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Remembering the Taste of Senegal

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Postcard from Dakar, Senegal

Fall Semester 2010 Remembering the Taste of Senegal

As James Beard says, “Food is our common ground, a universal experience.” When I prepared for my semester abroad in Dakar, Senegal, food was not a major concern for me. In my opinion, food was a given: we all have to eat and I knew I would be eating many meals in Senegal over the months that followed. As a result, I did not think specifically about what food experiences awaited me outside of the expectation of cultural differences in dishes and preparation methods. However, despite it being a relatively mundane aspect of culture, I soon found that food provided great insight into Senegalese culture and was incorporated into many of my most memorable experiences.

As Linfield’s pioneer group to Senegal in the fall of 2010, we did not know quite what to expect of the semester ahead when myself and four other girls were dropped off at apartments at 5 AM shortly after our arrival. As we unpacked our bags and settled into our apartment to take a nap, we were intrigued by the sights from our balcony and the sounds of sheep baaa-ing, people conversing in Wolof—the local African language—in the streets, and the morning call to prayer. With our first meal delivered to the apartment by our hosts at the Baobab Center came the realization that we were really in a different country. Lunch included a pan of delicious caramelized onions and a platter of whole fried fish, with eyes, teeth, and scales intact. Though we were hesitant at first, we were fascinated by their sharp fangs, decided that they were piranhas, and enjoyed playing with them more than we enjoyed eating them. While we soon grew to love and look forward to this dish, called *yassa jen*, the first few days of food experiences reaffirmed that we were far from the culinary world that we recognized.

Orientation involved our first lessons in the art of eating around a communal bowl. We learned how to comfortably sit on a mat on the floor around the circular platter, to respectfully stay in our own “piece of the pie” and tidy our area when we were through, to eat with our hands or expertly scoop rice up with a spoon, and to share the communal vegetables and meat in the middle that are separated out by the host. We learned about the expectation to eat more than we had ever eaten before, as our host families would continue to insist that we stay to eat—*Kaay! Lekkal!* (“Come! Eat!” in Wolof)—until we absolutely insisted that we were full and satisfied—*suur naa, neex na, bari na* (I’m full, it was good, it was enough). We were told to expect *teranga*, meaning hospitality in Wolof, but nothing could have prepared us for the invitations always extended to guests arriving at mealtime, the instant acceptance of last minute friends around the communal platter, and the demands to *Kaay! Lekkal!* from complete strangers in markets and other public places.

I sat around the communal platter with my host family for at least two meals a day throughout the semester, carrying on conversation, hearing the latest family gossip, and watching Bollywood soap operas and Colombo reruns with my host mother. I learned through observation, immersion, and trial-and-error. Seated on a short stool in the kitchen, I picked up

new vocabulary with the help of Ndeyekane, the *domestique* (maid) of my house who only spoke Wolof and enough French to tell me with a shy smile that she thought Barack Obama was very handsome. Using gestures and the little knowledge of Wolof I had, we chatted nearly every night as she expertly sliced onions in her hands, chopped up potatoes for homemade French fries, and laughed at my attempts to speak the language. My host mother bonded with me as she complained about my 30-year-old host brother Mouhamed never cleaning up after himself, realizing mid-rant that she was sitting on a half-eaten ear of corn he had left tucked in the couch cushion. It was in the kitchen and around the communal bowl twice a day that I began to fit in, developing my language skills and bonding with the members of my household.

