

April 18, 2004

Journey to Touba

Well, it's been a while since our last journal. Things are great here. Anzie just returned from four weeks on the road - Cape Verde, Burkina Faso and Malawi. I just finished teaching my Marketing Course at Suffolk U.-- just putting the final grades together. It turned out well. Good bunch of students. It was a lot of work putting a course together for the first time. I look forward to teaching it again; it'll be much easier. Weather is still fine. Windy, 70 degrees. Anzie says she's freezing!

Quiz: ten points if you can tell me in what countries the following stops on Anzie's tour are located: Lelongwe, Ouagadougou, Praia

Rokhaya Diop and Aminata Diop aren't related; yet they have two connections. They are strongly religious Muslims and members of the Mouride brotherhood. Secondly, they were both students of mine in the advanced evening English class at Suffolk University - Dakar. They're the surviving members of my group of students that I named "Charley's Angels". Rokhaya is a tall, handsome, slender woman of 42 who is always well dressed. In typical Muslim fashion she always covers her head with a shawl. She works in the government's Dept. of Commerce where she promotes the export of Senegalese products. In contrast, Aminata is a buxom, pretty 27-year old who works for a Canadian-based NGO that promotes aid programs in and around West Africa.

During our class we chose for topics of discussion pretty much everything, including sex, politics and religion. In every good class the teacher learns from his/her students. From the Diops I learned about the Mouride Islamic brotherhood and its religious center - Touba. Their conversations about Touba intrigued me enough to inquire as to whether outsiders such as myself and Anzie would be welcome there. Both women replied in the emphatic affirmative, saying they would be happy to escort us. I replied, "Maybe someday." Then at our graduation dinner that took place at our house, they repeated the invitation. This time I replied, "I'll call you."

Well, I did, and they did, and Anzie and I picked them both up early one Saturday morning for the three-hour trip to the town of Touba. On the way, they gave us a little history lesson of Touba. The town was founded in 1907 as the center of the Mouride brotherhood, which is one of four major brotherhoods found in Senegal. The others are Tijane ... Wait a minute! You don't want to know all these details. You'd rather know about the sexual perversions we discovered in Touba.

To continue ...the Mouride brotherhood was begun by a charismatic evangelist named Amadou Bamba - Senegal's most famous and influential marabout. He was a member of the wealthy, land-owning Mbacke clan, which helped to

enhance his status. His take on Islam was based upon physical labor (ideally working on his own groundnut plantations) as a path to spiritual salvation. He had a love-hate relationship with the French government. His development of the groundnut trade jibed nicely with the French desire to improve their territory's economic output. However, because of Bamba's anti-colonial stance and power-base, he was sent into exile - first to Gabon, then to Mauritania. Wherever he went, he increased the membership of the Mourides.

After 20 years Bamba returned to Senegal in 1907. Despite his continued anti-colonial rhetoric he became a secret ally of the French. They both had much to gain by keeping the peasants working in the groundnut fields.

Even today Bamba remains an iconic figure. And the convenient alliance between the brotherhoods and the government is still a major feature of modern Senegalese politics. (p.302, The Gambia and Senegal, Lonely Planet, 1999.)

During our trip Aminata confided that she is the great granddaughter of Bamba, from her mother's side, and that she has several religious leaders in her family. We were passing through the countryside when she pointed out a rather large orchard of mango trees. She owns this tract of land through inheritance.

We passed through Diourbel, known as the home of Bamba. He was placed under house arrest here and prohibited from setting foot in Touba, 50 kms. away. The Bamba family still resides here. We passed by the town's main mosque, which, to Rokhaya's taste is smaller, neater and more aesthetically pleasing than the great mosque in Touba.

We arrived in Touba to find many of the roads under construction. We could see the Grand Mosque from a long distance, but we couldn't drive close to it. We finally settled for a parking spot in a family's courtyard, which was a good eight city blocks from the mosque. We walked the rest of the way.

By the way, Anzie and I were dressed appropriately for the occasion: she in boubou, shawl and sandals; me in boubou and sandals. The sandals come in handy, since one has to remove one's footwear before entering any religious edifice. I also enjoy the fact that I'm getting quite a few opportunities to wear my boubou.

We arrived at the Grand Mosque complex, and quite a complex it is. Across the street from the mosque is a compound consisting of meeting rooms and sleeping quarters for religious pilgrims. We were escorted to the quarters reserved for VIP's (Very Important Pilgrims). These were definitely five star accommodations: lots of mirrors, gilt, French provincial furniture, queen-sized four-poster beds and multi-colored marble. However, they were a trifle grungy. The wall-to-wall carpeting was speckled with stains, either food or candlewax, we couldn't be sure.

We again donned our sandals, and walked across the street to the Mosque. Actually we walked for about fifteen minutes around the Mosque to a side entrance. Before we entered the Mosque itself, we again removed our sandals. As soon as we entered we were struck with the immensity of the structure. The inside was very open, with 313 (count 'em) pillars holding up the immense roof. The outside of the mosque is covered with pink marble from Portugal and white marble from Italy(Carrara). Every mosque has a tower. This one rose 10 stories.

It took 15 years to build the Mosque, from 1948 to 1963. Looks as if they spared no expense. The interior is very reminiscent of The Alhambra in Spain. The pillars, walls and ceiling are decorated in the same motifs, except these are freshly painted in green, gold and white. All of the designs are either floral or geometric. No representations of either human or animal are found.

Rokhaya was leading us to the "tomb room" that housed the remains of Bamba when we were stopped by a guard. Apparently only the faithful are allowed to visit the tomb. Instead, Rokhaya guided us around the exterior of the mosque, just to give us an idea of the size. We only walked half way round and my bare feet on the marble were pretty sore.

