A reader's companion: *Songs of Dust and Water*

by M.J. Hydara

This Companion discusses the whole novel, including the ending. Before you start the book, you can read the first entries for Part One's characters and the section on the world of the story. Later notes and sections have chapter labels: read them after finishing the chapters they name. Save the last section until you reach the end of the novel.

On songsofdustandwater.com, later material stays hidden until you choose how far you have read.

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The characters

Part One: Madina and Bakoro

Talib

Talib is a weaver's son in Madina, and his father expects him to take up the loom. Talib wants something else. He has taught himself how machines work, and he sells his carvings to help pay for his sister Hawa's training.

Read after chapter 27. Talib stays in Madina. He works with Aisha on the district's hand pumps, using leather seals Malik cuts from a hide.

Ibrahim

Ibrahim, Talib's father, is a weaver, and the loom has fed his family all his working life. He has not sung at the loom since his wife died, and he says little to his son.

Hawa

Talib's sister, the first in the family to study past the village school, is training as a nurse in Bakoro. Everyone sold something to send her, and if her exam fee is late she loses the year.

Malik

Malik is the village smith, and he keeps Madina's tools and machines working. When a part breaks, he forges it back into shape instead of throwing it out, and that is how the village's only tractor has kept going for decades.

Samba

Samba is a farmer and an elder who makes a joke of most things, even the rain.

Read after chapter 2. When the papers for the plant come to the meeting tree, he is the only one who asks Adam whose land it will stand on.

Mustapha

Mustapha is the elder the Ministry has registered to sign Madina's papers.

Read after chapter 4. He has held the post for fifteen years, taking the village's needs to the Ministry in Bakoro and bringing back whatever he can get.

Others in Madina

Neneh's eldest son has gone to the capital for work, and she wants him home. Yero and Hamadi head two clans, the Magribe and the Mashrik, who have argued for three generations over where the line between their grazing land runs. The ground set aside for Madina's new solar plant lies on that line. A Mashrik widow has kept that ground for twenty years as her late husband's share.

Aisha

Aisha is an engineer. Khresay, the Minister of Rural Hydraulics, sends her to Madina to watch the new plant's engineer for him. In her last post she reported that a contractor was using salty sand in his concrete, and a week later she was moved.

Adam Sterling

Adam, a systems engineer, trusts parts that have been tested and figures that have been checked. The Proxima Fund has sent him to build and run the plant at Madina, and he has promised Khresay that it will run itself, with no work needed from the village.

Read after chapter 4. He answers to Mark, his director at the Fund.

Khresay and Balla

Khresay, the Minister of Rural Hydraulics, is Soninke, and says his ancestors built the old empire of Wagadu. He has watched plenty of foreign projects arrive and then rust, so he is wary of Adam's plant. But his Ministry can't even pay for a new well at Madina, and if he turns Adam away, the Fund will go somewhere else. He agrees, knowing the risk.

Balla is his griot, the keeper of his family's history. He sits on a low stool in a corner of the Minister's meeting room, where a visitor might take him for a servant, but the Minister listens to him.

Dunia

Dunia is the Minister of Energy.

Read after chapter 4. Half the capital is in the dark, the National Energy Fund her Ministry runs is empty, and the President wants results. She calls every foreign project in the country "an island with its own flag", and says that when one breaks, her Ministry is left to clean up.

Others in Bakoro

Read after chapter 4. Ebou, the Minister of Finance, has known Dunia for twenty years. Nabil, Dunia's right hand at the National Energy Fund, handles the buying. On Hawa's ward everyone, even the doctors, calls the senior midwife Major.

Part Two: from chapter 10

Kadiatou

Kadiatou is Nafawol's Water-Keeper, who looks after the village well. The women of her family have held the title for generations, and she also sits on the village committee.

She has drawn water from the well every morning for sixty years, and she knows its water is now making the children ill.

Fatou

Fatou began as a girl selling groundnuts at the Talawol lorry park, and she has been trading ever since. For thirty years she has hired other people's lorries, and she knows what they cost at harvest. She is Kadiatou's oldest friend, and neither is shy of arguing with the other.

Read after chapter 25. Fatou grew up hungry, and when Veldane makes its offer, she argues for taking it. Her side loses the vote.

Mamadou

Mamadou is a herder and an elder who has heard many promises of new wells and seen none of them kept. When strangers come offering a new machine, he wants to know who sent them and where their rules are written down.

Dr Arramata

Dr Arramata was born in Nafawol, four hundred paces from the well. She has measured the floodplain's water for eleven years, and her warnings about the children have come to nothing. Now she is the Proxima Fund's engineer, and the plan that brings the Fund to Nafawol is hers.

Adam, ten years on

Adam arrives with Dr Arramata and speaks careful Nabari. He tells the elders he used to be an engineer and now looks after the money. The village calls him Tubab, a word for a Westerner, or for anyone with money and foreign ways.

Others in Nafawol

Every year Alkalo Sankung, the head of the village, writes to the capital about the well, and every year the answer is brief. Ousman, an elder who has grown groundnuts all his life, makes fun of the new machine.

Read after chapter 12. He takes on Dr Arramata's team in a test field, his way against theirs.

Read after chapter 22. Later he carves a bird for the academy from an offcut of the mill beams.

Bakary is the master weaver, though in these hard years his loom stands idle. Mariam, Kadiatou's granddaughter, is one of the children the well water has made ill. Her mother is Kadiatou's eldest daughter, and Kadiatou's son works on the docks at Port Walada.

From chapter 12 onwards

Edrisa

Edrisa, Nafawol's best builder, leads a crew of young labourers.

Haja

Haja is a widow of Nafawol, and she keeps her business to herself.

Read after chapter 20. She is the eldest woman in the women's savings group. In the month the money is hers, women from Sirawol ask to borrow from it, and Haja is the first to say yes. Half the pot goes to Sirawol and half to Haja, and the next week she sells her goat.

Read after chapter 24. When Veldane offers money for every household, Haja asks who will register the households, and on what day they will be counted.

From chapter 13 onwards

Isatou

Isatou runs the kafo, the women's working group. When the village works together on the road, the women of her kafo cook and carry water for the crews. Isatou knows exactly what that costs, and she wants it counted.

Read after chapter 16. She also runs the women's savings group. When the wind takes a roofing sheet off her son's house, his wife asks to have her turn early. Isatou says no, and the grandchildren sleep in her room until the rains are over.

Hassan

Hassan, a young man of Nafawol, is a welder. While the road is being built, he reads the drawings for the crews.

Read after chapter 19. He learns fast, and he knows it.

Read after chapter 22. When Nafawol sends a team to Sirawol, Hassan goes as its technical lead. When the Union's leaders start to depend on him for every answer, he worries that he sounds as certain when he is wrong as when he is right. So he goes from village to village to listen.

Read after chapter 28. By the last chapter Bintu runs the Union's technical work, and Hassan teaches at the new university.

From chapter 14 onwards

Demba

Demba works in Edrisa's crew. He grew up in the hunger years, watching his mother measure grain into the pot and tip some of it back. On the road he is always the last to stop work at night.

Alkalo Musa

Musa is the alkalo of Sirawol, the next village along the floodplain. Since the harvest he has sent Nafawol no greetings.

Read after chapter 20. When Kadiatou visits Sirawol, Musa greets her by her father's name, asks after everyone in her household and walks her back to the turning himself.

From chapter 15 onwards

Fanta

Fanta is a young weaver, the first girl Bakary has ever let work a loom. She can feel a slack thread in finished cloth with one pass of her thumb. She keeps watch with Demba among the Floodplain Guardians, and picks up the radio code faster than he does.

