

August 20, 2003

A Celebration in the Fouta

Last week we traveled to the land of the Fouta.

Remember Mamadou Kane and his wife, Satou? He works at the Lagon Restaurant and invited us over to their house for a wonderful dinner - an evening that exemplified "Teranga", the Senegalese word for welcome/hospitality?

Mamadou invited us to travel to his home village for a great festival. We even received a special invitation from the president of their village society here in Dakar. Way back in 1930 the men who had immigrated to Dakar from the village of Mbolo Birane in order to find work founded a social club. The purpose was to provide these emigrés with a place to socialize. They also assisted new emigrés to get settled and to find work. Each member paid monthly dues, which are now \$1.75. As the dues accumulated they were used to fund various projects in the village, e.g., water system, infirmary, schoolrooms, etc. They even built a three-story office building in downtown Dakar. It houses their office and meeting hall. They rent out a good portion, so it is self-sustaining. Their organization is quite impressive, considering the population of Mbolo Birane stands at around 4000.

When we arrived at the Kane household to start the journey, we really didn't know what to expect. We had heard that it would be hot, so we brought six two-liter bottles of water. We also brought bedsheets, pillows, towels, toilet paper and an umbrella ("Umbrella? Hon, it's not going to rain. It's the desert out there!"). The Kanes brought suitcases, boxes, bags, a gas stove. By the time we finished squeezing everything and everybody into the car, including their two little boys - Pape and Ibrahim - we had very little room to move.

The 400-mile trip took nine hours. The last three hours were the toughest, because the road was filled with potholes ("You could house a family of five in that one!"). It was like maneuvering through a minefield.

The land of the Fouta comprises the Northeast portion of Senegal, bounded on the North by the Senegal River, which separates Senegal from Mauritania and Mali. We noticed many Mauritians in the area, distinctive in their long, flowing bou-bous and turbans. Mamadou explained that many were displaced during the "evenements" of 1989-90, when both Senegal and Mauritania were ejecting each other from their countries.

The Fouta region is inhabited primarily by the Peul people. The Peul, a.k.a. Fula, Fulani and Tukolor, range throughout West Africa. Their language is Pulaar. They are a tall, lightly built people who look you straight in the eye and are quick to smile. They are also strong on "teranga", as you will see.

When we arrived in Mbolo Birane, we were met by a welcoming committee consisting of men dressed in bou-bous. We didn't even have time to pee before we were ushered to a patio, and the entertainment began. A group of about eight women, led by a "griot", began a song. The griot sang the verses. The chorus sang the refrain. Mamadou explained that it was a song of welcome.

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that everyone was looking at you, that you must be ten feet tall and green? We felt that way, only we weren't green. We were white, the only toubabs in the place. The children acted as if we were the very first white people they had ever seen. They crowded in on us wherever we sat, to the point that finally an adult scolded them to move back. The children were very respectful. When Chuck tried out his Pulaar salutation, "Salaamelekum" and shook a girl's hand, he had to repeat the process with 15 other children. Anne whispered, "Make sure you wash your hands soon."

We then moved over to the family compound, which consisted of a two-room house fronted by a raised cement terrace, a couple of small outbuildings for the animals and, of course, the outhouse. The toilets are all the Turkish, or squat type. Chuck's knees aren't quite as springy as in yesteryear. If he hunkered down like you're supposed to, he'd have to call for help to get up. We both noted that even older men seemed to possess supple limbs. They could hunker with the best of them. We theorized about the difference between their chairless society and the chair society that we're used to. In the chairless society everyone either squats or assumes a cross-legged, semi-lotus position. Whereas, we are used to sitting on chairs, benches and toilets. This along with their five-times-a-day "Muslim aerobics", which they perform during prayers, keeps them more supple longer than us sitters.

Mamadou explained that the compound was built by his uncle, who he calls "father", about ten years ago. It was the first house built outside the village walls. We could see that many more villagers had since followed his example. He went on to explain that the village was founded in the year 1006, and that the village chief had always been a Kane since the beginning. Another uncle is the current chief.

We sat on the edge of the terrace and were introduced to many people of the village. A lot of them were Kanes. We began to relax as we laid on a mattress on the terrace, gazing up at a billion stars. We saw several shooting stars and at least two satellites. Chuck sighed with relief as he commented, "Thank God that trip's over. I don't have to get behind the wheel again 'til Monday!"

