

February 12, 2004

Fatik

Meet Baro Diouf. He is descended from a long line of royalty in the Sine Region of Senegal. He is Serrer, Muslim and an Animist. He also works for Peace Corps as the head of Facilities Maintenance, Procurement, among other things. A handsome, if diminutive, vivacious, sweet, gentle man with the temperament and the talent of an artist, we have become good friends since we arrived here in Senegal.

He invited us to attend the one-year anniversary celebration of his mother-in-law's death. That's right. They "celebrate" the death of a loved one. This celebration was a bit different. Although the family practices Islam, the mother, like many Senegalese, still believed in Animism. Still in good health at age 93, she called her daughter, Baro's wife, over a year ago to announce that she knew she would die within a month. She made her daughter promise to hold an animist celebration of her death one year hence.

Animists believe in the attribution of life or consciousness to natural objects or phenomena. Thus a certain tree, mountain, river or stone may be sacred because it represents, is home to, or simply *is* a spirit or deity. Animism was *the* religion in West Africa before Islam and Christianity arrived. I've heard it said more than once: "Scratch a West African Muslim or Christian, and you'll find an animist underneath." As you will note later on, this statement seems to be oh so true.

I met Baro at his house at 8:30 Saturday morning. He was wearing a gleaming white boubou along with black dress shoes with brass buckles. I was dressed in standard western garb, but my boubou was hanging in the back seat. It took us a little over three hours to get to Fatik, a village located southeast of Dakar.

Fatik is Baro Diouf's birthplace. I noticed that the name Diouf was found on all sorts of buildings -- schools, hospitals, businesses. Baro explained that the Diouf family was, and still is, considered royalty in this the Sine region of Senegal. It is named after the Sine River, which winds through the region from central Senegal southeast to the point where it joins with the Saloum and heads out to the Atlantic. When the French granted independence to the country in 1960, things were not going at all well in the Sine region until the new government under Senghor appointed Baro's grandfather as regional director. Still considered "king", he was able to bring relative peace and organization to the region.

But enough of the history; let's discuss the animists and their specific beliefs. As prologue I must describe events as they occurred after our arrival in Fatik. Our first stop was at a bar. It was crowded with men, most sporting boubous, watching the African Cup Football games on TV. I could tell that I was in Serrer

territory. Everyone drank and smoked. The bar was all cement - floors, walls, seats, even the bar itself - even though it was decorated with some non-descript tile. It looked to be designed so that you could hose it down real quick to clean it each day.

We were there for about a half hour when up came a tall man who looked and acted to me like my brother, Kevin, would had he been black. Dio-Dio (Jo-jo) is a griot. He is also a non-stop comedian who drinks and smokes to excess. During our conversation he stated that he currently had four wives. He used to have nine! When we discussed the logistics of this arrangement, we all had a good laugh. We stayed and watched an exciting match between Guinea and Mali. Dio-Dio, Baro and I then drove over to a house owned by Baro that he rents out to a family. We spent a half hour there, after which we drove off overland, following sand cart paths to the deceased's little village of Sagne.

We caused quite a stir when we arrived. A large open-sided tent had been erected for the occasion. Underneath were several griots, both male and female, who were entertaining about 50 people with singing and drumming. We met up with Baro's wife, who introduced me to several of her relatives. Everyone was dressed in colorful boubous.

I was then escorted into the tent, given a seat, and entertained by the griots. I then walked over to the head griot and gave him a 1000 franc note - about \$2.00. This is standard practice as I had learned on other similar occasions. One difference here, though: as soon as I pulled money out of my pocket, all of the ladies gathered around me asking for money. One of them even touched my pocket. All of a sudden I felt the same way I sometimes do around my sons -- like I'm a walking ATM machine. I felt very uncomfortable as the token toubab=money, and I left the tent as quickly as I could with due courtesy to the entertainers.

I sat with Baro and his wife's relatives, and took some pictures with our digital camera. They were fascinated with the results. I promised them that I would give copies to Baro to send to them.

The big match -- Senegal vs. Tunisia -- was about to start. So four of us guys took off to a mud hut with a six-pack of beer to listen to it on the radio. Senegal lost. A disheartened bunch returned to the central meeting place for the final celebration.

This time I was dressed for the occasion in my boubou. Baro was signaled that it was time for the graveside ceremony. The drumming and singing began anew, and Baro went over next to a large baobab tree, where a man and his wife were selling liter bottles of warm Coca-Cola and red wine. He bought a bottle of red wine. We -- Baro, Dio-Dio and myself -- then walked the 100 yards to the village cemetery. The graves in the cemetery were poorly marked, if at all. Baro's mother-in-law's grave was distinguished only by a raised mound of dirt that was

bordered by a mess of twigs.

