

# Walking in Senegal



Mama Ndiaye, Ndeye Marieme Ndiaye and Daba Ndiaye.

**“If you don’t make mistakes, you’re not working on hard enough problems. And that’s a big mistake. - Frank Wilczek”**

This month my coordinator, Pastor Kristin Engstrom, sent our cohort the quote from Frank Wilczek. She conveyed to us fumbling YAGM, that we will continue to make mistakes as we journey through our year in Senegal. Making mistakes is something that not everyone is comfortable with. Heck, when I make a mistake I have two reactions: 1) I will probably feel so terrible that I have wronged someone that I will cry, and 2) I will shut down. When Pastor Kristin sent us this quote above, it reminded me that our year here cannot be perfect. We cannot walk through this country in this idea that we will be perfect volunteers. We will make mistakes and we will fail our own expectations, but this is the process of figuring out how to be a young adult. All too often in America, I am reminded of the ideal that we need to be super successful or have our life planned out to a tee, otherwise we jeopardize failing in our society. But here, I can never have my life planned out. Here in Senegal I must be stretched and pulled and torn in order to understand, comprehend, learn and grow into the person I will eventually become. My mistakes here, all be it many, prove that I am trying to work on hard problems. The problems here could be buying phone credit or asking for help and it could even be asking someone to tell me about a cultural tradition. All problems or challenges are those whose purpose are to enable me to learn from my mistakes and to be humbled by my success in problem solving. This month of October brought a ton of big challenges to understand and a ton of situations where I would fail, but the best part about all of



**Biram Ndiaye**

A wonderful young boy who is a devout soccer player and protector of his little sister Ndeye Fatou. He is a quiet but observant young boy who is slowly learning how to be a man of the house.



**Ndeye Fatou Ndiaye**

A curious, playful and wild child. This little girl is not only my sister, but my daily walking buddy. She can always be found wandering around in my room looking for pens to draw with. She is also a fantastic five year old, who is sassy and knows what she wants.



this soul and social searching was I did it in a community and with a family that surrounds me with grace. Solving challenges and making mistakes prove that I am slowly but surely living fully; mind, body and soul in Senegal.

## God’s Bits of Wood

### Who are God’s Bits of Wood

During the first month of being in Senegal, I thought it was important to understand as much of the culture as I could. Our cohort was suggested to read as many books as we could about the culture of Senegal and the culture of Africa. The book I read was *God’s Bits of Wood* and it is a novel written by Sembene Ousmane. Ousmane is a popular writer from Senegal who wrote about life in this beautiful country and would write about social and political issues that faced the Senegalese. He was very dawn to topics that shed light on political and social matters, that would push the generations of Senegalese to think about their country and the context in which they live together.

Before coming to this country I had never heard about God’s Bits of Wood and I had never heard about Sembene Ousmane. And I am sorry that it took me twenty-one years to discover authors outside of my American bubble. As I began reading the book *God’s Bits of Wood*, I began to question the title, ‘What and who are God’s Bits of Wood?’ And why was it so important that it would supersede the overall theme of the book which was about the Dakar-Niger Railroad strike during 1947-48. It would be more aptly named something like, *Revenge of the the Railway* or *Standing up for Our Rights* or *A Fight for Our Lives*. All three possibilities are more central to the theme of the book. *God’s Bits of Wood* is a novel about a group of Senegalese workers who were protesting their unfair working conditions on the Dakar-Niger Railway. From the book it is absolutely marvelous to learn about how people were basically starving to prove their point, that they were not going to be apart of the colonial system of the French. As a group of rail workers, wives, families and communities they said ‘No’ to the disenfranchisement of their people. While reading this book, I was enamored by the conviction of those in the story, how they were so firm in their beliefs and wanted to be treated equal. It was also truly fascinating to see how generally peaceful the protesters were in this story.

The railroad workers demanded pensions, higher wages, family allowances and recognition of their union. All things that demanded mutual respect between employer and employee. I knew that the reason there was such disparity between company and worker were due to the issue of race and colonialism. However, throughout this story, the railroad workers continued to protest peacefully. It was hard to read this story mainly because I could not imagine what it was like for the people of Senegal who were just trying to get what they deserved. Not only were the workers loyal to the railroad, they only knew of this work. To see how a group of people could be forced into a profession because they didn’t have access to equal education and opportunity was also a hard pill to swallow while reading this book. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn from this book and gain a perspective of global peaceful protesting, much like the women’s march to Dakar.



