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Reflections on the Quotidian on the West African Coastⁱ

Emad Mirmotahariⁱⁱ

Abstract

In this piece the author will discuss his impressions of Senegal and the Gambia on a quotidian basis. He discusses the reasons he went to West Africa, his interpersonal interactions, his travels therein, and his cultural observations. The author also provides some reflection about how his daily and personal experiences impact, complicate, and further, his academic commitments.

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Introduction

I went to Africa for the first time during the summer of 2005. I received the Graduate Summer Research Mentorship and I had finished my field examinations in Comparative Literature. That spring term, I took a seminar on Francophone African literature with Professor Dominic Thomas and wrote a paper on the intersection of Islam and identity formation in West Africa, especially in a colonial context. Historicising my reading of my chosen novels was important to me because I had not found a satisfactory body of criticism that addresses this encounter in African literature other than Ahmed Bangura's work. I decided to cultivate the central problematic of that paper into a dissertation topic.

The first steps in pursuing this project were talking to people who work on the subject and traveling to the places that I would write about. So, I decided to spend my summer in West Africa and I arranged a meeting with Dr. Telly Diallo, a now retired Guinean sociologist and former affiliate of the IFAN (Institut Francophone d'Afrique Noir) whom I had fortuitously met several years ago in New York City. Many of his writings address Islam and identity in West Africa. The other reason I wanted to go to West Africa was to explore more thoroughly *les marabouts*, the powerful Islamic brotherhoods found throughout the region. Further, I knew that I would be writing about little known and *living* African authors. I planned on conducting yet another interview that summer.

Since England was conveniently en route to Senegal I visited Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Tanzanian-born writer I have been reading and writing about for roughly seven years now. I asked him for an interview that spring and he granted my request. I got to London three or four

days after the Underground bombings and thought to incorporate this development in the format and sequence of my questions but was glad that I didn't when I saw how fatigued he was by the then-ubiquitous and inescapable topic. From London I went to Canterbury, where he chairs and teaches in the English department. The discussion turned out principally to be about the status and (dis)advantages of 'area studies' in a comparative sense (how it operates in the UK and in the US) and the impact of Islam on the Swahili coast.¹ His comments left me with the marked impression that West Africa was a different world, one quite removed from his experiences on the Swahili coast, so my trip to Dakar could not have come at a more logical and opportune time. I started seeing a hazy outline of a comparative project.

Before I continue with my recollections of Senegal and the Gambia in that decisive summer of 2005, I would like to state that I had not in any shape or form kept documentation of my trip and I did not keep a journal or a memoir. I even refused to take a camera. I wanted to avoid falling victim to a certain irony. There was nothing that I would see, hear, or experience that I would not be grateful for, that would not be transformative, that I would not be able to commit to memory in the most vivid manner. What I learned that summer was very circumspective and it was my aimless meanderings on the West African coast that, in hindsight, had the most instructional value. What follow are not academic or 'filmic' (if you please) experiences but those that, for some reason or another, had the most affect on me. My mind had free reign to interpret, distort, filter, or erase my experiences. I was alone in Africa for the first time and I did not want it any other way.

I arrived in Dakar's Leopold Senghor International Airport, which is approximately twenty minutes or so outside of Dakar's centre. That afternoon I had failed to change my currency from UK pounds sterling to CFA Francs so I allowed myself, out of desperation, to be led to a room just above the airport terminal where a group of men changed money in a tiny and sequestered storage room that was barely lit. I ultimately refused their rate and had to shove my way out of the room. I had read about diabolical conversion scams in compromised situations and was quite pleased to have saved myself the frustration of knowing that I had been taken for the proverbial 'ride.' I finally caught a cab to Dakar and later learned that I had paid three times the standard fare between the airport and the city centre, so whatever money I had saved by avoiding the 'storage room' fee I lost to the cabbie, who constantly swore to Allah about the honesty of his fair. I went for a ride in the *least* proverbial way.

