

# A Senegal Travelogue

by Fred Tutman

**Background:** *About 3 years ago I was hired by Ford Foundation to write a video script about a program they were funding in West Africa to fuse the wisdom of ancient African healers with modern medicine. I did the gig on a very tight schedule and as I recall, turned my script in literally on the way to catch a plane to Paris for another project. Quickly caught up in other things—I had all but forgotten about the project until mid May of this year. The same folks contacted me again and asked if I would consider traveling to Senegal with their cameraman for a little over a week to research and write a new script as a follow up to the original piece I had done for them. Even though I lived for a few years in Africa as a youngster, it seemed like a unique chance to visit the continent again and see things with adult eyes, so I accepted, got my yellow fever shot and received a plane ticket in the mail shortly thereafter. On the day before the trip the cameraman cancelled and so I hopped on the plane with a load of camera gear and my laptop computer determined to wing it. It's actually been about 9 years (and about 15 lbs) since I had last hefted a broadcast video camera on any regular basis. Once I got over the aching joints and feet, I had what I think was quite an interesting adventure. Here is a short travelogue about the experience. I hope you enjoy reading it as much I enjoyed preparing it...*



*A road lined with Baobob trees*

## Thursday Day 1

Customs turned out to be a breeze after seven hours of dreary flight time out of New York on “Air Afrique.” It’s really muggy here. However, it’s refreshing to travel for once to a third world country that does not seem to have a huge presence of guns and anti-terrorist posturing. Panama, Argentina, Cuba, England, France, even Puerto Rico and several other places I have visited, generally have watchful military types with deadly-looking weapons all over the place. Here, the cops have holsters but no guns in them (hmm). The hotel DOES have a bunch of UN peacekeeping troops who apparently are staging here for some reason. Lots of fatigues and blue berets about the place. A pretty congenial bunch who seem to be giving the lobby bar a run for its money at all hours. I guess being a barfly is one way to approach “peacekeeping.” I haven’t asked, but I wonder if this group is in the vicinity because of the not-too-distant Sierra Leone. I’ve been hanging out with Dr. “Maurice” who works for NIH near DC, and who is a native Nigerian with the traditional tribal markings on his face. Once you get past the initial contrast between his heritage and his western education he is almost as urbane as James Bond (but laughs a lot more). He and I have been swapping “Mindspring” stories since we

share the same Internet service back in the States.. Maurice came here on the plane in conservative western attire, but has now switched to African traditional dress, which includes a turquoise toga with matching Fez-looking hat.

The Africans I have encountered here seem to find humor in most everything. Very warm and hospitable.. When they speak with you they look into your eyes as though they want to see into your soul. The missionary I met on the plane said that the way to avoid unwanted communication here is to not make eye contact. That Africans perceive eye contact as an invitation to communicate. Incidentally, “Gordon” a local missionary I met on the plane explained (along with various biblical references) that AIDS here is spread by the Moslem (male) lifestyle of having several wives. Also, that women as well as men tend not to be monogamous by culture. I don’t know what to make of this explanation. I suspect Africa as seen through the eyes of missionaries is likely a very different place. Nonetheless, --one of my hosts told me that the body count here (all over Africa) is many thousands per day from that illness. Could that really be so? If there any truth to this I don’t think it gets much attention back home.



*A local fabric pattern that caught my eye*

## Friday Day 2

I finally got to tour the city (Dakar) somewhat today. Wow, there are some pretty rugged places! The whole town seems to be built in the desert. There are no sidewalks, just sand...and trash...and more trash. The outskirts of town are one huge open-air dump. Many people seem to live in cardboard, thatch and tarpaper shacks, strewn about the place with no obvious pattern. One of the more striking scenes I saw today was a shantytown of squatters all living in the shadow of an ancient 727 jetliner that seemed to be stranded in the midst of some sand dunes. I don't know if there used to be an airport there and the plane was just abandoned-- or if it made an emergency landing decades ago and could not take off again. It is rusted and seemed to have vegetation growing around it. Like a scene from an Armageddon movie set. Pollution is heavy, lots of diesel fumes and traffic jams. People drive like they are possessed. The taxicab I took didn't have windows, barely had brakes, and I had to hold the passenger door closed with my arm.

