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In the blink of an eye: A discussion and example of an experimental genre of ethnography for West Africa

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In The Blink Of An Eye: A Discussion And Example Of An Experimental Genre Of Ethnography For West Africa

by

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ABSTRACT

In the Blink of an Eye: A Discussion and Example of an Experimental Genre of Ethnography for West Africa

by

Evan Tyler Sulieeman Davies

A discussion of some of the experimental genres used in ethnographic writing today, their origins, and which particular genres are most effective in relaying ethnographic data. This brief study is followed by an original ethnography based on anthropological fieldwork in Senegal, West Africa.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Melvin Francis Ames,

and to a life well-lived. Your grace, caring and wisdom enriched me, when I lost direction you healed me, Doctor, and inspired me, to become, in these ways, like you.

And also to Pierre Ngong and his gentle manner, for his kindness and sincerity, to Sharon, for caring, to Harry, because this will be more interesting to read than "A Marxist, Non-functionalist Interpretation of Bronze Age Longbarrows" could have ever been. With this work, I hereby redeem myself. Lastly, to the good ship Sow's Ear, November Yankey 3876 Juliett Whiskey, because she never quit on me.

"...promises to keep..."
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..................................................................................................................1
Chapter 1 The Road to Thioubalel Lao.................................................................25
Chapter 2 Into the Village......................................................................................47
Chapter 3 Life in Thioubalel................................................................................53
Chapter 4 Mother and Child..................................................................................60
Chapter 5 Tea in the Sahara...................................................................................64
Chapter 6 The Marabout.........................................................................................71
Chapter 7 La Grande Prière....................................................................................83
Chapter 8 The Following Weeks............................................................................99
Chapter 9 Blood on a Crescent Moon.................................................................103
Chapter 10 Dakar and the South.........................................................................112
Chapter 11 Peter the Baron..................................................................................122
Chapter 12 Fragments.........................................................................................134
Epilogue..................................................................................................................136
References.............................................................................................................143
LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS
(referenced to page number)

Photo #1 .............................................. 24
Photo #2 .............................................. 24
Photo #3 .............................................. 27
Photo #4 .............................................. 29
Photo #5 .............................................. 33
Photo #6 .............................................. 34
Photo #7 .............................................. 36
Photo #8 .............................................. 40
Photo #9 .............................................. 46
Photo #10 ............................................. 48
Photo #11 ............................................. 52
Photo #12 ............................................. 56
Photo #13 ............................................. 59
Photo #14 ............................................. 61
Photo #15 ............................................. 63
Photo #16 ............................................. 68
Photo #17 ............................................. 80
Photo #18 ............................................. 86
Photo #19 ............................................. 94
Photo #20 ............................................. 98
Photo #21 ............................................. 100
Photo #22 ............................................. 111
Photo #23 ............................................. 127
Photo #24 ............................................. 141
Photo #25 ............................................. 142
"Could an ethnography be both anthropologically acceptable and at the same time be a work of art?" This question (Langness, 1976 in Ruby, 1982) reflects the quandary over the various experiential and somewhat experimental forms of written ethnographies being produced today.

The traditional anthropological fieldworker, much like the universal (though gender specific) hero as defined by Joseph Campbell, leaves his home for a different land (goes abroad), lives and adventures among an exotic "other" people (conducts fieldwork), then returns home with booty acquired during his "travaillles" (in the case of the latter day "hero" this booty consists of knowledge of the people he has resided with during the time away from his homeland and on occasion, specimens of native material culture destined for a foreign museum). This pattern in many ways resembles a picaresque fiction; loosely characterized by a lowly man who journeys, willingly or otherwise, to foreign lands, has adventures, and returns home with stories about them. "Through his experiences, the "picaroon" satirizes the society in which he lives" (Cuddon, 1991; 495). While in traditional literature the adventuring hero is masculine, real-world female ethnographers follow this pattern as well.

Finally, but perhaps of greatest importance, the hero imparts a piece of wisdom, a lesson learned or a "moral" if you will, some meaning gleaned from his experience which he may apply to his own life and also teach to others. In the case of the anthropologist, the ethnography produced from the information gathered during the fieldwork experience, while crucial to the reputation and the career of the anthropologist, serves as the hero's tale.

Indeed this last facet of the hero's saga is perhaps modern anthropology's self-proclaimed raison d'être. The promise of cultural critique, insight into our selves and our society through study of the culturally different "other". Yet consider for a moment some of the ethnography produced in this century. Some
of the dry, technical scientistic presentations of social data—what's missing?
Where is the "moral to the story" in these ethnographic accounts? Where is the
meaning? As Berger (1982) states,

Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts,
Information, do not in themselves constitute meaning. Facts can be
fed into a computer and become factors in a calculation. No meaning,
comes out of computers, for when we give meaning to an event, that
meaning is a response...

(p. 89)

Anthropology has the potential to reach and affect many, many more people
that it does in the present day. The following study is a suggestion of how
ethnography might do this, what literary forms it might take to become appealing
and accessible to more people.

Socio-cultural anthropologists today contend with an exceptionally wide
variety of subject matter—much of their work being done well outside the
traditional scope of the discipline. The boundaries between observer and
observed have become substantially blurred in the last half century, and in
today's world where "difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood,
(and) the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth", it has become less well-
defined who ethnographers need to gear their writings towards (Clifford,

"Fieldwork", writes Boon, "must be hauntingly personal and richly particular...."
(1982: 5). In recent years, many ethnographic fieldwork experiences have been
converted to personal accounts, and presented as memoirs, stories and autobiographies. These accounts are accessible to a wider audience than those written in classical ethnographic format, and therefore have the potential to be significant to many more people than their traditional counterparts.

Additionally, because these experimental ethnographies are not written in the traditionally standard manner, dichotomies in power between observer and observed are to an extent at least textually minimized, which, in turn, may in fact facilitate re-interpretation of the texts by the "other" being written about. More importantly, such texts do not claim a western empiricism for their authority.

Two anthropological terms I use repeatedly in this study are "experience" and "meaning". These particular terms have specific significance within anthropology and I need to define them for the scope of this study. "Experience" is a broad term and especially needs to be "unpacked" here. In a general anthropological sense, "experience" is regarded as a datum to be explained in an ethnography, and not a self-evidential "given" ("and that's how it was, folks") that cannot be debated and analyzed (Fischer, personal comm). "Experience" is generally referred to pejoratively by anthropologists; as socially formulated or simply narcissistic. This, to some degree, has been and continues to be an exclusionary tactic- experience is not enough. One needs anthropological training- one needs to have years of academic indoctrination in order to be able to convert a field "experience" into anything considered significant by the anthropological community (see debate of Donner, 1982 by Pratt in Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

By a "fieldwork experience", I refer to those sights, smells and sounds encountered by the fieldworker during day-to-day life in the subject society as well as significant social interactions that lead to intimate discoveries of the subject society and the ethnographer's own cultural preconceptions. The day-to-day living experiences leads to familiarity with the people lived with which in turn
contributes to an understanding of the people and their society.

Significant occurrences that dramatically shape the social environment in a fieldwork situation, as well as particularly joyful or horrific and "searing" events that leave themselves forever ingrained in the fieldworker's memory are also a major part of the overall fieldwork experience because they color perceptions of other events.

"Meaning" is generally used in discussions of representation, cognition sense and interpretation, but also may be discussed in terms of significance. When I ask of some modernist ethnographies, "where's the meaning?" I am asking about their significance to people in the contemporary world, their overall contribution to the contemporary world. What do they mean to contemporary society?

We all make decisions in our everyday lives which affect many people other than ourselves. In contemporary global society the decisions many people make are also very far-reaching. If we wish to educate the majority of our society to the realities of "other" societies, other cultures and people, we need works of ethnography which are accessible and appealing to a wider range of people than have been previously reached. I believe that an ethnography written in the same genre as The Tiv of Central Nigeria does not mean much to the majority of our educated society. If we wish anthropology through its vehicle of ethnography to serve as cultural critique for the people of our society- and not simply a collection of data for our files and libraries- the ethnographies, the stories, must be accessible to larger numbers of people than they have previously. They must re-interpret for their intended audience the lifeways, beliefs and values of other societies, they must allow other societies to be understood by the people who are in positions to make decisions which influence these societies. They must, above all, refute incorrect and harmful assumptions about the subject societies.
If we are to examine the ethnography from the standpoint of cultural history, we find that it is but one of a myriad of historical manifestations employed over the centuries to assign meaning to experience among a cultural "other". The ethnography can be seen as a particular evolution of travel writing, just one of several ways humans have tried over the centuries to digest, abstract, explain, anchor and assign meaning to their experiences among other peoples, we may examine what sorts of observations have been significant in different historical periods and under different circumstances. The topics addressed in this study are current, relevant and important subjects in anthropology and of great personal interest. In basic form these topics are worked through and adequately treated herein. This present study can be seen as the precursor or outline to a much more thorough and detailed study of the same problem.

To begin a brief discussion of the various sub-genres, or "types" of travel writing, it is necessary to understand that travel writing is by no means a single or simple genre.

In considering the history of travel literature, we note...
how ancient the form is, how popular it has been since the invention of printing, and how varied are its practitioners, its fashions, its contents, and its types. But because so few writers have studied the history, it is vague in outline, incomplete for every century, and most difficult to theorize about.

(Adams, 83;161)

Adams summarizes some of the difficulties encountered when attempting to categorize this immense body of literature. After just a cursory examination of some of the analyses and discussions of travel literature today, we learn that
European travel literature is found to have its origins in works such as Cea'sar's *De Bello Gallico*, continuing through the journals of the first circumnavigators of the Earth, through the "impressionistic sketches of nineteenth-century aesthetes" up to contemporary travel writers and also including the recent works of contemporary field ethnographers (Porter, 1991, Adams, 1983, Mortimer, 1990). This is indeed a massive body of still untamed literature, needing much scholarly attention in its own right (Porter, 1991 & Adams, 1983). Nevertheless, a general examination of the corpus of travel literature reveals several structural formats commonly used in travel literature, each having its origins of its development in a specific historical context, and each at least generally associated with a particular breed of traveler, the missionary, the diplomat's wife, the ship's officer or seaman, the wandering merchant, and so on.

Such examples of travel over the centuries are grouped into roughly four categories by Adams (1983). The simple letter, the diary or journal, the narrative, and lastly, "other" formats. This last category includes accounts written as dialogue between two or more people, autobiographical accounts, guides for others wishing to traverse the same ground, memoirs, and accounts written in verse or as poems, their literary origins in eighteenth century imaginary travel literature.

Beyond information on the geography, cultural customs and peoples of "other", places in the letters and written accounts of conquerors, some of the earliest examples of information of other people and places are found in the works of Greek and Roman historians and authors such as Homer and Virgil, themselves both avid travelers of their times. The earliest travel accounts are often compilations of information designed for those wishing to follow in the
footsteps of those travelers who had actually compiled that data. Various "crusaders manuals", detailed guides to the Nile, the Mediterranean, Jerusalem and the Dead Sea were popular even into the early Renaissance (Adams, 1983).

The advent of Columbus' discovery of the Americas and the beginning of an age of global exploration via the ship, saw a major change in the form and subject matter of travel literature. Accounts were now presented as journals or diaries of the voyage undertaken to a new place. The format of the diary, while by no means confined to maritime exploration, developed to a distinct sub-genre of travel literature, and came to be known as voyage literature. From the conquistadors through the British naval expeditions and colonization to nineteenth century scientific exploration, this literature flourished and developed.

With the voyages of discovery, the voyage itself constituted a scientific institution and praxis. The voyage is not a means of gaining access to the terrain of possible knowledge; but it supports, generates and assembles knowledge as the locus for systematic deductions for celestial and marine observations, for taking samples of flora, fauna and humanity...

(Defert, 1982)

The voyage literature of the Age of Discovery continued in the same general form during the times of colonial expansion which followed. The origins of "travel literature", especially in Africa, lay in the early reports of explorers, such as
Mungo Park, seeking Timbucktoo, the fabled kingdom of Prester John, and other actual and legendary sites of exploitable wealth. These early travelers would often make notes of the geography of the land they were traveling through and of the people that lived on it. Very general observations of indigenous customs, language and physical appearance were the most common.

In the last century, the focus of travel writing shifted to studies of the peoples of other societies. In a world of empire and colonialist regimes, there was a perceived need to control subject populations- control was facilitated through an understanding of the subject peoples and their societies. Again, we see that the focus of writings about the "other", these colonial reports, were tailored to the needs of the society producing them, at the time.

Until the turn of the last century, the writings of travelers, colonialists and missionaries were used by students and "experts" of ethnology to draw their conclusions about other peoples. In the early part of this century, Malinowski announced (1922: 4) that the credibility of the traveler's account, mere travel literature and those nineteenth century reports by colonial administrators had been "killed by science"; "killed" by the more distanced, more analytical ethnographies of social scientists.

Travel writing and all earlier genres of voyage literature were popularly abandoned by anthropology in favor of the scientific ethnography. Though the accounts of early explorers and voyagers were still made reference to in these scientific ethnographies, the personal accounts of life among the other, told in terms of human actions, desires and senses, were deemed no longer adequate by the majority of the anthropological community. It was felt that the "experiences" of the "traveler, the casual observer and the everyday practical man" were not rigorous, analytical or distanced enough for scientific ethnography (Hall & Abbas, 1986; 198).
In a 1986 study Mary Pratt discusses the relative worth of forcing an account of an "other" people (i.e. an ethnography) to be "scientific" and objective, and investigates the desire of Modernist ethnographers to produce a personalized, almost novel-like text in addition to that required by their profession. She isolates the competing forms of discourse as experiential and observational.

The distinction is between a discourse that constitutes its authority by anchoring everything that is said in the senses, desires and interests of particular human subjects, especially the speaker; and a discourse that constitutes its authority by detaching everything that is said from the senses, desires and interests of specific human subjects, especially the speaker.

Pratt, 1986; 205

Pratt continues her assessment of the post-Modern condition in anthropology by discussing one of its historical paradoxes. She cites the contradiction between the active participation and engagement required of the anthropologist during field work and the cool, distanced objectification of the subject expected in the resultant ethnography. She claims this deep-set contradiction to be responsible for the reliance by some anthropologists on the publication of paired works or the "two-book phenomenon" to arrive at the complete account of a fieldwork experience (p. 217).

Around the middle of this century it became fashionable among anthropologists to adopt a practice used by travel writers of the last century. Two accounts, usually published separately, of the field work would be produced. One of these, the ethnography, would always contain the data collected during the field work, presented objectively and authoritatively. The second work would be the ethnographer's account of his or her experiences in the field, a more personal
text describing the conditions in which the data produced in the ethnography was produced. An early example of this is Mary Kingsley's 1899 *West African Studies* (her "just the facts" work) and *Travels in West Africa*, the account which contextualizes the information she presents. Such classic paired works of ethnography include Maybury-Lewis' *Akwe-Shavante Society* and the *Savage and the Innocent*, Dumont's *Under the Rainbow* and *The Headsman and I*, and Bohannan's *Return to Laughter* and *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*.

If our goal, as anthropologists, is to prove or make significant the lifeways and realities of "other" cultures and societies to our own society, in the hopes of expanding our awareness of our position in the global community, perhaps to the idealistic end of ceasing the current destruction of our collective natural and various cultural ecologies, clearly the former, more personal mode of discourse is desirable and more directly significant to all people involved in the fieldwork situation, and with the subject society.

These works, especially *Return to Laughter*, explain in different language than the ethnography the nature of the subject society in each case- an explanation which was somehow not possible-or not accomplished in the ethnography. Each of these anthropologists felt the need to write another work in addition to their ethnography. *Return to Laughter*, for example explains to it's readers the nature of witchcraft in West African society-why was Bohannon compelled to write this text if she could have explained it in her ethnographic account?

Pratt states (1986) that most anthropologists feel their ethnographic writings omit some of the most valuable knowledge they have gained as a result of their fieldwork experience; a personal and humanistic knowledge of the "other" and a
deep-rooted knowledge of their own society which we have been striving for. Oddly enough, it was the objective observational discourse which "consolidated itself as the orthodox" mode of discourse in this century: the experiential discourse is used as an example of ethnographic "heresy", to complete the metaphor.

Historically, this is quite understandable. Malinowski and others sharing his views were writing in the wake of Darwinism and more specifically a Scientism which came to be identified with all modern industrial societies. In a general light, science and technology had become the answer to all of societies' problems, science and applied technology became in may ways almost a new religion. If the emergent discipline of anthropology was to be recognized by those facets of society having real power, those considered critical to societies' development, as having real worth in society, of being anything other than a historical continuation of travel writing, it had to be scientific. It had to be identified with scientific method to be taken seriously.

Discussion of experiences, personal interpretation, first person narration and any emotional writings were all considered fallible and biased, weak, ethnocentric and solipsitic, in short, irrelevant to the "science of man." How to reconcile this view with the need for cultural critique however, has not met with much success. Reflexive critique and insight into the processes of studying and interacting with another society are critical aspects of anthropology: they will increasingly serve perhaps the most important function as we enter the next millennia. If anthropology is to have any real future, any valuable role in human society, these aspects must play in the forefront of post-Modern anthropological discourse.

Stanly Diamond (1974) states that

Unless the anthropologist confronts his own alienation, which is a
special instance of a general condition, and seeks to understand it's roots, and subsequently matures as a relentless critic of his own civilization, the very civilization which objectifies man, he cannot understand or even recognize himself in the other or the other in himself.

(Diamond, in Pratt, 1986)

Ethnographers continued to rely on writing paired works, one to satisfy their anthropological audience, and the other, if not only to satisfy themselves to produce the critique that can only come from a work describing the process by which the ethnographers engage themselves in another society and what happens both to them and to the subject society once they do.

Is this to say that post-Modernist ethnography is essentially travel writing? Not at all. In this section, I discuss three examples of contemporary travel writing and compare them to two examples of experiential ethnographies. While both discourses utilize many of the same literary devices, they are, as we shall see, fundamentally different. Upon comparing Matthiessen's *African Silences*, Lowerre's *Under the Neem Tree*, and Heminway's *No Man's Land* with Stoler's *In Sorcery's Shadow* and Alverson's *Under African Sun*, one fundamental difference is that the travel writing, with the exception of Susan Lowerre's work, are a collection of stories, fragmented by space, and discontinuities in time.

