

# The Road to Timbuktu

## Travels in West Africa



Judith Porter

For some people when you say 'Timbuktu' it is like the end of the world, but that is not true. I am from Timbuktu, and I can tell you we are right at the heart of the world.

Ali Farka Toure

## January 12-14: Bamako-Mopti, Mali

Twenty one hours-including an 8 hour layover in Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris-and we arrive in Bamako, the capital of Mali. The airport is jammed with people in bright colored African clothing, Tuaregs in blue caftans with their faces wrapped in black headscarves, beggars with physical disabilities, and one literally has to fight one's way through people vending jewelry and material. Bamako is an overnight stop for us on the way to Mopti, 200 miles north. After going to the Sahara desert, we'll have a chance to come back to Bamako and see it.

We're on an adventure travel trip. There's no way to get into the Sahara and the back country of Senegal and The Gambia in a short time without going with a group, because there is unreliable or in some places nonexistent public transportation. Part of this group is from the Harvard Alumni Association; the rest, like us, are with International Expeditions. I have never been with a bunch of people who have traveled as extensively. Whether it is a several day camel trip in the desert in Rajasthan, India; traveling through New Guinea; hiking in Bhutan, or comparing notes on the best way to enter and exit Tibet, these folks have been everywhere! They are an impressive group.

Although we had been warned that ATM's are either nonexistent-or if there is one, it doesn't work-Jerry, ever the empiricist, tried one in the hotel. The ATM machine immediately chewed up his bank card and of course, no money came out. Credit cards aren't accepted, so the transactions are all cash only, in CFA's (Currency Francais Afrique, about 500 to the dollar), though in urban areas some people will take dollars.

The next day (1/13), we head for Mopti on a chartered plane (two planes are needed for 30 people). Mopti is at the

confluence of the Niger and Bani rivers, and is in the sub-Saharan area of Mali. It is a city of dirt and sand, without sidewalks. Because of its location on rivers, fishing is a major industry. The Bozo and the Songhai, as well as the Fulani, are its main ethnic groups. The dirt roads are full of goats, donkey drawn carts, and women carrying babies on their backs while carrying big piles of food or wash in tubs on their heads.

Aside from fishing, the salt trade is a major industry. The salt is mined in Taoudienne, far North in the Sahara, and brought to Timbuktu by camel caravans. Trucks are also used, but the expense of gas and the problems with being stuck in the middle of the Sahara if there is a breakdown make camel caravans more efficient. The huge slabs of salt are sent by river from Timbuktu to Mopti. The caravans are organized and run by the Tuaregs, who are desert people and live in nomad camps in the Sahara. On the banks of the Bani River, the salt market has huge slabs of salt piled up, with Tuaregs and other ethnic groups bargaining over sales.

The rivers are the lifeblood of Mopti. Pinasses, or wooden canoes, ply the river, and on the banks women wash their clothes and dry them in the sun; bathe their children and themselves; and wash trucks, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, and goats. Again the inevitable vendors crowd around, selling jewelry, pirated cd's of Ali Farka Toure's music, cloth, and various other trinkets. The inevitable beggars are also in evidence, although there are fewer of them than I've seen in other places.

The regular market is also a bustling place, with piles of dried catfish, big cannon balls of soap, freshly caught fish, meat, and household goods like clay pots. Women do the selling at the market, and many children run around. The children are friendly and excited to see their photos on Jerry's digital camera. The women don't want to be

photographed, but the men are willing to have their pictures taken. Since the major religion is Islam, men are permitted to have four wives. Women are routinely circumcised; however, wealthier and more educated families are departing from this practice but in the village, among poor families, it is expected. Women wear turbans on their heads and long robes but their faces are not veiled.

Mali is one of the world's poorest countries. Some of the kids look relatively healthy, but others are obviously not in good shape, with visible fungus infections, yellowish discharges running from their noses, and enlarged stomachs, which indicates protein deficiency.

All buildings are made of adobe, including the mosque, which is typical mud brick West African architecture, with arches and wooden poles sticking out of the side. At prayer time, many people put their mats down on the street and kneel and pray. There is also a separate vegetable market, with tomatoes and what looks like lettuce as well as some vegetables I can't identify. Everything in the market, including the fish and meat, is covered with flies. Mopti is a bustling place, as befits its important location as a trading post on the river. Though dry and sandy (this is dry season), it is not very hot (probably in the low 80's), and there are shrubs and occasional trees. One sure way to make friends is to take photos of kids. Once the cameras come out and one or two are photographed and see their photos, every kid in the vicinity shows up.

A trip down the river on a pinasse (wooden canoe) exposes the voyager to a pastoral scene. In the small villages, one passes, people are herding goats, washing clothes, or kids are playing in front of their mud brick houses. The Bani River merges with the Niger outside of Mopti, and we continue on the Niger.

The pinasse stopped at one village, Bignaville, and we got out and spent some time there. People said "tababou" (white man) to one another as we walked through the village. The mud houses have a courtyard, some rugs on the floor, and very little furniture. Donkey carts and herds of goats are village fixtures. There is a very small area where women appear to be selling food they cooked, but most of the village population appears to be engaged in household work for women or fishing for the men. Water taxi pinasses are the major access. There are huge numbers of kids for a village this small. In fact, people under-report the number of children in government censuses, because they are afraid that the more children they report, the higher the taxes. Thus, if they have eight kids, they report two. If an NGO then comes to vaccinate kids against measles and relies on the census, they are unprepared when huge numbers of kids show up. The population of Mali is listed as 12.7 million, but it is probably closer to 13 or 14 million. The kids and their mothers are excited when the tubabou show them their photos on digital cameras. I admired one baby and the mother gave him to me to hold. The women and children were pleased by the tubabou's exclamation of praise for the baby and enjoyed the digital photos of the baby and me.

The poverty in Mali is readily evident here. There is no school. Though school in Mali begins at age seven, there is no official age at which someone is permitted to leave school. In some villages, there is a village primary public school or a Koranic school, but many children leave school after a few years or use the public school funding for the Koranic school. Since the fishermen migrate to the best fishing grounds during the school year, they take their kids out of school to help them, so even if there is a village school, it's hard to keep the kids enrolled.

One old man took us to see his house, a courtyard with an adobe residence. He was proud of his property. There is no medical care in the village. He begged us for pills, which he thought would help him fight whatever ailed him. Unfortunately, we had none with us. The kids here are in considerably worse shape in terms of health than are kids in Mopti. They have visible eye infections, upper respiratory infections, and the typical enlarged stomach from protein deficiency.

We were told by the guide that it was better for USAID to give money directly to NGO's than to the government, because NGO's at least send people to help in the villages. For instance, Plan, an NGO, has worked with municipalities and the Ministry of Health to strengthen the existing health care system in one region of Mali and has increased the number of children vaccinated. UNICEF has contributed insecticide treated bed nets to protect children from malaria. The government trains medical personnel, but the medical personnel don't want to work in the villages; they would rather stay in the towns. The U.S. Peace Corps is very popular here. Mali has the highest number of Peace Corps workers of any country, and they are teaching in rural schools. Forty per cent of Mali's economy is U.S. and French aid. There is hope that if oil is discovered, the situation will be changed, but that is currently a pipe dream. Despite the poverty, people are living their lives as they always have and participate in a vibrant local culture.

The big killer here is Malaria, a virulent form of chloroquine resistant malaria (*falciparum* malaria). The HIV infection rate in Mali is 1.7% of the population. The malaria rate dwarfs this figure many times over, and it is the biggest killer of children. Permethrin-impregnated bed nets would really cut down the size of the problem, and

they are cheap. However, they need to be made more widely available.

The official languages of Mali are French (it was a French colony until independence in 1960) and Bambara, the major ethnic group. However, in this village, the major ethnic groups are the Bozo and the Songhai, who have their own languages. Many people are bi-lingual, and most can understand Bambara; however, French-which is required after the first four years- of school, is not spoken much.

### **January 15: DJENNE, MALI**

We proceeded to Djenne, north of Mopti. Djenne is a major market town. Djenne is on an island. In 1591 it fell to the Moroccans who controlled it until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1893 the French took control. It is a major stop for the goods coming out of the Sahara. The road to Djenne is paved but narrow. Villages occasionally appear on the road. They are all brown mud brick. Women stand and pound millet with pestles in large mortars. Men herd cows to eat whatever thin dry grass they can find. Goats and guinea hens roam the streets. Women in bright traditional clothes, with babies in shawls on their backs, do household tasks. There is often a small open air shack that is a store, with some minimal items. Occasionally one can see a man skinning the hanging carcass of a goat. Granaries, small mud buildings with pointed thatched straw roofs, keep the harvested corn and millet and are scattered throughout the village. Each village has a small mosque. Children are abundant, with very young boys often naked, and they wave vigorously as we pass. Dust is everywhere. Men often wear turbans wound around their heads, with part of the turban over their mouth, to keep out the ever present reddish brown dust.

