# 1
# Mother Africa and Child Me

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Biting heat. Sand and more sand as far as the eye can see. Strange languages rising into the air. Small dark hands attached to bodies with small dark mouths that begged, "One dalasi, one dalasi." But it was finally the small nip at my neck by a welcoming mosquito that confirmed for me that this was not a dream—I was really in Africa. The rest of the St. Mary's group climbed aboard our bus, me leaving my former self behind.

*Keisha standing next to a statue of an African woman carved by a local artisan.*

Alice, Dorothy, and even the modern day Harry Potter were characters who entered other worlds unlike the ones they were accustomed to. Why did they have to venture into these worlds? The answer is simple. The answer is my own. They had to be moved out of their comfort zones so that they could grow, both spiritually and mentally.

That day, as we zigzagged and bumped along the road from the airport, I was introduced to The Gambia in West Africa. I mentally recorded everything I saw during that first bus ride into Bakau where we would spend a large part of our trip. Women walked, wrapped in colorful fabrics, babies strapped to their backs and loads on their heads. Their flip-flopped heels kicking up sand as they moved. I had to constantly remind myself that I was looking through a window and not at a TV screen.

What is cultural immersion? I now know that it is when you are completely immersed within the context of another culture; you might as well be in another world. Nothing around you is the same: food, clothes, language, even social norms. We were submerged, all right. But we were given tools, and if we used them properly, they offered us the opportunity to stay afloat. Every morning for the first two weeks of our six-week stay, we took Mandinka language classes followed by culture, history, and religion classes. We came to Africa as a field research or study abroad class. All of our respective topics were different, but we would all need and later rely on those language and cultural basics we learned in the first two weeks in order to maneuver throughout the country during our stay.

One of my most important realizations on the trip was how fortunate we are in America—especially our children. True, we have children who grow up in despicable conditions here in our own cities, but with struggle (of course) there may be more access to some small opportunity they can grasp hold of to pull themselves out of the dark. In Gambia, the children have very few options on which to grab.

*Curious children from Brefet village, Lower River Division, the first stop during our trip upcountry.*

Nevertheless, the children are all smiles. Gambia is not a large tourist area, so the children are as enthralled with you as you with them. They remind me of beautiful wildflowers encroached by weeds. They are circled in by poverty and limited opportunities for advancement. Beautiful dark bodies that walk around, sometimes in rags. Some of the children mastered English, and with good reason they can be aggressive in approaching you with requests for items like money or pencils, to better meet their needs.

In a society where many people have little money, parents have to pay for school, books, uniforms, and school supplies. Some children sit in class without a pencil and some sit even without a teacher because of a personnel shortage. Still, they anxiously sit and wait for something better. Capable and willing to work hard for the grade, these children that commonly speak three languages are smart enough to know that they do not have the same advantages as our children

*Nyakoi junior high school students line up for a picture in the school library. Nyakoi, in the Upper River Division, needs books and all types of educational supplies.*

here. They know that when they grow up, there are fewer moneymaking or "professional" jobs available to them. As a result, many of the youth dream about going abroad to either Europe or the U.S.A. to make a living.

Once we visited a junior high school in a village on the north bank of the far eastern part of Gambia. The students were dismissed early on Friday afternoon (the Muslim holy day) but about 50 of them returned during their own free time just to meet us—the Americans. They wanted answers. One student asked, "What makes America better than us?" Another, unflinching in his gestures and serious in his meaning said, "I want to know, what are you going to do to help us?"

I felt the small sheets of paper crumbled into my pocket with pre-written addresses on them. They were written before they met me. They were written in hopes that their new owners would help.

In talking about our future, we need to remember our past. It just so happened that the past of these Africans was intricately my own as an African American. But really this past belongs to all of us because for better or for worse, black or white, all of our ancestors played a role in slavery.