Upon reaching the Oceanique, a pleasant and light-hearted *pensione* in the southwest corner of town, I settled into my room and phoned family and friends to let them know where to find me. I then headed down to the rusty but stylish bar where I tanked the rest of the night away with Gazelle, Senegal's national brew and one of the best lagers one can have. I should also note that the Oceanique is situated two blocks away from Dakar's largest fish and produce market, a fact that one can never live down owing to the odours that are strengthened by the humidity, odours that seem to have a life of their own. Just outside of my bedroom window, below the veranda of the Oceanique, was a group of *marabouts* who had set up a rug and a cassette recorder blaring verses of the Qur'an, the sound of which just seemed to hang in the sweltering night air,

intoxicating, and refusing to leave, as if waiting for answers. The tape played on until dawn as the *marabouts* slept on the mat. I could not sleep that night because of a combination of heat, mosquitoes, and restlessness. Every hour or so I would walk out onto the veranda to steal discreet glimpses of the *marabouts*.

The following day, my first in Dakar, I wandered around town taking in the scents, sounds, and speed of this surreal facsimile of Paris' eastern *arrondissements*. Rue Victor Hugo and Ave. Pompidou. Rue El Haji M'baye and Rue Carnot. I walked briskly like a resident, like I had somewhere to be and was late, like I knew the city. I ate rice and fish at a local white-tiled joint that reminded me of lunch-houses in southern neighbourhoods of Tehran, Iran. It was the first time I had had whole fish and *yassa* but I was convinced that it could not get any better. I ate there the rest of my time in Senegal.

On the second day I accidentally ran into Dr. Diallo, who turned out to be staying at the Oceanique as well. Another curious feature of the Oceanique, whose lower courtyard was a congregation point for local *marabouts*, was that it was staffed by highly pious men but had, nonetheless, a fine liquor and beer collection. I finally interviewed Diallo at the Oceanique's earthy and botanical lobby. He looked spent, modest, and unassuming, a late middle-aged man who had seen 'it all' and entitled to his impulses.

As we were talking we were interrupted by a pedestrian salesman clad in jeans and a leather jacket and with an inventory of sunglasses hanging off him. He had just strolled into the lobby from Rue de Thann. He approached us and began his pitch in French '*lunettes de soleil, lunettes de soleil, je sais que vous avez besoin d'une lunette de soleil, monsieur. Ils sont complements*

authentiques.' Dr. Diallo glared at him in a contemptuous way and asked him if he weren't ashamed of himself, if he felt no compunction about pushing garbage on people. But most importantly, the merchant had interrupted Diallo's unsettled thoughts about President Abdoulaye Wade's invitation of Condaleeza Rice to Dakar, a ceremonious meeting between the two that was transpiring that very moment. And of course debt restructuring and AIDS relief was not on the table, but rather how Senegal can serve as an example of the model moderate Muslim nation that cooperates in the war on terror. "Tu ne peux pas voir que nous parlons? Allez, allez." There was a touch of irony in Diallo's reaction because he was denouncing the abject poverty and lack of opportunity that afflict many Senegalese. But he was also condemning what he felt to be the widespread subordination of debate, discussion, and intellectual matters to material survival. Diallo refused the causal relationship between the latter and the former. It was for this reason that the salesman ignited him and paid the price, who then walked away humiliated with his charisma deflated. The interview ended and I realised that it was a purgative for Diallo. He expressed his hesitation about scholarship in the humanities by noting that no one in Senegal could tell you the first thing about Sembène, Kane, or Bâ. But oddly enough he encouraged me to finish my studies and to 'cherish' them. I got only tangential answers to the questions I asked Diallo on that oppressive July afternoon, but that was enough for me. My next move is still not too clear to me. I set out for the Gambia.

There was a big festival or to-do in Banjul and all I knew was that it centred on their president, Yahya Jammeh. The hyperbole surrounding his greatness indicated (as it usually does) practical dysfunction.

Jammeh is the type of leader that prohibits anyone other than his motorcade from driving through Banjul's main city centre roundabout and archway, Arch 22. These are the gesticulations of a president who is every bit as corrupt as his publicity is extravagant. I had seen his immense portrait in the Gambian consulate in Dakar weeks before when I had gone to apply for an entry visa. The building itself was dank and prison-like, which contrasted sharply with the colour and fanfare of his portrait. That was my first introduction to the Right Honourable Yahya Jammeh.

