

Inherent Solidarity



Studying and living in Senegal is both a challenge and an immense privilege. It has given me the chance to listen, speak, observe, and demonstrate in a world so different from the one I've known. It has broadened my perception of humanity, and I hope that by sharing some of my experiences, I can both facilitate understanding and convey questions still unanswered.



Jan-Feb. 2011

A newcomer to Dakar is stimulated, and often overwhelmed.

Dakar's airport is the beginning of the city's stimulating atmosphere. Hoards of people crowd around baggage claim as suitcases trickle out a few at a time. Boys pushing luggage carts find me staring attentively at the moving wheel, hoping to start up conversation and offer to take my bags for a steep fee. After leaving the terminal, grateful to have my baggage in hand, hagglers wait outside, not hesitating to wrap an arm around my shoulder, offering me a place to stay. In French, they say in my ear, "You are young, I am young. We should be friends."

Driving in the dark to our orientation hotel has me more disoriented than ever. As we swerve from lane to lane, avoiding ongoing construction, we are passed by taxis, and overcrowded car rapides; boys clutching the vehicle's back handles, and barely standing upright on the back steps. Arriving in the neighborhood of Mermoz, I begin to unload my bags in front of the hotel. The talibé, beggars linked to the Muslim brotherhoods, spot me instantly. One child, no more than six years old comes running to my side, holding out his hand, hopeful for a coin that he will take directly to his Marabout. Our driver shouts something in Wolof, and the child disappears. I am finally directed to my hotel room, a slightly musty atmosphere, still hot from the day's heat. There, I see a group of four American boys, students on my program, all sweating, and with similar expressions of wonder.

A newcomer to Dakar experiences community.

Babacar was my first Senegalese friend. Working at the front desk of La Citronnelle, the hotel in which we were lodged during orientation, the two of us would strike up conversation easily, talking about the city, sports, weather, and culture. He memorized every guest's name, last to first. To him, I am Tyson, Jeffrey. After leaving La Citronnelle, and beginning classes, I continued to visit Babacar at his place at the front desk. We now drink tea regularly and have meaningful conversations about friendship, and even religion. He invited me to his home on his day off, and I eagerly accepted his invitation. It was a Saturday. We left Mermoz by car rapide, and headed to Grand Dakar, his neighborhood. When we first arrived, I was immediately struck by the poverty, an aspect of Dakar that is less prominent in the neighborhoods of Mermoz, Ouakam, and Sacre Coeur 3, where we as students are placed with host families. In Grand Dakar I saw unattended infants swarmed by flies, and beggars lining the streets. Chickens roasted on skewers and goats moaned as children carried them around their shoulders. As I got used to the

environment, I began to realize just how communal this part of town is. Everyone knew Babacar as we passed, and curiously asked about me. I had fun shaking hands, and confirming that I was indeed from New York, having given up trying to explain that I actually live a six hour car ride from the Big Apple. When it came time for lunch, usually a late afternoon event, we ate ceebu jen, fish and rice, around a communal bowl with at least nine others: aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. With this sense of community comes happiness. Not one person I met in Grand Dakar seemed to be discouraged or unhappy, and despite what we as Americans would see as their lack of material wealth, they consistently give. I was subject to numerous, “lekk, lekk” “eat eat”, during our meal, and throughout the rest of that day I must have had five cups of tea. Just before hopping back on the car rapide to Mermoz, Babacar took me with two of his good friends to have some coffee on the street, another Senegalese tradition. Amongst the four of us, we bought two cups. We shared, taking two sips and passing. They explained to me that this was the Senegalese way; the mentality of a Senegalese community.

Everyone in Dakar is caught in the dark.