We visited what is now called James Island, a small beautiful island that sits off by itself in the river Gambia, not far from Juffure, home of Kunta Kinteh. However, its beauty is conflicted by the "ugly" that took place on the island. Slaves were shipped to James Island to be held in a holding fortress for the dreadful Middle Passage. From the island, you could just make out Albreda, only a few miles off in the distance. Albreda boasts a British Flag, also known as the Freedom Flag. It was said that if a slave escaped James Island and could touch the flag in Albreda then he would be granted immediate freedom. Many tried. Only two men were known to have survived the escape and swim in the Gambia River. The original flagpole is just a stump; behind it is a newly erected flag. I rubbed the rough, old surface of the broken flagpole.

*This cannon on Fort James Island is a grim reminder of an ugly page in Gambian and Gambian-American history.*

I rubbed it for me. I rubbed for the slaves that tried but never could.

James Island is slowly eroding; however there are a substantial amount of ruins left on the island. I investigated one. I inched down the steps into the dark room; the walls were made of stone and the floor of dirt. One small rectangular light shaft was cut into the wall, and a small stream of light eked out against the dark shadows. Although empty, there was something else inside the room—misery. My heartbeat quickened and the air seemed to thin. I quickly scrambled to the top of the steps to rid myself of the strange sensations. The ruins were all that were physically left of my ancestors' suffering; spiritually, however, those lands were left with an irreparable scar—pain that never fades.

*Sign at the restored slave museum on Gorée Island.*

Another slave fortress that has hardly faded at all is situated on Gorée Island in Senegal. That fortress, now a museum, remains the only fully intact one of its kind. There are two grandiose staircases leading up to the living quarters of the Europeans. Right below the stairs was where the slaves were housed. Straight ahead is a small hall with a doorway that faced the water. This is where the slaves were loaded onto the ships. To the right, there's a large room with plenty of space and even toilet holes built into the floor so that the women held in the room could go to the bathroom. A luxury. Not really, for this room was used so that the slave masters could mate with their slaves. The toilets allowed the women to be cleaner.

The room to the right of that was a holding cell for men. In broad daylight the room was jet black, even with the one-pinhole light shaft. I stood at the door, my foot raised to enter but my body could not, would not, enter there. I strongly felt the force of discontent

*This is the stairway leading from the master's upstairs quarters to the ground-level cells holding slaves.*

and unhappiness. I felt that if I stepped inside I would be swallowed whole.

There were small cubicles carved into the backs of the staircases only large enough to fit an animal the size of a dog. These were the punishment holes for rebels and unmanageable slaves. The rooms go on to include a room for the sickly, the underweight, and mothers with children. There was a great feeling of unrest here. I am obviously not the only one to have felt it. I was told that our very own President Clinton stood in these halls and cried. I wondered if this place remains in emotional chaos because the tormented souls cannot rest while their nightmare still stands—completely intact.

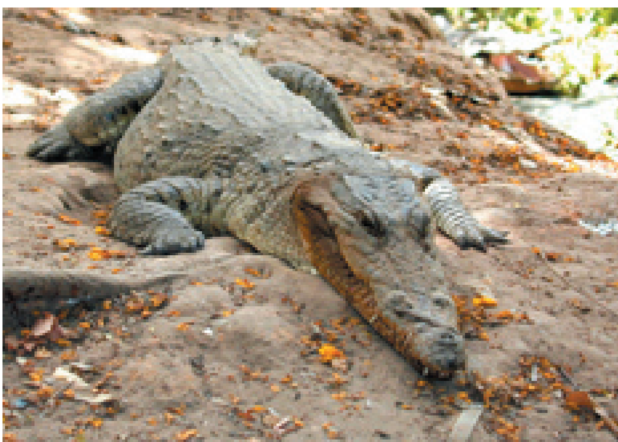
From James Island I took dirt, and from Gorée, rocks, and placed them into my backpack. This was my way of carrying some of those spirits back to America with me—into the freedom they never got to know.

