

Going Home “An African-American Experience in Senegal”

*By William C. Daniels
(for the Senegal-America Project 2005/06)*

“Life brings about many twists and turns. And with it comes moments of needed retreat, a period to pose critical questions to the soul. What better way to measure human worth, direction, and purpose? Only one place offers the aesthetics for this metaphysical inquiry: the human soul. But here, inside man's most private place, it is lonely. For here, man cannot mask his flaws from himself. Here, all weaknesses escape excuses, and accomplishments receive little or no accolades. It is a place of innermost fear, but ultimate truth.”

(Excerpt from “*Comfort My Soul*” – William C. Daniels, 1997)

The timeliness of his call could not have come at a better time. After almost four years, the call from Tony Vacca would consummate the invitation extended by Massamba Diop during our first meeting in Florida a few years earlier. “Come to Senegal,” he said. Without pause, I accepted the renewed summons to “visit” this distant land – Africa. For me, it would be a monumental step, adding a critical piece to my 20-year study of classical African civilizations. More importantly, it would provide a respite from a tumultuous year (2005) – professionally and personally. Abroad, I could remove the numerous masks often required of me; the ones often insisting that I “reform” my inner self and restrict my outward calling. Internally, I was creating a compilation of Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Outwardly, that can be dangerous – in America 400 years of struggle had clearly demonstrated that. I was in search of something greater as the New Year loomed – a new approach, a renewed spirit, a greater vision, deepened purpose and *ultimate truth*.

Though this was not my first time out of the country, it would be the farthest distance from the place of my physical birth. More momentous than the distance was the location. Unrefuted, finally, as the birthplace of mankind, I had long imagined my reaction when I eventually matted my feet on African soil. My father had always told me – “*Son, you always do things the hard way.*” “*Backwards,*” he would often say. This time would be no different. For this trip would land us in the western-most tip of the continent, not the eastern cradle near Ethiopia. Senegal and the infamous “Door of No Return,” a prominent port of reluctant departure, would be my retreat for the next two weeks. Once more, I would be traveling backwards and again I was willing.

We had all been summoned individually, by an Italian percussionist, coordinated by his spirited New England agent, welcomed by an international Senegalese Tama Drum player and compelled by our individual callings. The day after Christmas is not the usual time that 18 relative strangers (unknown to each other) would board an international aircraft across the Atlantic. This was a time to spend with families. Little did we know what was about to happen. We were about to become one. As soon as I entered the terminal at JFK Airport, I recognized a couple of faces (Lenny and Derrik) from the crew section of our web page and immediately introduced myself. After Jean hustled me through ticketing and got my bags checked, I called out to my friend (Tonyyy...Vaccaah!), reacquainted myself, met the others and boarded Royal Air Maroc.

By 7:30 p.m., we were aloft and I began to shed my mental skin. My unconscious began to merge with my conscious. Suddenly, I didn't feel like I was leaving anything behind. For almost seven hours, I would sit next to a young Haitian-American who had unwittingly forced me to deal with my own prejudices. He was young, with corn rowed hair, baggy clothes and a red scarf tied around his head. "It's gonna be a long flight," I thought, until we began to converse. As it turns out, he [Kenwood] was the son of a United Nations diplomat (Ivory Coast), an early childhood education teacher in south Florida and extremely informed on the body politic and global and historical facts - intelligent. He was on the way to Niger to retrieve his wife and daughter. My law enforcement profiling and inner-city experiences did not apply to this subject and I was glad. Instead, I (Mr. Diversity) had to take the medicine that I frequently prescribe to my students – *"The me that is me you cannot see..."* (Mary Lou Van Atter)

Ever since I can remember, I had always cheered for the underdog. Even as a small boy, I had wanted the Native American to win in their television battles against the colonizing cowboys. Without anyone even teaching me about slavery, colonization, or genocide, I sensed something wrong about their persecution and slaughter. No matter how "savage" they tried to portray the "red culture," I was drawn to their way of life. My research throughout latter years would reveal why. So, when we arrived in Casablanca, Morocco, I was not interested in nightlife, palaces or partying. I wanted to see the people of North Africa – common folks. And so we did, as Tony, Irma, Debby, Kim and I plotted our walk to Hassan Mosque II. Along the way, I saw the beauty on their faces and the tenacity in their work. From alleyways and opened doors they stood poised and positioned – going about the business of making a life for themselves. Only a shade lighter than my own skin, some not even that, I reminded myself – they are African!