Matthiessen's work, while it accurately portrays certain aspects of African society, does not explore that society. His work is a collection of stories from the late sixties until today, focussing on African wildlife, those who govern it, understand it, and some of the peoples who live in close proximity with it. Matthiessen's work is a collection of writings about his travels, connected by his involvement with organizations concerned with the preservation of African
Wildlife. Matthiessen is the narrator, and every anecdote related in the text was something he experienced at one point or another during his residence in Africa.

Television producer John Hemingway's *No Man's Land* is constructed in much the same fashion--a series of stories and anecdotes--descriptions of and dialog with some of the last expatriates living in sub-Saharan Africa. One gains some understanding of living in Africa, at least from one white man's point of view, but that is all. Again, while some sense of Africa is provided by the text, which is very descriptive and sensitive toward indigenous African society, there is no exploration of that society, no attempt to communicate the reality of Africa from an African point of view, no attempt to elucidate aspects of African society and culture. But then this work is travel literature and does not claim to be ethnography.

Susan Lowerre's work, while not an ethnography, is not travel literature in the same sense as the two works described above. *Under the Neem Tree* would perhaps be better titled "In the Peace Corps." It is best described as "living abroad" literature. Lowerre describes her life during a two year stay in a small Pulaar village in northern Senegal under the aegis of the Peace Corps, though the focus of her text is everywhere herself, her illnesses, her dealings with Peace Corps administrators and doctors, in one instance her life back in upstate New York. However she does stay with one small group of people for a prolonged time, and becomes very familiar with their lifeways, their language, their culture and values.

Her writing describes her personal discovery of Pulaar society. The only factor that prevents Lowerre's work from being classed as an ethnography is primarily that Lowerre is not associated with professional anthropology. Neither did she explore any particular facet of Pulaar society in detail as Bohannon did, for example, by examining the concept of witchcraft in rural Nigerian society.
In a 1991 New York Times Book Review, author Carol Spindel described Lowerre's work as belonging to "a body of literature that seems to be rapidly growing- first person accounts of Americans living in other cultures". Spindel continues her definition of Lowerre's genre by stating that "...these memoirs (by Americans living in other cultures) are not travel literature because their authors are not traditional travelers. Brought up by mothers who probably read Margaret Mead's magazine columns, they are armchair anthropologists and amateur ethnographers. They tend to leave New Jersey or Virginia to settle in a village in Africa, Asia or South America for at least a year...." Perhaps Lowerre's writing style was influenced by Mead and Bohannon as she wrote in Return to Laughter, but Under the Neem Tree is no more than a personal memoir (anthropologically speaking), a diary of her time spent in Africa.

Very similar to Lowerre's work is Marianne Alverson's Under African Sun. She writes about life as she lived it and saw it lived in a small village in the Botswana bush. She lived in this village for the better part of two years with her husband, also a professional anthropologist and her two young sons. Her text is non-technical, informative and gives a general reader a very good feeling for lifeways, cultural history and society of the people of rural Botswana. This work is classed by the University of Chicago Press as "Travel/Antropology/ Women's studies". I debate the title of "Travel" simply because there is no traveling going on anywhere in this work. It seems in many instances that "living abroad" literature often falls under the broad classification of travel literature. Under African Sun is more anthropological than Under the Neem Tree certainly, as it focuses less on the author's life in the rural village and more directly on peoples' lives in the rural village setting. The Women's Studies' classification is due to the book's concentration on Botswanan village women, (which is important because it has been traditionally overlooked) who were more accessible to the author because she was female, than they would have been to a male anthropologist.
Though this work gives an excellent general sketch of the environment, day-to-day life and culture of rural Botswanan people, it does not delve into a particular aspect of that culture which could stand elucidation. It is not sustained enough in its focus on women in rural Botswanan society to make up for this short-coming. By itself, *Under African Sun* is enjoyable and informative to read, and had it been advertised to the general reading public, it might have been a popular text. Though I feel this text should not be classified as an ethnography, its format of description and dialogue is not simply that of a memoir or a recounting of time spent in another place, and would be surely be suitable for ethnographic purposes.

Paul Stoller begins the preface to their work *In Sorcery's Shadow* by defining it as a memoir, "fashioned from the textures and voices of ethnographic situations" and definitely "not a standard ethnography" (1987; xii). In Stoller's own words, he violates one of the principal conventions of ethnographic realism, (which are increasingly being challenged) "according to which the author should be unintrusive in an ethnographic text" (xi).

Stoller and Olkes' work, in my view however, picks up where Lowerre's text left off, and should be seen as an ethnography. In addition to constructing an image of Niger, its landscape, its people and their society Stoller deeply explores a facet of traditional Songhay culture- witchcraft and sorcery. Stoller also sets out to answer some questions of fundamental importance to anthropology. He tells us in his prologue that the theme of confrontation is inherent in his text- "the clash of two worlds' reckoning". Stoller asks about our limits in our quest to understand other peoples.

"Is it ethical for ethnographers to become apprentice sorcerers in their attempt to learn about sorcery? And what are our motives as ethnographers? Are we seekers of knowledge? Self-actualization? Power?"
Upon reading through Stoller's work one becomes aware that his fieldwork methods were not governed by his desire to write In Sorcery's Shadow as he did. Nor were his methods greatly different from any other ethnographic fieldworkers in terms of data gathering. Through his familiarity with the Songhay, their language and culture, Stoller was invited to study one of their most guarded and cherished secrets- an aspect of their society that has survived decades of French colonialism. So far this pattern of what was studied and how data about it was gathered is in keeping with anthropological tradition. The break occurs at Stoller's choice of literary genres.

Stoller chose to write his account like a novel- full of description of the land and the people, flowery in some parts- "The skin of his hand was like sun-baked leather, but when he touched my hand it was with the gentleness of a child" (1987; 35)- but everywhere accurate. Many examples of dialogue are used throughout this work, dialogue between Stoller and a Sorko or marabout, a wise man or a magician, with whom he was discussing Songhay magic rituals or incantations. Again, these dialogues read almost like dialogue from a novel, but Stoller tells us that they are all real conversations, that most of his discussions with the Songhay sorcerers were audio taped and later transcribed and translated into English.

In Sorcery's Shadow is not a novel, and is not simply the personal memoirs of one person's experiences in a foreign country. It is a powerful work of great significance to professional anthropology in terms of the questions that it poses and the issues it raises as regards the fieldwork method and the manner of writing up results. Unfortunately, the text was limited in publication and was not advertised to the broader reading public, who undoubtedly would have found it easily understandable, informative and of great interest. Stoller and Olkes offer this work to the anthropological community for their contemplation of
methodological issues, and though it is not directly stated by the authors, they fully expect professional anthropologists consider their form of writing as a possible alternative to traditional discourse.

Stoller and Olkes explain that Stoller is a character in the text of *In Sorcery's Shadow* and further assert that "Every ethnographer is a character in the story of his or her fieldwork" (1987; xi). Presented in this fashion, we (a more general "we") will first be able to identify and associate the authors' field experience with our own lives, then apply the meaning gleaned by the authors from their overall field experience to our lives. We will also realize that the report is based on one person's interactions and experiences with no claims for an abstract, omniscient understanding of "reality" (Traweek, personal comm.).

As Clifford (1986) explicitly argues, all ethnographies are essentially fictions (though not necessarily falsehoods!). Whether written in technical language in an authoritative third person narrative or presented in the first person as an experience with numerous and revealing examples of dialogue included, the account has been shaped, re-(de?)formed, and edited, and is therefore a fiction. Much information gathered in during the fieldwork process has been omitted, and the remaining data have been carefully arranged to present the readers with a digestible, perhaps pre-digested, view of one person's experiences with an "other" society. Both the traditional and the contemporary "experimental" ethnography are fictions, the later is no more fictional than the former.

From a dialectical point of view, it is certainly necessary for us to examine how our own personalities in the field influence the data we collect; how who we are determines what we will be able (or willing) to see. Reflexive accounts of the fieldwork process lend insight into this process. Ruby states in the introduction to his edited volume *A Crack in the Mirror*(1982), "The concept of culture as a
means of understanding our humanness is a powerful concept. Too bad we haven’t conveyed it to more people in a form that they can apply to their own lives” (p.25). To this end, it is the richly particular and hauntingly personal experiences which must be brought to the forefront in an accessible and engaging mode of discourse. We must have meaning in the form of experiential reports as well as positive data.

Thus, beyond returning with a trove of cultural data, the returning fieldworkers, like Coleridge’s ancient mariner, like Campbell’s universal heros, can impart insight gained from their field experience to others members their societies who do not, or would never be in a position to live in the field (or understand) what the ethnographic fieldworkers do.

Through readable, detailed and personal accounts of life in another society, like Stoler and Olkes work and to a lesser degree Alverson’s text, ethnography can continue to provide for the public cultural and historical data from rapidly westernizing and industrializing worlds. Particularly for the privileged ones living in the richer countries of this increasingly industrialized world, these accounts can convey a personal understanding of human society and our (“ours” and the “other’s”) mutual humanness to a wider range of people, in a form they can apply to their own lives, thereby certainly fulfilling anthropology’s original self-proclaimed promise of cultural critique; by "suggesting reform in the way we live our lives" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 3).
Photographs tell you of the existence of places and people; if the photographs are skilfully taken, we can even discern relationships between the people photographed. But photographs by themselves tell you nothing of the significance of people's existence. Indeed, this is the task of the ethnographic photographic essay, to assign significance, assign meaning to the existence of the various people and places photographed for the audience.

Thomas Mann once wrote that if one was too attached, too personally involved with the subject that one was trying to represent, one would make a sappy, sentimental mess out of it. Ironically however, it seems that the only time we are ever impressed with the need to convey something of worth is when we are hit over the head with it. Then of course we care too much, and bungle the effort.

While in a rural West African village in 1991 I became impressed with the desire to relate to others something of what I encountered there. I felt that other people needed to know about the place, about some of the people who live there, and also about certain events which I lived through in West Africa. My reasons for feeling this way were twofold; I had hopes both that others in my culture might become more aware of the differences that exist between West African and Western society, and secondly that by telling my story I might better come to terms personally with my experience there. I have so far been successful in the latter effort. The events I lived through in West Africa had too much significance to my life to keep to myself.

No one person, no matter how familiar with a people, a society and it's culture can write or speak definitively and finally about that people, that society or culture. The best any ethnographer can hope to do is relate his or her experience in a manner whereby others are able to reinterpret it for themselves, and draw their own conclusions from the ethnographer's observations.
We, as a people, as a culture, base our society, our lives, perceptions and our principals on what we know. Herein, I attempt to produce an ethnographic photo-essay of a rural West African village which targets the general reader. The photographs should be seen as "quotes" from my experience and the text as my "translation" of the portion of reality I encountered.

The writing serves to contextualize the photographic material, though it is not subordinate to it. Rather text and photographs act in tandem to portray existence in a rural West African village, and explore aspects of rural West African society. Text and photograph augment each other in relating an entire, very personal experience, and, in the truest sense, they tell a story.
...O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea...

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge
The Ryme of the Ancient Mariner
One might say Africa exudes a cooked smell; somewhere between raw and burned flesh...

For those who will fall in love with Africa, this smell is warm, comforting, and familiar. For those will be repulsed by Africa, this smell is invasive and inescapable, oppressive and suffocating. Africa is a strong place- the land, the people and their history and culture- a history and culture that shapes the way they live today. One cannot immerse oneself fully in Africa, one cannot drink Africa, it is too powerful and too poisonous; even Africans cannot drink too deeply of life in their motherland. Too much of Africa at once will kill you.

To survive in Africa you must allow yourself to be taken, sparingly, but taken certainly. If you resist, at best you will remain ignorant, you will gain nothing for your trouble. At worst, you will be raped, perhaps chewed up a bit, maybe even alot. Africa will not be denied, and will force all of its beauty and terror upon you, force itself into you. Too much of Africa at once will kill you.

Landing in Dakar, one is welcomed by a wave of hot, sweaty air. This initial experience is not unlike entering a steamroom. For the first few minutes, it seems that if you stay there you will suffocate, that it is literally too hot to support life, or that your heart is about to stop. The second feeling is one of panic, for you are not in a steamroom, and cannot simply leave when the atmosphere becomes unbearable.

"Pssst!"

"Hsssst!"

The universal African attention getter- it is heard in the airport as you are surrounded by strangers- some trying to separate you from your luggage and others demanding money. It is heard on the sandy suburban street corners, in
the government offices and in the heart of the city where men in Italian-cut polyester suits loiter amid robed Qur'anic students, choleric infants and women hawking peanuts and oranges.

Pre-adolescent girls wearing traditional pagnes - cloths wrapped around their breasts and pelvises - carry their mother's children wrapped up on their backs, while their mothers sport European hairstyles from twenty years ago, and wear bright polyester blouses and designer jeans.

Everywhere is the smell of cooking...

cooking meat, roasting corn, roasting nuts, smoking fish. Vendors and beggars are everywhere. Everywhere African tradition is mixed with what appears to be the absolute lack of it. It seemed to me when I arrived that European culture has triumphed in most of this city, many Africans have embraced it; renounced, perhaps even forgotten who they are.

The breezes in Dakar, while occasionally cool, are never fresh; there's something rotten there...
Photo #1(top)- An ex-legionare standing in front of his store in Dakar.
Photo#2(bottom)- Young boy in a Dakar restaurant
THE ROAD TO THIOUBALEL LAO

The screams never stopped.

Waiting half a day in the Dakar gare d'autobus. Vendors shouting while selling sunglasses, peanuts and prayer beads.

Stopping everytime the bus broke down on the endless road or in one of the small, dry and nameless Pulaar villages if the driver wanted to quench his thirst, or buy some dried fish. Pulaar is the second largest language spoken in Senegal after Wolof, and is spoken by peoples in the north of the country. While it is the name of a language, the people in the north commonly refer to themselves as Pulaar.

The bus was traveling north from Dakar to Pete, a town nearest on the bus route to the small village where I was going. Impatient people, annoyed people- other people seemingly complacent one moment but suddenly screaming to and at one another the next. When I finally arrived in Thioubalel Lao, the people were screaming there too.

It was a continuous fight for the corn farmers in the northern villages to keep the birds away from their precious crop. The river Sénégal which ran right next to Thioubalel was the only source of water for irrigation in the Sahelian village. Those who lived on its banks depended on it not to recede too low during the long summer months- not out of worry for their meager crops, for it was impossible to grow anything edible in the summer, but for fear that the soil would dry out completely and be literally baked to clay by the blistering sun and completely ruined for future agriculture.

There are fish in the Sénégal to be sure; the biggest ones around- but this source of fresh protein is not available to those who live on the Sahelian banks
where the river forms a border with Mauritania- the Mauritanians guard the river more closely than nearly any other part of their country, as it's the only water they have, and they fish it. Those Senegalese villagers who try and are seen doing so are shot from across the river. Dried fish from the tributaries to the south are instead smoked and brought up to be eaten with the daily meal of imported rice, cabbage and goat meat.

Death is everywhere- from failed crops to starving goat herds to infant mortalities- life is hard.

beyond this

The flies and the dust.

The dust gets everywhere; into everything. It works into the pores on your scalp-coats every hair- coats your body with a fine khaki film-even beneath your clothes.

You breathe-and you smell and taste it-

it forms a paste in your mouth and grits against your teeth. It dries out your nose and you feel as though you are suffocating. When the Harmattan blows the dust directly into your face, you really are.

The Harmattan is a wind which blows in the spring-down from the desert-down across Africa, a hot, hot wind; harbinger of the summer to come. The Harmattan often creates dust storms which, unlike sand storms, last for hours. If caught in the open spaces in a major dust storm without a turban or cloth through which to breath, you will asphixiate- the dust will coat the inside of your lungs and
Photo #3- The river Sénégal, the opposite shore is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.
dry them-making absorption of oxygen from the air impossible.

In the safety of a village you can see the Harmattan's dust blowing across the Sahel- it begins faintly- it grows and impacts upon the skeletons of trees, with rocks- the land itself. It impacts upon me and I am choked and blinded- suffocated by heat and dust.

When the storm passes, the air is deathly still; you open your mouth to breathe and the flies descend into it-

the flies surround your eyes, your mouth and nose. If you have any cuts on your body, the flies are there too. So are the children.

Everywhere.

They stare and stare and stare. Small, pathetic urchins with oversized heads topping their skinny bodies- and scrawny filthy fingers touching- probing- everything. They approach and cluster around you-touch you, your belongings, hold on to you. My first day in the village all I had to do was step out of my room- to find the village children waiting for me. Waiting to see the white man.

The stare.

I have spent many weeks in African and New Guinean villages where I have been the major attraction for the villagers. I have never been able to escape the masses of people who came to look at the strange white person, but I always made my appearances out of doors very short and at hours when most of the staring people would be away or asleep.

This time I wanted to flood myself. I wanted to indulge in a stare. When you
Photo #4- Some of the children of Thioubalel Lao.
look back into their faces they each begin to compete for a glance- each hoping
to get something from the White person's stare- I began to smile as I stared back
at the group of children squirming around my squatting body with increasing
agitation and intensity. Their glances engage you, challenge you. None of them
really know what to make of you.

In every region in Africa, there is a word for White person; In West Africa it is
toubab. Toubab is a corruption of the Arabic word toubib, which means
"doctor," and as Whites are best known to Africans for their medicines, the use of
a word such as doctor to label them seems logical. Toubab, however, means
something quite different to the majority of the West Africans who use the word.

A toubab is a sort of boogyman, a monster with strange features, a long
pointy nose, long straight hair like an dog's, and skin the color of a dead fish, so
light that it burns to an angry red just from walking around outside on a clear day.
Toubabs are sad and empty- hollow creatures, but can also be very dangerous,
as the colonial past attests. Toubabs are things African parents tell their children
about to frighten them if they misbehaved. At a few instances during my time in
West Africa I came to see myself this way.

I arrived in Thioubalel late at night, it had been a long ride from Dakar to Peté
by bush taxi, and from Peté to Thioubalel had been another two hours in the back
of a Toyota pick up. I was exhausted from the ride and I went directly to my
mattress. Tomorrow I would begin to work on the archaeology project I came
here to participate in.

