



A Visit To Dakar

A morning in Fatick

I roll out of bed at 6:45 wishing to sleep just a bit longer. I stare at my wardrobe sleepily trying to pick out an outfit for the day. After finally deciding on something to wear, I finish getting ready and wander out of my room.

I say good morning to my host mom who is busy heating water for coffee and leftovers for my morning baguette. I have tried suggesting that I could let her sleep in one day and do it myself but she is insistent on taking care of me, so I sit, eat, and greet Papa.

I leave the house around 7:30 wandering down my road, saying Mbaldo (the morning greeting) to one of the women who lives next door. I continue and wait to carefully cross the national highway before deciding if I want to walk today or wait for the bus. Recently, I have been walking every morning. In my walk, I watch the sun as it continues to climb higher into the sky. The warm morning light encompassing everything in sight.

I greet those I see each day and find myself in a wave of children walking to school. Noticing the many breakfast sandwich stands I pass, I imagine myself stopping to buy one if I had not just eaten.



A View from my Morning Walk

After over a mile walk, I make it to the center where I go to work each day.

Often, I am one of the first ones to the center for the day, after the guard and wonderful ladies who clean our space. I make sure to greet each person and then find a seat in the courtyard until someone from my team comes and I will join them in the office. From there my day begins.

The Art of Craftsmanship

On that walk to work, I pass many woodworking shops where they build beautiful furniture and metal smiths where they create intricately crafted gates. Each day I think about the fact that these crafts so common here, feel forgotten in the United States. At this point in American history, hand-crafted items aren't often readily available.

Here, in Senegal, hand-crafted items are around every corner. I am sure not everyone can afford bigger items but repairing a sandal cost me less than what is equivalent to a dollar. I had not thought it was fixable, not believing my host mom when she told me to take it to a small shoe stand in the market. Something I would have otherwise thrown out was easily and quickly fixed because of a skilled craftsman who was easily accessible to me.

There is a loss of art and goods that has come with the culture of buying and replacing things quickly and cheaply. With the rise of this culture in the States those who can do these types of crafts dwindle, making them less available, more expensive, and often unattainable.

Anoo Oxene? Daba yo!



Who's that? Its Daba!

You all know me as Cecilia or Ceci but here in Fatick, I have a new name, a Senegalese name. My name with my host family, my coworkers, and my neighbors here is Daba. In Seereer, this name is a shortened version of the word Ardaba meaning Wednesday. Often it is given to those born on a Wednesday. I was given this name as it is a family name for my host family.

A new identity that comes with the opening of arms into a new family. Above, you can see me in a dress I had tailored for a wedding that happened within my host family. All of the family had matching fabric they got tailored for the wedding showcasing our shared identity.

Getting clothes tailored is the norm. People also buy off the rack but tailors are abundant and affordable. The Senegalese value good fashion and well-made clothes. Another accessible craft

The Morning Sky



From my journal:

January 5th 2024

Sometimes I look at the sky and think wow gorgeous and not much else, but other times I look at the sky and think of home, of the past, once in a while the future. I look at the sky and I see the sky I saw as a kid. I look at the sky and sing lord listen to your children praying and think of camp when I was in the 7th grade watching the clouds with my cabin group after discussing what prayer even was. I look at the stars and I think of the many years I spent looking up at the sky from Sugar Creek as a counselor, leader, staff in summers and in the months of cold I looked at the stars often. I looked to the sky often.

I look at the stars and think of years camping with family. Going to the bathrooms with my mom in the middle of the night and her telling me to look at the stars because it was the best time to see them. I look at the sky and think about how much I love clouds. How much painted skies are often my favorite part of paintings. I think of how sometimes the sky might look similar at home and how it might look completely different but its all connected. How many skies I have looked at and yet I've looked at one sky. My sky is your sky, and my air is your air.

December 2nd 2023

Today I learned I have been saying bat wrong in French for years, I have been calling them below mice, instead of bald mice.

