Naaja Woobiir
Inside the Gambia

a travel blog by
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July 2012
Welcome to NaajawooBiir - InsideInside (2012-07-03 19:37)

Naajawoo = Inside (Mandinka)

Biir = Inside (Wolof)

For the next month I will be traveling throughout The Gambia capturing images of the inside of structures. As I meet people and go inside their spaces, I want to thank them with a polaroid image of themselves or whatever they want an image of.

As I am able, I plan to post those images with comments. I hope you will enjoy.

(caveat: I am new to blogging, so this will be a work in progress)
This is me. I’m in the back cabinet of a Creole dependency at Laurel Valley Plantation in Thibodaux, LA. (I’m not in Africa yet; just testing my iPad blogging software. I leave for Dakar tonight.)
Banjul is the capital of The Gambia (pop. 60,000) and the seat of Colonial provincial government at the time of independence. Colonially known as Bathurst, it sits on a small island at the mouth of the river Gambia, separated by from the larger urban centers by a 15+/-km causeway through a delta marshland. Half Die is the first, and poorest settlement for Africans in the city. It was intentionally burned to the ground in the early 19th century following a yellow fever outbreak. It is named Half Die literally because half of the residence had died of the disease.

I regret that I did not have my Polaroid when I got access to this krinng house (my first chance to look inside). Krinting houses are made of palm posts, reed thatch, and a sand plaster - not so different from American French colonial bouchelage. The wall in this Wolof woman's (Wolof is the dominate tribe in Senegal and Banjul, but not The Gambia as a whole) room collapsed during some recent construction, and the architect repaired the wall for her. Krinting houses are viewed by most Half Die residents as substandard regardless that most of these houses are over one hundred years old. It was repaired in the name of preservation at no cost to her, which I believed pleased her. But most residents of Half Die would prefer to have their krinting houses be replaced with cement block. This might explain her expression of mixed emotions when Aleiu, one of my guides, exposes some of the repair work. I hope to get back to her to take a polaroid and also get her name .... I'm still learning how to intrude.
Aunt Matilda lives in a wooden Aku house (similar to a Louisiana Creole cottage) in Half Die - one of the few old wooden structures. She is Aku, a person of slave heritage whose ancestors would have been liberated from colonial owners or intercepted in Portuguese or French transit when Britain abolished slavery in the early 19th century. Her home dates to that period when the British allowed African settlement in Banjul, specifically Half Die. The Aku are often Christian and live in nuclear families, speak both Aku (Patout) and English. Because the Aku had some western training when they settled in Half Die, they took a position as the social elite, build wooden houses, and prioritized western education.

Matilda had a dignified accent and, to my southern eye, a sense of gentility. We sat briefly and discussed her home and my education. Her nephew, Michael, and I posed with her here. She is blind. According to Michael she wore too much eye make-up in her youth, but she has confessed this now.
This group of guys were working shoulder to shoulder in a small service building behind an Aku house. They were excited to have their picture taken and show their work, but the foreman in the center was not as excited. Later he came to speak to me ....
The Forman, I think, was not aware that the camera would print. He's a serious man, as you can see, and wanted to get a picture with me. He is a refugee from Ivory Coast and showed me his Gambian refugee status card. This brought on a serious and sympathetic conversation with my guide in broken Wolof and English. As I understood it, he can only hope that the pictures I was taken might be seen by someone who can help, but I could not.
This Wolof woman rents an Aku house from an Aku owner. Akus are known for being preservation minded and maintaining ownership of their family homes regardless if their entire family has emigrated to America or Great Britain. This renter was demure in her allowing me to photograph her home, but I sensed it was more out of obligation to her landlord than kindness to me. She was happy, though, when she got her picture taken and the paint scheme matched her boubou (her traditional colorful outfit).
On the left of the picture is Mamba Sanyan, on the right is my guide Hassoum Ceesay, the Director of Museums and Copyright for the National Center for Arts and Culture of The Gambia. Mamba is a Jola in the village of Tampoto in the Fonid district. The Fonid district is in the southwestern portion of The Gambia, about a 30-60 minute drive into the rural areas away from the urbanized Atlantic coast. It is adjacent to the Casamance region of Senegal where there is some border fighting. Thankfully I did not see any fighting. Typical of West Africa, Mambas family lives in an extended family compound. Jola tend to have their compounds remote from villages. Other cultural groups like Mandinka and Wolof will cluster compounds into groups and form villages. One of the Jola households we met was a distant but walking distance away from a nearby Mandinka village. We bought milk from them and they sent their child into the village to make change. This is typical of Jola who are seen as being much more connected with nature than other ethnic groups of The Gambia. Some comparisons of the Jola were made to Gypsies as they tend to migrate more than other groups. That may make for a good comparative bases for conversation, but I’d not venture that as a serious hypothesis.

Mamba’s compound follows the traditional Islam where related men live together with their wives and children in single communal compounds. Men and women live in separate quarters, and the children sleep with the women. I have learned that most adults have rooms to themselves in rural areas, and that when inside the rooms, it can be difficult to know if it is a mans or a woman’s without asking as decor seems to be gender neutral. Most compounds are walled, although Jola may have theirs sitting un-walled. Mamba’s was an example of the un-walled type.

This compound building was a long rectangle about ten approximately 12’x12 rooms wide and one and a third rooms deep. The third of a room was a small sitting area, while the larger room was a sleeping room. There were nearly 20 people in this compound, large for a rural compound. I will need to review my interview recordings to verify specific
numbers. The sleeping rooms access the outside in an alternating fashion so that every other room had access to the opposite side of the building. The men and women alternated the sleeping rooms and the sexes had access to the building firm different sides. There were interconnections between some sleeping rooms inside which I photographed. I did ask about family relationships in my interviews, but I avoided exceptionally personal questions so I did not ask what the interconnecting passages were for between some of the men's and women's rooms as I thought it implicit

Although the building faced two sides, one was defiantly a back side (the woman’s side) which faced a garden and toilets, and a front that faced a forecourt which was not enclosed and visible from the adjacent road. Included under the roof was a extended eave covered 5’ deep veranda which addressed the forecourt. As an example of the modern progression in housing in West Africa, the support for this veranda was made of columns of with the same mud brick and mud mortar columns rather than raw wood posts that are common throughout the region.

All building walls were also made of mud brick and mud mortar. Bricks would have been formed with no cement and allowed to dry in the sun. It is not uncommon for some structures to have a cement plaster finish, but in the case there was none inside, only outside. I asked Mamba about that and it seemed to cause a little shame, Hassoum offered quickly that the corrugated metal roof was very nice. Mamba responded proudly about the strength of the metal roof, and we discussed the oil palm roof structure. Oil palm is a species similar to the rhun palm used in the coastal urban areas of Banjul that is more plentiful away from the coast. The structure formed trusses, but not of consistent design with each truss responding to the specific walls below it. The space has a lovely airiness as the interior walls do not extend to the underside of the roof structure, and light seems to have its own space above each room.

I was able to see the kitchen building which was detached and at a ninety degree angle to the main building, it was large so that a few fires could be burned simultaneously. There were some modern metal strap ties here that connected the mud brick to the roof structure. Mamba was also proud of these.

