

Gwen Hopkins  
Dakar, Senegal  
Spring 2007

Senegal is Delicious  
(And Other Things I Learned in Wolof)

One month and one year ago, I was up late having a heated discussion in my common room at Trinity College. I was enlisting everyone I knew to lend input and opinions on a question I had to answer by the end of the night: study abroad in France or Senegal? I should've known that it had to be Senegal just from the fact that I was asking the question. Advice for future debaters: if you have even the vaguest curiosity, feel even the vaguest pull away from the Western world, you have to go. The fact that I was asking for others' opinions meant that I was looking for validation, which was unlike me. Normally other people's opinions don't have much of a place in my life decisions – but here I was looking for reinforcement, needing people to tell me that it was perfectly sane if I decided to Africa while the rest of my friends went to Europe and Australia. I was afraid.

I knew my parents were afraid for me, and that freaked me out a little. I knew that if I went, we wouldn't be able to tell my mom's parents, who had forbid me from going. I knew that if I went, I would be leaving most of the rules and continuities that had structured my entire life. I knew that the part of me I admire most was the part that wanted to go: adventuresome, curious, headstrong, impulsive, thrill-seeking, but above all the traveling part. But I was worried that part of me wasn't big enough, that everyone else one the program would be 100% all those things and well-versed in politics, geography, the art of navigating cities, and the patience and confidence required to be a racial minority.

Not that France wouldn't have been an adventure. I had selected a program that went to Aix-en-Provence, right by the Mediterranean. The photos were beautiful and compelling – but something gripped me about going to Africa. I love high ropes, adrenaline rushes, and places outside my comfort zone. That's one of the reasons I wanted to go abroad: you learn and grow so much more outside of what you're used to. So eventually I decided what some of my friends thought was brilliant and some of them thought was crazy. I decided that the beauty of study abroad was to immerse yourself in something wholly different than all you'd ever known. I decided I could travel Europe on my own anytime. I decided to go to Africa.

I could probably write an entire paper just on the culture shock we experienced at the airport. We stood in long lines to show our passports to guards speaking French with an accent we'd never heard before, wondering why we couldn't understand as the people around us spoke Wolof mixed with French. Thankfully, our program directors grabbed us and pulled us out of the ever-closing-in circle of Senegalese who haunt the airport, trying to make money off the new *toubabs* by offering broken English phrases and unnecessary services. Driving to the hotel, the 6 of us who'd shared the flight over stared out the window at the unfamiliar countryside, too disoriented to register anything. Throughout orientation week, we alternated between orienting ourselves geographically, learning lessons on the culture grounding the country around us, and sleeping. We had done it: we left Western culture.

I don't think I could've possibly anticipated how significant leaving Western culture would be. Just as it is impossible to separate American culture from Western culture as a whole, it would be impossible for me to separate my ideas and values and life from my cultural backdrop. I don't know if I run myself into the ground doing work at college because I am born competitive or because my culture pushes me to reach for success. I don't know if I travel instead of going home for breaks because I was born adventurous or because my culture teaches me to be independent and individualistic. I'm sure that (as is always the case) I am formed by some combination of nature and nurture, but without the ability to tell how much Western culture has influenced me, it would've been impossible to tell how big of an impact leaving it would have.

Although the term "Third World" is outdated in the post-Cold War era, in a metaphorical sense it is appropriate. Stepping out of the West, out of America, into Senegal was really like stepping into a new

world. Through orientation week, we learned neat summations of the tenets and values of Senegalese culture attentively, like we would study the rules of a new game. We tried to follow these rules and incorporate them into our lives, asking each other: where is your *fayda* (pride and determination, attitude) with that vendor? Do you think I did enough *wahauli* (bargaining)? Are you feeling full of *jamm* (inner peace)? We dutifully quizzed each other on the new culture just as we quizzed each other on Wolof words, noting how cultural values of peace and trust in God were strung through common vernacular: *jamm rekk, alxamdulilah*. Peace only, thanks be to Allah.

We lived by these rules, relaxing into them as the semester wore on. We accustomed ourselves to them just as the Wolof greeting exchanges became second nature and we learned to make that injured “eh!” noise when the vendor gives his first price. But these values grew much larger than a game, and we experienced exhilarating highs and exhausting lows that our American lives wouldn’t have led us to. We met people on the street who became cultural tour guides and friends, where in American we would pass those people by without a greeting. We were invited into people’s homes for tea, and learned that in contrast to rapid-paced conversations in English, spending long periods of time in silent comradery is perfectly acceptable. In fact, we slowed our lives down in general, repressed our urges to multitask, stopped making to-do lists, and let some *jamm* sneak into our schedules.