### Thioro Ndiaye

Not only is she my host mom, but she is responsible for growing my appetite here in Senegal. She is the protector of the house and the wrangler of children. She is an amazing woman who always checks on me and makes sure I am always full.



### Maguette Ndiaye

He is my tough younger brother. He definitely has a tough exterior, but has a huge heart. He can also be found playing in the street and looking for his gaggle of buddies.



The march to Dakar was in protest for the women to show their strength even though they were on their last legs and resources. The very fact that the women marched days to reach the capital shows the reader the importance of the protest of the railroad and that what this railroad did in Senegal impacted everyone. The women of the workers were also a part of the system. And they knew that they needed to take a stand against the railroad in order to show the higher-ups why they needed to listen to their men and to them. It was quite amazing to see even during the 40's strong women who would fight for themselves and their families in order to survive.

God's Bits of Wood is a term that I learned during orientation. In the Senegalese culture it used to be a superstition that if you ever counted something that bad luck would come upon it. Therefore to ask questions that referred to numbers such as ages, number of children, and time, we're all loaded questions and a person would never want to answer nor be asked such a question. In the book, while the women are protesting and marching towards Dakar in order to show the Frenchmen their desire to withstand



The Neighborhood Kids (God's Bits of Wood): Baiveer, Ababacar, Ousmane, Aisha, Mohammed, Lemene, Housaine, Daba, Mohammed, Babacar, Allou, Fallou, Maguette and Maodo.

this year long fight towards equal rights, there is a moment on their way from Theis to Dakar where the women stop their march. The women are so tired and have no water on their march to the capital. So, they stop to rest for an hour or two, eventually when some of the women are ready to proceed to the capital, many of the older women do not want to continue. The elders wanted to give up and go back home. They felt discouraged and did not think that this march was worth completing. It is a young woman who threatens the elders to begin to count them off. This action creates a very positive reaction from the elder women who immediately begin to get up and continue their arduous journey. If the young woman had begun to count she would have jeopardized good fortune on the elders and their families. The elders being extremely superstitious did not want the young woman to continue and therefore they would arise from their rest and continue on their journey. Eventually, getting to Dakar, the women were celebrated and there was a newfound resurgence in the protest.

The book ends with the protest ending and the railroad workers getting their terms. It was nice to see that their efforts did not go unseen and that there was a step in the right direction for the liberation of French colonialism. The book taught me that everyone is a piece of God. We are all his children and we are celebrated by being a part of his kingdom. I like the idea that it is superstitious to count things because sometimes when we are souly focused on numbers we can loose sight of what is important. Hence, being God's bits of wood, allows us to not focus on ourselves but to be bits of wood floating down the river of life. Sembene wrote this book not only to elaborate on his personal experience through characters, but to get the people of Senegal to think about how they could be among the conversation of political action. They did not have to be a number to the French, instead they could be a piece of



the puzzle in solving and liberating themselves. The people of Senegal could be freed from the French and they could take matters into their own hands.

## The Kounkorang

### Understanding the Local Culture.

When I first arrived to my host community I was met by many kids running up and down the sandy street. My first evening, I had a ton of emotions and I wanted to be able to remember how I was feeling months from now. As I was sitting on the front stoop of my home, I noticed this little figure in the distance. All the kids were circled around this “thing” and I could not tell what it was. The children surrounding this unknown cultural norm were all screaming and running around the being that was draped in frays of onion bags and potato sacks. It looked much like a figure of string or something a cat had torn up with its claws. As I sat on the stoop of my home, I just watched the children run up and down the streets. It was actually quite funny to see this little stringy figure chasing kids that it probably knew. At this time, I was still unsure of why this thing was running around the streets and why it had so much power of the children. Eventually, my sister Daba told me that this figure was known as the Kounkorang. The Kounkorang is an imaginary figure that has been in the Senegambia region for hundreds of years. It is much like old folk-lore, some might compare it to the boogey-man or an evil tooth fairy. The story goes that the Kounkorang is supposed to celebrate the circumcision and to ward off any evils surrounding children. This figure is said to roam the streets guarding those who have been circumscised, however, now the social norm is that the Kounkorang acts as a sort of parental threat to children who are behaving badly. Sometimes my family threatens Ndeye Fatou that the Kounkorang will come and get her if she is not behaving well.

