

The Bakau Women's Garden

Anne Dailey

Adama Ceesay wakes each morning at five o'clock. With the absence of electricity, it is the five o'clock call to prayer that serves as her alarm clock. Eyes heavy, she rises without waking the children and begins her day. Adama, along with the other women of her compound, is responsible for cooking breakfast each morning for the men, women and children. She may have pounded the rice for porridge the night before, if she had time, but it is more likely that she will spend half an hour or more at this task in the morning, laboriously hand-grinding the rice into a coarse powder. Water must be drawn from the neighborhood well shared with other nearby compounds. While the pounded rice porridge is boiled slowly over a wood fire, Adama and the other women busy themselves preparing the vegetables that will be used to make lunch and dinner. Adama and her daughters also prepare a groundnut-based sauce for the porridge; some days she may vary the sauce by adding Baobob juice or sour milk.



Sarahule at the well

At about 8:00, just in time to take advantage of the fully prepared meal, the men of the compound emerge. Adama divides the porridge and sauce into several different containers, distributing it among the family members. The men do not thank the women, and they, in turn, don't seem to expect any show of gratitude for the hours of work they have put in while the men and boys slept. While cooking, Adama has also swept the compound clean and gotten her children dressed and ready for school. Many Gambian women spend the rest of their day around the compound, cooking, cleaning, and watching their children, but not Adama. Besides balancing her duties as a wife and mother, Adama Ceesay is a gardener.

Every morning, between eight and nine o'clock, Adama heads to the women's community garden where she maintains her own set of vegetable beds. During

the dry season she will be there until six or seven at night, planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting. During the wet season she returns home at one or two in the afternoon, though she may go back in the evening to water again if the rains haven't been consistent. Adama is lucky; she doesn't have to return home to cook lunch for the family because her daughters and other women of the compound have taken over that duty, allowing her to devote more time to the garden. Many women, however, do not have this luxury, and during the dry season they may have to return home at mid-day to prepare lunch, return to the garden until six or seven p.m., and then go back home to prepare dinner.

At the garden, Adama divides her time among several tasks. She hauls water from the large cement-lined wells by hand, using a bucket tied to a piece of rope, and carries buckets back and forth to her own beds until all of the vegetables have been soaked. She weeds the beds carefully, harvests whatever vegetables are ready, and plants new seeds when one crop has finished. Work at the garden is hard and takes up most of Adama's day. She doesn't get weekends off or vacation time if she feels tired or ill. If she doesn't go to the garden for a day, no one will cover for her, and her vegetables will suffer. She goes through this routine, day in and day out, year round, and she never complains. She gardens out of necessity, and for survival. What she makes selling her produce is used to pay for her children's education, to buy clothes and food for her family, and to save for something special. Adama's daily life is challenging and monotonous, but it is not unique. She is every Gambian woman who struggles each day to survive and pull her family along with her, facing a myriad of hardships along the way, but never complaining.

Adama is a composite of all of the Gambian women I met through my project. They are women who work harder than any American I have ever met, but who are also more content with their lot in life. Some women I became friends with lived in compounds without electricity, shared bedrooms with four people, and were unable to afford to send all of their children to school. Others were more successful and had relatively spacious compounds, and even some money to spare for a couch or radio. Despite their differences, all of the women shared an unparalleled work ethic and remarkable attitude towards life. Most importantly, for me, these women took the time to smile at, and accept, the curious white girl who came into their lives one day with poor Mandinka skills and so many questions.

Before my trip to The Gambia I had never been on a plane, never crossed an ocean, never been immersed in another language, and had never been part of a minority. My Gambian experience was one of a thousand firsts, and I returned an experienced woman, wiser and more open-minded, and forever changed. While the entire seven weeks that our small group spent in The Gambia contributed to my experience, it was my individual project that ultimately had the biggest impact on me. I couldn't imagine a better way for me to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell all that is The Gambia. I learned so much in seven weeks, about myself and about Gambians, but I feel as though I barely scratched the surface. I am left with a desire and a need to go back to The Gambia, to maintain my friendships, and to continue learning all that I can about the "Smiling Coast" while I am away from it.

