

Tippi
My Book of
Africa

PHOTOGRAPHY
Sylvie Robert
and Alain Degré

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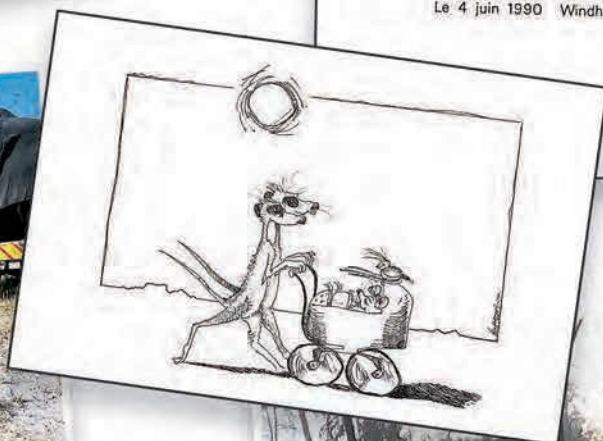


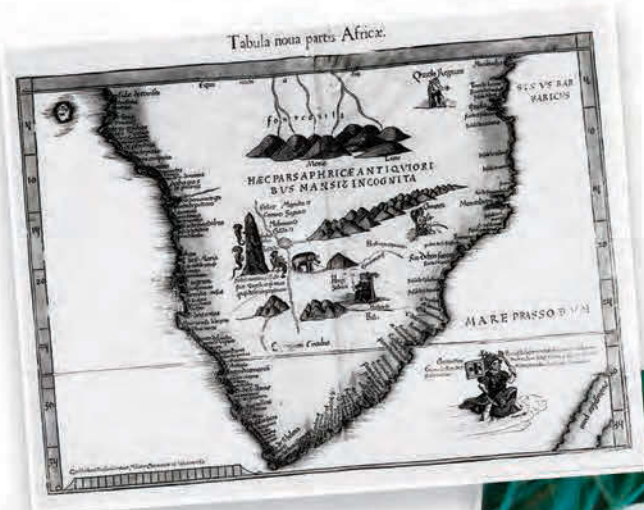
Alain DEGRÉ et Sylvie ROBERT
sont heureux de vous faire part
de la naissance de leur fille

TIPPI

Le 4 juin 1990 Windhoek (Namibie).

P.O. Box 5774
Ausspannplatz 9000
WINDHOEK
NAMIBIE





I dedicate this book
to my old companion,
Leon the chameleon.

Tippi











I wanted to write wild sentences

Tippi is my name. I am African, and I was born ten years ago in Namibia. Lots of people ask me if I spell my name like 'teepee' as in 'Indian teepee'. My parents named me after Tippi Hedren, the actress who starred in *The Birds*, a scary movie by Alfred Hitchcock.

I'm happy my parents named me Tippi for many reasons: first of all, there are not many other girls named Tippi, which is okay with me because there are also not a lot of other girls who have lived like me. This name also reminds us of the Indians who lived in the wild, just like me. And finally, Mr Hitchcock's movie is called *The Birds*, and I love animals enormously. I'm not exaggerating when I say enormously.

The animals are like brothers to me. It's normal. I was born and raised with them. These wild animals of Africa were my first playmates, and that's why I know them so well.

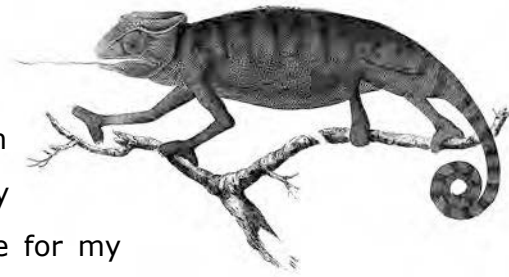
Tippi is my first name but my whole name is Tippi Benjamine Okanti Degré. My last name, Degré, comes from my parents, Alain and Sylvie. They are wildlife photographers who came to live and work in Africa. It's because of their work that I was born in Africa. My first middle name, Benjamine, was given to me to thank Benjamin, a friend of my mom's who gave her accommodation for several weeks when I was born. My parents lived in the bush and giving birth to a baby in the wilds of Africa is not always possible. So when I was ready to be born it was Benjamin who helped my mom in Windhoek, a city in Namibia where there is a hospital.

My other middle name, Okanti, means 'mongoose' in the Ovambos' language. Ovambos are one of the peoples of Namibia. It may seem funny to call your daughter mongoose, even if the word Okanti sounds lovely! It's here where my story begins . . .

Before I was born, my parents spent seven years living and working in the Kalahari Desert. The Kalahari Desert is located in southern Botswana and borders on South Africa and Namibia. For all these years, they observed, photographed and filmed meerkats, which are adorable little mongooses. You won't find meerkats anywhere else in the world.



The meerkats soon became 'family' to my mom and Dadou (that's what I call my Dad). Even though the meerkats are wild, it was they who adopted my parents. I know that this was a really great time for my mom and Dadou, a time without any worries. They were so happy living in the Kalahari Desert with the meerkats, I'm sure they would have liked to spend their entire lives there if they could have. If my mom had had the choice, she would have given birth there, so I would have become a 'little meerkat girl', to be like a sister to the meerkat family. But it never happened.



One day, my parents got into an argument with some men who had different ideas and who didn't believe in my parents' work. And because they were in command, they chased Mom and Dadou out of the Kalahari. Sometimes humans are so stupid . . .

I was born a few months after my mom and Dadou left the Kalahari. I never got to see the world of the meerkats, except in the photographs and films taken by my parents. But I still feel that I am part of the meerkats' family because my name is Tippi Benjamine Okanti and I know how to talk with animals.

Everyone is intrigued when they find out that I can talk with animals.





Everyone but the animals! I am always being asked again and again how I learned to talk to animals. It's boring! I don't have much to say . . . I don't want to explain how I talk to them, because it's useless. It's a secret. You must be gifted to understand. Everyone has a gift whether it's to write, to sing, to paint, to learn other languages, to do sport. All gifts have some kind of mystery.

Understanding animals, this is my gift. Not any kind of animals: only wild animals from Africa. I speak to them with my mind, or through my eyes, my heart or my soul, and I see that they understand and answer me. They move, or they look at me and it seems that letters appear in their eyes. Then – I know it may sound weird – I'm sure I can talk to them. This is how we become acquainted and sometimes we even build a friendship.

Well, that's life. We have all been given gifts and mine is a little bit special. I know it is a great treasure and deep in my heart I hope that I'm the only one to have this gift. Because, like all treasures, we would rather keep them for ourselves.



Tortoises always
look grumpy.