The streets are just teeming with crowds of people, many of whom show obvious signs of malnutrition. Kids with spindly legs and distended stomachs from drinking water instead of ingesting food. Women with papooses strapped to their backs and carrying huge bundles balanced on their heads. Mulecarts and horse drawn wagons. Sometimes people just seemed to be sleeping or were passed out in the middle of the sidewalk. All of this unfolds in the presence of huge colorful billboards depicting healthy smiling Africans driving fast cars, drinking Nestcafe or smoking a brand of cigarettes sold here called "Houston's" and their slogan... "USAAuthentic!" Sometimes we would find ourselves crawling through gridlock and drive past a lean-to with people out front selling peanuts, mangos and dried fish to the blaring

sounds of a boom box hanging from a coat hangar in the shack. Much of the scenery is like what I remember from having lived in Sierra Leone years ago. The clash of smells, sight and sound. Frenetic activity and constant blending of impressions like some kind of human soup. It's alternately wonderful and horrible at the same time. More UN troops arrived today. Each bunch arrives with some 4 cases of Beck's beer per man. Someone told me today that they receive \$1,000 per month for their services as peacekeepers--which sounds like far less than minimum wage back home. In any event, it seems that beer is the fuel of choice for this army.

The Africans in my contingent are having a fabulous time. We ate dinner tonight in the garden of our host, a local Doctor. His house staff served us a multi-course meal that began with an enormous fish. The fish was large enough to feed about 14 of us, with plenty left over. We then moved to lamb and then chicken. They kept trying to pour straight Scotch down our throats, followed by wine (first red and then white) then coca cola, then juice, and finally for the toasts...champagne. It's so typical of an Islamic country that some people here drink like fish. The Africans each got up and made elaborate toasts to each other. To the host...to his children...to the guests...to the cook... and to the hostess. Each toast was done first in English and then again in French. Much pomp and circumstance. What can I say but that it was very African.

A Discovery TV camera team joined us this evening. They are filming a documentary here. They are a husband wife duo that actually fit in quite well with the effusive Africans. The wife immediately adopted traditional African dress even though she lacks the regal African posture that women here have (Senegalese women walk as though they are always balancing something on their heads, even when they aren't). By the end of the evening, the two "yanks" were slightly tipsy and well into the spirit of the occasion, playfully teasing the others, trading hugs amidst offering their own ab-

surdly long toasts. The cameraman is a shutterbug and had to take everybody's picture several times to make sure he covered all the possible photo-op combinations. All the women as a group, all the men as a group, each of the men with each of the women and so forth. It's all good natured pandemonium. The three (inebriated) Africans in the cab with me slept (snored) all the way back to the hotel. Just as well since the cabbie drove like a fighter pilot all the way back.

Earlier today I went to an island off the coast of Senegal called "Gooree" (pronounced like it rhymes with Hooray) which was a slave depot during the 1700's. It is preserved as a historic site now by the Senegalese government. Gooree was once heavily fortified and guarded by the Dakar harbor. Later, (after the slave trade) during WWII, it was a site of strategic importance because of its gun placements, and several ships were sunk here. The guide tells me that part of the film *The Guns of Navarone* was shot here using the giant guns as a backdrop.

We took a ferryboat, about the size of a river tugboat, to the island. They cram as many people as possible on the boat. The whole thing seemed to be in danger of tipping over. Half way over, sirens went off in the engine room and boat hands threw



*A mural on a side street*

## Sunday day 4

open a bunch of hatches to let clouds of gray smoke come boiling out of the bottom of the boat. A very hassled looking engine worker kept climbing the ladder from down below as though he was coming up for air. The passengers were quite freaked out. The boat crew seemed bored like this happens all the time. The boat sort of yawed it's way over to the island, which seems carved out of solid volcanic rock. The former gun turrets now house squatters who have added homey touches like curtains and TV antennae to the former powder magazines and gun batteries.