The afternoon lunch in the hotel restaurant began to assign our individual positions on race, religion and politics – forbidden discussions in America, particularly among a diverse group such as ours. But here, we talked freely about most of them. Tony was the perfect facilitator, between taking chomps out of his French bread. No matter how fervent the interjections, there were no hurt

feelings – only the excitement over gaining new perspectives. This would not be the last time for such a discussion. It would prove to be the beginning of an extended discourse that would continue even after our return to America.

Beautiful as it was, Morocco had not produced the type of internal stir that I had anticipated from being in Africa (Al-kebulon). Senegal did! At Senghor International Airport (Dakar), crowds of people leaned through the gates, waiting for their travelers to arrive. Finally, a familiar face emerged from the crowd – Massamba! The path to the hotel was paved with sandy streets as the tattered taxi kept pace with the bus ahead. Clothed in darkness, I could not appreciate the beauty of the coast or its inhabitants until the next morning. So as the sun filtered its rays through the ether in the atmosphere, I grabbed my camera and immediately made my way to the beach, answering the call of the shore. I knelt briefly to clinch a mound of African soil in my hand; then released it. My soul began to stir as I watched the locals emerge from their homes, into the streets of Dakar.

“An old woman makes her way down the reddish road, carrying two buckets and a stick clinched in the right corner of her mouth. Her eyes are strong and penetrating – her head lifted upwards. She is a proud woman! Another (younger) woman emerges from between two houses to cross the street. She empties a bucket of water onto the beach sand – the same sand that I had clinched between my fingers a few moments ago. Am I dreaming? I had to be sure. I am in Africa!”

(Excerpt from the forthcoming book *“Soul Call”* – William C. Daniels)

The people here did not wallow in their lack. Rather, they embraced it with a quiet dignity – perfect balance (demonstrated by the hands free baskets atop their heads), dignified stance and erect posture. In the midst of their material poverty, I immediately discerned their spiritual richness and resilience. There was regality about their presence. The victim mentality was not as pervasive here as it is with black Americans. There was a reason for this. Even in a country where over 50% of the population suffers from “poverty” of essentials, they still knew who they were. There was no identity crisis, as they could verbally trace the lineage of their parentage on both sides beyond two or three generations. In that fact alone, they stood proud.

I was welcomed by many as “African – American. Welcome brother!” Yet, I could not help but wonder when they spoke spontaneously, whether Wolof, Fulani, or Mandinka was my native tongue. How would I know? More evident than ever now, I was aware that I was the product of the African Holocaust. The blackness of their silky skin contrasted with my caramel buttery cream hue, evidence that my family oracles were true. My great-great grandmother was the product of Massa’s (the slave master) midnight romp in the slave quarters. I was not embittered by the physical comparison or historical realization, just reflective. Repeated conversations over the coming weeks only solidified my academic

research of previous years. This had been a rich culture (still was), they were brilliant people, but while they were among the earliest victims of genocide, they had still managed to hold onto the most vital component necessary in any resurrection or restorative process of any people, anywhere – *Identity!*

The welcome at Massamba's house reminded me of the openness that my own parents used to extend to neighbors or visiting relatives, back in South Georgia. It was a much simpler time then, when we left our wooden doors open and screened ones mostly unlatched. Those times have long passed. Now, we live in glorified fortresses – entering and exiting to the tunes of electronic [alarm] keypads, peepholes and gated communities. We don't even know our neighbors and Lord knows you'd better not chastise their children. It was a simpler, more efficient time back then. Senegal appeared to preserve that era. The large platters of shared food on the floor, group singing and impromptu dance lines reminded of those celebrations (holidays, funerals, birthdays and barbeques) when everyone was welcomed into the other's homes. No fence could keep a neighbor from my father's barbeque, as they straddled and leaped over to join us in the backyard. An invitation to join was always inferred by the fumes produced by the drippings of his homemade sauce. As Tony and Massamba emerged from the back rooms, taunting each of us with their tama solos, and Earl found his place on the Djembe, I finally knew. I was back home!

The road exiting Dakar was lined with an endless sea of people and goats. It looked like a mass exodus. I was overwhelmed by the inequities within the world and I contemplated the role of contemporary superpowers in the chaos. I knew now that the restoration process of Africa's crisis or any others, for that matter, was an uneasy burden for any one individual or group to bear. There were so many people with so many needs. As we neared our turn onto the dirt road to Sobobade, the conversation in the crowded bus turned political. Many, in America, would blame the condition of Senegal and the greater continent to lack of vision, laggardness, and incompetence. I knew better. Their condition was due largely in part to the systematic colonization of early European and modern western expansion. I quickly referenced the works of Walter Rodney (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*) and Chancellor Williams (*The Destruction of Black Civilization*). Baobab trees pointed the way along the road as Kim and Elizabeth burst into melodic tribute. Lenny, Richard, Jason and Earl leaned forward to share our exchange. Such exchanges became a daily and integral part of our familial ritual.

