

Extracts from 'So Far' – An account of the three months I spent in Senegal



Dakar and two departures: 01/10/2017

Travels commenced in utter excitement. I baffled gloomy businessmen with my backpack on the morning train and sampled all the hand creams Madrid airport had to offer on my stopover. During the descent into Dakar however, I was definitely queasy; a combination of realising just how far I was from anything or familiar and turbulence. I had arrived at 'how long can make the three pairs of underwear in my hand luggage last' by the time my suitcase moseyed on to the carousel – my relief to see it trumped by the comfort of seeing a 'Harriet' sign in the hands of Ibou and Oumi, my hosts in Dakar who could write the handbook on hospitality. We drove to their house from the airport to their house in the dark, so my first impression of Dakar was comprised of roadside vendors with baskets of fruit on their heads and tailgating. During the following days in Dakar I had several cooking lessons with Oumi and discovered such joys as fresh tamarind and hibiscus. I didn't see as much of Dakar as I'd have hoped as I slotted in with their sedate and flexible timetable but I feel these lessons will be invaluable when alone with a kilo of rice and a giant gourd to wash it in and not a blender or even chopping board in sight.

The first venture out of the house into the suburbs of Dakar on my first evening was loud and overwhelming. I have never exchanged money in a shop that also sells hair dye and bananas cards, nor been such an obvious outlier when all one wants as a newcomer is to be able to blend in quietly and without attention – but coping is part of the point.

On my second evening Oumi took me to a beach facing Ngor island where sand and sea bustled with locals and the air was thick with music and the scent of honey and shisha. With Oumi and I was a sixteen-year-old girl called Khady, who I gathered throughout the day had arrived at the house in the morning in in refuge from a forced marriage. She was confident and funny and keen to teach me Wolof and look at all the pictures on my phone – a mirror not of an experience scarring by any standards but of exactly how a sixteen-year-old girl should be. Khady and I swam in soft, flat water and sitting on the rocks afterwards it was the greatest treat to feel somewhat cold. Leaving on my fourth morning felt like as large a leap as crossing continents and my self-belief skills have been tested to an extent far heftier than a half an hour cross

country race in the mud. I watched with gritted teeth my suitcase flung onto the roof of a rickety bus bound for Foundigoune, in which I then spent four of the sweatier hours of my life.

We arrived at the Foundigoune port which is across a wide stretch of sea from the main town, traversed on a tiny and refreshingly windy boat and I finished the journey sitting on top of my suitcase on a horse drawn cart. My house, surrounded by sand in a tranquil part of town, is large and in need of some adornment.

In my first days in my new home I began the hunt for necessities (fan, coffee, salt, cooker, fridge, vegetables) lunched with the family of Alioune Diouf, the teacher who set up my post. Meals are prepared and eaten outdoors, with men and women separate and streams of children appearing who seem constantly content – of the many I've seen this week I've only witnessed one child cry in a week and he was a teething baby accidentally dropped by a sibling.

It seems far more pressing for me to work on my Wolof than practice my French in order to best fit in – I thought it was a culture where everyone was particularly surprised and impressed by everything before learning that waaw means yes not (as it pronounced,) wow.

On my first evening I was invited to a party to (very fittingly) commemorate the start of a new lunar calendar. The Senegalese new year is celebrated with vats of couscous and the children in their best clothes drumming and dancing – it was a joy to be a part of and I left resolved and hopeful, just as one is supposed to feel in the new year.

Acclimatising: 10/10/2017

It's funny how quickly two weeks goes when an essay is due – this fortnight has lasted eons.



I was introduced to Foundigoune (pronounced funjun) where the ratio of goats to cars is about 30:1 at its most joyful on my third evening here at the 'Oscars des Vacances,' a dance competition assembling all the towns of the region in a little stadium under the stars to celebrate the end of the holidays. The preamble was disconcerting as hundreds of eyes were on me while I was given one of the best seats in the house but once the dance began the foreigner was, thankfully, forgotten. Children competed individually in freestyle Mbalax, the national dance which involves Elvis/Forrest Gump-esque movements and body rolling to heavy drumming and was executed with absolute confidence and conviction. A celebrated singer performed a couple of hits then teams from each high school in the region performed choreographed routines with much encouragement from their crowds of supporters. The night was exciting and energising and unlike anything I've ever seen while also having aspects that were so familiar; preteen boys and girls

huddling to show off and check each other out and siblings bundling each other out of the way to get the best view.