Our new Senegalese values began to show through in our everyday lives. On the most basic level, my wardrobe became infused with Senegalese patterns and colors; I wore Senegalese shoes, donned *bin-bins* and bought sunglasses off the street. Though these changes are superficial, they reflect an attitude change, a personal jump to embracing the new culture. Physically, I noticed myself becoming more quickly dehydrated, sunburning more easily, and *de temps en temps* developing funny little bumps on the backs of my arms – all of which I could chalk up to Doxycycline, my anti-malaria medicine. Okay, this isn’t a result of the culture, but it is a result of being here. And then of course, there were breakdowns.

When you live out of your element, there is very little reserve built up of energy, of courage, of patience, of all the resources needed to deal with an unexpected disappointment or bad news. There are already many, many elements of our daily lives that are out of our control as we wonder through Dakar, so when something else falls apart, we fall apart too, much faster than we would at home with all our support networks and comfort rituals. Being in a new place made us vulnerable, a feeling which was unfamiliar to us: we the independent, we the young, we the globetrotters who had decided to uproot ourselves for a semester to live here in Senegal. At the same time that we found ourselves breaking down, we found our newfound *jamm* coming to our rescue, our new attitudes of *ce n’est pas grave* over things that would’ve had us biting our nails and pacing back in anxious America – and we found pillars of strength in those around us: in our program directors, our Senegalese families and friends, and each other.

So we really had no choice but to embrace a more communal lifestyle. Partly, we were following Senegalese tradition of sharing and working for the common good; partly, we just plain needed each other. And maybe the experience wouldn’t be a positive one for everyone currently living in the individualistic West. But for those of us on the program, with both the passion and independence to have deciding coming here was a good idea, learning to find some peace for ourselves and some strength in each other has been an invaluable education. I don’t mean to say that Senegalese culture or life in Senegal is all *yassa poulet* and *bouye* juice. Hardship, poverty, pollution, and corruption make daily appearances in our lives as surely as white bread and rice. Especially for white Americans, there is a constant feeling of having been highlighted – we stand out everywhere we go.

Still, though I could say that these are tiring experiences, and I could say that we’ve grown from them, I think that most importantly underlying them all has been the constant *mbalax* beat of Senegalese culture, throbbing with hope and love and support. I feel it just listening to the daily greetings: are you in peace? Are you enjoying your health and your youth? Or even the response to how are you: *Maangi fii*, I am here. Existence is enough. The simple “I am here” implies determination, satisfaction, hope, peace. We are here, we have each other: we don’t need anything else. We see the manifestations of this attitude everywhere. On a crowded *car rapide*? Your fellow passengers will pass your change to the *appranti*. Flat tire on your taxi? Anyone on the side of the road wouldn’t think twice before lending a hand. Broken sandal? Within seconds, someone will appear to hand-fix it for you for less than a dollar. These are the

little things that keep us thinking to ourselves, right before we collapse into our foam-padded beds with exhaustion, *Senegal neex na*: Senegal, it is pleasing. (Actually, directly translated it means “Senegal, it is delicious.” But that’s the general idea.)

I can tell you now that leaving Western culture for my study abroad experience has been crucial, but I still can’t explain or understand the full impact of my semester. At the beginning, we could all tell we were somewhere new, but it was too much and too surreal to understand the full weight of our cultural transplantation. Even writing this now, at the end of the semester, I’m still in the culture, so I can’t see how much it has changed me. I won’t feel the full impact of my time here until I go back, and the crushing weirdness of having to reorient to being home will register just how much I adjusted to being here in the first place. Still, thinking now about my imminent return to the land of the free, I am afraid. It is still my home, but I am not the same; I don’t know how I will fit back in, and I am not sure if I entirely want to.

There are pieces of myself I have discovered here that I don’t want to lose. I found them both because Senegal created space for me to open up, and because Senegal demanded that I grow up. Senegal caressed new calmness out of me, and Senegal yanked out of me new strength. And I am nervous about having to reconcile the influence of my two cultures: individualistic and communitarian, high-paced and slow-moving. I am still an ambitious American, and I am looking forward to enjoying to the fullest my great fortune to be born into the land of opportunity. But here I have found a style of living that allows me perspective and humor, and I am determined not to lose my *jamm*.

I am proud of having come here. I am proud of my parents for ultimately accepting my decision, and especially of my mom for coming to visit me despite her own parents’ disapproval. I know that I have opened the minds of my suburban neighbors of my childhood community, if only a little, to think about Africa as a vibrant place and Senegal as a beautiful country in it, instead of a dark and dangerous mystery. I know that my dad has talked about my experience with friends at work, and my mom has showed pictures to her circles at her church and various groups. I know that when I go home, I will be a diplomat of Senegal just as I have represented America here, and I think both roles are very important. I am deeply, deeply satisfied by my decision to come to Senegal. I think I knew the whole time that I was going to, but I didn’t know how much it would change me. And I still don’t, but I know it has, and I am grateful. I will miss it. *Jamm rekk*.