Perhaps the most interesting detail to me was the use of mahogany to create all of the door and window frames. Each member was about 2” x 2”, and at the lintel, two along with a single piece of bamboo where tied together using a strip of thin fiberglass reinforced fabric. It was an interesting combination of available modern and natural materials.
Left to right are Isatou, Kadya, and Ida. Kadya and Ida are co-wives and Isatou is their mother-in-law. Polygamy in The Gambia, and most of Islamic West Africa, is still very common, although it is becoming more rare in urban centers. The discussions educated people have with you about polygamy are interesting as the notion of romantic love over arranged family marriage seems to be taking hold just as traditional Islam is growing. This contradiction is evidenced in the streets of greater Banjul where you will see young Africans in western attire holding hands during a stroll on the street shared with women in burkas. Traditional Islamic dress is reportedly more common now although most people you speak to seem to feel it is much a risk to stability of traditional African ways as influences from the west. These three women are in a rural area and, for now, removed from that debate - attired and living in the West African tradition. They also look much more serious and dower in this image than they were. Unaccustomed to cameras, I believe many rural Gambians are not in the habit of "smiling for the camera." My memories of this compound are of nothing but smiles. I hope some of the video I took of them demonstrating their technique for finishing the cow dung floors will show the pleasant and cheerful atmosphere I remember. As I remember, the chickens seemed to even be in a good mood.

These women are Fula, and Fulas are rare in this region of The Gambia. Fulas are nomadic herders and are a large and dominant ethnic group throughout the sub region of The Gambia, Senegal, and surrounding nations. Their language is no tacitly distinct, and luckily our driver, Wuuyueh Manga, spoke Fula. Their compound was meticulously made of widely spaced Oil Palm timbers with tightly bound vertical palm frond panels. The binding was a thin wire; a new material made cheaply available to The Gambia recently form China. Their village was rectangular with three about 10’x10 huts on either side and a single hut at the end opposite the gate. In front of each hut is a small wooden platform where the families of that hut would socialize. The entire compound was enclosed in a vertical bamboo fence about 7’ high.
Each of the huts sat on a slightly built up cow dung floor and was roofed with a soft white wood structure and traditional palm thatch. It was explained to me by Hassoum, my guide, that the soft wood roof would become victim to termites, a surprising choice given the general meticulousness of the construction elsewhere. The distinct pride of place was obvious, and evidenced when I passed by of the woman's huts without entering to photograph. She stopped me, not wanting to be skipped, inside she had a lovely mahogany carved bed that sat about 18" off the floor. It was rich in color and was better crafted than those I'd seen at the market in the Banjul area, I complimented her on it, and she beamed with pride. It was explained to me that she got it at a village market. It may have been only my projection, but of any compound I have visited, this had the strongest sense of craftsmanship.

I asked how old the compound was and how long they intended to stay or keep the huts. They explained that they were new to the area, a young family, and only here for two years. They also explained, with a laugh, that they would keep these huts until they could afford concrete block. The reality is that concrete block was a very far stretch and it is more likely they would augment and build with mud block sooner than concrete. But the comment did reveal the general desire to move towards modern building materials. A move, in my view, that would most likely result in a lower quality of light and air circulation. Also, there is something very beautiful about being in a masterfully constructed building that was made, with little exception, from material harvested from immediately adjacent fields.

Although Fulas are nomadic, it is unusual to have seen them in this area. The women also noted that the men were away working. Although far from the urban coastal centers, Foni is close enough to travel in as a day or weekly laborer. This family may well represent the rural urban shift that is prevalent today in The Gambia and throughout West Africa. It left me with some reservations about modernization because to my eye this compound was thriving and happy without much modernity.

I know I should insert a comment about the western view that the traditional Islamic system is oppressive to women and misogynistic in character. I wanted to approach this trip and research from as value neutral position on this subject as possible. If people appear happy, I want to document that, if they seem sad, frustrated or embarrassed, I hope to document that too. I recognize that any project like this conducted by me will have a specific overtones and bias of Anglo-western, (post) colonial, male centric, hetero-normative/queer view of dominant/subcultural discourse etc., etc. But it is my hope that any reader of this blog and other research resulting from this can draw their own conclusions. I did ask a number of people in The Gambia what this project and my process would be like if I were a woman, and they uniformly agreed that it would be very different.
Gema Kujabi - Dobong, Foni (2012-07-16 20:15)

Gema is Jola and is a skilled mason and plasterer. He uses traditional mud materials as well as sand and a cement mixture to complete interior plaster work unlike most of the people I have met, he is paid for his work and works at other families’ compounds. I met him at a Jola compound being built in Dobong. This compound was similar to Mamba Sanyan’s, but slightly smaller. It was recently constructed of mud block and Gema showed me his work in progress.

Gema showed me his piles of sand which he collected from the nearby River Gambia, it was moist and dense, what I would call a pump river sand. The cement he uses is industrial, imported and delivered in bags. He applies the plaster with a modern metal trowel and creates a smooth surface, but does not turn the plaster around the mahogany window openings. Although smooth, there is a rough edge exposed at the mahogany frame. Gema trained only as an apprentice with no technical training. I asked and he was proud to say that he had one apprentice training with him now.

I asked if there were levels of work or standards that he meets. He said that he can apply two or three centimeters of plaster pending on what his customers pay. In this case he was applying two centimeters. When he described this, the owner inserted that he was doing a very large house. I recognized both some embarrassment on the part of the compound owner and what I interpreted as the universal contractor grin for "I think this owner is too cheap."

Dobong, being Foni, is very spread out with a lot of space between compounds. Gema road with us to meet another mason in the village who worked in mud not cement, Sulaman Baji, who I will discuss in another post. Along the way, Gema stopped at his own compound which was exceptionally large with four residential building containing six or more quarters each arranged around a large open square. One of the buildings appeared to be modern concrete block buildings, perhaps a colonial attempt at supplying rural housing. They also had a few beautiful mahogany
doors. All the buildings were smoothly finished with cement plaster that turned in at openings giving a monolithic impression. It was the home of a skilled builder.
Sulaman, a Jola mud mason, showed me work he had done at a compound in his village of Danong. He, like Gema discussed in an earlier post, was an apprentice trained craftsman who worked for others. Of all of the traditional buildings I encountered all were constructed by members of the family and the only skilled labor were masons and they typically were hired for their finishing skills rather than the masonry work itself.

Sulaman showed me a building he had plastered with a mud and sand plaster. The building was similar to the other Jola buildings discussed except that all of the buildings opened out onto one side, and in this case the verandah was supported with raw timber rather than mud block.

