

# Finding What's "Right": Understanding Women's Rights in Senegal Through Multiple Identities

DANA SAWITZ '08

"Man gui dem Ndakaar"  
*I'm going to Dakar*



The road from the airport stretches along *la corniche* as a long tear in the orange sand that would otherwise cover everything – the feet and bony knees of the child standing at its edge, the patterned dress of the woman walking with a younger girl, the backpacks which seem to be perched precariously on the shoulders of a young student wearing a stark white *boubou*. It is the *rue à l'aéroport*, bustling with activity even at 6:30 in the morning.

I look out the windows in every direction, eyes darting past restaurants, unfinished buildings and glorified mosques, already trying to take note of the landmarks that will eventually form my map of Dakar. We enter a traffic circle, then merge onto a new road. Stopped at an intersection with no traffic lights, we wait for a break in the endless line of black and yellow taxis, imported cars, buses and small, toy-like painted public transportation vans called *cars rapides*. Exhaust and the smells of Dakar that are still unfamiliar to me seep in through the open window that, just minutes before, had allowed the sea breeze to rush through the car as we had sped down the highway. A young boy reaches his open hand into our stopped car through the window, calling to me, "*Madame, Madame, cent francs, Madame.*" I shift my eyes away and shuffle uncomfortably in my seat, not yet having any currency to give this poor street boy, even the equivalent of twenty cents that he demands, and not yet knowing how to respond to his begging.

To Abdoulaye, my supervisor, nothing is new; he drives along this road every day to and from the office. To him, I am the spectacle: the petite, light-skinned American girl sitting cautiously

in his passenger seat, with a purse clutched tightly in her lap and way too much luggage packed into the back seat of the tiny European car.

After a few hours of rest, he picks me up from the humble little hotel room where he had brought me this morning after picking me up from the airport. It is now lunchtime, just 13:00, and he plans to take me to the office for a meal with the rest of the staff. "Past *l'École Franco-Sénégalaise*, a left at the tall yellow sign that marks the DHL office..." He narrates the way as he drives, knowing that soon I will have to learn to walk to the office on my own or face the challenge of giving directions to a *taximan*. Passing the boutique on the corner, he waves to the *boutiqué*, a friendly man named Boubacar Diop. "You can buy soda, Coke, Fanta, biscuits, Nescafé there if you would like, but we have a restaurant," Abdoulaye informs me.

Turning right after the boutique, finally, he pulls the car to one sandy shoulder of the quiet street. Looking westward down the street, only three blocks away, there is an intersection with a perpendicular road, and beyond that, one can see the ocean painted on the horizon. Despite the impressive vista, this is not a tourist spot;

after all, the whole of Dakar is on the coast. Here is a residential area, and the only people who seem to be on the street are those coming in and out of the research center for lunch, and the two men chatting leisurely outside the public *télécentre*.

The entrance to the West African Research Center is nothing elaborate: a simple mosaic of tiles, red and blue, flank the short walkway from the street to the gate entrance. In the center of the mosaic on the ground is pieced together the logo for WARC: an image of the *chiwara*, a half-antelope half-man who is said to have saved the Bamana people of Mali by introducing agriculture. Depicted in the shaped blue tile, the *chiwara*'s antlers strategically form the "W" in "WARC." Each glossed tile, carefully polished and artistically arranged, creates a humble display to greet those who enter. I awkwardly step over this little bit of sidewalk art and enter through the gateway, relieved finally not to be trekking once again through the sand pits that seem to serve as sidewalks along the streets everywhere else.

The plastered cinderblocks and high green hedges surrounding the center serve as a containing wall. Looking about, I wonder if

---

this wall is meant more to keep unwanted guests out or the buzzing whirling minds of the researchers inside where they can contemplate without the bustle of the city. The center itself seems to be more of a complex of offices than a single, concise building: the exterior “hallways” and staircases connect the small gardens of leaning palm trees and magenta hibiscus bushes to the computer lab, the multiple rooms of the library, the administrative offices, and an assortment of conference rooms and temporary and resident researcher offices. Although the layout of the center may seem backward to the visiting foreigner, with the reception lobby tucked away at the back of the complex and the restaurant at the entrance, this organization is perfectly indicative of Senegalese society: the meal and general niceties must always precede the serious business.

The restaurant, a portable metal trailer with red paint faded from the sun, bears an image of a bursting bottle of Coca-Cola next to the word “*Soif?*” (“Thirsty?”). Men and women line up at the small window in the trailer and tell the restaurant servers which of the two plates of the day they will choose. Inside the open doorway to the kitchen, a group of women sit on short wooden stools. In the afternoon heat, they are perched around a pot that rests over a charcoal grill, preparing and watching over the cooking that will feed the researchers, hungry and tired from a morning of academic exercise.

The dining area of the restaurant consists of white plastic chairs and plastic tables, the kind of setup that could be seen laid out on manicured green lawns or wooden decks for an American BBQ or high school graduation party.

At the center of each table is a tall recycled Kirène mineral water bottle, now containing filtered water from the tap, and a cluster of four or five tall water glasses, each complete with a knife, large spoon, fork and paper napkin tucked inside. To mark each place setting at the table, there is a placemat, the floral design worn from being scrubbed lunch after lunch five days a week for who knows how long by the women who work at the restaurant.

Here, it is not strange to find foreigners. Based on the mix of skin tones bearing colorful fabrics and styles of dress, from traditional Senegalese *boubous* to Malian indigo prints to American denim and khaki shorts, it seems that the majority of researchers mulling about are either from or have extensively traveled to other countries outside Senegal as well.

The regular staff are seated already, waiting for the arrival of Abdoulaye and myself, the new American whom they are told is “*spéciale*” and different from the other American students who pass through the center. Leigh Swigart and John Hutchison, members of WARC’s American-based sister institution, WARA<sup>2</sup> at Boston University, are there to welcome me as well. I am introduced to the group, one unfamiliar name after another, and finally take a seat in my own white plastic chair. Mame Coumba, the secretary, jokes that her placemat is not as pretty as mine, hardly being able to read the now faint “*Bon appetit!*” that was once printed in script on its center, welcoming the diner to enjoy her meal. Leigh turns to the waitress, a smiling woman named Angel, and tells her that we all will be having the “*soupe kànja*.” An American student wearing a

modified hijab and a long skirt pulls over a chair and joins the already crowded table. She is a Fulbright scholar, preparing to leave Senegal in the next two weeks after spending the last nine months in the country. Introductions are brief, and though we are both Americans, we speak to each other only in French in this mixed company. The food is served, and the conversation eases seamlessly from French to Wolof<sup>3</sup> to English.

After lunch, I sit down in the upholstered desk chair in my personal air-conditioned office. I am relieved to have the time and space to myself. I try to absorb and make sense of the mix of people, buildings and resources here that have all seemed to be thrown together and contained by the high surrounding wall. The mix seems deliberate, with a delicate balance of contradictory and complementary ideas, items and identities. Already

**“To Abdoulaye, my supervisor, nothing is new; he drives along this road every day to and from the office. To him, I am the spectacle: the petite, light-skinned American girl sitting cautiously in his passenger seat, with a purse clutched tightly in her lap and way too much luggage packed into the back seat of the tiny European car.”**

exhausted from my day's travel, I open the laptop that Abdoulaye has just told me will be mine for the duration of my internship, and I stare above the blank Word document at the palm tree just outside my window, wondering if I too can learn to become part of this mosaic that I have stumbled upon.

**II. "I think this tension in society is necessary. It's necessary. And it is perhaps the conflict in the society that can make some progress and push for society to change and the mind to shift, of course. This tension is very important."**

— Mme. Penda Mbow,  
Director of Mouvement Citoyenne  
June 22, 2006, Dakar

I had just arrived in Dakar, Senegal. It would be Leigh Swigart's last night there after her short trip, and my first, and she and John Hutchison invited me to join them for dinner. We sat at a table of the coastal cuisine restaurant in the patio dining "room." Over heaping portions of rice and fresh fish, the conversation jumped from Senegalese cuisine to Brandeis, to social justice, to anecdotes of past experience, to a quick things-you-need-to-know orientation to Dakar. About to take the last bite of fish that my already full stomach could handle, I was interrupted by an object hitting my arm. Now in my lap lay a mango, its skin split open where it had fallen onto my arm. Looking up to trace the source of this falling fruit, I realized that I was sitting closer than I thought to the trunk of the mango tree under which our table was positioned. Laughing together over my message from above, Leigh and John exclaimed with smiles, "*Bienvenue au Sénégal!*," giving me the official welcome to the country that would become my home for the next ten weeks.