From chapter 16 onwards

Lamin

Lamin, Mamadou's grandson, is a young boy who herds the family's goats.

Alie

Alie, the senior technician, keeps the village's machines running and can hear one going wrong before any gauge shows it.

From chapter 17 onwards

Minister Sulayman

Sulayman is Tekuru's Minister of Rural Development. He has lasted nine years in the job by getting things right more often than his rivals do. He sees the danger at once: if one village can manage without a ministry, others will try.

The regulator's inspector

She goes through the Coffer Fund's ledger for the banking regulator and holds the village to its own charter.

From chapter 19 onwards

Bintu

Bintu studies at the academy, the school Nafawol builds to train its own technicians. She works at the bench beside Hassan, and she often sees what he has rushed past.

Nyma

Read after chapter 20. Nyma runs the presses at Nafawol's new mill.

From chapter 21 onwards

Alkalo Yaya

Alkalo Yaya of Kumbawol and Musa come from families who are joking cousins. By old custom, the two of them may tease each other without giving offence, and they do, at every meeting.

From chapter 22 onwards

Aminatu

Aminatu, a young delegate from Talawol, speaks for her village and its mill, and she backs her case with the mill's own records.

From chapter 23 onwards

Evelyn Reed

Evelyn Reed speaks for Veldane Agriculture, a large foreign company. She has studied the villages closely, and she comes to Nafawol with a bigger offer than any they have had before.

From chapter 24 onwards

Jankero

Jankero, an elder of Kumbawol, does not like to see a woman speak at the meeting place, and he does not keep it to himself. Later he asks Kadiatou, politely, how far away the hospital in Veldane's offer would be, and she doesn't know.

From chapter 26 onwards

The Teranu family

The Teranu are a farming family of nine in Nafawol.

The world of the story

The land and its two countries

The story is set across the Sahel, the dry belt of land south of the Sahara, and the floodplain country further south. In the novel's villages, one short rainy season has to last the whole year. In the dry months the harmattan blows dust down from the desert, and it gets into everything.

The characters call their wider region Senebia. The name is older than the border that now cuts across it.

Part One takes place in the Republic of Awdagha. Madina is a village of weavers and farmers in the dry north. Bakoro, the capital, lies to the south, a long day's drive away, or a night on the bus. When the story opens, Madina has had three bad seasons in a row, and the water in its well is falling.

For Part Two the story crosses the border into the Republic of Tekuru. Nafawol, six hundred kilometres south of Madina, is a village of about two hundred households on an old floodplain that the river abandoned long ago. Other villages lie close around it, and the capital, Port Walada, is on the coast.

Languages, faith and old empires

The village families in the story include Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Sarahule, and they speak their own languages at home. In Awdagha, Sarahule is called Soninke. Nabari, a fictional language, is used in offices and markets, and most of the characters speak it alongside their own. They are mostly Muslim, and the five daily prayers shape their day.

Many of the characters remember an old empire from their family's past. Sarahule families in the story look back to Wagadu, Mandinka families to Kaabu, Wolof families to Jolof and Fula families to the old kingdoms of Futa Toro and Futa Jallon. A griot tells these histories in words and song, along with each family's own story.

How a village runs

Every village in Tekuru has an alkalo, its head, who deals with day-to-day matters, signs for the village and speaks for it to the district. A seyfo, or district chief, is in charge of all the alkalos in a district. Inside the village, bigger questions go to the committee. Its members, men and women, meet on the bantaba, the raised platform beneath the big shade tree, where village business is talked over. In Nafawol, the committee includes Kadiatou, the Water-Keeper.

A family lives in a compound, a few houses round a shared yard. In the book, business waits until the greetings are done: family, health and work, each in turn.

A kafo is a working group, often of men or women of the same age. When a job needs many hands, such as clearing land or putting up a building, the kafo turns out to do it.

The women also save together in an osusu. Each pays the same sum into a pot whenever they meet, which in Nafawol is once a month, on a market day. The members take turns to collect the whole pot. Once a week a village or small town holds a lumo, a market for traders and buyers from all the villages around.

Four feasts come round in the story. Koriteh ends the Ramadan fast. At Tobaski, the Feast of Sacrifice, families slaughter a ram and share some of the meat with neighbours and the poor. At Gamo, the Prophet's birthday, the Qur'an is recited late into the night. Tamkharit is the night for chereh, a millet couscous. After dark, children with painted faces go round the houses, beating tins and singing for coins and grain.

What is fictional, and what the novel draws on

The two countries, their towns and governments, the language Nabari, and the funds and companies in the story are fictional. So are the characters, and some of their customs. Otherwise, the novel draws on the languages, old empires, festivals, food and crops of the region.

The novel ends with a list of the characters and places, a glossary and a pronunciation guide. The glossary is called Words and Names.

Chapter by chapter, as you read

Part One: The Glass House of the Sahel

Chapter 1: The Foundation

Talib is meant to carry on his father's weaving in Madina, but his hands won't take to it. His father, Ibrahim, has not sung at the loom since Talib's mother died. What Talib cares about is in his notebook: drawings of pumps and mills, and a radio diagram he once found in a ditch and worked out for himself. His sister Hawa's exam fee is due, and the birds he carves for lorry drivers will never pay it in time. When a thread snaps on his small loom, he leaves it hanging.

In the capital, Adam Sterling of the Proxima Fund shows Minister Khresay his design for a solar plant at Madina that will water the fields by day and keep the lights on at night. It will run itself, Adam says, and no one in the village will have to work on it. Khresay signs, and then decides to send someone of his own.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "That is the work. This thread of ours fed me, and it feeds you. It asks only for your hands."
>
> Ibrahim, page 3
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Ibrahim and Talib see the loom in different ways. Have you ever been expected to carry on someone else's work, or expected it of someone else? How did it turn out?

Chapter 2: The Signature

For decades Malik, the village smith, has kept Madina's only tractor going by re-forging parts that others would throw away. On the second morning of building, a certified steel bracket on the plant snaps, and he mends it in his forge rather than let the work wait a week for a new one from the capital. Adam won't fit it, because he can't tell how strong the mended steel is now, and the bracket is left lying in the dust. Malik says one thing, to his apprentice: "A thing you are not allowed to mend is not yours."

Samba is a farmer and an elder. Next day, under the meeting tree, he asks whose land the plant will stand on, since two clans have argued over it for three generations. Adam has no answer. He hands his pen to Mustapha, the elder the Ministry has registered to sign for the village.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "His signature tells you who held the pen"
>
> Samba, page 17
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Mustapha signs for the whole of Madina. Would you trust one person to sign for your street or your village? Who would it be?

Chapter 3: The First Cracks

Aisha has already lost one post for warning that a contractor's concrete would crack. Now Minister Khresay has sent her to Madina. When a whine starts in one of the air intakes that keep the batteries and the inverter cool, she wets a dish of the local dust and shows Adam the grey paste of salt and clay that is clogging his filters.

Her answer is a box of sisal, charcoal and woven grass in front of the intakes, the way the villages screen their grain stores against the harmattan, the dusty wind of the dry season. Adam will only let her try it on one of the other intakes. While the test runs, he offers a place on his own team to Talib, who has swept the site since building began and wants it more than anything. For a week the intake with the box runs cooler while the whining one gets worse, and Adam says the test proves nothing.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "They don't get dirty, Mr Sterling. They choke."
>
> Aisha, page 24
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Have you ever seen a good idea turned down because of where it came from?

Chapter 4: The National Energy Fund

Dunia, the Minister of Energy, can't keep the lights on in her own capital. When half of Bakoro goes dark one night, Hawa, a student nurse, holds the torch for the senior midwife everyone calls Major. Next morning Ebou, the Minister of Finance, comes to tell Dunia that the President is furious. The plant that lights Madina is not hers.