Sulaman’s work included traditional Islamic geometric patterns. Although they were not precisely drawn, they were regularly pressed into the plaster using a sharpened stick. They included vertical undulations, diagonal lines, and cross hatching. They were arranged in horizontal layers of about 18” and separated by a continuous horizontal line. I asked if they had any meaning, and this was either lost in translation or it was irrelevant. He explained that the patterns allowed the plaster to bind with the subsurface. I asked if there was a reason of the order of the patterns and he explained that he did what the owners wanted, but in this example he just did what he liked. He also stated that he liked them all. My trying to find some symbolism and/or aesthetic preference to his work did not appear to compute with Sulaman, and he gave me a look that I interpreted as contractor for “that crazy architect is up to useless stuff again.”
Alieu Jawarah is my research assistant whose services I found through Bala Soha, a professor of African history at the University of Oklahoma. Alieu is an oral historian and videographer for the National Council of Arts and Culture
of The Gambia. Alieu has some advanced training in video and sound technology, but advanced education in these subjects is limited in The Gambia. Not being trained in either myself, his services are a godsend. You can see here in this picture that he is holding the sound recorder. We have collected some great oral histories.

When you read research on West Africa written by white westerners, they will usually make some comment about the value of and special relationship with their research assistants. This is certainly true in my case with Alieu. The researcher / assistant partnership is a strange situation in that you as the researcher are directing the program and the plan, but they, as the local expert, actually see to it that your plan happens, acting as translator and interpreter. Alieu speaks three of The Gambia’s five languages fluently, Mandinka, Wolof, and English. He also speaks some Sarahulli, and a little Fula. English is The Gambia’s colonial and official language, while Wolof is the the lingua franca (language of commerce and trade), but the largest ethnic group is Mandinka. The most common language spoken in social and home settings is Mandinka. Alieu is Mandinka.

I find myself quite dependent on Alieu, and as I try to think objectively about the situation, I realize that this dependency will shadow any research; should an assistant have a specific agenda a researcher may be directed down that path. Our match seems very comparable, though, as our interests in visual media is common. Alieu is a quiet man, and this is certainly a balance to my rambling mouth. He is also an expert assistant, slowly weaning me off of my dependency so that I can now take public taxis (usually s 90s era Mercedes 190D that carries up to four passengers for a flat fair onset routes from community to community) alone and hopefully soon the transport vans (similar to public taxis but crammed private minibuses).

Alieu brought me to his cousins wedding celebration at his sisters compound in Latrikunda. It was an incredible experience. I have never been to an Islamic wedding celebration and certainly not a West African or Gambian one. The official nuptial occurs at the local mosque and is conducted by the local imam, but family and friends of the couple gather at the brides family compound to celebrate before the nuptial and to greet and send of the bride after. The new husband does not attend the celebration. He is married at the mosque and then goes to his compound to prepare his home for his new wife that evening. This wedding was tempered by a death in the brides family, and the father of the bride requested that there be no celebratory music. Some of the young men listened to music on their cellphones, but I caught a look of reprimand from the bride’s father. The bride’s sisters were complaining that this was a bad situation while busily preparing for the celebration by donning colorful and stylish dresses. Alieu thought is was funny that I understood, in Wolof, "you look nice," "thank you, you too, thank you, that is a very nice dress,” "oh, thank you, thank you, those are very nice shoes;” “oh, thank you thank you.” I explained the conversation was universal.

Alieu offered me a seat for the dowery presentation in the front row. All of the the friends and the family gathered around and the elders of the two families speak advice to each as to how to treat the new family members. As is typical of Gambian society, they speak to each other through griots. A griot is a special class in West African and Gambian society who are both revered story tellers and unwanted bums. The elders whisper to a griot who will then announce it loudly for everyone to hear. The griots spoke the advice with dramatic confrontation and humor to everyone’s entertainment. This concluded with the announcement of the dowery amount and with one griot choosing a bride’s family member to praise for her good heart and hospitality. The griot chose Alieu’s sister and slowly everyone started to hand her money which she gave to the griot. This built into more of a frenzy, at least to my eye, and the griot became more intense speaking to individuals. He confronted me and in sudden English said "what about you, what about you." I was scared out of my skin and dug into my pocket and handed over a bill. Everyone laughed, and I was embarrassed. But as it turned out, the reaction played along well with the scene. As the frenzy built other, uninvited but accepted, griot street beggers started to beg of the crowd. One dropped a scarf in my lap, I handed it back, and she gave it back me. An older gentleman sitting next to me said to me that because I had participated in the praising of Alieu’s sister, the griot thought I understood. I’m still not sure what it was I was thought to understand, but I dropped a small coin in her hat. She looked at me with disgust and walked away. This brought on laughs from those around me, and I apologized to the man asking if I should have given more. He laughed and said that was "perfect"
and that it was time for the griots to go.

With this feeling of public humiliation and along with earlier being jovially "confronted" by the grandmother of the bride for a contribution towards the cost of the reception (in standard etiquette I should have sought her out and made my contribution discreetly, although the "confrontation" was in good spirits), I felt completely ill at ease. But to my surprise, it actually seem to make everyone more at ease with me. I joined with some of the brides family for dinner which is served on a large platters on small tables with everyone pulled around shares it directly from the platter. I met many of Alieu's siblings, cousins, and five year old son. Eventually the bride arrived and while everyone was seated she went through and shook each person's hand. Only close female family members stood to hug her briefly. The formality of the bride greeting was balanced by lots of wedding crying.

The emphasis on money in this ceremony paired with the sense any American has of personal comparative wealth to West Africans made me feel uncomfortable with transactive nature of the evening, but I can understand the differences as cultural. I got two take home dinner plates out of the whole deal, so I cannot complain. Another thing that was uncomfortable and hard to understand was a practice where some of the female members of the brides family dressed in simple clothing and straw hats acting out the role of "slave" to do the necessary chores during the celebration. When we arrived some were washing up and during the celebration others where cleaning up dishes etc. They each were playing a character, some would do a little jigg and bow to other family members, others would exaggerated the hard physical nature of their work by playing a sore back or sweaty brow then laughing it off. It was explained to me by one that she was playing slave because back when they had slaves, the slaves would be doing this work, but now they must do it themselves. She was giving her slave work to the family ... for now. I would see her later in the evening in a fine and colorful boubou, no longer playing the slave.

I did not bring my camera to the wedding, and I am glad I did not. Most family and guest did not, and they hired a videographer to do a recording, so hopefully Alieu can get me a copy or snippet. I do wish I would have pictures to share, but this narrative will have to suffice. Like many architects, I prefer not to have people in my pictures. Aside from the polaroids posted in this blog, I have been focusing my efforts in that architectural documentary way. It was nice that Alieu gave me this opportunity to balance out my experiences.
In a baseball cap and to the right of Hassoum is the national parliamentary minister representing the Janjangbureh area, Foday Manka. I was honored to interview Minister Manka and to have him give me a tour of the town. Minister Minaka is also a local historian and author of a history of Janjangbureh; a copy of which he shared with me. (The photo here is not a Polaroid. It was taken with my DSLR.)

Janjangbureh is the indigenous name given to the original English colonial settlement of Georgetown upriver about 300km from the coast. The two names are now used interchangeably - it seems to be a common practice in The Gambia to have renamed geographical locations with indigenous names but to keep the English term in normal use. Janjangbureh is the only settlement in The Gambia that originated from an English grided plan.