The mornings in Thioubalel usually began with the smell of petrol lamps- the
kerosene vapors acted as a lubricant to awaken my nasal passages to the sense
of smell. During the night my nasal passages became completely dried out and
feel - almost dusty. A water soaked handkerchief usually restored them to
normal.
My first morning in the village I awoke after the sun had already begun to rise to find a magnetic neon blue dawn vibrating through the cracks and gaps in the crude plank shutter which covered the window in the room I had passed the night in. I rose slowly, went to the window and peered outside. The outside world was still, the ground was less a khaki tan than a dark grey. The window looked out on a neighboring courtyard; a small square area of dust surrounded by clusters of huts and rickety wooden fences. The large mortars used for grinding millet were standing against the walls of the huts in their standard "not-in-use" upside-down positions in which they doubled as stools. A few dented aluminum pots were left carelessly about the courtyard, some were used in cooking, some served as toilets for the children still too small to use the communal pit. At first sight it reminded me somewhat of a ghost town- houses and tools, but no people- just the still and silent morning light. A faint breeze pored cool and clear morning air across my face. I took the air through my nose and into my lungs in long, deep sighs. The air from the window was fresh and poignant, smelling almost slightly-

(charred?)

The crisp air coming past the window contrasted with the suffocating staleness of the air in the room. Most Africans have a general fear of the night- and hence the opening of windows at night for ventilation is an alien concept. This feeling does not arise out of superstition, but many times out of common sense- many creatures which are not wont to show themselves to the likes of humans during the day prowl the night freely; and thus to leave an entrance into the chambers where one is sleeping and defenseless is simply foolish.

The outside air startled my body awake, though my mind would take longer to begin functioning fully. I left the window and gathered the clothes I would wear
that day together. I stepped outside into the brightening morning, poured some of
the water from the loonde, into a small bucket, and began to bathe.

A loonde is a large clay pot which West African villagers use to store their
drinking water. The clay is porous, and a small amount of the water seeps
through the walls of the pot and evaporates on the outside. This constant process
of evaporation keeps the water in the loonde cool. Drinkable water is a vital
necessity in the Sahel; cool drinkable water is almost a luxury.

By the time I had finished with bathing and dressing, the sun was beginning to
climb into the sky, already a seething coppery ball of heat. While putting my
pants on I noticed that I had begun to sweat. While putting my socks on I was
wet, and after tying the laces of my shoes, I was dripping; the dust had somehow
already begun to settle on my skin, and was now running down in thick pasty
streaks along the cracks and crevasses of my hands. I wondered why I had just
bothered to wash myself.

Back in my room I moved towards the window and its delapidated shutter.
Gazing outside, I saw the same courtyard less its neon blue backdrop and
buzzing with activity. A simple domestic scene had unfolded while I was bathing
and dressing. A mother donkey nuzzling her baby, both with tails constantly
whisking away the flies, tranquil chickens clucked slowly about the dust in the
yard, pecking at a lone seed, grain, insect or perhaps just a small pebble to
eventually aid in digesting whatever meager scraps they might manage to get
into their gullets. There was a woman sitting on one of the upside-down mortars
breast-feeding her child, another one was filling one of the right-side-up mortars
with millet, in preparation to grind into flower, a small child was wandering
aimlessly about the courtyard, the fingers of one of his hands in his mouth,
slowly kicking one of the dented aluminum buckets around the courtyard.
Photo #5- A village girl pounding millet.
Photo #6- A village woman separating the chaff from the grain after pounding.
The houses in Thioubalel are constructed from a sun-baked mixture of fluvial mud and goat feces. When wet, it is a foul smelling, slimy mess, though when dry it affords an attractive, reasonably sturdy material, that lasts for about a year or so before needing touch ups. The houses are the same color as the surrounding land- a dry, dull tan. They appear to sprout from the surrounding ground itself- having no set architectural design and no sharp corners or boundaries-often with one compound flowing into the next- they seem at times like giant mud wasp dwellings- almost if they were themselves alive-growing from the land. The dust which always seems to float into the village in the afternoon when the hot wind blows is the same color. My skin seemed to blend perfectly with the shades of tan- the village houses and the hot, dry dust.

I picked up the small waterskin on which was written in a sloppy hand "l'eau potable"

I tried to suck with sun baked, cracked lips on the mouthpiece. I let the luke warm liquid fill my mouth; a small stream of water ran from my lips down across my stubble bringing the dust with it- getting brown from the dust- finally running down my chest in synchrony with the water leaking down my esophagus.

Filthy chlorinated water
squirting
in pulses- tepid, foul pulses down my throat.
piss
from the waterskin.

Away from the villages in the Sahel, all you hear is the wind. The sky is filled with small cyclones of reddish tan soil, dust, and the wind-sighing across the landscape.
Photo #7- A young girl in the sandy streets of Thioubalel.
At night the breeze blows cool and the bright and vibrant colors of the day fade to shades of black and grey. The only relief from the heat comes at this time.

The next day that I decided to walk around the village for the first time. The paths through the village were narrow winding alleys between compounds and were usually littered with straw fallen from the thatched roofs.

I walked through the village with a local boy named Amadou Hanne. He spoke French and was one of the few polite boys in the village. He took me around the various compounds, introducing me every once so often to people we encountered on the path. I needed to buy some kerosene for the lamps we were using for the archaeology project and Amadou said he knew someone in the village who sold kerosene. The two of us went to his house and found the kerosene man and some friends, his three wives and some of their children sitting in the dusty courtyard, telling stories while the wives milked goats.

After greetings in Pulaar to the whole group took place, Amadou introduced me to the kerosene man and his friends. I, in turn greeted each one of them in French and shook their hands. I asked the kerosene man for two liters, paid him 3,000 francs, and waited while he walked off to get the kerosene. Three thousand West African francs is about twelve dollars, the price of fossil fuel in Senegal is outrageously expensive, and especially so when it is sold to a toubab.

While I was sitting under a veranda with Amadou and the rest of the kerosene man’s family, the children started slowly exploring me. They moved close and I could feel the heat from their small bodies- I began to sweat, but didn’t mind as the children reached out to touch my white skin, my light-colored straight hair. Just a few moments before the kerosene man returned with two dirty plastic bottles filled with silty kerosene another of his children, a blind girl about twelve years old came out.
She felt her way along the wall of the house to a certain point then confidently walked over to the veranda with the rest of the group and sat down beside her mother. The blind girl had apparently heard the commotion and went outside to investigate the new visitor. Her eyes were slightly closed— one more so than the other— and she appeared to be looking up and to the side. Her pupils were clouded over, with what appeared to be cataracts. Her mother began smiling and telling her about the toubab. I reached out my hand slowly and took hers.

I let her feel my skin, I brought her hand up to my face and let her feel my nose (White people are renowned by Africans for their long noses), then brought her hand up to my hair. All the while I was telling her about what I looked like to her in English, just to let her hear the sound of toubab language. Her mother was quite happy that her daughter was experiencing the visitor, and the little girl was happy to satisfy her curiosity.

The sun went down that day at 6:30 as usual, and the Sahel became a giant beach at the end of the day. When the sun went behind the clouds, I could finally stop squinting from the glare, and the warm late afternoon breeze refreshed me. I found myself reminded of Crane’s beach in Massachusetts, where I used to walk with my grandmother for hours and hours when I was much younger.

Here in the Sahel the scorpions were scampering for shelter, and a dry wind blew across my face and through my hair, coating them slowly and evenly with warm dry dust, and making my clothes flap gently around me.

In the distance various villages could be seen as small black clusters on the horizon, each recognizable because of the prominent shape of the mosque that was the pride and joy of each village. The Sahel at sundown was my place. I watched a bright blue sky and cotton ball clouds fade to dull blue, then to grey, dark grey to blackness— until the moon rose. The pestering and bothersome
children were not allowed out after dark, and there was no one around to be polite to.

Just the wind.

I listened as the wind blew across the Sahel, blew warm air of the dying day across my dry, sun-baked lips, now as tough as leather. Here again, I would walk for hours just thinking about the day, about myself, about things I was interested in, about people I knew. All the time the wind, faintly- but always there- making all my thoughts sublime and dramatic. I thought of the science-fiction novels I read and loved as a child. Here I was at last- walking on an alien world- loving everything it had to offer. Lost somewhere in my thoughts out there in the Sahel, I first heard the Muezzin at Thioubale! Lao call into the starry blue-black sky, still deep red at the opposite horizon.

"Alla-a-a-h-h-h hua Akbar-r-r, Alla-a-a-h hua Akbar"

Sound seems to carry in the desert, huge spaces bridged by one voice alone, unchallenged in the twilight sky. In the Sahel between all the villages, I felt almost as though I was in an immense arena, awaiting something just heralded by the Muezzin's call.

I spent about another hour wandering around out there alone with my thoughts, enjoying every last second of the privacy. Before long I became aware of the presence of others around me. I heard distant humming or chanting mixed with the low moans of the wind. I sunk to an cross-legged sitting position on the ground and remained still and watched one of the people closest to me walking out into the Sahel-
Photo #8- Thioubalel as seen from the Sahel. Note the minarets of the mosque on the left of the photograph.
He was dressed in a boubou and was indeed chanting.

I sat very still in the desert twilight and watched him. He had stopped walking and had sunk to his knees. He continued to chant while facing the distant mosque at Thioubalel. Looking around me in the distance I saw about five others. Two were kneeling toward the Thioubalel's mosque and chanting like the one closest to me. I noticed that as they were chanting they each held one hand slightly out-stretched and held a finger in the air as though lecturing to a small child sitting directly in front of them. The rest of the group were still walking, although it was more like swaying while they chanted.

Swaying out into the Sahel, away from the village, I watched them as they went, finally they each turned around, lifted their palms to the village on the horizon, kneeled, and continued to chant. I sat there for some time listening to them, finding myself increasingly relaxed. The surrounding land radiated the warmth beaten into it from the sun which had reigned all day. The night air was warm enough so that if I didn't move, I almost didn't feel anything except the warm glow from the ground. Only the soft breezes, strangely silent during the nights, made me aware of my body again. While remaining completely comfortable, the night wind made each of my senses keen-sharpened my concentration. I must have listened to these strange chanting men in the desert for hours. After a long time, I stood silently and began to walk back to the village.

Getting closer to Thioubalel I saw a few people, mostly shepherds herding in the last of their flocks and the human scarecrows returning from the fields following the road onto narrow paths which led into the village. There were no clearly marked paths or trails. Some paths petered out and ended in a series of rills eroding into the river channel. Many times while walking back from the Sahel I ended up lost on one of these "dead end" trails.
Tonight, one of the villagers who I had met before saw me returning and waited by the side of the road for me. I stopped when I reached him and we exchanged some simple polite conversation as is the custom in most parts of Africa.

"Bonne nuit?"
"Ouais"
"Ça va?"
"Ouais, ça va"
"Ça va comme ça?"
"Bien sure"
"Mais, ça va toujours?"
"Ça-a-a va"
"Ahh ouais"
"C'est ça"
"Al Hamd li Allah"
"Ahh bien sure, Bismilah"
"Bismilah"

Most expatriates in Africa do not speak the various vernacular languages, and so cannot greet Africans properly in their own tongue. What may seem to be corruptions of the now-official languages (the ex-colonial languages; mostly French in West Africa), or attempts to be irritating are really just their efforts to speak an extended African greeting in a language the expatriate will be able to understand.

When I first arrived in the village, I remember seeing an old man, carrying a tremendous load of vegetables on his back, walking past two women of roughly the same age. The verbal exchange that occurred took place entirely in Pulaar,
and though I have no idea of what was being said, it was much the same as every other greeting I ever saw take place between older villagers. The women asked an interrogative question in unison, the man answered quickly, they asked another, and the man answered quickly again. They continued to exchange question and answer about five more times, even as they walked past each other and continued along their respective ways.

I later found that, in keeping with traditional greetings in East and southern Africa, the women were asking after the man's health, then the health of his children, his grandchildren, the general state of his homestead, how his crops were doing, and so on; the old man politely replying something like "just fine" to each question (because of the lack of rain in recent years and the political tensions with the Mauritanians who control the river Sénégal's waters, no one's crops are "just fine", but why tell the women something they already knew?).

As I had no family in the village, had no homestead of my own and kept no crops, the villager I found myself talking with could only enquire after my health and general state, and rather than appear curt or superficial to me, he chose to follow the etiquette he knew to be proper and respectful in a greeting situation and ask many questions.

After we finished exchanging greetings I asked him what he had done this day. He told me that he had been working in the fields. His skin and hair were saturated with dust. He wore a light blue button down shirt that glowed in contrast with his dark skin in the dim moonlight. My skin now tanned to the same color of the khaki shirt I was wearing blended perfectly with the color of the dust of the ground and the color of the huts in the village.

We walked into the village side by side, speaking in low meters- almost soft shallow rumbles- a soothing, complacent conversation. I told him that I came out into the Sahel every evening, and that tonight I saw the men chanting. He told me
that they were *talibes*, Qur'anic students, disciples of the village Imam, and were reciting the Qur'an. I was fascinated by this I told him that I would like to talk to the village Imam about the particular brand of Islam they practiced in northern Senegal.

He told me that in Thioubale there was a *marabout* named Thierno Hanne who was the Imam for the local mosque, and that he was very kind. He thought it was a good idea for someone like me to talk to such a wise man.

After we entered the village, we said our good nights, and walked back to where I was staying with the Senegalese archaeologists.

Later that evening, after the evening meal of rice and fish sauce, I met with Homady Bocum, a Senegalese government archaeologist with whom I had been assigned to work. Homady was a gentle and intelligent man, who possessed an enormous sense of humor. Homady and I had gotten along very well since we met on my arrival, and because he was Pulaar he turned out to be a very valuable aid to me when I needed to know about Pulaar society, customs and language.

He told me that in West Africa a *marabout* usually acted as an Imam, and the traditional role of the Imam was simply to lead people in prayer in the mosque. A *marabout* however, while usually wise in the ways of the Qur'an, was also a traditional healer, a counselor, a spirit medium and also something of a sorcerer, very knowledgeable about the medicinal and narcotic effects of roots, seeds, leaves and the like, in addition to magical incantations. In the strict sense, a *marabout* is a magician, skilled in the production of everything from love potions to healing charms, and has nothing to do with Islamic religion.

In West Africa the village Imam is, however, always a *marabout*, and is usually elected by the village elders, many of whom may themselves be *marabouts*. The Imam and the *marabout* are again different from the village chief, who is the eldest male of a dominant family, usually the founder or
descendant of the founder of the village. In recent decades, under the Socialiast
government of Senegal, the chief is imbued with a small degree of local
executive power.

All official business must be overseen by the village chief, and every year he
and his counterparts from other villages travel to the regional government center
of Podor to report the state of affairs in their respective villages. When the
archaeological team arrived in Thioubalel, for example, it was the chief we
needed to report to; we checked in with the village chief and gave him copies of
our research permits. He made notes of how many we were, and where we
would live. The chief had, incidently, put us all together in what had previously
been a grain storage house; there was no ventilation there and worse yet, no
opportunity for contact with anyone.

Homady continued to tell me about the differences between Imam and
marabout and chief, waited for me to absorb what he told me then patiently
answered my questions. When this was finished, we bid each other good night
and began to retire. In the small talk that is made as roomates begin to fall
asleep, Homady mentioned offhand that he planned to move into the village
tomorrow, into one of the spare huts that an old widowed woman owned. I
immediately asked if I could join him, and he answered that he would be
delighted. The prospect of living in the village greatly appealed to me, because
there I could meet more of the villagers and become more familiar with the things
villagers were doing and how they were living. I realized then, that on every
archaeological project I had ever been on, the most fascinating part for me was
living among the people on who's land we were working. Here again, I would live
with them.
Photo #9- A young village boy imitating a Mauritanian soldier.
INTO THE VILLAGE

Early the next morning, Homady and I packed our few belongings, and left the grain shed. We walked down a well traveled dusty trail into the village, and began snakeing our way down the long, winding alleys between the houses. Thioubalel is built on a levee on the banks of the Sénégal, and halfway through the maze of alleys I noticed the ground began to slope appreciably upwards.

We moved into an empty hut in Madame Jalow’s compound. By rural African standards Madame Jalow was one of the wealthier people in the village. Before her husband had died they had many children. Madame Jalow lived with her three daughters in her compound, and until these three were married, they would all be supported by Madame Jalow five sons, who worked in the corn fields every day. She was happy to have us stay in an empty hut of her compound- I later found that she was hoping that Homady might marry one of her daughters, and hosting a toubab gave her a little added status in the village.

The days that followed brought boredom, and an increasing frustration with the archaeology that I had been sent here to do. It paled in comparison with what I saw going on around me every day. I began to take daily walks through the village after my work was through. At first, predictably, these walks brought throngs of screaming children and young women following me everywhere. Young boys threw pebbles at me to get me to chase them. Young women would accost and harass me in Pulaar, then run away giggling if I tried to follow up with any sort of "conversation" they had initiated. Older men and women usually ignored me, and young men my age would politely nod "hello."

There was one day when I seemed to be drawing a much larger crowd than usual. There were so many children; yelling screaming and dancing.
Photo #10- Madame Jalow's compound.
I remember thinking that some of them must have come from another village just because of the sheer number of them. I liked to walk through the village because the village itself appealed to me. I liked the aesthetics of its construction. There is certainly much Arab-influence in the design of West African architecture, the winding daub alleys would lead to courtyards, some to groups of houses that seemed to flow into one another, some to trash piles, and occasionally to a small pen containing a cow or mare which would turn slowly to face me and stare. I would always get lost in the village, it wasn't very large to be sure, but nevertheless I would get caught in some loop, forgetting which alley I had come down, and continually choosing the wrong one each time I found myself presented with a choice. Most of the time I had a small following of children on these walks, and as they followed me some would drop off and the group would quiet down. Usually I turned around to see a small group of disinterested faces, most not even looking at me. Just following. Bored children with nothing better to do than to follow the *toubab* through the village on a lazy afternoon.

