

Rosalie Sanyang
Fatou - en syster i Gambia



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Preface

This is neither a documentary nor a biography. Names of people and places have from time to time been replaced and mixed for reasons of safety, in order to complicate comparisons with real people.

But everything in the book really happened, although not necessarily exactly in the way it was described. This is my personal interpretation of what I have heard, seen, read and experienced, which has become a story of a fictional Fatou with an ingredience of a real background.

As the writer I put the words in the mouths of the characters in the book and I alone am responsible for everything that is said or described in the book.

I want to thank:

The PRO College of Gysinge for arranging a writing class for seniors. Without that experience I would never have dared to write a book.

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But above all, I want to thank "Fatou" and all the sisters and friends in the Gambia for benevolently allowing me to share their everyday life.

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1. Home of Fatou

Fatou woke up in the morning as the rooster sang its usual cock-a-doodle-doo. The clock showed half past six. Fatou stretched her body and enjoyed the fact that she was alone in the bed. For the last week she had shared her bed with her sister Bintu and her two daughters.

- So I overslept today, did not even hear the call for prayer from the mosque. I guess I was too tired.

Fatou was a Muslim so she said her prayer several times a day, but seldom all five as was stipulated in the religion and the tradition. She put on a veil and found a mat and said her prayers.

There was often a mat big enough for many to use together. Even if each one said their prayers for themselves, Fatou liked to do it together with others. Before the prayer she performed ablution, that is she washed her hands, mouth, nose, face, head, ears and feet. All this was routine all the way back to her childhood. It gave her a moment of peace, which she did not want to be without. If she missed a prayer because she was busy, or like this morning, she used to add that prayer on the next occasion. Fatou knew that God was satisfied, if she simply did her best. She also tried that approach towards others.

Yesterday she worked late and before that she had bought a mattress for her sister Bintu, the same sister who moved in with Fatou a week

ago with her two children. Bintu's husband had beaten her once again. Fatou caught him red-handed. That is why Bintu could not deny facts this time as she had done so many times before. Fatou did not ask, but packed without hesitation, called for a taxi and ordered her sister to bring her children and then enter the car.

She threatened to humiliate the husband, if he did not leave his wife alone in future. She did not suppress her words, and explained in detail how she would humiliate him. He understood that she was dead serious. Then what had frightened him and held him back? She had said that she would tell his work mates that his wife had betrayed him. She made it clear to him that she knew some of them by name. She had lovers out of wedlock, as he was unable to perform in bed. He was probably not even the real father of the children. And now his wife had left him. The neighbours would laugh at him and call him a coward.

To tell the world about the abuse would mean nothing. Everybody knew that many men used force and acted violently to keep track of their families. This was something that was expected of men. If you could not keep track of your family and wives, how could you then be trusted with more important responsibilities at work, in the community or in society?

At Fatou's place, there also lived two children of one of her brothers. The brother was a security guard and had been stationed at a road security post far away, deep in the country. For the moment he had no possibility to take care of his sons, five and eight years old. His wife, the mother of the two children, had died a year earlier, when she was pregnant with their third baby.

Fatou's two daughters, sixteen and nineteen years of age, also stayed with her now. Fatou was happy that she had been able to take them home from an aunt, where they had stayed for many years.

Fatou had recently managed to get a contract on part of a compound

in Brikama. In the other part the landlord was living with his extended family. The compound was surrounded by a high wall, and outside the house somebody always washed clothes, cooked dinner, got children scrubbed clean in a tub or was making ataaya.

Ataaya was the tea, which was boiled and drunk ceremonially while chatting. The tea was boiled in a teapot made of metal with a spout and a small cap, standing on a rack over burning charcoal. On a tray there were usually two glasses. To get the right flavor the tea was poured repeatedly from one glass to another in a long beam, which made it foam vigorously in the glasses. The tea was drunk with plenty of sugar and the eldest male always got the first glass. Then they went down in rank and age. A plastic jug with water was always on hand to wash the glass thoroughly between each round. Fatou attended ataaya, as often as she could. Perhaps she was a little caffeine addicted. Also, it was always followed by a nice little chat, something she appreciated.