Today Janjangbureh’s population is in decline, currently 3,223 persons. Minister Manka explained two reasons for this, one is that all river towns fell into decline after Gambian independence in 1966 when the English stepped away from control of the river transportation corridor, the other is the rural to urban drift effecting the entire country. The last scheduled passenger service along the river stopped in the 1980s, reportedly due more to a lack of infrastructure maintenance than need. Since independence, The Gambia has focused on the development of roads rather than waterways. Many you speak with comment in the lost asset of the river, specifically as The Gambia is defined by the river.

My interview with Minister Manka started on a flat note as I asked a ridiculously general question due to my own unease and ignorance of the Minister’s sophisticated understanding of his home area. He politely suggested I asked more specific questions, and this started our conversation in a much more productive direction. I learned a lot about the town, and saved a great deal of face when I began to ask how citizens viewed the historic colonial structures of the town. We had a great conversation about those attitudes, derelict historical structures, and the local perception of them. The perception, it seems, is not one of respect but rather (and I am hypothesizing here) distrust. It is also hard for local residents to see any pragmatic value in these structures as they respond to English lifestyles and use
building techniques that have neither survived or are native to the area.

On my tour I got to see the local school built in 1927 and other colonial structures such as the administration building, on the verge of total collapse, and housing structures built for civil servants. At the governors residence I met the current governor of the region, Ganya Touray, and the mayor of the coastal urban center of Serekunda, Yankubba Kolley. It is customary in West Africa to have extended greetings where you sit down exchange extended hellos and ask how things are where you are from, and my meeting with the Governor and the mayor consisted primarily of that. But the outcome of the meeting established a comfort level between us all, exchanging brief discussions about buildings etc., and they gave me access to crawl around many of the areas buildings. I did not, sadly, take any pictures in the governors residence as I thought it rude to even ask, but the interior was furnished with a suite of nice West African upholstered furniture (a typical set of four chairs and one sofa in a fashion I will describe in a future post) and had a grand sense of colonial scale. although like most of Janjangbureh, the building was in need of renovation and repair. I did get to take some great images in other buildings too.

The town itself has the feeling of a ghost town. The straight, gridded streets are almost empty, and most of any new development is clustered around the old town and in a traditional Africa fashion. I was introduced to the town chief, Jam Jaw, who was sitting outside one of the few open stores in the town with a few friends. I toured some of the old colonial industrial buildings which where not in use and was lucky to gain access to one of the Aku houses which still existed. This picture here was taken in that house. You can see that this building is vacant and in disrepair, although there was a lot of interesting repair work done by the owner who is trying to keep the structure from collapse. Notable to me was that the building was on a clay fired brick foundation; Akus would have been trained in this skill, but would have left with the British at the time of independence. You don’t see any signs of this technology elsewhere in the area today.

You can see in this picture that there is some interesting graffiti on the walls here. There were even more interesting graphics in other empty colonial structures ... images of which I was able to get! (just wetting the appetite for my photo essays, haha).
I met Kemo in a small village along the main road leaving Janjangbureh. He is Mandinaka and his sister-in-law’s family lived in a compound building next to two older round mud brick huts. He is here in this photo with his nieces and
nephews, along with Hassoum, in front of these huts. One hut was about 15 years old and the other was older than Kemo, who I guess to be about 30. Because the annual rains will deteriorate mud structures over time, it is unusual that these were not replaced. The newer one was being used for storage, but the older one was the home of Kemo’s grandfather. I was able to get some images inside of both, and I found them large, “clean,” and comfortable. I asked when they expected to replace these huts, noting that the rest of the compound was of a newer more resilient design, including some concrete. Kemo replied that he would be keeping them forever. I have the conversation recorded, but I was certain that this was in deference to his grandfather who, I gathered, would be respectfully allowed to live in whatever building he would like until his passing. I interpreted Kemo’s saying "forever" was his hoping for a long life for his grandfather.
This family of Fula were selling some old millet on the roadside where we stopped to make some minor repairs to the truck. We were headed upcountry and now out of the Foni district towards The Central River Region which is in the central part of The Gambia, across the Bintang Bolong, a major tributary to the River Gambia. Here the boarders with Senegal change from being a specific latitude to a mere 20km from the River Gambia.

I did not visit this compound, and mainly stood around being tapped by numerous small children who called out "toubab toubab." Toubab is a term used primarily for white people but might refers to any outside visitor. I think they might tap for luck, or maybe to feel our strange white skin, or maybe just for fun. Many white people find this chant annoying, but I personally found it cute. Only small children seem to chant it. Every one calls white people toubab; it is not considered an insult or racist. I like the term because now when I hear people saying it, I am pretty sure they are talking about me. There are very few white people at all in The Gambia.

I was left with the impression that this group may be of a "lower social class," most children in the middle class areas of the urban centers don’t chant "toubab, toubab," and my fellow travelers seemed a bit taken aback by the old millet for sale. Millet is a grain used for couscous and other grainy foods, and is a staple of the Gambian diet. Everyone is cheerful in this picture, but unfortunately, the camera jammed and we left before I could get them a copy. It was disappointing, and I could tell they felt as if I had broken a promise. We even failed to recognize the compound on our return trip so I was never able to get them a print of this picture. I was not a lucky toubab a that day.
Pictured here in the long haftang, junior cleric Salem Mohmed Heidek has Famarah Heidah and Ousman Jawara to his right. They are between our driver, Wuuyeuh Manga and Hasssoum Ceesay. Their village of Toniataba is a regional center for Islamic study, and the junior cleric is the teacher there. The village is also the location of, reportedly, the largest round Mandinka hut in The Gambia. It was large, easily over 30 feet in diameter.

Salem and the village are used to occasional visitors, as the hut is listed in some versions of the Lonely Planet Travel Guide (but not mine), and was skeptical of my coming. Fortunately having a guide from the National Center for Arts and Culture seemed to put him more at ease, although in our conversation he also commented on promises other researchers had made to help in the maintenance / restoration of the hut that never materialized. Salem, though, become comfortable with me as we discussed the building. It was in this conversation that I realized that once people understood that I wanted to learn about their building / home / trade, they got comfortable with me quickly. I hope my enthusiasm for their buildings or work came through in translation. I think in this case it did.

Salem shared the history of the hut. It was built for an Islamic saint or walui named Saikou Ousman Jimbiteh Fatty who was said to have mastered the Koran and to be close to Allah. He was also a successful farmer and provider, building this large hut as a record and legacy for people to use as an example of holy life. The building is now a tool for learning and in both the village and those who come to study in the village. If I have accomplished anything on this trip, perhaps digitally recording that story for the Gambian national archive is it. Everyone in my research party seemed very pleased to have recorded this. I noted to myself that the cleric was telling a familiar story, but that his voice had a soft and thoughtful tone, even more so than most Mandinka speakers who are very melodic in their cadence and rhythm.

The cleric shared additional information with me about the preservation of the building, describing the difficulties in repairing the mud walls and the use of mud brick to create repairs. He was concerned that once readily and
immediately available roofing palm fronds were now a further and further trek away; making the biannual roof repairs more and more difficult. It was clear, though, that the village would do what was necessary to make repairs and that preservation was not a concern. He explained that the hut was over two hundred years old, but I would want to research and verify the date.