On my first night the character had two sticks and would slap them together when they would come across a child. The Kounkorang would never hit the child, but would get awfully close and get up in their face. Eventually, they would leave the terrified child and continue their parade down the road. It was quite a pleasurable experience seeing the kids laugh and scream and run away from this 3.5 foot figure. It was not until two weeks later that I fully experienced the adult version of this mythical and ancient figure.

Two weeks later, I was walking home and there was a crowd of people all along the street. Most of them adults, but also mixed in were the children laughing and screaming. I was not trying to look at the mob of people, I was more worried about getting home. However, I turned my head and saw what a true Kounkorang could look like. It dawned the same outfit, but there were many more layers to this shredded onion sack robe. Again, their face was completely unseen and their whole figure moved in such a way that mimicked a river flowing. This time, the Kounkorang had two machetes and clanged them together as he walked around the swarm of people. It was quite a scary thing to see, if you had no idea why this figure walked the streets. Around the Kounkorang was his gang of protectors who also had machetes and other objects to make noises with. I got to my home with out any terror from the Kounkorang, however, it did make its way to my street and I watched from my home’s roof. Now, instead of kids who were screaming in terror it was grown women and teenagers who now were in the presence of the scary and elusive figure.



The whole event which lasted until night fall was quite funny. I think people here understand that the Kounkorang is a cultural and historic event to partake in. It allows families to pass on traditions and tales that were told to their own generations. The Kounkorang can be seen for four weeks terrorizing the children of the streets, getting very close to them and just hovering around their screams. I took this event as a time to be fully introduced to the culture of Senegal. The Kounkorang all-be-it quite scary in its adult form, but comical in its child form, allows the community to come together and share laughter, screams and a neighborhood parade.

## The First Day of School

**Ndeye Fatou and Ndeye Marieme learning together.**

Ndeye Fatou and I had two first days of school. One on Oct. 3rd and the other on Oct. 7th. Our first day of school, I was extremely nervous as I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that there were going to be kids I didn't know and they wouldn't know me either. The best part about school was that I knew some of the faculty and I could rely on them to point me in the right direction if I had any questions of where I should go. I'm sure Ndeye Fatou was nervous as CSN is a new school for her as well and she would not know anyone.

When we arrived at the school, there were about twenty children and a few parents scattered around, but there was a brilliant stillness to the grounds of the school. However, it was only 8:00 a.m. and I knew that the craziness of the first day of school would commence soon enough. And, surely the chaos of school did begin by 9:00 a.m. Ndeye Fatou and I were sitting in two chairs in the courtyard waiting eagerly for the children to be shuffled into their classrooms, but I was indeed wrong about this assumption of how school would play out. As minutes passed by, parents and children began to fill up the empty chairs around us. The faculty that I had been working with, rushing around their offices to fulfill uniform and supply orders. Meanwhile, I was just sitting in silence with Ndeye Fatou. My little sister was quite a shell of who she is at home. She was polite, sat in her chair and asked me periodically for her water bottle and snacks. At home she can be found playing in the street, laughing, teasing, being quite a character, but here at school she was a wide-eyed school girl. On the other hand, I was losing it internally. There seemed to be no direction, children were playing and roughhousing with each other, the faculty was calm about all the influx of parents that were just now registering for school or their uniforms and I was sitting in a white chair waiting for someone to tell me what to do. By 10:30, I became itchy with the need to be helpful and to do something I knew, which was the registration office with my co-worker Elmir. Elmir works in the cashier's office, where she handles the new registrations and the current account affairs for all of the students of CSN. During the beginning weeks at the school, I had



Ndeye Fatou on her first day of school.





The Playground at CSN, where children play with sand, tires and each other.