Electricity cuts in the city are recurrent and are the cause of much political unrest and bitterness towards President Wade. Many people see him as a corrupt leader who has taken advantage of his power to build his fortune and leave the basic needs of the people behind. I have learned that in recent years, cuts in the electricity have become increasingly frequent, and for me they have become another aspect of life in Senegal. Those who can afford it have generators on hand, but most people resort to lamps, flashlights, and even candles. Eating dinner on the floor from a common bowl is difficult enough for me as a foreigner, and attempting to do it in the dark is a whole new experience. Likewise, finding my way home at night during a power cut while

still new to the city is not always evident, but in any case, I am coming to terms with the realities of a developing country.



A newcomer to Dakar sees faith.

The Muslim influence in Dakar is powerful. Tall mosques look out across the ocean and the city, and house loudspeakers that emit calls to prayer at certain times of the day, most notably at sunrise, when I'm desperately holding onto sleep. Daily expressions such as "Alhamdoolilay", praise God, and "Inshallah", God willing, have strong religious backing, and images of religious leaders appear on taxis, and inside car rapides. The strong integration of religion into daily life is surprising for me, being from a country in which Christmas trees in public places are controversial, and where we are careful to stick to the greeting "Happy Holidays" during the month of December. At first, seeing the same cloaked figure displayed in shops and appearing within modes of public transportation, I couldn't help but think Big Brother, but I've realized that the incorporation of religion into Senegalese lives is a testimony of faith rather than an imposition of values. Having faith is what I believe keeps the people of Senegal so

happy amidst trying conditions. Faith for the Senegalese is not limited to Islam. The Christian community, although a minority, is equally as dedicated and passionate. Having been to numerous Evangelical services on Sunday, I can say that it is rare to see so much human emotion in one place. Faith this deep, whether Christian or Muslim, should always be regarded with admiring eyes.

An American in Dakar is Obama.

I am often stopped on the street, and am asked the question, “American or French?” At first, I was hesitant to reply, but now I respond with a smile, “Je suis americain”, because I almost always hear back, “American, yeah, yes we can, yeah, Obama”, followed by a thumbs up, or a pat on the back. I know my dad would have found this amusing, and, being a strong conservative, probably have some remark to elaborate on, but from my perspective it is nice to be seen abroad in a positive manner, and for that I thank Mr. Obama.



To own a camera in Senegal is to be popular.

The first day with my host family, my 22 and 26 year old host brothers introduced me to a large group of their closest friends. We spent the afternoon watching soccer and listening to rap

music. Although they are extremely friendly, my knowledge of rappers and soccer teams is miniscule, and so I quickly began to feel as if I lacked any sort of credibility around them. Finally, someone proposed we take a picture, hoping I had a camera, which at the time I was carrying in my pocket. Of course, I immediately jumped on the opportunity, not realizing exactly what I was getting myself into. That day, I was no less than paparazzi. I took picture after picture of extravagant poses. They passed around a pair of sunglasses and made gestures at the camera, insistent that I capture the perfect angle. They laughed as they compared pictures of one another, and came up with new poses. Every so often my host brothers and their friends still ask me to take pictures of them, which eventually make it to their facebook pages for them to share and comment on. I am always happy to do it. I am sure they like me for more than just my camera, but I'm still searching for better ways to relate.

A Tyson in Senegal is a wrestler.

Back home, my name is often associated with the boxer Mike, or the chicken company with numerous TV advertisements. Coming to Senegal, I had no idea that my name would spark an even stronger association. "La Lutte", or what we would call wrestling, is almost as popular as soccer in Senegal. It consists of two massive human beings going at it in the sand, wearing straps of leather, face paint, and little else. One of these wrestlers goes by the name Tyson, and has become one of Senegal's biggest celebrities. I first discovered the significance of my name in class, as one of my Senegalese professors took attendance on the first day. As he came to me at the end of the list, his calm demeanor quickly changed, and he announced with a smile, "Ohh Tyzzon, pow pow", making gestures as if he were in the ring. Since then, revealing my last name has resulted in similar responses. In Grand Dakar, one of Babacar's friends, about a hundred

pounds heavier than me, does “La Lutte” everyday. Once, we were jokingly thrown side by side, and told to begin the match. I awkwardly laughed that one off.