Then along came the griots again with their chorus. First came the women that sang for us before. A griot who looked a lot like a young Pearl Bailey had a strong, wonderful voice. Griots constitute a special class in the society. As a caste they rank pretty low, just above slaves. More about castes later. Griots are born, not made. One can become a griot only if one is born into a family of

griots. Perhaps the most famous griot in Senegal is Youssef N'dor. The griots are paid for their performances in the form of tips.

Mamadou tipped the griot. Then a man whom Mamadou introduced as the main griot for the Kane clan began to sing. Griots sing about the heritage and accomplishments of a family. Their tips depend to a large degree on the magnanimity and "floweriness" of their praises. Mamadou nudged me, " He's singing about you - Kennedy". So I tipped him. This man was a vision of ugliness. He had a pushed-in nose and a huge cleft palate, on either side of which his teeth stuck out like wings. In spite of his appearance he was one beautiful guy. He possessed a wonderful singing voice, and just radiated optimism every time we saw him, which was often.

That night we slept outside under the stars, until 3:00 AM when the wind began to blow. With it came the sand. We finally were forced inside the exceedingly hot house. We tried to sleep as best we could, coated as we were in a sheen of sweat.

Anne woke up first and took the first of our many "bucket baths" in our tiny enclosed courtyard out back. Chuck woke up in a pool of perspiration, gazed up at the ceiling, and had a profound thought: " Hey, so I didn't get much sleep. It's only for four days. I can handle it. Just imagine if I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, and this was the first night of a two-year stint." The Peace Corps has a term for this experience: "demystification". On the fourth day of training the volunteers are sent out to their prospective village for a couple of days in order to give them a reality check. Usually a few volunteers choose to "E.T" or Early Terminate after this experience. We heard of one instance up in Mauritania where a volunteer commented in dismay." Gee, I didn't know there was so much sand here." E.T! Phone home, and tell them you're coming!

The Festival, called "72 Hours" began the next day, Friday. This first day was a celebration of Islam. A famous Marabout was invited, and there were religious ceremonies and seminars. The Fouta is very conservative and religious, and this day was planned in order to appease the conservative faction in the village.

The next day began pleasantly with breakfast served in our quarters by Satou and Mamadou. They had brought from Dakar sliced whole wheat bread that they toasted with marmalade. This and the coffee were served on plates, cups and glasses that they also brought all the way from Dakar in order to make us feel comfortable. What nice people! Satou was dressed in another gorgeous bou-bou, looking well-rested and beautiful as if she had spent the night in an air-conditioned hotel, instead of three hours of fitful sleep with two young ones in a sweat box.

An hour later the day turned ugly. Satou informed us with tears in her eyes that a young boy had been hit by a car on the highway and killed. We envisioned a

very sad funeral that would certainly cast a pall on the celebration. An hour later Mamudou, Mamadou's brother, approached me to ask if I would be willing to drive this young boy, the accident victim, to the hospital. I agreed without a second thought, elated with the fact that the boy was still alive. I drove the car to the Dispensary where was loaded the boy, complete with IV, his uncle, his mother and the Doctor. A crowd of weeping and wailing people surrounded the car as they left.

The journey took two hours. I navigated through a streambed past a bridge that was destroyed in the rains, down a highway replete with humongous potholes. Occasionally my three hours of sleep caught up with me, and I lost my concentration. Not for long, though. As soon as I hit one of those devastating potholes, I was wide awake and wondering whether a change of underwear was in order.

We arrived at the hospital and were directed to drive right into the atrium. There the orderlies extricated the young boy, Ibrahim, from our back seat and on to a stretcher. It was an agonizing 2 1/2 hour wait before the prognosis came through: broken arm, head laceration, possible concussion. Nothing really serious; however an overnight stay was recommended. A car arrived from the village, containing Ibrahim's father. His was a familiar face. We had met the night before. I had the opportunity to give the father the good news that it was nothing serious. The father's grateful hug was all the compensation I needed.

The uncle and the mother elected to stay overnight. So it was just myself and the doctor on the return trip, which only took 1 1/2 hours. By this time I knew the location of practically every pothole.