After a two hour drive we reach a river, which has to be crossed by a ferry.

It's a long wait to get on the ferry. As we get out of our vehicle, young girls and women descend on us like locusts, vending jewelry and metal cars and planes made out of coke cans. They are relentless, and they literally cling to us and follow us everywhere. Everything is bargained for. One man has a nice purple mudcloth fabric. Jerry bargains with him, but he will not accept our price; nevertheless, hope springs eternal and he follows Jerry for much of our wait at the river, continuing to bargain.

Wooden pinasses or ferries take people across. It is interesting to see people trying to push a small truck onto a wooden canoe. The river bank is a hectic scene. Today is market day in Djenne, and people come from all over to sell their goods. Women walk with large washtubs full of vegetables and large bundles of wood and straw, to sell at market, balanced on their heads. Donkey carts with large rubber tires, loaded with goods and people; old trucks piled high with various goods; children running around, and the invariable vendors following us in droves dominate the scene. We eventually end up walking across the river on a sandbar, as our friendly vendors follow us, calling out in Bambara, French, and occasionally English, "best price." These folks should have no trouble being successful as a candidate for an MBA. They already have extensive marketing experience.

Djenne is an ethnic mix of Bambara, Bozo, Fulani, Tuaregs, Bella, Songhai, and Fulani. The Fulani married women have the area around their lips tattooed with black.

Djenne was a center of Islamic learning and still has a number of Koranic schools. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, conversion to Islam occurred here, and the king razed his palace to make way for the first mosque. The mosque in Djenne is the most famous example of Sahelian architecture in West

Africa. It is in the center of town, huge, with arches and rows of sticks coming out of the walls, and made entirely of mud. When the rainy season is over, it has to be repaired by hand with mud. There are replicas of circumcised penises on the corners of the mosque to indicate the importance of patriarchy. One cannot enter the mosque unless one is Moslem. It was built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to replace another mosque. Islam was brought to Mali by traders coming across the Sahara, and the Moroccan conquest cemented its dominance. There is a hint of Moroccan influence in the construction of the mosque. The Islam in Mali is Sunni, but it is different from Middle Eastern Islam. It is basically Sufi. Orthodox Sunni Islam believes that there is direct contact between the individual and Allah. However, the North African Sufi variety believes that contact with Allah is channeled through saintly intermediaries or marabouts, who are given divine powers and link Allah and the common populace. Marabout brotherhoods were brought initially from Morocco, and the marabouts have had political influence throughout Malian history since the time of conversion.

Next to the mosque is a market. The vendors, as in all of Africa, are women, bringing fruits, vegetables, and spices to sell. They sit on blankets, nursing their babies, and dispense their goods. Men sell hardware and cut the meat. As soon as we started walking in Djenne, children materialized from everywhere and wanted their pictures taken so they could see themselves on digital cameras. Two young boys attached themselves to me and said they wanted to practice their English. They also, of course, had another agenda, since they wanted to be our guides and earn some money. They were 10 and 14, and the 10 year old looked like he was blind in one eye. They followed us everywhere we went. Lo and behold, the man selling the

purple material from the ferry dock appeared and began following Jerry again, bargaining with him for the material. As we threaded through the crowds at the market, our faithful retinue of child guides, jewelry vendors, and the “material” man followed us, the latter two imploring us to buy their wares.

We visited a cooperative where the distinctive brown and black mud cloths are made and sold. We chose a couple and Jerry began to bargain. He is really a professional at bargaining. The older woman, sitting on a blanket, quoted him a price in Bambara. Although Jerry has not passed a language proficiency test in Bambara, with gestures and some interpretation help he indicated “too much, not interested.” The bargaining continued at a heated pace. The folks on our trip were cheering him on. One retired Goldman Sachs credit manager took the side of the mud cloth seller, and when Jerry gave a low price, humorously countered with, “that’s too low—the dollar is weak.” Finally, Jerry got up and walked out. The mud cloth seller stuck to her price and after our group left, Jerry went back and reached a deal with her. Jerry received praise from the economists, businessmen, and bankers on our trip who observed this business transaction.

We bid our legions of followers farewell, gave our child guides some money, and went back to cross the river. As we waited for the ferry, Jerry-caught up in the spirit of commerce-trying unsuccessfully to sell his hat to the woman trying to sell him jewelry.

Mali is a very poor country. The major exports are cotton and gold. However, because the price of American cotton is subsidized, the Malian small farmers can’t compete. Gold mines are owned by South Africans and Canadians, who are taxed 18% of the revenue by the

Malian government. However, most of the wealth goes out of the country. There is massive corruption at every level of government, according to people with whom we spoke. People work under the table or under-report their income to avoid paying taxes, which are also 18%. Foreign aid often ends up in government pockets and frequently does not really reach the villages where it is needed. However, even if foreign aid can be misused, it is undoubtedly keeping people from dying of famine, which is not infrequent in this harsh, dry climate. The guide is concerned that Al Qaeda will try to take over Mali from its West African base in Algeria, directly north of Mali. He says that although most Malians are antagonistic to the U.S. to some degree and see it as an enemy of Islam, they definitely do not want the Wahabi brand of Islam in Mali. Also, many Malians are in the U.S. and sending home money to their families. US aid also is a big part of Mali’s GNP. It is clear that Malian Islam—though people are devout—is a far cry from the Wahabi variety in Saudi Arabia and does not fit with the current life of the people, which suggests that there is minimal enthusiasm for an Al Qaeda takeover. Local people are also very friendly and seem to be able to differentiate our group of “tubabous” from American policy.

As I said earlier, the folks on this trip are adventure travel addicts. We tried to figure out a place where only one family had been. New Guinea, Rajasthan, the Amazon, and the Antarctic had been visited by a number of people. We thought we won with Prezevalsk in Kyrghizistan, but alas, someone else had been there. The winner was probably Irian Jaya in Indonesia, visited by a couple in their 80’s. What terrific role models!!

## January 16: Dogon country, Mali

We drove 4 ½ hours from Mopti, over bumpy roads, into Dogon territory in a 4-wheel drive vehicle over nonexistent “roads” of dirt, sand, and rocks. It felt like we were becoming a milkshake. The vehicle bounces around, we bounce around, and occasionally on big bumps our heads approach the roof of the vehicle. Clouds of reddish dust precede us. The ground is very dry, with brownish-red dirt mixed with sand. Everything around us is brown, including the villages we pass. The Dogon villages look different from others we have seen. The clusters of houses as we enter Dogon country on the lowlands are raw stones unplastered with mud, and a stone fence surrounds the village. The granaries are shaped like elongated, rounded rectangles with pointed straw roofs. The villages are busy, with men herding cattle, children herding goats (the most frequently seen animal), and women pounding millet in large mortars they have to stand to use. Women carry huge loads on their heads in metal washtubs and draw water from village wells. Many of the women carry babies on their backs in shawls, and little girls carry younger brothers and sisters on their backs the same way. There is an astronomical pregnancy rate. In fact, among the Dogons, a couple does not have to commit to marriage until they have two children. In one area, there is a small river with terraced patches of green onions growing along the banks, watered by hand from calabashes filled at the river. These onions are the major crop at this time of year. It is a surprise to see these patches of green in the arid, brown landscape, but they soon disappear in the distance and the arid landscape takes over, broken only by a few baobab trees with large pod-like fruit hanging by threads.

At one village (Sanga), a diviner listened while the guide explained his

profession to us. The diviner, an old, wizened man in ragged clothes, sacrifices a chicken and leaves it for the foxes. If anyone has a question they need answered about an important decision, they place a stone in a rectangular area near the altar, and next day the diviner “reads” the fox’s tracks to give them the answer.

Dogon are 2% of Mali’s population. They moved to this area in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to escape the Islamization of the rest of Mali so they could continue to practice their animistic religion. They have a complex cosmology, believing that a single God, Anna, created the sun, moon, stars, and earth. The ball of clay he threw to create the earth assumed the shape of a woman. He impregnated the woman and she gave birth first to a jackal and later to twins. The major celebration is the Segui, celebrated every 60 years, in commemoration of the passing of a generation. They calculated the time of the Segui by the periodicity of an invisible moon of the star Sirius, which Western astronomers did not discover until the 1930’s. It’s not clear how they knew this, except they tied knots in a cord whenever Sirius appeared between mountain peaks and must have surmised the moon.