I have lunch every day with the Diouf family, where I have been welcomed as a sister, albeit a sister to whom they have to explain a lot and who's experienced things that baffle them, like freckles and the channel tunnel. The household is made up of multiple generations and spouses who cohabit and share parenting so I have no idea which child is whose. Initially the children saw me as an ET-like apparition but their fear has now evaporated and the comfort provided by a child deciding your leg is an apt place to lean, or charging down the path to hug you hello is the greatest reassurance for someone sometimes feeling vulnerable or dependant. Among the many tiny ones there's Khady, who bustles everywhere and trips over a lot, Aram who has a constantly runny nose and always party dresses, and Omar, the smallest who if he can't find his djembe will happily substitute it with a football or someone's thigh to continue expressing his rhythmic urges. I'm also finding friendship with those my own age; I made hibiscus juice with a young woman called Ami and she imparted sage advice on the dangers of men – though my experiences seem gentle compared to her former husband of a year concealing the fact that she was his second wife.

On one long and testing day I politely declined a proposal while on the back of a scooter which was the last leg in a journey that also included a boat and a bus to get to the nearest ATM, which wasn't working. I'm discovering which packing choices were useless – anything tight fitting/averse to dust – and which items – like my white nightie that makes me look like a Dickens character and some collapsible IKEA storage baskets – were strokes of genius.

I don't have my timetable from the school I'll be teaching at yet as lessons have been postponed for two weeks (the head wants to repaint all the classrooms) and I'm thinking of using my free time to visit the Gambia. Once school does start I hope to have some mornings free so I can swim as much as possible. The sea is a walk away and the beach deserted but for a few miles and pelicans. Being shallow and under the same sun that has given me a fetching farmer's tan the water is sadly bath-like by the afternoon but otherwise it's beautiful. The locals call the water refreshing – they have never been to Normandy.



The Smallest Country in Africa: 22/10/2017

Gambia consists mostly of a river, surrounded by Senegal on three sides with the Atlantic to the east. Despite slotting into Senegal like the knobble on a puzzle piece however, switching countries involved a significant shift in culture. My first experience back in an Anglophone country was with the immigration official on the border, who was very enthusiastic in his praise of Boris Johnson, and described

Theresa May as an inspiring orator and woman of great principal. He had a gun and my passport, so I picked my battles.

During my two brief days in Gambia I explored a beautiful park, full of mangroves and medicinal plants and at last got an answer to the question of how humans first discovered which plants were food and which were poisonous, which has often bothered me. It turns out they watched what the baboons ate and copied them, obviously.

Gambia has an infrastructure based more around tourism and globalisation than in Senegal, but an infamous electrical system (or lack thereof.) Of the 3 days I was there, 2 of them passed without electricity, which meant no fan at night so sleep in the humid forty-degree heat was scarce.

Back in Foundigoune, school came to a stuttering start, with a couple of mornings of timetable configuration and being told to come back in a few hours but I have now had a week of lessons. In theory I'm observing to start with, and admiring the pupils' stamina during two-hour lessons while I resist the urge to draw in my margins. The English teacher however has accelerated the schedule has given me the topic of 'family relationships' and left me to plan my own two-hour lesson for Monday. I haven't witnessed much practicality in language learning thus far but I plan nevertheless on taking a Maria von Trapp approach and having them all drawing family trees and singing the colours of the rainbow.

The Diouf family are determined for me to become fully local; they've named me Mame after the materfamilias (everyone is named after someone else in the family) and taken me to the fabric stall and tailor to have dresses made. When I wear the dresses, and when my hair was braided they all assure me that I'm 'so much more beautiful than before!' and don't quite see the flaw in the compliment.

I'm missing green vegetables but gorging on watermelon and bananas and am discovering how many wonderful interpretations there are of fish with rice. My joy at finding oats for sale in Gambia raised some eyebrows but it's a treat to have a familiar breakfast before school on the terrace of my new house, surrounded by a congregation of tiny frogs who gather in my shady spot.

Lessons in both boldness and subtlety: 04/11/2017

I am now a fully-fledged English teacher with classes of 60. I say fully-fledged as that's what I have to convince myself I am as I plan and deliver two hour lessons and find myself adopting the voices of favourite secondary school teachers I haven't thought about in years. I've covered families, furniture, asking questions and jobs and never knew how happy hearing the answer 'I walk to school' would make me, having explained why you can't answer the question 'how do you get to school?' with 'fine thanks, how are you?'