Such was my baptism to Senegal, the beginning of a summer in Dakar learning to keep my eyes and ears open and yes, now being wise enough to look up as well. At WARC, my primary responsibility was in assisting the development of a research project

entitled, "Know Your Rights!" The project, still in its conception, is an initiative of Leigh and John, members of the Center's Boston-based sister institution, the West African Research Association, and in cooperation with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>4</sup> *Know Your Rights!* has the primary objective of assisting in the sensitization and education of the rights afforded by national and international legislation, charters and conventions within eighteen countries of West Africa. As an effort to reach the masses of West Africa with information on human rights, the process entails the collection of relevant legislation, publications and documentation outlining human rights for the region and in each country respectively. The innovative twist: *Know Your Rights!* is focused on translating this documentation into select languages of West Africa. Most obvious, this breaking away from the colonial languages of French and English is viewed to be an effective way to legitimize these African languages that have for so long been unrecognized or deemed as merely devalued "dialects" that are secondary to colonial *languages*. Moreover, the extra step of translation that *Know Your Rights!* is pursuing will be done in hopes of broadening the populations that generally have knowledge of and access to such documents: namely, to reach beyond the politicians, the formally educated and the international scholars. Ultimately, these translations and summaries will be digitized and made accessible to the public via the internet. Recognizing that internet access only applies to a minority of the region's population, and certainly not to those who are most vulnerable to human rights abuses (i.e. women, children, rural communities, the most impoverished, ethnic minorities, refugees, etc.), the hope is that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), schools and other institutions directly in touch with communities would be then able to dispense the information through dialogue, workshops, formal education programs and even radio broadcasts.

For obvious geographic reasons, the West African Research Center in Dakar is to serve

as the home base for the project and the researchers involved. As an ECSF intern at WARC, my role was to begin the background work for the project. Recognizing the relatively short duration of my internship in Dakar (less than three months), it was logical that I be assigned a particular focus within human rights. In the end, my site supervisor as well as the founders of *Know Your Rights!* back in Massachusetts suggested that my focus be women's rights.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I was charged with discovering the current actualities of the women's rights scene in Senegal: what are the most important issues, what activities are already being initiated, what publications are available to other NGOs and to the general public and in what languages, how to best make these important legislations and documents available to the larger public, what is the degree of networking between NGOs, etc. Most importantly, my question became: *To what extent and how does the legislation and official discourse pertaining to the women of Senegal actually reach the homes and daily lives of individuals of the civil society?*

Formally, my attention was to women's organizations and other NGOs that had a particular branch or project concerning women. The list of organizations I pursued ranged from the grassroots human rights education organization Tostan, known internationally for its work in eradicating female genital cutting village by village, to the Senegal chapter of the German international Foundation Friedrich Eibert Stiftung, working for social democracy, to a neighborhood *tontine* or private microfinance-type group of women in the city of St. Louis. Each day I sought out a different contact or organization, one leading to another, in search of publications concerning women's rights and a general sense of the perceptions and activities concerning women's rights among the circles of urban activists.

It is through these formal interviews as well as the not-so-formal discussions over lunch at the workplaces or homes of the scholars and activists that I was able to gain the information

I needed to assist with the *Know Your Rights!* project. Who is leading the movement? What are the ideologies informing the movement? And most simply, what is "right" for the Senegalese woman?

### III. "Tout le monde participe dans le mouvement" *Everyone participates in the [women's] movement.*

– Mme Naffie Sow, Coordinator for women's local tontine or informal finance group  
July 08, 2006, St. Louis Senegal.

June 29, 2006

The wife of one of the employees who works at WARC had her first baby today. Amdy met myself and Abdoulaye as we returned from our morning of rendezvous, and told us the good news: "Je suis un père!" He walked quickly toward us, with a lift in his step, coming to Abdoulaye to receive a handshake in congratulations. "J'ai une fille!" ("I have a daughter!"), he uttered, finally allowing his joy and pride to show through a great grin. Abdoulaye pulled closer to his friend and colleague to embrace him, the handshake not being enough.

Congratulations were exchanged throughout the offices, and Amdy seemed to be glowing all day. There is going to be a party for the newborn at his house next Thursday. All the staff of WARC are invited, and that includes myself as well. Amdy personally invited me, with great pride in his voice – a voice that suddenly seemed more gentle, perhaps fatherly. Silently, I wondered if there were certain traditions for a newborn Muslim child. Had she been named the moment she was born, or would she receive a name after some time had passed, perhaps at a naming ceremony, as in some other traditions? Do the guests at a reception for the newborn present the family with

gifts? Perhaps they give gifts to the family of the father, or perhaps even the child herself? What kind of gift should I bring if this is the case?

I began to muse over the baby showers and baptism parties that I had been to in my life in the States, calling to mind all the amusing traditions and gifts that become part of the festivities. There are gag gifts and jokes and games, and it seems as if the adults themselves have reverted back to their own childhood, cooing and oogling in the newborn's face.

Surely the celebration may not be same here, but I expect it to be one filled with great joy. A woman is valued according to the family she raises, from her first child's birth to the day her children have children of their own. As I contemplated the great significance of this event, I noted that the birth of a boy is much more celebrated than that of a girl. And yet I remember how Amdy's smile broke loose after he revealed that he was not only a father, but that he is the father of a girl.

Now, as I wonder who I should ask to find out what kind of gift, if any, I should present at the party, I begin to think more of the child and her future. With perfect innocence, she does not yet know the travails that many West African girls and women face: she has not yet had to carry her baby brother on her back, with her tiny and frail five-year-old body, begging for spare change in the streets; she has not yet felt the power of the beating sun as she sits on the ground all morning, scrubbing clothes clean over a bowl of soapy water; she has not yet felt the weeks of agony and bleeding after excision at the onset of puberty; she has not yet spent hours in front of a shard of broken mirror, tugging at her hair to make it straight and applying pastels to her lips and eyebrows and cheeks to give more color to her already beautiful skin; she

has not yet been forced to put down her books and end her studies after secondary school to be married off to a man almost twice her age; she has not felt the shame and loss of miscarriage from malnutrition or even abuse from her husband; she has not yet felt the burden of carrying her own child for a full nine months without once seeing the rain to ease the heat of the sun; she has not yet felt near death after being in labor and delivering a child with no assistance because the husband is not home to give permission for her to go to a midwife or hospital; she has not yet known rape as a "war crime" committed by the soldiers or officers of some rebel forces; she has not yet spent hours in the house waiting for her husband to return home with only meager spendings to feed her six children; she has not yet had to confront the reality that her husband, whom she had cooked for and taken after for the past ten years, is about to take a second, much younger wife, despite the fact that they both selected "monogamy" on their signed marriage contract; she has not yet felt the back aches she will receive in old age as a result of carrying heavy groceries atop her head returning home from the market and working so many hours in the house; and she has not yet known what it is to see one of her grown and married daughters give birth to a daughter of her own, knowing that she too may live the same life. And incha'allah, God willing, Amdy's newborn daughter never will come to know these pains.

On the day of this baby girl's birth, all of the WARC employees gathered and excitedly discussed the news that had so quickly spread. Congratulations were given by every person that passed Amdy, and he could hardly stop smiling to eat the plate of rice and fish in front of him. Already he was talking about his daughter's future, referring to her as a princess and vowing to protect her for

his life. She will go to school, “only the best,” and have the opportunity to seek out a job. Undoubtedly, with Amy’s and his wife’s support, this particular child will live not live her life as a Senegalese woman, but more so, as a Senegalese citizen.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that my painful imaginings about this child’s future are not necessarily a depiction of the life of every woman in Senegal. These descriptions of a woman at various stages of her life have come in bits and pieces from the very diverse intimate conversations, interviews and witnesses that I have had throughout my time in Senegal. However, it seems to me now that if even one woman has known such pains, it is too much.