Segui, as all festivals, is marked with masked dances, a major part of Dogon culture. The dances are also done when a man dies (women are not memorialized in this way). The masked dancers try to attract evil spirits to them so they do not interfere with the passage of the dead person’s spirit from the body. We observed a masked dance at a village called Tirelly, Some Dogon live in the plains where we drove previously, but the Bandiagara escarpment, which is the heart of Dogon territory, also contains villages up on the escarpment. The village in which we stopped involved climbing the rocky path of the escarpment to the center of the village. The village houses are made of brown mud.

They are rectangular, but the granaries are cone-shaped with straw pointed roofs, and the entire village of 4,000 people hangs on the edge of the escarpment. The village contains a woman's house, where women who are menstruating must stay until menstruation is finished. Every child in the village came out to see us, with the older boys trying to help us up the embankment in hopes of a tip. These kids are born salesmen. They tried to sell us handmade slings, gourds, pictures they had drawn in school, and anything else available. They also asked for empty plastic water bottles, though what they used them for was unclear.

The entire village gathered around an open space to observe the masked dancers. Several old men pounded drums. Only males can dance, with the exception for women being those who were born during the year of a Segui. The dancers came out wearing purple straw skirts and large wooden carved masks. Some were beaded, others were carved, and they represented key figures in Dogon mythology: the snake, the buffalo, the bird, the priest, the hunter, and other symbolic figures. The snake masks were huge and had elongated tops. The bird masks were worn by dancers on stilts, which represented bird legs. There was even a goiter mask, which had huge swellings under the face (goiter is a problem because people don't use iodized salt). The elaborate masks completely hid the dancers' faces, as they danced in a circle. Each set of similarly masked dancers did the dances that represented their symbol. The drums pounded in the background to provide rhythm for the performance. Hordes of village children gathered to watch this, as did the men and some women. Many of the small girls carried their younger siblings on their backs in shawls. Most young girls are traditionally dressed in long colorful cotton dresses and the older men

dressed in pointed hats and blue pants and overblouses. Many of the young boys, however, are dressed in second hand western shorts and t-shirts, many obviously imported from America. T-shirts with gun control messages in English, used and ragged baseball t-shirts, and t-shirts carrying other English messages were common. There is clearly a lot of protein deficiency among these kids, because many babies, especially, have enlarged stomachs. Runny noses with heavy yellow discharge indicate the prevalence of sinus or other respiratory infection. Along the road, we saw many little children wearing clothes full of holes.

The villages are ruled by a king who is alleged to be 97 years old. He cannot bathe and no one can approach him except priests. Although some people have adopted Islam, the Islam here is strongly mixed with animistic religion and most people are animists. These villages are isolated, and they have kept their traditions in part because of this isolation. The chief of this particular village has three wives and 13 kids. The oldest child is in Bamako, but even kids who have left the villages return to participate in ceremonies and help out.

The weather is hot in the afternoon, but not as terribly hot as we anticipated and there are surprisingly few mosquitoes. Near most villages the landscape is filled with non-biodegradable plastic sacks. One wonders what some archaeologist in 3007 will think when he recovers these blue plastic bags. Perhaps he will think that wealth is measured by the number of plastic sacks one owns. The trip back to Mopti involved several hours of bumping and bouncing. Everyone waves as we go by, and our arms are exhausted from returning the greetings. As we drive, a woman with a large tub on her head appears on the horizon. She walks on in this isolated, arid location. There is no

indication of where she came from or where she is going.

### **Jan. 17: Timbuktu**

Onward to Timbuktu, the fabled city of gold located many miles from nowhere at the beginning of the Sahara desert. Timbuktu was a major center of trade in the 14<sup>th</sup> century for caravans bringing salt, gold, and other trade across the Sahara. Because it has an outlet on the Niger River, it was a natural means of access for goods to other parts of Africa. When a Malian emperor arrived in Mecca laden with gold in the late 1300's, the rumor spread that Timbuktu was a fabulous city. It was not only the center of trade but also of learning, with great universities and scientific writings. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was conquered by Morocco and as trade routes shifted to the coast, it declined as a major center and over time became a desert backwater. The Europeans, however, did not know this, and when they began exploring the interior of Africa in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they sent explorers to look for the city of gold. The British and French both had their eye on finding Timbuktu, because no-one in Europe knew where it was located. Many British explorers died of disease trying to find it. Finally, in 1825, a Scottish explorer named Gordon Laing made his way from Tripoli Libya, through the Sahara, getting attacked by the camel drivers (Azalai) with whom he was traveling and almost hacked to death with swords. Strapped onto the back of a camel, he made it to Timbuktu, the first European to get there. After a brief stay, he was forced to leave because Christians were not welcome in Timbuktu, and he was killed by his supposed guides soon after leaving the city. Rene Caille, a Frenchman, was the first European to find and return from Timbuktu in 1828. We figured we had

a better chance than they did of surviving this expedition.

At the airport, however, one of the two small planes that were supposed to fly our group there was broken. Therefore, one plane took off with half the people for the two hour flight from Mopti and promised to return to get us. As we sat in the airport, a young Moroccan man approached us. He had just come from the Festival in the Desert, the major Malian music festival, and had run out of CFA's (Malian currency). No-one would take Moroccan money, so he was stuck in the Mopti airport. He had a guitar and offered to play his guitar and sing for us if we would take up a collection for him. He obviously modeled himself on Bob Dylan, because he was dressed like a Bob Dylan photo. He sang Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and John Denver songs in accented English, unfortunately off key, until we all collected money to pay him to stop.

Waiting for the plane to return, I had a chance to ask the guide for information. The child mortality rate for those under five is 19%, but this is probably an underestimate due to underreporting of children and erratic surveillance. 90% of childhood deaths are from malaria. When there is a measles epidemic, fires are set around the village and the children wear amulets to ward off the evil eye. Many children are still not vaccinated against measles. Sexuality is not discussed. The official HIV rate is 1.7%, but it is probably higher. It is estimated that up to 30% of sex workers are HIV+, and a high % of street vendors may also be infected. Truck drivers, as in much of Africa, are a major source of the spread of HIV. If a man dies, his wife is married to his brother. If the man died of AIDS, his wife is also probably infected and she infects his brother who then infects his wives who infect their fetuses. In circumcision, the same knife is used for the group of boys who are ritually circumcised together. Women are also

ritually circumcised. There is also ritual scarification, and in some ethnic groups women have the area around their lips tattooed, all with unsterile instruments, which is a source of spread of HIV. The government is providing free HIV meds to those infected. AIDS medications have reduced in price from 400,000 CFA's ten years ago (\$80 per month) to \$250,000 CFA's (\$50 per month), and then to \$80,000 CFA's (\$16 U.S. dollars) per month and now are provided free by NGO's to the government. NGO's also bring in free condoms. Posters are visible around towns stressing AIDS prevention. However, in rural areas there is no HIV testing or medication. People migrate to cities to work, get infected there, and bring the infection back to rural areas.

The more children a woman has, the more will survive. With a high child mortality rate, there is little motivation for birth control, since one has a lot of kids to ensure that at least some will survive. C-sections are now free to prevent fistulas, the tearing of the bowel during delivery of a baby, which is a particular problem for very young women. Although females are circumcised, there is no treatment for hemorrhage or infection in many rural areas, and these are killers of young women. Women were traditionally circumcised by the blacksmith or his wife, and if the girl dies of infection, the death is blamed on a witch. Women were traditionally circumcised between 12-15 years, but they are now being circumcised at younger ages. Circumcision predates the introduction of Islam.

People get rich from lots of cattle, government service, and corruption, which is endemic. If a new car is imported, the tax is 42%, but if someone can be bribed, the car is listed as an old car and the tax is 3%. It can then be sold as a new car and taxes avoided. Inside information on

bidding for government contracts, with consequent bribes, is routine.

There is no Shariah (Muslim traditional law) in Mali. 120 billion CFA's (\$240 million U.S.) a year comes from France to Mali from immigrants who work in France and send money home. 80% of them are undocumented workers. From Timbuktu, one can get to France within a week from Gao in Mali or from Mauritania. Documents are forged, and friends send required invitation cards. People get visas to France for one month and then stay in France illegally for years. Many work in construction. It is easier for Senegalese to get to the U.S. than for Malians, because there is reciprocity with the U.S. since Senegal does not require a visa for Americans. Mali does, so there is no reciprocity; this makes it more difficult to emigrate to America.