Two years of art A-level also proved its worth when for lack of resources or printer I had to draw a selection of furniture to explain vocabulary; disappointingly, none of the children noted my reference to Van Gogh's yellow chair. With such a volume of students I worry about the lack of time available



to give to the baffled ones who sit at the back while the front ones have already finished their exercises and are waving their hands in the air, clicking and saying 'miss miss miss' (with new titles and the challenges of pronunciation, I realise this is probably the longest I've ever gone not hearing the name Harriet.)

Outside the classroom friendships are blossoming; Ayou and I have been sharing the preparation of our national cuisines either at the Diouf household or at mine, which Ayou prefers as it is without an infant cacophony. With the ingredients available it is mostly her teaching me the Senegalese classics though she now has the vital knowledge of how to make a cake, previously only seen on TV. A joy of these afternoons is that we can present what we've made to the family, which is how we celebrated Mame senior's birthday. Senegalese Muslims don't really do birthdays but they decided having a European present justified a party – they tell me we celebrate everything and I agreed, not describing the *excruciating* distances between Halloween, Bonfire night, Advent, Christmas and New Years Eve. We stuck a candle in the tower of beignets we'd made (the local version of cake involving the same ingredients but fried in little balls on a gas cooker) and I conducted the children in a rendition of Happy Birthday whose inaccuracy was more than made up for with enthusiasm.

Another excitement of the past fortnight was being taken to a local wrestling match. This is not a sentence I ever really imagined myself saying, but seeing the national sport live and at close quarters was as exhilarating as the dance competition when I arrived, and involved a similar uninhibited and instinctive form of expression. The competitors, sporting loincloths and sand slapped onto their bodies, often tumbled onto the crowd encircling them and I found the children who had so confidently brought me to the event springing into my lap for safety – its rather nice being seen as a refuge from sweaty wrestlers.

I've been on the fence about including the most unanticipated and unfortunate aspect of recent weeks for several reasons. My experience of professions of love in French has thus far been limited to the confines of FR2102: Romance and Desire in the French Novel; a module I took last year in which I diligently and often cynically analysed phrases such as 'Je t'aime au fond de mon cœur' never imagining that I would hear them on my own terrace having been here less than 6 weeks. Yet there I was, for half an hour, being barraged with the emotions and loving confessions of Alioune, my colleague who is at least fifteen years my senior and who since I've been here has made every effort to be responsible for me, in ways both indispensable and irritating. I'm not at all predisposed to publicising my love life, but this isn't *my* love life at all, and instead is a surreal new challenge far more delicate to handle than those I expected to face here, like giant class sizes and missing yogurt. Writing it also turns it into a story; something distanced from my present, and as I repeatedly assert my indifference I'm comforted by that fact that if nothing else, it's great for my French (though I would not complain if he just asked me to analyse a film extract or give my thoughts on nuclear power stations instead.) It's a development I'm determined not to let define my experience and fortunately with lesson planning, female bonding and Wolof learning there is plenty else to keep me occupied.



'Where did you get your hair from?' 20/11/2017

This question was posed to me by Aram as she patted my ponytail with a sandy hand. My answer was translated into Wolof by her mother but being two and without a firm grasp of genetics I think I might have left her with an impression that my parents are in the business of making weaves, which get dryer and slightly ginger as the months go on.

My recent extra-curricular activities have included a trip to a village a few kilometres inland from Foundigoune to see the peanut harvest. I was taken there by a carpenter who was working on a house I was visiting and who insisted I experience the peanut farming that he does alongside carpentry (he's also a wrestler – a diverse CV.)

Peanuts and fish are the main sources of income for the area and I now know that peanut farming involves drying out the peanut-covered stalks, turning these stalks into a mountain then climbing up onto them and whacking the stalks with two metal sticks to shake the peanuts off. I wasn't very good at it.