I have never considered myself to be a feminist. In fact, I have often found myself disturbed by the current talk of women’s rights in the United States. Perhaps the director of WARC, Professor Sene, and my site supervisor, Abdoulaye, had suggested that I do research

of women’s rights in particular because they assumed that as an American young woman from a liberal arts university, this would be my obvious interest. I took the assignment not necessarily because I wanted to support feminism or women’s rights activism, but more because I wanted to find out if perhaps there was an alternative way to address the women’s situation. I was prepared to ask questions and make challenges.

“Suddenly, the question of whether or not, I, as a female, could jump over a gutter the same way that he, a male, had done so, became a window into the larger questions that I had been exploring through my research interviews.”

At its very roots, the women’s rights movements in the States began as a way to break down walls and to open doors to the full citizenship of women. However, with great regret, I have personally come to experience that while the goal was to disassemble prejudices, stereotypes and restrictions toward women, the movement has since created new stereotypes in other areas. “Get the women out of the kitchen and into the work place,” had been the rallying cry, and now, according to some, the woman who chooses to stay at home with her family is seen as the woman who has given up her rights. I had always perceived “rights” to be the ability to be afforded the chance to make a choice – and now, I question the extent to which there is a greater element of choice here in the discourse of today’s movement in the States than when the movement made its first achievements with suffrage and the advances toward equal wages and affirmative action. In this context, the empowerment of woman seems to be defined more by her academic and economic achievements than by her own personal integrity.

I admit that I had not extensively studied either feminism or the women’s movements in the States prior to going to Senegal, but it was these acquired perceptions that led me to question what really was at stake when talking about “women’s rights” in the States. This mentality had driven me away from feminism and convinced me that “women’s rights” as distinct from “human rights” could not produce positive relationships between men and women in society – until I had come to be a witness to that very reality in Senegal.

Surely, there are those Senegalese activists deemed as “radical feminists” who, against the perceived majority, declare that woman must be entirely independent from man, breaking away from the nature of symbiotic relationships that at least ideologically govern social and family structures. However, after speaking with those men and women who are advocating for the empowerment of the Senegalese woman, it

seems that the more general understanding of “women’s rights” is the application of “human rights” to women as equally to men.

It has become most obvious to me that “women’s rights” and even phrases such as “the liberation” or the “empowerment of women” can mean something entirely different in Senegal than it does in the States. The debate is not only about parity in the economic sector or a fight for freedom from restricting or harmful stereotypes imposed on women as it often is today in the States; rather, for many Senegalese, “liberation of the woman” often means allowing her to achieve full citizenship, including everything from having access to the courts to having the personal authority to act without requiring permission first from her husband or other male authority.

Perhaps a brief account of an interview with Mme Oumou Lam, *Directrice* of the *Reseau de la Femme* (Women’s Network) for ANAFA<sup>6</sup> (an NGO that approaches social, economic and political development through literacy education) best illustrates the potential severity in gender disparities to which the “women’s rights” discourse in Senegal may refer. Mme Lam told me of one extreme case that *Réseau* worked on concerning a woman who almost died from delivering a baby with no assistance. The laboring woman was not forced to attempt to give birth on her own because she was alone. Rather, living in the house of her husband, she had been surrounded by her female in-laws at the time of her labor. However, these women who were present had refused to take her to a hospital or midwife until the husband returned to the house to grant his permission. Considering the tone of voice with which Mme Lam narrated this story, I got the impression that this example was neither surprising nor rare, despite my own shock.

Regardless of whether or not this particular account is an anomaly or a general representation, it speaks volumes about the extent to which Senegalese women are able to participate in decision-making in day-

to-day life, let alone to be regarded as full citizens in the public sphere as political or economic actors. In fact, for many activists in Senegal, “women’s rights” are perceived to be inseparable from the larger goal of making human rights accessible to the entire population: many have reiterated that women need to become citizens in order to enter into partnership with men. Only through this dialogue, this partnership, can the nation as a whole strive toward greater development: “the role of the movement is to improve the society and to improve, of course, the role played by the individual and the *shared* responsibility and giving opportunity to *everybody* to participate in the development of the society. I think it is one of the goals that we are trying to achieve.”<sup>7</sup>

#### IV “Égalité”

We cross the street to walk up the hill to the schoolyard. Ousseynou walks next to me, not needing to lead the way; for the past month, I have been coming here almost daily. With ease, he jumps over the deep rut in the sidewalk that has been carved in the earth to channel the waters that would otherwise flood the streets in the rainy season. Once on the other side, he looks back to me, cautioning, “Girls can’t jump. Go slowly.” Ignoring his “advice,” I jump easily over the gutter. Landing next to him, I shoot him a grin. He returns the joking smile, and together, we say the word “*égalité*” (“equality”), miming the word by each holding both hands out in front of us, the left and the right hand side by side at the same level.

For now, it is a jovial challenge about whether or not males and females are both physically capable of making the small jump (or large step) over the gutter. Really, this became the punch line to end so many of the conversations that we had as he helped me explore Dakar. Ousseynou is a colleague of mine at WARC. Working as the assistant in the library there, he interacted with me daily. After a month of being in Senegal, he had invited me to his home in one of the villages that comprises the greater Dakar district, saying that “my mother will

prepare lunch and you can come take dinner with the family.” After the initial tour of his village and the introduction to what seemed to be all of his family and friends, it became my second home outside of WARC.

In the time that I spent with him, both in the office and out, we talked often of the progress of my research. “Where are you going today?” “What’s the next organization?” The conversation was most often light-hearted, not delving into the greater issues and conflicts within the field. However, it was in his knowing my focus on women’s rights, thought to be the classic choice of an American female anthropology major, that the commentary about *égalité* between genders developed.

From the beginning, he pegged me as a feminist – again, a label that I myself would not use to categorize my own ideologies – and I, interested in raising questions about his own perceptions of the role of Senegalese women, often prompted him from this viewpoint. Suddenly, the question of whether or not, I, as a female, could jump over a gutter the same way that he, a male, had done so, became a window into the larger questions that I had been exploring through my research interviews. Yes, this may seem to be only a trivial example of the discussion of equality of capability and social expectations. But then again, I reasoned that if the view is that it is not proper for a woman to act in such a way, jumping over rather than walking around the gutter, or even that she is physically not able to do so – an action so seemingly meaningless – then how would a woman be able to pursue the larger questions of rights to inheritance, education, health care and employment, that are already outlined in law?

For myself, the interviews were only half of the research. From them, I was able to absorb the perspectives and histories constructed by the women (and a few men) that were active in the field of empowering the Senegalese women. However, this did not seem to be enough. Rather than simply providing

answers about the rights, status and needs of women in Senegalese societies, the interviews led me to formulate new questions. Over and over, those whom I interviewed expressed the view that men had the power to make decisions in the public sphere as political and religious leaders, and in the private sphere as fathers, uncles and sons. If this was indeed the reality, or even the perceived reality, it became apparent to me that it would also be necessary to explore the first-person perspectives of these males, collectively identified as the final decision-makers.

It was at this realization that I chose to diverge from what my undergraduate anthropological training on how to properly engage in “participant observation” would otherwise dictate. The ethnographers would teach that in order to complete my research, I would need to see the views and actualities in everyday life as well as those brought forth through the appointed interviews, *to live among the people* with whom my studies concerned.

“Over and over, those whom I interviewed expressed the view that men had the power to make decisions in the public sphere as political and religious leaders, and in the private sphere as fathers, uncles and sons. If this was indeed the reality, or even the perceived reality, it became apparent to me that it would also be necessary to explore the first-person perspectives of these males, collectively identified as the final decision-makers.”