I quickly realized that members of the crew were less concerned about promoting their individual gifts and personal agendas. I remembered jotting down a line in my journal – "*We must have drowned our egos in the Atlantic.*" It was a beautiful thing! No one worried about wardrobe, accoutrements or vanities. It was all about the experience, interacting with the people and discovering the peace that it all brought. No matter how awkward we may have appeared, we wanted to dance – so we did. Each day, an itinerary was provided,

but not forced. *“I’m just putting it out there,”* Tony would say. Our commitment was left to the discernment of our internal compasses. There was no sense of impending urgency, yet we always managed to exceed our myopic expectations. This really felt like freedom. Strife didn’t dare rear its ugly head. Because by now we were dependent on each other for new ideas, group activities, photos, writings, shared mosquito nets, showers and toilets. And most important of all, the greatest commodity - water!

“Bottled water is a premium and I share some of mine with Bob. There is instant trust among the group – each sharing and assuring one another.”

(Excerpt from the forthcoming book *“Soul Call”* – William C. Daniels)

There was no time to segregate ourselves into human enclaves, as is so prevalent in culture that we had left behind. Here, black men proudly escorted their Caucasian spouses on the beaches and no one performed a double-take. As European men embraced their African women and mixed offspring, I could find no insulting stares – and I looked. Flip the script. In America (a “free, democratic and civilized” society) both groups (black and white) still make insidious assumptions over such public pairings. And bias-crime related incidents still reflect their fear and hatred in escalating cowardly acts. As I strolled along the beach one morning, a white woman emerged from the surf, in front of me. She is topless, yet makes no deliberate dash for her clothing. This could mean trouble in America. I staggered my step, in anticipation of an unsettling reaction by her or a surprise attack by the hidden camera American T.V. show – *Punk’d*. Her cadence was uninterrupted as she tied the halter strap behind her neck. I passed the spot where she continued to gather her things and she then proceeded along the same path behind me for about a mile before changing direction towards the local village. Now, I was convinced that I am not in America – where domestic migration patterns usually reflect a history of *“white flight”* when large numbers of blacks or browns begin settling in significant numbers! Here, whites were moving into the areas where blacks were the majority.

There is a different kind of peace in Sobobade. The children create their games and are not dependent on \$40 high-tech cartridges to capture and shape their imagination. For the first time in 25 years, I saw young boys playing marbles and was ecstatic when they invited me to play along – even though I missed my shot. Little girls played “hand-patting games” and the most elaborate game observed (by me) was an occasional Foosball table in the sand. Soccer took the place of basketball, as platoons of young men trained along the sands as the sea breath kissed their faces and combed their hair. They were happy and selfless! I found my Sinai atop a red rock at the edge of the ocean. I waded through the shallow surf and navigated the jagged edges until I reached the top. My shoes were removed as I sat facing the west – this was hallowed ground. For the first time during my meditative states, I did not have to close my eyes to

envision a far away paradise. I was in that place, so I kept my eyes open. God was here!

No matter where we went, I felt welcomed and invited to share what little substance that the people of Senegal had. I shared a glass of Bisop (Hibiscus juice) with Agee, his sister and her friend. Before leaving she presented me with a wrapped gift (a carved mask) saying, *"You are a good man; you have a good heart."* Azul, a Muslim drummer removed a leather bracelet from his wrist and fastened on mine. *"You have a good heart,"* he said. Before my departure, I gave him a pair of my leather sandals to replace his plastic flip-flops. Begging took the form of exchange or barter. "My friend" usually meant that they had something to sell or offer you. Even hospitality ain't free.