Every cultural experience that stands out in my mind is somehow associated with food. My host cousin taught me to brew traditional tea (*attaaya*), and I taught him the macarena as the rainy season trapped us under the shelter of the patio, flooded the yard, and drenched the clothes hanging on the line. Between mouthfuls of Senegalese hamburgers which featured more egg and fries than burger between the buns, we introduced our Senegalese friends to “Je n’ai jamais...” (“Never I have never...”) and stayed up laughing until 4 AM. Sitting in the cool breeze on the roof of another Linfield student’s host house as the sun set, we played cards, listened to songs by Bob Marley and Rihanna, and discussed our different yet similar cultures over three rounds of *attaaya*, ears of charcoal-grilled corn on the cob, and handfuls of freshly roasted peanuts. Accompanied by neighbors, I cheered at soccer games and enjoyed small bags of frozen fruit juice that cooled me off as I continued to sweat through my clothing. I tasted refreshing juices made of ingredients I knew, like mango, tamarind, ginger, and hibiscus (called *bissap*), and others I had never heard of before—baobab fruit (called *bouye*) and *ditakh*.

We enjoyed ripe mangoes, coconuts, bananas, and oranges from familiar fruit stands on the walk home from school each day. In a true Senegalese fashion, this was always a leisurely stroll involving chats with the locals who grew accustomed to seeing us. We knew the woman who made hot *beignets* dusted with sugar that melted in our mouths, and the men in the tent down the street from the Baobab Center knew our names from our frequent visits for egg sandwiches and *Touba café*. Rather than rushing from place to place in an American manner, we were encouraged to take our time and spend it with people.

We discovered delicious snacks at the *boutiques*, small shops on nearly every street corner. The experience of making food purchases emphasized once more that we were far from the United States. In my quest for a bag of yogurt at one boutique, I experienced the shortage of coins in Senegal firsthand when a shopkeeper did not have change for my large bill (10,000 CFA=\$20). He allowed me to come back the following day to pay him the 250 CFA (50 cents) that I owed him. Weeks later, I trusted him in return when he owed me 1000 CFA. When I learned how common this practice is, I was in awe of how trust worked in Senegal in ways rarely seen in the United States. Furthermore, the value of respect was emphasized in encounters in grocery stores when I utilized the extensive traditional Wolof greetings to chat with the cashiers. By asking about their well-being and their families, I recognized the humanity often denied to employees in the United States as we simply wait in silence to hand over our money so we can move on with our lives.

In addition to adapting to these cultural customs, we developed food habits of our own. There were the late night walks to Chez Joe's to satisfy cravings for hamburgers, the early morning stops at the best bakery in town for a chocolate croissant after a long night of dancing, and the frequent trips to buy ice cream bars between classes while Senegalese onlookers laughed at us silly *toubabs* (white people) who still enjoyed such sweets past childhood. For me personally, there was the obligation to try the Barack Obama flavor at every ice cream shop, the strategic skipping of Friday lunches to avoid *soupe kandja*— a okra gumbo with a mucous-like texture that I always dreaded, and the naming of the sheep who I chatted with daily in my yard as I fed them leaves and watermelon rinds through the windows in their pen until they disappeared and our fridge was restocked with meat.

As I adapted to my Senegalese life, there were, of course, difficult days. My food experiences were not always pleasant, but there was always a lesson involved. Having the stomach flu during a bread strike taught me about medical beliefs in Senegalese culture as everyone I knew pushed me to eat as much as possible, conflicting with my American medical beliefs of sticking with small helpings of bland things. One of my first cultural lessons came after I was kept up all night by gnawing sounds when my forgotten stash of comfort food had been discovered by mice. As terrible and homesick as I had felt throughout that night, it did not compare to the guilt I felt when I had to take the contaminated food out to the garbage and realized that I should have shared it with my host family while I had the chance. In Senegalese culture, food is always shared; whether it is a bag of cookies or the last two inches of a can of soda, everyone in the house is asked if they would like a bite or a sip. From then on, whatever I brought home or received in the mail was eagerly passed into the hands of family, friends, and visitors.