This afternoon however brought a virtual army of children and young women, and their teasing, taunting and screaming was more than I had ever encountered in an African village before. I tried to talk to them, all to no avail. I became annoyed and flustered, and the mob became emboldened by my distress. The cries became more shrill and the women became more cruel in their taunting. Homady had told me once after a group of young women came by to stare at me and laugh that they were asking me in Pulaar if I wanted them and were singing sexually explicit songs. Apparently they found the idea of having sex with a White man tantalizing because it was looked down upon to be promiscuous, especially with a non-Muslim, in an Islamic society, and at the same moment found the idea of sex with a *toubab*, a symbol of past-colonial domination and a strange and alien creature in it's own right, very off-putting.
Many of the songs, dances, manners and habits of women in West African society are very sexual, and to conduct themselves in this manner in front of me was, at the very least, extremely amusing to them. I became increasingly annoyed with the crowd and my distress became evident to them. I just wanted to be left alone on my walks through the village, but here I learned one of the first rules of Africa: one is never left alone in an African village.

Not even the villagers themselves. People do not wish to be alone as they do in my land, and certainly if one is in a village, as opposed to the mosque, the cornfield, or the desert, one does not expect to be left alone. West Africans, as all people, do not particularly enjoy being harassed either, and this became quite clear in the next instant.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two young men, each carrying a long, thin stick, charging out of one of the daub alleyways. The men waded into the mob, and began whipping the children and the women with their sticks and screaming at them in Pulaar to disperse. Within instants, the band of tormenters was gone. The two men shook their heads at me apologetically, said a few words in Pulaar and disappeared into another alley. The only sound remaining was the quiet whimpering of one or two of the beaten children as they staggered home.

It had all happened so fast. One moment, I was engulfed by a haranguing mob, the next surrounded by the quiet mud and fiber walls of a Pulaar village. I knelt down and rubbed my eyes and scalp and tried to figure out what to do next. I didn't know where I was in the village, and had less of an idea as to where to go. After a short while I stood and walked forward.

By some stroke of pure luck, I found Madame Jalow's compound, complete with Madame Jalow pounding millet and looking quite bored. I hopped the thin
fence and crossed into her yard.

"Bonjour Madame Jalow"
"Ça va?"

"Bonjour" she repeated kindly and continued with her work.

Madame Jalow spoke only a few words of French, but was one of the friendliest women in the village.
Photo #11- Madame Jalow touching up her courtyard with the mud and goat feces mixture.
LIFE IN THIOUBALEL

Every day in the afternoon Amadou Hanne and some of the older boys would wander into Madame Jalow's compound and sit with me while I read, wrote in my journal or tended to the dry rot between my toes. We sat in the daub floored courtyard under a twig and leaf veranda which appeared, like everything else in the village to grow, almost like a tree out of the ground.

The boys would pick their teeth and their ears or make sweet green tea, a specialty in this part of the world. Occasionally they gave me friendly advice, when one day for example I washed my clothes, they scolded me as I hung them to dry in the branches of one of the trees in the courtyard. I turned and found them sitting and looking at me with grave expressions shaking their heads negatively. One of them had gotten up and took my tattered clothes away from my hands and gingerly hung them in the branches of another tree.

"Pourquoi?"

I asked the group, not particularly interested. I had come to accept many of what seemed to me as peculiarities in the behavior of the villagers, trusting that somehow they had explanations for everything they did.

One of the seated boys began to speak to me in Pulaar and pointed at a group of goats making their round through the compound. I understood. There were so few bushes left in the Sahel, so few trees left for the goats to graze on, that they would generally eat what ever they could get into their scrawny noisy mouths and swallow— including some unlucky person's clothes. I thanked the boys, who nodded seriously, acting somewhat proud that they had just instilled the toubab with some common sense, and returned to their lazing; picking their teeth, or cleaning their ears with small twigs.
In the late afternoon, when all of their chores were done, five girls would wander through the courtyard adjoining Madame Jalow's, stand and stare at me over the daub wall which separated the two compounds. This was unfortunate, because the wall was adjacent to my hut, and in the late afternoon this was my favorite place to be. I had rigged a hammock between two trees which supported an overhead veranda, and had set one of a few small wooden stools which Madame Jalow kept around her courtyard for guests against the wall of my hut, right next to the hammock.

Every day at this time, usually while I was writing in my journal, The air against my back felt hotter, I turned to find five girls standing staring and grinning. My staring at them in return did nothing to discourage them.

"Degagez." I said dismissively. Get lost.

No reaction.

"Allez eh? Va-t-on!"

The girls remained still- smiling.

I soon learned that no amount of antics, admonitions or anything else could disperse these five. I eventually turned and ignored them, continuing with my writing. What I didn't realize is that these girls would be a permanent feature in this late afternoon landscape. This was just the beginning. They appeared day after day, just standing quietly and smiling, watching every single thing I did, every breath I took. Then one horribly still day, the kind that draw the flies by the millions, a demand came that I will never be able to forget as long as I live. It was uttered by the oldest girl, who could have been no more than sixteen. It turned out it was the only French she knew.
"Donne moi ça."

I turned my head towards them slowly in complete disbelief. The eldest girl was pointing at my pen.

Now, "donne moi ça" is very poor French, and is roughly the English equivalent of "gimme," perhaps "gimme that" if you want to stretch things.

I repeated it over to myself slowly a few times. "Donne moi ça." I began to snicker. "Donne moi ça."

I got out of the hammock and started to laugh slowly, until the eldest girl, still sweetly smiling shrugged her shoulders, opened up her hand, outstretched her palm towards me and said,

"Reguard, eh? Toubab, donne moi ça"

I squatted on the ground and remained perfectly still, but I felt my stomach swell with bottled laughter. When the eldest again pointed to the pen I was holding I burst out gales of laughter. Here I had been, minding my own business and trying to write, and these pesky little girls came up and just demanded my pen.

I suppose through a combination of malnutrition and lack of sleep due to the insomnia I had been having for the past week I found the situation hysterical.

"Donne moi ça" I thought again to myself. "Hey toubab, gimmie."

I burst out in a torrent of laughter this time, and two of Madame Jallow's daughters came to see what the fuss was all about.

After a few seconds I straightened up, wiped the tears from my eyes, looked at the girls with tears swelling in my eyes and my mouth quivering with anticipation and extended my pen to the eldest girl.

She took it, and the five of them walked away.

They just took the pen, I thought. They told me to give it to them, and
Photo #12- Five curious village girls.
I did.

I broke out in a fit of violent laughter this time, and sank to my knees. Madame Jalow's three daughters leaned on each other and giggled at the site of this poor toubab rolling around on the ground contorting with insane laughter.

My spasms continued for well over two minutes. This was, I thought possibly the funniest thing that had ever happened to me.

I lay on the ground, exhausted, wiping my eyes, my laughter slowing down, and feeling the pain in my sides. I began to stare blankly at the ground in front of me.

Smooth dusty tan; a few leaves, one plastic sandal, and my field notebook.

About five minutes later, I heard soft footsteps over the side of the wall that divided the compounds. Five small heads soon appeared above the wall. I looked at them almost with an air of pleading. Not again, please, I thought to myself, just go away. The eldest girl pointed at the lone plastic sandal.

Feeling a growing trembling sensation in my gut, I followed the path of her finger down to the sandal with teary eyes, stared at it momentarily, then looked sideways up at the girls again.

"Donne moi ça" she said smiling.

I exploded with a fit of fresh hysterical laughter and continued the spasm until I was nearly unconscious from lack of air. Sometime during my fit, the girls had left, possibly figuring that the toubab was too far gone to be able to give them anything else on this particular day.

A few moments later, after I had managed to sit up, I heard someone coming up behind me from Madame Jalow's house, I turned to find Madame Jalow walking up to me very slowly with a steaming bowl of bouillie, a concoction resembling porridge, made from rice boiled in goat's milk. She had a look of
grave concern on her face, and her eyes never left me as she gently set the bowl down on the ground before me. Backing off a few paces and staring at me, she made some encouraging gestures to the bowl, gestures as I would imagine one might make when trying to quietly persuade the insane, trying to encourage me to eat it. Perhaps she thought I needed it more that anyone in her family did.

I took it, slightly embarrassed, but really to exhausted to care, and she backed away from me, mouth ajar and eyebrows raised and nodding her head to me affirmatively and gesturing to the steaming bowl of gruel I held in my hand.

I took the stuff inside my hut with me, but I didn't eat it, as there was always a chance of contracting tuberculosis from anything made with fresh milk. I poured it out my window into the goat pen, and went to sleep.

The next day was a Friday and I walked with Homady to the mosque. I waited well outside for the prayers to finish, and just listened to the sound of the prayers inside. The Muezzin's call to prayer each day was nothing short of awe-inspiring as it echoed through the alleys, around the small houses and into the courtyards of the small village. The call had made me curious originally, and for the next two weeks I walked to the mosque with Homady and waited outside for him during the Friday prayers.
Photo #13- Homady on his way to the mosque for Friday prayer.
MOTHER AND CHILD

One afternoon while I was sitting on the communal boxspring that formed the center for social gathering in Madame Jalow's compound, Mbintí, a village farmer's wife, herself somehow related to Madame Jalow, happened by with her two year old daughter Fodé, bouncing in her arms. I had been sitting there in the compound like most afternoons listening to some of Madame Jalow's daughters trying to teach me the Pulaar words for various things, laughing at me historically whenever I tried to reproduce the sounds of the words, when I noticed Mbintí stride in, her face beaming with pride.

"Mbada!" she shouted at the group. Hey! Hello!
"Seli" came the response back from everyone sitting on the box spring.

The women's faces all light up immediately and they all rose to greet Mbintí and admire little Fodé. This commotion even got the attention of Madame Jalow who emerged from her hut and with a matronly stride went over to greet the proud mother and her child.

Madame Jalow and her daughters had all seen Fodé before, and it was such a small village that both Madame Jalow and her three daughters probably saw Mbintí at least once every day. The daughters later told me through Homady that whenever a mother came visiting other women with her child, it was always a special event.

"The life of a small child is very important," Homady told me later, "very often children die here while they are still young."

I believe it was then that I began to understand how important people in this village were to each other. Life, because it was so tenuous suddenly became very important, and even the visit by a mother and her two year old daughter
Photo #14- Madame Jalow and some other village women sitting on the communal boxspring outside her home.
became a cause for a small celebration. While inspecting the baby, Madame Jalow nodded approvingly now and again almost as if to say "so far so good." Of all the women in the village, she had a great deal of experience raising children and many young mothers and mothers-to-be came to her with questions of birth, excision (female circumcision) and child-rearing practices. Though I never witnessed her in any of these roles (nor in all likelihood would I have been allowed to) Madame Jalow was a midwife and also performed many of the excisions when village girls reached puberty.

Excision involves cutting off the lips of the labia to make a girl more sexually appealing to her prospective husband, and is viewed in West African society as a rite of passage into womanhood. It is a common and widespread practice in Africa.

At one point during the gathering, Madame Jalow spoke quickly to one of her younger daughters who ran off quietly and returned a few minutes later with two local boys who knew how to prepare a sweet green tea that is popular in the Saharan regions. The boys began to prepare the tea for everyone as the women sat on the boxspring and began to talk. Soon after the women's conversation began, Fodé fell asleep on a folded *pagne*.

At the end of the gathering, Mbintí insisted that I take some photographs of her with Fodé. I was the only person for hundreds of miles with a camera, and this might be the last chance she would have for a while to have a photograph taken of her with her young child. I took some, and promised that I would send them in the mail soon after I had them developed, though I was unsure just when that would be. Mbintí seemed pleased with the prospect of getting some pictures in the mail at some stage, even though that would eventually entail her making a fifty mile trip to the nearest post office. With Fodé half asleep over her shoulder, Mbintí walked out of the compound amidst cheerful goodbyes.
Photo #15- Mbintí and Fodé, proud mother and her child.
TEA IN THE SAHARA

On one of my daily walks through the winding tan alleys of the village I emerged in a small courtyard close to the mosque. Seated on a mat spread out under the shade of a thorn tree, were six old men sipping green tea and talking quietly.

As I emerged from the alley into their courtyard, they stopped their conversation and turned to stare at me. After hesitating for a moment for fear I had just interrupted something important, I promptly walked over to the group of elders and introduced myself to them, shaking hands with each. They invited me to sit down and have a glass of tea with them. During some initial casual conversation while my tea was being poured, I found that each of them spoke excellent French.

The men told me that every afternoon for the last thirty years they each came to this courtyard to sit, drink tea and discuss the times. They then proceeded to question me-

What was I doing in Senegal?
-in Thioubalel?
-why did I walk around the village every day? (they must have heard)
-why was I sitting outside the mosque during Friday prayers?

I answered each of their questions in turn as fully as I was able- and still they were not satisfied. Politely, after another round of green tea served in shot glasses, they pressed me for more information.

I told them that I had originally come to Thioubalel to learn about the people who had lived here thousands of years ago. I explained that I found it more meaningful to learn about the people who lived here now, and that through my
walks in the village I was able to meet people and talk with them. As for sitting outside the mosque on Fridays, I explained to the elders that I was waiting for my friend Homady, that I was interested to know more about what was going on inside the mosque, but that I also respected their customs, and as a non-believer, I thought it best to wait outside.

The elders told me that it was good for someone to be interested in the ways of Islam, and that it was best for a non-Muslim not to enter a mosque, especially not during the Friday prayer. Their next question for me, somewhat predictably, was what did I believe in? They assumed correctly that I was Christian, but what, they wanted to know, did I really believe in?

This question was harder to answer that their previous ones and I stumbled through an explanation of my disillusionment with Christianity and my proclivity toward agnosticism.

At the end of a good two-or-so hour talk about spirituality with these men they concluded that I was an interesting person to talk to, but that there was a part of myself I needed to examine. From what I understood, they believed that everyone needed to have a god to pray to, a source of supernatural strength.

Just then the four o'clock call to prayer began. The Muezzin and three others were in the minaret of the mosque, hands linked and facing opposite directions. The elders told me that they needed to go to the mosque to pray but asked me to return tomorrow at roughly the same time and continue to talk with them. I agreed.

The next day, I found my way back to the courtyard and found the circle of elders under the thorn tree sipping their green tea from shot glasses. They greeted me and asked me to sit down. One of them asked me what lessons I had been taught as a child. He said he was curious to know how toubab children were raised.
I told the elder that I didn't know exactly what he meant—what sort of lessons?
"Contes" one of the elders clarified; tales, stories.
"Contes?" I asked tentatively.
"Ouais, quelles types des contes?"

I thought carefully. What sort of stories. Legends, stories like Aesop's fables, that's what they must be asking about. All I could think of at the time was the story of the tortoise and the hare; so I told them the story.

The elders listened carefully during my telling of the story and my explanation of the moral "slow and steady wins the race". After I was finished, they praised my story telling and told me that my story was very similar to stories told in Senegal.

They then told me a story about grass in a savannah. The grass that grew near the river was very well watered, and very green. The blades of grass further away from the river's water were far less healthy than their well-fed brothers on the river's edge, and they lived close to a patch of dry, craggly thorn trees.

The elders said that one day the dry grass had asked the green grass to drink less of the water in the soil so that all the grass in the savannah might have enough to drink and be green. The dry grass also told the green grass that if there were ever a fire in the savannah, all the dry grass would burn up. The green grass heard the pleadings of the dry grass but refused to stop drinking up all the water.

"Why should we care if there is a fire?" the green grass asked the dry grass aloofly, "Green grass doesn't burn."

The elders continues their story by telling me that in the weeks and months that followed the green grass continued drinking up all the water, even though there was more than enough to share with the dry grass.

One day during a thunderstorm, a bolt of lightening struck one of the thorn trees in the savannah and set it on fire. The thorn tree burned to the ground and
easily set the dry grass around it on fire. Soon, all of the dry grass in the
savannah was in flames. Because it was so parched, the dry grass burned with
such intensity and heat that the green grass began to dry out even before the
actual flames reached it. When the flames finally did come to the green grass, it
was so dried out that it burned as well.

The proverb that comes from this story, the elders told me, is "the dry grass
can set fire to green grass."

Perhaps to ensure that I understood their story they spelled the meaning of
the proverb out for me.

"If there is trouble around you, you need to pay close attention to it and do
what you can to alleviate it- because chances are, even if you think you are
immune to the trouble at hand, like the green grass did upon talk of a fire, you are
probably very much involved and just as vulnerable as those more closely
involved." The elder explaining the story to me looked into my eyes after he
finished speaking, possibly waiting to answer any questions I might have had.

I thought the elders' story marvelous and I told them this. They agreed with
me modestly, they said that they knew their stories were marvelous.

We began to drink another round of the green tea, there were only three shot
glasses, so only three people could drink at a time. Usually you finished your tea
inside of ten or fifteen seconds, knocking the hot sugary concoction back in two
or three gulps. Each person then handed the empty glass upside down (to
indicate that one shot was enough) to the person pouring the tea, who washed it
quickly in a small pot of water, refilled it with tea and gave it to the next person in
line.

As I was gulping down the last of the tea in my glass, one of the elders asked
me if I ever planned to enter the mosque with the rest of the congregation.
Photo #16- One of the elders of Thioubalel.
This question startled me somewhat, because during the weeks I had been waiting outside the mosque for Homady this thought had been on my mind a great deal. There was something very compelling about the call to prayer, something that seemed very soothing about the way the men performed their ritual ablutions outside the mosque before entering to pray. Hearing the prayers recited fascinated me and made me want to learn more about what was happening in the mosque.

"I haven't gone in because I don't want to upset anyone," I explained again, "I'm not a muslim." I couldn't understand why they had asked me this.

"I see" one of the elders said. He seemed satisfied with my answer. The rest of them sat there looking at me, apparently content as well.

I returned to the elder's courtyard every afternoon for the next few days. There was no more talk about Islam or spirituality. Each afternoon, we greeted each other, drank tea and discussed things. We discussed the war in the Persian Gulf, we discussed the differences between American and Senegalese society, I answered their questions about American politics and they answered mine about day to day life in Thioubalel.

Towards the end of the fourth day, I asked one of them, named Abduli, if Islam brought him peace. There was silence for a moment.

Without changing his expression, or taking his eyes from mine Abduli responded very sincerely "of course."

I thanked them for the tea and bid them each goodbye as usual, then walked back to Madame Jalow's compound to find Homady.

"Homady, tomorrow I want to talk with the Imam, the marabout, O.K.?'"

"Why?" Homady had asked.

"I want to ask him some questions about Islam."

"Why?" Homady asked again.
"I think Islam might be good for me" I answered, too fatigued to be eloquent. "I want to..."