I was struck by the contrast of the attitude toward preservation of these structures and the colonial ones in Janjangbureh. I was left thinking that there was something to be said for the attitude of the locals in Janjangbureh towards the colonial structures. In order for something to be worth saving, the community has to value it. And although I found the colonial, particularly the Aku houses, quite nice, this hut was more essential to the Gambian identity of place.

I was not allowed to go or photograph inside this hut. The gentlemen of the village made it clear that it was off limits and there were even some things they were not sharing with me about it. But they did draw the plan in the sand for me. Explaining how there was an inner circle, which they drew as sealed, and how dwelling compartments surrounded the perimeter. To my eye no one was living there, but I could have been wrong. The building had a large covered verandah that is used a classroom and gathering space. I did get to photograph that.

Not being able to go inside has left me wanting to see more, and I intend to do additional research upon my return to the U.S. to find out more about the building as I am sure there is some academic documentation. I am excited to have recorded the oral history, and I think, if the building has some historical record, the discussion of the efforts for contemporary maintenance will be of interest to others.
Carpenters - Half Die, Banjul

This was the first set of carpenters I spoke with - I have an earlier post about them. They were the first people I spoke with about buildings, design, and craftsmanship, and I should have been more thorough and gotten their names. Luckily, I was more thorough in future visits with others people. They, like everyone, had me photograph the photographs they had of their work. At first I thought I was doing this to be polite as they showed me their work, but now I realize that I have a great record of the work of these craftsmen.

In this image they are working on a suite of upholstered parlor furniture. The frames are plywood, and the final product will take a bulbous overstuffed art deco meets 80s era "pleather " form. (I am working on a more academic description, but I think I make my point.) These suites are usually four chairs and one large sofa, all with rolled arms and usually some wooden detail at the arm front. I saw them in many homes, and of various quality. These will have a plush fabric upholstery which you can see being sown in the back ground.
A few days after I first met some of the carpenters above, I decided to meet a few more. I am much more comfortable meeting people now, and I think I learn more because of it. Modou did not have a market stall, rather a large open work area where he was able to make a number of pieces of furniture at one as well as display. I could not decipher if the large area was to this benefit, or if his lack of a stall was a detriment. I gathered that it was half a dozen of one and six of the other.

My time with Modou, with the help of Alieu, helped me to see that many researchers might focus more on the ethnographic story at hand than I did. And although I did find that Modou was Fula, had been working in the market for ten years, had trained as an apprentice, and was training a few of his own, I was more interested in the work he was completing and how he was completing it. I got great pictures from his set of sample photos, and I got a good explanation of the different materials he used and the styles he preferred, the heart motif you see here is common throughout the Gambia, as is the bulbous rococo style.

Modou works in plywood, keno, and mahogany. I got some great video of Modou carving a plywood pattern, and most of the work he had around was clear stained plywood as shown in this picture. Keno is a local hardwood that has a wide variety of tones from very light to a dark warm brown. It seems too varied to my eye, but local craftsmen comment on the beauty of it whenever asked to describe it.
Every carpenter I met was an independent business man, and they shared their phone numbers with me. I agreed to share them. Modou’s number is 9118903. 

Agibou Jallow - Albert Market, Banjul

You can see here that Agibou and I hit it off. He was enthusiastic about his work and spoke of his love of the craft and the freedom being carpenter gave him from management and a fixed schedule. Of everyone I spoke with he seemed to be the most of an artisan. He worked alone in a small stall and was working on a pattern for a bed when I arrived. He explained that he is often hired to just draw the carving pattern either by clients directly or other carpenters.

Agibou was Fula like Modou, but it was explained to me here that tribe and trade are not strongly linked.

Agibou was also working on a parlor suite in a style I found freQUITLY, but not as common as the overstuffed deco suites. These suites are very rectilinear, and some examples appear almost like knock-offs of craftsmen Morris chairs. I think it more a matter of the pragmatics of assembly than a direct reference, but there is much research to be done on that I am sure. It is clear to me that these craftsman style pieces are falling out of fashion; you will see complete sets with the upholstery or cushions removed piled up as scrap wood. They are typically mahogany, which is expensive in The Gambia comparative to other materials, but still a common site. It is also a common site to see mahogany being sawn for making fishing boats, construction lumber, or large chords being put in containers for export to China and India. There seems to be no controls regarding deforestation, a concern for many Gambian intellectuals.
Agibou, though, was working in pine for this specific suite. This seemed strange to me, and we had a great conversation about pine and its workability and color. When I explained that where I lived in the U.S. I was surrounded by pine forests his eyes lit up like mine did when I first saw all of the mahogany lying around in The Gambia. We shared that irony with a laugh. Pine is imported and while not a precious luxury, it has a price on par with mahogany. People like it for the knotted texture and variation of color. Agibou and I got another good laugh when I said that was considered "common" in the U.S., and he said the same of the dark consistent color of mahogany. Pine is considered a fine finish wood in The Gambia, and you can see it being used to trim around rough carpentry and structural mahogany.

Agibou's numbers are 9943081 and 7943081.

Ibrahem Singnathi - Albert Market, Banjul

Albert Market is the main market of Banjul. It sits atop an area know as Wolof Town. Wolof Town and Half Die are separated by Banjul's central axis from the colonial areas of Portuguese Town and New Town. (many of the colonial trading companies working in English administer Gambia were Portuguese.) The central axis is Rene Blain Street around which is flanked by a narrow area called soldier town. The plan of the city is similar in shape to a boomerang, Rene Blain is the short line of symmetry while the colonial and indeginous/Creole areas form the swept back wings. For those who know New Orleans, it is hard not to see a direct comparison to Canal Street and its dividing of the American sectors from the French Quarter and Creole faubourgs. Along with Janjangbureh, this is one of the few Gambian examples of the black/white division seen more frequently in American colonies.

Albert Market is at the black shoulder of the boomerang and is a center of activity for the entire city. It is a
place for merchants to squeeze a penny out of customers even though the market sellers seemed to have friendly relations with each other. When you interview people in West Africa, it is appropriate to leave people with a token of your appreciation, and these Polaroids have been wonderful expressions of thanks. But I have also been giving small informant fees ($1-3) at the close of my interviews. The fees are not an obligation, but they are not a surprise to my interviewees either. I think, though, the news that toubab was handing out money for carpenters had gotten around, and Ibrahem was enthusiastic to show me his stall. He explained that he had two apprentices (in the right of this photo) and had been working for thirteen years. I did not see any work underway, but there was a lot of mahogany craftsmen style components about. I asked what hours he work, and he explained that sometimes he works all day, other times he does nothing and lays about ... "the African way."

"The African way" is a term that I hear frequently. It is usually used to describe lazing about waiting for something to do for reasons of beurocracy or lack of opportunity. Many people seem to use it with irony describing their own situation. One young man told me that he can spend a day reading for his own intelectual development, studying for comprehensive exams, then just sitting under a tree ..., "you know, the African way." Other people use it, I hypothesize, to explain marijuana use, but frank conversations about this, like many vices in West Africa, are difficult.

Sainey Jallow - Brikama, Kombo North

Brikama is listed as The Gambia’s third largest city behind Banjul and Serekunda (considered the coastal urban centers) but most Gambian’s will tell you it is larger than Banjul. It is also geographically large; the first major city outside of the coastal urban centers, but many Gambian’s describe Brikama as quickly, if not already, becoming part of the urban core.