She arrives in Madina with soldiers and cameras and a change to the contract that moves the plant's money into the National Energy Fund, which she runs. Mustapha has a daughter getting married after the rains and a son in debt in the city. He has already taken an envelope from Dunia's right-hand man. Adam checks the payment clauses and signs without reading to the end.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "Ebou, every foreign project in this country is an island with its own flag."
>
> Dunia, page 33
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Dunia doesn't trust projects run from abroad. Does she have a point, even if you dislike how she goes about it?

Chapter 5: The Mechanical Rot

On Adam's team at last, Talib watches the plant go wrong around him. His pay arrives nine days late, with a third of it missing. When one of the air intakes overheats, Adam can't order the new bearing it needs, because a clause he never read in Dunia's change to the contract says orders like that need her approval.

Aisha rings Khresay, who no longer has any say over the plant. That evening she buys an exercise book at the stall by the well and writes until her lamp runs low. Then Talib opens a crate Adam never ordered and finds the gaskets inside are fakes.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"Every warning. Every part. Every date. Keep a copy somewhere they cannot reach."

Khresay, page 43

TO THINK OVER

When you can't stop something going wrong, what good does it do to write it all down?

Chapter 6: The Human Rot

By now Talib sleeps on a camp bed at the plant, and gets up every hour in case the next alarm is one they can't stop. With Aisha's help he has traced the plant's money to firms that lead back to Dunia's brother. He asks Adam to take what they have found to Khresay, and to switch the plant off until the right parts come. Adam calls it noise. That evening Talib goes home for the first time in weeks, and wakes in the dark to find his father has laid a cloth from the loom over him.

Two weeks later, on the hottest afternoon of the season, Adam tells him to bypass the last backup intake, the one Aisha's box once cooled. Talib's hands shake on the keys, and he does it. Adam has already raised the temperature at which the batteries and the inverter cut out, so nothing shuts itself down, and the plant burns.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"The looms were still, and the children did not cry."

The narrator, page 52

TO THINK OVER

Have you ever gone along with an order you had doubts about? What made you do it?

Chapter 7: Ash

After the fire, nobody in Madina but Ibrahim will go near Adam and Talib where they sit under the meeting tree. Towards evening he crosses the square with a jar of water, fills his son's cup, waits for him to drink and fills it again. He never looks at Adam.

On the third day Dunia comes back with cameras and tells the village that this is what comes of trusting foreign hands. When Adam tries to tell her about the fake parts, soldiers push him back, and the villagers turn their anger on everyone at once: on Adam, on Mustapha, on each other. One of them, Neneh, had hoped the plant would bring her son home from Bakoro. As a car takes Adam away, he sees Aisha already winding unburnt copper wire out of the wreck.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"You sold us ash!"

Neneh, page 55

TO THINK OVER

Neneh turns on Mustapha, not on Adam. Who, if anyone, do you think is most to blame for the fire?

Chapter 8: The Scramble

Dunia wants Aisha on her side. She has Aisha driven to Bakoro and tells her about growing up in the north, where before she was twenty she had counted eleven charity plaques on pumps, wells and a grain store. None of them still worked, and the charities had gone home. Only the state had stayed. Then she offers Aisha the job of running rural energy in the north.

Next morning a government committee blames the fire on Adam. Its findings leave out the fake parts and the bearing Adam could not order without Dunia's approval. Aisha turns the job down. She tells Khresay about a borehole that nobody is responsible for, two hours' walk from Madina, and he posts her to the district water office.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "The worst of it was that none of the facts they read out were false."
>
> The narrator, page 61
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Can a report be true in every line and still be unfair?

Chapter 9: The Warp Thread

Six months after the fire, a letter comes from Hawa. Her fees are due with the rains, she writes, and she is not asking her brother for them. Talib sits down at his small loom, where the thread that snapped long before the fire is still hanging, and ties it with the knot his father taught him. Ibrahim takes up his son's beat and starts to hum.

Adam sends Proxima's board one page saying what he did and that he was wrong.

Seven years after the fire, an engineer from Tekuru, the country to the south, comes to see him. Dr Arramata wants a machine that draws water from the air for her village, and Adam has twice turned her plan down: it leaves the village's money in Proxima's hands and the village relying on her. "Write it so it doesn't need you," he tells her. When she does, she asks the Fund to send him to her village, and tells him to learn enough Nabari for the village to argue with him.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "*Do not carry what is not yours to carry.*"
>
> Hawa, page 73
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> What do you think Hawa means? What is Talib carrying that isn't his to carry, and what is his?

Part Two: The Water-Keeper

Ten years after the fire

In Madina two looms are still at work every morning, with Talib's notebook on the shelf above them. Some families there remember journeys as far back as Wagadu, and others the cattle roads their grandparents walked.

Over the border in Tekuru, Kadiatou looks after the well at Nafawol, Dr Arramata's village. For six years the well has given less water each season, and saltier. She noticed in the first season and told the village committee. The water harvester comes ten years after the fire, and Nafawol counts its years from then.

> **FROM THIS PASSAGE**
>
> "The grandmothers called it a road that had not yet run out."
>
> The narrator, page 81
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Some of Madina's grandmothers still tell how the families of Wagadu followed the water south. Does your family, your town or a place you know have a story like that, of leaving one place for another? How is it told?

Chapter 10: Words Are Wind

Every morning Kadiatou, Nafawol's Water-Keeper, draws water she knows is making the children ill, her granddaughter Mariam among them. There is nothing else to give them.

She has a seat on the committee, and she is there when Dr Arramata and Adam sit under the baobab and make the case for the water harvester. Kadiatou tells them "words are wind", but she still brings them a bowl of the well water, as any host would. If the machine works, she says, they can show her now.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "My mother used to say a well has no gate. Anyone with a rope may draw from it."
>
> Kadiatou, page 90
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Kadiatou worries about who will control the new machine. Is there something you depend on that someone else controls? What would change if you had the key?

Chapter 11: The Taste of Nothing

The first beaker from the test machine goes to Kadiatou, and the water tastes of nothing at all. At home Mariam pulls a face at her cup. She has forgotten that water can taste like that.

Fatou is a trader, and every buyer who has read his own papers to her has left a line out. So when the agreement with the Fund comes to the baobab nine days later, she reads it aloud herself, sentence by sentence. Once it is signed, she keeps the committee's key, a small piece of black plastic, in her purse beside her money. On its own it opens the machine, the borehole and the shared account.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"I didn't choose a good man, Yaara-Jaxo. I chose a man who knows what it costs to be wrong."

Dr Arramata, page 92

TO THINK OVER

Dr Arramata chooses Adam because he has already been wrong, in public. What can a mistake made in public teach someone that nothing else can?

Chapter 12: The First Furrow

Ousman, an elder, has farmed groundnuts all his life, and he has no intention of being taught by an engineer. He takes up Dr Arramata's challenge: each of them will farm half a hectare of the village's worst ground for a season. When the rain stops for a fortnight and Dr Arramata's cowpeas begin to wilt, Kadiatou keeps the water she washes her rice in and pours it along one of the rows, without being asked. The next evening two women join her, and after that more come each night.

On judging day Ousman scoops up a handful of soil from each half. His is pale dust, and Dr Arramata's is dark and cool and smells of roots. He lets the dust fall and, in front of everyone, asks her to teach him.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"*I thought I would be glad. I am glad.*"

Kadiatou, page 99

TO THINK OVER

Kadiatou has looked after the old well for years, and now the taps run. Why might good news bring her mixed feelings?