Joining the dance

In pre-departure orientation, my small group discussed how it can be difficult to "join in" while struggling with the newness of an experience. We talked about this struggle and compared it to a "dance," sitting on the sidelines observing or having the courage to join the dance even when unsure.

Recently, I have had many opportunities to join the dance. Although the dance is a metaphor, ironically many of these opportunities actually came in the form of physical dancing.

In December, my host cousin got married. I was able to attend both the traditional celebration Friday, and the church service and party on Saturday. Both days were full of music and dance. Friday, we went to my host mother's family home, the home village of the bride. This celebration was for the women. I started the day dancing inside with some of the relatives, I would later observe and dance with many more women outside.

I finally got to put my new Senegalese dance skills to use. This day I was dancing mostly with the mamas, an older crowd, still their foot work was impeccable. In joining them I thought "I've got this, my foot work is not as clean or impressive as the others but it's not too hard."

Everyone got a kick out of the foreigner dancing and were quick to invite me in. I joined often but also found much joy in watching. What these ladies can do with their feet is impressive. To watch and listen to this joy, brings joy in itself. Even while watching I was "joining in the dance." I found myself greeting new people introducing myself and talking in Seereer, the local language.

The day of the wedding I did not dance as much but did not turn down invitations. Not only was I invited to dance, but pulled into family photos. For celebrations, families will often wear outfits made of the same fabric. With my new dress in the matching fabric, I was already marked as part of the family. As a newbie, I was unsure about being part of family photos but since I was invited, I joined the photo.

On Christmas Day I was invited to a concert and dance that night being put on by the Catholic church my host family attends. I was unsure how late I really wanted to stay up but I am so glad I joined my host siblings.

I looked like a complete fool trying to dance with the young adults whose feet move quicker than my mind can even follow. Still, it was fun.

There was a mix of traditional Seereer music played live and prerecorded pop. It was much easier for me to dance to the pop music as I was more familiar with that type of the dancing. Again I realized I enjoyed observing the joy around me even when I wasn't moving.

One other time I "joined the dance" was when I went to a concert fundraiser for the Lutheran church. I had been given a ticket for the concert but I wasn't sure about going as it would be a long trip. However, Lydie who is both a coworker and host cousin, was going. Her brother was one of the performers. If I went we could travel together. That made up my mind.

That weekend I had time to explore with fellow YAGMs Carl and Abigail. We visited a beach that had been a recommendation from a MSID professor that I never got to visit before leaving Senegal in 2020.

Before heading to the concert, I joined Lydie in spending time with family, giving me another opportunity to speak Seereer.

In true Senegalese fashion, we did not leave until much later than the concert was originally said to start. And in true Senegalese fashion, the concert did not start until after we got there. It was almost 11 pm and I was already tired. I knew dancing was likely to come with the music, and when invited I joined in, but this night I was not as eager. I was happier watching, and listening and I thought to myself that is okay. Not everyone was dancing, it's not a requirement, and it is not the only way to enjoy the moment.

In all these instances I saw that there are times to join, but its okay to observe. It's a balance. I have for so long found shame in observing over choosing to dance. Yet I have realized observing in this way is still taking part in the dance. It's not as active but your are still a there. Observing is important, just because it comes easy to me does not make it bad.

It's a way to slow down, to see the world, and appreciate what's in front of you. To learn to be present in observing is a skill. Learning to join in when I'm invited and feel that tug, even if I don't know exactly what I'm doing, is important.

Both are ideas I can hold. Both are needed.

- Attended one part of a cultural festival in which my host brother played music
- Made tater tot casserole for my host mom and dad
- Made tacos with pico for my host family
- In introducing tacos my host mom found a love for tortillas and now is excited about their versatility
- Have been watching the Cup of African Nations with my family
- Gotten two outfits made while living with my host family



Christmas Eve outfits with my host mom and sisters

Merry Christmas

This year the holiday season looked a bit different. With the hot climate, it didn't feel like December and without traditions or décor I am used to at home, it didn't feel like Christmas until my host siblings started to arrive home to celebrate.