The 7th November was a day off as the country celebrated a significant event in the country's emancipation. I was told many versions of the story but it seems to centre around a Senegalese prophet's insistence to pray, which was against the rules of the white colonists on whose boat Muslim prayer was forbidden, so instead he set his mat on the sea which went flat for the duration of his prayers and symbolised a much-needed win for the slaves. To celebrate the occasion a large chunk of the population makes a pilgrimage to a mosque in a town called Touba. One of these pilgrims was the husband of my friend Yacine; quite pregnant with a sibling for her 8-month old baby she couldn't make the journey herself so she invited me to stay the night. We cooked supper together and watched the French dubbed telenovelas that are bizarrely popular here (I did reassure her that not all white people with mansions are having affairs with our sibling's spouses.) Yacine, baby Hassan and I all shared a bed and the latter was somewhat disappointed when snuffling and nuzzling around in the night to discover me not to be his lactating mother. Despite my useless breasts I hope I redeemed myself with a sneezing fit that he found inexplicably hilarious in the morning.

School continues to be both testing and wonderful. The children have sussed out that I'm not predisposed to the corporal punishment favoured by many of their other teachers and are thus can be quite wriggly and chatty – no matter where you are in the world 13 year olds are going to find themselves and each other more interesting than the present continuous tense. However I'm enjoying the moments of enthusiasm I get when my words capture their imagination. Time has decided to pass with increased vigour and with just over a month left I'm determined to give my students the best experience of English possible, or at least an idea of how to pronounce the word bought.

Celebrations: 04/12/2017

As fortnights go it's been a big one – I've witnessed the circle of life at its most visceral and encountered recognition in both unwanted and hugely touching forms.

On the 26th of November one of the five women of my adopted household had her baby. I may be inexperienced in living with pregnant women but I was sure she was a while off giving birth, and had been hoping the baby would be born before I leave on December 22nd.

Bear with me, as to vindicate my obliviousness I should first describe the means of getting drinking water in Foundiougne, a busy town in a fairly well developed country relative to its neighbours.

At unscheduled intervals, a lorry sponsored by the Japanese pulls up in a corner of town of its choosing and honks its horn. The sound rouses the female population from whatever they happen to be doing and they spring into action, running to collect giant buckets and bottles to place in a line behind the truck. Sprinting, buckets in tow and wearing whatever attire they were in at the time this is a hilarious event for all involved, though when the excitement passes there is also a sense of local outrage at the unpredictability of it all. Once their many buckets, of about 20-30 litres are filled they are placed on their carrier's heads and the water is transported back in several trips to the houses of all those who've judged the lorry close enough to make the journey worth it. Water is exclusively a woman's work, possibly with the help of some offspring carrying bottles proportionate to their size but with no aid from husbands or brothers who are taking a siesta or discussing philosophy over tea. The 25th of November was a water day, and the pregnant Mariama made several trips back and forth with huge buckets on her head without complaint or offers of help, so I think I, who has seen a barely pregnant woman be offered a seat and take it (justifiably) huffing and puffing for all of two stops on the Victoria line, can be forgiven for not believing it when I was told she had walked to the hospital and was giving birth the next morning. I visited her that afternoon, bringing oranges and bananas as I've heard birth can be a bit tiring, and found both mother and child to be very calm. A week later (yesterday) the baby was baptised. His father Pape came back from Dakar where he works and had just two days with his wife and newest son but the money he was busy earning was well spent on a truly joyful occasion. Clubs in



England are going to seem pretty drab compared to a circle of women singing and drumming with girls (and grandmas) in the middle hitching up their skirts and dancing uninhibitedly.

I was approached by Mariama and Pape on the morning of the baptism and asked my father's name; they told me had the baby been a girl she would have been Harriet but nevertheless they wanted to recognise their visitor in the naming of their son. This may be the most personal and touching honour I have ever been given, and its made all the better by the necessity of a Muslim name so that I think the world may have its first ever Mouhamed Nigel Diouf.

On the theme of Islam, I was baptised head first at the Gamou, a festival celebrating the prophet's birth in Kaolack, the hometown of an Islam leader Ibrahima Niass. I went with a selection of Dioufs including three boys aged 9 to 11 who's awe at the event was a joy to share in. The mosque was at the centre of proceedings and visiting it I had the strange sensation of being the only one in such an enormous group not to share in their common belief. I've been to my fair share of churches and cathedrals – in fact I'd say I've been to several people's fair share – but there have always been other people there just to see the mosaics or the work of Giotto. Covering my shoulders in a sundress feels quite different to covering my hair with a scarf and fretting over how to make it stay on while at the same time mulling over my feminist objections to its existence, and the fact that there's a just quarter of the mosque in which women can pray and those women must be post-menopause.