American popular culture has been introduced big time to Mali. American flags sell for \$12. America is helpful to Mali both through NGO's and the Peace Corps, which is very popular. There seems to be hostility to France on the part of people to whom we spoke, because the French won't learn local languages and give money directly to the government, where there is a lot of corruption. France finances Mali's deficit but the US finances infrastructure and capacity building through the Millennium Challenge Fund. However, the US is supporting the notion of reducing Mali's debt through the International Monetary Fund. There is little American corporate investment in Mali. American farm subsidies make Mali's cotton industry non-competitive. China invests in the sugar cane industry.

There is one university that is free if one can pass the tests; however, only 2% of Malians have a college degree. Out of 71 kids in the guide's village cohort, he is

the only one to have more than a secondary school education.

After this lengthy discussion, the plane from Timbuktu arrived. We had to sign our names on a sheet when we got on the little plane. I was grateful that they did not request that we list next of kin and identifying marks. After a two hour flight, we arrived in Timbuktu. We immediately went to a Tuareg encampment in the Sahara. Riding through the sand on non-roads made our trip to Dogon territory seem tame. The Tuaregs are desert nomads who live in the Sahara. They speak a language called Tamashek, and they live in tents made of easily disassembled mats. They move with their camels and goats whenever the sparse vegetation in an area gives out. When we arrived, the camp was full of camels. Large dung beetles scuttled over the sand. Tuareg men dress in blue pants and overblouses with black turbans, and the women wear long, full black robes and have black headscarves around their heads. A few wore silver jewelry on headbands. There are many kids. A musical performance was in progress when we arrived. A man strummed on a string instrument, really a drone, and the women clapped, chanted, and ululated. A loud noise startled the camels, who began rearing up and becoming agitated. The little kids went and calmed them down.

I decided I wanted to improve my athletic prowess by camel riding. The camels are HUGE. One of the Tuareg men got the camel to lie down and I tried to boost myself up on the camel and promptly fell off on my backside. Jerry captured it on videotape, as a sure winner on You Tube. Finally, with pushing and shoving from my Tuareg friend, I made it up on the camel and went for a camel ride. I will not be successful as an Azalai (camel driver).

The Sahara is vast, and in the beginning of the desert where we were, has

some scrub bushes and endless sand everywhere one looks. An occasional donkey naps in the minimal shade of a bush. The Tuareg make their living not only from livestock but from salt, which they transport on camels from the salt mines at Tadouienne, 800 miles north in the Sahara. It is a 1600 mile round trip which takes five weeks in inhospitable territory. Several years ago there was a severe drought and much of the Tuareg's livestock died, so some Tuareg moved closer in the desert to Timbuktu, where much of their income comes from adventure travel agencies who compensate them for introducing visitors to their lifestyle. We had lunch at the encampment—couscous and veggies, mixed with plenty of sand, and roasted goat—and returned to Timbuktu.

Timbuktu is a city of sand. The streets are sand, there is sand everywhere, and it constantly blows around. The city is no longer a city of gold but of sand and dun-colored mud bricks. There are two mosques in Timbuktu, built in the Sahelian style and made of mud, shaped like an inverted tetrahedron with a protrusion and a flat top and columns of sticks on the side of the mosque, which allow people to climb up and repair it after rainy season. We heard the Muezzin call people to prayer.

There is a famous library in Timbuktu, the Ahmed Baba library. There are thousands of books, written in Arabic, many with geometric illustration. They date from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Timbuktu was a center of great learning. They were kept in families, but many have deteriorated over the years. The Ford and Mellon foundations, as well as other governments, paid to build the Ahmed Baba library as well as a few private libraries to preserve this important source of knowledge for research. We watched the pages being scanned into a computer and then preserved and stored. One of the books we saw was a mathematics treatise

from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A French mathematician translated it, and said it was equivalent to what was taught in second year college mathematics.

Our guide was the former mayor of Timbuktu, who is now the head of the UN World Heritage sites there. He said that there were Jews in Timbuktu from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on. They came from Spain, when the Spanish inquisition expelled the Jews, and some came from Morocco where there was already a Jewish population at that time. The Jews from both of these immigration streams began to travel as traders with the camel caravans through the Sahara to Timbuktu, where they settled as traders and metal workers since there was a ban in Islam at that time on Muslims doing metalworking. They were eventually expelled from Timbuktu in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, there are remains of a synagogue and a Jewish house, and there are records of 350 Jewish families who settled there. The ex-mayor, our guide, was very interested in contacting the U.S. Jewish community to help rebuild these historic monuments and in encouraging Jewish tourism to Timbuktu. It should be pointed out that he is Muslim, but he is far more ecumenical than the fundamentalist variety of Islam. The Tuaregs rebelled against the government in the 1990's, but the rebellion was settled and there is a peace monument with a centerpiece of melted guns from both sides.

My impressions of Timbuktu: sand, isolation, men and boys on camels riding into the distance in the Sahara, mud brick houses, some very poor tents in which the Bella-the historic slaves of the Tuaregs (they are called "black Tuaregs")-live in the middle of town, and clouds of dust. It's not the place the European explorers envisioned, but it is still a vibrant ethnic mix. By the time the plane ferried the earlier group back and came back for us, it was dark. The airport had closed and turned off

all its lights. All one could see were a few lights in the distance on the runway. The pilot was from Midland, Texas; the plane was originally an American missionary owned plane but it has to do commercial flights also to be permitted to fly. The pilot was confident he could get us back to Bamako. We took off without a problem, Insh'allah! The radio towers are nonfunctional, the Timbuktu airport has no instrumentation, and he had to fly by GPS to return to Mopti.

### **January 18: Bamako**

Jerry's ATM card was awaiting him in Bamako, because the someone from the bank had managed to fish it out of the ATM machine. He did not try to use an ATM again. The main streets in Bamako are wide boulevards surrounded by trees and concrete buildings, the French colonial influence in city planning. Once one gets out of the center of town, however, it becomes much like a typical third world city. The streets are dirt. Market women in brightly colored robes and matching turbans, many breastfeeding babies, sit by the side of the road selling vegetables. There are small stalls out of which people sell other goods. The streets are bustling with crowds of people: women carrying large tubs of their goods on their heads, kids running around, motor bikes driving at breakneck speeds, cars spewing exhaust fumes, and huge traffic jams. Crossing the street becomes a life threatening experience, similar to Rio, Cairo, or Ho Chi Minh City. The air is totally polluted with all this exhaust and the vendors by the roadside wear masks to filter the air they breathe. After a 20 minute walk, our eyes were smarting.

The most interesting market was the recycling market. Men and boys were making all variety of household goods from scrap, tin cans, auto bodies, and other

metals from sources unknown. In one place three men were working; the first took a rectangle of aluminum and bent it around a pipe into a cylinder with a seam holding it together; the second man trimmed the top and bottom and hammered the seam top; the third man put a disk on the bottom, bent up the flaps and hammered it tight. A small drinking cup was created in about 40 seconds total. Other men made small and large boxes, funnels, and other things. With heavier slabs of metals two men, one with a sledge and one holding a cold chisel, were punching holes for the top of a brazier. Heavy iron bars were cut with chisels and sledges and angle iron was bent to a rectangular shape by repeated hammering. There was one blacksmith whose flame was fed by a ten year old boy operating a bellows for hours on end. In this way, scrap was converted or recycled into household objects. The new scrap was stacked in large piles throughout the area to be trucked away and shipped to India for recycling. There are hundreds of men, each in his own shack, engaged in this enterprise.

There were children everywhere surrounding this market. They beg for their pictures to be taken so they can then see them on the digital camera screen, and a group of kids jumped and screamed happily when they saw the photos Jerry took of them.

Bamako has a wonderful museum of Malian wood carvings and material. Much of the carving was Dogon; we finally identified some of the pieces in our collection at home. Animist tradition is similar in Malian ethnic groups. There is the belief that everyone has a double of the opposite sex which follows them. If someone dies suddenly, it is difficult for the double to follow them. When someone dies the spirit remains and must be propitiated to bring good fortune. The cosmology is very complex. The mask collection in this

museum is outstanding, as is the collection of cloth material. Some of the material glitters because it is starched, sprinkled with water, and then the starch is pounded in with wooden mallets.