I left the Oceanique early one morning on foot to the bus depot. I boarded the bus to Gambia, which used to belong to the fleet of Barcelona's metropolitan public transportation. Everything was written in Catalan. The excruciatingly bumpy drive lasted a good six hours or so and we stopped in many townships on the way. It was on this journey that I saw two things that left particularly lasting impressions on me. The first was the imposing, almost divine sight of baobab trees, spaced out as if respecting one another's regal territory. The second, on a break stop, turned out to be the skeleton of what I could only surmise to have once been a four or five year child in the field. There was a gentleman, a passenger on the bus, standing close by in the field who had deboarded to stretch his legs. He looked at me as I looked away from the once-child and gave me one of those 'fact-of-life' winks.

Banjul was quite the wreck and commerce was visibly in the hands of the town's handful of Lebanese entrepreneurs. The city was perhaps twenty blocks by twenty blocks and I had the (mis)fortune of spending one night at the Apollo, a name that time and neglect had transformed from mark of glamour to euphemism, a building that was built in the sixties judging by its

indistinct functionalist architecture. The Apollo is the best structure in town but it would not pass code anywhere else. The rooms were in total disrepair, there was no water or electricity, and I could not imagine in what sense exactly Yahya Jammeh had 'transformed' the country, as all the decorative fliers around town asserted. I spent that night with a traveling group of *griots* (praise singers) who were in town to provide the main music for the festival in Yahya Jammeh's honour. It turned out to be the eleventh anniversary of his 'assuming' the presidency on 22nd July 1994. The ensemble leader Jaly Bakary Mbye was the only one who spoke English. Gambians, unlike their Wolof brethren in surrounding Senegal, speak English and not French. This has to be one of the more absurd and comical illustrations of the randomness of colonial cartography. The Gambia, known as the 'smile of Africa', is a mere slit in the heart of Senegal. The British carved it out ostensibly to preserve their navigational 'rights' on the Gambia River and their commercial access to the 'interior.' The division is particularly arbitrary but an arbitrariness that anticipated its own endurance. The two countries entered a brief and ill-fated union in 1982 known as the Senegambian Confederation. Their relations today are mediocre at best.

Jaly Mbye and I had a very long and amicable conversation about his travels and performances. Shortly after, he reached into his satchel and handed me a pamphlet that featured an outlined biography and a curriculum vitae of sorts of Jammeh. As I looked over it I saw nothing particularly impressive but knew that all eyes were waiting for appraisal of their leader. "Well, do you like?" Candour is not always the best course of action. But many of them, including Mbye, *knew* (and some things you just *know* beyond knowing) that there was nothing particularly

redeeming about this individual other than the fact that the forces of ephemerality, a cornerstone in some African nations' politics, had put him where he was. Those same forces will remove him. That night we drank what I was told was traditional Gambian tea (the packaging stating 'Made in China' notwithstanding) and talked the night away. One among the many gentlemen I talked to was an MP from the Serekunda region, incredibly articulate and well read and armed with a lethal but enlightening sense of humour. He mused about the title of MP being a bad joke played on Gambians by the British.

I tried to sleep but could not due to the suffocating heat. I returned to the lobby where it seemed like midday at 4 am. Everyone was awake and strolling about, talking, laughing, and formally dressed. It was only then that Jaly Mbye started sharing his music and his past. He asked me to his room where we were joined by some others of his ensemble. They took out their pipes, drums, and *koras* and played an exquisite sound. Mbye asked me where I was from and why I had come to the Gambia. Right afterwards, he improvised a flattering song. *Emad from Los Angeles/Has come to the Gambia/We hope he stays/ But if he leaves/ Leaves his spirit behind.* It was quite melodic and beautiful actually, and became more so when I realised he expected a 'gift' in return. I was then asked to indulge in a communal bowl of chicken, which I would have done had it not been for being a vegetarian. I don't recall now how exactly I manoeuvred out of eating without offending them, but I did. Meanwhile the MP was convincing me to visit his jurisdiction.