That evening who shows up but Fatou McPhee, our dear friend from Dakar. She had threatened to join us, because Mbolo Birane is only five miles from the village of her grandfather, a place she had never visited. At about 6 PM we get a cell phone call from her asking for directions. Mamadou complies. Then Fatou says they are running out of gas, and her cellphone battery is just about kaput. Mamadou estimates that they should arrive within 1 1/2 hours. At about 7:30 we walk out to the road with a flashlight to flag her down. The appointed hour comes and goes. At 8:30 we were really worried that she and her driver are stalled on the road someplace. I was not looking forward to getting behind the wheel again that day. Finally, at 9:00 Mamadou and I drove off to search for the missing party. We went less than ten miles before I spotted Fatou's white Mercedes wagon heading in the opposite direction. We wheeled around and caught up with them in the next town. Fatou, having spent 11 hours on the road, was exhausted. We guided her back to our "house", had a delightful dinner, and we all went to bed, under the stars.

We missed the night's entertainment, which was provided by Mamadou's good friend, Amadou. Amadou was showing a DVD movie on a building wall using a

computerized projector. Amazingly it was the first time many of the villagers had ever seen a movie.

Our sleep was interrupted about 2:00 AM by a tremendous cloudburst. We dragged our mattresses inside and tried to sleep. The wind howled. The thunder crackled. The lightning was continuous. Anzie kept asking if we were safe. I assured her that our foam rubber mattress would insulate us from any lightning strikes. Yeah, right! The rains pummeled the metal roof for over four hours. We lay there, hands tightly clasped for most of the night.

Will Chuck and Anne make it through the night? What happened during the opening ceremonies? Did Fatou find her family? Are Chuck's days as an ambulance driver over? What's this about slaves? Running out of water? A plague of huge insects?

23rd – two days later

We had a few leaks in our room, but we never got wet. Fatou was another story. She had leaks onto her mattress. So she moved the mattress. Within a short time another leak developed, and she was forced to move again. This went on all night. One good thing: the rain cooled things down to an almost comfortable level.

Anne arose at 9:00 and toured the village with Satou. She witnessed much flooding and erosion. Mamadou awakened Chuck at about 10:30 bearing breakfast and a bou-bou. It was time for the opening ceremony. Chuck donned the silken, pea green bou-bou, which consists of pajama pants and a robe. He also slid into these white, pointy-toed slippers that all the men wear. Anne wore one of her beautiful collection of bou-bous. Yes, we will send pictures.

Although it was a short walk, Mamadou insisted that we drive in order to arrive in style. On our way we passed a bevy of women dressed in their best bou-bous who were walking to the ceremony. Suddenly a breeze arose, causing the bou-bous to billow so that they looked like a bunch of multi-colored spinnakers sailing before the wind. Beautiful!

Mamadou ushered us to the VIP tent and introduced us to the Minister of Civil Affairs and his two regional deputies, as well as several other dignitaries. Since the introductions were done in Pulaar, we didn't find out until after the fact that Anne was introduced as the Peace Corps Country Director. We made certain that the facts were straightened out before any false publicity was sent out. Chuck was simply introduced as "Kennedy, from Boston". People were left to draw their own conclusions. Hey, we understood that one of the reasons Mamadou invited us in the first place was to bring some honor to himself.

Following the introductions we were ushered to our seats, right next to the dignitaries. We were located right on the edge of the tent roof, so we were in the shade, for the first hour. For the next four hours the sun roasted us. The ceremony included many, many speeches. The Minister gave a wonderful speech in three languages: French, Pulaar and Wolof - all without notes. He spoke of his pride in being a Peul, the proud history and traditions of the Peul people, the tremendous accomplishments of the people of Mbolo Birane. He was very well received, and justly so.

Next came the entertainment. During the next two days and nights each caste presented entertainment. From what we learned from Mamadou, these are the castes in hierarchical order:

- Farmers (they own land)
- Herders
- Woodsmen (includes carpenters, cabinet makers)
- Fishermen
- Artisans - Weavers
- Metalworkers
- Leathercrafters
- Griots
- Slaves

Do they really have slaves? Only in a manner of speaking. Slaves today are not really owned by a family. They work for a family of their own free will. The family provides for them. Slaves are also given a piece of land on which they grow crops. They split the harvest with their "provider" family, much as sharecroppers did in the U.S.

