

## Senegal Revisited

by Allegra K. Troiano

I made a big mistake. I went to the local grocery store on Saturday and ended up waiting fifteen minutes in an express line, my arms bulging with food. In front of me stood a very unhappy lady. I must have given off an air of friendliness because she began talking to me. "Isn't this ridiculous," she said, "I just don't understand why the hell they can't put another gal on." I nodded and she continued complaining.

In my reverie, I wandered back to Senegal. In comparison, shopping there was a tedious chore. If you didn't want to be besieged by flies and heat, you went to the market by eight a.m.

I usually began my shopping at the fish market because early in the morning I was guaranteed my choice of fish. For a dollar in local money, I bought a three-foot fish. I arrived at this price by bargaining. I always fixed an amount in my mind, and I haggled with the merchant until he lowered his original price. "How much is it?" I asked in Wolof.

"800 CFA," replied the fishmonger.

"You're crazy if you think that I am going to pay you 800 CFA for that little fish," I retorted.

"What's your price?" he asked.

"400 CFA," I said confidently.

"Never, never, never," he replied. And I went through the motions of leaving. He then yelled out, "Name your last price!"

"Again I said, "400 CFA," and our haggling continued until he finally agreed to my price. For fifty CFA extra he descaled and degutted the fish. I put the huge fish in my small net shopping bag. It was a sight to be seen; the fish was larger than the bag and its tail and head hung out over the edge. Every time I looked down I saw the fish blankly staring me in the face.

I continued on to the vegetable market a couple of blocks away. I wanted to buy tomatoes and eggplant. I went to Madame Diatta who always had the best red tomatoes and a sense of humor to match. She sat regally behind her little pyramids of tomatoes, her midnight black skin glistening in the sun, always cracking jokes and flirting with anyone that walked by. After greeting her and chatting a bit, I began bargaining for her delicious red tomatoes.

When we reached an agreeable price for the tomatoes, I bargained for the eggplant. After all business was completed, she tucked the bills into her bra and smiled toothlessly. I put my vegetables into my other bag and wiped the sweat off my forehead with my finger like a windshield wiper on a rainy day. Already tired, I picked up my bags and headed for the Pulaar shop where I could buy eggs. I bought six eggs and carefully wrapped them in newspaper hoping they would survive the bumpy ride out to my village the next day.

Contemplating my next purchase, I stood watching all of the people from a distance while listening to the buzz of their bargaining. From afar I smelled a sweet perfume-like odor and my nose led me to where the juicy ripe mangoes were stacked in piles. Sané, my favorite mango merchant saw me coming and smiled. "So, Salimata, how are you?" he asked using my African name.

"Fine," I said gazing hungrily at the pyramid of sweet, yellow mangoes.

"And how's the family, the house, and your work?" he continued.

Each time I replied "fine," wishing that I could pay him and leave, but if you wanted to be respected you had to engage in the social protocol, no matter how tedious it was. I began bargaining while my stomach growled loudly.

My stomach was still growling when my mind jumped suddenly back into the present. The unhappy woman standing in front of me was still cussing at the girl. "This is the las' time I'm comin' here," she hissed and walked out.

I asked the cute little clerk if she was having a bad day. She nodded sadly as I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my finger. Smiling, I walked away thinking about the very unhappy lady who never stopped complaining.