The Africans in the group found the place very moving, some got teary over being near the scene of so much human misery and suffering. They say close to 20 million people were transshipped here by the French until the 1840's. All of the group with me are respected healers from their own countries—some even claim to have spiritual abilities. They explained to me that the spirits of the dead slaves still inhabit the island and that it needs to be ritually cleansed. They feel these spirits are now dominating those living on the island today. Truly, residents here seem a bit low in “spirits”—I just thought it was everyday strife but the “Africanos” with me insist it is the weight of tears from the long dead people once imprisoned here that are weighing on the locals. There are many tourists here but I notice that while people snap a lot of pictures of their companions posed in front of monuments, nobody was smiling as in typical tourist snapshots. I imagine this must be so at the Holocaust memorial in DC, too? There are huge cellblocks where they used to store men, a much smaller one where they stored women, and really tiny ones that were reserved for children. There are tiny rooms with 4-foot ceilings that were used to confine and subdue rebellious slaves in solitary confinement. There is a long sloped ramp that runs

through the facility, which leads to the sea like a diving board, which is where sick or uncooperative slaves were simply thrown into the water to feed the sharks. A couple of the Africans explained that the slave trade is why they will never trust any white people...ever. Although one in the group who was laughing, indicated that some of his best friends were white! Quite aside from the white-black race relations, however, the Africans in this group seem to have complicated relationships with one another. They are tribally competitive and are alternately either “brethren” or good naturedly arguing with each other from one moment to the next. The spark for one such debate occurred when one of the African gentleman was chagrined to learn that in America there are laws against husbands beating their wives. He insists that he could never live in a backward country that has such stupid laws. Wife beating, he insisted is a time honored art in his homeland. Two in the group keep peppering me with theories about my own family origins. Each tribal faction tries to claim me for their own. I kept mum about my Afro/Irish origins. One of the South Africans explained that there is simple test she can perform, which involves playing a drum with a rhythm unique to each tribe. When I hear the one from my ancestors, I will feel an uncontrollable urge to dance!



*The Gooree ferry boat*

This is one helluva hot place! Now that the taping has finally begun and I have been out into the countryside, it is unbelievable how hot it gets here. I think I was badly dehydrated earlier. I had a Nalgene backpacking water bottle with me but the water in the bottle turned scalding hot during the course of the day. I think my scalp is sunburned because it hurts to comb my hair. It was really tough to work in these conditions. I felt woozy and nauseas most of the day. Thank goodness for sunglasses! Trying to go without them feels like a hot lance being pushed into my eyeballs. It's just that bright! I have sunburn all over. It seems to just burn right through my clothes.

Today we were at a combination rain dance and soothsayer event which featured much furious drum banging and lots of chanting and dancing. Turn off the sound and it's like a Baptist revival back home--just more pastel colors! I think I met a cabinet minister today but I was too busy trying not to pass out to register exactly from which ministry. By the way, I learned today that it is common for men who are friends to hold hands here, which is initially eye catching but soon becomes quaint, although it would probably be a show stopper back home. Right now I feel coated from head to foot with the dust. A rather surreal moment in the day occurred when my translator explained that our taping subject (a local medicine man) wanted to visit a tree where a giant black snake lives to see what the snake could tell him about potential deaths or weddings in his village. They told me not to be afraid -the snake hardly ever comes out (he didn't). I kept my distance--*no one can prove to me that snakes don't fly!* The lunch they served at the event consisted of huge communal troughs set on the ground surrounded by very hungry people sitting Indian styles and using their hands to scoop couscous into their mouths. They were happy to share, but, it wasn't my cup of tea--if you know what I mean.