Space is certainly one of the main traits of Brikama, and has taken a little acculturation for me to recognize
Shops are often individual, although spaced by only a yard or two, and the shops are larger. Sainey’s shops was large to my eye, although he demurred to agree with me. He had eight apprentices and reported steady growth in his business since he opened in 2006. Unlike many of the carpenters I spoke with, he volunteered that he completed grade twelve, and he employed many young highschoolers who would become carpenters after completing school. All of Sainey’s, and every carpenter I met, apprentices were male.

It is hard not to make the American parallel of Banjul as decaying urban core, Serekunda as a congested first ring, and Brikama as a sprawling, unyoked and soon to boom outer ring.

Sainey showed me his work in plywood and keno. He had a few beds about that had the trademark keno striking variation between dark and light grains. Sainey also showed me work he did in maligna. Maligna is an indiginous soft wood similar to pine which the carpenters generally refer to as "white wood." Maligna is affordable, and used for all applications, but it is not resilient to termites like mahogany or keno, and it does not have the desired preferred "richness" of grain that pine does.

Tucked away in Sainey’s shop was a hand carved keno door. It was detailed, intricate, and seemed to have references to traditional West African wood carvings. It was completed for one of the tourist lodges in near by Makasutu Culture Forest. I documented it, but I found through this conversation and others that the traditional wood carving was limited to tourist production now, and that little was done outside of souvenirs production. It has been a number of years since authentic wood carvings were readily availible, so I did not spend much time trying to investigate those. I did, though, find the ones I saw, and Sainey’s door, to be quite beautiful.
The Kanifig region, which includes city of Serekunda (which is in turn divided into various districts), is The Gambia’s most densely populated area. Serekunda is located up against the marshlands of the River Gambia, but Kanifig extends out to the Atlantic ocean. This is one urban mass that forms the heart of the urban coastal center with Brikama, more suburban areas, and the tourist zone of Senegambia to the south. Banjul is a short 15 minute drive on a causeway through the River Gambia delta.

Babocar’s shop reflected this density, he even introduced it as the smallest shop I would see (as he grabbed my arm when I stepped through a cushion slat of the craftsman sofa "stored" in the entrance alleyway). Babocar explained the various sizes of wood as it comes from the local mill, which was immediately behind his shop. He explained the price differences between woods, that kano is the most expensive at about $5 for a 1x6x1m. Mahogany for the same volume is about $3.50 while pine is about the same or a little less than mahogany. Maligna is significantly cheaper at about $1.75. The thought that pine and mahogany carry similar prices is hard for me to believe given the premium we pay for mahogany in the U.S.

When Bobocar showed me his work, we had a great conversation about current tastes. The range of color in kano and pine is particularly desirable, with mahogany preferred for traditionalist and termite protection. Painted maligna and plywood was common at lower price points. Painted white or cream was very fashionable for a while. I noticed that white furniture was popular in photographs but limited in the shops. Babocar explained that the fashion now was brown, something I think is common in the U.S. now too. One thing I did not see were wood stains, and Babocar said that there was rairly any brown painting done - people wanted natural finishes. This was true of what I saw in the marketplace.
My day in Makusutu Wildlife Forest was perhaps my worst of any in my trip. The night before I suffered from my only bout of "Banjul Belly," and I felt detached and woozy most of the day. The three kilometer walk from Brikama was not a help on a steamy day either, but I enjoyed the landscape regardless. Plus, I got to see some baboons up close! They are pests around here, and I got to see them being shewed away.

Nuha was the foreman on repairs being made to the lodge at Makusutu, and he was directing about five men at the time I was there. The lodge includes some lovely floating hoses built on barges in the marshes of the River Gambia that are quite nice, but are not indigenous. There are two forms of tourism in the Gambia, eco and beach. This would be an example of eco-tourism, ironic that the amount of steel, lumbar, gigantic pool, and luxurious "huts" on barges seemed to be worlds away from the indigenous communities I had seen earlier.

It was great to visit the lodge, but it was my intention from the start not to investigate the tourist architecture and design of The Gambia. I think my stomach that day may have sealed the deal - Alieu seemed surprised that I asked as few questions as I did. There are a few lodges of this type along the river, and the beach tourist areas, center on a community called Senegambia, are replete with modern convenience and priced far outside of the reach of Gambians. The tourism industry caters to northern Europeans during the winter months, and my trip is during the off season. In my opinion the tourism industry is much underdeveloped. For my trip, though, I hope to focus on the life of Gambians rather than the tourism industry, but I should recognize the intertwined nature of this part of the Gambian economy. Plus, my weekly trip to the Senegambia tourist strip is the only place I can get the wi-fi to upload these posts from iPad!
Malik, the tall gentleman here alongside one of his apprentices, is a metalworker. He produces gates and railings and any other typical architectural metal work. He showed me a gate in Brusubi that he made for the brother of the president. It was ornate and complex with a similar set of rococo motifs that one sees in the furniture in the markets. I can’t say if the house was the actual brother of the president’s; the president’s family and land ownerships is a source of much hyperbole amongst Gambians.

Practicing for over 15 years, Malik was proud of work. He shared is photographs with me, and showed me the work for sale at the site. Included in his wrought work were some cast pieces from Senegal. I’d have to look at the photographs I took more closely, but I did see a French colonial similarity to the iron work of New Orleans. Most of Malik's materials come form Senegal, and he complained that the cost of materials is what kept him from having more completed work in inventory for sale. Commissioned work, he reported, can cost as much as $1,000, the presidents brothers house was in that range.

Malik said that he loved his work and enjoyed the design of each piece. This passion for the work is something I hear repeatedly from the craftsmen I meet. It is hard for me to know if that was what they wanted me to hear, but I’ve been left with sense we of genuine artistic passion. Malik said that most of his work was of his own design and that clients follow his lead. The shop was active with nine apprentices, and everyone seemed very engaged. Malik said he hoped each would find their way to their own shops in the future.
Tanji is a fishing village I have visited twice. Once with my camera and once without. Many Gambians go to the village to buy fish and to resell in the markets of Serekunda. The beaches are crowded with people wading out to fishing canoes and others buying those fish for resale. The mahogany canoes are large and seagoing, painted colorfully so that you can recognize them individually from a distance. The entire beachside is a frenzy of commercial fishing with many specific trades at work and some villagers who mill about hoping to catch scraps of pay for odd jobs. There are many drying racks and cutting and cleaning tables with everything organized in a fluid and specialized but confused way. If you just let yourself move with the crowd, you feel as if you are being bumped along a Rube Goldberg assembly line around the beach.

One of the destination point along this "assembly line" are a series of smoke house. These concrete block structures are long rectangles, dark except for the light penetrating through clerestories of patterned punctured blocks. The smell of the beach is a mixture of fresh and souring fish, but the smoke houses have a rich aroma of burning paper, saw dust, and fish. Upon entering, those monitoring the smoke houses were happy to let me taste the fish. The yaboye fish I had has was delicious. The range of fish included a few I recognized like tapia and barracuda, and others I did not.