As I write this on the weekend of April10-11, the Mourides are celebrating the "Grand Magal". This commemorates Bamba's return to Touba in 1907 after 20 years of exile. At this time over a half million Mourides make a pilgrimage to Touba from all over Senegal and Gambia. The only pilgrimage that is larger is the Haj to Mecca. A guide told us that they pack in upwards of 300,000 pilgrims into the Mosque at this time -- just to give you some feeling for the grandeur of the place.

We left the mosque and went across a narrow road to the house of the Grand Caliph, the chief of all the Mourides. The house was a modest one-story ranch design. The sandy front yard was filled with probably 200 faithful who were also awaiting an audience. I was really looking forward to having an audience with him; however such was not to be the case. Saturday is not the day to seek an audience unless you show up very early.

A member of the Mbacke clan, the Grand Caliph is in his early nineties. When he dies, his replacement will be one of his sons, who are all currently marabouts, each with his own group of followers. Rokhaya explained that all is not well in the Mbake clan. The Grand Caliph doesn't trust any of his sons. Rather, his closest confidant is a "cheikh" - one rank below a marabout - who is an outsider, not a member of the clan. Rokhaya considers this cheikh as her religious leader, and fears that the sons of the Grand Caliph will conspire against him. Sounds like the making of a good novel, right?

As we left there, Aminata suggested that we go over to her nearby village and have lunch at her uncle's house. Sounded like a plan to us. Of course we had visions of sharing a nice *thieboudjem* sitting around a community bowl on the floor of a modest bungalow. We drove about a half-hour east of Touba to a village of not more than 500 inhabitants. As we entered the village a man met us with a cell phone. Without a word he got into the car and guided us to the uncle's house.

Did I say "house"? On the outskirts of the village, our guide directed us to pull up to a gate in an expansive white concrete wall. He made a call on his phone, and the gate opened. Another 25 yards was another wall with another gate. Another call and our car entered a large, sandy courtyard, complete with central fountain, which confronted a palace. This palace resembled a somewhat smaller version of Versailles! The wall of the house had to be 240 ft. long. We were ushered into the house by three rather officious men in boubous. They conveyed the demeanor of security guards, but turned out to be relatives.

We entered the palace up wide marble steps and through huge wooden doors, which opened onto a long hall, which we entered on the perpendicular. The hall went the length of the house. It was decorated like the waiting room of Ali Baba's dentist's office. Lots of overstuffed chairs and couches jammed up against the walls. On the walls were plug-in "paintings" that I used to see for sale in Times Square: Niagara Falls with revolving lights simulating water flowing, a city skyline at night complete with building lights twinkling.

Aminata suggested that we clean up and rest a bit before lunch. We were ushered though two sitting rooms the size of grand hotel lobbies. The first I would label "the Gold Room": flocked wallpaper, crystal and gold chandeliers, Baroque/Rococo ornate furniture all done in gilt. The second I would call "the Carousel Room". The chairs and tables had carousel horses as a motif: all the same color, ivory with black spots ala Appaloosa with golden reins, saddles and hooves. Two of these horses supported the glass top of a coffee table, for instance.

You think I'm making this up? Honest to God, it was like entering the set of a schlock Hollywood version of "1001 Arabian Nights"

We exited the second "sitting room" onto a hall that replicated the entrance hall, except much narrower. A series of bedroom suites were situated off this hall. Aminata and Rokhaya entered one, while we were escorted further down the hall to another. We noted that we passed two more large sitting rooms. Although we didn't have the time to determine the motif of each, let's just say that they were way "over the top".

Our suite was done in French Provincial: crème and gold, plush crème wall-to-wall carpeting, king-size bed with sound/radio system built into the shelving

behind the bed. It didn't work. A separate dressing room gave off to a large marbled bathroom. We looked out the window onto huge gardens: lots of green hedges, grass, flowers and fountains. What made it so amazing is that we were surrounded by desert. Two good-sized houses flanked the opposite side of the gardens -- like the Petit and Grand Trianon. The resemblance to Versailles was amazing. We finally surmised that our building was used only for "representational" purposes. That's Embassyese for hospitality. This is where they gave the parties. The other two houses were where they lived.

After cleaning up we lay down for a bit. A knock on the door, and a guard offered us a tray with glasses and a large bottle of water. We laid back and waited for our call to lunch.

Both of us slept, and woke an hour later. It was now 3:00 PM, and we had to start back soon in order to avoid driving at night. I opened the door to the hall intending to walk down to Aminata's room to see what was up. I was immediately confronted by two of the guards. I explained my purpose, and they escorted me to Aminata's suite. I expressed my concern to Aminata, who replied that she would find out. I was escorted back to our suite to wait.

Fifteen minutes later Aminata arrived at the door with apologies. She explained that her uncle was off on business and was expected to arrive shortly, but that the help understood that we were to stay for dinner and the night. I explained that this was impossible, that we already had a prior dinner engagement, which was true.

So, we bid a fond adieu amid profuse apologies from Aminata, and headed home. Aminata decided to stay overnight. She believed that it would be disrespectful for her to leave without seeing her uncle. Praise be to Allah that we had thought to pack Power Bars and water so we weren't starving on the return trip. As we entered Dakar my cell phone rang. It was Aminata checking to see if we were OK. We dropped Rokhaya off at her home; went in for a minute to meet her children; then made it the rest of the way home.

It had been a tough trip. We were pooped by the time we reached home, but satisfied that we had experienced another worthwhile adventure in my Travels with Anzie.

A la prochaine, Chuck