Chapter 13: The Road of Hands

Fatou is taking ten tonnes of cotton down the old track when an unseasonal storm turns it to mud and her hired lorry sinks to its axles. The government once sent a surveyor, who drank the village's tea and vanished, so Nafawol decides to build its own road to the tarmac. Everyone turns out in their age groups, the kafo.

Isatou, who leads the women's kafo, wants something written down before the work is done. She brings the committee a list of what the women have given: oil, hours at the cooking fires and millet the families need to last until the harvest. When the road is finished, she says, the men will tell their grandsons that they built it. Fatou enters the list line by line, and the common fund pays for the millet and the oil. From then on, whenever the accounts are read, Isatou reads her list first.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"Let it be a road of hands"

Kadiatou, page 110

TO THINK OVER

What does a village gain by building its own road, instead of waiting for the government to do it? What does it risk?

Chapter 14: The Shadow of Envy

The cotton buyer's agent has been buying in these villages for fifteen years. He brought sweets for Fatou's children when they were small, and he knows her mother by name. Once Nafawol has its road, it can take its cotton to the coast without him. He asks Fatou where the road will join the tarmac. Within days his truck is buying at Sirawol, the next village. For twenty years a woman from Sirawol has haggled with Fatou over onions at the market. This time she takes the price Fatou names and doesn't ask after her family.

Then the new culvert, the stone channel that carries water under the road, is found wrecked. At the meeting under the baobab, Fatou comes close to blaming Sirawol. Alkalo Sankung, the head of the village, stops her. Tonight, he says, no village is to be named.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "I only ask because I may have to buy a smaller truck, if nobody needs mine any more."
>
> The buyer's agent, page 114
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> The cotton buyer's agent smiles as he asks his question. What do you think he is really asking, and how would you answer him?

Chapter 15: The Floodplain Guardians

Since the culvert was wrecked, Demba, a young road-builder, has carried his father's machete on watch. He is one of the Floodplain Guardians, the village's night watch, whose rules say they never give chase unless a life is at stake. One night two of the newest Guardians chase someone along the gully. It is a Sirawol herd boy, out looking for a stray goat, and he falls and breaks his arm. Demba could have called them back, but for a few seconds he wanted them to catch whoever it was.

Mamadou, an elder, takes the boy home to Sirawol with a good goat, kola nuts and an apology. Alkalo Musa, the head of Sirawol, accepts the goat but offers Mamadou no water. After that, Demba goes out on watch without the machete.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "And you use them to chase our children into the stones."
>
> Alkalo Musa, page 122
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Was Nafawol's apology enough? What else could Nafawol have done?

Chapter 16: Three Names

Mamadou knows that one day someone he loves will ask him for an exception, and he wants a rule that will say no for him. When the village's shared money becomes a trust, the Coffer Fund, no large sum can leave it without three signatures from three separate households, and Mamadou insists that the rule covers him too. His grandson Lamin wants a motorbike, and that evening the boy works out how many years it will take to buy one by selling young goats at Tobaski.

When the committee talks of putting the accounts up on a wall, Adam says that where he worked before, money went missing in offices only a few could see into. Isatou asks whether he could see into them. He says yes.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "A pot everyone can see into does not empty in the night."
>
> Isatou, page 130
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Even Adam's pay is on the village wall. If every shared fund where you live put its accounts up for all to read, what would change?

Chapter 17: The Two Lines

Sulayman, Tekuru's Minister of Rural Development, wants the Coffer Fund handed over while his ministry reviews it, and Fatou won't do it. Give it up once, she says, and every office in the capital will come back for it each time it grows. So the village registers it under the banking law instead, and the regulator sends an inspector, who asks only to be left alone with the ledger.

The inspector finds a payment with two signatures instead of three, and another entered twice. The double entry is in Fatou's own hand, and she doesn't cross it out. Before dawn she writes up what went wrong, signs it with her full name and pins a copy to the wall in the square.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "If you let it be two when it is convenient, it will be two when it is not."
>
> The regulator's inspector, page 136
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> A payment for the stone that the culvert needed had only two of the three signatures. Is the inspector right not to let it pass? Have you ever seen a small exception become the rule?

Chapter 18: The Mill

With more crops than the village can store or carry, Fatou wants her trading partners to lend the money for a mill on their usual terms. Kadiatou asks who would decide things while the debt was being paid. When Fatou calls the terms normal, Kadiatou says the buyers in her grandfather's stories said the same about groundnuts, and the two friends fall out. In the end the Coffer Fund pays for the building, and the traders lend only for the machines.

Later the open ledger shows that a supplier Fatou has dealt with for twenty years has overcharged the mill. She goes to the port to face him. The evening she gets back, she sits on Kadiatou's veranda for the first time since their quarrel and admits she had thought the ledger was meant for strangers. Kadiatou tips Fatou's cold tea onto the okra and pours her a fresh cup.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"I have read four hundred. Do not tell me about groundnuts."

Fatou, page 139

TO THINK OVER

Fatou has just said that Kadiatou's grandfather could not read a contract. Was that fair? Why do you think Kadiatou doesn't argue back?

Chapter 19: The House of Knowledge

The village wants an academy of its own, the House of Knowledge, to train its technicians, and Ousman is against it. The capital's schools, he says, send a farmer's son home ashamed of his father's fingernails. When his son, an accountant schooled in the capital, visits with a new baby, Ousman walks them to the bus. He holds his granddaughter with one hand flat on the cloth under her, so that his fingers never touch her skin. There is still earth in the cracks of his hands.

The academy is built anyway. When lightning knocks out the mill, Dr Arramata fetches two students. Hassan goes straight for the transformer, but Bintu tells him to wait, and together they find a small burnt part behind the larger relays. Once the mill is running again, Ousman pushes through the crowd and puts a hand on each student's shoulder.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"A strike does not always reach it. Sometimes it only burns out the protection in front of it."

Bintu, page 149

TO THINK OVER

Dr Arramata could have fixed the fault herself. Has anyone ever held back so that you could work something out on your own? What did it teach you?

Chapter 20: The Blueprint Spreads

Before Alkalo Musa asks Nafawol to help Sirawol, he owns up to something. Two brothers from his own village, paid by the cotton buyer's agent, broke the culvert. He found out a year later and said nothing, because he told himself the herd boy's broken arm evened the score. Mamadou has both wrongs written into the records of the two villages, names and all.

Nafawol lends Sirawol money for a mill, and a government inspector seals its boiler over a missing certificate. Every morning Nyma, who set the boiler up herself, sits beside it and writes in her log that it is still sealed. When Sirawol can't repay, it is Nyma who finds a way through, and Nafawol writes a pause on repayments into the Coffer Fund's charter. With nothing coming back from Sirawol, there is no money left to pay Edrisa, the builder who started the road, and he leaves to find work on the coast.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"This village did not fail. It was stopped."

Nyma, page 159

TO THINK OVER

Where would you draw the line between a village that fails and one that is stopped? Was Nafawol right to carry the cost?

Chapter 21: The Senebian Economic Union

Bintu teaches at the academy now, and each Friday her class copies a column of the Coffer Fund's figures from the wall and does the sums in chalk. One Friday Mariam notices a carter from Sirawol who has been paid nine times in seven months. The carter has no cart. The clerk who entered the payments is Mamadou's grandson Lamin, and the money has bought a motorbike.

That night Mamadou argues for the boy from the back of the meeting, until Alkalo Sankung says to him, "You told us what to write." Mamadou walks forward to his usual seat and tells them to write down Lamin's name, with his own beneath it as the man who asked for the rule. Before long twelve villages sign the charter of a new Union, with the Coffer Fund at its centre.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"Why does the carter always stop just under the line?"

Mariam, page 164

TO THINK OVER

Mariam spots what the adults have missed. Who checks the public accounts in your town, and could a child do it?