"I want to convert." I said emphatically.

"Are you sure, Evan?" Homady queried.

"Can we talk to the marabout tomorrow?"

"Yes, we can go."

Before I knew it, tomorrow had arrived Homady and I were walking to the marabout's courtyard. Before leaving, Ibu, one of the men who lived next to Madame Jalow's compound told me it was always a good idea to talk with such a learned man. He wished me good luck.

After a brief walk through the village, we arrived Thierno's compound, and I saw him there in the courtyard, surrounded by his talibes, reciting verse. I had entered the courtyard and approached this serious and dignified man. Everyone in the courtyard, the marabout, his wives, his talibes and some of the elders, had all turned to face Homady and me. It was too late to turn back.
THE MARABOUT

"Il dit que," Homady halted; there was noticeable tension after the marabout spoke, Homady looked down from my gaze and glanced nervously around at the dusty ground as he repeated the marabout's words in French.

"Tu a besoin de couper ton zizi..."

"Mon zizi? But I told you..."

I understood then. Homady was surprised yesterday when I told him I was circumcised, and had laughed.

"Well then", he had said, "there is no problem..."

I felt now that he had said that just so I'd be happy, but he didn't really believe me. White people were never circumcised. He had wanted to make me happy and now the marabout called my claim into question. No one was willing to take my word for it.

"Is he worried that I'm not circumcised?" I asked him. "Does he think that I'm lying?"

I didn't need to wait for any reply from my friend. He was looking very troubled and quite awkward. I think he was a bit ashamed that no one was willing to take my word for it.

"Come on.." I said to Homady while standing up.

I took him by the arm and pulled him to the side of the shed, out of public view.

"D'accord", he said.

His eyes had remained to the ground as we walked to the shed, he had glanced at my penis, then quickly up to the side as he turned to walk back to the
group. He was clearly embarrassed by this whole situation. One of the elder students watched us from a distance and had evidently seen what he needed to from that distance, and reported this to the marabout. One of the young talibes had seen it too, and with a very surprised look on his face had exclaimed something in Pulaar. The marabout and his contingent heard what the boy had said and laughed. Rejoining them, I found them all smiling, quite content and ready to move on. All except for Homady. He was still quite embarrassed. I found out later that the boy had said something like "Wow! it's white!", possibly he had expected the other body parts of the toubab to be "normal" in their coloration.

The marabout told me about the five pillars of Islam.

"One pillar a day" Homady said. "The marabout wants you to truly understand what you are trying to do."

On Sunday he told me about Salat, the need to pray five times a day. "It will keep you filled with Allah's will", the marabout explained through Homady, "If you do not pray often, you will begin to stray from Allah's will."

On Monday he told me about Zakat, the need to give money to those who needed it at the close of each year. "We are all the same, no one is another's superior. Shatan (Satan) makes some people rich and keeps others poor to make us forget that we are all the same. Giving money to the poor is one way you can frustrate Shatan's will, and humble yourself at the same time."

On Tuesday he told me about the Hadj, that I must try to go to Mecca at least once in my life to make the pilgrimage and honor Mohammed the Prophet, peace be upon Him. He told me that while in this day and age many people fly to the holy city, there were still many traditional ways of getting there.

I remembered seeing the dhows of East Africa and hearing about how some
still sailed up the coast and eventually to Oman. I remembered reading about the
great camel caravans caring African nobles which worked their way across the
Sahel and Sahara to some port in Egypt to continue on to Arabia.

The marabout also spoke of Ramadan on this day.

"Ramadan is not actually a pillar of Islam, and so I will not wait another day
before I tell you about it," the marabout began.

"I know what Ramadan is!" I told him triumphantly.

I explained that one waited until Venus first appeared as the evening star
within the first sliver of the moon as it moved out of its new phase into the first
quarter. I told the marabout that this sign heralded a month of fasting and
intense prayer aimed at purifying the soul and instilling us with humility and a
taste of suffering to strengthen our convictions. No one may eat or even take
water between sunrise and sunset.

Finishing my display of knowledge, I sat smiling, waiting for approval. The
marabout sat and stared at me, listing to the last words of Homady's translation.
For a few instants Thierno's gaze did not change. His plump face lay in the same
expression. He then made a pensive "Hmm" noise, and proceeded to tell me
through Homady that he was impressed that a White boy knew so much about
Islam. I reminded him that I had studied Islam in university several times, and
that I had read the Qur'an once before in English.

"This is good" the marabout said through Homady while abruptly standing.
"Make certain that you come here tomorrow for your lesson."

I assured him that I would and I left the marabout's compound feeling quite
pleased with myself. His asking me to be sure to come to the next lesson was the
first sign that he was interested in my conversion. That he was taking it, and me,
seriously.

On Wednesday he told me about Jihad, or holy war, and that the most
common kind of *Jihad* was war against the evil in one's self. To practice *Jihad*
requires courage, the *marabout* explained, you must not be afraid to recognize
your own short-comings and ask Allah to help you fight against them.

"Simplicity above all things", the *marabout* spoke, "to help you keep a simple
life and to keep your thought clear you must avoid certain poisons which will
contaminate your life." He continued by warning me not to eat carrion, any meat
that was not prepared according to Muslim practice and never to drink alcohol.
Pork, and the meat of any animal which scavenged, such as vultures and
hyenas, was to be avoided because the animals were considered unclean.

Muslim dietary practice has very little to do with the actual religious
philosophy of Islam. The dietary restrictions are a cultural trait of the original
practitioners of Islam, the Semitic peoples, most formerly anamists, some
formerly Jews, of western Arabia. The steps taken during the slaughter of
animals necessary for their meat to be fit for human consumption under Muslim
belief closely parallel the procedure taken for meat to be kosher under Jewish
dietary law.

The *marabout* told me through Homady that if I were ever starving that I
could eat anything normally taboo and it would not be a sin. He said Allah cared
about me and didn't want me to suffer needlessly. Allah knew what I was thinking
and I never had to worry about being judged unfairly by Him.

On Thursday, I went to the *marabout's* compound as usual, to receive my
tutelage, but found a very somber crowd. I sat down opposite him on the reed
mat, followed immediately by Homady, ever-ready to translate. The *marabout*
looked seriously at me, and his contingent of village elders and *talibes*, loitered
around restlessly.

He looked into my eyes at length with a concerned and tired stare, though his
face was round and plump, the lines on his face showed his age.
His gaze was deep, his face looked almost sad. He looked at me, into me, for a while. I had already made up my mind about this man. I liked him, he was kind, a genuinely good man, and somehow he reminded me of my father. He began to speak slowly in Pulaar to Homady, though his gaze never left me.

"Il dit que," Homady began to translate. He began every translation this way. Homady. I couldn't have done without him.

"He says that he thinks you have a good heart, but that your spirit is haunted, and is looking for a place to rest. He thinks that you will come to be a good man but that your spirit must first find peace."

Silence, except for the dim howl of the wind.

It took me a few moments to go over what Homady had told me. Pulaar thoughts to Pulaar words to French words finally into English thoughts. I understood, and was amazed at how close to my situation I felt the marabout had come. He had crystallized in words something I am still coming to terms with.

"God can bring peace to your spirit" the marabout continued,

"If you submit to His will, God can give your spirit a home and will guide you in your life."

All the time that the marabout spoke, or that Homady translated, the holy man was looking into my eyes. I know he believed completely in what he was saying, and made anyone listening to him believe as well. If he could understand
such an inner conflict, there must be truth in what he said. The beauty of what he was saying, the care on his face, the gentleness in his voice when he spoke reached me in a way that I had not experienced before in Africa, indeed, in any place before in my life.

"Do you understand what I have told you about Islam?"

The marabout's slow and purposeful French words surprised me- awoke me- he had always been looking at me, talking to me, but his words might as well have been English for the degree to which they surprised me.

"Yes, I think I do."

"You will find it impossible to turn back once you have started down this path" he warned, through Homady.

"I think I understand, and I want to start down the path."

"Al Hamd li Allah" someone spoke. Praise be to God.

"Do you know how to make the ablutions?"

"Yes."

"Make them."

He snapped his fingers and one of the talibes ran for an old copper kettle filled with stale river water.
I got up from the mat and walked to the middle of the courtyard where the boy with kettle stood. As I approached, another boy ran up with a stool for me to sit on while performed the ablutions. I began.

I poured some of the cool river water from the kettle into my cupped hand and took it into my mouth.

I spat it out with the opening word of the Qur'anic Suras.

"Bismillah." In The Name of God.

In West Africa before the traditional pre-prayer ablutions are made, one sips the ablution water into the mouth and spits it out with the word "Bismillah". This is not traditional Islamic practice. Spraying water out of the mouth is a symbolic act common to West Africa- it symbolizes the purging of anger and evil thoughts. I found it interesting that it had been incorporated into religious practice.

I continued by washing my right hand three times, then my left three times. Next I poured the water from the kettle into my cupped right hand and sipped it into my mouth. I moved it around my mouth, brushed my teeth with my finger and spat it out- I repeated this twice more. Next, I took water from the kettle into my cupped right hand and cleaned out my nose with it, three times. I then washed over my face three times, washed over each arm, right, then left, three times. Next I took water in my cupped hand and washed over my head, once. Then I washed my ears together (using both hands) once. I finished the ablutions by washing my feet, right then left, three times each.

The marabout, the elders and the talibes all watched me while I did this- I turned and saw some of them nodding approvingly. They motioned for me to
return to the mat.

"Now the final pillar of Islam, Shi'ahada, is something that you must believe with all of your heart," the marabout began to explain, "above all else that I have told you about Islam, above all else Islam holds sacred is the belief that there is only one God, Allah, and Muhammed was his last prophet."

"Je comprends" I said.

"Shi'ahada is the utterance of this belief," the marabout continued, by repeating this after me three times you take it into your heart as truth."

All the time while the marabout was explaining this to me, two of the older talibes, crouching on the reed mat behind him, were busy washing a vaguely rectangular-shaped board. These boards were used mostly by talibes in learning how to write Qur'anic passages. They were wooden boards coated with a thin wash of clay. When dry, the students would practice writing passages with ink on the clay. The boards were very practical because they were reusable. The Qur'an is a sacred text and any piece of paper or other object upon which is written The Name of God must be protected from deliberate or accidental disrespect or defilement. For example, in many Muslim countries, people are discouraged from using their old newspapers for wrapping old food remains for disposal, or being thrown away with their garbage because the pages might contain The Name of God or a quote from a Sura.

Such is also the case with the water used to wash the clay and ink from student's copy boards. The two elder students were collecting the used water in a small clay pot. After they had finished the placed the now-blank copy boards against a small hut and placed the clay pot with the sacred water by the marabout's side.

"Take my hand now and repeat" the marabout told me through Homady.

I extended my hands and he took them in his, huge, corpulent and calloused.
"Ash ha du Allah Ilaha il Allah, ash ha du ana Muhammad rasul Allah" he spoke the flowing Arabic while never taking his piercing eyes from mine. I looked directly back at him and repeated the verse.

I bear witness that there is no god but The One God, I bear witness that Muhamed is The Prophet of God.

He repeated the verse twice more, and twice more I repeated it after him.

The marabout then picked up the small clay pot filled with the clay water from the copying boards, dipped his hand into it, and began gently washing my forehead. While he was doing this he was chanting in Pulaar.

As there is no direct equivalent of baptism in Islam, I believe this ritual was a vestige of traditional Pulaar practice.

"C'est ça" the marabout said, almost like "Well, that's that."

"Now we here welcome you into the folds of Islam, every Muslim on this planet is your brother and your equal."

"Adjarama" I said thank you to him in Pulaar smiling, "Merci."

"Maintenant," Homady interjected, "tu as besoin de prendre un nom Islamique..."

"Ahh ouais..." the group murmured in consent. I needed to take a Muslim name.

"Yusuf?" someone suggested.

"Ibrahim?" someone else offered.

"...d'accord..." I thought for a moment, and remembered the name of a distinguished older man I had met the previous summer on Zanzibar.

"Suliêman" I said decisively. That was it. I liked that name. There were loud murmurs of consent and approval from the small group of elders and students.

"Welcome brother Suliêman" the marabout spoke directly to me in French.

"In the name of God, welcome."
Photo #17- The marabout and the author after his conversion. Pictured is a clay board inscribed with Al-Fatiha.
After handshakes were exchanged, the group dispersed, and I walked back to
my hut from the marabout's compound feeling quite content. I was looking
forward to learning more about this new world I had entered into, looking forward
to tomorrow, Friday, when I would first enter the mosque during the "Grande
Prière." The afternoon prayer on Fridays, like the Sunday morning mass in the
Christian church, is the main prayer in Islam. Many of the less devout muslims in
the village made this their weekly trip to the mosque. I walked down one of the
main straw paths and right about to turn into the small dusty courtyard of
Madame Jalow's compound when I heard Madame Jalow yelling at one of her
sons. Her thirty year old Musa had come to her for advice on a certain matter,
and was now in the process of getting it.

He listened seriously, about seven inches from her face, which was contorted
with rage, alternately disgust, spit flying occasionally from her thick lips, as she
spoke her mind on the issue that Musa had come seeking advice about. This
"motherly counsel" went on for about twenty minutes, during which time I seated
myself a short distance away under the veranda and watched this display with no
little amusement.

In the late afternoon sunlight I waited patiently; I wanted to tell her what just
happened to me, that I had just seen the Imam of Thioubalel, the marabout, but
I soon remembered that she spoke no French. I couldn't tell her anything!

After a bit she finished yelling and ended her monologue with an emphatic
"Uuhl!", Musa took this as his cue and walked quickly away from his mother, eyes
to the ground. I had been sitting outside under the veranda watching her lecture
her son, so I could not just walk away; she knew I must have had some business.
I thought quickly, skipped into my hut and emerged moments later with a large
bag of peanuts and presented them to her. Her eyes shot to the bag and her
mouth broke into a large, toothy, open smile. Her disposition changed
immediately.

"Ahhh bon!" she exclaimed.

"Adamuji Madame Jalow, adjarama." I spoke one of the few Pulaar phrases I knew. "You are nice, Madame Jalow, thank you."

"Ahh.." she repeated smiling and nodding her head to me. I could tell that she really was quite pleased with her gift. She would it to make a peanut sauce called Mafé, which would be served over rice or cous-cous. Peanut sauce is a common dish in West Africa. The only real alternative is fish sauce, which in my experience, is horrid. Because food is precious in regions that have to import large amounts of it annually to ward off mass starvation, sauces are sensible alternatives to whole meals. Instead of each family member eating a plateful of meat, vegetables and rice, meat and vegetables are cooked into a peanut or fish sauce and served over rice, cous-cous or millet. The total amount of meat or vegetables that go into preparing a sauce is much less than that which would need to be divided among a large extended family.

I watched Madame Jalow take her peanuts and walk towards her house, still eyeing them and mumbling approvingly. I would have to wait until word got out about my conversion before I could begin talking to the villagers about it. As it turned out, I did not have to wait long.
LA GRANDE PRIERE

There was a small supply *boutique* in a town called Peté about twenty miles or so from Thioubalel and I had gone there early in the morning with some of the villagers. We needed batteries, some new kerosene lamps and a few cans of *lait condensé sucré* which I needed to make the coffee-flavored hot water which I drank in the morning palatable. I returned to Thioubalel around eleven in the morning, and as I finished locking up the truck, a man in a brown *boubou* approached me and shook my hand. I did not recognize him but was not surprised, as hand shaking and greeting among strangers is common place in Africa.

"*Aujourd'hui c'est vendredi,*" he began in halting French, "*tu vas aller à la mosquée?*

Just then I realized that he was the *marabout*. I hadn't recognized him without his *kaflia* and small white skullcap.

"*Ahh bien sure*" I said, my eyes now wide with recognition. "*Oui, je vais aller à la mosquée.*"

The *marabout* nodded solemnly in approval and continued along his way.

Today was indeed Friday and this would be my first time to pray in the mosque. I was slightly nervous, for I wanted everyone to know that I was serious, but I couldn't readily communicate with the villagers unless they spoke French, and nearly every man in the village would be in the mosque today. There was potentially a lot of room for confusion, and that was the last thing I wanted. Ibu had told me before I converted that it was sacrilegious for a non-Muslim to enter a mosque, much less to enter during the central prayer.

Though many Muslim countries open their mosque's doors to tourists, in the strict sense, a non-believer, because he or she is considered unclean will defile
a mosque. In any case, the presence of a non-Muslim during the central prayer would be insulting at the least to the believers present. I was worried about a misunderstanding developing. I was worried that I'd forget a critical step in the prayer ritual, or I'd make a mistake in pronunciation during the prayers. I never felt more like an outsider than before I entered the mosque at Thiouba-lel.

While Whites are aliens in Africa, they do have a place there. There is an acceptable social role for the White in Africa, the *toubab*. Whites are expected in Africa, sometimes eagerly anticipated, often dreaded, but always expected. They are ugly, with big noses and thin, stringy hair, they wear funny clothes, they speak strange, hissing languages, and they have lots of money and other "little things." Lots of "little things." Sometimes the Whites give their "little things" to Africans. They give them their calculator wristwatches, their flashlights, their radios, their guns. By being White I had a defined place in African society. I was the *toubab*, and was expected to act like one.

*Toubabs* did not enter mosques.

I was about to cross over into a very critical, very sacred part of the villagers world. I was renouncing my defined, socially accepted role as the *toubab*, and trying to become something neither African nor *toubab*. Something in between. I was not sure what the ramifications of this might be.

I asked Ibu what time he planned to go to the mosque; I knew the prayer started at two-thirty, but I wanted to go with someone I knew. Ibu thought that this was a good idea. He told me to meet him outside his hut at about quarter-past two and we would make the ablutions, then go to the mosque together. It sounded to me like a good plan. I went back to my hut and found Mustafa, a Senegalese archaeology student and devout Muslim, sitting with Madame Jalow's son Musa under the veranda. Mustafa was wearing his Dakar clothes, his fancy polyester running suit and shoes, and had his *boubou* folded neatly on the
ground next to him. He saw me as I walked into the courtyard and stood up with his boubou. I exchanged greetings with him and Musa.

"Suliêman," Mustafa began, "prends le boubou, c'est bon pour la mosquée, pour le Grande prière."


