

Senegalese Wrestling

By Badiyyah Waajid



Prior to traveling to this phenomenal country, I had been told that I would definitely need to experience Senegalese *traditional wrestling*. The Wolof word for wrestling, *Laamb*, is borrowed from the Serer people. As one who had only witnessed wrestling matches on American television, however, I truly underestimated this advice. With my vision of wrestling in mind I must admit that I was happy at the thought of the match being postponed or even cancelled when the evening rains arrived. In fact, some of my colleagues did just that...but...oh, what a treat!

The Senegalese wrestling match that I witnessed was nothing what I had imagined. *Everything* took place outside on the ochre-colored grounds of Toubacoute. To begin with, there was non-stop drumming, singing and dancing during the entire event. *Laamb* is apparently a tradition among the Serer and was used in the past for a variety of purposes. For example, It was an exercise in preparation for the warrior class depending on the particular technique. It was also used as an initiation rite among Serer men, and also for the young men to court perspective wives. This particular match lasted approximately two-hours. There were two or three women who sang throughout the entire event while drummers maintained the musical

rhythms for the wrestlers who danced around the perimeter of the open ring-space. I later learned that the particular dancers were also the actual wrestlers preparing for their upcoming match. In other words, the dancing was a type of preparation. As the dancer-wrestlers passed by members of the audience, they would gesture for particular audience members to join them in the dancing. This was all very interesting and really excited my senses--- a perfect first experience! The sought-after-prize at this particular event was a large sack of rice for the winner. It is my understanding that there are more formal and professionally organized matches where the stakes are higher with monetary gains. Since the 1950's this wrestling has become a national sport with recognized Senegalese champions who earn sizable purses for participating in the sport.

The most amazing realization for me during this match was that the wrestlers were not focused on hurting one another; not interested in injuring the opponents' pride or self-esteem. The main objective apparently was to pin or throw the opponent to the ground by lifting him up and over, usually outside a particular area. If any part of the body except the hands or feet touched the ground, the match which lasted no longer than a few minutes were over. Apparently this nationally beloved sport is a favorite of the youth and in pro wrestling, there are some theatrics although unlike that in North America (www.bradtguides.com). Once again, the Senegalese never ceases to amaze. There was no mention of this while I was Senegal, but apparently now there are women entering the sport.

[Women Wrestling](#)