It is interesting that we have not seen a lot of begging compared to other third world cities, except for a few handicapped individuals. Begging is replaced by vending. It is almost impossible to move without hordes of vendors surrounding one. When you politely say no thanks, no one listens. They are persistent and will follow you wherever you go. They are mostly young men, and they try to sell jewelry and other small things.

We had to literally run to the bus from the market, followed by a group of vendors running along beside and behind us. When we got into our vehicle and shut the doors, they clustered around the windows, holding up their goods. A small boy offered me a thin blue plastic bag, a staple in American supermarkets, to hold some of the things I was precariously balancing. He helped me put my things in it and I thanked him and walked off. He followed me and kept grabbing the bag. I thought he was trying to get what was inside and kept jerking it away until someone translated what he was saying. He apparently was selling the bag, and since I didn't pay, he wanted it back. Everything is bargained for; there is no such thing as a final price initially quoted. If you want to buy something, a sale takes an endless amount of haggling. Jerry is terrific at it. He walks away when the price is too high, knowing that he will be followed by the vendor and they will compromise on a price.

The Niger river, which runs by Bamako, unfortunately is being fished out. Wood and charcoal are used for cooking, and the trees are being chopped down in a wider and wider area and the whole area is

being denuded of wood. That means instead of the harmattan (strong desert wind) blowing only at the appropriate season, the wind is now blowing all the time, raising a cloud of dust, because there are few trees to hold it back. We heard again that many Malians hate the French. One of the women we talked to was vociferous about this, claiming the French treat them like servants and still have a colonial attitude.

I realized that the bidet was the perfect place to wash clothes.

### **January 19: Bamako, Mali to Dakar,**

Leaving Mali, there was a huge commotion in the airport. A young Chinese man was screaming and yelling and surrounded by airport guards. No one knew what his problem was, because he spoke no language but Mandarin Chinese. One of our folks spoke Cantonese and was able to communicate somewhat with him. It appears he and his companions were flying from Nairobi to Dakar, and he got off the plane in Bamako, thinking it was Dakar. He thought the staff in departure lounge was trying to keep him out of the country. He had never heard of Bamako.

We disembarked in Dakar. Dakar is a major city and cosmopolitan compared to Bamako. The major administrative center of West Africa during the French colonial period, Dakar was also the place where the Free French had their administrative headquarters during WW II when the pro-Nazi Vichy government controlled France. The center of Dakar is an attractive city, characterized by large modern buildings as well as attractive embassies, some with gardens, and also some fine homes. The Ifan museum of art, run by the university of Dakar, has an outstanding collection of West African masks as well as a terrific modern Senegalese art section which surpasses what is sold in many New York

art galleries. The older part of Dakar, the Medina, is a third world city, with people piled into minibuses, sitting on wooden seats; women with babies in shawls on their backs; outdoor markets; and female fruit and vegetable vendors sitting by the side of the road. There is also a lot of litter, crowded streets, traffic jams, smog, and some unpaved streets. However, even the older portion is much larger and more bustling than Bamako, and more developed economically. The section near the port has concrete buildings, real stores as well as outdoor kiosks, and an occasional pizza parlor and small supermarket. The traffic is horrific. People, we heard, pay bribes to get driver's licenses. The streets are packed full of vehicles, and it is an adventure to maneuver through this massive traffic jam. There is a lot of construction, because the world Islamic conference will be held here next year and Saudi Arabia has contributed a lot of money toward the construction of large hotels. Bamako is a sleepy backwater by comparison.

Senegal is 95% Moslem and 5% Catholic, though both religions are mixed with animism. The population is 10 million, and it has had three presidents since independence in 1960 and had a socialist economy until 2000. Wolof and French are the major languages. The Islam here, like Mali, is less fundamentalist than the Wahabi variety. Women are not veiled; in fact 20% of parliamentary seats are reserved for women. Major problems in Senegal are lack of education (there is a shortage of teachers and 20% of rural village kids don't attend school because none is available). There is also acute corruption at every level of government. 70% of Senegalese are farmers, but during the dry season young rural men may come to Dakar where, as we have certainly seen, they become vendors.

We boarded the small ship that slept 30 passengers, the Callisto, that would take us to the backwoods of Senegal.

### **January 20: Casamance, Senegal**

After a night on the Casamance river in southern Senegal, we got into pirogues-wooden canoes with motors-and went down the Casamance river. Herons, egrets, ospreys, and brilliant Abyssinian roller birds lined the banks of the mangrove swamps. The mangrove has long curling roots stretched out well above the waterline; they look like legs. We went ashore at a Fulani village of Kachouane. The school was closed on Saturday, but children danced in a circle and chanted for us to the sound of drums. The huts were mud with grass roofs, and cattle were penned in to a corral made of sticks. Cattle equal wealth. The kids did not have the enlarged stomachs of many Malian village kids, indicating better nutrition, but many had thick yellow discharges from their noses. They asked for empty plastic water bottles, as they did in Mali, though it's still not clear to me why they wanted them. The village paths were all dirt, so it was very dusty. As we drove out of the village, we saw a tall TV antenna, which in Malian villages is unknown. There was also an outhouse next to the TV tower.

We drove for a long while in the back of an open truck in the hot sun over sand and dirt, an extremely bumpy and dusty ride. The scenery was relatively arid, but there were small bushes and palm trees with hanging birds' nests. We arrived at the village of Djembering, inhabited by the ethnic Jola group, the dominant ethnicity in the Casamance region of southern Senegal. The village is large. There is a huge kapok tree with prominent above ground roots in the center of the village. There are electric power lines, a shack with a sign that says "internet café," and some

small ramshackle stores. Buildings are either concrete or mud brick and straw.

There is a Catholic primary school, run by two nuns, which cost families 100 Euros a year per child, and a public primary school that is free, but families are required to provide uniforms for students. Some of the kids look quite ragged, so I questioned the accuracy of the statement of the nuns and my conversation with some of the older kids, who all said that every child is in school until age 12. Apparently, according to everyone I spoke to, if a child can't pay for a uniform they can still attend public school. From looking at the variety of kids, however, and from what our Malian guide who is on a working vacation here with us said, that is more a wish than a reality. Apparently if someone starts school and then leaves, they are always considered a student. After primary school, kids have to pass exams to be admitted to high school. If a child can't pass the exams, or the family can't afford the related expense of primary or high school, the child leaves school and tends cattle or some other work to help the family. Although there are power lines, there is clearly income inequality and not every family has electric power. There is a woman's cooperative that makes and sells dolls to support themselves and the school.

Several miles from town, a young man has created an outdoor ethnographic museum in Sangawatt as a source of income. His family was too poor to send him away to high school, so this enterprising guy assembled various artifacts and ritual objects of Jola daily life and spread them out in a mangrove forest. For instance, there are fetishes, hunting artifacts, household artifacts, and a cow's head on the scarecrow-like figure of a woman. He said that the woman is represented by the cow. Because the cow is so important in the economy, women are respected. The Jola do not circumcise their women and there is also a prohibition

against beating them. He had each woman choose an artifact and guess what it is used for. Jerry mouthed “winnowing grain” to my artifact. I repeated that, and the young man praised me for my astuteness at giving the right answer. He hopes to make enough money from this outdoor display to make his own fruit orchard, but my guess is that given the remoteness of the place, tourists are few and far between.

The difference in development between Senegal and Mali is evident in the villages. Relatively remote villages like the ones we went to have electricity and schools, which most villages in Mali lack. The kids in these Senegalese villages look healthier and the economy seems better. The river may have something to do with these observations, since fish are plentiful, and I don't know what areas really distant from the river look like. We stopped at Cap Skiring, a beautiful beach resort populated by French tourists and continued onward, though it was really hot and the beach looked inviting.

Returning in the back of the truck, covered with sweat and dust, we once again got into the pirogues and stopped at a small fishing village. Pigs, chickens, and goats roamed freely on the dirt streets, women sold fruit at small stands and the shore was lined with all varieties of pirogues. After nine hours on the river, roads, and in villages, we returned to the boat.

