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Journal entry, December 25, 2007: Merry Christmas

I'm pretty sure there is nothing in the world that could make me happier right now. I just had the most unexpected Christmas of my life. My parents have been here for 4 days now, and ever since they arrived I've been nervous about what Christmas day would be like when my American family and my Senegalese family came together. Would my Senegalese family understand the quirky American traditions that my Mom would undoubtedly have found a way to transport across the Atlantic? Would the language barrier make it a day of awkward silence as I try to translate conversation from Wolof or French into English? But I told myself, whatever happens, happens. It's Christmas and I'll enjoy it no matter what.

After church this morning, my Mom, Dad, and I walked the mile or so up the hill to my house in Sacré Coeur. The deep bellowing tones of African drums still reverberating in my ears from mass helped take my mind off my anxiety about how the rest of the day would pan out. Little did I know that I was in for the biggest treat of my life.

My mum had brought a few small trinkets to make me feel more at home for Christmas. First out of the bag came green ribbon, old holiday greeting cards, scissors, and tape. I was hoping that at least my youngest Senegalese brother might get a kick out of a make shift Christmas tree of green ribbon taped to the wall. What really brought the smile to my face though, was my older brother Pa Ibou. Pa Ibou's 22, and on a normal day he struts around the house with his macho, too-cool-for-being-fun air. As soon as the green ribbon was unwrapped, however, it was as if he'd become a kid again. He asked me how many layers of "branches" the tree should have, and made me show him exactly how to meticulously fold and cut sheets of paper so that his paper snowflake would come out just right. To add to the merriment, I could feel Christmas spirit bubbling up inside Tanor, Aida, and Mohamed, my younger siblings, as they came running over with "ornaments" which Mum had showed them how to make from the old holiday greeting cards. Without having any idea of the significance of the images of angels and Santa and his reindeer that danced before, they loved every moment of the festivities.

The holiday cheer peaked when Mum pulled out the stockings she'd made for each member of my Senegalese family. Candy cane stripes, snowmen, cartooned Christmas tree farms, tinsel made from fabric paint, visions from my childhood that I never would have believed would be before me in Senegal. As if Pa Ibou hadn't made my day, my host father topped it off. I have always perceived him to be an extremely dominating male figurehead, rarely interacting with my siblings and I unless there was family business involved. Since the day he came to pick me up at the CIEE study center, I've desperately wanted to break through his hard shell and connect with him on a level that was deeper than that of a foreign student living under his roof.

When I handed him his Christmas stocking, that moment finally came. The rigidity of his nature seemed to melt away right there in front of me. He was enthralled by this over sized, brightly colored sock, that for him bore so much more than the tooth brush and candy that was inside. "What do you do with this?" he asked me with an excitement I'd never seen in the four months I'd lived with him. I explained that according to the tradition, everyone hangs their stockings on the mantel on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas morning children race downstairs before their eyes are fully open to inventory the treasures that have been left in their stockings. "But we don't have a

fireplace,” my host dad declared with concern. “Amelia, you must be the mantel!” Aida and Pa Ibou set to work tying everyone’s stockings around my arms and waist. My Senegalese Dad then made everyone lie down on the floor and pretend to be asleep in order to accurately simulate waking up in the morning and rushing over to tear their stockings off of my human mantel.

When the initial elation of the stockings had quieted, I saw my host Dad casually leave the room. I was worried that I had overestimated his enthusiasm about the Christmas holiday until he came back holding a tarnished bronze statue of a horse. I’d seen replicas of this famous Senegalese revolutionary on several occasions around the city, but never in our home. My host Dad explained that it had been in their family for many years and was a symbol of national pride in Senegal. As he presented this prize possession to my American father, he looked directly at my parents and said that he hoped that this small gift would help express his gratitude and appreciation of the gifts they had brought for his family. My American father was so moved by the offer of the statue, that I had to repeat over and over again how honored he felt until he was convinced that my translation had accurately conveyed the message.

What none of them realized, however, was that for me the greatest gift was not wrapped in colored paper, and I didn’t pull it out of my stocking. What made me truly love today more than any single day in my 20 years of life was seeing my Senegalese family and my American family, 9 people from such incredibly different backgrounds and customs, sharing the joy of Christmas that comes with being with the people you love. Whenever I’m sad I’ll just look at the photo of all of us squished on the simple gray couch in the upstairs living room, my family photo, and think *Alhamdulillah*. Thank you God and Merry Christmas.