

## The Women of Toubacouta

By: Badiyyah Waajid



Traveling to Toubacouta was a real opportunity to interact with the Serer women of Senegal. This was a long bus ride approximately seven hours away from Dakar. On the way, we were invited to stop for lunch at the village home of the director of our host agency. Upon arrival at the lovely home, we were greet warmly by family and friends, before being ushered into a very spacious area where lunch would soon be served. We sat on mats on the floor while being served large platters of traditional foods. This was an opportunity for many in our group to have their first traditional meal; seated around a platter, eating with hands. I was seated around a vegetable platter with others who chose to eat vegetarian.

As we finished our meal, we moved outside to thank the kind women who had prepared and served our meals and with the help of our guide were able to make our “thanks” known. By this time, however, we observed the women and girls gathering to sing and dance using traditional items such as gourds and pans---beginning to make beautiful drumming music. Suddenly something magical happened! Although we spoke different languages, the music began to unite us as one. I began to observe a pattern to this merriment---the music would begin, everyone would sing repetitive lyrics, then

one or two would dance as the others sang, laughed and had fun being supportive. Within no time we were all involved in the fun. When it was my turn, the ladies chanted my name for me to join in the dance as one grabbed my hand and led me to the center to dance with her. By the time our bus was ready to leave, it was as if we were old friends. What an experience---becoming friends without being able to have a conversation.

On day two in Toubacouta, I joined the group for a boat ride; first through the mangrove and then to Sippo Island to meet the Queen of Sippo. *In the Mangrove* is a term I have seen used in literature, but for the first time I truly understood the meaning due to my experience in the waters of Toubacouta, approximately seven hours away from Dakar. Somehow I had not realized that a single *mangrove* is a type of tree, and that these trees grow in cluster in the waters all around the world. In Toubacouta...groves and groves of them can be reached only using boats. As we rode through the mangrove on this day, our very knowledgeable guide explained that the women of Toubacouta come in their boats to the mangrove, prepared to stay for approximately three days at a time to harvest honey and oysters. Bees live in the leafy part of the grove and produce the honey used for these families. Oysters cling to the bark of these trees as the tides go in and out, leaving a tremendous supply for the women to collect. The cooked oysters are a delicacy for family meals and the shells are ground for practical uses. It has not taken me long to learn that Africans are not a wasteful people. A lesson to be learned.



As with everything else I have experienced while in Senegal, riding through the mangrove in the boat was extremely peaceful. It was quiet and the beauty was astounding as the boat captain pointed out various types of fish near the boat and birds lighting high in the mangrove trees. I could almost imagine the peace of camping out in a boat for three days...harvesting honey and oysters.

After our boat ride through the mangrove, the real treat was getting to meet some of the women who lived on the Island of Sippo. Our boat dropped us off near the tall piles of oyster shells; evidence of the oyster harvesting. The children of Sippo Island ran to greet us. Using my limited Wolof, I was able to greet them, ask their names and tell them mine. They walked with us to the home of the Queen of Sippo, who we soon learned through our guide and interpreter was an 86 year old matriarch whose grandfather was one of the first to arrive on what was then an uninhabited island; coming from Guinea Bissau during the war. When we arrived, the queen attired in beautiful traditional clothing was on her porch surrounded by island women and children. She welcomed us with open arms and invited us into her home where she spoke in Woloff, through our guide and interpreter. She kissed each of us on our cheeks as we were allowed to take plenty of photos with her as she shared her history. Throughout this process she seemed to have a particular motherly fondness for one member of the group whose hand she held for the entire time we were there.

Perhaps she was reminded of someone who had been close to her...a daughter...grand daughter?

We had other experiences on this island before docking for our picnic. There were women who had luscious gardens and made items from their harvest, as well as vendors who sold jewelry and other items of interest.

On the bus ride back to Dakar, we stopped for our visit to a school. As we approached, the teachers and para-professionals were waiting outside the school to welcome us. How surprised we were to see our new friends---the ladies who led us in dancing and singing two days before. It was like old-home day as we ran towards one another and hugged as if we had known one another for years. Yes, my friends from Toubacouta. I will not soon forget you!

Learn more about [Toubacouta](#).