Fatou liked to have people around her. She wanted to exchange thoughts and experiences with everyone she met. She was quite short and slender, but she was noticed and heard as she moved along. She had bright eyes, was curious and despite all the hardships she often laughed.

It had not been easy for Fatou to find housing. No one wanted a single woman in the compound. She had heard many excuses. One said:

- There will surely be a lot of men running around here, and how will you be able to pay and do what you are supposed to as a tenant.

Another said:

- I have to think of the married men and not risk exposing them to the temptation of having an unmarried woman in the house.

But when Fatou paid six months' rent in advance, she managed at last. The money was given to her from a friend in Europe. She had

asked for it, degraded herself in order to take care of her family. She found herself lucky, having friends to turn to in an emergency like this, without having to rub someone else's back to return a favour.

Although she worked full-time, at uncomfortable working hours at the magazine with layout, the wages were not enough to pay for rent, food, commuting and school fees. The living costs were rising all the time but the wages were not. But the job gave her status and meaning in life. The magazine she worked for was independent but had close links to the opposition party, in which Fatou was an active member. She believed that popular education and party political organization were essential for Gambians in order to change their living conditions one day.

2. Childhood, adolescence and political awakening

When Fatou was only a few years old, her mother left her with one of her sisters, Fatou's aunt. Fatou did not remember her biological father at all from childhood. The mother came to visit every now and then, but the aunt and uncle became her parents, and gave her safety. They had no children of their own. Everybody in the community advised her uncle to find himself a second wife who could give him children, and assumed that it was his wife that was infertile. But he said:

- I am fully satisfied with the wife I have. If we do not get any children, we can always take care of someone else's child. There are plenty of children who need parental assistance everywhere. Fatou was the child they had been longing for.

It was an unusual home in the way that Fatou remained the only child. But also because there were neither harsh words nor violence between husband and wife. Surely, they discussed a lot, but they never quarrelled.

At school Fatou played a leading role. She was not taught to obey blindly like so many other children, but rather encouraged to ask, think and only then draw a conclusion. She gave a speech at school when representatives would be selected. She was never afraid to speak her mind. She knew her parents would listen to her and stand by her,

if she was wise.

A Swedish couple, on holiday in the Gambia, came in contact with Fatou at the time she was ready for high school. They paid her school fees in her first year of Nusrat High School. Her uncle paid, with great effort, for her second and third year. But then he died and Fatou had to quit school. She had only one year left to graduation.

At the age of 16 Fatou was now providing for both herself and her aunt who fell ill. She started working in the fields with the men, after she had been forced to leave school.

One day the landlord passed by on his horse. He asked the group leader something in English. Fatou understood and she answered the landlord's question. He looked wide-eyed at the young lady and asked her if she had gone to school.

- Yes, Fatou said.

- So why do you work out here he said, come with me and work indoors in my household instead.

Fatou did so and stayed for almost a year. There she found out about a newly started beekeeping project in a village nearby. She got interested and was able to start as a trainee. She showed curiosity and a sense of responsibility, and soon became an instructor for new employees. When the Cooperative Beekeeping Association through a development co-operation with the Danish Beekeepers Association needed a trainer, Fatou got her chance. For a couple of years she was employed and paid numerous visits to villages helping people to organize new beekeeping cooperatives.

Her older brother had been in contact with the political party PDOIS and one day he took Fatou to a party meeting in Serrekunda. Fatou liked what she heard and attended more meetings on her own. In 1994 Fatou turned twenty and her first daughter was one year old and spent most of the time in a piece of cloth on Fatou's back. The

authorities then announced plans to close all public water taps in the villages to be able to charge the people for water used. Resistance was mobilized and led by one Buba Sanneh where Fatou lived. Fatou took part in the demonstration, organized in Brikama. The seals of the water taps were broken up the night before, and the women were invited to fetch the water they needed. In the morning the youths gathered at a roundabout with banners and started chanting, as they marched to the regional office, responsible for the water supply:

- Jiyoo jiyoo moo kaanaa jiyoo sang.