I crossed the ocean and arrived in The Gambia still having no idea what my individual project would focus on. I insisted that it had to be related to the environment since it will eventually evolve into my senior thesis in anthropology and environmental science. I decided just to wait and see what caught my interest as we spent the first two weeks traveling to nearby sites of interest and attempting to gain some familiarity with the local language. This turned out to be the ideal approach for me, and my last-minute nature for once worked to my advantage. During our second week in The Gambia one of our trips took us to a women's community garden in Banjulunding. The moment we stepped off the rickety van and had our first look at the garden, I knew that my project was going to be, in some way, related to this.

To me, gardening has always been fascinating and enjoyable. My parents maintain beautiful and successful flower and vegetable gardens, and I have always played an active role in their design and upkeep. One aspect of agriculture which I had never explored, though, was gardening out of necessity, for income and survival. We have flower gardens because they are aesthetically appealing, and vegetable gardens because we prefer our own fresh produce to what can typically be found in grocery stores. The idea of farming and agriculture as a way of life, and not a hobby, was rather foreign to me. For the women of the Bakau women's garden and many others in The Gambia, vegetable gardening is a way for them to earn money for themselves or to send their children to school, to improve their family's nutrition and to have some independence. It is also one more chore added to the endless list of what a Gambian woman is expected to do each day.



Bakau Women

Despite the effort added to an already exhausting lifestyle, women's gardens in The Gambia have become quite common, and are more successful as each year goes by. It is much more than simple production that makes these gardens such a success. What they do for women, the environment, and The Gambia as a whole is extremely valuable. Without the garden, many of the women I met during my experiences in The Gambia would have no source of income or

independence. They would be housewives, hardworking without question, but with nothing substantial to show for their efforts. Community gardens provide these women with a way to make money through their own work, to spend it as they wish, and to feel free, independent, and empowered because they are doing something for themselves. Community gardens provide fresh produce for the markets where it is sold by the women growers, but they also aid in improving nutrition of the women's families as they are free to take home as much produce for their own use as they want. From an environmental perspective, many of the peri-urban community gardens are experimenting with composting and natural pesticides and insecticides, teaching women about sustainability and how to produce the best vegetables with the least environmental stress. The future of women's community gardens is exciting, if somewhat unknown. There is the potential to improve the lives of individual women growers as well as entire communities and to build a truly sustainable project in The Gambia.

I began my project in the same manner that I chose the topic, by remaining open to what spurred my interest as I went along. I knew that I wanted to study women's gardens and, having some knowledge of gardening and vegetables already, I decided it would be best to start my research simply by participating in the every day activities at a women's garden. The Bakau women's Garden at Mile Seven was the perfect place. Just about a mile from the Friendship Hotel, I could walk there every morning, help out for as long as I wished, and then walk back. I visited the garden on the first day with my professor, Bill Roberts, who helped make introductions and explain why I wanted to visit their garden and try to help. Bill and I approached one of the first women that we saw, a slight, yet extremely fit, woman of perhaps 40 years, whose name we soon found out was Hawa Camara. I was nervous and apprehensive, unsure of whether or not this woman would want or even accept help from me or allow me to observe the gardening activities. I should have thought of all the instances in which I'd been apprehensive up to that point and been immediately welcomed by Gambian strangers, because as before, there was no need for me to worry. Before we had even begun conversing, Hawa asked for my African name, and finding out that I didn't have one, promptly named me Isatou, giving me her own surname. Just like that, my Gambian gardening identity emerged - I was now Isatou Camara, the helper of any and all gardeners at Mile Seven, and Anne Dailey had ceased to exist.

Bill briefly explained my purpose in being at the garden, without going into any specifics, something that worried me initially. I had always been a hesitant person in new situations and was counting on him to smooth things out for me. I now see, however, that this was certainly what he knew to be the best approach. I was going to have to spend time with these women and get by with my small bit of Mandinka, by myself, everyday, and it was just as important for me to get started on my own. The woman who had given me my name grabbed her bucket and walked away to a farther area of the garden, clearly not irritated, but not willing to be held up any longer either. I looked around for a moment, feeling a little lost, as Bill walked around conversing with other women gardeners. I thought about following him, asking him to translate some more for me or explain my goals further to the women, but then I remembered some words of advice that I was given before my trip - to take every advantage given to me and to never hold back because I felt uncomfortable or lost. Spotting a woman drawing

water from a well a few feet away, I summoned my courage and decided to take action.

