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Dakar and old friends

Welcome to another page in the journal of an Innocent Abroad. Starting my third week in Dakar. Meeting all sorts of people, each with an amazing story to tell.

Debbie Fredo stayed at our house most of last week. Debbie comes from my hometown - Elmira, NY - the Hub of the Universe. She has lived in Africa for most of her adult life. For the last seven years she has lived in a small town in Mali, the country just east of Senegal. She founded an elementary school together with a Malian partner, which has become so successful that it is becoming a model for introducing new teaching methods in the school system of Mali.

One evening Debby showed up for dinner with her old friend, Fatu, a Senegalese woman who lives just outside Dakar. Fatu is an attractive woman, probably in her 50's, whom I met at our house in Newburyport back in 1995. Had she predicted back then that we would meet again in Dakar, I would have declared her a loony.

Anyway, Fatu worked as a cleaning lady for Sylvia Bah. Debbie was a student of Sylvia's at Trinity College in Washington way back when. Are you still with me? All of these characters have fascinating stories to tell. This time I want to tell you Sylvia's.

Sylvia majored in French Literature in college. In her senior year she had to pick a subject for her thesis. Her advisor suggested she explore the subject of "negritude". An African American, Sylvia was interested. Her advisor recommended three authors who had explored the subject. One of the authors was Leopold Senghor, first president of the newly independent country of Senegal. Senegal was a French colony up until 1960.

Sylvia became fascinated with the writings of Senghor who, by the way, became the first person not from France to be elected to the Academie Francaise. She had just completed her thesis when her advisor told her that President Senghor was in Washington on a state visit, was looking for an interpreter, and would she be interested. She ended up meeting her idol at a state reception. "I was nervous as hell! I showed up at the place without an invitation, talked my way in the door. I found an acquaintance who introduced me to Mr. Senghor."

During that evening she was finally able to explain to Senghor about her thesis. He asked to read it. She gave him a copy. He read it one evening. The next day he asked her if she would be interested in teaching in Senegal. The first year she taught at a high school. After that she moved to the French Literature Department at the University of Dakar where she ended up teaching for 30 years.

She became very close to the Senghor family. "Before I got here I didn't realize what a big deal Senghor was." Senghor died a short while ago in his 90's. His memory is very much revered. The airport and the football stadium are named after him.

Sylvia married a government official, and has one son, Bijan. Bijan is married and is an engineer (degrees from MIT and Stanford). He works for one of the successful dotcom companies in Silicon Valley.

Sylvia is retiring and moving back to Washington to live with her father, age 93. She has a problem letting go of Senegal. Consequently she doesn't want to sell her furniture. She may just want to move back some day. So, we represent a perfect solution. We need furniture. The deal is that if, at the end of our tour, she has decided to stay in the U.S, we will move her furniture back to the States for her. She can then pay to move it from Newburyport, which is a damn sight cheaper than from Dakar. Conversely, if she decides to move back here, we give back the furniture that we borrowed. A good ol' "Win-Win".

Sylvia has given us a great perspective on life here in Dakar, especially for us "Toubabs". A toubab is the local term for "foreigner" Heretofore I thought it meant "white person". Not so, according to Sylvia. Even she, a black American, is considered a toubab. Black American Peace Corps Volunteers often have a hard time. They come here expecting to blend in and see immediate acceptance from their African brethren. Instead, the West Africans look at them and see dollar signs. According to Sylvia, some of these young people quickly become frustrated and leave.