

Fulbright Hays GPA Senegal Week Two

Toubacouta – July 6, 2017

This weekend we traveled southeast, heading to Toubacouta, where we would spend the weekend at the Hotel Keur Saloum, located along the Saloum River Delta in west central Senegal north of the Gambia border. This region is inhabited by the Serer people, the third largest ethnic group in Senegal, and is the location of two former ancient kingdoms founded by the Serer—the Sine and the Saloum. The father of Leopold Senghor, Senegal’s first president after independence, was Serer, though Senghor was born in the small fishing village of Joal, near Dakar. The Director of WARC (West African Resource Center), Professor Ousmane Sene, has promised to join us in Toubacouta, and our itinerary includes a stop for lunch in Sokone, his family home.



The long drive gives us a chance to experience the diversity of Senegal’s landscape—the groves of massive, expressive baobab trees (one of the nation’s symbols), the expanse of farmland that grows greener as we move southward, and the rolling savannah. Outside the air-conditioned bus, the temperature rises as we travel inland. When we stop in Sokone, we are hot and hungry, eager to stretch our legs. We receive a warm welcome from Professor Sene’s brother and his family.

Enticing aromas waft through the warm air. We do not see the women in the compound as they prepare our mid-day meal, but before long we are presented the fruits of their labor as they bring in large silver platters of the Senegalese traditional dish, thieboudienne or *chebujen* in Wolof (fish and rice). In small groups on mats, we eat in the communal fashion that we have learned about in Wolof class, scooping rice, vegetables and fish from the area of the platter in front of us. (Reaching across to retrieve food from the center is considered poor manners.) The centerpiece of *chebujen* is *thiof*—the Wolof name for grouper. It is both a plentiful and iconic ingredient of the Senegalese diet.



Versions of the national dish that we have previously tasted in Dakar have been merely poor imitations, for the dish is absolutely divine.

After the meal, beating on drums and large pots, the women issue a rhythmic call to join in traditional dancing and merrymaking. In our response, the heat is easily forgotten. When we climb back on the bus, we easily finish our journey—our bellies full, hearts overflowing with the warmth bestowed upon us, and spirits invigorated. Our destination comes quickly.