As a female American student arriving in Senegal, I was faced with two choices: 1. to listen to the voices of the women in day to day life, spending my social time in the home with the Senegalese women, or 2. to associate myself with the male population, another option available to me due to my own identity as an American and due to the overall visibility of the life of men in Dakar. The men sitting on benches on the corners, drinking tea and discussing life; younger and older boys gathered around foosball tables that were commonly set up along the street sides in the villages; the businessmen; the street vendors; the boutique owners; the taxi drivers – to some degree, the public nature of the male population seemed more accessible than the woman’s life, which is largely private and confined to certain spaces. Additionally, as an American student, or even as a light-skinned foreigner, I was perceived by many to have a higher status than many Senegalese women within the society. For example, while some older religious men would refuse

**“If many of the activists I spoke with were at all correct in stating that development of the nation must include the participation and efforts of both men and women, then so too are the voices of both women and men needed to conceive of and to fully understand the realization of rights for all Senegalese citizens. Therefore, I felt it just as necessary to be highly attuned to the opinions, actions, and histories of Senegalese men as well.”**

to shake the hand of a woman, considering it an improper and unclean action, I was always expected to initiate greetings with these same men, complete with handshakes. Although bewildering to me, I learned quickly that my identity as a foreigner often had more weight in determining the way I was perceived and received by Senegalese society than did my identity as a woman. In many cases, this identity granted me access to interact within social networks that were predominantly male, predominantly female, or even those not defined by gendered lines (i.e. my environment interning at WARC). Both the relative visibility of the life of the Senegalese man and the fact that being an American student granted me a certain respected status allowed me the ability to engage in and to witness male social life.

However, more than just these factors alone, it was the very fact that it is precisely these men who are viewed by the women with which I spoke to be the power holders – and I note, seldom the malicious enemies of women’s rights, although this view was occasionally expressed – that led me to seek their voices as well. From the Family Code, a legal document that outlines the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the woman and the young girl within the family, to the numerous international charters for human rights that Senegal has signed and ratified, it seems that the legal framework already provides for the full citizenship of the woman in Senegalese society. Yet each woman I interviewed would cite gaps between this legislation and the reality. After all, this gap is the focus of most of their work as activists and scholars, whether from an educational, economical, legal, cultural, political or even interpersonal perspective. And if it is the men who are those cited as governing the popular ideologies and the ways that they are played out in daily interactions, I was curious to find out what their views were.

To study the actuality of women’s rights in Senegal, in a society that recognizes men’s and women’s roles as opposite but also

complementary, it would be naïve to only listen to the voices of the women. Surely, women may be among those most commonly vulnerable, and I do not mean to deny the importance of giving them voice. However, in order to even begin to formulate the appropriate questions about the roles of women, I needed to discover more about the notions that create and enforce such a gendered power hierarchy. If many of the activists I spoke with were at all correct in stating that development of the nation must include the participation and efforts of both men and women, then so too are the voices of both women and men needed to conceive of and to fully understand the realization of rights for all Senegalese citizens. Therefore, I felt it just as necessary to be highly attuned to the opinions, actions, and histories of Senegalese men as well.

It is for this reason that I had gone with Ousseynou almost every day to the schoolyard. Since it was summer vacation, the children were no longer in classes, but the plot of land designated as the school grounds was hardly void of people. In addition to the schoolhouse, there was a family whose home was also on the property. They were friends and family of Ousseynou’s, his grandfather having founded the school, and they now were designated to be the guardians, holding all keys to the buildings and outhouses. Next to the one-story school and this family’s house was another, taller building, resembling more of a warehouse than an education facility. This building, with its raw cinderblock construction not yet concealed under plaster and paint, was also a part of the school. Apparently, it was an addition that was started but, due to a lack of funding, time and/or labor, was left incomplete.

In the meantime, this abandoned second “school house” had become extra living quarters for the family who lived on the property. The older son, who went by the name Vieux, had pulled his mattress up to the second floor where he would often sleep to escape the heat and commotion of being cramped into the humble house with the rest of the family

below. Another younger brother had converted a first floor “classroom” into a bedroom for himself, furnished with his own mattress, a mosquito net, and a candle stuck into the neck of an empty Coke bottle. As the sun set each evening, these brothers, Ousseynou, and their other friends would gather in this building to sip tea and discuss life at the day’s end.

For me, initially, it was a place where I could listen to the leisurely conversations of the men gathered around me. Ultimately, I must admit, the school house undoubtedly became a place for me to explore a social network whose members would become my friends or even my “elastic family” – a factor that I am grateful for, and not only for the progress of my research. In the beginning, my presence was merely as a witness, and I was limited even in that capacity; I was just becoming comfortable communicating in French, and my skills in the local Wolof did not go far beyond greetings or discussion about food.

However, the more time that I spent in this place, the more the men began to make their conversations more and more accessible to me, either allowing Ousseynou to translate into English or even pausing to speak directly to me in French. Vieux, the older brother who called the second floor his “bedroom,” could not speak French fluently himself, having gone only to the Koran schools and not having a formal French education. However, he made it his mission to teach me Wolof. Calling himself my professor and often forbidding Ousseynou to translate, he would speak to me sometimes for an hour at a time only in Wolof, pleading me with his eyes to understand if not his words, then at least his message. Some days he would be angry with me for not trying hard enough to practice Wolof and demand, “*Wolof rekk*” (“Wolof only”) if I even so much as slipped in a French affirmation “*oui*” (“yes”) as I followed the conversation. As time passed, he even made his own try at speaking French, confessing to me that he did not mind practicing with me because he knew that I too am just learning the language.

As I became more and more integrated into their tea-time conversations through language, I also gained an increasing opportunity to engage in some of the informal aspects of my research, the true “participant observation.” I often teased and provoked these men by adopting the views of the women I was speaking with in the interviews. My first try at this was by interrupting a conversation that they were having in front of me, but did not think I could understand. One of the men had turned to Ousseynou, and, raising his eyebrows in my direction, told Ousseynou in Wolof that if I returned to Senegal, he should ask me to bring a girl just like myself for him to take as a second wife. Understanding clearly, I waved my index finger and speaking in a firm voice, uttered the first sentence that I had attempted to form in Wolof: “*Deedit. Bena ngoor: Bena jigeen.*” Simply, “No. One man: one woman.”

Surely, their surprise was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that not only had I followed their Wolof, but was also able to respond in their own language for the first time. However, as my face remained stern and they began to understand the firmness of my statement, the brief comment that one of my friends had made – perhaps even a light-hearted joke – opened the way for discussion about the practice of polygamy. They argued that polygamy was legal in Senegal, and therefore, man had the right to take up to four wives as outlined by the Family Code. I asked why they thought the practice should be legal, and their responses ranged from the classic “*c’est comme ça*” (“that’s just the way it is”) to justifications through certain interpretations of the Koran and the life of Mohammed. Citing the Koran, they explained that if man could not be faithful to his one wife, he should take a total of two, three or four wives as long as each was afforded equal treatment.<sup>8</sup> Besides, seeing as there are more women than men in the country, and many widows, they reasoned that it was necessary for man to take more than one woman, lest these women not be taken care of. Challenging them further, I asked them if this was a reality, if the polygamous families that they knew of

in Senegal could be described as being composed of many wives with *equal* households, properties and attention from their shared husband. After having this debate on many occasions, I chose to push them even further, asking if it was really possible for polygamy to even serve women.

In the end, their responses varied, certainly not taking a unanimous side as “*the male viewpoint.*” However, it seemed obvious through their reactions to my poking and prodding that these were not questions that they would expect to be asked so bluntly, especially by a friend with whom typical gendered hierarchies had seemed to dissolve. In developing friendships with these men, my identity as an American reigned over my identity as a woman, although both were obviously visible.

