Juma
11.06.10

“There’s a mad man watching a football (soccer) match. His neighbor approaches and says, ‘You’re mad, you don’t care for football. Why are you watching it?’ The mad man replies, ‘I may be mad, but these players are more mad than I.’ His neighbor asks, ‘How so?’ To that he replies, ‘They run around for hours chasing after the ball, but when they catch it, instead of picking it up, they just kick it away and continue to run after it. You tell me, how is that *not* mad?’”

This is the kind of good clean fun that I get to share with my work counterpart Tamba on an almost daily basis. He loves to laugh. Each time he shares one of these jokes with me, which he does quite often, he laughs hysterically. I mean *hysterically.* To the point that he cries. Most of the time I don’t even get the jokes, I think they must be lost in translation, but I laugh with him anyway. It’s impossible not to laugh. His pure joy would make anyone smile.

This particular joke was told while we watched Uruguay and France play in the first round of the 2010 World Cup. The sun had just set, and I had been talking with Tamba for more than an hour already, discussing our plans for our community. When I rose to leave, however, he asked me to stay for dinner. So we sat outside with his boys, ranging in age from not quite 2 to 20, while the prettiest cat in Mali chased moths and locusts in his yard.

I was almost entirely at peace in this setting, but since the rainy season has finally graced us with her presence (please Ala, don’t take that as slander and take the blessed rain away from us again!), the mosquitos are now out in full force. I haven’t yet responded in kind with an attack of the bug repellant, so I’m welcome feeding ground for the malaria-carrying creatures. This is why Mefloquine is so important.

So, trying to ignore the pesky bites every few minutes, I watched as an absurd number of players continued to fall over each other during the second half of the nil-nil game. Tamba’s youngest son, Solemon, continued to run up to me grinning, wait for me to say “So-loooo!” and tickle him, before smacking me across the face with his dirt, saliva and who knows what else-covered hand and running off again. His little grin has convinced me that Tamba is father to the most adorable boy in all of Mali. There’s hardly a minute that passes where this little terror does not have a huge smile lighting up his face. He just started talking too, mumbling things in Bambara and chasing after the cat. I love watching kids in Mali. It helps to remind me that I’m not an alien walking on a far-away planet after all. The kids are the same all over the world. They're the ones we’re here for.

Earlier, as Tamba and I talked and Solo ran up behind me with his grin-and-smack

routine, Tamba said something to him, too quickly for me to understand. The little boy stopped, looked at his papa, and asked for more clarification. I heard the words, “your mother” and “leave it” once again, and Solo ran off, his head trying to keep up with his chubby little legs. That’s how he runs, you see, at a slant, his legs running much faster than the rest of him.

A few minutes passed, as Tamba helped me to understand some more Bambara idioms and proverbs that he’d written out for me. Sixty-four, to be exact, were waiting for me on my return from Spain. We laughed over the funnier ones like, "the young man may die from diarrhea, but he will not have defecated as much as his elder brother." Priceless.

Then Solo returned, carrying some fried dough in his dirty little fist, and handed it to his dad. Tamba laughed and told him to eat it, then proudly told me that he’d sent his young, barely-able-to-speak son on a mission. Solo had run out of the family yard, down the dirt road where other dirty children played and people socialized, out to where his mom and his dad’s other wife sat frying dough made of millet and beans. He communicated that his dad wanted some, collected it, and ran back home to give it to Tamba.

I was impressed by this display of how families in Mali function. I’ve known for some time now that children do as they’re bid to do by their parents and older siblings, but I’ve now witnessed the training and inauguration of that particular cultural aspect into that little boy. He isn’t quite 2 years old, yet he’s just completed his first chore. Impressive.