The herders gave a presentation which included singing, dancing and drumming. All at once a shepherd ran across the open area followed by twenty goats that appeared to be all on the same tether. He and the goats disappeared through the crowd. Immediately another shepherd appeared with another herd. We realized by now that the goats were not on a tether, that they were simply well trained to follow the shepherd. And follow him they did - in a circle, in a figure-eight. These shepherds performed this "enter stage right, exit stage left" bit for 20 minutes, much to the pleasure of all. One shepherd brought his herd to an abrupt stop in front of the Minister and his deputies. He shook hands with all, ran his troupe through a couple more arabesques, and exited stage left. From the last herd of performers the herders selected a goat for that night's banquet.

After the ceremony we shook more hands, then beat a hasty retreat to the bathroom and to our house. We changed into more comfortable clothes and relaxed before dinner.

We met up with Fatou, who described her interesting day. She drove over to the village in question, and asked if a family with her grandfather's last name still lived there. She received an affirmative answer along with directions. She introduced herself at the house, was invited in, and began to ask questions. She asked if anyone had heard of her father's name. An old man replied, "I had a brother by that name. He had a daughter named Fatou." Lo and behold, she had found her uncle. Tears and embraces followed this news. Fatou felt that her long, arduous journey was worthwhile.

The evening's festivities began around 11:00 with a skit about AIDS that was put on by the Weavers' youth group.. This was a follow-up to a conference on AIDS that was held earlier. Oh yes, they had something for everyone, including seminars on the prevention of AIDS and malaria (known here as "paludism"). We had to dress up in our bou-bous again. After the skit came a Battle of the Griots. At least four griots sang one after another in "rap" fashion. People came out of the crowd to tip the singers. We left around 1:30 AM, and the singers were just getting warmed up.

The huge rains had caused a veritable plague of insects. Three-inch long scarab beetles and cockroach-like bugs were everywhere. They flew around the stagelights looking like birds. When we first arrived at the festivities we made the mistake of standing too close to one of the lights. Within a minute we were all slapping and dancing around like a bunch of Indians, fighting off the bug attack. We quickly moved to a much less well-lighted area. Then we watched as a group of latecomers discovered these great seats that we had abandoned. We had more fun watching their antics than we did watching the onstage goings-on.

The next day Satou sent us out on a mission to find fish for the evening meal. This plan was fine with us. We were getting pretty sick of goat. Mamadou, Anne, myself and Mamadou's uncle, the village chief, piled into the car, along with three large jerry cans for water. The village water system shut down for some mysterious reason. It was a crisis, since there were 2000 more people than normal in the village. Here we had floods going on, but the solar-operated water system wasn't working. So everyone's job that day was to find water. "Water, water everywhere"

We headed east stopping at every village market. All we found were little panfish. Everyone blamed the rains for the lack of fish. We had several chances to see the Senegal River. Normally 100-200 yards wide, it was many times that. After 25 miles and four village markets we decided that the next one would be the last. Sure enough we found a lady selling a large capitaine, a river perch that often goes more than a yard long. It was expensive, but we bought enough for ten people.

We also filled our water cans at the village well. I found a tennis ball in the trunk and began a game of catch with about ten boys. One tall kid was an excellent

athlete. I told him he could do well playing basketball. The boy replied that he already did.

Upon our return we discovered that the government had sent a water truck from which the villagers were filling every available container. In late afternoon I was called upon again to serve as ambulance driver. A sick woman, one of Mamadou's aunts, needed a ride back to her village, which was only four kilometers away. Mamadou and I installed the lady and her two friends in the back seat, and we started off. Turns out that her village is not on the main road. It is accessible only by donkey path over the sand hills. Our little Nissan Sentra was a workhorse. We often were forced to leave the donkey path because of the rain's erosive effects. No problem for our baby. The rolling sand hills were covered in green, thanks to the rains. It actually looked like it would make a pretty good golf course. I really couldn't believe that there could be a village out there, until we rolled over a sand hill. We saw a two-mosque village in the distance. Most villages have only one mosque. The ladies directed us to the house. We helped our patient out from the back seat. She immediately laid out on her front terrace, covered herself with a shawl and went to sleep. Meantime Mamadou introduced me to some village elders. He knew everybody! I practiced my extended salutation, and waited for Mamadou to stop talking so we could leave. Our return trip was uneventful, albeit nerve-wracking.

Before dinner we introduced Mamadou and his son, Papi, to Frisbie. I remember introducing French kids to Frisbie when I was an Experimenter in Bordeaux back in 1960. I figured that everybody in the world knew about Frisbie by now. Wrong!