I would also carry back vivid memories of an activity that perhaps best characterizes Africa—the sensational dancing. We traveled "up-country" to some of the more rural village areas. Usually during each overnight stop along the way, the villagers would honor us with their traditional dance before we retired. My first true witnessing of such a performance happened in Bintang Bolong. The drum pounded, calling us to the circle. A fire glowed off the dark faces that surrounded us. Someone—a lady—slowly entered the circle doing a half-shrug half-jig movement until the drumbeat picked up. It was then that her arms spread and flapped like wings, her legs stomping at an incomprehensible speed. Her quick motions were heightened by the clacky-clack, clacky-clack sound made of handclaps and small wooden blocks, pounded by the audience. I watched as the drummer squared-off with the dancer, both toe-to-toe and face-to-face,

dancing and drumming with everything they had. Watching the flailing arms and legs, I knew that the feeling it gave me was freedom.

*Keisha dances with one of the women in Brefet village. Students danced nearly every night on the road to Basse, Upper River Division.*

The feeling of freedom was an understatement. Imagine being able to look at your life from a distance. You are no longer the actor in the play, but also the editor and critic, and that was a good feeling. And good feelings can make you do things that you wouldn't normally do. For example, I actually petted a crocodile. Some Africans believe that their family has a totem, a spiritual kinship with a certain type of animal. In Bakau, a large family, known as the Bojang family, believe that they have such a bond with the crocodile. The crocodiles live in a place known as Katchikally Crocodile Pool. Villagers go to this pool to gather water after they have prayed and left offerings.



*A large* bambo *or crocodile that lives in Katchikally*

It is believed that a bath in the water will help prayers come true, especially prayers for fertility.

I timidly walked into the woods. A sharp turn in the dirt path put me face to face with the sleeping scaly creatures scattered all over the ground. I was almost afraid to walk for fear that a hungry one would mistake me for his next meal. The awakened crocodiles seemed to be completely disinterested in our group. The guides were stroking and tugging the animals affectionately, demonstrating the seriousness of their totem bond and helping us feel a little more at ease. I felt myself bend down and swipe the scaly creature across his back a few quick times (with the guides aiding, of course). Without even turning his head the crocodile's right eye quickly shifted to the rear to check me over. Never would I have dreamed about doing this at home. However, increasingly this place was becoming my home or rather a home to the new version of me.

The homey feeling that I was developing also extended to the friends that we made at the Friendship Hotel where we were staying. When I left my room in the morning, I was quizzed. "Keishie," they would say because they had trouble pronouncing the "sha" part of my name.

"I saama." (Good Morning)

"I saama." (Good Morning)

"Kayira laata." (Peaceful night?)

"Kayira dorong." (The night was there/good.)

"Suu - mool lee?" (How is the family?)

"I be jee." (The family is there/good.)

Every day it was the same sort of drill. They wanted to make sure we knew the language.

As our friendships deepened, many of us started eating with the hotel staff. I mean, what is home without one of its most acclaimed comforts—food? One guy from the staff, whom we all got to know pretty well, would share his lunch with us every day. At about 2 p.m. he would start to round up people to join him. I was not very good at African-style eating, especially because you were only allowed to use your right hand. I never realized how much I depended on the use of both hands. We gathered around a large bowl filled with rice and sauce with vegetables and fish in the center. If you want some of the treats in the middle, you were required to reach with your right hand, breaking a piece of food off and returning it to your side of the bowl. I smushed the food until it formed a soft paste between my fingers, opened my mouth and sloughed the rice/ fish mixture down my throat. I almost felt bad eating their food because they generally had a lot less than what I had at home. But if I didn't eat with

our friends they would feel insulted. I now knew that it was possible for people who have so little to give a lot. "Abaraka Baake," I would say so it often that it felt like I was chanting that phrase. I was saying, "Thank you very much," to them for sharing their food, their friendship, and their hearts.