Not all my first impressions were allowed to quietly sit in my head however; over the two days of the festival I was twice interviewed by SSTV: the national news. The first time was at the house of the daughter of the mysterious Cheikh Ibrahima Niass, Seda Nafi. This woman is revered with people coming from all over Africa to bring her presents, confide in her their problems and have her hold their sick children. I was urged to do the same but without the long cultural tradition and anticipation behind me, and with problems very different to those she had probably just heard I didn't particularly feel like exposing my emotions to a stranger, taking time that would be more appreciated by someone else. I thought instead of my dearest friend, who is my own Seda Nafi Niass. The news came to her house to interview her and spotting a definite anomaly in the crowd, came to talk to me about my impressions of the festival, whether I was a Muslim, and was I planning on becoming one – all in all fairly intense. They then had me come into Seda's sitting room and sit next to her among her sons and some supporters, while she gave her interview. I now know how the ethnic minority students who are asked to be on the front of prospectuses feel. The next day outside the mosque the cameras popped up again, this time for a live interview. I was later told by someone who'd seen the interview that I spoke quite well but looked slightly terrified. I'd say this is an accurate description as I did my best but the subject of Muslim festivals isn't exactly my metier and under my headscarf under the sun my brain was slightly boiling. This sensation increased afterwards was I was asked to take pictures with people who I didn't want to disappoint in a crowd that grew and surged with every important person that kept turning up at the mosque until I had to wriggle out, as the lack of control made my throat close up and my lungs shrink. I recovered in the shade with a guava juice and a very small cry – for future reference it seems I can only get famous in cool climates. My students who saw me on television were very excited about it; while giving examples of addresses in a class on letter writing I managed to convince some of them that the footballer Neymar is a close personal friend so there are some who have decided I must be a fully-fledged celebrity. After this class I gave them homework to

write a letter to a friend or famous person and so for the last week have been marking 115 letters (alas they all do their homework here.) They range from incomprehensible to very convincing – I’ve had one to the president complaining about the number of girls who leave school early to get married which had none of the elements I’d asked for but which I loved.



In other news I’ve witnessed the termination of two chickens which I then plucked as I helped with the cooking at the Dioufs. I don’t know any of my carnivorous friends who have plucked their food but I took comfort in the fact that the dinner grew up scampering around less than a mile away, besides there was no excuse to be squeamish as I was being shown how to do it by a nine year old.

The first fortnight may have felt like a month, yet in a predictable yet somehow still surprising way the days now seem to be slipping away like minutes at the end of an exam. I’m glad to be so busy; I feel like I am profiting as much as I can from the time that remains, besides it leaves me no time to mourn the fact that this is the first year I can remember that I haven’t woken up every morning in December to the thrill of a little picture behind a paper door.

Postscript: 03/01/2018

I started writing this on the plane home, but it was 5 in the morning and both my laptop battery and I were spent. It’s hard to get back into the mind I was in a fortnight ago when I left, as the perspective of my experience has been so clouded by its comparison with the UK, but I don’t like to leave a project unfinished so here are some parting thoughts, wonderings, and things I might have known before but certainly didn’t spend much time thinking about.

1. Blending in is a privilege.
2. With enough will power and numb limbs, a seven-seater car can house ten passengers.
3. Knowing a few clapping games can go a long way.
4. Ditto origami.
5. Tourism without efforts towards mutual understanding is at best ignorant, at worst destructive.
6. Curiosity tends to be appreciated.
7. Having a fretting baby fall asleep in your arms must be how superheroes feel at the end of the film when all the civilians are clapping.
8. The French left Senegal with a co-dependent currency and a bitter history, and without a decent baguette recipe.
9. The human body (with a foundation of home-grown greens) can adapt to pretty drastic changes in temperature, diet and lifestyle.
10. Teaching is an art of balancing unquestionable confidence with the ability to really listen to your students and adapt constantly if they don’t understand, and I have so much respect for those who have mastered this art, cause it isn’t easy.

Coming home is harder than I thought it would be. Baths and a bed that isn't made of sponge, which leaves you waking up in a person-shaped hole against the slats are both very welcome but I'm struggling to reconcile the polar opposites in such fundamental things as possessions and values. Christmas of course is western materialism on acid which didn't ease the transition, but as my head clears I'm hoping I've absorbed some aspects of the very brief life I lead in Foundiougne – not the patriarchy, but the generosity and serenity and unselfconsciousness which can often be forgotten here.