Freely translated: Water for people without payment!

Some of the protesters and the leader Buba Sanneh were arrested.

Since those days Fatou has remained politically active.

But shortly after these protests some coup plotters within the military overthrew the president and came to power in the country. Since then, the leader of the coup, general Yahya Jammeh, has won the presidential elections four times and has ruled the Gambia with an iron fist for nearly two decades.

3. Clan-Community

When Fatou's biological mother was old needing help, she turned to Fatou, the family's solid rock, for help. Fatou did not have a very strong emotional attachment to her due to the fact that her mother had not brought her up.

- But you cannot leave an old woman who needs help, especially your biological mother, no matter what, Fatou said. She helped her mother to get care when she needed and paid for it.

- Who else should do it? she said.

As an adult, Fatou had resumed contact with her biological father. He was from a village in the coastal area of the country. As adults, Fatou and her siblings had been listed in the community in their father's clan, though not having grown up with him.

One day Fatou's dad said:

- There will soon be a clan meeting in our home village. I will arrive there before you, so I can pay your fee too.

- No you cannot, I will take care of it myself. I will be there on Friday when the meeting starts, Fatou said.

After the compulsory prayer, which is said in the beginning of every form of gathering in the villages in the Gambia, the Clan leader greeted all welcome back home. He talked initially about life conditions in

the village, thanked God that they were not affected by any epidemics. Malaria did not appear to be as severe as usual this year. But there had not been enough rain. This winter you will have to be prepared that we will run out of rice, he said. Everyone should try to cultivate as much cassavas, sweet potatoes and vegetables as they could and be careful not to slaughter their chickens or goats too early.

The assembled clan sat on plastic chairs and wooden benches in two rows in a large circle. They were probably close to 50, almost all men. But Fatou was not the only woman. There were a few others, including one traffic police officer who fairly recently had been widowed and therefore did not have anyone who spoke for her. She had not yet been persuaded to marry one of the brothers of her deceased husband, who lived in a neighbouring village. This was otherwise, the most common case when a married man died. The men at the meeting were of different ranks. A few of them were wealthy and influential. But most of them were poor, exposed to huge restrictions in their on-going efforts to cope with the responsibility as breadwinners of their large families. They all had a house, albeit some more resembled tiny ramshackle sheds. All of them had one or several wives and many children, and some had relatives and others living with them too.

The cashew nuts-, and mango trees which grew nearby, gave shade to one side of the circle while the other half sat in the sun and would still do so for another hour. But the sun was not too hot and did not trouble the participants especially. But the sunny side was filled last.

- Now we shall discuss common matters. Is there anyone who has something special on their mind that we should bring up? the clan leader asked.

Fatou took the floor. Her father loudly tried to make her refrain. She would embarrass them in front of everyone. But the clan leader said:

- Let's listen to what the young woman might have to say. It cannot

be so dangerous.

Her father twisted in his seat and looked down.

- Why is she always bringing herself to the centre of attention, he murmured.

Fatou said:

- I willingly pay my fees like everyone else which means you will have to treat me the same way that you treat others who pay, so before you do, there will not be a butut from me.

- What are you saying my dear child, said the clan leader staring with wide eyes at Fatou.

- You did assign land to my half-brother when he was just five years. But my widowed aunt, who is over 50 years, has never been given any land. She is forced to rely on the charity of others! You cannot continue this discrimination against women, if I am to belong to this clan. A large buzz erupted.

- Hey, nothing like this has ever been heard before at a clan meeting.

- You marry the women so that they have somewhere to stay.

- You can show pity and marry up to four wives if necessary, and make sure they get a roof over their head.

- It is not for women to live alone.

And it continued like this.

But then the clan leader said:

- There is something important in what she is saying. We have to listen to this. It is definitely an issue we need to address and think about in the future. The buzz continued.