To watch TV in Senegal is to discover *India-a Love Story*

It is common knowledge among the Senegalese that most products in their country are imported. I've often heard it mentioned that even the rice in the famous Senegalese dish ceebu jen doesn't even come from Senegal. Television is no exception to this trend. Apart from the local news, and one decently popular comedy show, the Senegalese spend their TV time watching French shows, and the Brazilian made soap opera, *India-a Love Story*. I always find it amusing when I see the Senegalese sitting on the edge of their seats watching this complicated drama of love across nationality and social class in India. There is no doubt I am truly getting a complete cultural experience.



A traveler across Senegal finds pot holes.

As part of our study abroad program, we students are given one week of vacation to do as we wish. During this week, six of us, based on recommendations and our Lonely Planet guide books, decided to travel to Kedougou in Southeastern Senegal to do some hiking, and visit some villages in the region. We found a guide to lead us on our expedition, and from Dakar we squeezed into a Sept-place, a seven person taxi, to make the 12 hour journey across the country. We had high spirits after making it through the stop and go traffic of Dakar, only to discover that the country roads are anything but smooth. Pot holes, more like craters, are rampant. For much of the drive, when not being jostled vertically by massive holes in the road, we were driving in zig zags, our driver doing his best to save the vehicle from almost unavoidable damage. At certain points we came across detours consisting of sandy side roads that would eventually rejoin the main route. Despite the cramped and sometimes painful ride, it would soon become apparent that our destination was well worth our efforts.



A visitor to the countryside finds nature.

Spending nights in campements in and near Kedougou, we spent our first few days hiking across the country's only mountainous region. The elevation and dry climate, mixed with greenery, makes for beautiful surroundings. We came across caves, prairies, expanses of termite mounds, cliffs, rocks, and gorgeous waterfalls. In the dry season it is rare to see many animals, but monkeys, cows, and exotic birds crossed our path, and we were lucky to spot hippos relaxing in the water. At night time we would find some relief from the heat, and the stars would come out. The sky at night is pristine. We could see clearly the Milky Way, shooting stars, planets, constellations, and even satellites. I now understand that the term "twinkling stars" is a realistic description and not simply a metaphor. Looking at the stars at night, I would lose track of time, and forget completely where I was.



A toubab in the countryside is a celebrity.

The Wolof word “toubab” means foreigner, but more specifically, someone with light skin, or a clear complexion. In Dakar, toubabs are easily recognized, followed by street vendors, and honked at by taxis. Despite the Senegalese value of “teranga”, or hospitality, this kind of attention can often feel unwelcoming. Away from the city however, teranga is untainted. I attribute much of this untainted teranga to children. Walking, or driving through the villages, we would often see packs of children running after us with smiles, shouting “toubab, toubab, toubab!” We would smile back, and wave, saying, “Bonjour, çava?, Nangeen def?, How are you?” They would then get timid, as most children do, and respond shyly, “Nungi fi”. In the village of Dindéfélo, we came across a large group of children huddled around a single TV, a rare sight in a village, where electricity is uncommon. On TV was the American comedy, “Two and a Half Men”, dubbed over in French. It was obvious that the children were engaged, and I will never forget their faces as we approached. They looked from us, back to the TV, back to us, with expressions of awe. For them, it was as if the characters on TV had come to life, appearing in their village. At that moment we were celebrities, and all we could do was smile and wave.



A visitor to the villages is humbled.

While hiking down Dandé Mountain before entering Dindéfélo, with my backpack, polyester shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers, I rolled my ankle on a rock. As I groaned and hobbled to the next flat surface, I saw a middle aged lady pass me on my left with her African dress, flip flops, and bucket perfectly balanced on her head. I couldn't help but laugh at the situation, feeling both embarrassed, and at the same time strangely gratified; enlightened.