Through these ideological and political, and even at times personal, discussions in the school house, I walked a thin line. I was able to maintain their trust and respect while at the same time challenge their ideas of the norms that govern domestic and public life between men and women. Often, as the first conversation about polygamy had begun, the

**“For me, initially, it was a place where I could listen to the leisurely conversations of the men gathered around me. Ultimately, I must admit, the school house undoubtedly became a place for me to explore a social network whose members would become my friends or even my “elastic family” — a factor that I am grateful for, and not only for the progress of my research.”**

debate ended with friendly joking. Knowing the topic of my research, they would poke fun at me, saying, "You, you are my friend, my sister, but sometimes you are crazy," and we would laugh. This is not to say that the issues discussed were not serious matters, but I too had to play various roles, using my

**"When discussing women's rights in Senegal, it becomes impossible not also to talk about the ways in which Islam, traditional culture, contemporary culture, globalization and the changes to African culture by the colonial system are involved in constant dialogue (and more often, I would say, argument) with each other to define the women's rights movements in Senegal."**

own privilege as an American student to give voice to the women who were so often pressured into silence within Senegalese society. Ultimately, by embodying the voices of the Senegalese feminists, I was able to enter into the dialogue that so many women were calling for: men and women engaging together in relationship toward social betterment. In order to understand how this can be made a possibility, there must be consideration of all the peoples within society. Listening sincerely to both men and women without distinction must be seen as a fundamental step if the progress of the movement is truly to reach the Senegalese people.

## **V. "It's part of who we think we are"**

— *Mme Khady Ba, Volunteer Coordinator for Tostan, referring to reasons for the practice of female genital cutting July 14, 2006, Dakar.*

As a student with at least eight semesters of undergraduate training in anthropology, I must say that I was quite absorbed in the ethnographic process during my internship for *Know Your Rights!* at WARC as well as in my daily social interactions. However, reflecting now, I would rather call the result of my daily studying "ethnographic conflict" than simply "ethnography." I make this distinction because, rather than trying to understand a single notion of culture that would inform women's rights, I found myself more and more facing multiple understandings of culture, ideologies and frameworks that shifted from person to person, community to community, and context to context. In doing research on human rights, specifically women's rights, these multiple notions and aspects of culture seemed to be everything. While there are many institutions at play, it is certain that cultural phenomena are a huge influence in shaping these different understandings of women's rights. Particularly, when discussing women's rights in Senegal, it becomes impossible not also to talk about the ways in which Islam, traditional culture, contemporary culture, globalization and the changes to African culture by the colonial system are involved in constant dialogue (and more often, I would say, argument) with each other to define the women's rights movements in Senegal.

Hoping to further my knowledge of the country's population before arriving, I took note of the fact that reportedly 95 percent of the population is Muslim. Islam was a religion that I knew about more from the negative images and language in American media sources than from serious personal inquiry. In the spring of 2006, I chose to take a course at Brandeis that could better prepare me before going to the country. Going to Senegal as an Ethics Center Fellow

to research human rights and particularly women's rights with relation to legislation and charters, this background knowledge seemed essential. Considering the complex and perhaps inseparable tie that is often evoked between religion and the state in the view of Islam, it would be necessary to have a basis in the ideology of politics and Islam in West Africa before even beginning to understand the status of the woman. Additionally, recognizing once again the influence of identities and communities in shaping viewpoints on responsibilities, especially in the ever-debated domain of human rights, it is certain that Islam is one of the possible institutions that would play a role in shaping ideologies.

The course that I chose to take in preparation, called "The History of Islam in West Africa: Tolerance and Coexistence," seemed to be the perfect fit to allow me to explore these realities. The professor, a Muslim scholar who had been born in Guinea, lived in Senegal, and lived and traveled extensively in the United States, France and throughout Europe, was well known in his field, and the course syllabus was promising. First, for myself and as well as for the other students in the class, the course served as an in-depth introduction to the basic principles of Islam. Second, although I had studied colonization of the African continent as well as some pre-colonial history, the course provided me with a background in the pre-colonial history of West Africa in particular, ranging from issues of statehood to trade and finally to the colonial impact on a micro scale. Third, by learning a history of how Islam first spread throughout the region, arguably mostly via vast trade networks and self-conversions, I was able to identify the originating principles behind Muslim faith in West Africa. Fourth, as a counter-argument to the way that Islam is perceived and addressed in the States, especially in a post-9/11 world, the course provided the idea that: 1) Islam, as it is understood and practiced in West Africa, is very particular to the region, partly for historical reasons of how/why it even reached *Afrique Noire*; and 2) despite the fact that

extremist sects and brotherhoods are often perceived as being the majority as they “speak” louder, the mystic Sufi sect of Islam that is most adhered to in Senegal certainly does not follow this “louder” voice. The premise of the course, as suggested by the title, was that Islam in West Africa is an Islam characterized by peace, coexistence and tolerance. Of course, the syllabus also delved into issues of slavery in Islam and of the jihadist wars that were fought in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as the religion really took hold of the region. However, according to the course instruction, these instances of violence and human rights abuses were looked upon as being anomalies, not consistent enough to tarnish the region’s tradition of tolerance.

I took this information with an analytical lens, trying to draw my own conclusion about how to reconcile this historical evidence with the somewhat apologetic tone of the course. Regardless, the course prepared me with the knowledge base to seek out evidences and understandings of tolerance and coexistence in regards to human rights in the daily life of Dakar, Senegal. Quite simply, or so it seemed, the course’s emphasis on West African Islam as being peaceful and tolerant proved true to me initially. My colleagues at WARC, for one, seeing the cross I wore around my neck had no negative feelings or commentary to dispense toward me. Even as they confirmed their suspicion that based on my appearance I must have Jewish family, there was no judgment, tension, or negativity passed. Likewise, a Senegalese friend of Leigh Swigart’s, a devout Muslim himself, volunteered happily to take me around to the two churches within walking distance of my homestay family’s house, encouraging me to find which church I preferred to attend. Later, he volunteered to drive me to church and pick me up after the services, at least for the first two or three Sundays until I got oriented to the area and got used to walking on my own in the city. The Islam that I felt and saw was certainly one of tolerance, perhaps more so than I had felt anywhere else that I have been a religious minority. And yet, I

was not too much surprised. After all, as it was explained by my new friends and colleagues, I am a practicing Catholic – something, according to those I met, “rare” among Americans – and I was respected for being part of one of the Abrahamic faiths.

Of course, it was not only my own faith and differing beliefs/practices that made me so attentive to the role of Islam in every day life in Dakar. In fact, it seemed virtually inescapable. My colleagues would stop working to shower or at least wash their hands, face, and feet before and after lunch and again at 6 p.m. if they were still in the office, take out a prayer mat (the women would cover their head and tie on a wrap skirt if they were wearing pants), and fulfill their obligation to the five daily prayers. In fact, as I went from office to office to do interviews for my research, I found it was not uncommon to see showers in the bathrooms of work places, in part for this purpose specifically. Come Friday, many offices were closed for the holy day. As an international research center, WARC operated on Fridays, but the atmosphere was somehow quieter, more gentle, more reverent on these days. Many of the researchers did not return after leaving for the mosque at around 1:00. My colleagues, the permanent employees, at least those who were men, even left to go to mosque, certainly adding to the general quiet. And every man and woman, employer, Senegalese student or researcher came to WARC on Fridays wearing their best clothing (I too made the extra effort on Fridays, wearing my own tailored *boubou*, or Senegalese dress).

Initially, I had assumed that I would have to do a lot of digging or engage in deep theological conversation in order to explore the question that I asked after my Spring 2006 course: *How do the beliefs, practices and histories of Islam in Senegal translate into shaping the ideologies that govern day to day life, particularly in regard to development and human rights?* The class had prepared me for the idea of Islam being quite central to daily life, but perhaps I still expected religion to be only *one* influence, one of *many*. However, as I quickly experienced

the religiosity of Sufi Dakar, I had to reform my views. It seemed as if there was a mosque on every corner; one could hear the muezzin’s call to prayer from any location, and it was not uncommon to see people praying on sidewalks along even the busiest streets.

Yet Islam was apparent not only in those activities that were a part of religious obligation, the five principles including daily prayers. From the public transportation, with each bus having *Alhamdoulillah* (“thanks be to God”) painted across the hood, to learning to say *incha’allah* (“God willing”) after every discussion of a future planned event, it became quite clear that Islam pervaded everyday conversation and thought. Even for the names of the days of the week, Wolof speakers use the Arabic words, reflecting once again the influence of Islam and the way that it spread to the people of Senegal.

