

12.26.05 Royal Air Maroc 6:24 a.m.

Already on the plane ride I am absorbing some new cultures. The three year old in front of us is on her way to visit her Lala Fatima (grandma) in "Ma-WOKko". The lasagna was full of salmon. One of the choices through the headphones was the Q'oran sung and chanted gently enough to put me to sleep. All the signs and magazines are in three languages: French, English and Arabic. The Arabic is calligraphic and punctuated with lots of dots, ascenders and descenders, rising and falling and squiggling like the notes that the Imam sings for my listening pleasure. It reads from right to left, back to front like Japanese graphic novels. The upholstery on our airline seats looks like burning candles seen through the mist and the wallpaper mimics tessellating mosaics from the mosques.

On the airplane to Africa, we could put on our headphones and listen to an Imam sing verses from the Muslim holy book, the Q'oran. It was sung so gently, it made us fall asleep.

12.27.05 Mohammed V Aero port Casablanca, Morocco 8:45 a.m.

I took a photograph in the terminal of the mosaics on the wall matching the I-beams and infrastructure of the construction. Seemed to me that the intricacy of the tile work was a metaphor for the inner workings of the universe, the complexities of how everything works, the wonder of it all.

The mosaics on the wall inside the airport at Casablanca looked as geometric as the beams of the construction underway outside the airport.

12.27.05 Sightseeing in Casablanca

Royal Air Maroc put us up in a nice hotel from where we could shower, take naps, eat meals and sightsee while waiting during our twelve-hour layover in Casablanca. Some of us went to the Hassan II Mosque, a magnificent building with intricate mosaics. Others went to the casbah to shop from vendors whose stalls were full of everything imaginable, from ceramics and lamps to shoes and rugs.

We had one day of sightseeing in Casablanca, Morocco, before we flew to Dakar, Senegal. While there, some of us visited a beautiful mosque while others shopped at the market in the casbah.

12.28.05 Awa Plaza seaside hotel outside Dakar 11:10 a.m.

We got into the airport in Dakar around midnight last night. In a sweltering baggage claim area, we grabbed our stuff and loaded it out into the parking

lot where Massamba and his crew of strong young men were waiting. They threw our bags on top of a rickety old customized van in assembly line fashion. TWENTY of us piled into that van with a hundred pictures of Muslim holy men on the dashboard and we drove here. It was dark. We were exhausted. The hotel was so clean and inviting that we all grabbed bottles of water and rushed to bed and sweet, comfortable sleep, a nice breeze blowing in the windows.

When we arrived in Dakar, Massamba's friends put our bags on top of a van in assembly-line fashion. Twenty people rode in that same van from the airport to the hotel. The dashboard was covered with many pictures of Muslim holy men to be sure we would have a safe journey.

This morning I was shocked to walk down into the lobby and look out the front door onto the ocean! Edward Hopper's painting came to mind. Nothing obstructed our view of the sea, except for palms, a red dirt road and a few goats scavenging along the dunes. Donkey carts rode down the road, alternating with taxis and compact cars. Ahhh...it's good to be in Africa. Someone came down and said, "Have you seen the view from the roof?" We hadn't, so we climbed the five flights of stairs to a beautiful rooftop with a mosaic tiled floor. Looking out over the half-wall, I was shocked again to find that I was NOT in a secluded seaside resort, but right in Dakar! The expanse of the city in its geometric salt crystal formation went from horizon to horizon.

Our hotel that first night was on the beach. There were goats on the beach. Horse-drawn carts came by on the road, as well as cars. From the roof of the hotel, we could see the crowded neighborhoods of Dakar just behind the hotel.

I painted a picture of our host Massamba's eye, the first one in my Senegal-America Eye to Eye painting, while waiting for the bus to pick us up. He's a busy man and I figured I'd better grab the opportunity while I could. Even while I painted, he sorted receipts and checked his cell phone messages so there was never a dull moment.

12.28.05 At Massamba's House in Joff

Our friend and host, Massamba Diop, invited us to his new house in Dakar. We met his wife and three daughters. They cooked us a traditional meal called chebu jen.

We sat on the floor around the big platters. The polite way to eat this traditional dish is with your right hand. You take a handful of rice and squeeze it into a neat wad and put it into your mouth.

On his roof there were goats being kept for the upcoming Muslim holiday called **Tabaski**.

Massamba's friend Ousmane brought two **djembe drums** that he had just made. Ousmane and Earl took turns playing and we all danced together in Massamba's house.