I greeted the woman, gave her my new African name, and then, in my broken Mandinka accompanied by hand gestures, managed to convey that I wanted to help. She handed me a bucket filled with water, lowered hers, filled it, drew it back up in a few fluid motions, and headed off toward her garden beds. I followed, and my introduction to the work of Gambian women gardeners began. I helped Sunkari Jaata water all ten of her beds, walking back and forth from the well at least twenty or thirty times with heavy buckets of water, without rest. Obviously, I was a conspicuous visitor at the garden, and it quickly became apparent to other women that Sunkari was getting some free help. Before I knew it, I had a line-up of women to assist. As soon as I finished helping one woman with her beds I would hear "Isatou!" and look up to see another woman motioning me over. Those who were already done asked me to help them the next day. My role at the Bakau women's garden had quickly been established -- I was a workhorse. I have no complaints about the role I played at the garden. Yes, I worked hard, non-stop, for several hours every morning, but the information that I gained simply through being there was invaluable.

I worked at the garden almost every day from 8:30 until noon, performing whatever tasks were necessary and practicing my Mandinka skills. Often, I would ask Bill at breakfast for the Mandinka translations of a few new sentences to try out for the day. While walking with buckets of water or pulling weeds, I would try to cleverly slip in my new question and then watch Binta or Aja laugh at my efforts and attempt to answer me. The women worked all day at the garden; I expected that the same would typically apply to me, but that was not the case. No matter how much I tried to blend in at the garden and just become one of the girls, it was clear that they looked at me with a mix of reverence and motherly instinct, and Isatou Camara was clearly too young and too white to be out in the garden all afternoon as well.

Each day at about 12:00, the women would start gesturing towards the entrance of the garden and speaking rapidly to me in Mandinka. When I finally asked one of the women who spoke a small amount of English what they were saying she pointed at the sun and replied "Too hot for tubabs." This was the first time that I realized that the Bakau women cared about me as more than just free labor. The women worked me hard but they also watched out for me. If I left my bag behind at the shed, I would quickly be called back and told that it was not safe. If I didn't drink enough water, I was handed a bucket to drink from and every day at noon, without fail, I was ordered to leave. The women at Bakau became my surrogate family. I'm ashamed to admit that by the time I left The Gambia, I only knew the full names of ten or twelve of the women, but I made sure to greet all of them every morning and to try to be fair about equally helping each woman.

I stayed primarily in one in area of the garden and became particularly close with the women who had plots nearby. There was another Camara who greeted me each morning with a huge smile, announcing "same family!" in English. Binta appeared rough around the edges at first, but soon became one of my favorite women. Whenever I helped Hawa Camara, she would explain to anyone who would listen that she was the first to speak to me at the garden and had given me

her name. Yassin Jeju invited me to lunch several times and her daughter became one of my best friends. Aja Samateh and I became close friends towards the end of my time at the garden, and there were several others with whom I could laugh and joke by the time I was ready to leave The Gambia. These women never ceased to amaze me with their hard work, positive outlook on life, and openness to me and my questions.



Ajatou Samateh

I realized after two weeks of gardening that there was still much that I wanted to know about the workings of the Bakau women's garden, and I was beginning to worry about how I was going to get that information. I had gardened alongside various women for days, observing their techniques, finding out about their families, soaking in everything that I could through 'doing.' I had developed close friendships and even spent a day shadowing Aja, starting at seven A.M., to see how the garden fit into her daily life, but there was only so much I could learn from the women. At best they spoke minimal and broken English, so they rarely could understand my questions. I had watched them work and learned volumes from my experiences, but the specifics were still out of my reach. I wanted to know how many women worked at the garden, how new members were chosen, what crops they planted and when, and so much more. I was at a loss for how to get my hands on this information, but once again I got lucky, and my "wait and see" approach paid off.