Chapter 22: Six and Four

Hassan, the Union's technical lead, brings formulas to the Union Council's first full meeting, and the delegates take up none of them. Alkalo Yaya of Kumbawol wants the year's spare money spent on channels and a seed store, so that one bad year can't wipe out what his farmers have won back. Aminatu of Talawol wants training, after her village's mill sat idle for nine days waiting for anyone who could fit a bearing. Hassan puts his formulas away and spends the next week going round the villages.

Fatou settles the argument at the mill scales before dawn, with six parts for the fields and four for the workshops. Any less for the fields, she says, and Yaya would walk out. Any more and Aminatu would. Hassan calls that haggling, and Fatou asks him what he thought a council was.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"*And I sound just as sure when I'm wrong as when I'm right.*"

Hassan, page 172

TO THINK OVER

When everyone is waiting for your answer, what does it take to go and listen first?

Chapter 23: The Offer

Evelyn Reed of Veldane Agriculture, a large foreign company, studies the Union's weak spots before she makes her offer. The water harvester gives less than seventy per cent of what it was designed to give, and Proxima's funding stops in three years. She offers more money than anyone in the room has ever seen: new mills, a university, a hospital and fifty thousand dollars for each family. In return Veldane wants the first right to buy the Union's crops.

Kadiatou asks Reed whose hand would be on the key, and Reed calls it a partnership. Fatou, who is already working out what so much money could do, breaks in to say it would be a sale, and that they should call it that before they talk about price.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "Anyone can copy the charter on your academy wall. Nobody else can deliver your crop."
>
> Evelyn Reed, page 181
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> What do you think Veldane is really trying to buy with its offer?

Chapter 24: Perpetuity

The offer splits households, Demba's among them. One night Kadiatou, who wants to turn it down, finds Fatou working late at the mill. As Fatou sees it, Kadiatou has never known hunger like hers: Fatou watched her mother cook the family's seed millet when there was no food, and she won't let that happen again over an argument about words. Kadiatou answers with the six years she spent giving children water she knew was making them ill. Then she asks if there is tea, and brews all three rounds herself. The two of them drink without a word.

Bintu finds a clause that would give the company the right to use anything the Union invents, for ever. Within the week Reed narrows it, and nothing else in the deal changes. Veldane would still buy the crops first, at a price its own buyers set, and could still say no to any large plan, from Yaya's channels to the next school.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "Fifty thousand is not a word to me. It is rest. It is medicine."
>
> Demba's father, page 184
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Demba and his father disagree about the offer. Which of them do you understand better, and why?

Chapter 25: The Vote

Fatou, the Union's treasurer, doesn't vote, but she keeps count as Alkalo Musa lays out the stones, white for yes and black for no. With two still to come she knows the offer has lost. The vote ends fourteen to ten against, and nobody cheers. Next morning, before the market opens, Fatou walks to the well. If she had voted, she tells Kadiatou, her stone would have been white.

In Madina the news comes over the radio in Malik's yard, where Talib sits with Aisha and with Hawa, up from Bakoro for a naming ceremony. On the same broadcast Dunia, now retired, opens the northern grid's last substation. That night Talib writes the Union's name inside the cover of his old notebook.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"We have not delivered a child by torchlight in years"

Hawa, page 197

TO THINK OVER

Whatever else Dunia did, Hawa gives her credit for the grid. Can someone do real harm and real good in the same job? How would you weigh the two?

Chapter 26: A Sower and the Soil

Teranu borrowed to buy bullocks in the good years. In the first year after the vote, cotton prices drop. He asks the Union Council to let the rule that pauses repayments cover a fall in prices too. Kadiatou plaited hair with his mother fifty years ago, but she holds to the rule with the rest of the Council. Before the trade season ends, Teranu's family sell their bullocks and pay what they can, and all nine of them leave for the coast.

Three years after the vote, the rains come late and all at once. Water runs in the oldest riverbed by Nafawol, where for seven dry seasons the crews have built low stone lines to let it sink in. On the first cold morning Kadiatou draws a bucket from the old well and tastes it. It is still bitter, but less so, and she tells no one. When Proxima's ten years are up, Adam hands Fatou the second key, which Proxima has kept since the agreement was signed, and leaves.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"It was always ours. This is only the receipt."

Fatou, page 207

TO THINK OVER

When does a thing become yours: when you build it, when you pay for it or when the papers say so?

Chapter 27: The Second Song

Most mornings Ibrahim sings at the loom again, and when he loses a line of the song, Talib gives it back to him. In Bakoro, Hawa is now the senior midwife the students call Major. When a mother comes in off the market road with nothing, Hawa wraps the newborn in a length of her brother's cloth.

After Ibrahim dies, Talib finishes the length his father left on the loom. Then he takes his notebook to the committee under the meeting tree, where Mustapha's son now reads every paper aloud before he signs it.

FROM THIS CHAPTER

"It's paid for"

Hawa, page 214

TO THINK OVER

Hawa could have told the mother the cloth was free. Why do you think she says it is paid for?

Chapter 28: The Water-Keepers

A man past forty, carrying a cracked old notebook, comes to Nafawol with visitors from Awdagha, over the border. It is the fifteenth year since the harvester came, and the Union has grown to thirty-one villages. Madina, a village in the visitors' district, has asked for the Union by name. The man asks Hassan, "Who is poor here now?" Hassan answers straight away: "The farmers at the edges." A fitter in the mill towns, he says, earns three times as much as a farmer. Later he tells Kadiatou the man's name, Talib.

That evening Kadiatou takes her great-granddaughter Halima to the old well. They pull the bucket up together, full and cold. Kadiatou tastes it. The bitterness has gone, and she gives thanks. Halima tastes it too, pulls a face and can't see what the fuss is about.

> **FROM THIS CHAPTER**
>
> "We have never agreed about it."
>
> Kadiatou, page 220
>
> **TO THINK OVER**
>
> Years after the vote, Kadiatou and Fatou still disagree about Veldane's offer, yet they are close friends. What keeps a friendship going through a disagreement that never ends?

Wagadu through the book

Wagadu is the old empire that the Sarahule characters look back to. The Sarahule are also called the Soninke. The empire comes up only a handful of times in the book, and always through one of the characters. In Part One that is a minister and his griot. In Part Two it is first some of Madina's grandmothers, in the short passage before chapter 10, then Kadiatou at the well in Nafawol, and later others in the village.

The Minister's ancestors (chapter 1)

Adam Sterling, an engineer from the Proxima Fund, has come to the Ministry in Bakoro to explain his plan for a solar plant at Madina. Minister Khresay pushes the briefing pack aside and talks instead about his own ancestors.

> "I am Soninke," he said. "My ancestors built Wagadu."
>
> Khresay, page 7

His ancestors grew rich, he says, because they set the terms for the gold that crossed their land, and never let a foreign trader learn where the mines were. Then he asks what Adam plans for the villagers themselves. Adam answers that the plant will run itself.

Four times lost (chapter 8)

After the fire at the plant, Adam takes his evidence to Khresay. The Minister makes a telephone call, puts the receiver down and tells Adam that Minister Dunia has beaten them both. Adam can do nothing more, Khresay says, and should go home.

Balla, the Minister's griot, sings the one word "Wagadu" from his stool in the corner. He reminds Khresay that, as the grandmothers tell it, a promise was broken and after that the rain stopped coming. Then he names the four ways Wagadu was lost: vanity, falsehood, greed and its own quarrelling. With his eyes on the Minister, he sings again.

> "Wagadu, four times lost."
>
> Balla, page 64

"Four times found again," Khresay answers, and Balla sings the words back to him.