### **January 21: Ziguinchor, Senegal**

The Casamance area, where we are now, is 1/7 of the area of Senegal and Senegal's bread basket. Rice, fish, and cashews are all produced here. It is separated from the rest of Senegal geographically by The Gambia, which is shaped like a finger in Senegal's mouth; i.e., it is a long, thin protrusion into Senegal, claimed by the British because of commerce and resource

opportunities along the Gambia river. There has been a separatist movement in Casamance since the 1980's because the Mandingo and Jola, the major ethnic groups here, feel that the Wolof (48% of Senegal and the most prominent ethnicity in the central government) are neglecting the area in terms of development. One leader of the separatist movement was attacking Senegalese towns from Guinea-Bissau, but France pressured the president of Guinea-Bissau to withdraw support and the rebel leader's base was bombed. No-one knows where he is right now, though he is presumably still alive. The rebel movement split, with a Catholic priest the head of the more conciliatory faction who made a treaty with France. He died a natural death a few days ago. The separatist movement, however, is still active in this area. In fact, the nun at the church school has seen Cuban land mines for sale in the market.

We disembarked this morning in Ziguinchor, the major town in the Casamance region of Senegal. Armed military men in jeeps with mounted machine guns were visible on the dock, central government troops stationed here because of the rebellion. Ziguinchor is a large, dusty town with a main asphalt road and many dirt roads. Tin-roofed shacks contain small stores of goods, and others are sold in the open markets. Women with babies on their backs and large tubs on their head populate the markets. Mule-drawn wagons with heavy rubber tires, bikes, motorbikes, and cars pack the roadway. Pirogues line the shore, and men sell fish. Pirogues (large wooden canoes) are built here on the shoreline, and men are constructing them with hand tools. There is a backlog of orders, because of the demand for pirogues to take undocumented workers to Mauritania which is a transit point to get to Europe. It cost 3 million CFA's to build a pirogue, and it is sold for 3 ½ million CFA's to entrepreneurs who sell tickets to local

people trying to illegally emigrate to Europe. Families collect money to send a member. If the person is caught in transit and sent home, he will try again. Given the rough passage, pirogues are sunk and people die. There is a monument in Ziguinchor to the Jolla disaster. Two years ago, people piled into a ferry which was overcrowded and unbalanced and sank, killing 2300 people.

The buildings here that are more substantial are discolored concrete. Although women are dressed in traditional boubous, many men and kids are in western dress, with t-shirts that are obviously used clothing donated by the US and France and somewhat the worse for wear; for example, a t-shirt that says Pittsburgh Pirates, a worn Dora the Explorer t-shirt, one that says Brooklyn, an animal farm in Tennessee, and European soccer team logos. Telephone communications centers in shacks are a source of telephones for locals who do not have cell phones. Signs are prevalent, such as a picture of a woman painted on a wall saying "iodized salt!", an AIDS poster warning in French, "AIDS is creeping on us" (obviously an AIDS prevention poster funded by a French company that exports heavy equipment here), an AIDS red ribbon painted on a wall with "prevent AIDS" in French, and a sign from UNICEF saying "stay in school."

There is a large Catholic church here. Thirty percent of the population is Catholic, compared to 5% in Senegal as a whole. The rest is Moslem. The two groups get along well. The church has a school. The nuns who run it say they charge 90,000 CFA's (\$180 US) per year and they give a better education than the overcrowded public schools. However, given the steep price for Senegal, many people who cannot afford it are now sending their kids to public schools, so many of the Catholic schools in this part of Senegal are closing. There is no

mandatory schooling but there is an attempt to build public schools. What is interesting here is evidence that Senegal is more economically developed than Mali. Although Senegal grows some rice, bags of rice from Vietnam and Thailand are visible, and signs of malnutrition are less than in Mali.

We got into the inevitable pirogues to visit the distant village of Djilapao. It was terribly hot, with a blazing sun, and it was rough going sitting on the hard wooden rim of the pirogue with no back rest for two hours there on the Casamance river. Herons, ospreys, darters, and flamingoes were visible on the mangrove-lined banks, and local people in small pirogues passed us by and waved. By the time we got to a remote village which was our destination, we were literally fried. The village had ten small houses made of mud with straw roofs. They had a small cooking area outside for a fire, and no furniture. Pigs and chickens ran around the yards, next to children playing in the dirt. A woman was scrubbing pots in her yard in the midst of the chaos. The houses were surrounded by a circle of poles made from tree branches and held together horizontally with another branch. Big baobabs were everywhere. This village lives by fishing, and men are sitting outdoors mending their nets. They sell what they don't eat. There is no electricity here and no school. If children go to school, they must go to Ziguinchor and live with relatives. A man who was shunned by the village, though it's not clear why, lived at the edge of the village and made a hut whose walls are elaborate mud sculptures of people and village scenes. They are incredible. He had never seen a western art museum, but his work was of museum quality. He died last year and his hut is crumbling from water damage during the rainy season.

## **January 22: Ziguinchor, Senegal**

We remained in Ziguinchor this morning and visited a farm in Djibelour, owned by a French ex-pat. He came here 30 years ago as an agricultural extension worker, married a local woman, and remained here, buying land and establishing a large farm. He is a corpulent man with a wild mane of white hair, attired in an undershirt. He was sorting sunflower seeds with his workers when we arrived. The farm appears somewhat ramshackle. He grows oranges, grapefruit, bananas, calabashes, and lemons as well as flowers and sells them. The farm has several hundred crocodiles, which I thought were rather strange pets. However, he raises and sells their meat and skins.

Ziguinchor also has an Alliance France-Senegalese, which inhabits a large building with a circular structure and walls painted floor to ceiling with Ndebele designs from South Africa. I thought it was an excellent example of French cultural insensitivity to have South African art on a Senegalese building, but apparently the French support Senegal's central government, which the people in Casamance dislike, so they are suspicious of any French attempt to appropriate local culture. The Alliance cost \$40 per year U.S. to join, and people can take language and math classes, see movies, and use the library. The French government helps support the alliance, and a Swiss group raises money for scholarships for people who can't pay. The math lesson on the board, Jerry said, was continued rational approximation of the square root of 2, which in the U.S. wouldn't be taught because students would use calculators.

Near the Alliance is a craft market in sheds. The shop owners are aggressive, literally pulling you in. A standard ploy here is for a salesman to say, "I give you a gift" and hand it to you. You are then expected

to bargain for it and of course return it if you don't buy, but it is a way of pulling you in.

There are two naturalists accompanying this trip who know about the birds and plants but aren't experts in local culture. Thank goodness for our guide from Mali, who is an expert on African history. He is accompanying us to Senegal both as a vacation and to share his observations with his Malian tour company. He has never been outside of Mali. Raised in a village in the Mopti region, he was one of a total of 14 kids of his father's four wives. His father died when he was 10, and he went to live with his uncle since he was not comfortable living with his mother's husband. His uncle was very poor and he had to go from house to house in the village begging for food for them. He managed to attend the local public school and got scholarships to secondary school and college. Because he is extremely knowledgeable about local history and culture, he is sent with academic groups and diplomats as a guide.

## **January 23: The Gambia**

Gambia was a former British colony and is the smallest country in Africa. After Britain's attempts to establish this as an agricultural and commercial base failed, they gave up and tried to give it away. There were no takers, and it became independent in 1965. Gambia has revived its economy to some extent by exporting ground nuts (peanuts and cashews). It also has built a tourist resort industry for Europeans in some beach areas. The Mandingo, who are called Bambara in Mali, are the major ethnic group. The first president had an extremely corrupt regime overthrown by a military coup in 1994. Jammeh, the coup leader, is now president and has suppressed the press and regime critics and enriched himself personally. He runs an extremely repressive government

and has been accused of human rights violations.

We went by pirogue across the Gambia river to Tendaba, where we piled into an open truck to visit the Kiang West national park. On our way to the park, through dust, dirt roads, and lots of bumps, we passed several villages. The villages have mud huts with tin sheets for roofing, and pigs, chickens, goats, and children in abundance. This is not a tourist area, so women and all the kids in the villages came to the side of the road and waved at us as we went by. In one village, the kids ran after our vehicle as it left the village; the vehicle was like the pied piper, followed by legions of kids. One child who looked 3 or 4 years old had on adult shoes many sizes too large. They all asked for empty plastic water bottles. Apparently, I found out, they use them to carry water to school.

After leaving the villages, we stopped at a kraal (enclosure) in the middle of the savanna. A little boy in a mule drawn cart approached from the distance, and several other young boys magically appeared. Most were barefoot and wore faded second hand t-shirts with American or European logos. They wanted their photos taken, and like many of the kids in Mali and Senegal, went nuts with delight at viewing their photos on a digital camera. They go to a Koranic school (madrassa). These schools are funded by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and they also charge a fee for enrollment. The school is in the last village we passed, next to a public primary school. Although there are primary and secondary schools in many villages, not all kids go to school. Although theoretically primary school is available to all, it is income that determines education. Some families can't afford uniforms and others keep their kids home because their help is needed to generate income. Boys are favored over girls if a family can afford to send only some children to school. Gambia

has a 40% literacy rate, with the rate 15-20% lower for girls.