A few days before we were scheduled to leave The Gambia, I arrived at the garden hoping to speak to the president, a woman named Biere Cham whom I had heard mentioned often but never seen. I had attempted to send a messenger to her a few days before, but knew that the likelihood of it getting to her was poor. When I walked through the gates, I heard my name called out as usual, but this time it was a male voice, something entirely unexpected. A tall, heavily built man with glasses motioned me toward a building that had been locked all of the time I had been coming to the garden. In perfect English he said "Isatou, come here, we need to talk". Thoughts raced through my head of what I could have done wrong, what law I might have broken or who I might have offended.

I followed him into the building, watched him dust off a cluttered desk, pull up a chair for me, and sit down on the other side. He pulled out some notebooks and announced in a deep scratchy voice, "My name is Jalamang Jatta, I think you want to know about our garden. Let me tell you about myself." I overcame my initial shock and mumbled, "Oh, okay," and sat down, still having no idea who this man was or where he had come from! He proceeded to list his credentials starting back in 1964 (among them having four wives and sixteen children), almost without pause, while I scribbled away in my notebook. By the end of his personal speech I had learned that I was speaking to the project manager of the Bakau women's garden who had founded it 16 years ago.

With Jalamang's help, I was able to trace the history of the Bakau women's garden, copy down countless statistics, and through our interviews learned to see the garden from an entirely different perspective. I spoke to Jalamang for two hours that first day, until he stopped my questions, announcing, "That's enough for today; come back tomorrow and we'll finish." The next day I completed my interview in a dusty cement building filled with boxes of seeds that looked 20 years old, amid stacks of yellowed documents and notebooks which Jalamang somehow sorted through with ease.

Through chance, and some luck, I had found the rest of the information I had been seeking about the garden. I was amazed to learn that the garden had been organized and run almost entirely by the women of Bakau from the beginning. In 1985, 552 women of Bakau decided that they wanted to acquire land and start a women's garden. Because of his experience in agricultural work that dated to colonial times in The Gambia, Jalamang Jaata, himself of Bakau, was brought in as project manager. In that same year, he helped the women found the garden, starting with 2.5 hectares of land suitable for cultivation. By 1998, with some funding from outside sources, that land area was increased to 10.5 hectares, the majority of which was cleared. Funding from groups in Great Britain, the United States, and the UN helped in the building of concrete-lined wells, purchase of seeds, and contributions to the general building of the garden. I was surprised to learn that there are still outside donors today who contribute to helping the garden grow, providing money for expansion and new projects.

Jalamang seemed quite proud of the financial assistance that he had helped bring to the garden, and it soon became clear that he was explaining the workings of the garden to me with the hope that I might do the same. This was one of the aspects of being an American that I struggled with most in The Gambia. No matter where I went, I was asked and even begged for help and assistance in a variety of ways. Little boys asked for water bottles and dalasi (the local currency), beggars stretched out their hands for anything that I could offer, and parents asked for money to send their children to school. The constant requests were frustrating at times, but I had to remind myself that, though by American standards I am not rich, by Gambian standards I am. This fact was not lost on the women of the garden or any of the other friends I made, and Jalamang was no different. I was a young white American who was interested in the garden, and by those characteristics alone he determined that I was rich and could potentially provide financial assistance. Throughout the course of our interview, he probably paused nine or ten times to urge me to find money or

sponsors for the garden when I returned to America. I realized after a few weeks in The Gambia that it was pointless to try to explain to Gambians that I wasn't rich and didn't have connections with influential people in the United States. Though I felt guilty about it, I resigned myself to simply telling people who asked for my help that I would do what I could, and that much, at least, is not a lie. Regardless of his motives, Jalamang provided me with the information that I had been hoping to find. With his help I was able to piece together the details of the Bakau women's garden that keep it running year to year, and more importantly make the project sustainable.