assisted her by taking the money, writing receipts and becoming acquainted with the parents of the school. I got up out of my chair, took Ndeye Fatou and walked to the Cashier's office. I needed to do something. But, I realize now, there was no need for my help, for if Elmir wanted my help she would have recruited me earlier in the day, it was my own accord that took me to her office to help her with her busy accounts. I grabbed a chair and quickly began to write receipts for the new registrants. My assistance all be-it desired by myself, did allow Elmir to get through more people and to have more focus on the parents who asked questions about the accounts. Ndeye Fatou soon became the prisoner of the Cashier's Office. Ndeye Fatou did come and go as she pleased throughout the courtyard, but it was quite a different experience

than just sitting and waiting, now I was working and she was apart of my work. Around 11:30 the Principal of the School, Mousier Jean, gave a speech about the school year and thanked the parents for coming. As soon as he finished the courtyard became a graveyard of empty snack bags, popsicle wrappers and empty white chairs. Ndeye Fatou was stuck with me until 1:00. Unfortunately, I had to stay and finish my hours at the school, but she wanted to leave as soon as everyone else left. Our first day together at CSN, was that of misunderstanding. When Ndeye Fatou and I returned home, it felt like we had just finished a marathon. She was tired, cranky, sassy and hungry while I felt accomplished, but still very uncertain on how the "real" first day would pan out.

Eventually, we both went to school and went our separate ways. She went to her classroom where I can imagine there was a ton of chaos and I went to the office to work with my co-worker, Elmir. We were tasked with finishing up any accounts that were unpaid and new inscriptions to the school. I was sad to see Ndeye Fatou and I go our separate ways, but it allowed us to both prosper at the school.

Our day went by and once we were reunited, she came up to me and was so excited to see me. I was also very glad that I was able to see my little sister after a day of writing accounts and learning more about the inscription system. We then walked home together silently reflecting on the day and our lunch that was awaiting us at home.

School continues to go on and I continue to learn how the Senegalese school system works. I look forward to my time spent in the classroom learning the curriculum and eventually teaching English to students.



# Celebrating the Sports and Leisure Program

## Nothing but Basket.

Working for the Centre Galle (SLDS Center) has really opened my eyes to what it means to be a community center. A community center does not care what race, religion, ethnic background, age or whatever social constructs there may be, all they should care about is how each person who walks into the center adds a unique diversity and perspective to their community. A community center’s responsibility is to nurture its community so they can be successful in whatever programs they choose to participate in. This month I was able to see what a celebration of a community’s success looks like. The Sports and Leisure program was just finishing up their Summer Basketball program. As I arrived here in Yeumbeul, I noticed that strings of children were coming in and out of the building at all hours. Some as early as 7:00 a.m. others came around 6:00 p.m. and stayed until 10:00 p.m. Throughout these hours different coaches supervised, sometimes they were even older teens that would return in the cool evenings to play in their own league. Throughout, the couple weeks I was able to observe and quietly get basketballs for the players, I noticed a great environment between all of the players and coaches here. Regardless of how the practice went or who came, people had a respect and a want to continually get better at basketball. What was really interesting to me was seeing older teenagers who were coming to the younger sessions because they had just started playing basketball. See, basketball is a harder sport to come by in Senegal. Many



The Centre Galle Girls Basketball Team.



The Young women executing a defensive play against the rival team.



people do not have the resources to play on a court. Many of the fields and streets are filled with sand and therefore, make a better futbol field than any basketball court. The court at the Centre Galle allows for kids who have been playing futbol their whole life to be introduced to a new sport with an entirely different game plan. Seeing the older boys who would probably be freshman or sophomores in high school learning to play basketball made me reflect on the opportunities of those in the states. I believe that in America, people are able to enjoy the flexibility of availability. It seems that most of my friends when I was growing up sampled many different sports by the age of 10. Meanwhile in Senegal, people know and live by futbol. Futbol seems to be their soul and their past-time. In the meantime, basketball is picking up traction and it is places like the Centre Galle that allow kids of all ages to try something new.

The celebration of the league was an all Sunday event. It began early in the morning and lasted until 8:00 p.m. Lunch was provided for the students and coaches. The coolest part of the whole experience was the ambiance. Everyone was watching each game. The boys and girls were equally supported and cheered on

as the day progressed. Music played in the background, a mixture of local artists and the occasional American rap song. That was quite a weird experience hearing American music that probably could not be understood. But I fell on the other side of the spectrum of not understanding any of the senegalese music.



The Centre Galle Player shoots a Three-pointer and sinks it.

I came to this event to take pictures for the coaches to have so they can keep record of all the students and activities that they do for the community center. I felt very privileged to be on the sidelines of the games, being able to take photos of all the students. The most interesting part of the games, were the fact that the Centre had invited other teams to play their more serious teams. I was very impressed by the level of play and because many of the games were intense it sometimes made it difficult to take pictures because everyone was moving so fast! The festivities eventually concluded that the students walked home and as did I. The celebration marked the end of the summer and the beginning of school. It also meant that the next league would not start back up until November. I cannot wait to see what November brings and the students she streams into the center.



