sum in Mali, where the average annual per capita income is \$221. Sidibe's salary permits him such small luxuries as a digital alarm watch, which emitted regular pings and drew envious looks.

Amiable about the interruption in his work, Sidibe readily agreed to talk about his job and sat down on a pile of lumber under a mango tree. We told him that we were reporters and that I also sponsored a Malian child.

Sidibe should have been able to tell us why I had not been notified of Korotoumou's death. He emphasized that he closely monitors sponsored children and visits each village once a month.

Moreover, he said, "In my knowledge, everything that happens, the teachers tell us through a letter and automatically, we tell Kolondieba," where SCF has its regional office. "If it is a death, I send a delegation and we present our condolences to the families and there is a report to the sponsor. We inform Kolondieba even if it is a student that is not sponsored. At the end of every month, we go to Kolondieba and report that at a meeting."

Asked if he knew Korotoumou Kone, Sidibe said he did. He said she was in her third year at school. "In general, the students of N'goufien are impressive, especially in math," he added.

He professed ignorance when told that Korotoumou had been dead for nearly two years. "Frankly speaking, I'm not aware of it. Maybe they told it to my assistant. This is the first time I heard of it," he said.

When told that Korotoumou's mother had identified him as the SCF official who had offered his condolences, he demurred. "Frankly speaking, I'm not recalling any time I came to present my condolences. I don't recall this at all, the death of a child in N'goufien," he said.

To reconcile the difference between his account and the story told by Korotoumou's family, Sidibe agreed to accompany us back to N'goufien.

As the car jounced along the rutted track, he chatted in French in response to questions about local trees and animals and spoke glowingly about his young son who he said was first in his elementary school class. But as the car neared N'goufien, Sidibe fell noticeably silent, his eyes staring straight ahead and his fingers drumming lightly on his kneecaps.

Without much trouble, we found Bourama Kone, Korotoumou's 31-year-old former schoolmaster, working in a field outside the village.

Sidibe and Kone faced off across the furrows of a corn field. Kone clearly recalled reporting Korotoumou's death to Sidibe. "I told Brou," he said, pointing at Sidibe, who had squatted down on a furrow. "I told him face to face."

Hearing this, Sidibe visibly sagged. "Really, I don't remember. This might be a case I forgot," he said.

"One thing I'm sure of is that if we knew about it, Kolondieba knows about it," Sidibe insisted.

Officials there, at least, should be able to explain why I was not notified of the death.

No answers in Kolondieba

I met Fanta Sangare the next day, a Saturday, at Save the Children's regional offices in Kolondieba, about a four-hour drive north of N'goufien. In Kolondieba the organization occupies several buildings in a walled compound that also contains quarters for housing and training.

A businesslike woman in her 30s, Sangare, an assistant director of finance and administration, was the ranking SCF staffer on hand. The Kolondieba program director, Barnabe Diarra, was away in the capital.

Well-dressed in a brown and white printed headwrap and boubou, the caftan-like traditional dress, Sangare led the way into her small, sweltering office and touted SCF's work in Kolondeiba, which started in 1986.

"There was a water crisis" at the time, she said, "health problems, no NGOs (non-governmental organizations) involved and a food crisis." She said SCF currently sponsors some 6,200 children in the Kolondieba district, where 126,000 people live. Sponsor visits, while welcome, are infrequent, she said.

While she spoke, Kassim Kone, the young sponsorship agent responsible for N'goufien, came into the office. Asked if he knew Korotoumou Kone, he said: "She's healthy and she's continuing her studies. Soon, they close the school (for vacation). When she is not in school, she helps her mother."

I told them Korotoumou was dead.

Kassim Kone gasped. "I'm not aware of this," he said haltingly.

Struggling to explain why he had described Korotoumou as healthy, he said, "We meet the child once a year. We assume the child is just in good shape because nobody notified us of the death. I cannot say a child is dead if no one's told me. That's why I told you she was fine."

But that did not explain how Korotoumou could have been dead for nearly two years without SCF ever knowing, particularly since the organization says its agents visit at least once a year to compile the annual status survey on each child.

No one in Kolondieba could answer that.

