

Death of a Chief

I am at the Dulles airport Delta check-in counter frantically searching through my purse for my airline ticket. A sick feeling rises up inside me. I dig through my other carry-on bag, but it's not there. My ex-husband, Papis, watches me patiently. We're about to fly to back to Senegal, West Africa via New York City to be at his dying father's bedside.

"You'll have to go on without me. I'll catch up to you in Dakar."

"No," he responds calmly, "we'll stick together."

In the old days, there would have been harsh words and tears. No longer married, our egos disentangled, there is no reason for conflict. I manage to get my boyfriend on the phone and he rushes to the airport with my ticket. Papis and I miss our scheduled flight out of Washington, D.C., but catch a later one and make it to New York just in time for our connecting flight to Senegal. I feel lucky.

On the plane, my thoughts turn to Papis' father, Souleymane Goudiaby, chief of the village of Belaye. Even though he is 103 years old, I can't believe he is dying. *Le Pere*, as everyone calls him, seemed to be immortal. Year after year in his nineties I visited him in the humid, palm-tree-laden village of Belaye and found him in good health with all his mental faculties intact.

He would often tell me in Jola, "I'm old...very old. If you ever hear in America, that I am sick or have died. Do not be afraid or feel you must rush back to Belaye. It is okay."

Now the moment was approaching. Everyone in Belaye was in a panic, because Le Pere had been chief for sixty years, and no one could imagine the village without him. Who could replace this great, universally loved leader?

For the past ten years Le Pere had encouraged the village to choose a new chief. Though still capable, he was tired of the responsibilities and it was difficult for him to travel, so he thought it was time for a younger person to take over. But each time he raised the subject, the villagers' response was,

"You choose someone for us."

"No, if I choose someone and later on you are unhappy with my selection, you will curse me in my grave. I've seen it before. It is you who will live with the new chief and you who must choose."

And that was that. Now, Le Pere was on his deathbed and still no one could decide on the next chief.

No one was using the "D" word but all the Goudiabys were slowly gathering in the village to be near Le Pere. His oldest son Omar, a nurse, traveled from the north of Senegal a month ago and was prepared to stay in Belaye until the end. So when my ex-husband called me and said we needed to go, I agreed without hesitation to return to Senegal.

I am glad to be on the plane with Papis, but a little frightened about the state in which we will find Le Pere.

My own father died nine years ago. When I finally arrived at his hospital bedside, he was no longer able to talk. I immediately dissolved in a puddle of tears at the foot of the

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bed. He managed to eek out the words, “Don’t cry.” Those were his last words to me. He died a few days later of acute mysoletic leukemia.

In African communities, there is great pressure to maintain composure under difficult circumstances. With all the hardships people continually face, it just wouldn’t do if everyone burst into tears on a regular basis. I would try not to cry at Le Pere’s bedside; at least not in front of the others.

I accept a glass of wine from the flight attendant. It helps calm my nerves. I am looking forward to seeing the Goudiaby family, especially Papis’ 30 -year-old brother Moussa. I’ve known Moussa since he was twelve years old. He used to taunt and mock me when I was a Peace Corps volunteer living with his family. My insecurity, made his teasing hard to take. Though I couldn’t admit it at the time, I was a lousy development worker. Having grown up in the suburbs of Chicago, subsistence farming was never one of my fortes. I’d never planted anything in my life. What advice could I give to people who had been growing rice and peanuts for generations?

What I lacked in agricultural knowledge, I tried to make up for in human relations. I loved the Goudiaby family and made many friends in the village. I followed all the social protocol, which involved a lot of handshaking and extensive greetings to people you saw nearly every day. “Relationship before task,” was the underlying rule. Only problem was, I never really got to the task.

I did learn to play the kora, a twenty-one stringed instrument, and sang songs to the family in their language, called Jola. I bought colored chalk and drew pictures on the front porch with my little “brothers and sisters,” and I played fifties tunes on my boombox and taught the kids how to do the twist. As one Peace Corps volunteer used to say,

“Let’s face it. We’re just here to entertain these people for a couple of years.”

Despite my failure to work with the village on meaningful development projects, Souleymane Goudiaby, chief of the village, aka Le Pere, adored me. He made it clear to everyone in the village that I could do no wrong and that I always told the truth. If anyone criticized me, Le Pere always took my side. Papis, who 12 years later would become my husband, once told me,

“My father has an exaggerated idea of your being.”

It was true and something I never understood. Why did Le Pere think so highly of me? He was respected and loved far beyond the borders of Belaye. Stories of his wisdom, clairvoyance, good humor and diplomacy were widespread. Never did I hear an ill word spoken of Souleymane Goudiaby. That I should be the recipient of his respect and unconditional love was a blessing and a gift of immeasurable magnitude.

One night 20 years ago when I was still a Peace Corps volunteer, after the family and I had eaten an unsatisfying meal of rice and minnows for dinner, we were lying outside the decaying mudbrick house on mats woven from palm fronds. Gazing up at the sky full of stars unhindered by any electric lights, I asked Le Pere what heaven was like. He responded in Jola.

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“It is a place of great beauty, very green with flowing streams and fountains and plenty to eat. All the needs you have are met. You see all your friends and relatives who have died. Everyone is kind to each other... but, I don’t suppose you believe any of that, do you?”

“Well, I don’t really know ... I suppose not.”

“You don’t need to believe it. You can get everything you want in this life.”

It wasn’t the first time Le Pere surprised me with his insight. Although he rarely strayed beyond the borders of Belaye, he was incredibly knowledgeable about the world. His short wave radio was never far from his side. He took great interest in international affairs, and no doubt would have been an excellent ambassador or head of state had he been given an education and the opportunity.

His diplomatic efforts in Belaye kept the village from being torn apart in an ongoing rebellion that ravaged the southern region of Senegal, called Casamance. The rebellion started in 1985, when a group called the MFDC declared an independent Casamance. The Jola ethnic group had suffered more than one injustice at the hands of the Senegalese government based in the north of the country. They were tired of seeing their houses razed and their farmland stolen so that fancy tourist hotels could be constructed.

The ensuing “rebellion” was badly managed and poorly organized. The Jola villagers ended up being squashed between the rebels and the government forces. Government soldiers would appear in a village in search of rebels and question frightened villagers. Some villagers would give up names of people who may or may not have been connected to the rebellion. The government forces would then pursue those individuals, often torturing or killing them.

In turn, the rebels would descend on the same village asking for names of people who had denounced their members. They would then search for and kill the tattlers. Le Pere abhorred the tactics of both the government forces and the rebels. He counseled the villagers of Belaye on more than one occasion not to take sides.

“We have been rice farmers for generations. We know nothing about the rebellion. I have never seen a rebel. We don’t speak to the soldiers. We don’t speak to the rebels. We just go about our business as farmers.”

It was a simple concept, but it worked. Although some houses were burned by a drunken soldier and village shops looted by rebels, no one in Belaye lost their life in the rebellion.

Le Pere’s position was not popular with everyone. Shortly after a local radio broadcast in which Le Pere expressed his non-confrontational approach, a rumor spread that the rebels were going to kill him for not taking their side. For several months, Le Pere spent every night sitting on a chair with a rifle on his front porch. A non-violent man in every sense, he reserved the right to protect himself and his family.