That evening we had guests for dinner - Amadou and his French wife, Pascal. Amadou and Mamadou grew up together. Amadou won a scholarship to study in France, and he stayed. They live in Toulouse, but they return to the village every other summer for vacation. Mamadou pointed out many houses that were owned by emigrés, who lived throughout the world. His uncle's next door neighbor had worked in the U.S. for many years. His wife lived in the village, while he returned to visit every 2-3 years. Another impressive structure - three stories with spaces for seven boutiques on the ground floor - was owned by an emigré who worked in France. He was known to have two wives, one in the village, the other in France. Yes, polygamy is quite common in Peul society.

The village association had printed up a nice folder for the festival. It described the village history and accomplishments. One of the achievements listed was, "Two classrooms built with the help of the Peace Corps". We assumed that Mamadou had it included to impress us. It did. We asked him about it. Both Mamadou and Amadou were 7 at the time when the Peace Corps volunteer, who went by the name of "Birane" - same as the village - helped to build the classrooms. They remember that he stayed in the house of the village chief. They remember when he fell ill, and that he got better. They remember that they

liked Birane. I'm sure that if "Birane" heard this, he'd be pleased with the mark he made.

That evening we all attended the festivities, which included a skit by the Fishermen about catching a large capitaine. Lots of laughter. Then came the fast, high-stepping, foot-stomping dances by the Woodsmen, the Herdsmen and the Slaves, in that order. We can just remember great costumes, singing, unbounded energy.

At about 1:30 we bid everyone goodnight and retired.

We awoke the next morning, Monday, at 7:00. We packed, bid everyone a fond farewell (Mamadou, Satou and the kids decided to stay another week) and many, many thank-yous. We were on the road by 8:00.

Our first stop was in Djoum, where I had brought the young Ibrahim, the accident victim. We visited a Peace Corps transit House. This is where volunteers in an outlying district (read "boonies") gather for medical treatment, meetings and de-stressing. They had a real sitdown toilet there! I was ecstatic. I sat there for about 20 minutes reveling in my return to civilization. My bowels also joined in the reveling. Anne had a good meeting with the Volunteer Leader , Whitney. The place was well organized and well-kept.

Next stop was Podor, supposedly named after a contraction of the French, "pot d'or", meaning "pot of gold". At one time it was home to many goldsmiths. Currently most of the good jewelers reside across the river in Mauritania. It was also a key slaving port on the Senegal River. We spotted a red monkey, about the size of a medium-sized dog, crossing the road. We had no luck with our pre-arranged meeting with the local PCV. She couldn't be found. However, we did buy three large decorated terra cotta pots, called "canaries". These porous pots are used to keep drinking water cool by evaporation.

As we left Podor the heavens opened up. Our St. Louis-Mbolo Birane trip that took five hours just five days ago, now took seven hours. Bridges were washed out. Roads were flooded. We passed houses that were completely inundated. Some mud huts were being washed away.

We arrived in St. Louis at 3 PM. We decided to stay the night. We had no luck finding a suitable room. I got caught in a traffic ticket scam. A policeman stopped me as I rounded a bend. He ticketed me for going the wrong way on a one way street. He pointed out the sign. It was the diameter of a CD and mounted 20 feet in the air on the side of a building. The cop said I could either pay the 3000CFA (\$5US) at the commissariat or to him personally. The transaction took half an hour because the cop was so busy stopping other drivers for the same infraction. I finally paid him directly.

I was so ticked off that I didn't want to spend another minute in that burg! Here was St. Louis, "The New Orleans of West Africa", the site of the Jazz Festival, our wonderful experience last May. Tired as I was I was ready to do the whole four-hour trip back to Dakar. We went about six miles when we noted an attractive hotel situated on the riverbank, nestled in a stand of trees. We checked out the Hotel Coumba Bang. The rooms were lovely. The personnel were friendly and accommodating. The price was better than downtown. So we stayed the night. Lovely sand beach, gardens, swimming pool and a good restaurant.

The next morning we left early and headed for home. On the way we talked about the "demystification" process (see above) that we had undergone in Mbolo Birane. The Peace Corps uses demystification to separate the wheat from the chaff among their volunteer trainees. At the end of our village experience we've decided that a 2 ½ to 5-year stint looks good. We love Senegal more than ever.

A la Prochaine, Chuck