That same day, in the evening, after resting in the shade at the base of the mountain, we were welcomed into Dindéfélo. As we walked through the village, we were subject to the gaze of curious children, and shook hands with village elders. We formed a circle with some children and kicked around a beaten up soccer ball. A little boy, no more than three or four years old came walking up to my knee, looking up with an expression of wonder. He wore no clothes, and held in one hand a morsel of bread that he was slowly chewing. I held my hand out to him, hoping to shake his hand or simply give a high five. Instead of reaching out for my hand, he rips off a piece of his bread, and without hesitation holds it out to me. I told him to keep the bread, and as he walked away, slowly chewing, I was left humbled, speechless, and wishing I had more to give.

March 2011

Language in Dakar is unpredictable.

In a bilingual city there is a great deal of meshing between two languages. On the streets of Dakar, Wolof is predominantly the spoken language between natives, although it is common to hear French words and phrases embedded into daily conversations, a testament to the historical French presence and influence. In an academic setting, French dominates. For the Senegalese, in an increasingly globalized world, knowing French is essential to communicating beyond borders. Thus, from primary schools to Universities, learning takes place in French, and follows closely the system put in place in France. For an American student living with a Senegalese host family and taking classes in French with other Americans, this can make for one big headache. I feel as if I am constantly jumping from French, to broken Wolof, to English, most of the time using the right language for the right occasion. I greet and say my goodbyes to my host family in Wolof, relying on French for the rest of our more meaningful interactions. The same goes for the street vendors I have gotten to know on my walks to school. Amongst Americans, English prevails, and with our professors, French is the way to go. While oral expression changes consistently throughout the day, so do cultures, and therefore gestures and type of greetings must always be thought through. With other American students, a quick wave, followed by “Hey, how’s it goin?” is often enough, whereas with the Senegalese, a handshake is always necessary, and a more meaningful interrogation required.



Solidarity in Senegal is inherent.

A sense of community is engrained into the culture of Senegal, and there comes with this a desire among the Senegalese to help one another. This solidarity is evident in daily life, even on the crowded and intimidating streets of Dakar. Often, commuters will shout words of encouragement to construction workers perspiring in the heat, and street vendors work together to muster up change after a sale. From a broader perspective however, solidarity can be seen in Senegal's growing civil society. Stemming from a French political system that by nature provided no foundation for a civil societal structure, Senegal did not support the existence of non-governmental organizations until the early 1990s. Today, Senegal has the most NGOs in West Africa, and these organizations have been crucial in fostering democracy and participation. This year, Dakar was host to the World Social Forum, a week-long international event consisting of debates, discussions and exposés for how to make positive change in the world.

Among the many NGOs are those that monitor human rights across the country. In addition to taking classes, I have been fortunate enough to intern with one of these organizations based right here in Dakar: RADDHO (Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de

l'Homme). RADDHO has taken significant steps to defend human rights in Senegal on a wide spectrum. They advocate against torture, write detailed reports concerning the rights of women, children, refugees, and detainees, and even work towards finding solutions to political conflict and unrest through facilitation of negotiations. The dedication that the Senegalese have to this type of work is admirable, and I feel lucky to be in an environment in which helping one another is of upmost priority.

Running in Dakar is diversity.

In the mornings, before class, I often like to go for a run to clear my head, de-stress, and re-energize. Here in Dakar, it is safe to say that I always come back re-energized, but rarely am I de-stressed or free of thought. From my host family's house in Mermoz, I cross a set of basketball courts filled with students from the nearby high school. Once I reach Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop, I encounter traffic and ongoing construction that presents different obstacles each day. Stray dogs walk amidst the taxis and car rapides, and carts pulled by horses somehow manage the route. I then pass onto La Corniche, where I'm running past embassies and hotels; the ocean in view. The dichotomy is striking. Men in suites stand near palm trees smoking cigarettes, and 4 x 4s line the road. Eventually I make it to one of the many small beaches near which is set up a makeshift "weight room" looking out over the water. Men in sandals and shorts do push-ups and sit-ups, and use a rusty bench press. Despite the many staring faces, I stop to do some pull-ups before continuing my run to the mosque in Ouakam. Once at the mosque, situated between a cliff and the water, I stop to look out over the ocean and the fishing boats coming and going, finally finding some solitude. My run back to Mermoz is just as diverse and stimulating, and as I arrive back home I look forward to my breakfast of bread, butter, and the characteristically Senegalese powdered milk with a sugar cube, before my walk to school.