We waited while a group of twenty women danced their way from the village center over to the graveside. They all sang and danced a uniform step which was accompanied by hand gestures that looked as if they were pushing something away. They danced around the graveside twice and danced the 150 yards back to where they started. They repeated the same ritual three times. The third time they stood on one side of the grave while Baro poured a half bottle of wine over the grave. He then gave the bottle to Dio-Dio, the griot, who immediately chugged the remainder. Whether this was part of the ritual or merely evidence of Dio-Dio's bacchanalian appetite, I really can't say.

The ladies danced back to the village center where the singing and dancing continued. Baro, Dio-Dio and I adjourned back to the drink vendor and settled down under the baobab. I bought us another bottle of red wine. I noted that the wine was from France but was bottled in Dakar. The vendor produced some water glasses, and all four of us shared the bottle. The wine was surprisingly good.

I began asking questions about the animist beliefs. The answers were really fascinating. Here is what I remember, in no particular order:

1. They believe in the power of "gri-gri". Gri-gri is a form of talisman that is worn somewhere on the body. It either protects you or gives you some form of strength. The gri-gri may be an animal or bird part -- hair, fur, feathers, teeth, eyes, claws or paws. People often wear a small leather pouch on the upper arm that contains the gri-gri or else a passage from the Koran. For instance, Baro wears a one-inch square of lion skin beneath his boubou to assure his virility. Watch out, Viagra!

In the old days, when tribes were warring against one another, the warriors used potions and gri-gri to render themselves invincible to spears, knives and bullets. Baro has seen men who, after downing the right potion and/or donning the right amulet, can be neither cut nor pierced with a sharp knife.

2. A Griot is not buried in the ground, for fear that nothing will grow in that surrounding soil. Instead he is interred inside a baobab tree. The wineseller explained that they use a knife to slit the tree bark. The baobab opens up to the point where the griot's body will fit. After the body is in place the baobab grows around it to seal it in.

Baro added that sometimes the griot doesn't want to be buried in a particular baobab. The corpse suddenly becomes heavy to the point that it is next to impossible to carry.

A short time ago, when son Rowan visited, we toured a wild animal reserve, Bandia. While there we inspected a very old baobab inside which we could see the skulls and bones of griots. This baobab hadn't completely sealed in the remains. Our guide explained that this ritual was banned in the area in 1976, after which time griots were buried in the ground in the traditional manner. Wouldn't you know it? 1976 was the first of several years of extraordinary drought in the area, during which time virtually nothing would grow. Believe it or not!

The next morning Baro took me to a spot on the Sine River, a tidal river, where a stake was implanted half way between the high and low tide lines. We could see coins lying at the base of the stake. Baro explained that the river spirit, "Mindis", will sometimes appear in the town on market day, Saturday. She appears as a beautiful, well-dressed woman. She makes several purchases, and then disappears. No one knows where she goes. We added some coins to those around the stake. Baro commented that Mindis must be quite well off, judging from the number of coins that he has seen there.

From there we drove a short distance down the river to the Malango Healing Center. It could pass for a Club Med, save for the wall that surrounds it. Located right on the river fronted by a sandy beach, it consists of many round, cement, thatch-roofed huts. It is here that people come to be cured of their ailments by the "guerriseurs" - the healers - who use techniques and medicines that are not recognized by traditional medicine. Some of the sick have tried traditional medical treatments to no avail. Others come here as soon as they become ill.

It is Sunday, no patients. An assistant director explained that the Center began about ten years before with grants from several American concerns, including the Ford Foundation. Enough evidence existed of the beneficial results of the non-traditional healing processes that these entities chose to fund research. Every case is carefully documented. This documentation is forwarded to a research center in the U.S where it is examined and placed into a database. Only one problem - a big one: none of the healers care to share the procedural details of their cures. "Eye of newt ... wing of bat ... blood of lizard"? None of that. This info is only passed down to a younger member of the same family, who is destined to become the next healer in line.

Baro tells a story of a woman he knew who suffered from a severe stomach ailment. After many months of seeing a variety of traditional doctors and trying many prescribed remedies, she finally visited a female healer. The healer examined her, went into some sort of trance, and reached right through the skin of the woman's stomach. She pulled out a rather large, writhing black snake, which she threw into a fire. The previously ailing woman rose, thanked the healer, and walked out completely cured -- without a mark on her.

Everyone you talk to in this area has similar stories to tell.

On the way home -- a trip that took much longer than three hours due to car trouble -- I thought about the animist beliefs and their main point being that a higher power exists everywhere in nature. I realized that many of us are in close accord.

A la prochaine, Chuck