These gentlemen, named above left to right, all monitor a fish house. It is a slow job, and they enjoyed the slow African way here. The fishing village was a dynamic mix of diligent, arduous work and nonchalant beach lazing.
Fatou is sitting, flanked by her two daughters, on the front steps of the house where I am staying. She is from the neighboring compound and has befriended me, helping me to be more comfortable in my odd new surroundings. Fatou's littlest daughter is precocious while Awa is a little, but just a bit, more reserved. Awa is a twin and her brother's name is Adama, Adam and Eve. Fatou explained that it is common to name twins Awa and Adama and there was another set just a few doors down.

Fatou holds rank in the neighborhood, and everyone knows her well. She used to sell juice in the market, but will not be now that it is the rainy season and Ramadan. A few days before Ramadan, she came over and made me benechin, a traditional West African rice dish. I got the spicy red benechin with fish, a barracuda. all three of these ladies showed me how it was made, I hope I can replicate it at home. Fatou will often stop in and have a chat with me in the mornings, now that it is Ramadan, she stops in at the end of the day with a pot of food leaving it on the kitchen counter. No one expects me to fast, but I make a point of not eating in front of anyone. Also, you need to limit your intake during the day because the meals at night are large.

Fatou likes to talk about family. Some people familiar with West African culture will tell singletons like myself to just lie and say you are married and that you hope for children soon. I realize now that that might have been a good strategy, but not because people look down on you. Gambians know that general social pressures are lower for Americans to marry, but they sincerely worry about you. It seems everyone here is married by 30, and most much earlier. Children follow soon. Fatou is divorced, which is more common that I would have thought, but she is content that she has been married and has children. Fatou's concern for me is not about my lack of marital and familial bliss rather the paramount need here to have children.

Fatou is a little precocious herself, and everyone in the neighborhood seems to know that. I was surprised how much goes on when the men go to the mosque to pray on Fridays. Fatou has been great at getting access to neighbors...
homes to do photography. She is the "boss lady," as one man who showed us his place said.
Zena is about three, and I met her, her mother, a family friend, their maid, and their yardman at her family's home in Brusubi. Brusubi is not far from Banjul, perhaps 20 minutes directly by car without traffic, and it is a dramatic physical
departure from the rest of The Gambia. About half of the roads are paved and the land has been parceled out by the
government to civil servants and for purchase. Many Gambians living abroad will build homes here that are easily
5000+ square feet for the equivalent of $60,000 to $70,000. They bring with them western tastes and often western
lifestyles. Zena was the only child I met at the home, and her mother was working with the family friend to put the
finishing touches on their home.

Zena’s mother declined to be photographed stating that she was not ready for a photograph. This was the first time
anyone declined to be photographed, and her attitude was noticeably western in this way. She was a beautiful women,
icely attired in a patterned day dress. Picture perfect as I told her, but she still declined.

One room, which was to be the kitchen, was being used as a side parlor. It had a stack of Philippe Stark Ghost Chairs
in the corner. I was able to access a few homes under construction in Brusubi (much thanks to Fatou), and often
the last piece to be completed was the kitchen. These houses had additional, more traditional compound buildings
adjacent to them within walled in compounds. It is strange how some tower over these walls without the lower part
of their porticoes or rusticated bases showing. The wealthy expatriated Gambian owners typically will have some
family members living in the compound, but not in the house. Typically the cooking is still being done outside in the
traditional fashion by these relatives. Along the roadside, near and in Brusubi, you see LG and Samsung appliance
stores and billboards advertising "European Kitchens," but the unfinished kitchens I found had limited if any of such
things. Kitchens which are not yet fitted out will even have floor to ceiling tile arranged in patterns that would never
accommodate a typical western countertop.

The imbalance of wealth represented by these houses and compounds is in visceral visual contradiction with the rest
of The Gambia. The area is built, on the whole for and by Gambians, and it rises in contrast out of a landscape of
traditional farming and living. You will see farm animals roaming about and traditional palm thatch roof lean-tos
attached to half built mansions of concrete block. Gambians build when they have the funds, and stop when they do
not.

Interspersed amongst these rising suburban edifices that would be comfortable in L.A. or Miami are subsistence farm
plots of peanuts, corn, okra, and other produce. This seems natural to Gambians, and after a few weeks of being here,
It seems logical and appropriate to me too. I have recently been reflecting on this in the context of the theoretical
"whitewashing" of the American south during the nineteenth century where wealthy planters expended great efforts
to separate toil and work from genteel living (and some would say black and white). Here in Brusubi they reside
together without contradiction. Many people familiar with West Africa will comment on the difference in the African
approach to race (white and black) when compared to America. My subconscious racist even said to myself, "it is as if
they do not know that they are black." Although I have learned that "black" is an American construct, it never struck
as deeply as when I understood the sameness of both rows of hand tilled corn and the half built mansion they were
pushed up against. You cannot have the distinctions of toil and gentility, dirty and clean, or black and white if you do
not separate them initially.

There is also a familiarity in West Africa with New Orleans and Louisiana that is palpable. The bright colors of clothing
and decoration speckled in the dirt covered street scapes, a general blatant lazing amid symbols of power and wealth,
and the cultural permission to allow things to deteriorate from apparent usefullness if there is still some practical use.
This sameness, I think, is a result of both places deemphasizing the polar oppositional construction of black/white
and toil/genteel. Most historians would probably suggest that in New Orleans the line was more permeable than in
other American places, but in West African, I think, the line was never constructed.
Nedy and Sohna are Fatou’s sisters. Fatou took me to Serakunda, where she makes her daily market, and we visited with her family compound there. This is where she lived before she divorced from her husband, and she seems to miss having all of her family around her. I met her uncle (or perhaps former uncle-in-law) too. He had lived in Atlanta and New York. When I told him I came from in Mississippi, he chuckled and said, “oh, like Africa.”

Most people I meet ask where in America I am from, but few have an understanding of more than New York, Atlanta, Miami, and Detroit. Some can name the hometowns of hip-hop stars. Florida gets an “ahah,” Alabama gets the rare, “not so good?” Louisiana is just hard to say, and Mississippi is, well, fun to say! In one conversation I said Mississippi, and after a solid pause I got the reply, “Oprah is from there?” Startled by this tid bit, I replied, “yes! And Elvis Prestly!” in return I got, “Who? I have not heard of that one.”

Nedy and Sohna’s compound was walled, like most, and their was a wide concrete block compound building set back from the wall creating a small forecourt. The compound building was one room deep with a verandah at the forecourt. It was pleasant and cheerful, although it took my eyes quite a while to adjust to the dark room and yellow walls.

Sohna was the most cheerful of the two, and she looked as if she’d dressed for the town in her white floral outfit. Nedy in contrast seemed tired. Her sons behind her, the boy Pamoudou and the baby Muso, where in a mix of spirit. Pamoudou was cheerful, but Muso was ill. It seemed a great point of concern for everyone, he was small and not walking yet and already 15 months. Later Fatou would explain, in a surprisingly (to my western ear) candid discussion about breast feeding, motherly health, and the value of being fat sometimes, that all of Nedy’s children start slow like that. She assured me that he would be fine, but we agreed that he did not seem very well at all that day.
Thefellas! I’ve given them this name, and although they seem to like it, they haven’t really adopted it. I’ve tried not to give people western nicknames, but in this case I can’t help it. The fellas sit directly outside my hosts compound underneath the palm tree trees on the north side of the street in the morning and afternoon. In the evening they switch to the south side of the street where the neighboring compound wall gives them shade.