"There is a need to know where there is a break in the system," Sangare said, shaking her head. "We must find out the explanation."

Incomplete records

The Malian capital of Bamako is a hot, dusty, low-rise city filled with open sewers and drab buildings that owe their bulky facades to the bland signature of Soviet architecture. It is also the home of SCF's headquarters in Mali, a relatively distinctive pink building close to the Niger River. Jeff Ramin, SCF's newly installed Sahel region field office director, was working in his office the next day, a Sunday morning.

A Canadian and former journalist, Ramin oversees SCF's operations in Mali as well as neighboring Burkina Faso and Guinea. A veteran child sponsorship worker, he is a tall, thin, bearded man in his 30s who joined Save the Children in September 1996.

Ramin said he oversees a \$4 million budget. Prominently taped to a window in a nearby office was a large sign titled, "Principles for Sponsorship Management." The No. 1 principle: "Each sponsored child must benefit regularly from SCF programs."

He volunteered that tracking sponsored children in Mali was a challenge. "It does take some organization and tracking to be sure we know where those 6,200 children are and that they're benefiting.

"Actually," Ramin said, "we are going through a bit of change in this respect. We're trying to be sure that the sponsored children receive significant benefits, either life changing or life saving. Previously, the focus was a little more diffuse."

When asked, Ramin's staff could find no record of my sponsorship. I produced my most recent SCF statement, which was less than a month old. A further check of the printed master sponsor lists, sent from Westport, Conn., showed I had been terminated as a sponsor.

"There's a difference between our records and Westport's records," said Ramin. "We'll have to get this straightened out."

Eventually, Ramin's assistants found a thin, pink-jacketed file on Korotoumou. It held only four things: her photo, a case history filled out on her the day she was enrolled in the program, a copy of the original dossier sent to me and the assignment notice of my sponsorship. Attached was a note that my check for the first year of sponsorship had arrived on May 11, 1995, and that a sponsorship kit had been sent on May 18.

I told them about my own visit to N'goufien and that Korotoumou had been dead since August 1995.

Ramin seemed stunned. "Oh. Really," he said slowly.

Despite subsequent days of effort, he and the SCF staff in Bamako never could explain how a child who was supposed to be receiving "significant benefits" could have been dead for nearly two years without Save the Children's knowledge--much less why I hadn't been notified.

SCF launches an inquiry

Word of Korotoumou's death reached Save the Children's U.S. headquarters long before I did. In Westport, embarrassed SCF officials immediately began an inquiry into Korotoumou's death and offered me profuse apologies.

"First, I share your sorrow over the tragedy that took the life of Korotoumou Kone," Gary Shaye, SCF's vice president of international programs, wrote me in early June. "Second (I also want) to offer apologies and express our embarrassment regarding the human and systems failures that delayed our notification concerning the child's death."

Ten days later, Save the Children sent me a refund check for the \$480 I had contributed on behalf of Korotoumou over two years. I never cashed the check.

Located on the banks of the Saugatuck River, SCF's two-story, yellow-brick headquarters is not extravagant by the blue-chip standards of Westport, Conn.

In July I went there with Dellios and other Tribune reporters to question Save the Children executives. Seated at a large table in an unadorned conference room, Charles MacCormack, SCF's avuncular, silver-haired president, emphasized the exceptional na-

ture of the situation involving Korotoumou.

"Our own ongoing sampling and testing says we've never seen anything like this. It really is an exception to what happens," he said.

Three months after MacCormack spoke, an SCF internal inquiry would uncover 20 other cases in Mali of sponsored children who had died without their sponsors being informed promptly.

In the instances where notification was made, 10 deaths had occurred more than a year before sponsors were notified. Save the Children subsequently learned that in two cases more than five years elapsed between deaths and notification.

The inquiry also found an additional four cases in which the sponsors of Malian children had never been notified of their deaths. I was one of them.

Save the Children investigators concluded that the failure of SCF employees to record Korotoumou's death was symptomatic of deeper problems within the organization.