Living in Senegal is the unexpected.

As someone who appreciates routine, it has been challenging getting used to a lifestyle in which the unanticipated can arise at any time. Class cancellations due to student protests; being served lunch number two during a late afternoon visit with a friend; meeting a lizard in the shower; a power cut on the night of a skype date. All these unexpected moments have taught me that planning is often wasted energy, and that taking things as they come, with an attitude of acceptance, can be both exciting and rewarding.

Packing for the Peace Corp is Camembert and Scotch Whiskey.

As another piece of our study abroad program, CIEE students are given the opportunity to spend one week away from Dakar to live with and learn from other host families, NGOs, or the Peace Corp. For my “rural stay”, as we call it, I chose to travel south, and was sent to the village of Medina Abdoul in the region of Kolda to stay with Jake, a Peace Corp volunteer from Southern California specializing in sustainable agriculture. A day before leaving Dakar, I got a hold of Jake on his cell phone, and asked him if I could bring anything for him from the city. He didn’t have to think hard. “Cheese and booze”, he told me. In a city of imported goods, I had no trouble finding just what he needed: cheese from France and booze from Scotland; big hits at the Peace Corp house.



Medina Abdoul is a place unlike any other I have seen.

My experience staying with Jake in the Pulaar village of Medina Abdoul is hard to put into words, and yet, although writing can't do justice to everything I saw and heard, I can at least begin by sharing the community's work, their humor, their happiness, and at the same time, amongst the younger generation, an underlying longing for something more.

Life in the village seems to revolve around cultivation and production. Throughout various times of the year, peanuts, rice, fruits, vegetables, and other goods are grown to feed mouths and bring in income. Pulling well water to keep this production in motion is a regular process, and I felt lucky to help in the pulling and watering. The month of March, part of the dry season, is prime time for the vegetable garden, cashews, and as I happily discovered, cashew apples. This sweet fruit, which, to be honest, I never knew existed, grows on trees and surrounds the top of the cashew nut. There are, from what I could tell, two different types, yellow and red, the yellow being sweeter, but both equally tasty. The fruit itself tends to rot fairly quickly, making the nut the more important source of income for the village. This being the case, Jake and I were offered many cashew apples, and didn't feel bad about picking our own, being careful

to save the nuts themselves. When it came time to leave Medina Abdoul, I did find myself sentimental about leaving this delicious chow.

Humor and happiness in Medina Abdoul go hand in hand, and are abundant among the villagers. Having Jake there to translate Pulaar allowed me a glimpse into their world which I never would have had otherwise. In Senegalese culture, it is common and in good humor, to insult your cousin of a different last name. Jake, having adopted the last name of his large host family, informed me every time he was called a thief, or gluttonous. At one point he was accused of hoarding cashew nuts for himself. Village humor did not subside with my arrival. During our first greeting of the village, the chief's wife announced she wanted me as her husband. I found out later that the chief happened to be away for an extended period of time, and Jake and I suggested that that made me chief. There were nods of agreement from which sprouted grins and laughter.