But now it was said! So let's follow up with this issue from now on, Fatou thought to herself. She felt this proved that change is possible, if you only believe in it enough and do not give in to other people's power or traditions.

4. Forty years old and unmarried

Fatou was now 40 years old. She knew her date of birth from her childhood clinic/maternal card that was presented to the headmaster the day she was taken to school. It was when her aunt and uncle, who took care of her, thought it was time for it. She was lucky to get her exact date of birth, unlike many in her generation who would only get estimated birthdates.

The thing with a particular birthday was not so important. Fatou had never celebrated an annual birthday and never visited someone else's. Later in life when Fatou needed an ID or an electoral card, she went to the immigration office with her birth certificate but many of her generation who did not have birth certificates had to go and see the Alkalo, the village head, in their native village. He affirmed in writing that they were born there and to what parents. After presenting that to the authorities, they were able to get their ID card or electoral card. In the villages they kept the information about everyone who was born in the extended families by oral communication.

On one occasion when Fatou visited her native village to attend an old friend's wedding, there were two special wedding women who performed songs several times at the party. They sang about family history and circumstances of the two families who were to be united by the

wedding. The songs went way back in generations. The women had a simple form of megaphone in front of their mouths so everyone could hear them and they were highly praised and received a lot of money from the wedding guests in appreciation of their singing.

But Fatou was not married. At her age that was very unusual. This was absolutely not because of lack of interested men, but she valued her freedom more. She had two adult daughters. The eldest one was almost twenty years old. Fatou had been deeply in love with the father of her first child. However, he was not so interested in family life at that time. Fatou cried in solitude and found it difficult to repress the feelings he brought to life within her. She was not yet twenty years old. He disappeared and left her with the child. A year later a handsome young man courted her. He was caring and Fatou's daughter was so happy in his company. He took care of the baby, changed diapers, bathed her and played with her. He even cooked sometimes. He's a real mother's dream Fatou's mother said, and encouraged the relationship. He already had a wife. But he promised Fatou that he would have plenty of time together with her too. Fatou accepted. They had another daughter. Fatou tried to live as his second wife for about a year.

But she soon realized, when the first wife started attacking her, that the man gave her one version and quite another to his first wife. Fatou took to the nearest social authority. The husband also attended. Fatou did not want to be married to someone who was not telling the truth. The divorce was confirmed and it was decided that he should pay 100 dalasi per month. He did so for a year but then money stopped coming.

Fatou, however, ensured that her daughters regularly met their fathers while growing up.

They should know where they come from, she claimed.

Many men courted her over the years but she could never trust any of them. After these experiences in her younger days, she had chosen

to live alone and free. A Gambian man, who lived in the United States, tried to charm Fatou. She was somewhat interested, but when he explicitly stated that she was difficult to control, she simply agreed.

- If you want a wife that you can easily control, then I am not the right one for you and that was the end of the thoughts of him.

The past year an elderly gentleman, about 75 years old, made several courtships to her through a mutual friend.

He already had three wives, one of whom was very young. Fatou had politely but firmly stated that she was not interested. But he did not give up. Fatou told their mutual friend:

- Well let me see him then so we can end this parody.

They met in a café. He entered in a freshly washed and ironed bright kaftan and smelled of eau de cologne.

Fatou spoke:

- What do you want from me? How have you imagined that you, old man, should be able to satisfy all four of us sexually? Of course you cannot. And if I took a lover into the house you would be really upset. And please realize that you are old. You will die soon. What do you think people would say? Well they would blame me, the latest wife, to have killed you. They will accuse me of bringing bad luck and rumour would spread rapidly, and after that no one would want to see me or associate with me. Is this what you want to offer me?

The man could hardly take in what he heard. This was too much! Speechless he got up and walked away. She never heard from him again. He probably had the notion that she would have been happy that someone like him took pity on her, this unmarried poor woman.