In the versions that the German scholar Leo Frobenius published in 1921, Wagadu rises four times and is lost four times, each time under a new name. Those versions also call Wagadu a strength that lives in the hearts of those who belong to it.

The road south ("Ten years after the fire")

By now the plant's site at Madina has been cleared, and the children who play there don't know what stood on it. In some families, the grandmothers remember further back. When Wagadu's promise broke, they say, the rains moved south and its families followed the water, well by well. They call it a road that has not yet run out. Other families remember the cattle roads their grandparents walked.

The snake in the well (chapter 10)

At Nafawol, Kadiatou looks after the well, and the well is failing. Looking down into it, she remembers her grandmother's story. Wagadu once kept a covenant with a snake in a well, and the water came for as long as the covenant lasted. When it was broken, the wells turned bitter, and Wagadu's families scattered to the south and west. In time they became villages like Nafawol.

> "*I have never been sure about the snake, but I have believed what she said about the water for years.*"
>
> Kadiatou, page 85

Her grandmother's story is on the website, at songsofdustandwater.com/wagadu.

At the House of Knowledge (chapter 19)

When Nafawol plans its academy, Ousman, one of the elders, is against it. The capital's schools, he says, send a farmer's son home ashamed of his father. Kadiatou says he may be right, since she has never seen those schools. But in Nafawol's school, she says, the children should at least hear about Wagadu the way her grandmother told it at the well. Mamadou, another elder, points out that the empire has been gone a thousand years.

> "Not gone," Dr Arramata said. "Dispersed. Everyone in this room is what Wagadu turned into."
>
> Dr Arramata, page 146

"Or what other stories turned into," Mamadou answers, and he says his own ancestors kept theirs.

Once a month a griot comes out from Talawol to teach the histories, and he always begins with Wagadu. Then, because the academy's children come from every family on the floodplain, he goes on to the histories their families keep: Kaabu, Jolof, the kingdoms of the Futas, the Jola rice country and the old Serer kings.

In the griot's song (chapter 26)

At the mill, Adam brings Fatou the last of what Proxima has held for Nafawol: a small key and a folder of papers. At the feast that night, a griot from Talawol sings the village's ten years, from the first drop of water to the last signature.

> "He named people by their deeds: Kadiatou by the rope, Isatou by her list, Edrisa by the first stone of the road."
>
> The narrator, page 207

Near the end the griot comes to Adam and names him by the basket he carried on the road, and a shout goes up from the men who hauled beside him as boys. Then he sets the village's story beside those of Wagadu, Kaabu, Jolof and the Futas.

To think over (when you have finished)

1. Khresay is proud that his ancestors set the terms for the gold that crossed their land. Who in the book decides how things are bought and sold, and who has to accept someone else's terms?

2. Balla names four ways Wagadu was lost. Do you see any of them in Madina's story, or in Nafawol's?
3. Kadiatou has never been sure about the snake, but she believes her grandmother about the water. Is there a story in your family that you half believe?
4. Dr Arramata says everyone in the room is what Wagadu turned into. Mamadou says his ancestors kept their own stories. Can both be right?

How things work: money, water and land

Much of what the characters hope for, and could lose, turns on a contract, a fund or a vote, starting with one elder's signature at Madina. This part explains them in the order they come up.

The plant and the amendment (after chapter 4)

Mustapha is the only villager who signs anything. The Ministry has registered him as Madina's signatory, so his signature stands for the whole village. The Proxima Fund's deal itself is with Minister Khresay's Ministry of Rural Hydraulics, not with the village. Proxima builds the plant, proves it works and hands it to the government within two years. Everything the plant buys goes through the National Energy Fund's online ordering system, from a short list of approved sellers.

Dunia, the Minister of Energy, brings an amendment to the contract, and Adam signs it without reading to the end. It sends the plant's income to the National Energy Fund and lets her Ministry take the plant over whenever she judges there is an emergency, a breakdown or a threat to the country's power supply. It also says that any order over a thousand dollars from a seller that isn't local needs her written approval.

Proxima's rule, and the agreement at Nafawol (after chapter 11)

When Fatou asks who is paying, Adam calls the Proxima Fund "many purses in one": governments, charities, development banks and individual donors who give a little every month. After the fire at Madina, Proxima's board voted to pay for a project only if the people who would live with it owned it and could stop it.

At Nafawol that rule goes into the agreement. One clause holds the promise Adam made under the baobab: if Nafawol does not own what is built, the money stops. Another gives the village committee a small plastic key, and that key on its own opens the water machine, the borehole and the shared bank account. Proxima keeps a second key for the first ten years.

One more clause covers the machine's design. Proxima holds the drawings in trust, only to stop anyone else claiming them, and Nafawol is free to use the design to build the machine, repair it and copy it.

The water (after chapter 12)

Dr Arramata wants the deep water under Nafawol kept for the village's grandchildren. The machine she brings, the water harvester, draws water from the air. It cools the air until the moisture in it turns to drops, much as dew forms overnight. It works best at night, and trays of grey granules beside it soak up moisture after dark and give it off the next day.

The machine was never meant to do the job alone. A deep borehole makes up whatever the harvester can't supply, and its water is saved for drinking and cooking. Dr Arramata tells Kadiatou that every litre the harvester makes is one they leave in the deep water.

A second, shallower borehole reaches a layer of water that is no good for drinking but will do for cotton. It feeds the fields through drip lines, black pipes that let water out slowly at the roots. Salt blocks the drippers, which have to be cleared by hand. The salt also builds up in the soil, so the lines run longer than the crop needs, to wash it down below the roots.

The harvester, and putting water back (after chapter 16)

Each Friday Dr Arramata measures the water level in the deep borehole and puts the figure up on the wall in the square, next to the harvester's numbers. The salty dust wears the harvester down, and by its second dry season it gives a little under seventy per cent of its full output. In the hottest months the borehole pump runs longer to make up the difference.

To take the pressure off the borehole, crews lay knee-high lines of stone across the old riverbeds every dry season. The lines are curved against the slope, so that rain running off the hard ground slows down and soaks in. The aim is to put water back underground. Dr Arramata thinks the old channels might run again in ten years with luck, or fifteen without.

The belt of trees the village has planted round itself holds back the dust. Some companies will also buy credits for the carbon the trees take out of the air, but only for new growth, and not for at least three years. Part of each credit is kept back against fire and drought, and nothing is paid unless the villages around Nafawol look after their land as well.

Fatou argues that this money is different from cotton money, which goes to whoever grew the crop. In her view it belongs to the land itself, and to everyone who hauled stone for the lines, so the village keeps it in a separate account.

The Coffer Fund (after chapter 16)

Mamadou wants a rule that can say no for him, and say it to his own household most of all. In the third year of the work at Nafawol, the money the village holds in common becomes a trust called the Coffer Fund. It helps the poorest households and pays for the clinic and the next machine. Nothing worth more than a young bull can leave it without three signatures, from three different households, and the alkalo's household counts like any other. The fund's accounts are written up on a wall in the square, where anyone can read them.

The Coffer Fund and the banking law (after chapter 17)

When Sulayman, Tekuru's Minister of Rural Development, moves to take over the Coffer Fund, the village's lawyer registers it again under the banking law, this time as a savings society belonging to the village. From then on, the Ministry can only take it by going through the banking regulator.

Loans, and the Union (after chapter 21)

When Alkalo Musa of Sirawol asks Nafawol for help, the Coffer Fund makes its first loan to another village. It lends without interest, to other villages and to families in Nafawol. A village repays the sum it borrowed, plus a small fixed fee each year to cover the cost of keeping the accounts. If the state halts a borrower's work and the borrower is not to blame, the repayments are put on hold, with no extra charge.

