

## Where Does Our Information Come From? by Debby Kern

All stories, photos, sounds, movies and descriptions you see here on this website came directly from our experiences during our trip to Senegal, December 26, 2005 – January 7, 2006, and are supported by our research and reading prior to the trip. We checked and rechecked all information for accuracy, but we find absolute truth to be illusory. For example, if you asked twenty people in Senegal if women are treated differently than men and how (one of our schools' questions), you would get twenty different answers, each answer coming from the personal experience of the respondent.

We were constantly aware of serious language challenges since our African friends and hosts spoke a variety of Wolof, French, Serer, Pular, and English. Among us there was a variety of expertise, to put it kindly, in these languages. Communication was usually supported by good-natured playacting until we were hopeful that we understood each other and the true meaning behind our words.\* Sometimes we would ask a question and our friends would say "Wow, wow" ("Yes, yes" in Wolof) just to be polite if they didn't understand us. We had to be careful to discern if the answer was really an answer.

Written words in Wolof can have several different spellings since there are several systems for writing the language phonetically. You may see the same word spelled differently in a journal than on a page. They are all correct.

We checked with each other as we wrote our stories and journals. When facts didn't match, we tried to find out why. For example, our African friends often would give one of us the "Americanization" of their name (Bob and Moses) then give another of us their real name (Pape and Moise). Whenever possible, we asked our new friends to check what we had written about them for accuracy. For example Pape Sakho, the griot, checked his piece on Daily Activities, Day 4-6 carefully, made a couple adjustments, and then was happy with all we had said.

As we observed what was going on around us, each of us, of course, would have different impressions depending on our previous experience. We're planning to have several of the crew write about the important stories, like our visit to Goree Island, because we believe the variety of impressions together create the whole story.

\* If you want to get a true feeling of these exchanges, check out the first audio sample on the music page of the website where Moise Niassy was trying to teach us a song and explain what it means. It's a perfect example of good nature, frustration on both sides because we couldn't speak much of each other's languages, snagging someone who could translate, then hoping that we got the story right. <http://senegal-america-project.org/music25.htm>