## Monday

Day 5

Today was much better heat wise. I actually had a good time and the climate seemed more tolerable. We took a bone-shaking trip up some mighty bumpy roads to a “temple” where they perform “transference” of ailments using chickens. It was quite a pretty spot in marshy lowlands that would have made some great kayaking. It kind of reminded me of pictures I have seen of parts of the Nile. A wide expanse of water with lowland grasses and heat shimmering off the water. There was a hot wind blowing off the water and everyone seemed to move in slow motion from the heat.

Here is how the chicken deal works. Water is drawn in buckets by young children (because they are pure) and brought to the temple where the water is mixed in gourds and heated with special herbs. Patients disrobe and don special ceremonial clothing and then they are bathed by a priest who uses a live chicken that has been dunked repeatedly in the sacred water. After the bath, the chicken is beheaded and gutted. The entrails are examined for dark spots, which represent toxins, or illnesses that have been “transferred” from the patient. And you can have all of this for a mere 20 cents (probably not covered on my health plan). The chicken part was grisly but I just shut one eye and kept the other glued to the viewfinder. I learned some time ago that gore doesn’t look quite so bad when it is in black and white. I interviewed one of the South African healers on camera this morning and asked whether African healing only works for Africans or would healers be just as effective with non-Africans. She explained that it works with people who are African inside (which she says included many Europeans). She explained that quite a few Europeans are African inside but don’t know it and thus she can always tell when she “throws the bones” whether a person’s ancestors will be open to the healing remedies

## Wednesday

day 7

We ran out of battery power for the camera gear and had to drive back early. There’s a pattern here that wherever we go we get a mob of folks who want to hitch a ride. A ride in a private car is a welcome treat here in the country. Public lorries are usually jammed with people standing on the tailgates and riding on the roof. At each port of call we suck it in, make more room and end up like a circus buggy with people crammed in the cargo hatch, sitting on laps, and packed in like sardines.

## Friday

day 9

I had a strange experience this morning. My translator and I grabbed a cab to go to our first location and from the moment we left the curb this guy drove like a nut case. He was weaving in and out of traffic, driving on the sidewalk and even nicked his side mirror in an attempt to scoot past a Mack Truck at an intersection. It took us a few minutes to realize that the cab did not have working brakes! The guy was driving that way because he had no way to stop the car! We made him pull over (he coasted into an open field). Needless to say, we flagged another cab. At the shoot I was asked to remove my shoes and my shirt so we could film in a ceremony in a temple. I think the translator snapped a picture of me in this state toting the Betacam (I’ll get even later, he can run but he can’t hide). In the temple there were animal skulls hanging in the air and numerous empty (sacred?) bottles and objects. The pries” was in a sort of Roman style toga and did a variety of chants and incantations. Meanwhile, I was being eaten alive by mosquitoes feasting on my bare stomach. The ceremony concluded with

the priest taking shots of vodka and spitting them onto a woman in the temple. She didn’t seem to mind. I narrowly got the camera out of the way to avoid being nailed myself. After he dribbled vodka on her chest and back, she then stood up and lifted her “Sarong” so he could do her legs. I won’t be trying this at home without proper supervision.

## Sunday

Departure day

So much for my Senegalese sojourn. I leave to go back to beltway traffic, a full voice mail box and a fridge that probably contains items growing hair by now. Of what importance is traditional healing in a country with high infant mortality, malnutrition and still hosts yellow fever? In Africa’s future, what role will modern medicine play when 85% of the population goes to traditional practitioners and distrusts advanced medicine. For that matter, how much of my perspective hinges on whether I am African “inside” as my South Africa friend put it? Is the key to healing in this environment, expunging the bad spirits--or is it eliminating the hazardous bacteria in the local waste dumps (or both). I leave the answers to these questions to people who have to live with the solutions. For me, my assignment was a break in the usual routine, a chance draw some impressions about Africa and Africans in a context that was somewhat unique. I am hope I will get back here again some day.



*Part of the Dakar coastline*