In the sixth year, twelve villages form the Senebian Economic Union, registered under Tekuru's law as a union of village cooperatives, and the Coffer Fund becomes its central fund. A village that joins borrows money to start its own fund and pay for its machines. It repays the loan from its mill, land and trade, and then sends part of its profit back for the next village.

Each village has two seats on the Union Council, one of them for someone its young men and women choose. There is also a Council of Elders, which can warn against a large decision but can't stop it.

The offer (after chapter 24)

Evelyn Reed brings an offer from Veldane Agriculture: fifty thousand dollars for every family, new mills, a university and a hospital. In return, Veldane's trading arm would get the first right to buy the Union's cotton and oil, at prices set by its own buyers. Veldane's management company would get the right to block large investments. The Union's leaders would keep their places.

The first draft also gave Veldane alone the right to use anything the Union invented during the partnership. That right would last for ever, and any dispute would be settled in London. When Bintu, who teaches at Nafawol's academy, finds the clause, Reed replaces it with a fifteen-year licence to use those inventions, but only outside the Union's villages. The Coffer Fund would be paid a royalty each time they were used, and disputes would go to Port Walada instead.

The vote (after chapter 25)

Kadiatou and Fatou are on opposite sides, but as the Union's convenor and its treasurer, neither of them votes. Each of the twenty-four representatives holds a white stone for yes and a black one for no. They drop one in a clay pot and the other in a covered basket, so each vote stays secret. The stones in the pot are counted in front of everyone. A tie means no.

When you have finished

Sisal, charcoal and grass

At Madina, Aisha brings a filter box of sisal, charcoal and grass for the plant's air intakes, and it is thrown into the scrap store. About twenty years later, in the academy workshop at Nafawol, Bintu makes a water filter from the same three things, packed into a clay pot. It is free for any village to copy, and it is named after Kadiatou.

When visitors from Madina's district come in the last chapter, Talib is among them. Bintu takes the filter apart for him. He knows the sisal, charcoal and grass from home, but filtering through fired clay is new to him.

Talib's notebook

When the story opens, Talib keeps a notebook of machine drawings inside his shirt. Adam teaches him to trust the plant over his own hands, and in the record heat, with his fingers shaking on the keys, Talib does what he is told.

After the fire the notebook goes on the shelf above the looms, and it comes down twice. The first time, the radio has brought news of the vote in the south, and Talib writes the Union's name inside the cover.

The second time comes after his father has died and Talib has finished the cloth Ibrahim left on the loom. He carries the notebook to the meeting tree and asks the committee for something, though the novel never says what. In the last chapter a group comes from Madina's district, because one village there has asked for the Union by name.

Adam after the fire

Dr Arramata tells Kadiatou why she chose Adam: "I didn't choose a good man, Yaara-Jaxo. I chose a man who knows what it costs to be wrong."

The last pages of Part One let you inside Adam's head once more. He has kept to a desk since Madina, and he turns Dr Arramata's plan down twice before he says yes.

Part Two never lets you inside his head, so you know him only by what he does. While the road is being built, he carries a basket at the back of the boys' line. When Isatou asks if he could have seen what went wrong at Madina, he admits that he could. When Evelyn Reed takes him to dinner by the harbour, he pays his own half of the bill.

Kadiatou and Fatou

Kadiatou and Fatou disagree over the mill's lenders and, later, Veldane's offer. Each tells the other why in chapter 24. Fatou's mother once cooked the family's seed, and Fatou will not watch that again. Kadiatou has handed children water she knew was harming them, and she tells Fatou, "I will not have our grandchildren's cup in another man's hand."

They can sit together without settling the argument. When Fatou admits, on Kadiatou's veranda, that she had thought the open ledger was meant for strangers, Kadiatou says nothing and pours her a fresh cup of tea. After the vote, Fatou comes to the well herself. If she had had a stone, she tells Kadiatou, it would have been white.

By the fifteenth year Fatou is still saying, every time it comes up, that they ought to have taken Veldane's money. Kadiatou says Fatou has every right to.

What the vote cost

In the hard year after the vote, the village loses the Teranu family, who leave for the coast, and Mariam loses a year of study. Later, Kadiatou also loses the goodwill of Jankero's family in Kumbawol.

Kadiatou doesn't argue with any of it. When Fatou says Reed's money would have carried them through that year, Kadiatou says yes.

Twice Mariam asks her whether the vote was wrong. The first time Kadiatou says it cost Mariam a year, but won't say it was wrong. The second time, when the bus comes to take Mariam south, Kadiatou hands her the bag, and Mariam tells her that isn't an answer either.

Writing it down

Aisha keeps the exercise book Khresay told her to start, wrapped in plastic in the glovebox of her pickup. In the last chapter an unnamed woman among the visitors from Madina's district leaves an exercise book in the academy library at Nafawol. She was once an engineer at Madina. She says she has kept it for close to twenty-five years, ever since a minister in the capital told her to write it all down.

Nafawol keeps its own record in the open, on a wall. In chapter 21, Mariam is copying a column of the ledger in chalk for her sums when she sees the same carter paid nine times in seven months. The Union's papers are open to anyone as well. When Evelyn Reed arrives with Veldane's offer, she already knows the Union's story, and Fatou knows where Reed read it.

In the last chapter Halima, Kadiatou's great-granddaughter, shows her a photograph from a village three borders away. Its ledger is painted on a white wall, and halfway down, one column has been painted over and filled in again by someone else.

The job Aisha turned down

Dunia offers Aisha a job running the north, and Aisha says no. Later she tells Talib that Dunia was right about a great deal: the charities and their plaques, and who is still there once everyone else has gone home. She could have done that job well, she says, and knowing it frightened her.

Two evenings after the vote, Aisha, Talib and Hawa are sitting in Malik's yard when news comes over the radio. Dunia has come out of retirement for a single morning to open the northern grid's last substation. "Her grid," Aisha says. "Her brother's bank's grid," says Neneh's son, who works for the grid company. "We have not delivered a child by torchlight in years," says Hawa, who has been listening with her eyes closed. "Whatever else."

What the book leaves open

Adam is sure the fire was Dunia's doing. "She engineered it," he tells Khresay. As Aisha sees it, Dunia needed only the plant's money and never had to decide whether the plant burned. The book doesn't say what Dunia knew or meant.

When Fatou asks Dr Arramata which way she would vote on Veldane's offer, Dr Arramata says that Proxima has no vote. Fatou says she didn't ask Proxima. Dr Arramata walks on along the stone line she is measuring, and she doesn't answer, then or later.

Ousman speaks for Nafawol at the vote. Several of the younger delegates watch him closely as he crosses the room. He drops his stone into the pot and sits down, and you never learn which colour it was.

Whether the villages were right to turn the offer down is left to you. Evelyn Reed asks Adam whether he has thought about the next village, where the water is still bad. If these villages say no, she tells him, that village will wait ten years. He doesn't answer her. At the vote, Hassan thinks of how someone at Veldane could veto Yaya's channels without ever setting foot in Kumbawol.

Kerewol, one of the Union's villages, pays back its loan, sells its mill and leaves the Union, as the charter allows, and the others can't call it wrong.

Talib asks who is poor in Nafawol now, and Hassan tells him it is still the farmers at the edges. The Council has argued about it for eight years without finding an answer.