## “You’re Up Coach!”

**Figuring out the dynamics of coaching in another language.**

This month, I was truly challenged by my supervisor, Jean Magna, when he challenged me to coach the basketball team on one of their last days of programming. I had just come out of working in the library, when Jean looked at me and said in French, “*Aujourd’hui vous êtes en train de coaching.*” I began to look around for other coaches I had seen during previous sessions, but all I saw was a sea of kids yearning to play basketball. It was just me and the bits of wood. Jean was of course going to be in his office while I supervised and “coached” the children. He gave me a whistle and went on his merry me. There I was just standing with this whistle and a bunch a children looking at me for answers. I quickly gravitated to a young girl I had met from previous weeks. Her name was Asul and she would be my translator for the next twenty minutes. Asul and I do not have a common language. She mainly speaks French and when I ask her to speak Wolof, that is also a difficult road. Therefore, I had to preform what I wanted the kids to do when I was trying to continue the drill. Luckily, most of the players knew the basic drills that I had seen them do, so it was kind of second nature for them to get into line ready to warm up their dribbling up and down the court. We went through about six different dribbling routines, until I felt that they had all gone through the lines enough, and people seemed warmed up. Normally, after they finish their dribbling, they go into two separate groups where they work on rebounding, and other passing drills. I asked them to get into two separate groups and that is when all hell broke loose. This is where I felt like I was standing still amongst chaos and feeling stranded between two worlds. One where I knew how to coach and run a team and the other one where I was completely useless to Jean and his program. I felt like I had failed Jean and had failed the kids around me, who probably knew I was way in over my head. And I agreed with them, because I knew there was no way I could succeed without a pretty decent comprehension of language. I was lost. The kids had gotten into two separate groups but were doing their own thing and were trying to self diagnose this situation on their own. They knew that I could not get their entire attention. I do not demand that respect at this moment. I am a foreigner, with a blatantly different language, culture, background and understanding. This whole situation reminded me of when I took a summer job in a small, rural town in Cairo, Illinois. I was hired as a sports camp coordinator, and was told that the children were not accustomed to listening and that it had been difficult in previous years for things to run smoothly. The kids in Cairo demanded respect, they knew how they wanted things ran and they were not going to pay any attention to me unless I had earned their respect. My first week was chaotic but somehow controlled. As the weeks went by the kids respected this out-of-towner and they wanted to be apart of my life, just as much as I had been intentional in their lives. While I was standing there in utter chaos in Yeumbeul, I could only compare it to my experience in Cairo and how much I had grown with those kids. In the moment in Yeumbeul I was loosing my mind, but I was also having a moment of clarity, that this experience will take time, and it is ok that I did





not excel in coaching these amazing kids on my first day. I soon went into Jean’s office and told him I needed help. It took me several times going into and out of his office, in order for my need of help to



Asul and I at my home. One day she came and walked me home.

actually settle in. Eventually, Jean called in a coach who lived near by and he took over the coaching tasks for the rest of the evening. Meanwhile, I sat on the sideline taking notes and even made my way to the library to see if they had any books on basketball drills. While I sat there being a student of the game in front of me a young boy named Pop sat beside me and slowly started teaching me the body parts in Wolof. There was a beautiful silver lining to this car wreck of an attempt to coach, and that was even though I couldn’t succeed in running the program, someone else could. I failed, but my failure allowed me to see that I don’t have to do everything on my own. I need to rely on the good people in Senegal to help me when I cannot help myself or the people

around me. I am grateful for the experience that Jean pushed me into. He had me get outside my comfort zone and understand that there are times when you are going to have to go against the grain and try something so completely unfathomable to you at the time. I let go of my idea of helping the basketball program which was just shagging balls and talking to the youth and was forced to coach. I am looking forward to seeing how far my coaching ability grows throughout this year, after all, we were able to do some drills. I also learned that I will not be able to always have success in the programs that I am apart of here. And sometimes you are going to fail the people around you, but that means that there is more room to grow.