It seems strange to me to have only one posting about the fellas because in actual practice they were my first resource on local information and language. They, like the plurality of Gambians, are Mandinka and speak Mandinka amongst themselves. It has been very hard for me to be in town muttering through my horrible Wolof only to return to the fellas for a greeting in Mandinka. The divide between social and market language is a hard one to navigate. These men are all educated, and they hold tightly to their cultural heritage - specifically language. They even had me practicing the Mandinka noun phrase for “person who operates machine” so that I would know that there was an indigenous term for “driver.” “Driver” is the universal term for a taxi or minibus driver in all of Gambia’s five languages, or so I had thought, with relief, until I was informed otherwise.

The group in this photo is a large one, mainly due to one of the frequent power outages, plus the work day had ended. Sometimes it might be just one or two fellas, depending on the time of day, the availability of power, and the weather. At first I was not comfortable sitting with the fellas, but that change abruptly when they asked why toubabs don’t like to sit under the tree. I realized then that I needed to sit under the tree too to help me understand the African way.

I’ve described the term "African way" already, but the ironic use or reference to marijuana does not apply here. Here the African way is about lazing in the heat having conversation, understanding what’s going on, and building relation-
ships. All of which I did with the fellas. We discuss politics (usually of the African variety), Islam, dreams of studying in America, values, "when I get married I will's," and some of the neighbors who "are like that" and don't join in on the conversation. One young man, Ansumana, (who is not in this picture) runs a small shop out of a 2'x3'x6' caged box. The traffic the shop drives helped me to understand who lived around me and what they did. Every conversation was a valuable cultural lesson, even those that where just nods of greetings followed by an hour of relative silence.

Buba Saho, who is third from the left, is a very busy man and my host. He lives alone in his uncle's compound, but his friend Keymo Saidykan (the next on the right) spends the majority of his time at our compound for Buba has a hectic job managing the service station about 1km away. Buba is a smart young man, and filled with witty irony. His family has some clout, and this helps him in many ways. Either in the African tradition or due to his own character he has a generous spirit, many people come through for meals. He has a reserved but open door to all passersby. Buba, like all of the fellas, has taken to calling me Prof, Prof Will, or Professeur Will. I have become accustomed to it, but the honorarium bothers me. Buba laughed at that saying, "Americans hate honorariums, why is that Professeur Will Wheam?"

Keymo is the political commentator of the fellas. He has opinions about local and African politics and was one of the few who started Ramadan a day late, more in protest of what he felt was an inappropriate government decree claiming the start of fasting than because he himself did not see the moon the night before. Like most Africans I've met, Hillary Clinton is the American Keymo sees and relate to most. The African world view is interesting, and I cannot say that there is uniform consensus on future direction, although opinions about past events seem to be consistent. America and historical American policy seems, even when I filter what I think might be pandering, to be popular here. Obama is a hero for some obvious reasons, but almost universally, Bush's policies in Africa are held in high regard. If you want to feel good about American, I think Africa is a good place to do it.

Keymo, being the contrarian and naysayer, wants to go to Toronto, and he wants to study law. Everyone of the younger fellas wants to leave the Gambia for further study, and it is heartbreaking to know that most won't. Education in The Gambia is expensive opportunities an the process of admission nepotistic. The chances of finding sponsored funding to leave for a foreign school are slim. Buba keeps a library at the compound, and most of the fellas seem to be reading often and studying for their comprehensive and qualifying exams. It's hard not to take everyone's actions with a grain of salt as I am, like any American, viewed as a potential ticket to a western start. I believe, though, the dreams of the fellas are genuine, most want to help their country, and all lack the financial and complex cultural knowledge required to navigate their way into a western setting.
Another important character of the Fellas, and Buba's compound, is Sainey Baldeh. He is not in the Polaroid above, so I've loaded a picture of him here. Sainey is a Fula and an identical twin. His brother is in Brikama and named Sanna. Sanna and Sainey are common names for male twins, while if the set is female the names are the same as a boy and a girl, Adama and Awa. (I bring this up because twins are very common here). Sainey is a mainstay around Buba's compound, and he is industrious. Sainey is always cleaning and sweeping. I can't determine if it is out of obligation to Buba for the shared meals in the compound or if it is just his nature, perhaps both. He is also thoughtful, and the most intellectual of the bunch. He is good at explaining the Koran - a common event during Ramadan. Of all of the fellas, Sainey is the kindest to me, and he is the one that first explained the "African way." Sainey always has a message of perspective and reflection, somewhat Rastafarian with out the trappings.

The rest of the fellas are a mix of employed single men (one a policeman, one a bank executive, one an immigration officer) and men looking for employment. Occasionally a married man will join but only rarely.

Women do not join the fellas, but they pass by inserting instruction and commentary. The gender separation is, I am sure, ripe for study and catalog in anthropology. Although men and women socialize differently, there is a lot of interaction and permeability throughout the day. Fatou noses in on the fellas often, and Buba makes a mess of the kitchen as much as possible. Much like the color-line of toil and gentility, the western concept of feminine compassion and reflection is not reserved for women. Sainey, for example, works at the local early childhood center, and all of the fellas are affectionate and, from a western perspective, maternal to all of the kids in the neighborhood. They were strangely motherly to me.
I am beginning this post just after saying goodbye to Fatou. She offered me her left hand as a handshake, a real gesture of friendship. I've promised to stay in touch with everyone and to try and come back to continue my work here. I'm surprised at being so sad to leave! When I first arrived I was a bit overwhelmed, but now I am not at all anxious to go.

The fellowship I was awarded to make this trip was given in the name of Delbert Highlands, a former professor of mine at Carnegie Mellon University. As I remember Debert, he was a hard character but thoughtful and filled with reflections on the past and architecture. The fellowship described Delbert in this way:

Professor Highlands emphasized the "individual," the "particular" and the "local" in his teaching. His courses were grounded in authoritative scholarship and meticulously presented fundamentals, but always went further: asking students to think of "this time," "this place" and this "occupancy."

My proposal for this fellowship was entitled "Exploring Gambian Vernacular through Louisiana Creole Eyes," and it was my intention to work in the spirit of Delbert to look at The Gambia in a particular and local way, through the eyes of a person informed of the Louisiana Creole perspective. In addition to the stories of meeting people through the Polaroids shown in this blog, I have investigated the Gambian design school system and spent time at the national archive. I've documented as much as I can through photography, video, and sound recording. I have a lot of work ahead of me compiling this all.

I'm grateful for this opportunity and hope to continue with future study in The Gambia. As I reflect on this experience, I feel pleasantly surprised by the consistency of my experience with the mission Delbert set. I also believe I now better understand the importance of being in "this place, time, and occupancy," and I hope that I have experienced and recorded a particular local place and the roles of individuals who make it.