Somehow, during my days of working alongside the women gardeners, I never thought of the possibility that the garden could be highly structured. What I discovered was astounding. The organization of the garden is impressive by any standards, and, at least to the eye of a naive American who doesn't understand the language, runs entirely behind the scenes. The 522 members, coming from four *kabilos* in Bakau, are, in fact, broken down into several different committees, each overseeing a different aspect of the garden and working to keep it functional and profitable for everyone involved. The garden committee consists of every woman who has plots in the garden, and all are responsible for meeting once a month to discuss current problems and successes. Market committees conduct surveys to determine what is selling well during which times of the year, reporting back to the women and helping to determine annually the percentages of each crop that should be planted. A 26-member management committee meets once a month before the general body meets, and an executive committee consisting of the president, vice-president, treasurer, auditor and advisor meets every three months. Each of these positions is filled by one of the women, with Jalamang being the only non-member with any rank. Jalamang is responsible for bringing his agricultural expertise to the women, and introducing new concepts and issues that could detract from or be beneficial to the garden.

Many of the women working at the garden do not speak English and never finished school, yet they contribute to the management of a large-scale horticultural project and understand all of the dynamics of the garden. This is a testament to the strength and work ethic of Gambian women, who refuse to let setbacks -- such as lack of education -- get in their way. During all of my time spent at the garden, sitting and chatting with the women or working by their side, I never once heard mention of the organization behind the garden. I had observed that each woman had her own garden beds that she was responsible for, but I had no idea of the level of detail that existed for governing even such specifics as this. Each of the 552 women is allotted 100 square meters of garden space, the equivalent of 20 beds. Each December she pays 50 dalasi which goes towards maintenance, seeds, and fertilizer. Garden members are selected by their *kabilo* committees. A member must be 21 years of age, the age at which women are determined to be fit enough to handle the necessary labor. This fact technically meant that I was legitimately old enough to handle the labor necessary to garden in Bakau, but my role had been established and was not to be changed. At present the garden is full to capacity, and until more land is acquired and cleared, no new members will be admitted. The greater Banjul area is growing all the time, and open land is disappearing quickly. As the population rises, more and more women will seek opportunities such as the members of the Bakau garden have, desiring to earn money and contribute income to their

families. Yet at the same time, resources, both monetary and natural, are becoming much more scarce.

In the face of such stresses I was happily surprised to discover that there is a clear breakdown of where the profits from the sale of produce go. Jalamang informed me that the general objective of the project is to grow more food crops for the family and for the market. This made sense, but I assumed that each woman could do as she pleased with the money she made from the sale of her vegetables. Thinking back on this now, such a system would have been disorganized and ultimately neither sustainable nor profitable. It would have left too much room for error, and although sharing is a great concern in the Gambia, it would have been much too difficult to ensure a fair breakdown without a structured method.

The breakdown that was described to me was precise, logical, and certainly seemed to me the most beneficial for all women involved. Jalamang and the women have determined that starting with 100% of income, 15% should be consumed by the family of the gardener to ensure that her children are getting proper nutrients. Out of the remaining 85% profit, 10% should go back home to pay for children's school fees and uniforms, 15% for domestic needs such as buying food; 30% is classified as compulsory savings for the garden group as a whole, in case the donors leave and the project is left to stand on its own, and 30% goes towards production costs. The yearly 50 dalasi membership fee serves in place of this if there happens to be no production for reasons beyond control, such as drought or pests. In an average year, the Bakau women's garden makes an impressive 1.7 million dalasi in profit. Every year some gardeners fail to make profit, but the more effective farmers typically cover the shortfall of those who are less so. Such a system of sharing and taking care of one another was another theme running through my entire experience in The Gambia. Those who are more financially stable take care of those who are less so, yet even those who are clearly struggling are insistent upon giving to guests and other family members.

I spent a great deal of time with one family of six members, sharing a two-room compound with no electricity. Each time I visited, a young child would run to buy me a Coke; another would hurry to the market for my favorite fish, and a fabulous meal would be prepared. I was never allowed to help or pay for anything. Another woman I knew gave all of her earnings to her parents to send her younger siblings to school, and my friend Aja informed me that all Muslims, regardless of economic status, give 15% of their income to charity.

In my time spent among the women of the Bakau Horticultural project, I was continually impressed by the hard work put in by the women and their dedication to their tasks and to each other. After meeting with Jalamang Jaata, my reverence for them only grew. I truly admire the ability of these women, who already are responsible for so much, to organize themselves and manage a large and profitable organization effectively, using sustainable farming methods and entirely on their own. The objectives that they established for their project were equally admirable, and I saw concerted efforts being made to ensure that the project will remain sustainable and environmentally sound far into the future.