## Braids with Maimouna

### What’s the matter with Braids?

My hair identity is not having a hair identity. I have never felt defined by the hair I have. I have never really wanted to change my hair, besides the occasional cut. I have never colored my hair or permed or done anything crazy to my hair. The craziest thing I have done is used Sun-In to lighten my hair this past summer. Overall, my



Myself, with the braids Maimouna gave me a week prior.



relationship with hair is that of a distant cousin twice removed. Those of you who know me, know that I never brush my hair, I probably have it up in a pony-tail or a messy bun and I am definitely not changing my appearance to impress anyone. I have always had the mentality that my hair is nothing special, it is nothing that should be sought after, its a little wavy and its fairly long. Overall, my hair is one of the last things I think about when I identify myself.

Coming to Senegal, I knew that braids would be everywhere. I knew that part of coming to a dominant African culture, meant understanding the hair of my fellow brothers and sisters. Many people of African heritage have hair that can be identified as a 4A or 4C curl. Their hair is extremely curly and it tends to be fairly coarse in texture. This hair type is also known to be extremely sensitive and prone to damage by heat and product. Many people tend to braid their hair in order to show personal style, for ease of care, to pass the time and to step into their identity of being a woman. Men here in Senegal keep their hair on the shorter side, one of the only groups of people that keep their hair longer and in a certain style is that of the Bai-fall, which is one of the Islamic Brotherhoods in Senegal. As for the women there is a huge selection in which you can braid your hair. Many times I have seen new styles that I have never observed in the States. In fact many of them are intricate and are changed every week or two. There is quite an unspoken time when all of the women and their children take out their braids and for maybe a day have their hair unbraided and brushed through.

Being with my family and interacting with their own immediate family I was approached by a cousin, Maimouna on a day about having my hair braided. I will say, I was quite shocked by this proposition, as I had never even thought of braiding my hair here. The last thing I wanted to do was to take a part of African culture and apply it to my hair. I have done research and some reading to understand the cultural implications of what having your hair braided can mean as a white woman. I never wanted to appropriate this beautiful culture and I wanted my intentions to be known that I wanted to live in solidarity with the women around me. This thought process of not feeling able to wear braids slowly faded away as I was continually urged by my surroundings to braid my hair. Maimouna, just happened to be the icebreaker when it came to actually getting it done. As she propositioned me she told me that she wanted to braid my hair and she would not take "no" for answer. Soon I was told I would meet her in four days to get my hair braided by the fabulous Maimouna.

Eventually, I got my hair braided, something I never thought I would do. I came to the consensus that having my hair braided here can have two meanings. One, people want to touch my hair because it is different and it is sought out in the media. Many women here in Senegal buy hair here that is called "Natural Hair". Now "Natural Hair" is not natural hair, in fact it is usually some form of straight or wavy hair that is then installed through a wig or by sewing it into the hair. My hair happens to mimic this "ideal" hair style that is adorned by almost all of the big celebrities in Senegal. Therefore, many people want to touch my hair because it is something they do not have naturally. My hair is different and I do understand that through unhealthy cultural beauty standards many women do not see their hair as beautiful. It breaks my heart when people tell me they like my hair, because I understand that they have probably been influenced by media. Whenever, someone tells me they like my hair, I always say "No, your hair is very beautiful". I feel that this statement sometimes allows me and the other woman to have a commonality of having different hair. And we are each beautiful for our own traits. My beauty and her beauty are the same and neither is better. The second reason I have come to believe people want to touch my hair is because they truly just want to braid it. There may be no desire to have my hair and their desire may only be to grab me by my hair and to make me a part of the Senegalese culture, where everyone has braids. I have



decided to tread lightly with the braids that people give me. I have decided that it is my privilege to wear braids in this culture and that me wearing them back in the states has an entirely different context.

I have been thinking and reading a lot about braids before I came to Senegal. I knew that I would never wear boxed-braids in America because I would be appropriating the African American culture that I respect. I still feel very torn about myself wearing braids in Senegal because I know that it can have implications back in America. But, I want my readers to understand that I am still walking the path of understanding what it means to walk together with my community in Senegal and what it means to walk as an American doing a year of service in Senegal. You see, I thought initially that wearing braids here would be a step in immersing myself in the culture and being a part of my family. I thought that this assimilation of myself into a culture that is not mine would be what people would want from me. I thought that doing something I did not want would be the step in being a friend in service. However, I have come to realize that there is an importance of figuring out people's intentions and what are my intentions when I wear braids. Even-though, I thought that I was doing the right thing by being a woman in Senegal and having my hair braided, I can see now that this action may not be the proper action in standing with my communities back home.