For the villagers, education in the French school system does not start until after they learn the Koran. Today however, the period of time between birth and the start of school has shortened, which means children are being introduced to Western culture at an earlier age. While there, young kids handed me French books, telling me to read aloud. One night, while sitting with Jake's family under the stars before dinner, I was talking with some teenage boys in French about sports and culture. One boy, holding an LL Bean radio flashlight combo in his hand from another Peace Corp volunteer, tells me suddenly, "Vous, les blancs, vous êtes forts; vous pouvez fabriquer les trucs comme ça, alors que nous, les noirs, on ne peut pas." "You, white people, you're strong; you can make things like this, whereas us, black people, we can't." Caught off guard by his statement, I fumbled trying to explain that we are all equal as human beings. Not feeling I made much of a breakthrough, I was left thinking to myself: how is it that today, in

2011, the idea of being inferior to another race still exists? And how can we work to erase this conception without destroying the unique village lifestyle and culture that I've just recently come to discover and admire?

Passion, Patriotism, and Pickpockets

A soccer match between Senegal and Cameroon is a big deal, especially when it marks the beginning of qualifiers for the 2012 African Cup. Going to the match as a spectator at Stade Leopold Senghor in Dakar is both exciting and hectic. 4 hours before the start of the match, lines extend far past the entrance, and seats begin to fill. Police officers on horses keep the crowd in check as drums beat and flags wave. Song and chant fill the air, and vuvuzelas buzz. Once inside, sitting with four American friends, I enjoy the atmosphere, taking pictures, and asking friendly faces about the importance of the match. A scoreless first half consists of hands on heads and shouts of encouragement. As the second half nears its end, still scoreless, the crowd picks up the excitement, lighting torches, and overwhelming the Cameroonian supporters. Finally, with 90 minutes fast approaching, Senegal strikes low and hits net in the bottom left corner. Drinks are thrown and hats fly. Everyone is on their feet. There is shouting, clapping, hugging, and even some tears. The final whistle blows, and the field is overrun by fans. Swept up in the commotion, I give a few too many high fives to smiling strangers, and whoop, the next thing I know, I have no more camera. As I left the stadium thinking over and over about how I could have been more careful, I hear shouts of "Senegal!" and receive pats on the back.

April 2011

Sagna makes sense.

The ongoing separatist movement in the Casamance, the region of Senegal situated south of the Gambia, has sparked violence and debate since the 1980s. Greener, hotter, and more

ethnically Jola than the rest of Senegal, the Casamance is a unique region that has lacked stability. Unorganized rebel groups wreak havoc on roads and in villages, and forgotten land mines kill and maim children. Today, there is agreement that to salvage this beautiful region, there needs to be an effort to make its inhabitants feel more a part of Senegal; to mend the disconnect.

Sagna, a friend of mine from my internship at RADDHO, grew up in a village in the Casamance region, and he often speaks of its beauty, and the simplicity of the village lifestyle. One day, he told me of his encounters with the rebels, and explained to me that they often impose their ideas of separation with violence and threats. According to him, the rebels are thinking irrationally and denying the wishes of their elders. Voicing opposing opinions, he told me, is often dangerous. It is easy to see why Sagna, a man of discussion, now lives in Dakar, although he speaks of his childhood with longing. He tells me about the mangos, and the coconut wine. He says that if investors were to take interest in the region, fruit that goes to waste today could be squeezed into juice and sold internationally as well as to the rest of Senegal, bringing in wealth and prosperity. Could investing in the villages of the Casamance serve to help mend the disconnect? Could small factories bring together a country and help to re-establish stability? Sagna's proposition may be farfetched, or filled with consequences, but it's worth discussing, and from my perspective, talking with him under the under-ripe mangos of RADDHO's small courtyard, Sagna made sense.

In Senegal there is the positive and the negative. There are the selfish and the well intentioned. There is hardship and happiness. Yet, through my experiences, the positive prevails. I have found overwhelming goodness and I think this goodness can be applied to the world as a

whole. We have an inherent desire to support one another, and this desire is not limited by culture or borders. Senegal is evidence for inherent solidarity, and provides an example that we owe ourselves to follow.