The inquiry also finally determined why I had not been notified of Korotoumou's death. SCF terminated my sponsorship in July 1996 because I hadn't paid my bill on time. After I sent the organization an additional \$240, Save the Children reinstated me as Korotoumou's sponsor. However, there was a glitch in the paperwork: SCF's Bamako office failed to record the reinstatement notice in its records.

Thus, when SCF's Bamako office finally heard of Korotoumou's death sometime in late 1996, or more than a year after the tragedy, she was officially considered unsponsored. However, I was still listed as her sponsor in the records at Westport, which had never known of Korotoumou's death.

Save the Children's inquiry found that several SCF staffers in Mali did indeed know early on about Korotoumou's death but failed to report it. Kassim Kone and Broulaye Sidibe have since received letters of reprimand.

SCF says it has instituted some reforms to correct the problems--such as requiring staff to contact sponsored children more than once a year and conducting annual on-site re-

views of field offices by Westport-based executives.

Save the Children still characterizes the problems found in Mali as "exceptional." But it is clear that the system remains error-prone, sometimes chillingly so.

On Aug. 5, 1997, two months after I had received the refund check and two years after Korotoumou Kone had died, another "Special Day Card," again preprinted with the names of Lisa Anderson Ober as a sponsor and Korotoumou Kone as a sponsored child, arrived from SCF with a letter from Charles MacCormack.

". . . We thought a 'Special Day' greeting from you would make your sponsored child feel special," wrote MacCormack. "Imagine the incredible smile Korotoumou Kone will have when this arrives in the mail."

The card featured sweetly childish drawings of trees, birds and rabbits, and a curly-haired girl kicking a ball.

"My wish for you on your special day," the card read, "is that you grow to be happy, healthy and strong!"

About this special report

Between 1992 and 1996, Americans donated more than \$850 million to four of the largest and best-known child sponsorship organizations: Save the Children, the Christian Children's Fund, Children International and Childreach. That money was sent on faith that it would reach an African village, a Pacific island or a Latin American slum and, in the language of the Christian Children's Fund, "work a miracle" in the life of the little girl or boy whose photographs and letters are the sponsor's only evidence of the child's existence. To determine whether such faith is warranted, in 1995 Tribune reporters and editors began sponsoring these 12 children through four organizations without any mention of their Tribune affiliation. Last May, with no assistance from the four sponsorship organizations, Tribune reporters set out to learn how the lives of the sponsored children had been affected. Part One of this special report recounts what the Tribune learned about two of those organizations, Save the Children and Childreach. Part

Two, which appears next week, examines Children International and the Christian Children's Fund.

Illustration

PHOTOS 14 GRAPHIC MAP; Caption: PHOTO (color): (Korotoumou Kone.) PHOTO (color): Kotio Traore stands in the doorway of her home in N'goufien, Mali. Traore is the mother of Korotoumou Kone, whose haunting image stares from this page. PHOTO: Kotio Traore, Korotoumou Kone's mother, and three of her surviving children in their rural Malian village."... It was the will of God," Traore said, recalling Korotoumou's death. PHOTO: Korotoumou Kone. PHOTO: A young girl in N'goufien climbs to the roof of a building where food is being dried. PHOTO: Korotoumou Kone. PHOTO (color): The small Malian village of N'goufien. Most children routinely do some work at home and most work in the fields during planting and harvest season which runs from late MAY until November. PHOTO: Ali Kone, Korotoumou's father, plays with a nephew. He was stunned by his daughter's death; he had never heard of anybody killed by lightning. PHOTO (color): Seydou Kone, a village leader, stands near Korotoumou Kone's grave. The girl is buried near a rice paddy where she was killed by lightning in August 1995. PHOTO (color): Kotio Traore, Korotoumou's mother, was unclear about what benefits Korotoumou received through SCF, aside from school classes. PHOTO: (A Sponsorship Welcome Kid.) PHOTO: (A letter.) PHOTO: (Broulaye Sidibe.) PHOTO: (Refund check from Save the Children.) PHOTO: (A "Special Day Card" from Save the Children.) Photography by Jose More. GRAPHIC: One sponsorship experience Tribune reporter Lisa Anderson recounts her two years as a sponsor for Save the Children. - See microfilm for complete graphic. MAP:N'goufien, Mali; Africa.

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