Suddenly, my question about Islam’s influence in the manifestation and understanding of human rights in Senegal became central. I could not ask

questions about the status, roles and identities of the Senegalese woman without also hearing responses that referenced religion. Indeed, Sufi Islam is not *just* a key influence in the process, not *just* one of many. Rather, I came to learn that it is deeply embedded in other cultural, historical, and social influences as well, truly inseparable for other factors, especially from my vantage point in Dakar.

**“Sufi Islam is not *just* a key influence in the process, not *just* one of many. Rather, I came to learn that it is deeply embedded in other cultural, historical, and social influences as well, truly inseparable for other factors, especially from my vantage point in Dakar.”**

For example, many “cultural” practices in Senegal that are sometimes deemed harmful to women, from female genital cutting to polygamous marriages, are said to have their root in Islam. Most intelligent readers would point out that Islam was brought to the people of Senegal and is no more “traditional” than colonial architecture and eating with forks and knives. However, the spring 2006 course enabled me to understand the connection between “traditional cultures” and Islam. While yes, Islam was not widely accepted among the ethnic groups that now inhabit Senegal until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local marabouts were present as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the religion had firmly taken its root by the time the French were beginning to gain social, economic and political influence.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Islam was used as a destabilizing force to fight against colonizers until the country’s independence in 1960. To this day, especially in light of a post-9/11 world in which divisions between Islam and “the West” have been so pronounced, some Senegalese still regard Islam as being an internal mechanism for fighting the lasting impact of colonialism. The Sufi sect of Islam, with which the majority of Senegalese Muslims identify, has a particular history of accommodation to and absorption of many earlier “traditional” practices and beliefs. Thus, when discussing movements toward gender-sensitive views and practices that do not subjugate women, one must consider equally understandings of traditional cultures as well as those of Sufi Islam. Interpretations of both “traditional cultures” and Islam engage in a dialectic that sets the foundation for the role of woman in today’s Senegalese society. The result is a perception of tradition not as “a culture of the past,” but rather, a concept of culture that is very much a part of modern life.

In part, it is precisely this blending and remembering of cultures and beliefs that further complicates questions about change; practices are not only seen to be rooted in history and identity, but also in religion in very complex ways. Surely, some women’s activists would

argue that Senegal’s 1999 outlawing of female genital cutting (FGC) as stated by the Penal Code is a great advancement in terms of questioning the perceived religious component of such practices. Previously, and even today, some hold the notion that FGC acts as a ritual performed so that women may further aspire to Islamic notions of purity, cleanliness and chastity, as well as marriageability. The prevalence of this rationale is evidenced by the fact that several non-government groups that continue to educate about or even eradicate FGC in Senegal have often targeted religious leaders in their campaigns and workshops for change. One such organization, Tostan, has made significant efforts and has received quite a positive response by involving religious leaders (namely, *marabouts*, or leaders of local Sufi brotherhoods) in the process of human rights education, especially those programs concerning FGC.

However despite these “successes” in lessening the dangers and threats to Senegalese women, there remain great obstacles in the debate. In the effort to eradicate the practice of female genital cutting, these challenges have now been further problematized by issues of stigma and fear of talking about an “illegal” activity. Tostan Volunteer Coordinator, Khady Bâ, has indicated that these silences have provided Tostan’s education program with even more obstacles. Having a non-imperialistic policy that requires that communities or villages to *invite* Tostan to teach them, the very reach of Tostan’s activities has been jeopardized by the legislation that was put forth with good intent. “What we are seeing more and more is that people are scared to talk about it. Now it is not just ‘bad’ or dangerous. FGC is *illegal*.” Indeed, as with any other practices and ideologies that impede the full realization of citizenship for the Senegalese woman, open dialogue is a necessary component to education and even steps toward reform.

Once again, Islam plays an important role, *interpreted* as granting men a God-given superiority over women, and therefore a louder voice in both the home and in public policy

enforcement. This assumed gendered power hierarchy seems to lie at the base of many issues concerning women’s rights, from access to education and economic means to decision-making capabilities within a polygamous family. In common discourse, this hierarchy is actually more cited to be a derivative of Islam than colonial or traditional ideologies.

For example, Mme Penda Mbow, a well-respected professor at University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and founding director of *Mouvement Citoyenne*, noted the role of certain interpretations of Islam in the progress of the women’s rights movement during an interview in her home. She commented that while the 1973 Family Code legislation had initially encouraged dialogue about women’s domestic roles and responsibilities by outlining legal terms for polygamy, inheritance rights, divorce and child custody, the local political nature of Muslim communities had since provided obstacles for any real change in the home:

*“What Islam is bringing is, for example, is the situation of the hegemony of man over woman. I think it is something ideologically you can find in Islam. And it is what is happening and shifted the status of the African woman, specifically in the area where woman is Islamized... Especially, religion. People used the religion, manipulated the religion, put woman in a situation behind man. I used to say the best example of that is ... a Muslim leader [who] is more strong, is strongest, and more powerful than, for example, the figure of a father. I think the Family Code played a great role. But now, in my opinion, the role played by the marabou system is very strong and for example, constitutes an obstacle to promoting and using the Family Code.”<sup>10</sup>*

Using the words of Mme. Mbow, a voice that was often echoed in many of the interviews and discussions that I held, these “uses” and “manipulations” of Islam cannot simply be dismissed as false reasoning. Regardless of their truth and validity, this ideology to which

Mbow refers to nonetheless a reality for some circles of both men and women Muslims in Senegal. The attention must be paid toward realizing that the “uses” and “manipulations” left so often unquestioned remain to be significant influences of determining gender politics in the street, in the government, in offices, and even in the home.

This is not to say, however, that Islam itself is encouraging these arguably negative consequences that are felt by Senegalese women and young girls. In fact, the activists whom I spoke with as well as many scholars of Islam have used the basic principles of Islam to point to the value of the woman, drawing examples from the Koran and the life of Mohammad. So too did Prof Lansiné Kaba, who taught the course “History of Islam in West Africa” at Brandeis in spring 2006, highlight positive powers that the doctrines of Islam may grant women. In the words of a Senegalese sociologist, founder of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (1977) and member of the women’s association *Yewwu-Yewwi* (“Awake”), “the kinds of Muslims who see the feminist movement as a threat are not the only type of Muslims around.”<sup>11</sup> I am not denying the reality of these understandings of Islam. In fact, through these arguments, it becomes obvious that Islam, like most religions and institutionalized belief systems, is subject to individual and collective interpretations and manipulations. However, in the context of Senegal, especially in the local politics that influence these collective ideologies, headed often by allegiances to a particular imam or marabout, it becomes necessary to consider the perceived reality of the understandings of Islam that justify and even encourage the power structures and behaviors that others have deemed harmful to women.

Ultimately, the course that I took about Islam in West Africa did provide me with a further background to better understand how Islam came to hold a dominant position in past and present formation of communities and gender politics in Senegal. In accordance

with the course, I did in fact experience an “Islam of tolerance and coexistence” in regard to relations with other religious groups and peoples. After all, the first president of independent Senegal was the much-loved Leopold Senghor, a Catholic Serer from Senegal. As an American student living and researching in a post-9/11 world, it would certainly be necessary to realize these realities in order to break down any preconceived negativities or nervousness that I admittedly had in living amidst Muslim communities. However, the reality that was significant in discovering what roles the foundations of Islam played in Senegal’s human rights development was not so much that which came through in *inter-religious* dialogue and interactions. Rather, I quickly came to understand that when questioning how notions of identity and group-belonging contribute to forming ideologies, one must look inward. This meant not only identifying the numerous factors that were at play in this process, but also the relationships between these influences. *How does Islam relate to conceptions of traditional culture? How does Islam relate to notions of political power? How does Islam generate general notions of about the roles and responsibilities of woman in Senegalese societies, communities and families?* Highly contested by definition and in practice, the realm of women’s rights lies at the intersection between these multiple understandings of political, religious, historical and social ideologies.

Certainly, as in the case with many social movements, especially women’s movements, the situation can be assessed on many levels. Cultural, social, political, economic, religious and familial relationships and definitions are considered, questioned and redefined. Therefore, in speaking of the role of Islam within the women’s movement in Senegal, I do not mean to oversimplify the complex nature of debate and progress. Rather, my intent is to highlight that Islam is only one of many of the viewpoints that is informing the movement, and as I illustrate here, contains within it many different understandings.