My journey with braids and hair in general is still a long one, but it's one I am interested in taking and one I want to pursue.

## Cooking with Thioro

### Learning to Cook Cheebu Jenn

Cheebu Jenn is the national dish of Senegal. It is also my favorite meal to eat here in Senegal and it probably has something to do with who is usually cooking my meals. My host mom, Thioro (pronounced Choro), is a very sweet but stern lady. During my first month I told my mom that I wanted to learn how to make this famous dish. I told her that cooking here in Senegal, is much different than what I am used to in the United States. You see, here in Senegal they cook over a gas stove that is an open flame. I have no experience cooking like this so this whole entire process would be a challenge.



Myself laying out the final product of Cheebu Jenn. There is quite an order to how you lay out each piece of the meal.

The day I learned how to make Cheebu Jenn was a Sunday and because it was lunch, it meant having to sacrifice going to Church to be a part of this learning process. So, I ditched Church and went with Daba to the market to buy all of the ingredients for the meal.

When we went to the market we bought fish, onions, okra, spices, potatoes, carrots and Bissaap leaves. Bissap is a popular plant in Senegal, many use the flowers for a sweet drink or cold ice-pop and people use the leaves as a side dish. Once we got back from the market, we immediately started to cut and peel all of the vegetables for the stock that they would eventually be cooked down in. While the women of the family all had a separate job, we all were able to share in the misery of crying while the onions were being





Thioro and I washing the rice together in a bowl made from a dried gourd.

cut. It was quite a funny way to rejoice in the fact that we were all cooking this meal together and I was learning how to be a woman in Senegal. The vegetables were cut and now it was time to fry the fish in hot oil. The fish were both fried for about two minutes and then were set aside to be cooked through after. Thioro gathered me around the cooking pot and allowed me to pour the water into the oil to create a broth that we would put the vegetables in and eventually the rice. Now you all can find a recipe for how to cook Cheebu Jenn online, but the truly captivating part about this whole process was being invited to be a part of the family through cooking. Thioro was so elated to have me be a woman cooking with her, and to cook the

national dish was also pridefull. The whole time we cooked the rice and the vegetables and the fish, Thioro was right by my side guiding me through each step.

Now the whole process took about 3-4 hours but, eventually we got the dish made and we fed the family a delicious meal.

The whole time this whole process was taking place, all I could think to myself was how thankful I was that Thioro wanted to share her culture with me and teach me a dish that she probably learned how to make when she was a young child. It was quite a surreal experience to be shown gently and masterfully how to make a dish that not only I love, but brings family together with a meal and conversation. I am forever grateful that my mother here wanted to invite me to be a part of her family, her stove, her kitchen and her presence. I am so honored to have learned how to make this dish, but I am forever honored to be a guest and hopefully a member of the Ndaiye Family.



Daba posing with the rice.



Thioro teaching me the exact way to lay out the Cheebu Jenn. Ndeye Fatou watching the process.





The raw vegetables that have been peeled and cleaned.



Cooking the ride and letting the vegetables cool down.



The family enjoying the meal that we all prepared.



Thioro Making the Bissap side dish.



