

July 19, 2003

Terenga and Mamadou

I've discovered something wonderful here. It's called "Teranga". It's a Wolof word that means "hospitality", "welcome". It's a deeply ingrained part of the Senegalese mentality. This is a story about "Teranga".

Meet Mamadou Kane (pronounced kahn-ā). He's a waiter at one of Dakar's finer restaurants, Lagon I.

Back in early May we decided to celebrate Anne's confirmation as a permanent hire by Peace Corps with a romantic lunch. Lagon I sits over the ocean on the Dakar waterfront. We chose a table located on the dock that extends about 100 feet out into the water. Mamadou welcomed us to his table, took our drink order and explained the specials. We engaged in a running conversation with this handsome, warm and amiable Senegalese over the course of our meal. We discussed the fact that we were new arrivals to Dakar and how much we were enthralled by everything so far.

Anne selected grilled gambas. I chose *thieboudienne*, pronounced *cheb-ou-jen*, a Senegalese favorite which consists of fish, rice, onions and other vegetables. It was my first sampling of the dish, and I liked it very much.

Mamadou asked if we were enjoying our meal. After my enthusiastic reply in my halting French, Mamadou countered with, "My wife makes a much better thieboudienne than this". He then said that he would invite us to his house sometime in the near future in order to prove his statement. Confident that this was merely a good ploy to augment the normal 5% tip, we gave him our number, tipped him an outrageous 10%, and left well satisfied with our dining experience.

One month later I receive a phone call. The conversation went something like this (in French):

Me: Hello

Mamadou: How's it going?

Me: Fine. Who's this?

Mamadou: Mamadou

Me: Mamadou?

Mamadou: From Lagon I.

Me: Oh ... Mamadou ... It's good to hear from you.

I later learned that no Senegalese identifies themselves immediately when they call you. They must go through a prolonged ritual which includes asking after your health, that of your wife, the rest of your family, extending on to your goat, your chickens, etc. Well ... maybe I do exaggerate a trifle, but not much.

Suffice to say that Mamadou called to invite us over for dinner. Unfortunately our travel scheduled delayed the dinner for over a month. Mamadou was persistent, and we finally made a firm date. I asked for directions, but Mamadou insisted in coming to our house to guide us to his home, which is over on the other side of Dakar.

During our conversation I discovered that Mamadou and his wife, Satou, have two boys ages 3 and 9 months. Clever Anzie had prepared for just such an occasion before leaving the U.S. She laid away a supply of various children's toys. For the boys we wrapped up stuffed animals.

Mamadou arrived by taxi along with his three-year-old son. Thank Allah that he recognized us, because I never would have recognized him after our single meeting. But then again we were the only toubabs within 1/2 mile! We all drove over to his house in our car. In order to get to his place we were forced to leave the paved road and take a series of turns down narrow sand alleys.

We entered the house - modest but well kept - and we remembered to remove our shoes before entering the carpeted parlor. Mamadou introduced us to his lovely wife, Satou, who was dressed in a gorgeous peach-colored satin damask bou-bou complete with matching turban. These Senegalese women really know how to dress!

We sit down to traditional refreshments which include *bissap*, made from red sorrel leaves, *gingembre*, made from ground ginger root, and *bouye*, made from the fruit of the baobab tree. We expressed our surprise at just how much we liked the gingembre and the bouye.

The two boys joined us. Like all boys their age they were very shy, but polite. When they opened their gifts the looks on their faces made it all worthwhile.

Then, as it happened in Mauritania, we are introduced to members of the extended family - Mamadou's mother, sisters, a brother, an aunt, cousins, nieces and nephews were all visiting from their village. West African families are like that. It's a kind of collective mentality. Many family members live under the same roof. With 48% unemployment only a few of the city-dwelling family members earn a steady income. This income is shared among the family members, not according to ability or effort, but according to need.

We then got to know each other. Mamadou Kane is a tall, charming, intelligent 35-year-old who has spent most of his life in the restaurant business. His brother is the head chef at Lagon I. A Pule, he comes from a town of 3000 located on the Senegal River over 400 miles northeast of Dakar, on the Mauritanian border. He spoke of their annual summer festival that occurs in mid-August as a great, fun experience. He returns every year to participate.

He counts several *marabouts* in his ancestry. A *marabout* is the religious leader of a Muslim brotherhood, of which there are several. Marabouts in Senegal wield quite a bit

of political power. Mamadou mentioned a book that was written by a Kane, "An Ambiguous Adventure". It tells the story of a young boy's life, the suffering he endures during his years in Koranic school, his years of study in Paris, where he is sent to learn the ways of the French conquerors of West Africa. It's not light reading, by any means. However, it does give insight into the Islamic upbringing.

I asked Mamadou if his experience in Koranic school included the severe corporal punishment and deprivation which was detailed in the book. He affirmed it and opined that the treatment is inordinately harsh.

Mamadou then showed us a photo album of a recent baptism party for their youngest. It contains many pictures of Satou in a variety of beautiful bou-bous. Theirs is definitely a love match. They met at a dance and were married four months later. Theirs is a mixed marriage, two different tribes - Sere and Puel - which is somewhat unusual. We have met mixed marriage couples whose families have disavowed them. Not so, in this case, according to both Mamadou and Satou.

Satou brought in the main course, thieboudienne, on a large platter that she placed on the floor mat. As we took our places I noted with relief that we were to eat with forks and spoons. Satou spent most of the meal passing choice chunks of the grilled fish to our side of the platter. It was indeed the best thieboudienne I have tasted to date, though I'm by no means an expert. Anne was in complete agreement. The secret is in the sauce. I could taste onion, lemon, bouillon (Senegalese use bouillon cubes in every dish) and some other spices that gave it a pleasant "zing".

As usual I ate too much but did make room for the dessert of fresh fruit - sliced mango, pineapple and melon.

Then came the big surprise -- gifts!! Satou presented us with beautifully wrapped presents. Anne's was a bright yellow silk lacy, very revealing, panya (like a sarong) complete with beads strung on elastic which are used to secure the panya. Satou explained with much laughter this type of panya is normally worn on the wedding night. It is really quite beautiful.

I opened my present to find a handsome long-sleeved sport shirt with an African design done in subtle hues of red, black and tan. It was my size exactly! Anne and I were completely taken aback by this outpouring of generosity. Anne finally asked the question that was on both of our minds: "What made you decide to invite us to this wonderful evening?" Mamadou responded that it was because of our openness and what he described as our empathy, that he thought Satou and he would enjoy getting to know us better. We replied that we felt deeply honored. He countered that the honor was his family's.

As we said our goodbyes Satou presented us with two liter-sized water bottles - one of gingembre, the other of bouye. Mamadou invited me to accompany him to his village for the August festival. I might just take him up on that.

On the way home we discussed the overwhelming hospitality we had just experienced, especially the gifts. Were they a quick response to our gifts to the boys? If so, how could Satou have prepared them so quickly? She was with us for most of the evening. We decided to ask some of our Senegalese acquaintances.

The answer we received was "Teranga". The Senegalese pride themselves in their hospitality. One discovers often that the less a family has the more they will share with you, proportionately. Is it normal to receive gifts along with a meal? No. It's not normal, but it's not that unusual either. The consensus is that the gifts were prepared in advance. We look forward to our chance to reciprocate Satou and Mamadou's teranga.

Teranga.-- just one more reason why we love it here in Senegal.

A la prochaine, Chuck