With the arrival of care packages from the United States, certain foods became more precious and brought more joy than they do when they are readily available at the grocery store in the U.S. Every last M&M was savored, boxes of Kraft Easy Mac were rationed for the occasional homesick lunches, and snacks were stashed away to share at a later date. Candy corn became a plaything for our Senegalese friends when it was deemed too sweet to consume and used instead to make vampire fangs. My host cousin Abdullah's terrible two's were cured when I treated him with a lollipop during each Sunday visit. Another Linfield student and I unintentionally deterred a persistent rapper who loved to strike up conversations with Americans in the streets when we greeted him with smiles displaying purple teeth thanks to dried blueberries. In this way, food I was familiar with and could usually pick up at my neighborhood Trader Joe's took on new meaning for me in an unfamiliar place.

Most of all, my experiences surrounding food made me feel like I belonged. When another Linfield student's mother and my host aunt returned from their pilgrimages to Mecca, I helped prepare for and clean up after two different parties. Wearing a *pagne*, I sat outside on the patio and cut onions for eight hours while talking with my host mom's friends and relatives; then I walked across the neighborhood with all the women to feast and celebrate. The fact that my hands smelled like onions for a week afterwards only added to my pride since they signaled

that I had finally gotten to know Senegalese women after months of hanging out with the college-aged men in my neighborhood. Then, while washing dishes in a Senegalese fashion outside of the other Linfield student's host house after the second party, we noticed that her host brother and his friend were laughing at us and taking photos of us on their cell phones. Apparently they found it hilarious that us *toubabs* had volunteered to do dishes since it went against their expectations. Domestic tasks were definitely a way for us to gain access and respect by proving that we were willing to participate in the culture as any other woman would. Since hospitality is so highly valued in Senegal, I knew I had become a member of the family instead of a guest when I was sent down to the shop on my own to buy the day's bread and when my host mom finally allowed me to tidy up after dinner.

It was also around mealtime that I finally felt that I had adapted to my Senegalese life, at least in terms of my language skills. One evening, I overheard the words "muus bi" and "bunt bi" (cat and door respectively), recognized that my host mother was describing her daily struggle with keeping the stray cats from sneaking inside while we ate, and got up to shut the door without a second thought. This stunned my host mom, who exclaimed a phrase equivalent to one that all of us Linfield students had joked about but yearned to hear: *Laayilah, toubab bi degg na Wolof bu baax!*— My God, this white person understands Wolof very well!

Then the day came when it was time to go home. Upon landing at the airport in New York and taking our first steps back onto American soil, we were bombarded with differences—the pristine restaurants and bright, spotless shops; the high prices; the outrageous portions; and the mechanical way in which we were processed through lines with speedy transactions and minimal human interaction. We gorged ourselves on foods that we had missed. As I tasted the difference in gummy bears, greasy pizza, and sugary frosted cookies, I regretted it almost instantly. Our stomachs and teeth ached after months of eating healthy in a country where high fructose corn syrup does not exist. With the physically sick feeling came the feeling of farsickness. I longed for chatting with my host mom over a cup of Nescafé, walking to Chez Joe's with my closest friends for a hamburger, sitting with Ndeyekane as she cut potatoes for fresh French fries, and joining my family around the communal bowl. But in the United States, mealtimes are lonely, private, individualized, and a means to an end. It was a hard adjustment coming from a culture where "each person is another's remedy" to another where time is money.

Now, over a year after my return, I have managed to keep a bit of Senegal with me. Food has played a major role in my coping process. Armed with my Senegalese tea set, I revel in the faces family members make when they taste the first bitter round of *attaaya* and when they are finally won over with the third sweet minty glass. I prepare Senegalese dishes for my friends and family to enjoy around a communal platter with me. I introduce my roommates and classmates to richly flavored *yassa* and creamy *thiakri*, a mix of yogurt, millet, and cinnamon. Each food comes with a story, a meaning acquired from my experiences. I describe the challenges of eating around a communal bowl next to a two-year-old, the deep conversations I had while drinking tea, the hours spent cutting onions, and learning cooking vocabulary from Ndeyekane. I tell of the laughter and the tears, and I heal. As I cook, I am transported back to

Senegal and, by sharing my creations *senegalaisement* (in a Senegalese fashion), my friends and family travel with me.

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