

The Story of the Students

N'Dar: The Place of Transformation & Liberation



There I stood anxiously waiting to walk down the steps of the airplane and to take my first steps on African soil. The air had a salty aroma to it that the breeze kindly brought our way to cool us on this warm night. The palm trees swaying in the wind were better than I ever imagined. Who would have ever imagined a young Muslim child, such as me, would be going around the world to learn Islam in another country⁹.

It was the summer of 1990 that I was blessed by Allah (s.w.a.) to travel to Senegal and learn at a place called *N'Dame* which is between *M'Backe* (A city founded by Cheik Ahmadou Bamba's grand father) and *Touba* (founded by Cheik Ahmadou Bamba). At ten years old I had never heard of Senegal. My family has always stayed around and connected with different African communities in my short lifetime, and I was eager to come to the place where my ancestors were disconnected from. My father *M'Muballigh* Muhammad Abd Al-Rahman had met Cheik Mourtalla Mbacke a few years back and they had discussed bringing American children to Senegal to benefit from an Islamic education, and as a child I was a little skeptical because many different Cheiks came to America and created more problems for our people than solutions – but this was definitely something different. This was real Islam... putting action before words.

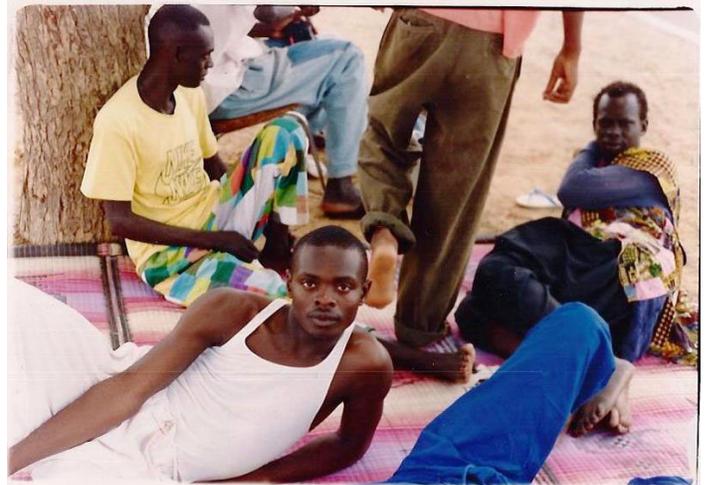


The first night in Dakar, all of the children, including me, were so

excited to go to *Touba* we couldn't sleep and stayed up the whole night talking and day dreaming on how beautiful *Touba* is going to be when we get there. The next day a few of us walked around the neighborhood to get acquainted with this new world we have been exposed to. The people were friendly and, despite the language barrier, the kids tried to communicate with us. Dakar was indeed very beautiful and reminded me of a postcard I seen of the Caribbean. At around midday we heard the most beautiful sound that some of us had only heard aloud on television... it was the call to prayer (*Azan*.) At that point we couldn't wait to go to *Touba* and see the Mosque that has been beautifully painted on all of the public transportation vehicles (*car-rapid*'). We immediately told the rest of the group what we just experienced on the streets of Dakar.

Touba: City of Light and Life

Two days later we are on our way to *Touba* and I awake as we are stopped at a check point along the road somewhere in *Thies*. The Mercedes Van in front of us is stacked seven feet high with mattresses and we are being accompanied by Cheik *Qasim* M'Backe (Son of Cheik Mourtalla Mbacke), Sheikh Mourtalla Amar (senior representative among seringe Mourtallas entourage), and



Biran Ndiaye. My understanding of *Wolof* was zero but, after a few exchanges of words and the mentioning of Cheik Mourtalla's name we were once again on our way to *Touba* being serenaded by the driver's Thioune Seck cassette and the moonlight brightening up the night sky.