*Keisha and her good friend Baboucar at the Friendship Hotel.*

This was not the only time I used the language. Our new language skills probably got the most use at local marketplace. "Nying mu jelu le ti?" I would ask. Of course, once the merchant realizes you are American, the price is increased ten-fold. Walking through the Serekunda marketplace was almost a sensory overload. Women wrapped in swirled bright dresses and matching headwraps pushed their way through tight dirt pathways that passed as aisles. A makeshift ceiling of cloth created the cover of the inside of the market. In some places, you would have to duck, avoiding the spots where the material was caving in. You also had to watch out and give right of way to oncoming single file lines pushing their way past you in the narrow aisles. Open vendors displayed fresh fruit and vegetables and even meat parts hanging from stall ceilings. Flies hovered low over fresh fish, crabs, and beef. The smell of seafood, mixed with body sweat and nearby open sewage holes, was set aflame by the sun and tossed into the air. The people there don't seem to notice or to care. Foreigners, at least new ones, could be easily spotted in the market by occasional nose pinches because they had not quite adjusted to the pungent smells.

*Keisha with some of the students at a fabric shop for tourists in Bakau.*

That's not all that the market offers. There's a visual smorgasbord of fabrics. Rows of sewing machines and tailors wait for your selection to be made so that you can place your clothing orders with them. A whole outfit would cost you no more than $10 U.S. dollars. Merchants push into your personal space, shoving wallets and watches and necklaces and bags into your face for inspection, and hopefully a sale. This is where the knowledge of a native language came in handy. "N Mang Kodoo Soto," I would tell them, which meant I didn't have any money. Okay, so I lied a little, but it worked its magic. An old lady came up to me, and before I knew it she was spinning me around, wrapping me in fabric. I looked at her and said, "Hani, abaraka baake," which means no thank you. She bucked her eyes, backed-up, and folded over with laughter. "Where did you learn that?" she asked. I just pointed to my language teacher, smiling in the distance.

Once I shoved through the tight aisles with the women of the Njie family. Their mission, per my request, was to teach me to cook—Gambian style. The wives within this Muslim household alternated household chores every three days. It was the youngest wife's turn to cook although the others would assist. We gathered outside the compound in a small yard-size clearing. This was the kitchen. The wife made a fire and put a pot of water and peanuts on to boil. She then pulled out a large wooden mortar and pestle and began mushing hot peppers. She could not speak English but I knew she meant to involve me when she passed the large wooden handle my way. I took hold of the handle and listened to the amused laughter of the other women as I wrestled between the handle and the vegetables I was suppose to be mashing. Watching the women prepare the food was like watching a dance. Every performer knew her place in the routine; when one was performing the others would quietly await their turn to take center stage. This was a comfortable time. Some women wore only their bras and skirts, some

removed headwraps, stories were told, and laughter boiled as intensely as the foods in those pots.

The exotic foods nourished my body, but the women cooking, the children, and especially our friends at the hotel nourished my spirit. All of my experiences helped me forge friendships that have added another layer onto my life. Every time I hear another language, I am reminded of difference. Every time I see a child, I am reminded of opportunity. I've got dirt and rocks on my shelves and freedom in my soul. I've got crumbled pieces of paper in my pockets and hope in my heart. I've got dare, challenge, appreciation, and generosity in my mind. All of these things, I've gotten from Africa.

It is interesting what you can learn about your life when viewing it from a distance. I believe that you are really defined by your environment to a certain degree, but exposure to different environments can broaden who you are. I developed a new set of friends, experienced a new kind of socialization and, to a degree, developed a new set of life priorities. And these lessons just don't disappear, rather they are integrated into who you were before. These enhancements were not foreign to me because they were always mine; I had just left them in Africa. Now, I long to travel the worldwide landscape picking up pieces of me.

*St. Mary's students with some of our many friends on the day we left The Gambia.*

I extended my right hand to my friends at the hotel who had gathered outside to see us off. Shaking their heads no, they would extend their left hands toward me. This means that you will see that person again. I climbed aboard our bus once again. This time staring out the back window at my friends and my life there. I choose to remember them this way: leaning against

*One of the many dancers we met on our trip up-country.*

the wall and squatting on the steps, some of them waving, some of them smiling, some of them with contemplative looks on their faces as we drove out of sight. All the while I wondered if I'd ever see them again. This time, as I zigzagged and bumped along that same crowded road we entered on, I played my arrival memory in my mind. I wasn't going back the same.