I took the garment and went into my hut to change. When I re-emerged a few minutes later, 'Stafa had disappeared along with Musa. I looked at the courtyard, usually buzzing with Madame Jalow's grandchildren, visitors, chickens and goats. It was now completely empty. Feeling a little scared I slipped on my sandals and walked to Ibu's hut.

I found Ibu outside his hut, stretching- he had apparently just woken up from a nap. He was wearing a hooded robe which he had acquired in Morocco during his Hadi. He saw me, his eyes widened, said "Ahh!" and produced a small skullcap out of one of his pockets.

"Mon premier cadeaux" he said.

"Merci" I said and put it on.

The two of us walked over to a small bench where Ibu kept his water bottle, and we began the ritual bath. We finished about twenty-five past two, slipped our sandals back on, adjusted our skullcaps and proceeded down the dusty path to the village center.

We passed through the winding alleys, past homesteads and yards. They were the same as always, a few lazy animals, a few bored children. This time however, the children just stared as Ibu and I walked passed them. No cries of "toubabou" or any of the usual antics. I'm not wholly sure why, perhaps they had never seen a toubab in a boubou before.
Photo #18- The author performing the ritual ablutions before the prayer.
Ibu and I continued on our way until we came to the village center. It must have been around two-thirty then because just as the mosque came into view the Muezzin's call was heard; loud and echoing:

\[ \text{Allah-h-h-h hua ackba-a-a-r-r Allah-h-h-h hua ackbar} \]

The village center was filled with the faithful, many dressed in elaborate boubous with magnificent turbans coiled around their heads, all gravitating to the mosque. The mosque itself stood out majestically in the bright afternoon sunshine. It was the most splendid structure for miles around.

It was then that I was the most afraid. It was too late to turn back now, I was going in. Ibu must have sensed my apprehension, for he took my hand then. Walking together hand in hand, we approached the entrance to the mosque, a small arched doorway in the west side of the structure. I was looking at all of the serious and strange people coming in closer to us as we all neared the entrance. My heart was pounding faster in my chest as I felt the familiar heat of huddled, sweaty bodies crowding around me but Ibu was relaxed, just smiling and looking ahead, mumbling the occasional "Ahh bon", "ahh oui, oui", "mmm c'est bon."

We took off our sandals and left them on a small platform right outside the entrance. There were various kettles of water laying about the small courtyard of the mosque for those who did not do their ablutions at home. When our turn came to enter, Ibu ushered me in first.

"Allez" he said softly with a gentle smile on his face.

I spoke "Bismillah" into my hand softly then touched my forehead as was expected upon entering. Homady had told me about that custom earlier. Ibu entered behind me and with a hand on my back directed me to one of the uncompleted rows of people, and we knelt down together.

In a mosque before the prayer begins, muslims kneel together shoulder to
shoulder in horizontal rows facing the kiblah, a small alcove in the wall of the mosque that faces Mecca. In West Africa the kiblahs face East.

Ibu sat at my right and a stranger immediately took his place at my left. He extended his hand to me, I took it gently, he retracted it and brought it along with his other hand to his chest and covered his heart in a symbol of sincerity and brotherly love.

Following his example, I returned the gesture. The mosque filled rapidly, soon I was surrounded by a sea of black faces; the sounds of muttered prayers, coughs, belches and flatulations. One old man in front of me turned around to face me slowly. His face seemed proportionately small on his head, his small beady bloodshot eyes scanned my face and body- his small features indicated great surprise. Though I shyly looked to the ground, I could still feel him scrutinizing me.

A man began to chant in the front of the congregation. Another came around between rows of the congregation with a small cloth bag which served as a collection plate. Only a few of the people put anything in the bag. When the man passed our row, Ibu put a coin in.

After a few minutes I became aware of some movement in the northeast corner of the mosque. On the outside of the mosque along the northeast corner was a small opening just big enough for one person to fit through. This passage evidently led to a corridor which then led into the interior northeast section of the mosque.

Out of this corridor emerged the same marabout who had converted me, who had appeared in toned-down Islamic street clothes to ask if I were coming to the mosque today. That same man was now dressed in majestic flowing white robes, an elaborately knitted skull cap, a red and white kafiah around his neck, caring an ornately decorated silver-plated staff.
He gathered a length of the white cloth from around his neck and tossed it over his head, covering his skullcap. The marabout walked gracefully to the front of the congregation.

"Salaam alekum" the marabout spoke to us in customary Islamic greeting, situating himself in front of the kiblah.

"Alekum salaam" came the chorused reply from the congregation. The marabout turned and walked into the kiblah. We rose, heads bowed, as he began a benediction, followed by Al-Fatiha, the opening Sura of the Qur'an and roughly equivalent to The Lord's Prayer in Christianity.

I breathed with some relief as I realized that I would not actually have to say the prayers at anytime alone in front of the congregation, where I would be bound to make an embarrassing mistake. We all said "Amin" together at the end of the marabout's recitation, and genuflected in unison. The marabout said a few more prayers and we genuflected again at the end of these. I found out later that the other two prayers said were Al An'am (The Cattle) and Al Naml (The Ants). These had no special significance other than he fact that they were simply chosen as the prayers to be said for this day.

After these prayers were said, the marabout turned on his knees to face the congregation. He lowered his head and began mumbling to himself. I noticed that everyone else in the mosque was doing the same. They were reciting al Hamd li Allah (praise be to God) and Allah hua Ackbar (God is greatest) thirty-three times each. Many of them were using small strings of prayer beads to keep count. After this, the marabout got up from his knees and sat on a small wooden stool just to the left of the kiblah. Again, the sounds of burps and nose clearing could be heard.

We were about to begin what is perhaps the most important part of the Friday afternoon prayer, the discussion. Here, every Friday, the elder villagers of
Thioubalel, many of whom were the ones who sat under the ancient thorn tree in the yard right outside the mosque, held a discussion of current events and decisions that needed to be made within the village. I heard the thin, raspy voice of an old man towards the front. He was asking the marabout a question, or so it seemed from his intonation. It was a short question, and the only word I understood in the sentence was "toubab."

They were talking about me.

Some of the other people around the man who was speaking turned around to stare at this white boy who stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb in their midst. Several people gave me odd, disgusted and surprised looks, the village elders in the front row never once glanced back. I wondered if they were too embarrassed to acknowledge me; they had known I planned to come this Friday...

The marabout began to speak, to explain my situation to the congregation—while this was happening, many of the same people who had been scrutinizing me before turned again to look at me with lips and brows turned in pensive, approving shapes; nodded to themselves and at me. After his brief explanation, the marabout gestured suddenly to me to stand up. Ibu softly urged me to stand quickly, almost as if he had anticipated the marabout's wish.

I stood.

The marabout continued to speak as I stood there, gesturing to me occasionally. The group murmured in unison after every so often during the marabout's explanation of the toubab in their mosque. I could see the serious expressions on their faces, eager to hear their spiritual leader give explanation, and ultimately accepting it with more affirmative murmuring. Finally the marabout gestured for me to sit down. With Ibu half tugging at my boubou, I
did. Ibu always liked things to go smoothly, or perhaps he just wanted a potentially strained situation to be over as quickly as possible.

Nevertheless, the discussion continued, Ibu telling me softly what was being said. It was a discussion of the times, current events, disagreements between members of the village. In short, the news of the village. Unlike a mere news presentation, however, solutions were found, and disagreements were settled, all according to the village elders' interpretation of Islamic law.

It is common in traditional African societies for the village elders to settle disputes among their villagers according to the laws of their society. It is also a characteristic of Sunni Islam that the elder community, not solely the spiritual leader, as is the case in Shi'ism, interprets Islamic philosophy and law and decides how its principles should be applied to the every day lives of their people. Thus, this characteristic of Sunni Islam meshes very well with traditional African culture in this case, and maintains the solidarity of the village.

The marabout and the community of elders determine the internal politics of the village, and since most of the villagers feel more affinity with their own society and cultural heritage than with the Socialist Senegalese government, the marabout's power and influence are in effect greater than the government "chiefs" and rarely stop at the village lines.

After about three quarters of an hour, the discussion was ending, and people began to stir. The marabout made his exit through the small corridor which led to the northeast entrance.

I rose with Ibu and felt a hand tug at my shoulder. I turned around and saw a smiling older man, wearing a bouba, prescription sunglasses, and a red and white kafiah in place of a skull cap.

"Felicitaciones" he said.

"C'est le père de Seli" Ibu told me. Seli was one of the workmen on the archaeological team. I saw the family resemblance immediately. Ibu continued
taking me around the inside of the mosque introducing me to the brothers and fathers of our workmen. I had forgotten that we had so many workmen.

"Suliëman!" spoke another voice, I turned and saw one of the elders with whom I drank tea every day.

"Suliëman!" He repeated, "C'est bon Suliëman!"

"Trés bien mon frère!" said another one of the elders. I recognized just who they were now- the small circle of congenial old men whom I had stumbled upon-these were the elders of Thioubalel, the law making body, the ones to take over as Imam should the marabout be away or be ill, the keepers of tradition, the sorcerers, the real rulers of the land. They all crowded around me now, laughing, touching my shoulders, taking my hands.

"Al Hamd li Allah" another of the laughing elders cried, wiping a tear from his eye with the sleeve of his boubou.

Gradually, Ibu myself and the others moved to the back of the mosque towards the door. I was extremely touched that the elders had displayed this much interest and happiness in my conversion. I think the time since I had first mentioned my interest in Islam to them and now had been spent waiting to see if I were serious in my conviction. From their genuinely joyful reaction, I felt as though they had been hoping all along that I was.

Hand in hand with Ibu, and with the elders touching my shoulders, we emerged from the mosque into the afternoon sunshine. Instead of the dwindling crowd that usually existed after the Friday afternoon prayer, I saw a sea of people congregated outside, many with umbrellas erected over them as shields against the unrelenting heat of the day.

Upon emerging from the mosque I heard a noise that sounded like the crashing of an enormous tidal wave against a beach.
I looked up and saw a sea of people in the dusty yard surrounding the mosque. They were all shouting and smiling, and all looking, I will always remember, directly at me.

"Sulieman!" The crowd erupted.

In addition to the entire congregation, the wives, children, and grandchildren of the villagers, had been waiting outside for me; out of this mass of people I saw Madame Jalow and her daughters, Amadou and his family, and some other people in the village I had seen before.

They were cheering.

I stood there, motionless, my foot half into one of my plastic sandals that I had left earlier. Ibu remained at my side, holding my hand, wearing a grin that might have stretched across Africa.

I looked at him, dazed, as if for explanation. He looked back at me, his teeth shining in the bright afternoon sunshine, and said,

"Ici c'est ta nouvelle famille."

Here was my new family. Ibu forgot all about our plastic sandals, one of which was still trailing on the big toe of my right foot, and led me into the group.

Laughing children rushed up to touch me or cling to my boubou, young men with serious expressions came up to shake my hand while girls and young women laughed, and circled around me crying

"Sulieman! Sulieman-i-il!"

"Bismillah Sulieman!!"
Photo #19- The author with some of the village elders outside the mosque.
The marabout and the elders, somehow they had done this. The elders had
told their wives and children, who told their spouses and children. They had
told essentially everyone in the village about me, they had told them that a toubab
had joined their community, and instructed them to come to the mosque and
greet me.

And this was the greeting.

People continued to mass around me, laughing children, respectful boys and
young men, and elders with patient, satisfied smiles on their faces. Old, old men,
eyes milkey with cataracts, all seemed to be saying "Suliéman, Suliéman...
merci mon frère, merci"

One young man, a tallibe I remembered from my visits to the marabout's
house, approached me and softly shook my hand in a strange way. I realized as
he withdrew, that he had put a ten franc coin into my palm- I never figured out
quite why he did this, but it touched me just then that he wanted to give me
something- not sell it, or demand something in return for it, but just give it. I
hugged him immediately- which caused the level of laughter and cheering to rise,
and the number of hands on my shoulder to double.

Just like a stare, or a teasing frenzy, in any event where the masses are
involved, emotions snowball. They had seen my stunned, overwhelmed
expression when I had emerged from the mosque and met them to the cries of
my new name. I don't imagine the joy I felt at this reception was reflected by my
facial expression; I was still too infused with surprise, but the people sensed my
feelings, and were encouraged.

Their cheering and laughter intensified.

Every one of them knew, to some degree, that what I must be feeling,
certainly what any of them would be feeling in this situation. This was the best
feeling anyone could hope for in their lives, especially in African society where
the most feared and hateful situation any of them could conceive of was to be utterly outcast and isolated. This was the feeling of being completely embraced, literally, by an entire community.

Choruses of "Salaam Alekum" filled the still afternoon air. Some of the older people therein this community people need never walk, eat or sleep alone. Kinship and friendship ties bind them together in simple solidarity as a community, and in the face of the daily hardships these people endure, it is one of their greatest strengths. They had, at least in word, just expanded that community to include me, and from the looks of it, were very, very happy to do so.

I had been frightened a few times during the conversion process, frightened that the marabout would think I was not serious, frightened that the villagers would think that I was trying to make a mockery of their faith, I was full of self-doubts and general low self-esteem. I only wanted to be thought serious, to become gradually accepted into their community, I did not expect this. And in fact this is all they had done, one elder later explained to me, they had only accepted me as a part of their community. There were many things they were not sure of; if I would remain faithful to Islam, if I were possessed of ill will, or if I were a jealous person, as some people in the community were. They would have to wait until after I lived and grew with them for a while. But they had accepted me, and this is what acceptance was to them, complete and unreserved. They are a community which does not allow its members to ever walk, eat or sleep alone.

Older women, warm smiles on their tired faces, emerged here and there through the laughing and cheering crowd, placed their hands to their hearts, and spoke a Pulaar greeting;

"Mbadal! Sulëman, Bismillah..."

"Adjarama..." I managed to say to each of them.
Gradually the crowd thinned and eventually dispersed. I wandered back to Madame Jalow's compound, ate an early dinner and went to sleep. My name was now Suliëman, but my stomach still belonged to a toubab. I was sick through the night and into the next day.
Photo #20- Homady and his friends after a Friday prayer.
THE FOLLOWING WEEKS

During the weeks that followed, life continued for me in the village much as it had done before my conversion, except that now people called me Suliëman, instead of "Avott" (the nearest approximation of "Evan" that they could manage), or simply "toubab." I began to work off and on in the fields during the early part of the day with some of the villagers, particularly Amadou's older brothers. I would work from about eight o'clock in the morning to about half-past twelve in the afternoon- after this time the sun got too hot and I was exhausted. I wasn't very productive at all, the first day I tried, I tore the palms of my hands open on the hand-hoes that we used to turn the hard and sandy soil over.

Moreover, I was generally exhausted from the intense heat that existed in the Sahel even in the shade, I was being sick every other day or so either from heat stroke or from mild food poisoning. What I did eat was not terribly nutritious, rice, small dry vegetables, and an occasional lump of dried fish. Mafé- my favorite dish- was a peanut sauce over rice or cous-cous- but this dish only appeared every other week.

Amadou came by every day in the early afternoon and would sit with me in Madame Jalow's courtyard while I read or wrote in my journal. It turned out that Amadou was related to the marabout on his father's side, and shared the same last name. Amadou's family officially adopted me, and informed me that my name was now Suliëman Hanne. The marabout was pleased and I was flattered. In the afternoons Amadou would try to teach me the Pulaar names for things. As always, Madame Jalow's daughters would laugh at my butchering of Pulaar words and phrases.

In the later afternoons, after Amadou's visit, I would stroll through the daub alleyways of which I now had a fairly good mastery to the elders
Photo #21- Amadou Hanne (center standing) and some of his family.
courtyard. There, we would either drink tea and engage in philosophical discussions about life and religion, or we would go next door to the marabout's courtyard, where I would practice my prayers with the marabout.

Everyone I met in the village after my conversion expressed their sincere happiness with my choice to turn to Islam. On one of my walks through the village with Amadou, he translated for me when we encountered a group of married women on their way back from market. They repeated the words for "thank you" to me and told me that I could live with them in their houses if I ever needed to. This one group of women asked me to take a picture of them in their Islamic finery. I agreed to, and waited for them while they changed their clothes. They soon re-emerged from their houses complete with full-length pagnes, shawls and prayer beads.

Even Madame Jalow seemed to have been inspired by my conversion. In the days and weeks following my first appearance in the mosque, she and her daughters would appear in their shawls kneeling on prayer mats facing the mosque during the two-thirty prayer. This was, I might add, the only time I was in her compound, except to sleep. Perhaps it was meant for me to see.

If one is not in the mosque during prayer, one prays facing the mosque, rather than facing toward Mecca. I never saw Madame Jalow or her daughters pray in the compound before my conversion, perhaps in her motherly way Madame Jalow thought it best to set a good example for me.

During one visit to the marabout's courtyard, the elders and I came across one of the elder talibes reciting the Qur'an from memory. He was chanting it, just like the first time I saw him that evening in the Sahel. The elders and I sat and listened until the student was finished. The sound of the words was beautiful and moved many of the elders in the courtyard to tears. The marabout told me
through one of the elders that singing the Qur’an was possibly the most beautiful experiences that any human being could have in his mortal life.

The marabout began to teach me over the next few days how to chant one of the Suras. I practiced over the next few days, and chanted with the marabout and the elders during the six o'clock prayer during the nights.

At that time of day, when the dying sunlight filtered into the mosque through the multitude of octagonal openings over the arches of the doors. The floating dust in the mosque was lit by the soft beams of evening light which shone gently inside. Just after the six o'clock prayer, the marabout and the elders would roll out a length of white cloth towards the front of the mosque and form a circle around it. We would then begin to chant, beginning with Al-Fatiha, until about eight o'clock. I could chant Al-Fatiha, and a few of the other passages with the group, but had to hum like a drone to the rest of the chants.

This twilight chanting became an event that I looked forward to every day. The chanting was almost hypnotic, it was extremely relaxing, and I could empty my mind of everything while I was chanting with the elders of Thioubalel. One day I asked the one of the elders who spoke French what a certain passage meant.

"How do you feel when you chant it?" he asked me in return.

"I feel quite... quite good when I chant it." I replied.

"It doesn't matter what it means in words," the elder explained, perhaps he did not even know- perhaps he did not need to.

