

Wedding Proposal

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“May God bless you with an amazing husband and a house full of children”, rings out from the mouths of strangers, friends, and host family members, and to which I respond with a warm smile and an enthusiastic ‘Amiina’. I am 28 and a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali, West Africa. In Mali a girl marries around the age of 15 and self worth is directly related to a woman’s role of wife and mother. To the Malians I am old, a spinster, and soon to be more barren than the desert that I live in. I can’t answer what it is like to be gay and in Peace Corps, but I can relate my experience as a PCV in Mali.

I joined Peace Corps having just come out of a five year relationship with a girl I had met in college. We said goodbye to each other as I made the endless walk through airport security to catch the plane to staging in Philadelphia. I admit that I was disappointed when I learned that I was going to a land-locked Muslim country in the desert, but I was willing to make sacrifices to make it work. I had already started to grow out my hair and wear an all feminine wardrobe; two huge steps for the ultra-butcht lesbian I was.

Peace Corps was an opportunity to rediscover myself and enact the change I wanted and needed in life while helping the greater good of a global society. I was ready to question all of the truths in my life and enact change upon any new answers I found. The nature vs. nurture argument waged a war in my head as I tried to decipher if being gay was God-given or an unconscious choice I had made in response to my mother’s four marriages to men who fell short of the mark. I was ready to be ‘straight’ and ‘normal’ find a good man, settle down, and have 2.5 children, a dog, and a white picket fence. The American dream, right?

When I arrived in Mali I swung from the ultra butcht side of the spectrum to the feminine side. Not only was my hair growing out, but I was wearing jewelry and skirts. The loss of fifty pounds in the first two months, due to change of diet, exercise, and a chronic case of intestinal parasites, did wonders to improve my self image. I integrated into my host family to the extent that I performed family functions and four of my host sisters would sleep on the floor of my hut each night. I even had the fancy to woo a fellow male PCV. At this point in time when people wished me a good husband my ‘Amiina’ was half truthful. I fell for a PCV; a girl from the stage before me. The nature argument won.

In a culture where the male-female relationship is quintessential how can a lesbian relationship work? The answer is that we are not ‘out’ to the host country nationals. Today I have one foot in the closet and one foot out. There was a point in my life where I would not have straddled the line like that; where I would have screamed to society that I was gay and they would have to deal with it, but Mali is not the place to challenge cultural standards, at least not at this level and not if I want to keep the respect of my village.

My village knows me as Djeneba. Djeneba with the hyphenated last name. I kept my homestay family’s last name and added my host family’s name to it. The Malians have an issue with the two last names; they say that one person can not have two last

names. If they can not handle the hyphen they could never handle the fact that I am gay. Change is a step-by-step process that can not be rushed.

My host father explains to visitors that I am still young and have plenty of time to find a good husband in America, which is the rhetoric that I gave to him. Some of the village members are convinced that I have a man in the capital and to them I can honestly say that I am not visiting a man. The women of the village have turned this into a joke by asking me in every greeting how my husband is. I don't respond and make a joking angry face which makes us break out into peals of laughter. I do not know what their response would be were they to find out, but I will let a Malian gay rights activist fight the fight when the society is ready for it. It is not my place or my fight.

It is not only my village who pushes me to marry, but also the random stranger on the street. The culture is open and inviting and the stranger will always give an invitation to chat over food or tea. When I first arrived in Mali I would tell the truth about my marital status; this usually lead to a proposal by a cab driver or street vendor and me making up some excuse about how they were too 'ugly' or ate beans (all said in a joking manner). Women who offered me their male relatives received the response that Malian men are no good because they sit under a hangar all day chatting and drinking tea. Now I just skip over these jokes and tell them a fake story of a made-up husband who closely resembles the attributes of my girlfriend. This may not be completely true, but it saves me about 20 minutes of a stale conversation.

In truth it is easy to be in a same-sex relationship here. I live in a culture where friends of the same-sex can hold hands and hug publicly, but lovers of the opposite sex must remain archaic in public displays of affection. I can walk down the street hand-in-hand with my girlfriend and not receive a second glance.