With Jalamang's help, the women have learned about, and are experimenting with, crop rotation, composting, and natural fertilizers and other organic production methods. Jalamang has brought in a female mushroom expert who works with four women on mushroom production, a venture which, if successful, will be highly profitable. I was surprised to see such efforts toward conservation and sustainability being made in a Third World nation, but perhaps that was just my First World ignorance and ethnocentrism shining forth. Both Jalamang and the new mushroom expert, Amie Faburah, stressed continually during my interview that they hoped to eventually transform the garden into one that used entirely organic methods. They seemed to know that I, and most Americans, would never expect such a commitment because they asked me on more than one occasion to "please write that we want to be organic, it is very important." It was somewhat humbling to see a project in a country such as Gambia so committed to the health of the people and the environment when in our own country just a small percentage of agriculture meets organic standards. Organic production is expensive to get started and distinctly more labor intensive. Though the market is growing, many American farmers are more concerned with mass production and maximizing profits. In light of this, the efforts of a Third World nation such as The Gambia towards organic methods are highly commendable. Meeting with Jalamang and discussing all of these aspects of the garden project gave me a special degree of respect for the women who had become my friends.

Gambia changed me, in incalculable ways, but the most lasting and important contribution that it made to my life was friendships. I credit my project with helping me form some of the strongest friendships that I had while in The Gambia, and I credit those friends with the success of my project. One of those friends was Isatou Ceesay, without whose support, generous help and understanding, I would never have accomplished everything that I did. She came to me like everything else in The Gambia, unexpectedly, yet perfectly. Bill had been searching for a counterpart for me with my project, someone to translate when necessary and to help me make connections. He found Isatou. One humid morning, by the pool at the Friendship Hotel, we were introduced, and a bond was formed that neither time nor distance will weaken. Isatou is one of the most amazing women I have ever met. That very first day, perhaps ten minutes into conversation, she pulled out samples of purses and bags and informed me that she sold them. They were interesting, but I had no reason to think they were anything special, and to be honest, there was a moment where I recoiled. Was she going to be one more person taking the opportunity to hassle me to buy something? Luckily, I heard her out. Isatou went on to explain that she has started a recycling project with the women of her village, through which they collect the cheap plastic bags that litter both urban and rural areas of The Gambia, and sew them into intricate purses and bags, complete with zippers, flaps and buttons. She has organized the women entirely on her own and meets with them once a week to sew the bags and socialize. Isatou sells the bags for the women when she travels, and all proceeds go back to each individual and her family. The enthusiasm apparent in her voice and facial expressions as she explained her project to me were unforgettable. This was a woman with ambition, direction, and passion, and I knew at that instant that I was talking to someone special.

Isatou accompanied me to the garden on several occasions. I knew I could rely on her whenever I had something important to ask, or talk to the women about, something I couldn't convey with my limited Mandinka vocabulary. She made introductions for me at the Department of Agriculture and helped me write the speech that I read to my women gardeners before leaving The Gambia. Her help in these instances, and others, was vital to my project, but, more important to me, were the afternoons we spent escaping the heat in my room at the Friendship Hotel, talking about her life and mine, our views, and what we wanted to accomplish in the future. One would think we didn't have much to talk about; we certainly didn't appear to have much in common. Isatou is divorced with two children; she lives in a Third World nation; she supports herself, her children, and other family members all on her own. I live in the United States, go to a college that costs more per year than she will make in her lifetime, and am far from supporting myself, much less a family. Yet, Isatou and I became almost as close as sisters in the two weeks that we spent together. Our conversations could alternate between vivid and intense, and relaxed and friendly, but we always learned from each other. Thoughts of Isatou, what she has accomplished, and her unending drive and energy are with me all the time.

Whenever I find myself sitting in my dorm room procrastinating, I think of what she, and so many Gambians, would give for the chance to be in my shoes. She motivates me on a daily basis and makes me want to take full advantage of what I've been given. I will never forget Isatou, and can only hope that I have provided, for her, a fraction of the insight and meaning that she has added to my life.