"...the Suras are all about life in the mortal world," the elder continued, "they are like life itself; you don't have to understand them, you just have to sing".
BLOOD ON A CRESCENT MOON

A light in the window is a crack in the sky,
A stairway to darkness in the blink of an eye...
- Ozzy Osbourne
"No More Tears"

The screams never stopped.

Driving up the dust road to the excavation like every other morning, river to my right, supplies and workmen in the back of the truck, half asleep.

At the wheel-half asleep- Mansur had his head out the passenger window, watching the world pass before him.

it was half past six now just getting light, farmers and human scarecrows busy at work since five o'clock in the fields to my left. Somewhere up ahead on the road, a car backfired.

Mbintí was there, screaming at crows, hedgehogs and other pests which came to eat the crops before they could be harvested. Somewhere back in Thioubalel, in a warm straw bed Fodé was still sound asleep.

Amadou's older brothers were aerating parts of the agricultural field with hand hoes, singing their work songs, waiting for the days end. The early light made everything a dull grey. The car up ahead on the road backfired again.

But-
there were no cars up ahead on the road-
Just those land rovers parked on the opposite shore of the river and those men in black fatigues and turbans.

Those men with -

"Bismillah Suliéman! Salaam Alekum!!" I saw them all, all of villagers in the fields, just for a second- like the day I came out of the mosque. But this was not what was happening now.

The farmers' screams never stopped, but slipped smoothly from routine to terror.

retaliation

Perhaps the Mauritanians had found out that there were Americans in Thioubalé-

perhaps the attack was due to the centuries long feud between the Moors and the Blacks-

perhaps it was due to the then raging Gulf War.

perhaps not-

"Daybiiss!!" Mansur shrieked, "Arrête la voiture!! Arrête ça!!"

I listened very carefully... Got to turn around -

Retaliation for what? What had we done to deserve--

"it's O.K..."
speaking softly to Mansur... English

"...got to turn around..."

The Mauritanian soldiers now leveled their Kalashnikovs at the villagers in the fields and fired them in bursts-
twisted pieces of hot metal punched through the air- in the early dawn light, I could almost see the projectiles.

One hit an old woman and tore her- ripped her pagne, ripped into her chest--
tearing her breast off-
more bullets smacked into her and she spun around in a grotesque pirouette-
splinters of bone and chunks of meat flew from her old body
the screams never stopped

Ibrahim's brother was running into the cornfield- pieces of burning lead slammed into his back and burst out of his abdomen, carrying with them most of his entrails. His front broke open loosely like a water balloon thrown against a wall.

In a hideous parody of a runner's sprint, he tried to keep running- and managed for a short time- he waved his arms viciously, almost like he was trying to fly-

no longer able to coordinate his legs, he tripped, fell and lay writhing on the ground still trying to run into the shelter of the cornfield.
slowed the truck-
"it's O.K."
I wanted so much for it to be O.K.

the screams- horrible, denying panicked shrieks- we all knew what was happening now- even the Mauritanians

just wanted them to stop- just like some of the village boys beating their younger sibling stop before the baby knows that someone's trying to hurt her-trying to make her sad-

-never stopped

Mbintí was still there, now just shrieking- wide eyed and pitching at the top of her lungs in protest against what was happening to her

the ground was erupting in small bursts all around her shuddering frame- dust clouds puffing up around-

she arched back suddenly, violently- snapped forward again like a whip and crumpled to the ground-

dead

took hours to turn the truck- not fast enough

I wanted them all to love me and be happy- why can't you just let them be happy
Amadou's brothers, I- I didn't see them- maybe- hiding?

No.

They were not hiding
please God I'm sorry
please its not my fault-I didn't know what to do.

remember

I trudged out of the Floral Park Belrose School on a cold spring afternoon in 1974. I saw my mommy in the white volkswagen waiting for me. I didn't need glasses back then.

Everyone had been fooling around in Mrs. Wynrich's first grade class but I was the only one who hadn't noticed when she came back into the room. I didn't know how long she had been standing there before I noticed her. She singled me out made me stand up in front of the class and "show" the other kids what I had been doing. I was different, she made me a bad thing- a monster- *(a toubab)*

"The Easter Bunny isn't going to come this year!" I wailed running to the car. I had been bad, and was sure the Easter Bunny wouldn't come to bring me eggs this year. I was bad. I didn't deserve them.

But it wasn't my fault.

Amadou's brothers were dead
I felt my stomach turn.

I didn't do anything wrong. The ducks were supposed to fly away
The Mauritanians piled into their land rovers, pulled away from the river bank and sped off.

remember

1972. In my bedroom in our house I pulied and pulled at my cowboy belt but it wouldn't break ripped inside why are they screaming I just want them to be happy please it couldn't have all been my fault

why are they screaming
why are they still screaming

I want them to be happy
It was supposed to be O.K.

You motherfuckers you told me the ducks would fly away in the wintertime

Scared
insides revolting
exhilarated
(\textit{La illah-ha illah la})

legs collapsed under me and my forehead was sweating and tingling-

laughing- it isn't so bad it happened so recently- if I drove back could I get to them in time
vomit

cold and sweaty - blacking out
the workmen ran wailing from the truck towards the fields, to find their brothers
and sisters

no relief

I couldn't pass out - couldn't feint - knelt there, over the steaming puddle of my
sickness - wide awake - wide, wide awake.

There was nothing left the dust, the dull neutral tan - dead dust, the shouts and
cries of the workmen in the distance, and the empty howling of the wind-
whistling through the truck door, over my body, over my clothes, flapping like
rags around me.

The hot dry dead wind - mocking

anything

left alive
the only thing to hear and feel is this
goddamned,
goddamned
wind

With never a whisper in the Sea
Off darts the Spectre-ship;
While clombe above the Eastern bar
The horned Moon, with one bright star
Almost atween the tips.

One after one by the horned Moon
(Listen, O Stranger! to me)
Each turn'd his face with a ghastly pang
And cursed me with his ee...

...Their souls did from their bodies fly,-
They fled to bliss or woe;
And every soul it pass'd me by,
Like the whizz of my Cross-bow.

-S.T. Coleridge
The Ryme of the Ancient Mariner

(but it wasn't my fault)
Photo #22- Proud mother and child.
There must be some kinda way outta here...

-Jimi Hendrix

Upon arrival in Dakar I first attempted to secure passage out of the country, and back home. Thioubalel had been officially "sealed" after the attack and my life there ended abruptly that cold February morning. Hardly a chance to say goodbye, a chance to say thank you, to promise letters and photographs. A sudden breaking off of the friendships and trusts I had been allowed to build. My forced, unexpected departure from Thioubalel left me feeling very, very sick.

My first stop in Dakar was the Sabena airways office. The clerk behind the desk saw my white face and broke into a large toothy grin. It occurred to me that I might have been the only customer this man had needed to deal with for a long time. He seemed pleased that this real "European" customer now needed to be seriously contended with.

I gave him my passport and ticket and asked if I could get out on the next flight. He took my passport and ticket politely, shuffled them gently in his hands, removed a pen from his well-pressed shirt and opened my documents. His hands were clean and his nails were on the long and neglected side. It struck me then how quiet this small airline office was, and how stifled the air in it was. It was quite warm in the city, and this office was without cooling or ventilation. I wondered how this clerk kept himself from falling asleep.

He thumbed briefly through the passport, then opened up the ticket and began studying the information it contained, tracing the air above the lines of words and numbers with his pen, now and again referencing one of the number codes on it to one of the large well-thumbed phone book sized number code
books on a stand by his desk. The warmth of the office and the low buzz of the
overhead fluorescent lights began to put me in a very relaxed state. I stood there
very still, and part of me wanted to remain in this safe office, and let this
courteous and seemingly competent man take care of me until he could get me
back home.

Except for the buzzing of the lights the only other sound was the clerk
occasionally sniffing air through his dry nostrils as he thumbed the number code
book or read some information off my ticket. After a short while he placed his
hands down on the table, looked at me earnestly, and tried to speak to me in
English.

"Wha woooood yu laak to do?

I began to explain slowly in English that I wanted to change my departure
date to leave on the next available flight.
He watched me carefully while I spoke; his expression unchanged after I finished.
He leaned forward across the desk, looked seriously at me and through his
closed mouth asked an earnest "Hmm?"

I respectfully repeated myself in my own version of French.

"Ahh." he spoke, and began typing something on the keyboard of his office
computer.

Again we waited while information came up on his screen, while he punched
more keys, while more information came up on the screen. Finally, he told me
that the next flight was on tuesday, three days from now. That flight was full
however, as was the next one after it. The next flight after these two had a
vacancy, and he had reserved it for me, but that there was no guarantee. The
Sabena flights from Dakar to Bruxelles left once per week.

To be able to get out of an African country on the third next flight of a major
airline is quite honestly a feat. There are so few flights to and from the continent
relative to the number of people making the journey, that the flights seem few and far between and nearly always completely full. The clerk had been pleasant and very helpful; the problem I now faced was how to occupy myself for two weeks and three days while waiting for a flight which might not even be there.

I thanked the clerk and stepped out into the congested warmth of the city. As I had no place to go, I decided to stop at a small café to gather my thoughts and try to make a plan. I ended up talking at length with a man of about my age, who was a student at the Ecolé de Beux Arts in Dakar. I told him of my situation and without having to ask him, he invited me to stay with him in his student housing for the duration of my stay.

Almost always, an invitation of this type is the last sort of invitation to accept while abroad, and certainly in Africa. I was at a point where I didn't care and I accepted. I gave him 10,000 francs (forty dollars) to cover me while I was living with him, which he assured me would be sufficient. I later met his roommate, who happened by the café and sat with us until we departed for the student housing. Papé was the name of the man I met at the café and Dam was his roommate. The housing complex was very small, and was in proportion with the rest of the neighborhood. It was basically a short concrete wall which enclosed three large sinks, two African toilets (the ones you crouch over- the ones that have no toilet paper), a fenced off bathing area, and about seven white domed structures which were the rooms. Papé and Dam's residence contained one large bed for the two of them, one desk and a large dresser. There was a single incandescent light bulb suspended by wires on the ceiling, but it was not working at the time.

Their housing complex was located in a suburb of Dakar known as Zone "B", or "Ballón". It was a quiet place, with an extremely large expatriate population due to the fact that it was the suburb closest to the city district where all the foreign embassies were. During the day, when Papé and Dam were away I left
the housing complex, crossed the street and sat on a bench on the opposite sidewalk. There I spent several afternoons relaxing in the sun and observing this small piece of African suburbia; narrow streets of broken concrete pavement, sidewalks of sand eternally spilling over onto the street.

A woman in one of the houses a little way down the street watched me sit while she was doing her laundry. The next day she came over to me and asked me who I was and what I was doing. I told her where I had been, what I had done, and that I was now waiting to go home.

"Ça c'est bon!" she replied.

She then asked me if I liked Dakar, and when I would be returning.

Children would approach me gradually, and in groups. This time I didn't try to talk to them, didn't stare back at them, but just let them stare, and inch ever closer. To my surprise, each child after coming so close that I could feel the heat from a small sweaty body, extended his or her hand to me, and shook it gently when I extended my hand to them. Even some small, frightened-looking girls, barely old enough to understand a handshake would take my hand. When I smiled at them they ran away laughing.

I stayed with Papé and Dam for about a week, doing very little. I found that Papé was actually a graduate of the arts school, and was now making a living by selling his drawings and paintings to the relatively large expatriate community in Dakar and to any tourists who happened to pass by.

Possibly to make myself feel better, I decided to spend about twenty dollars and eat at a small European-style restaurant/grill one evening. The winter nights in Dakar reminded me somewhat of August nights in New York City. I sat myself in a small corner table and watched the other customers while waiting for the meal I ordered. I watched them talk and gesture, flirt and laugh-
well-dressed Africans in silk ties and fancy dresses sat down to eat their European dinners with strong liquors.

"Ah bon?" one oily man murmured seriously through his mouthful of poulet à l'orange as he reached for his rum and coke, his oversized jeweled wristwatch flopped clumsily about on his arm.

"N'est pas?"

Giggles, coughs and clearing of throats in preparation for more French speech. All this amid polite offerings of cigarettes- no scars- no recognition- no tribal scars- no traditional clothes, customs food or language- no recognition of who they are, who they...

No.

I stopped myself.

This is who they are- I cannot be sure that they are emulating Europeans- indeed, there is no great love for them- I cannot be sure that they have forgotten their traditional ways- I cannot be sure what they are doing. The clientele in Le Couloir restaurant and grill seemed to be enjoying themselves that evening- they seemed to be happy; I suppose that is enough- enough for judgement's sake.

I suddenly became very sad, feeling sorry for myself for some reason I suppose, and though this feeling disgusted me, there was nothing I could do about it. I left some crumpled and faded bills on the table, grabbed up my hat still covered with fine khaki dust from the Sahel, and hurried out the door before the tears began- just wanting to be alone.

I thought I would do well to spend the remainder of my time in a more rural setting, to get away from this strange and confusing city. As many of the northern
villages were now sealed off to non-residents due to the renewed conflict with Mauritania, I went south with the two men I was living with. Dam insisted that I take them along, because, he said, neither Papé nor he had ever been to the south of Senegal, and because he told me that he knew many of the bush taxi drivers at the garé, and that he could "fait un bon prix..."

"How could I refuse...?" I wondered to myself half cynically.

After several afternoons of haggling over prices in both East and West African markets I resigned myself to the stubbornness involved in the art of African negotiation. Dam had his mind set on coming, and it might be fun with the three of us together. I remembered all the positive things about life in more rural African settings. The slow pace of life, the natural scenery, closeness of the community.

When we arrived in Joal, a small fishing village on the south western coast, I realized that I was in somebody else's small and close-knit community. The three of us had just stepped out of the bush taxi, which to my surprise cost very little. Dam, to his word, had arranged a special price for us- less for the three of us than it would have cost me traveling alone. Papé and Dam were brushing the dust of of their sleeves and pant legs (why bother?) and I was walking away from the football field sized patch of bare and burned earth that served as the taxi/bus station for this Joal and some other nearby villages. I had read that the houses in Joal were constructed of sea-shells and calcium cement, and was eager to see them. I walked toward the closest group of houses. Just like Thioubalel, there were children playing here and there, women preparing grain, men walking about looking very serious. Here in this village was a small church- I could see from where I was the plastic effigies of Jesus, Mary and the Cresh. About a hundred yards away I saw a smaller open air structure painted a faded green, inside were
about five men bowing towards the East in unison. It was roughly two thirty-

"About the same time..." I caught myself whispering.

By this time my traveling companions had caught up with me and we were all
heading into the village itself to find some food and a place to sleep for the night.
As we neared the houses I saw that they were indeed made from shells, and
were quite attractive at that. From around the corner of the nearest house, a child
appeared.

"Toubab!" he piped, then disappeared.

My "companions" chuckled lowly with long grins on their faces, and I felt a
little bit like the Lone Ranger must have after he asked Tonto what they were
going to do once surrounded by hostile Indians to have Tonto reply "what you
mean "we" paleface?"

I pretended I didn't notice any of it, and I smiled, stupidly, as if I really could be
a part of the laughing group of nearby laughing children and my traveling
companions, instead of the monstrous tousab. The idiotic grin faded from my
face tentatively, as the sadness slowly began to creep in.

The three of us continued moving through the village- one or more of us
stopping every so often to look at one thing or another. Joal was a larger village
than Thioubalel, and it had more people passing through it's streets. It's local
economy was related directly to the sea, the scores of pirogues on the beach
would be manned and taken out every now and again throughout the day- and
would return with nets full of shellfish or bunches of fish connected together at
the head by twine. These fishing crews did not appear to depart at any regular
time, but rather periodically throughout the day.
"Toubab" the word suddenly popped into my mind.

I had almost forgotten that word, and how alien it made me feel. It pulled me out of the otherwise beautiful world I was living in and kept me separate from it. I could never really be fully accepted or a part of it. No matter what clothes I put on, how I spoke, what I did, I was a toubab.

I continued walking into the village, Papé and Dam following behind, looking around at a village they had never seen before. I neared a small group of old men sitting together in a circle, in the shade of a thorn tree. They reminded me of the elders in Thioubalel, whose stories and company I had so much enjoyed. I almost said "Mbada" as I approached, but quickly remembered where I was.

"Ça va?" I addressed the group.

They continued conversation with themselves.

Perhaps they had not heard or were not paying attention.

"Bonjour, messieurs" I tried again.

They stopped talking and looked up at me, smiling like an idiot, with those glazed cataract- whitened eyes that I remembered so well.

"Aahheeeeyyy, toubab", one skinny old man with a long and crooked nose croaked, before he continued spitting short Wolof vowels across his dry almost non-existent lips. I hadn't the faintest idea what he was saying, and he knew it.

What must have again been a stupid smile faded from my tired face as I stood there crouched towards them with my hands resting on my upper thighs trying to make sense of what was going on. Only the one was talking, the others were just sitting there smiling at me tauntingly, taking pleasure in my confusion.
I just said "hello" for Christsakes, why can't they just answer me- maybe they thought I was French- couldn't be sure, I had no idea what they thought, or why they were acting this way. I began to feel even sadder. I wanted to leave before I began to display my upset, for I remembered what sort of reaction that might well bring.

I stood there looking at the group- I had nothing else to loose- I looked at them and stared- there were many more Whites in this part of the country many more than existed in the north. Had the presence of all these Whites made them forget who they were? Had they forgotten?

Had they forgotten what a horrible thing they were doing? Exiling another person? Or did they think that a toubab wasn't aware of what a horrible thing it was to be cast out?

In a society where no one is ever alone, where the company of other people is the only thing worth living for- did they know what they were doing to me? Two of them continued laughing at me- one stopped-

He knew.

He knew that I knew what they were doing. He knew that I knew they were doing the worst thing you could possibly do to another person on this earth- and he looked at me horribly- for an instant I could see real terror in the old man's eyes- he saw that I was truly alone there.

He saw and somehow he knew that I had once been treated like a member of an African family- that I had once been a part of an African family- that I had once belonged here, and now was being cast out.

I stood before the old men, my light hair blowing straight in the wind, staring back at them. I believe I was the most frightening, hollow toubab the one man had ever seen in all his years. I was truly an African monster then.
"Je m'exuse..."