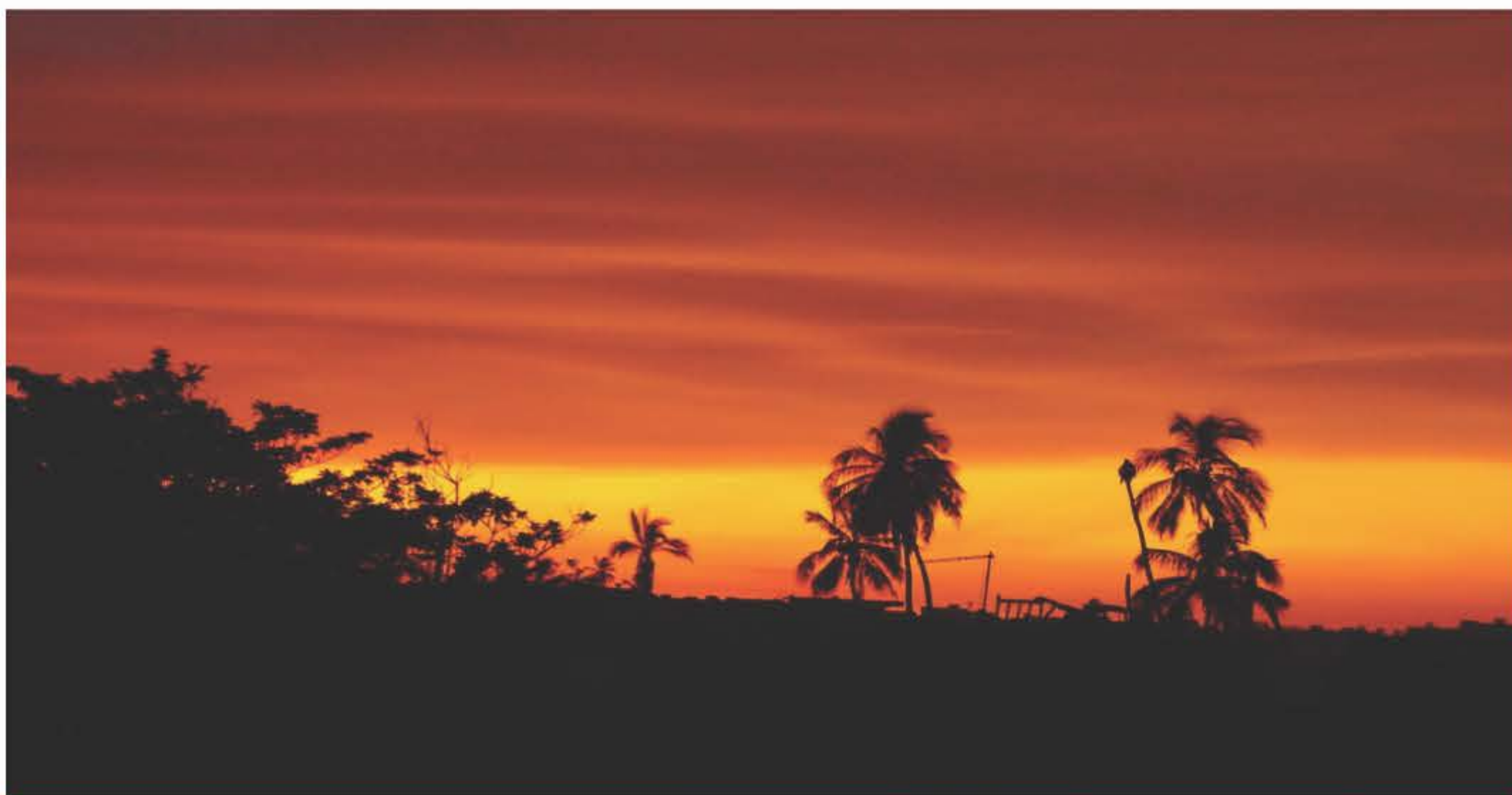
The fish cooking in the hot oil.



## Monthly Scripture

### Psalm 118

I was given this Psalm, this month by my pastor in Senegal. Church is completely in French and I struggle still to understand, but I am getting better at recognizing French “church” words. I sometimes feel like a detective in language, scouring a sentence until I can find a word I may know. During Church, I am lucky that there is a white board where Pastor Ndong, writes down the scriptures, the songs and the theme for the sermon. All of these are very important in my journey of being in church, for this information enables me to still be in the conversation. Psalm 118 was written down and we never read it together, but I chose to read it, as it was written on the board for some reason. Maybe God’s doing? In Psalm 118, it says that “His Love endures forever” and I truly believe this statement. God’s love is limitless, it is good all the time and it surrounds me even when I do not know it. This past month I have lived a lot of life. I have have gotten more familiar with Yeumbuel and the people who continue to push me to grow as an individual. It has been my experience that God’s love endures through those who continue to be a part of my life each and every day. It was a great coincidence that this scripture came to me half way through the month as that was my anniversary of living with my host family and this community. I feel that I have been able to see God’s love with the people of Yeumbeul. Every day I am greeted, every day I am fed, everyday I am surrounded by laughter and everyday I continue to learn. All of these things would not be possible if it were not for God. God enables us to come together through his love and even when we make mistakes or fall, it is that enduring love that is there to pick us back up when we are in the valley of life. This Psalm pushed me to see the goodness and the unfailing love that people are constantly giving me and it encourages me to return that love to those who are in my life.



Sunset from my roof in Yeumbeul.



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