Indeed, while there are those who use Islam to justify the “natural” power hierarchy that places men above women and to cite the historical tradition behind this manner of social organization, there are also those who find solace for women in Islam, noting the doctrine that God created all human beings in His own likeness. The purpose for my discussion on Islam and women’s rights is to explore the multiple ways in which *interpretations* of Islam and its role in Senegalese societies and identities have served as a hegemonic force in Senegal to define the place of the woman. The role of Islam in women’s rights development demonstrates the complexities that have arisen when cultural, historical, familial, political, and religious viewpoints collide (or at times, even converge) in defining who a Senegalese woman may be and what roles she is allowed and expected to fulfill.

**VI. “Unification of rights in our society means for woman to get citizenship, more and more citizenship, and of course, to put all the citizens in the same level.”**

— Mme. Penda Mbow,  
Director of Mouvement Citoyenne  
June 22, 2006, Dakar

The children run up and down the beach, flirting with the tide that rushes up to their ankles. One small group kicks around a soccer ball, barely noticing the sand that sticks to their bare, wet bodies. Beachside “fast-food” stands sell overflowing *chawarma*-filled pitas and hamburgers, stuffed as always with lettuce, French fries, and a boiled egg, for the equivalent of \$1.50 each. The people sitting at tables take swigs from their glass bottles of Coca-Cola or Fanta soda to cool their mouths from the spicy red pepper sauce. The unrelenting African sun beams down, hot and bright as ever, from blue skies. There are families, couples, groups of teenage boys affirming their independence as older kids at the beach on their own. Everyone has come out to enjoy the clear waters and the white sand — but I have come here for another reason.

I came with my friend and colleague, Ousseynou, arriving just in time at the port in downtown Dakar to take the ferry to the island. He approaches the ticket booth and speaks to the man in Wolof. He gives the man 1000CFA (US \$2) to pay for his ticket on the “*Coumba Castel*” that will carry us the short two kilometers or so to the island. I am next in line, and without me saying a word, the ticket man at the window says to me in English, “5000CFA, please” (US \$10). I hand the man the crisp bills that I just retrieved from the ATM, take my ticket, and my friend and I board the ferry where we sit together and wait silently for the other passengers to find a seat. Somehow I am not bothered by the higher price that I am charged because the light coloring of my skin suggests that I am a foreigner. My only thought is my destination: Gorée Island.

Once the home to one of the two largest slave trade ports in West Africa through which hundreds of thousands of Africans were sold, Gorée is now home to tourist attractions and people who want to escape the chaos of Dakar. I came in part to continue my research and in part because I could not visit the country without making the short trip to Gorée as well. I had an interview scheduled for 2 p.m., and it was hardly 11 a.m. For both Ousseynou and I, it is our first time here, arriving early so we could explore the island before my appointment. The man who helped us step off the ferry onto the dock that led to the beautiful coastline was calling out the locations of various “attractions” that we could see. We listen for the name of the island’s most infamous landmark, *La Maison des Esclaves*, and head down the pathway in the indicated direction.

The architecture is colonial. The rust, sea-green and marigold-colored plaster houses stand two or three stories high with large shuttered windows that open to balconies overgrown with vines and hibiscus blossoms. The paint is chipped, the walls are cracked, and the gardens grow wild, yet it is impossible not to appreciate the beauty of the color that abounds from every structure and cobblestone pathway that graces

the island. There is not a single motor vehicle here – only walking paths, just wide enough to accommodate a passing tour group or a horse-drawn cart. One cannot tell if the silence that hangs in the air is a peaceful serenity or a solemn remembrance of the painful history that these lands bear.

The pathway leads us past a monument. Standing atop an African drum, a man and woman stand, bodies pressed together, his fists held triumphantly in the air with broken shackles hanging from each wrist, her arms wrapped around his torso and her eyes gazing at his hardened face. A sign beside the statue indicates that it is a monument celebrating France’s declaration of abolition in 1848, bringing an end to centuries of the slave trade from Senegal. Residents and foreign and Senegalese tourists alike all stop in respect, and continue on their way to their next destination.

Just ahead is *La Maison des Esclaves*, the House of Slaves. Built in 1776 by the Dutch who had held Gorée as a strategic territory, the house now stands as the only slave trade marketplace left on the island. From the outside, the building looks no different than the others on the walking path. We would have walked past it if not for the small crowd gathered at the doorway and the hand-painted sign nailed above the entry. We pay the fee and enter, wandering about the dark stone corridors. *La Maison* is composed of several dank chambers which once housed hundreds of Africans as they awaited the moment they would be evaluated and sold. Above the open doorway to each chamber is a sign, identifying those who had once dwelled inside: “*les hommes*,” “*les femmes*,” “*les enfants*.” Some chambers had windows carved out of the stone. In the afternoon sun, the rays of light that pass through these small openings are fragmented by the horizontal bars that brace the windows. I cannot but help notice that in the chamber marked “*les enfants*” (the children), the spaces between the bars on the windows seem to be smaller than those of the others, perhaps to prohibit young and slender bodies from attempting to escape.

At the very center of the house is a courtyard with the two infamous curved staircases. They rise ominously to the balconies from which dealers would come to place bids on the dark-skinned men, women and children wearing nothing but the weighted iron balls shackled to their ankles. Upstairs, once the slave house owner’s pristine residence, is now a tidy exhibit of the tools and tales that are left from the grotesque history that unraveled on the ground level below.

Somewhere in the house, someone is crying out, “Why?!... why?!...” and for myself, flashback images of tortured faces appear with each look into another chamber of the house. Ousseynou wants to take pictures, and I give in, trying to let the camera speak for me, as I have lost all capacity for words. With each mechanical snap of my digital camera, I frame another image, hoping that framing what I see will somehow allow me to box out my own emotions, making them easier to comprehend. The “door of no return” looms before us like a light at the end of a dark tunnel – only this is not the gate to salvation that people speak of. This is the door from which the slaves, after being kept in *La Maison* for up to three months – stripped, weighed and evaluated by European purchasers – made their final walk to the ship that would carry them to foreign land, if they lived that long. Men to southern Louisiana, children to Haiti and the West Indies, women to Brazil. Ousseynou and I take turns standing in the open door frame. He clicks away at my camera and then I do the same, capturing each other as we look out into the Atlantic Ocean to the same abyss of blue sea that each person who passed before us had seen. A last glimpse at the free world. Later, Ousseynou told me that he couldn’t stop asking himself, “If I was alive then, this would have been me. What would I have done?” For myself, the question seemed more difficult, because my own identity afforded me a real element of choice: “If I was alive then, this would *not* have been me. What would I have done? Would I be one of the women standing up on the balcony, side by side with my

husband as he made bids on the man with the most muscle mass and the sturdiest teeth?"

At last, it is almost 2 p.m. We ask the man at the entrance to *La Maison* where the Women's Museum is, the site of my interview. Without a word, he points just across the narrow path to the doorway right before us. There, directly facing the House of Slaves is the Women's Museum. Certainly both buildings are equally old, with the distinct colonial influence, but the Women's Museum bears an entirely different atmosphere. The walls look as if they have been recently repainted, the floor has been swept, and each surface has been tenderly cared for. The courtyard opens to a garden where women chat amongst themselves while stitching embroidery pieces to be sold in the museum shop. The humming of a woman who is hand-dying pieces of fabric comes from a room adjacent to the courtyard. Two curved staircases rise up to the main parts of the Museum, the director's offices and a small library that is still under construction. Each room houses a different exhibit to pay tribute to the lives and roles of women. They are divided by theme: fashion, agriculture, culinary traditions, and then rooms dedicated to women influential in the women's movement. The rooms are brightly lit by the large open windows, unlike the dark stone chambers of the slave house just across the way. The plastered walls, adorned with artifacts and images of female politicians, famous activists, writers and musicians, are alive.