With most of the family home for both Christmas and New Years, I had a lot of wonderful time with the host siblings I am not able to see often. We had time to talk, go on walks, joke around, and play **a lot** of Uno. A game that reminds me of my own grandparents.

Christmas Eve, we dressed up, took photos, and headed to the Christmas Eve services. I was dropped off at the Lutheran church I attend every Sunday. My host family made their way to midnight mass at the Catholic Church. The chapel was lit up in Christmas lights and festively decorated. Josh was already there when I arrived. We looked around and saw we were the first there. We laughed at how American we were in being early. We would enjoy a lovely service, wish and be wished a merry Christmas, and head home.

Christmas day I witnessed the wonderful tradition in my host family of cooking lots of food, so much food we had to get out the large cookware cooking with fire instead of our gas stove.

My Maman Clotilde, my host mom, focused on the chicken vermicelle, a delicious noodle dish with onion sauce and chicken. This dish was being made to give away to all our neighbors and many friends.

My host siblings focused on our family meal, a delicious salad with vegetables, fries, onion sauce, a mayo-based sauce, vinaigrette, and both chicken and pork.

I helped cut vegetables. For a big meal like this everything is cut with presentations in mind. I practiced my hand at cutting thin bell pepper rings, and also thin beet slices. Whenever I would mess up creating an ugly pepper or beet my host sister, Clo, would laugh and tell me to eat the evidence.

Later that evening I would find a chance to offer a little bit of my own tradition giving small gifts to the family. Lastly, before I headed to the dance I highlighted earlier, the family got dressed up, took some photos, and had fun making TikTok videos together even convincing Maman Clo to participate.

And a Happy New Years

New Year's Eve I joined my host family at midnight mass. At the end of the service we went outside. People placed some of their hopes and prayers written down into a small fire to burn for the new year. We saw fireworks going on in the distance and everyone started hugging welcoming the new year. This day another amazing salad-based meal was prepared but we did not eat it until we returned home from church and found ourselves in the new year.

My host brother had friends over to celebrate the new year and his birthday. More food was prepared, juice and beers handed out, and I was introduced to my host siblings' childhood friend group. With that, the new year had begun



With my host dad



Programme D'education de Foyer



Etat Civil Educational Session

We had a busy start to December, visiting multiple preschools a day, as well as prepping for and attending the church Community Development Department open house hosted at a preschool. This open house included theatre and singing performances by the preschoolers, a dance group performing, and many speeches about what the department does.

After the open house, everything at work slowed down. As I inquired about this time I was told that the slowdown is normal for December.

After the holidays it was time to wrap up the year, a time full of meetings and end-of-year reports.

Classroom Mural



Now alongside our normal deliveries and visits to preschools, another project has been in full swing.

This project called "Etat Civil" focuses on helping families get all their papers in order. This includes helping pay for the declaration of a child who was not declared at birth, and education surrounding the importance of and how to declare marriages and deaths in the family.

What have I been up to?

I have had a few people ask me what I do at my volunteer site, and it's not the same each day



Below is a list of different things I have found myself doing over the last few months

- Helped pack and deliver supplies for the preschools
- Gathered books to share at the open house
- Delivered paperwork between offices
- Sat in on meetings about budgets, reports, upcoming projects, and more
- Alongside the team, I visited government officials, religious officials, and village heads about the Etat Civil project
- Helped troubleshoot technology
- Photocopied documents
- Packed goody bags (Pictured above) for educational sessions on declaring marriages and deaths. Dish soap, laundry detergent, and bar soap, the best goody bag ever!
- Attended these educational sessions and took pictures to be shared with the project partners

I often do small tasks, but my most important job is to observe, to learn, to practice my Seereer, and to be a witness to all the amazing things this team is doing.



Community Development Open House