A few hours later, in *M'Backe*, we stopped at a big compound with beautiful architecture and a tan wall that is long as a football field. Three men with dreadlocks and colorful clothing are sitting down waiting for us patiently, for what appeared to have been the entire night. We were told the compound will be ready by tomorrow and Cheik *Qasim* informs the group that we will be staying at a guest house across from the mosque in *Touba*. In the distance there appears to be a large minaret with a blue light on top. "What is that?" asks one of the kids and *Biran* replies, "That's *Lampe*

(Continued on page 6)



(Continued from page 5)

Fall. It is the tallest minaret of the Mosque in *Touba*.” As the minutes go by, I feel like I’m dreaming or reliving the fabulous 15th Century Muslim fables of men (saints) traveling around the world to places like Istanbul, Baghdad, Egypt, Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Timbuktu, and now *Touba*.

As a child I always took books from my father’s personal library, and one of my favorite books was this book filled with pictures of historical relics and mosques all over the world. I used to fall asleep day dreaming I was walking through the main hall or leaning against one of the pillars of those great monuments. My dream had become a reality as I found myself standing, for quite some time, admiring this beautiful house of Allah (*s.w.a*) on this beautiful night, grateful for having the opportunity of a lifetime.



The gates to the guest house were open and we walked into one of the most beautiful court yards anyone of us had ever seen in our life. The moonlight shined down upon us as we made our way to a very large living room area that was beautifully decorated with soft tan leather couches and a marble floor so clean you could see your reflection. Sheik Qasim leaves us for the night and a slender man wearing a three piece *grand buba* walks into the living area, smiling, as he puts down a case of soda. The gentlemen then takes off the outer garb, rolls up his sleeves, and begins setting up a mat so we can all get ready to eat. Most of the kids have never seen this kind of hospitality or behavior before and an onlooker might assume the man was from a lower class in society. As the man finished setting up the mat another group of men walk with dreadlocks, like the ones waiting for us earlier, place three large bowls of food on the mat and a basin of water to wash our hands.

The meal was a bed of salad topped with onions and roasted chicken with some potatoes and boiled eggs on the side. The meal was delicious and after the meal we drank our soda as Sheik Mu-

hammad posed a question to the group. He asked us if we knew who the gentleman was that humbly walked in and chattered to us, our answers were all no! And then he revealed to us that the gentleman was a medical doctor. Service is the corner stone of Islam and he was more than happy to serve young children from a distant land coming to learn Islam because the prophet said, “Who ever goes out on a path for knowledge is in the way of Allah until they return.” Fatigue begins to set in as we were paired into two’s and three’s to share the accommodations of Saint *Touba* house until tomorrow. I fell asleep that night praying that I wasn’t dreaming and when morning comes I would open my eyes and gaze upon the mosque in the morning.

After a Nescafe breakfast with buttered bread, a few of the other kids and I decided to go into the mosque and see what was inside. The mosque was very cool inside and the ceilings were taller than the apartment building I lived in Queens New York. Birds flew in and out of the different sections of the mosque. It was so big and there were many people praying, reading Quran, or contemplating until the next prayer. Walking out of the mosque we saw street vendors selling fruits, water, peanuts, etc. and an older woman

selling peanuts gave us a bag of peanuts from the kindness of her heart. We took the peanuts and walked back to the compound where everybody else was taking a nap in the air conditioned rooms or talking in the living room where we had eaten dinner the night before.

A few hours later we are finally coming toward the gates of the compound in *M’Backe* where we will be residing. As we pull up the

first structure we see is a mosque complete with a “star and crescent” on the side facing the *Kaaba*. The interesting fact about the beautiful compound is that it belonged to Sheik Abdul Qadir Mbacke (the older brother) of Sheik Mourtalla Mbacke, and one



Ramadan he paid a famous *Quran* reader to read the entire *Quran* for him. The reader started the recitation, the Sheik was getting his head shaved, and by the end of the recitation the Sheik passed

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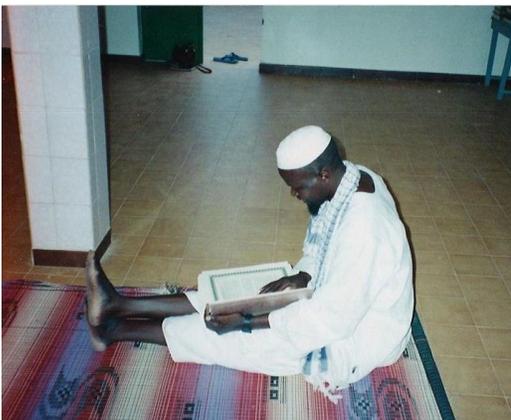
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away. The house has never been inhabited and we were honored to be the first inhabitants.