Here in the Museum, across the path from the House of Slaves, there is life and energy. However, one cannot easily forget the legacy of oppression that looms so near in spatial and temporal proximity. After taking a tour of the exhibits, I have my interview with the *directrice* of the museum. She speaks of the history of its founding, its mission in education today, the role that she sees it playing in the modern Senegalese society. And yet she uses the same discourse as the men who gave the tours at the slave house. She talks about matters of being denied citizenship, human rights violations,

crimes against the true heart and culture of the country; the rape of woman, both literally and in reference to the stripping away of human dignity. Of course, she mentions that there has been increased activity in the movement to pay tribute to the women who give their lives for the cultural reproduction of the Senegalese people and the foundation of the Senegalese family; indeed there has been liberation, such as the legal abolition of female genital cutting. However, oppression remains as history and collective memories of the people beg for the preservation of those "cultural" and "religious" traditions deemed harmful to women.

As I leave the museum, I see a large painting propped against one wall. It is of a woman with twelve or so arms, each doing a different activity to fulfill her many roles as woman: washing laundry, tending a crop, balancing fruit and vegetables that another arm is depicted cooking to prepare a meal, feeding her husband, breast-feeding the child she cradles in one arm, while supporting another child tied onto her back. The artist, a woman herself, seemed to express pain and fatigue in the overworked woman's eyes that she had painted here. In this image, woman is a slave, bound to her duties and her identity, which seem so unquestionable by social and cultural standards. Indeed, by the discourse taken up by the museum *directrice* and curators, it seems that the woman's movement has become a modern day cry against slavery. Surely in its early stages, the movement for the "*liberation de la femme*" is a new page in the country's history of fighting against oppression of patriarchal colonial powers and toward independence and citizenship.

Amidst the House of Slaves, the Women's Museum, and the laughing children basking in the natural beauty of the tiny island coast, one sees painful irony in juxtaposition of history and the present. Even the name of the island, by its first colonizing proprietors after the Dutch phrase, "*Goode Reede*," meaning "good harbor," makes one recall the horrific ignorance that has left such a mark on the world today.

Making my final pass around the island with Ousseynou, we walk through the small artisan market on the east side. Jewelry of cowrie shells, traditional hand-carved *djembe* drums, wooden carvings, batiks and canvases

painted by various techniques and artists flank the pathway, all for sale by the artists who created them. We carouse through the colorful stalls, stopping to have friendly conversation with an artist whose work catches our eyes. I marvel at the creative energy that has been brought forth from this island and wonder silently if the name of the island, Good Harbor, may actually have been fulfilled.

Gorée has become an honored place which, at least symbolically, any person – man, woman, modernist, traditionalist, Muslim, Christian – can rally around to recognize suffering, human dignity, and finally, human liberty. It bears a history that cannot be forgotten by the vacationers relaxing at the beach. The painful cries of oppression cannot be overpowered by the young men who gather to teach a *djembe* lesson to the tourist purchasing a drum. And yet by remembering, that memory has allowed for new life on Gorée Island: once home to a center from which hundreds of thousands of Africans were sold into slavery, now home to a new hope that the demand for liberation may once again yield freedoms – this time, for the women of Senegal.

**"Gorée has become an honored place which, at least symbolically, any person — man, woman, modernist, traditionalist, Muslim, Christian — can rally around to recognize suffering, human dignity, and finally, human liberty."**

---

## Further Reading

Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Yale University Press.

Association of African Women For Research and Development (AAWORD/AFARD). 1986. "Debates on Feminism in Senegal: Visions vs. Nostalgia." *ECHO* (AAWORD Newsletter). Vol. 1, N. 2-3. Pp.9-10.

Brown, Seyom. 2000. *Human Rights in World Politics*. New York: Longman.

Bâ, Mariama. 1981. *So Long a Letter*. London: Heinemann.

Center for Reproductive Rights, The. 2000. *Women of the World: Laws and Policies Affecting Their Reproductive Lives: Francophone Africa*. The Center for Reproductive Rights.

Churchill, Robert. P. 2006. *Human Rights and Global Diversity*. Upper Saddle River, NJ Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Cooke, Miriam. 2000. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. Taylor & Francis, Inc.

"Feminism in Senegal." 1987. Interview by Ibrahima Fall, July 1986. Excerpted from *Outwrite*, Reprinted in *Off Our Backs*. Vol. 1, November 1987. Pp.19, Pp. 22.

Ferne, Elizabeth Warnock. 1998. *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

Gellar, Sheldon. 1995. *Senegal: An African Nation between Islam and the West. 2nd Ed.* Westview Press.

Levtzion and Pouwels, eds. 2000. *The History of Islam in Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. Pp. 1-129.

Linares, Olga F. 1991. *Prayer, Power and Production: The Jola of Casamance, Senegal*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

McNee, Lisa. 2000. *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses*. NY, New York: State University of New York Press

Melching, Molly. 2001. "Abandoning Female Genital Cutting in Africa." *Eye to eye : Women Practicing Development Across Cultures*. Edited by Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd..

Michael, Sarah. 2005. *Undermining Development: The Absence of Power among Local NGOs in Africa*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Ousmane, Sembene. *Xala*. 1983. Clive Wake, Translator. Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, Inc.

Parker, Melissa. 1995. "Rethinking Female Circumcision." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 65. No. 4. Pp. 506-523.

Senghor, Léopold Sédar. 1965. *Poetry and Prose*. Selected and translated by John Reed and Clive Wake. London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd.

Sidikou, Aissata G. 2000. *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali and Senegal*. Africa World Press.

## Web links

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights – <http://www.achpr.org/>

Goree Island, UNESCO site – <http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/>

The Musée de la Femme "Henriette Bathily" – <http://www.museevirtuel.ca/Exhibitions/Francophonie/An-/MFHBS/Muse.htm>

Tostan – [www.tostan.org](http://www.tostan.org)

West African Research Association – <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/WARA/index.htm>

West African Research Center – [www.warc-croa.org](http://www.warc-croa.org)

## Notes

1. Colloquial term for the proprietor of any small boutique or street shop that are commonly found in urban Senegal.
2. West African Research Association
3. Wolof is one of the many languages spoken in Senegal, and the most widely spoken in the greater Dakar region. In Dakar, and increasingly in other regions throughout Senegal, one can find individuals and entire communities of other ethnic groups that also speak Wolof.
4. The general term "women's rights" in Senegal does not exclude those cultural, social, and interpersonal rights that are also afforded to girls or young women. In fact, much of the debate concerning women's rights to education as well as bodily integrity (relevant to discussion of female genital cutting) and marriage rights (i.e. marriage consent as opposed to arranged and/or forced marriages at young ages) are particularly relevant to girls from between birth to age 16 (age of consent for legal marriage is 16 for females and 20 for males according to the Family Code). Therefore, when one uses "women's rights" as a catchall category, it is assumed that young

---

girls are also considered without distinction from adult women.

5. Journal entry. 29 June 2006. D. Sawitz. Dakar, Senegal.

6. *Association Nationale pour l'Alphabétisation et la Formation des Adultes*

7. Mme. Penda Mbow. Interview. 22 June 2006. D. Sawitz. Dakar, Senegal.

8. For decades, this argument has been one most frequently referenced in casual conversation as well as religious and political debate: "A number of religious leaders assert that nowhere does the Coran provide justification for polygamy whereas others categorically point out that it is God himself who has authorized polygamy when he said in vers. 3 'Sorate': *'Marry those women who please you. Two, three or four.'* The only restriction imposed by Islam is that *'if you are apprehensive of not being fair, take only one'*" (Association of African Women for Research and Development. 1986. "Debates on Feminism in Senegal: Visions vs. Nostalgia." *ECHO*. Vol. 1, N. 2-3. Pp. 9-10).

9. Levtzion and Pouwels, eds. 2000. *The History of Islam in Africa*.

10. Mme. Penda Mbow. Interview. 22 June 2006. D. Sawitz. Dakar, Senegal.

11. "Feminism in Senegal." 1987. Interview by Ibrahima Fall, July 1986. Excerpted from *Outwrite*, Reprinted in *Off Our Backs*. Vol. 1, November 1987. Pp.19 , Pp. 22.