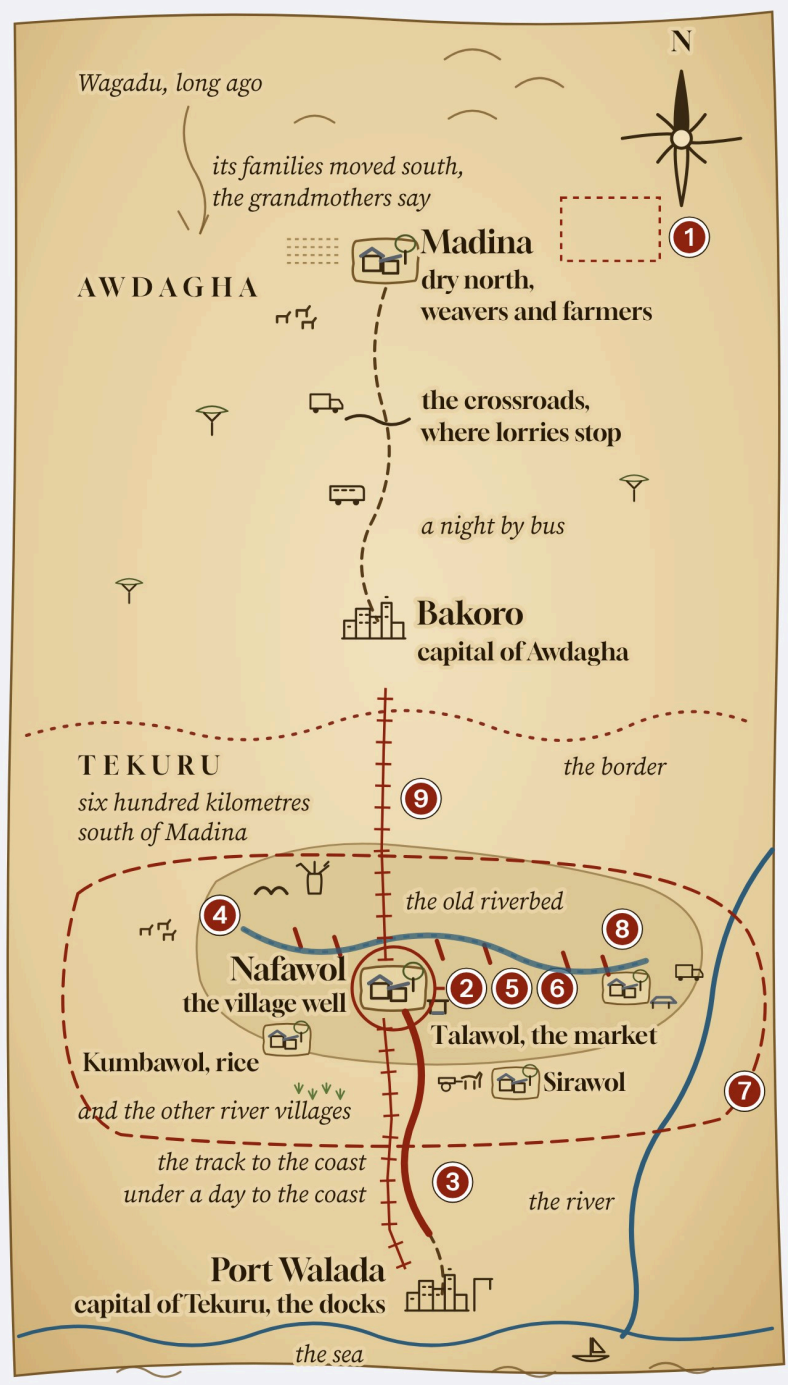
The story in years

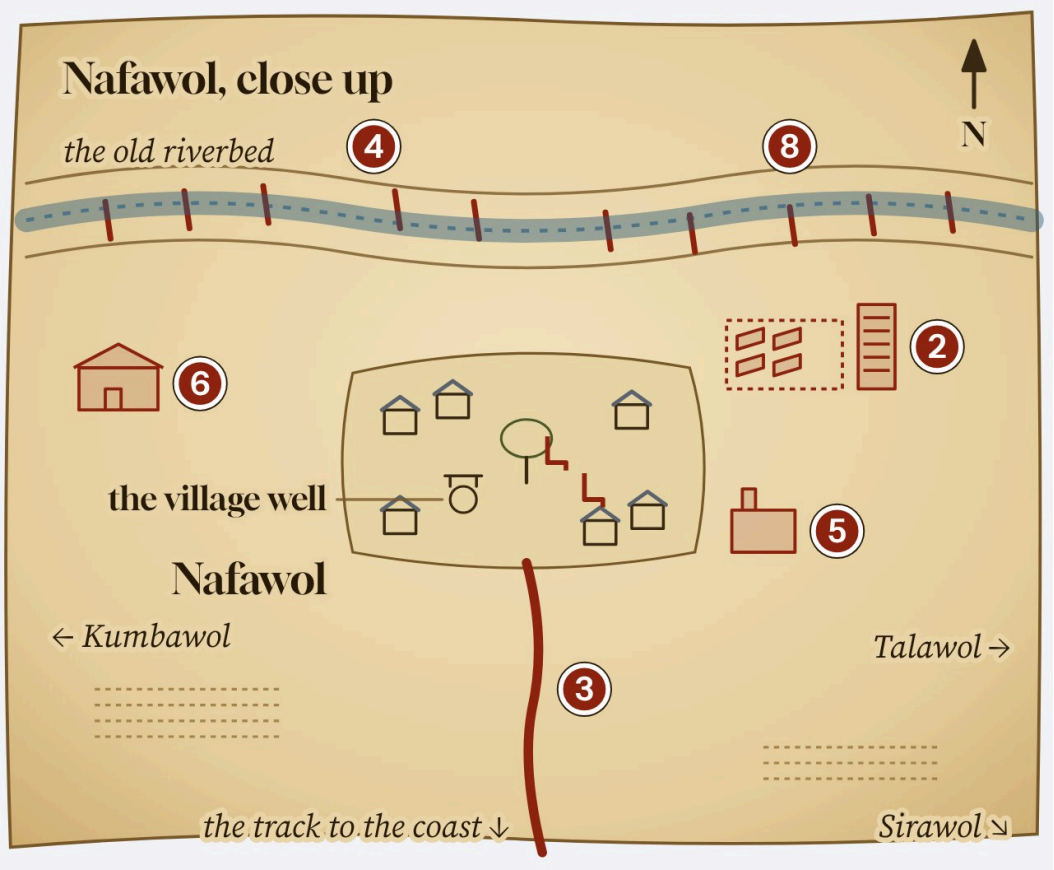
The plant at Madina burns less than a year after its lights first come on. Within two years of the fire, Proxima's board has made its new rule, and ten years after the fire, Adam and Dr Arramata reach Nafawol.

At Nafawol the years are counted from the start of the work. The road comes in the second year, the Coffer Fund in the third and the mill in the fourth, and in the fifth year Sirawol takes the Coffer Fund's first loan.

In the sixth year, twelve villages form the Union, and the offer and the vote come the year after that. Water runs in the old riverbed in the tenth year, the year Adam leaves, and the visitors from Madina's district arrive in the fifteenth year.

The map at the end of the story





Each red number on the two maps marks something that changes during the story:

1. In chapter 2, work starts on the solar plant at the edge of Madina, and in chapter 6 the plant burns down. When Part Two opens, the site has been cleared.
2. In chapter 12, Nafawol's water harvester starts working and the village taps run.
3. In chapter 13, the village starts building its own road, the Road of Hands.
4. In chapter 16, the village starts laying stone lines across the old riverbed to slow the rainwater and let it sink in.
5. In chapter 18, Nafawol builds a mill.
6. In chapter 19, Nafawol's academy, the House of Knowledge, opens.
7. In chapter 21, twelve villages form the Union. By chapter 28 it has thirty-one.
8. In chapter 26, after late rains, water runs in the old riverbed again.
9. In chapter 28, trains stop at Nafawol, on a line running south to Port Walada and north across the border.