The ecosystem here is different from anything we've seen. It is what is technically a savanna, or trees of different types separated by wide swaths of 7-8 feet tall elephant grass. The grass slaps one's face and arms as one drives through in an open truck. This is a bird watcher's paradise, with many types of birds like hawks and hoopoes. They prey on the insects and small rodents in the savanna. There are few animals, mostly warthogs, which we saw, and baboons, which we didn't. A large moist swamp, dug up by warthogs, turns into a source of irrigation during the rainy season and local villagers can grow rice there for three months a year. Gambia is the fourth most populous country per square mile in Africa, and for 85% of the population, wood is the sole source of fuel, leading to a dramatic decline in indigenous woodland. The government has set aside a large area, Kiang West national park, where gathering wood is not permitted. They are preserving it in part in hopes of stimulating an eco-tourism industry. This part, called a forest, has denser trees closer together, separated by smaller amounts of elephant grass. Although some trees are green, most are dry and it is very dusty. Local villagers can gather wood outside the park but it is forbidden to chop down live trees here. The villagers sometimes gash them, put in salt to dry out the tree, and then chop it down. The area is full of large termite mounds. During the wet season, villagers make soup out of termites or fry and eat them, and the acid extrusion from the termite soldiers when they bite is considered a cure for rheumatism.

As we returned to the pirogue, a fire raged across part of the dry savanna, right near the road. We got out of there fast. In Tendaba, a young girl approached me. Since English is an official language here, I

could speak with her. She is 16 and in the equivalent of 9<sup>th</sup> grade (middle school). When she finishes, she hopes to go three more years to secondary school and then to Europe to study computing. There is no computer in her school, however,

After lunch, we got back in the pirogues and went across the broad, crocodile infested Gambia river and then a narrow tributary through the baboalong wetland reserves. Mangrove trees had their roots above ground to get air, and long thin branches that look like vines that will eventually take root in the water. Many species of birds inhabit the tributaries of the Gambia, and they fly through the air and stand on the banks. Their different calls fill the air. Some are large and colorful; others are large and brown; others are small. I don't know any of their names. A large Nile crocodile is sitting on the bank and glides into the water behind our pirogue. Ever mindful of the Penn doctor in Penn's Botswana AIDS project, who was pulled from his boat and eaten by a crocodile last year, I moved away from the side of the pirogue.

### **January 24: The Gambia**

Banjul, the capital of The Gambia, is a port city. Huge shipping containers line the ports. Although it is a very small country, along the main road in Serakunda, the city on the main road next to Banjul, it looks somewhat more prosperous than does Bamako. Although it has many of the hallmarks of an African city-many children, kiosks, villages with tin roofs, and outdoor markets, there is more industry and commerce than I observed in Bamako, though it is nowhere near Dakar in size and development. There is a lot of small and medium sized commerce housed in concrete small buildings that are run down and discolored. Cell phone stores, fast food, and money transfer shops abound, as

do cell phone ads on the road. I could read shop and road signs since they were in English: "Home of the finest American used clothes"; "World Trade Center" (located in a shack); "Clean face, healthy eyes"; "Action AIDS International in Gambia"; "Women are decision makers too"; "Prevent malaria: Sleep under a treated bed net every night!"; "Transforming the Gambia into an economic super power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." The picture of Jammeh, the president, is everywhere, both on large pictures on buildings and small ones on posters. "Vote APRC [political party]-Jammeh" posters are visible everywhere (the presidential election is next month). Jammeh is both repressive and corrupt, but he has tight control of the country. A journalist who opposed his government was murdered in '04 and the government refused to open an investigation. On January 18, he announced "by tradition and mandate" that he could cure HIV in three days and had already done so for nine people. The world, he proclaimed, would soon become aware of his cure. The Gambian press was fulsome in its praise of the president who by "his efforts on behalf of Gambian health and his resourcefulness has discovered this wonderful cure"! This will not be a winner for HIV prevention. Since Banjul is a port city, it probably explains some of the economic development, as does the large export of peanuts and cashews, but they are aggressively pursuing both eco-tourism and resort tourism. The coast is lined with nice resort hotels and European tours book them up. As someone said, The Gambia has become Europe's new Spain. It has also become a retirement spot for Europeans. Libyan and Chinese investment also helps. The villages look a bit more prosperous than in comparable locations in Mali, but what we have seen is near a major asphalt road close to a major city, so small villages in the interior are probably much less developed.

We are part of Gambia's eco-tourism economy. First we visit the Abuko nature reserve, a Warwick University (England) research station and part of the Masakatu National Trust. This is an entirely different eco-system than what we have previously observed—dense tropical forest with thick vegetation, large palm trees, and many different kinds of birds, as well as crocodiles, vervet monkeys (who are regarded as pests because they destroy crops), colobus monkeys, bushboks, army ants, mosquitoes, and baboons. All of these are prevalent and easily visible. It was interesting to watch a large bird, the hammerkop, busily build an enormous nest, flying to the bank of the pond and bringing back leaves, grass, and twigs.

The Masakatu cultural reserve is another protected area that I bet will soon appear as a destination in the NY Times travel section. It is a project of two Englishmen who bought a few acres as a base for touring Africa. When they returned, many trees had been cut down. Using their own money and borrowing from everyone they knew, they bought 1,000 acres as a protected environmental area and lived there in a tent for nine years, allowing eco-tourists to visit. The local villages had always avoided the land because it was supposed to be possessed by the devil, so no one ostensibly cared when they bought it (at least that's the story they tell). They have recently built a small lodge for eco-tourists and they are using the money from eco-tourism for the economic development of local villages and for teaching villagers the importance of conservation. They clearly have self-interest, because one of their aims is to try and pay local villagers as ecological guides. The place has recently been rated as the top eco-tourism spot in the world. Bob Marley's wife is promoting it, as is the Eden Trust, a nature trust in England. The reserve is a tropical forest, and it has a

variety of birds and many baboons. I approached a baboon to get a good photo shot, and he ran at me, hissing and baring his teeth. Since they are nasty animals with vicious bites, I rapidly retreated.

We went down a small tributary of the Gambia to view birds. The air was filled with bird sounds, and mango trees with oysters clinging to their roots lined the bank. We also walked through the forest to the hut of an indigenous healer and fortune teller. The women in the family were cooking at an outdoor fire. Pigs, piglets, chickens and chicks were running around. A commotion ensued when one of the pigs ate two chicks in rapid succession. I had my fortune told by the curer, a wizened old man with rheumy eyes, sitting in a straw hut surrounded by various ritual objects. He studied my hand and my eyes and said I had a good husband, I would live a long life, and my children would always take care of me. He also said I would be very successful and that I must buy a weaving and give it to a Gambian to guarantee safety in travel. A young man translated. Later, he approached me with a weaving he brought from a craft market and said it cost \$15 but he had bargained it down for \$8 for me, so I could buy it and give it to a Gambian, thus fulfilling the prophecy. Clearly, it was a scam. Scams know no geographic boundaries, since he would undoubtedly take the weaving if I bought it and return it to the original seller to bilk some other unsuspecting tourist. I decided to take my chances at travel safety.

In Gambia, we have been divided into two groups, the bird watchers and all others. The bird watchers, replete with telescopes and bird books, are excellent at identifying the many types of birds. Someone is now up to 170 different types on this trip. To the rest of the folks, it doesn't matter what the names of the birds are; they just want to see a variety of

things. Thus, the birders take their time looking for birds and we go our own way.

We return to Banjul. The museum here is a dusty place, with an interesting exhibit on the slave trade and newspaper articles praising Jammeh's coup in 1994.

This trip no longer takes people to see the village of Kunta Kinte, the major figure in *Roots*, the TV docudrama in the 1970's about slavery. The vendors were so aggressive there, even compared to the ones we've seen, that it was impossible to do anything in that village.

### **January 25: Senegal**

The ship left Gambia for Senegal at 4 am and woke me up when it left. It rocked back and forth as it went up the coast, as did my stomach. I am definitely not a candidate for the navy.

Leopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal and an accomplished poet, was very pro-France and for remaining in the French commonwealth in 1960. Sekou Toure, in Guinea, insisted on independence from France. When Guinea became independent, the French left, taking everything with them—books, educational materials, and infrastructure. If it hadn't been for some African Americans and people from other African countries coming to help, Guinea would have been in terrible shape. There is a relatively low rate of AIDS in Gambia (2.4% of adults 15-49 yrs old), even a lower rate in Senegal (.9% of adults), and Mali's rate is between the two (1.7%). Part of the comparatively low rate in these countries is due to religion; however, Senegal's government has aggressively pursued an AIDS prevention program early in the epidemic.

We once again got into pirogues, this time on the Saloum river in Senegal, and upon disembarking at Dgiffere, a small fishing village, we were once again met by

vendors. The standard rap is, "What is your name? My name is Omar. My brothers are in the U.S." and then he brings out his wares and sticks like glue, insisting that we need what he is selling for "good price", which is always too high and bargaining is expected.

We drove down a spit of land, a peninsula between the Saloum river and the Atlantic ocean, marked by low vegetation and reddish sandy dirt. There are a lot of baobabs. The villagers here are the Serer ethnic group. The villages are relatively prosperous because both fishing and agriculture are good, and they benefit from tourism to Joal-Fadiout. Community associations have built schools and a small hospital and the houses are cement, which is a sign of economic development. Small mosques are in each village, and electric lines and cell phone towers are prevalent. The sea, the major source of this area's economy, leaves salt on the beach, and people come and gather it in pails. It is used to salt and prepare fish, which are then smoked, fried, and sold. The town of La Sabaoi in this area has a village market selling veggies, fish, cheap plastic goods, and t-shirts (The rapper 50 Cent t-shirts are displayed along with others). Market women sit at low tables merchandising goods. We were besieged by vendors who tried to engage us in conversation and produced bags of peanut confections they tried to sell us. You can't blame someone for trying to make a living, but you have to literally fight your way through the vendor throngs. Outside the village, people in donkey carts are carrying grass and firewood they collect for smoking fish. The road is basically non-existent, and we bump and bounce to Joal, Leopold Senghor's birthplace (he was the first president of Senegal). It is 90% Catholic, but the Catholics and Muslims appear to get along well, as they do in other areas of southern Senegal we've visited. Given the number

of Catholics here, the Catholics in Senegal as a whole may actually be higher than 5% of the total population. I wonder if the government underestimates the numbers so it can get aid from Moslem countries.

Joal has dirt streets, indoor markets, and oyster shells crunch under your feet as you walk. This area has huge oyster beds, whose method of cultivation was imported from Taiwan. The beds spread over a large area of the bay, and are demarcated by number to designate which groups own them. There are two famous small islands near Joal, in Fadiout. We get there in a small wooden pirogue, poled across the bay, and rocking back and forth perilously close to the water. Several times I was sure it would tip over, but we arrived without incident. One island is an old granary island with many straw roofed granaries on stilts where grain used to be stored to protect it from rats. Now grain is stored in warehouses on the mainland, but it is kept as part of the national heritage and also, I'm sure to attract tourism. The other island is made entirely of oyster shells. Oyster shells were dumped in this location for years and made an island. The shells crunch under our feet. There is both a Moslem and a Christian cemetery. An African American woman was buried here in '94. Her grandfather told her their origin was in West Africa, across from an island made entirely of shells. She thus asked to be buried in her ancestral home. The village of Fadiout, a fishing village, is accessible by a long bridge and the usual pigs and chickens are running around the street.

Going back through Joal, we pass a pediatric clinic whose walls are painted with pictures of health information. Since many people can't read, pictures are an important source of education. The pictures stress the dangers of AIDS, the need for iodized salt, the risk of malaria and leprosy, the importance of proper feeding of infants, and

interestingly, the danger of obesity. TB, Malaria, and AIDS all have vigorous government prevention campaigns. Senegal has the lowest rate of HIV infection in Africa and gets a lot of assistance from international NGO's. Abstinence is stressed, and free condoms are available in the health centers. Although the people are primarily Catholic, the guide says that if people are sensitized to the danger of AIDS, the chance that they will use condoms is increased. However, one can also make the opposite argument; that is, if people are sensitized to a religiously based anti-condom ideology, they may reject condoms. The government and NGO's are beginning to provide free AIDS meds. Leprosy has dropped off, but malaria is a huge killer. The importance of iodized salt has still not made enough inroad into the population. The medical infrastructure is still weak. There is one doctor for every 200,000 people. Senegal has a long way to go in developing a medical infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

The small ship we were on for our stay in Senegal and The Gambia served as a hotel room, getting us to remote areas. We disembarked early every morning and returned every night, when the ship would move further on the river to more remote areas. The ship was small, and when the seas were rough, the ship really rocked. It was fine on the rivers, but sailing back to Dakar from southern Senegal, the ship traveled up the coast on the Atlantic Ocean. I learned something I wasn't previously aware of, which is that I get seasick. By evening I felt miserable, and though I kept everything down, I vowed to honor my previous pledge to not join the navy.

### **January 26: Dakar, Senegal**

I gladly got off the ship in the morning and though it was a pleasant place and it would be difficult to have gone to

remote areas in a short time without a traveling hotel, I was delighted to be on land. We took a ferry to Goree Island, which is one of the places where slaves were sold and from where they were sent to America. A large group of Senegalese high school students were on a class trip to Goree. The girls all had hair weaves and tight jeans (some with "I love you" in English on the back pocket), and the guys had baggy jeans, American football shirts (Barber-21, for instance), and rap group shirts, some picturing Snoop Dogg. Senegal has a vibrant rap culture. The kids were dressed like American teens.

Goree Island is a beautiful small island, with streets of sand, nice flowers, nice places to eat, and many vendors. It is disconcerting to see this and know the bitter history of this place. The slave trade was triangular. Goods were brought from Britain to Africa, used to purchase slaves who were then taken to the US where they were sold, and the sugar and cotton purchased in the Americas with this money was taken back to England. The curator explained the history of the House of Slaves, where many of the Slaves were held, then sold, and taken away by ship. The House of Slaves opens directly into the sea. It was the last sight of Africa for those who were sold here. The men and women were separated here and sold separately. The curator explained the history. Although he did a good job on the horrors of slavery, he only gave a partial view of the slave trade. He neglected to point out that many slaves were sold to Arab middlemen by Africans who captured them from enemy villages. He complained that people always talked about the 6 million Jews killed by Hitler, but no one talks about the millions of Africans who for 400 years were like victims in a concentration camp. One group's misery, unfortunately, is not enhanced by minimizing another group's misery. Inhumanity to anyone is totally miserable.

The horror of this place in history is interrupted by legions of vendors calling, "my sister, come to my shop"; "my brother, good price for this jewelry". The incongruity of past and present is disconcerting.

This is the end of the trip and we are scheduled to fly to Atlanta at 4:15 a.m. The trip was terrific but very intense. We rode everything from camels to trucks to ships to pirogues to ferries to vans to buses to planes. We had almost no down time, but we really got out of cities and got a good look at some remote areas and learned a great deal about culture, history, and current issues in West Africa. The people on this trip were great. Almost everyone was interesting, very well traveled, pleasant, and laid back, and it was sad to say good-bye. Although not requiring a lot of hiking, and with comfortable accommodations and good food, it required a lot of endurance and agility climbing into and out of pirogues, bouncing across non-roads, and tolerance of dust and sleeplessness. The only intense heat was in southern Senegal, and since it was dry season, there were surprisingly few insects. We shall return to West Africa again, Insh'allah.

### **January 27: Ardmore, PA**

After enduring wars in Nepal and Israel, arriving in Argentina the day after Peron returned from exile and 100 people were shot in the airport, leaving Russia right before Gorbachov was overthrown, and arriving in South Africa as the momentum for protest in the 70's began, people are wary of going anywhere when we are there. Our track record, however, keeps growing. The day we left Dakar, there was a major demonstration against the president (occurring several hours after we left) in an area where we had been stuck in traffic earlier the previous afternoon. The police used electric batons to break it up. When

we got home, we read the state department warning that was issued "to advise American citizens to defer most non-essential travel to the Casamance region of Senegal due to increased violence there. There has been fighting on both sides of the Casamance river between rebels and the Senegalese military. Due to the increased violence, the State Dept. recommends against all nonessential travel to the Casamance region except direct air travel to Ziguinchor or the Cap Skiring resort area. Americans should avoid driving outside Ziguinchor and Cap Skiring city limits." Hey, we spent a week driving all over the Casamance region and emerged unscathed. People are beginning to suspect we work for the CIA. We seem to have some sort of strange karma. We will keep friends informed about future trips, so they can avoid those countries when we are there.