I set out for Serekunda instead of going to Jammeh's anniversary bash and I was punished for it. Jammeh controls even the weather in the Gambia. I spent the night at a bird reserve (quite the turn from the Apollo

and not much more expensive), which was ran by a wealthy expatriate couple from Harare, Zimbabwe. I didn't see any birds because it started raining in a way that it never rains anywhere I'd been, including growing up in the British Midlands. But the landscape was so lush that it rendered the word 'green' inadequate. The earth was sulphuric red and the contrast was ridiculously beautiful. It was one of the few times that I recall being perfectly happy in the moment. That following morning, after sleeping in a real bed for the first time in what seemed like epochs (time has a strange elastic quality in that sort of heat), I heard a strange pecking on my window and opened the curtain. I saw a white crow. For the first time on the trip I wished I had a camera. If this sight was an omen, I didn't know it. My passage back to Senegal was a wild one.

I crossed the Gambia River via ferry back to the shanty border town of Bara, the type of town that makes you vow never to slander Tijuana again. There, early in the morning, I met two young men, Eddie Sonko Laye, a member of the Gambia national football team, and the other was a young telephone operator named Lamin F. Jabbi, who is larger than life. I am in touch with both of them today, and survived a semi-spectacular car accident on the highway back to Dakar with the latter. We decided to take a ride from someone who was not an official transporter, but who was offering us a lift back to Dakar for half the price of the cheapest *taxi brousse*. This is all I can say about the crash without romanticising it, without embellishing the bravado I felt as I walked away from it in one piece. Somebody was right to note that the ubiquity of Islamic prayers imprinted on cars demonstrated a belief that death on the highway was entirely a function of divine design and not at all related to driving habits.

I was back in Dakar and the Oceanique, and once again I had a bottle, or bottles rather, of Gazelle in front of me. Having only a couple of days left in Senegal, I had to choose between visiting St. Louis, the country's former colonial administrative centre, or Île de Gorée, an island just off of Dakar's coast, which was a slave trading fort, a point of 'departure' if you will. I chose the latter and set out via ferry. When I got there I noticed Portuguese architecture and French names, suggesting that the area had probably changed hands several times. I noticed restaurants and many foreigners especially French and Lebanese. While I was there I went to the *maison des esclaves*. I evaded the organised tours and instead opted to read the graffiti and makeshift memorials on the walls. References to the Holocaust abound, I noticed that there were many commentaries by African-Americans. I eventually discovered some African-Americans from Louisiana viewed this area as a point of pilgrimage. I remember a particularly striking quotation on the wall of one of the 'cargo' rooms, which was dark, had an impossibly low-ceiling, and which opened to the Atlantic via a wooden jetty. It read, "If the skies were parchment and the oceans ink, I still couldn't express the horrors of slavery." Later in my readings I encountered considerable information that pointed to the 'fact' that Gorée was not the key point of departure because of its small size. The largest was in Ghana, perhaps Elmira, but the resolution of the question is impossible. Tourist dollars and a claim to history itself are at stake.

The only salient observations that I made which I can remit with any certainty or confidence was the fact that while being 'Senegalese' or 'Gambian' had currency, it was limited. The farther one went from urban centres, the less national punctuators held sway. The rural

population in Koalack, for example, identified themselves as Wolof. One would be more likely to run into Fulani (Pul) or Malinke (Mandingo) or Bambara rather than a 'Senegalese.' I also noticed the centrality of mosques, not only as a spiritual centre but also as a social focal point. *Marabouts* are powerful in Senegal, and they have influence in everything, from taxi collectives to the highest strata of the government and media. I learned another thing that can either harm or enhance my project. I learned that the academic imagination often does indeed 'invent' Africa, as an acclaimed scholar writes, sometimes in ways that do not remotely correspond to the place itself. But most importantly, I learned that I couldn't know what the trip meant to me exactly - until I return.

Endnotes

¹ The full transcript of this interview can be found in Mirmotahari, Emad; 2006; "Interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah," *Ufahamu* 32(3).