Isatou was a best friend, but the women of the garden were my family. They took me in without a second thought and opened their community to me, making me feel more at home than I do in many places in my own country. When I made my first trip to the garden I had no idea how hard it would be for me to say goodbye three weeks later. It seems such a short time to get to know people and to understand a place, but I felt after that time as though I had known these women for years. I spent the last week thinking of how I could best say my goodbyes and wondering what it was going to be like to leave all of the women behind, with the unfortunate possibility in the back of my mind that I might never see them again. I ultimately decided to have Isatou help me write a speech in Mandinka thanking the women for all they had done, conveying my respect for them and the lives they lead, and attempting to show them how much they meant to me. I prepared a speech about two minutes long, bought a bag of kola nuts to distribute among the women, and told them on my last working day that I wanted to speak to them all at 11:00 the next morning to say goodbye.

The women all knew that I would be leaving; my Mandinka skills had improved to the point where I was able to explain that I would be going back to America and to answer some questions about my trip. Several women had already asked if they could come along, stowed in my baggage! All of the women had told me repeatedly that they did not want me to leave, and I knew it was going to be hard to do so. I walked to the garden with Isatou for the last time carrying my kola nuts and a piece of paper with my speech written on it and found myself trying to hold back tears. When I arrived, all of the women I was closest to put down their buckets and hoes and gathered under a large tree. I pulled out my speech and slowly read it to the women, who alternated between chuckling at my poor

pronunciation and clapping enthusiastically. I presented the kola nuts and stood back for a moment, unsure of whether I should leave at that point or pick up a bucket and water a few more beds. Then Binta, a woman whom I had shied away from during my first few days at the garden, started speaking. Isatou translated as Binta told me how impressed all of the women were with how hardworking I was and thanked me on behalf of all of them for how much I had helped them. She said they would all miss me very much and hoped I would come back to The Gambia to visit them and keep in touch while I was away. I looked around at the women who had become like my family and thought back to the day, three weeks earlier, when I had hesitated to approach them and had wondered if they would accept me at all. It was all I could do to keep from crying as I thought about how far my relationships with each of them had progressed. Suddenly the women began to slowly clap, creating a beat I had heard many times before, and started singing. It was not a song that I understood, but they were working my name into it, smiling and laughing and soon dancing all around me. For six weeks I had managed to avoid dancing, Gambian style, the one experience that I did not think I wanted and was not sorry to miss. But that last day in the garden, the women got the better of me. I insisted that I didn't know how to dance, but Aja grabbed my hand, pulled me into the middle and danced with me, and the thoughts of tears were gone. I threw back my head and laughed, feeling ridiculous, free and happy, surrounded by Isatou and my garden family, and finally feeling, at least in some way, like one of the girls.

It is easy, being back home and at school, surrounded by friends, wealth, development and consumerism to lose sight temporarily of how The Gambia transformed me. Yet, whenever this starts to happen, something reminds of some friend I made there or the food I ate and it all comes rushing back. What is hardest for me to deal with is how positively my trip and experiences affected me. I am a better person for having been to The Gambia and experiencing all that I did, but I feel a need to give back. I know that I had friendship while I was there, but The Gambia and its people gave me so much more than that, and at times it is hard to feel that my friendship is enough. The irony is that for them, it was.

I think of the women of Bakau all the time, how they became like my family and how hard it was to leave them behind to a hard and repetitive existence to return to my easy life. When I read the women my speech, many of them asked to return with me to America or to take one of their children. I was wished a safe journey countless times and begged to return to see them, to write letters, and to never forget them. Though they knew I was returning to America, and certainly to more money, none of the women at the garden, or any of my friends for that matter, asked me to send them money or presents, only letters and prayers. They did not need or want anything besides my friendship, despite how much I had, despite how much they lacked. Perhaps it is exactly this that makes me want to give more. Reflections such as this define my Gambian experience and urge me to return. I envision going back to the Garden and surprising the women with new seeds, or financial assistance that I have garnered from some organization. Maybe this will never happen, but as long as I am thinking of it, and of anything I can do to help others with no thought of myself, I know that The Gambian spirit is still with me.