Massamba took us on a tour of his new house. Tall man that he is, the ceilings were high and rooms were spacious. Renters on the first floor, living quarters on the second floor for Massamba and Nara and their three daughters (an a spare room for Tony!), and a rooftop with goats for the Muslim holiday called Tabaski and places to cook, wash, and sleep under the stars. Before we knew it, our high school drummer Earl was playing one of the djembe drums that had just been made for us by Ousmane. Massamba literally rolled out the rug for us and we began to dance. Ousmane alternated with Earl while Robbie, our filmmaker, filmed. A beautiful young African girl named Boury came into the crowd and did her lovely modern/traditional dancing. She pulled us up by the hand and we danced, too. Nara and her daughters made chebu jen or rice and fish with root vegetables on HUGE platters. We sat on the floor in the living room and ate with our right hands, squeezing the rice into neat wads and putting it into our mouths, delicious and spicy. I did some after dinner doodling for Massamba's daughter Ida and Boury the dancer. Everyone wanted in on the doodling action and I think I'll have lots of people to send copies to when I get home.

12.29.05 Espace Sobobade in Toubab Diallao

The ride to our hotel, Sobobade, was amazing. Jean, Katie and Debbie took a taxi, so the rest of us rode in relatively spacious comfort, though now that I recount, we still had twenty people in the van. The street vendors all along the rush hour traffic in Dakar were tapping on our windows, hawking things like bananas, oranges, and roasted peanuts, much like the men who sell newspapers to drivers in their cars along the median strips in America.

On our ride from Dakar to Toubab Diallao, we saw many people carrying buckets and trays and bundles atop their heads. We saw many goats for

sale, too. Horse-drawn carts are very common, even in the capital city of Dakar.

We saw women balancing buckets on their heads, a man with five mattresses atop his head waiting to cross the street, goats everywhere in shops and along the road and every kind of outfit, modern and traditional, and a few wrong turns, we arrived at Sobobade. Drums were drumming and dancers dancing in the amphitheater. It sounded like a movie soundtrack. I wished the clouds would move. Sure enough, they moved and revealed tons of stars. The constellation of Pegasus was directly over the coast of Senegal, corralling us below in its giant box. We had time for a late dinner of chicken, vegetables and rice in the hotel dining room. The Senegal-America tour group is feeling like a family already with lots of laughter and camaraderie. Still conquering our jet lag, no one stayed up late, except dear Massamba and crew who still had to drive the long drive back to Dakar and their homes in the dark.

Through the dark, we drove down narrow, sandy roads through tiny villages. In the light, this is what some of those roads looked like.

12.30.05 Sobobade

We woke to the sounds of Africa awakening: roosters crowing, the call to prayer, chickens cackling and donkeys braying, the waves of wind pushing against the walls of our room, wooden carts clacking down rutted roads, laundry being squished in buckets, wood being chopped and sawed, children laughing and talking. The compound is even more beautiful in the daylight than at night. Around every corner are red and turquoise tile mosaics, sculptures, fountains, hammocks, stonewalls and arches studded with seashells.

Our place to stay at Sobobade is even more beautiful in the daylight than at night. Around every corner are red and turquoise tile mosaics, sculptures, fountains, hammocks, stonewalls and arches studded with seashells.

Sellers are hawking wares in between buildings and on the beach—masks, carved wooden figures, batik clothing, purses, indigo fabrics, sandals, fruits, drums and more.

Even in a very small village like Toubab Diallao, business people sell wares in between buildings and even along the cliff near the beach—masks, carved wooden figures, batik clothing, purses, indigo fabrics, sandals, fruits, drums and more.

...and children playing, always with a bucket for holding their lunches of rice and sugar cubes and to collect any coins or handouts they can convince unwary tourists to give away.

Children carry buckets to hold their lunches of rice and sugar cubes and to collect any coins or handouts they can convince tourists to give away.

The amphitheater at Sobobade was the site of our day's events. First, Earl (our high school drummer) got an impromptu drumming lesson from Moses (a Sobobade dancer) and the master drummers from the night before. Then came a dance session with Aissata Cisse whose flexible young body was tireless as she shook and bent and stepped and clapped and led us through the many movements of African dance.

Ousmane led the drummers. I brought out my handmade shekere and made good use of it when I wasn't dancing. Afterwards, when we were all tired and our feet were sore and burnt from dancing on the hot tiles, I painted our dance instructor and drumming leader into the eye painting. While I painted, Earl and Bob played more drums with a kora player who surprised us by playing some groovin' African tunes, and even went so far as to play his kora with his teeth a la Jimi Hendrix. Robbie, our filmmaker, shot footage of everyone. It's amazing how inconspicuous he can make himself with his filming equipment. The only time I noticed him was when he did an extreme close up of my painting and the fuzzy microphone cover tickled my face as I stroked on layers of watercolor.

The waves at the beach were a refreshing, cool respite from the heat of the sun. We saw a sand dune dotted with large three red dogs with floppy ears soaking up the sun, fast asleep. Supper was chebu jen (rice with fish and vegetables) in a secluded area of the compound along the cliffs. The large metal platter was in the center of the table and we all shared. Tony explained to us that when eating this way, if you can imagine a large sliced pizza in front of you, one slice would equal about how much of the food you should eat and you'll get your portion of what is on the platter.