

Student from Senegal experiences the differences between the myths and the realities of American culture

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Contributor

He wanted to improve himself as an intellectual while also "following that myth" of what it is like to be in America. He left his homeland, his family of six brothers and sisters, mother and father, and his friends behind as he boarded the airplane for a seven-hour flight from Dakar, Senegal, to New York City, NY.

Babacar M'Baye came to the United States last year to be a French teaching assistant at Ursinus College while earning a master's degree in American literature and civilization. He completed his bachelor of arts in American Studies at Universite de Saint Louis, Senegal.

When he first arrived at Ursinus College, M'Baye wanted to connect with his students but "had trouble finding an attention-getter." People had misconceptions about Africa and African people and cultures. By wearing clothes, bracelets and sharing his music from Senegal, more people began to talk to him and open up.

As he began to interact with Americans, he wanted to "avoid a cultural faux pas" because the U.S.A. has different values," than his

own. By sharing their cultures and values, M'Baye said he showed his friends that Africans do not live in trees, and he learned that not all Americans are cowboys.

M'Baye blames the media for misconceptions between the two continents. The Senegalese view NBC, ABC, and CNN regularly, and are exposed to much of the same advertising as we are.

He smiled and said, "If you come to my house, I would offer you a Coca-Cola and a Marlboro [cigarette]. This is what TV teaches us."

The educational system in Senegal is much different from that of the United States. "In Africa, the professor is like a king. You would never challenge him," said M'Baye. Professors are also independent, and will fail a student if they feel it is necessary, he said.

The courses and requirements are different from U.S.A. programs. African students cannot take courses outside of their discipline, which is the opposite of American universities. In addition, while studying in the United States, students may participate in internships which are not normally offered in Africa.

While he was defending his first master's thesis

at Ursinus College, M'Baye applied to the University of Richmond and the Pennsylvania State University to earn his second master's in American studies. Upon being accepted at both, he chose Penn State University because, "Penn State is famous in the world." With the opportunity to go to a superpower, as he described it, he arrived in Middletown in August.

His friends in Senegal recognized the name and were jealous that he would be studying there. They see America as a superpower, with the most important language in the world.

"You cannot be in this world and not hear of America," M'Baye reflected.

With this opportunity, he got the chance to experience what he is studying firsthand. "There is a myth of America, a hardworking spirit and patriotism that I wanted to be a part of."

Although American media does portray the U.S.A. as the TV show "Dallas," he has seen the differences. M'Baye conveyed that some of those differences are the people and their social habits.

In Africa, when you greet someone on the street, or out socially, it is a much longer interaction, asking

about yourself, the other, your mother, the other's mother, your father, the other's father, and your additional family members. He has found, that a "Hi, how are you?", "Fine, and you?" is the extent of a cordial greeting in the U.S.

French is the official language in Senegal. The dominant local language of Saint Louis, where M'Baye's home is, is Wolof. M'Baye is fluent in French, which he learned in school, Wolof, his mother's native tongue, Pulaar, his father's native language, and English and Spanish, which he learned in high school. Swahili is the only African written language, which he also has learned.

According to M'Baye, Dakar is the New York City of Africa. If someone wants to come into Africa, they must travel into Dakar first. It is the "opening door to Africa," he said.

Other differences that M'Baye has found include the social attitudes of those in Africa versus those in America. There is no racism in Africa, where there is much here. "Race is such a big deal here," he said, "and many people share the idea of Pat Buchanan."

In addition, polygamy,

which is having more than one wife, is a common practice in Senegal and with the Muslim people. More wives equals more children, which equals more wealth, because there are more hands to help in the fields. The tradition in Africa is "work," and more children add to the possibility of being immortalized, to carry one's name on.

M'Baye said that unfortunately, some take advantage of the Muslim traditions, and have many wives all over the country. M'Baye considers this terrorism. He says that the men who practice polygamy and do not have jobs or fields or businesses are taking advantage of a tradition and belief system.

After this year, Babacar M'Baye plans to return to his homeland of Saint Louis, Senegal to teach at a university. With the



photo by Debbi Mallek

completion of two American studies master's, and a B.A. in American studies, he feels he may teach the youth more about America. If he doesn't get a job with a university, he would like to work for an international organization.

"In my country, so much is Americanized, but people do not understand this culture. If you go out to a club in Senegal and cannot rap dance, you are not respected. I will never get away from the American culture, because it is all over the world. But now, with my degrees, I have a better understanding."



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