I muttered to the ground, turned and left; crusty, mocking old men's laughter following at my heels, burrowing into my soul.
PETER THE BARON

I went to sleep that night in Joal on a cold beach strewn with clam shells and I awoke with the emptiest feeling of my entire life. The wind blew chilly air from the Atlantic, and the sky was overcast. I arose, gathered some of my belongings and began to prepare breakfast for myself and my two Dakarois traveling "companions" sleeping in a small nearby restaurant.

A columnist from the Boston Globe once wrote that in Africa a "restaurant" can range from a European eatery in a four star hotel to a mud shack in a small out of the way village which on occasion houses an owner who prepares rice and fish sauce for anyone who might stop by. The restaurant in Joal was somewhere between the two.

Papé, Dam and I ate the remainder of our stale baugettes with a hot beverage I prepared from chlorinated water, a can of lait condensé sucré and a packet of coco I found in one of the pockets of my seasoned bush jacket. After breakfast Papé and Dam began to collect their possessions and brush themselves off. The two took their time at getting ready, in fact they seemed to take hours.

For some reason I was in a hurry to get out of Joal. I had seen it, I didn't particularly like it, nor it, me, I was sure. As I looked over the beach of clam shells and at the inlet to the ocean I began to panic.

I had to get out of this place, I had to get out.
I had to get out now.

Right now.

I started to draw pictures in my fieldbook, patterns... lines.
Anything to calm down.

I asked Papé and Dam if they couldn't hurry up a little bit, and I explained that I was really anxious to leave this place. The looked at me like I had just asked them to carry me on their backs to the next town.

"D'Accord, toubab." came the sullen sarcastic reply. Neither of them had ever called me toubab before.

The harder I tried to calm down the worse my anxiety became.

Breaths became short

(seemed to be taking hours)

"Why can't they hurry up?" I asked myself. I got a few glances from the people around me, but no one could understand my soft English hissing, so they continued about their business.

(la voiture)

The sweat began to bead on my forehead- just enough to be annoying.

I had to get out. I had to go- where was not important-though my home, America, seemed very appealing all of a sudden- all I knew was that I had to leave.

The sweat was now pouring onto my eyes, blinding me, my chest heaving in the fetid warmth of the day.

"Q'est-ce que c'est, toubab?" Papé demanded.

(la voiture)

"I have to get out O.K.!!??" I shrieked. Many curious faces now looked to see the crazy toubab screaming in his alien tongue.
"I have to go before-"

(Arrête la voiture)

A tremendous horror slammed into me all at once and maybe for the first time I really saw them. The villagers. Trying to run away as they exploded.

(Arrête ça)

"Stop it" I pleaded as I sank to a crouching position, one arm wrapped around my trunk, the other hand cradling my head, covering my eyes.
"Please."
"For Christ's sake please."

I felt many eyes on me, though I felt people backing away. I stayed there, crouched on my feet waiting for the recent memories to stop echoing inside my brain.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder- it wasn't hot and oppressive as thought any one's hand on me might be right now, just a gentle hand waiting until I opened my eyes and rejoined the world of the living.

I had scared them I suppose.

"Heeeyy maan! What is the problem?" the hand on my shoulder vibrated as I heard these English words, and I reasoned that the hand and the voice must belong to the same person.

I rose, slow and unsteady, the arm which had been supporting my head fell
away and curled around my stomach, crossing my other arm. I looked and felt as
if I had just been sick.

When my eyes came to focus on my surroundings I found myself face to face
with the man whose hand I had felt on my shoulder. It was still there. He was a
few inches shorter that I and his face was round and kind.

His expression was not understanding nor was it overly concerned. He was just-

patient.

"Are you allright man?"

"I... Yea, I... sure..." I stammered in reply, dazed and feeling quite sick.

He seemed at ease with his surroundings- I now recognized him as one of the
people who had been sitting around the table under the veranda earlier. His
friends were still there smiling and talking softly among themselves. Papé and
Dam had retreated to a small bench behind the table and from the quick glance I
shot in their direction I could see them staring at me with suspicious, hateful
glares, their jaws closed but lips open and quivering- not knowing what was
happening- and somehow trying to understand a language they had never heard
before. I quickly forgot about them.

"You don' look allright, man" he added with an sideways glance that says in a
friendly way "I know better"

"Now, what's the matter with you?"

"If I tell you, will you understand?" I spoke at him quickly; I assumed he, like
the rest of the Senegalese I had met so far who "spoke" English had memorized
a few sentences and that any conversation would quickly degenerate into limping
French. For perhaps the first time in my life I literally needed someone to talk to and a parody of a conversation would only exacerbate my frustration and desire to be understood.

"I will try to understand" came the reply. "I have many friends in New Zealand whom I write to in English..."

He was speaking too well for someone who was faking it. Whoever this man was he was the first and only person that I encountered in Senegal who spoke my language. I could not help but think how much he sounded like a Rastafarian however, and with a short, incongruous, and possibly quite insane chuckle, I told him this.

"A Rasta?" he echoed and looked quite pleased. He abruptly yelled in Wolof at one of the men sitting at the table. The man reached in a small bag beside him, produced a cassette and popped it into the nearby tape player. In seconds the familiar tunes of Bob Marley and the Wailers filled the warm afternoon air under the veranda.

For some reason I began to shake then. Very slightly, but everywhere.

"Hey man," my new friend said, "come sit down with my friends- we don’t have much- a bottle of wine, some cigarettes, but we’ll talk."

I followed him to the table and we sat down. His friends seemed to go about their business of talking between themselves, smiling and drinking their wine. They were not staring at me, jostling me or demanding cadeaux, they were simply going about their business in a pleasant way. I was very glad for this, for while I wanted attention, I did not need to be stared at by a huge group of people as I used to be by the children and young adults in Thioubalel every time I started to talk with one of them. Being constantly stared at, every movement carefully watched and scrutinized, being analyzed and perhaps judged by many people many times over requires in my experience a lot of patience, tolerance and energy. At this point in time I possessed neither of these qualities, nor had much
Photo #23- Pierre Ndong (at left) and his friends.
energy either.

To sit down quietly at a table, and talk with someone who seemed to be interested in what I needed to say, and would be able to say without thinking for the correct French words beforehand, all suddenly seemed to much. My shaking intensified, and I could not stop it for the life of me.

"Doucement." the kind man said. Slow down.

"Listen to Bob Marley, its what you need"

"Who were those people you came with?" he asked me. "They didn't seem to like you very much..."

"I'm not really sure," I answered. "I met them in Dakar and as far as I am aware I never did anything to offend them."

"They probably thought that because you are a toubab that they thought they would be able to get things from you- many kinds of toubab things and money."

_Toubab_ things.

(and money)

At that point I could not contain my emotions any longer. My grief, my self pity, confusion and exhaustion came then to a head. I broke down completely.

"Why do you cry like this?" I heard after a few minutes.

I cradled my head in one hand, long clumps of dusty, unwashed hair protruding through my fingers. I felt the thin slime on my cheek produced by tears and the dust from the north which to my amazement had still not completely come off.

"So many things..." I muttered through saliva and the remains of the tears on my face.
"Do you really want to hear about it?"

"My name is Pierre," the kind man started, "this is my table and these people here are my friends." He gestured to a small group of people seated around a table talking softly, drinking wine and laughing quietly on occasion. They seemed to take no notice of the scene I had just made.

"You are welcome to stay here with us. No one will tell us to leave, no one will make us do anything that we do not wish to do. I own a small store over there," he pointed to a small one story structure across the large patch of crushed coral and gravel that formed the center of the village like an enormous cul-de-sac. A small hand painted sign in structure front of his store read

Pierre Ndong, The Baron.
Vendeur d'Objets d'Arts.

"...and I live in this village" he ended.

"I think you need to tell me what is making you so sad". We went over to the table and sat down.

Though I have never given confession in a Catholic church, I imagined that this is what it would feel like. I started at the beginning, told him about Thioubalel, about the people I met and lived with, about my conversion to Islam and the small life I was building for myself there, I told him about the early morning massacre, how I had to leave the village so quickly, and how, since leaving it, I had felt none of the warmth or friendliness I had come to associate with Senegal.

"It is good to shed tears for the dead," Pierre began, "I know it is very dangerous where you were. Every month or so we here of news from the north, about people murdered by Mauritanians."

"But this was two weeks ago now," he reminded me, "why are you still so
sad?"

This one question told me more about Africa and its people than anything I had seen heard or otherwise experienced in over six months of living there. Why indeed was I still grieving? Why couldn't I just let it, and so many other thing that have been upsetting me for most of my life, go? I explained that I had never seen anyone shot to death before and that I thought that many of the villagers really loved me, and I valued this.

I told him about the elders who used to sit under the thorn trees for hours telling stories—telling me their stories in French so that I could understand them.

"I meant something to them. They wanted me to hear them and learn their stories."

"Did no one ever tell you stories in your own country?" Pierre asked.

At that question I was struck with an immense wave of self-pity, and began to cry again. No. I wanted to say no. No one had ever cared enough to tell me stories—but that wasn't true.

"I remember some from my childhood, I think people told me stories then. But I like stories, and I have wanted to hear some for a very long time."

"Maybe you did not hear enough stories when you were a child" he added. I began to cry harder.

"I think in many ways I still am a child" I managed to say.

"It is true Sulienne, toubab's are very much like children." Pierre stated matter-of-factly.

"They are too concerned with things; you know, choses;" he gestured to the bottle of wine and the cigarettes on the table, "...and they are not always aware of the things that really matter..." and he pointed slowly to his friends.

"But in Africa, we always tell stories—" Pierre continued, "it doesn't matter how old you are. Many Africans your age don't want to hear the stories. They think
that they are not important. These people usually leave here and go to toubab countries where they think their life will be better".

"We need our stories;" he repeated emphatically, "the teach us how to live a happy and honest life, we can't live without them."

"We have a hard life, you know, in Senegal," he continued, "but you, you can go back to your country."

"Yes," I spoke slowly, confused and exhausted, "yes, I suppose I can."

"But you chose to come here," Pierre looked at me askance,

"why?"

I tried to speak, but his question left me dumbfounded. Why indeed? Why had I left the world I knew and presumably could function in for one so different- or was it so different- not really, I decided, just harder.

And it wasn't just this time either I explained to Pierre, I had gone to many "different" places, over the years. I had sought them out. Papua New Guinea, Spain, Zanzibar, the British Isles; all in the name of archaeology, though my diaries had from the very first trip been filled with descriptions and relations of everything but archaeology. Why indeed?

"I suppose I learned about myself," I continued very slowly, my words forming on the tail end of my thoughts- I had never really asked myself "why" before.

"Because life in those places was harder for me and I had to adjust- but I also learned about people in general and how they live with themselves and each other."

"There are alot of ways of doing this, you know" I spoke to Pierre with a short, small smile. I just then remembered many different episodes from my various
travels, "alot of ways to live."

He nodded in consent and smiled in return. He knew.

"But why should people in your country care how people in Senegal live?"
Pierre's question was simple, but I found myself again unsure how to answer it.

"Life for many of the people in my country is easier than it is for you," I told him, "but people care about many of the same things that people in your country do, and if they knew about the ways of life in other places, if they could understand that their way of life is not the only one that exists." I paused, regained my direction of thought. Pierre listened, a very interested expression on his face. His friends continued their quiet talk between themselves - they spoke softly in Wolof between sips of wine in the African sun.

"...then they might learn that their perspective, their point of view is not the only one that exists, they might want to learn the perspectives of others, they might want to listen."

I stopped, not quite sure why. It all sounded too simple. That wasn't really what anthropology was about. No, it was much more involved, the aims were subtler. To subtle, perhaps, for someone in my present state.

"And you think that you can teach your people about other societies; Senegalese societies?" Pierre asked flatly.

"I think so, I want to try."

"So you will write about what you have seen in Senegal?" Pierre asked.

"Yes... I... yes I want to..." I replied, almost dazed.

"But you have to write about it," he probed for confirmation, "you know," "Yes, of course" I spoke quite frankly.
"...because it's no good unless you write about it."
FRAGMENTS

I sat down somewhere and my head was light-

I didn't think about it until my ears started buzzing. I remembered the first time I had malaria in Papua New Guinea. I thought deliriously that the crickets in the jungle were suddenly all inside my head. A strong steady drone. They were all back again.

I tried to stand up to walk somewhere, but there was an invisible nylon stocking only a few inches over my head. I could stand up a little but soon I felt all of my muscles straining against the stockings growing resistance. I couldn't move any further and I started feeling cold- a dull sick cold like a block of ice inserted into your skull. I fell down and started to shiver until I started to sweat.

I rolled weakly around on the floor in a pool of my own sweat and excreta. I needed to cool off- I could hardly breathe. I tried to tear my shirt open, but I couldn't lift my hand over my chest to tug at the drenched hot cloth smothering my suffocated, burning body.

I only remember seeing palm trees- lots of them. After a while the fever broke and I slept. I left Dakar two days later.

I had a twelve hour layover in Bruxelles. I tried to buy a newspaper there. I found a grey-haired woman wearing glasses behind a small newsstand/kiosk.

"Bonjour Madame. Je voudrais Le Soir si'l vous plaît"

"Ah! Tu es étranger! Es tu certain? Peut-être l'étranger veut une autre?"

"Madame..."
"Ahh non! L'étranger ne veut pas Le Soir..."

"Madame, s'il vous plaît..."

"Et bien sure l'étranger ne sait pas lire Français, et-"

"Hey! Goddamn it!! Jusie donne moi ça!!!"

"Eh?!?! Donne moi ça!!!!"

She did.
I didn't even have to pay for it.

On the plane to New York I filled out the customs declaration form. At the bottom it said "Welcome to the United States, most major credit cards accepted."

I think I laughed.
EPILOGUE

Words fade away,
Like hills in a fog.

-Eskimo saying

It was early afternoon on Thursday when I met Mammadu Njiaye in the Chambers street subway station. He was lost.

I saw him talking to one man, a well dressed executive who kept looking at the black man's face, into his eyes, and shaking his head negatively-straining to understand but not being able to. The well dressed executive finally shrugged his shoulders, turned and left.

"Ex-cus' me lady" I heard him say to one woman as I got closer. She walked past on the platform, ignoring him.

I knew from the first minute that I saw him that he was African, and a recent arrival to the city at that. I approached him with the expression that you never give to a stranger in New York City. The look that says "Hi I'm friendly. You can talk to me." He looked directly at me and began to open his mouth.

"Ex'cus me mistah. I wanting go to Gran' Central Station..." I listened patiently and never took my eyes from him while he spoke.

"...whel have I to change?"
"Where are you from?" I asked him slowly.

"Oh, I'm from Africa." I knew I had been right. He replied slowly staring at me as if he might be giving the wrong answer.

"Where in Africa?" I continued,

"Senegal."

The wind howls down the subway stairs, a girl shouts in the distance. From somewhere down one of the tunnels a train was coming. It was a cold day in March; you couldn't smell the urine on days like these. I looked into his eyes, he into mine.

"Est-ce que tu connais Thioubalel? C'est un petit village au nord de ton pays."

The train approached and trundled through the station, disappearing again down one of the tunnels. Someone ran down the platform, late, evidently for something. For a while, there was silence.

"Eh?" he stammered, looking very confused. "Tu es Français?"

I repeated the question, and he said no, very suspiciously, and acted for a moment, so I thought, as if he was ready to leave me and ask his questions to another person. Yet he remained standing in front of me, staring at me, as though I were the anomaly in the Chambers Street station that afternoon.
Judging from the great numbers of West Africans I now know to be living in New York, perhaps I was.

"Oh. Too bad." I continued in French. "I have a large family there. I was just hoping that perhaps you knew some of them."

Mammadu's manner suddenly changed.

"Je viens de Dakar," he spoke earnestly, "and I am not familiar with that area. I never expected to meet a man in America who knew my country better than me."

I have never been able to stand flattery, and this was close enough for me.

"Come on," I said to the gently smiling Black man shaking his head in mild disbelief at this chance encounter, "let's find your Grand Central Station", and we disappeared into a subway car.

During the ride we exchanged addresses and I gave him my telephone number. I found out that he had only been here for two weeks. He wanted to work here for a while, a few years, so he said, but definitely wanted to return home someday.

When we emerged in Grand Central Station I walked him to the subway which would take him where he wanted to go. All the way we had been talking about Senegal- parts of Dakar- he knew some of my favorite cafés, of course. Walking, talking and smiling. It felt really good to be talking about a world which was still so close to me- still so much a part of me. The same was true, to be sure, for him.

He ended our conversation by telling me how pleased he was that he had met someone who knew his country-

"No one else has been as nice to me since I arrived as you" he said. "I was beginning to wonder about the people in your country...the people here are
almost like the concrete they walk on."

I made a resigned, dismissive gesture.

"Ahhh" I sighed,

"Toubabs."

He glanced at me, a look of happy surprise mingled with slight embarrassment. I smiled back at him and he laughed. The two of us stood there and laughed for a long, long time before we shook hands and said our goodbyes. I watched him sit in the subway car and pull away from the platform smiling and waving as he disappeared down the dark tunnel.

I thought for a while in the Chambers Street station. I was pleased with myself for being able to help this confused and rather helpless Senegalese man, and yet I was sad to see him go. He reminded me of some of the people I had come to know and, yes, perhaps even love over the past few months in Senegal.

I thought more about what Pierre had said, how he encouraged me to write about Thioubalel. There was so much to say about the place, the people there and what I had learned from them. There was so much anyone—everyone could learn from them. But like all peoples—like everybody—one didn't need to understand them completely in order to communicate with them—affect and be affected by them—one doesn't need to understand Qur’anic chants to be able to sing them.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned in West Africa was that with patience and a desire to understand—two peoples of cultures alien to each
other - two people of the same culture alienated from each other can communicate, can affect and be affected by each other, and can even love, each other. All manifestations of the alternative - ignorant belligerence - are horrific beyond words - trust me on that one.

In a few seconds, in the blink of an eye, I had remembered parts of my early life; memories of feelings which had plagued me for years. The anger, guilt and resentment I had been unconsciously carrying with me for most of my life, would never do me any good - it was, at last, time to let them go. The horrible memory of a senseless evil along with these old feelings would fade, never from my memory, because I can always think about it, but from my conscious thoughts - I would let it go - let it fade with time, and at last disappear -

like hills in a fog,

like lead into the sea.
Photo # 24- The *marabout* and the author.
Photo #25- Mbintí and Fodé.
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