Joal-Fadiout (about 2 hours south of Sobobade) was evident of the fact that different religions and traditions could co-exist peacefully, while sharing an appreciation for their diverse expressions. There were no conflicts in that region, among the 90% Christian practitioners and 10% Muslim followers. Neither was there any denigration of the other's beliefs; in a country where Islam was predominate. *"To what do you attribute this success,"* I asked our guide, referring to the fact that the Catholics, Muslims and Animists all co-exist within close proximity to one another, yet without religious or cultural conflicts? *"When we (Catholics) celebrate Christmas or Easter,"* he explained, *"We invite the Muslims into our church to worship with us and they come. When they (Muslims) have a celebration, we go into their mosque. Our concept is that we are all brothers [under One God]."*

There were no police in Joal-Fadiout – no jails. Conflicts were resolved by the elders who gathered at the center of town, in a common area. It reminded me of the barber shops in the black [America] communities where the local political pundits of the 'hood' presided. You are liable to hear anything during course of your haircut or shave. Although, here, I could recognize no one who appeared to be under the age of fifty holding court. Experience and aged wisdom must have been a prerequisite for assembly. In Jaoul-Fadiout, adjudications were undoubtedly dispensed on the predicate of indigenous customs, traditions and order. I felt comfortable and proud as hundreds of crushed oyster shells cracked underneath my feet on the narrowed streets of the village – proud to be black, proud to be back!

There were too many revelations, captured by my mind and yet to be penned. The tenacity of the women, innocence of youth and wisdom of the elders all confirmed my research. Perhaps the greatest synthesis of our collective experience was the trip to Goree Island. I did not know what to expect for my compatriots or myself. I had recounted the atrocity of this holocaust for audiences innumerable times before, during my many lectures, my debates, etc. I had even seen the impact that the tour had on others via television. Now, finally, I was standing in the stone doorway that had produced me, my father, and

my grandfather – all *Africans in America*. This doorway, one of several, was the gateway responsible for my lost mother tongue, folkways, mores, and norms. It was the catalyst for Africa's modern state of economic depression, extended tribal wars and refugees. I stood in the hewn doorways, remembering what I had learned about the *Golden Triangle*. Yet, I was not incensed. Ignorance, fear and greed had produced this exploitative gene within the human psyche. The walls and chambers felt cold as the sound of the Atlantic surf pounded the rocks outside the sloping main corridor. As I respectfully descended towards the water, my chest tightened with an involuntary pressure. Still I was not angry – at least not yet. Only one chamber (immediately to the right of the final doorway) produced the chills that I had heard others speak of before. It was darker than the others and as I tried to proceed, I was halted by an indescribable haunting. I stopped, abruptly retraced my steps and returned to the others. Later, I returned with Elizabeth (who by now I had endeared with the title of “medicine woman” for the miniature pouch that she carried around her neck) and we walked to the end. This time, my steps were impeded by an unforeseen wall that was undetectable with the naked eye.

I was moved by the level of compassion exhibited by the other [white brothers and sisters] members of the crew. Some sobbed quietly, while others produced audible whines and guttural cries. Bob asked, “Are you okay Will?” Jason embraced and comforted Earl in a fatherly manner as the fullness of the moment encapsulated him. Others stood silently and respectfully, in remembrance of one of humanity's wounds. There was no time limit imposed on our collective reflection. Unlike many of my white colleagues in America, I didn't have to spend time qualifying the atrocity – they understood! This was *our* Auschwitz and my spirit was saying to theirs – assign no guilt to yourselves, but grieve for those who are still ignorant. Because while I have the capacity to forgive the sins of the past, we too should *Never Forget!*

By now, I had accepted man's global ignorance, fear and even understood his insatiable appetite for wealth – though I neither condone the means realizing the latter. My fury was kindled after going into the curator's (Joseph Ndiaye) office and seeing two pictures on his wall. There they were – U.S. Presidents Clinton and Bush. Both had visited Goree. Both had stood in the “Door of No Return,” crotched in the hollowed cells marked ‘*Enfants*.’ Yet, not one had demonstrated enough moral courage or resolve by returning to American soil and issuing a “formal” apology for the role that Europeans and American industry has played in the development and perpetuation of the African Holocaust. Neither would admit that this holocaust and this doorway had laid the foundation for America's wealth. An estimated 20 million lives were totally destroyed (through this port alone), yet for fear of opening the door to a reparations bill, they remain silent on the past while espousing freedom throughout the rest of the world.

Still today, American products not deemed safe enough for American shelves are being hawked in Senegal and throughout Africa. A continent so

ravished by AIDS, disease, civil wars and a need for food could definitely benefit from a portion of our overblown war budget. Perhaps the fiery black leader of the sixties, Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik Shabazz) viewed it through most appropriate socio-political lens:

"I don't see an American Dream. All I see is an American nightmare. I don't see a democracy. All I see is disguised hypocrisy."

(Excerpt from Malcolm X on Afro-American History)

I could not help but think about the role that I might have played in this condition by not speaking up when I should have, purchased a product that furthered the exploitation of poor peoples in developing countries, and made choices based on individual comfort rather than universal responsibility. It was definitely a gut-check and reason to reflect. This was my *soul call*.