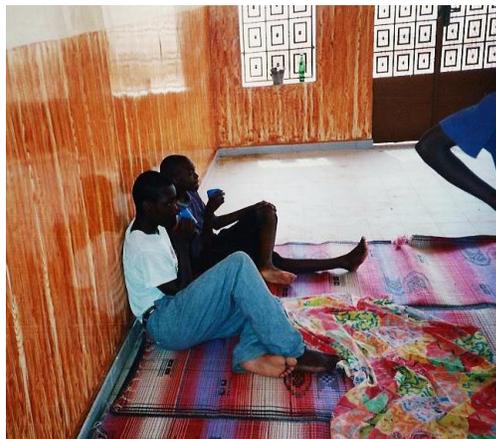
As the large green gates opened, we ran into a football field sized yard filled with soft sand that cushioned the feet and was cool to the touch. We were finally at our home away from home. The compound housed five buildings and a two car garage with four of the five buildings separated by a wall. Allah had been merciful with us because a few days ago we were all just living in the city, descendants of many parts of Africa deprived of our heritage and now we were back in the heart of Senegal being treated like royalty amongst Muslims who's mannerism remind you of the companions of the prophet or even his near relatives. We spent the whole day amusing ourselves with the many corridors of the compound until night came when we made our congregational prayers in the compound's own mosque.

The next day after morning prayers (*Fajr*) we talked until the sun came up and ate a delicious breakfast of millet balls and sour cream, *fundee*, then we made our journey to visit a special place called *N'Dame*. We walked down a dirt road that gave a pano-



ramic view of the beautiful country side and some railroad tracks. Every where we passed people would say, "*Nan gin Def*" translated, "How are you all," in *Wolof*. We waved our hands and continued our walk toward our destination. *N'Dame* was home to *Sohna Ramah*, Sheik Mourtalla's wife and mother of Sheik Qasim Mbacke, and our new teacher Serigne Lo.

After passing by school buildings we reached the house and were greeted by many beautiful smiling faces in the courtyard where the Sheik's wife was waiting. We were told to sit down on the mats that the young woman provided and we all just waved our hands as a gesture of respect. Many children never have the opportunity to see their grand parents or great grand parents but to many of us, the Sheik's wife was going to be a grandmother away from the United States in the years to come. After a few more minutes we were ushered to another large compound behind *Sohna Ramah's* house where our teacher lived. Many of the kids and I were very excited and eager to begin our *Quranic* instruction. We waited for a few moments and were greeted by Serigne Lo as he came toward our direction under a big shady tree. His mannerism was impeccable as he made it a point to greet each of us one by one smiling with a light radiating off of his face. The prophet said, "A smile can be charity," and thus far we haven't passed by anyone on our journey for knowledge that didn't smile at us and offer greetings (*Salaams*).



Our day was fun and interesting as we sat under the shade for hours talking and moments later three young women came to us with three large bowls of red rice and meat. This was true Islam, hospitality, because no matter where we went the people offered us the best of whatever they had and we graciously learned some valuable lessons about Muslims outside of the United States where some of us have experienced not so warm treatment and mannerism from Muslims indigenous to different parts of the world. This taught us that the corner stone of Islam is service, kindness, and peace. After our meal we began to walk back to our compound in *M'Backe* and Sheik Muhammad explains to us that the Lo family have always been linked with Sheik Ahmadou Bamba's family because the Lo's have taught many of Sheik Bamba's offspring and continues to be a pillar of strength in the local community.

A few days later we began an introductory Arabic class so we can begin learning the Holy Quran. Some of us had a few Surahs memorized from home instruction or lessons at Islamic schools but most of our pronunciations were wrong. To truly learn something one must start from the beginning emptying the improper knowledge and embracing the correct knowledge.