It was both amazing and refreshing to me! Our small delegation had managed to accomplish, in less than 14 days, what governments have not or have no real willingness to do in centuries. With all of their diplomatic legions they appear impotent in examining the facts, candidly exchanging perspectives, accepting some mutual culpability, apologizing, moving towards repentance, consolation, and establishing a comprehensive commitment for restoration. Here, we didn't have the resources, but our actions definitely demonstrated a resolve. *Blessed are the peacemakers....*

There was no mass transit system here (Senegal), yet I found peace in my limited mobility. For the reported 2 million people living under the jurisdiction of Dakar's Director of Police, there were only 200 police officers. Still, they reported mostly petty crimes. Homicides were the exception, not the weekly expectation. I felt more secure here than with the concentrated police presence that I was so accustomed to on the streets of America. Even with the icy cold low-pressured showers and shared toilets, I felt clean and warm. More notably, I found a tranquility that had long escaped me over the last seven years of my jet-setting schedule across North America, resting in four-star hotels and sampling prime cuts from restaurant entrees. I did *not* miss the tailored suits, or the mahogany tables – only my daughter. For a moment, I was willing to trade it all in for an extended period of solace.

My being was suspended in time - enveloped with a sense of kinship. It wasn't about things. *"Senegal is not about the place. It is about the people!"* That's what the granddaughter of the country's revolutionary thinker (Cheik Anta Diop) had told me before I left the United States. After being introduced to her before, she had taken the time to educate me on the culture. Her uncle was the national curator on Goree Island and her mother made it a point to extend an invitation to visit while I was there. *"Keep an open mind,"* she said. There were endless signs of our [blacks] greatness in Senegal – and this was just the tip of the iceberg. Why the slave makers (past and present) would

disparage the images of those civilizations and cultures were clear to me, but not among many blacks in America. Neo-colonialists cannot afford the wealth that lies underneath the soil of that great continent to be merged with the educational achievements and technology of empathetic blacks in the west. The 'jig' would be up. I no longer needed to rely on conjecture or speculation about the pathology in black communities across America. It was evident that we have lost our communities because our consciousness has been collectively destroyed and now perpetuated through self-inflicted bad choices. Sure, racism continues to play a significant part in our demise, but the purposeful disconnect from our antiquity and the constant alienation from our original value systems persist in hammering away at the last nail in the coffin. In short, we have been robbed of the knowledge of self – something psychologist Na'im Akbar has been trying to restore for over 30 years.

“Black people in America have a much greater inner power than they realize, but they must rediscover themselves in order to use it.”

(Dr. Na'im Akbar, Florida State University)

As our crew departed Dakar, I felt clothed in a purpose. The *Glory of the Lord* had shown at least a part of His/Her face to me. Morocco to New York and the spirit of the crew was still abounding. I could still feel it! For two weeks, I had not been bombarded with negativity, fear or cultural division. As we landed at JFK and began to separate, my glory was interrupted. “Breaking News” on the airport monitors – a dozen miners had been trapped and died, Grammy Award winning singer Lou Rawls had succumbed to cancer, police shootings left a widow and orphans and a holiday rapist had been captured. The voicemail on my cell phone was filled – everyone needing something and wanting more! The final leg of my flight to Tampa clawed further into my peace. A rebellious passenger challenged the authority of a flight attendant and another in my airport shuttle felt it necessary to share the reason for her travels - to attend the funeral of a family murder-suicide. Four days later, I would have to deliver a contentious presentation during an International Terrorism Summit. So much for peace....

Nonetheless, the Senegal – America Project served to affirm what I have always known – that I mattered! This simple notion is sometimes lost in the superficiality of American capitalism. Not a utopia by any means, still Senegal was a needed reprieve; reviving my sense of humility by bringing me face-to-face with individual limitations, restoring my faith in a Higher Power and affording me the opportunity to appreciate the many blessings that I have already received. And like Malcolm X's Hajj to Mecca and Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize experience in Oslo, it has inspired a greater sense of obligation and responsibility to the human cause beyond the color, ethnic, religious and gender lines – to the world community.

I was rewarded with knowing that there are others here, in America, who care about the human condition – regardless of their origins, class, faiths and/or

status. Together, we stand with the hopes of educating the rest as we continue to grow independently. Now, more so than ever, I am convinced that whatever affected one directly, would eventually affect all indirectly. You know what they say - "*Home is where the heart is.*" Well, if that's true, I didn't leave my home behind on December 26m 2005. I left my heart in Senegal on January 7, 2006 – and my home too. And one day soon, I'm *going home* again!