Fatou's life experiences had strengthened her self-esteem and confidence. She told her friends that she could not conform to a traditional Gambian marriage. She could not, and did not, want to live as oppressed as she felt that many married women were inclined to do in the Gambia.

And she thought that the husbands' families interfered in the men's lives to a large extent. The ordinary Gambian men were independent and nothing to rely on and share responsibility with, she thought.

- No, I'd rather stay single and struggle for myself, even if I miss being embraced sometimes, she said, when someone wondered how she had been able to remain unmarried.

5. Jainaba

One day Fatou's friend Satou came to her home for an important matter. Satou was only a couple of years younger than Fatou. They were both active party members and shared many experiences and common memories.

Satou was like Fatou, in many ways, but she was married to a man who lived abroad. He came to visit her once or twice a year, often leaving Satou pregnant upon departure, like this time. Satou already had three children, two boys and one girl, with her husband. He sent her money to purchase food and other necessities for the family. Satou ensured that the children got good education, good living conditions and the food they needed. She felt safe that her husband would provide the children with vocational training when they became old enough. She and her husband mostly communicated by text messages.

The two friends went into Fatou's room. No one else was allowed to join in. The unpainted concrete walls of the room were covered in colourful cloth curtains, suspended on strings. It gave the room a warm and cosy atmosphere.

The two women sat on Fatou's bed. In addition to the bed the room was only furnished with a small table with storage drawers under the tabletop, a few boxes and bags of clothes, shoes and other personal

gadgets like wigs and jewellery.

Fatou always wanted to be neat and fresh in public. Her own hair was thin, short and curly. When she was not wearing straightened headgear in the same fabric as the dress, she often wore a wig. But on this day she was free, had no wig, the hair was gathered in a small thin tassel neck and she was wearing long pants.

The two friends had spoken on the phone. A third friend, the younger, Jainaba was pregnant for the first time. Now halfway through the pregnancy she had sharp stomach pains.

She had screamed loudly in pain so her parents had finally taken her to a doctor, in their old home village up-country. But the parents had no money to pay for her treatment. This was what the two friends had to discuss. Satou presented an idea to use the money belonging to their theatre group. Fatou first hesitated and asked, isn't that theft? They discussed for a while and finally agreed that they would borrow money from the theatre group, where Jainaba was also a member. Fatou and Satou were the two signatories for the account. They calculated and promised each other to take part of their own salaries and pay back every month, according to a detailed plan. The money should be needed in the account again after the rainy season when they would set up a new play. They went to the bank, withdrew the money and called Jainaba's parents and told them that they had raised some money for Jainaba. They were told that Jainaba had been very weak the day before. Her father had immediately called the doctor and told him that they would bring the money. The doctor promised to do what he could, but he was unsure of the outcome.

Jainaba had recently married Lamin, a policeman, who already had a wife. The first wife was living with him in the police quarters and Jainaba and her children were to have their own place. The house was not far from her parents' home in Serrekunda. Jainaba was twenty-five

years old. She came from a strictly religious and traditional family, and was one of the few, in the social circle to wear the veil. Otherwise Jainaba was equally candid and open to change as her lady friends. She was the leader of children's activities in their neighbourhood. In a local association, she organized and led both football teams and theatre groups for kids. The association had managed to form a partnership and an exchange with a child and youth association in Sweden. This had resulted in management training as well as the renting of a clubhouse. This really had pleased Jainaba. Now, the work with the children could continue even if she eventually would be forced to move.

Jainaba's parents nagged at her, claiming that she was too old to live at her parents' for no use. They were of the opinion that she had to get married not to disgrace her family and not to be a burden for them, now that she was getting older.

Petty trade, buying and selling whatever was being asked for, was the common commercial exchange in the area, including for Jainaba. Finally, she had acquired a market stand as second partner and managed to make a small amount of money for her family. But it was not enough. As for jobs, she had never succeeded in getting any employment.

When Lamin, the handsome policeman, approached Jainaba's father to show his interest in her, he was extremely happy to meet with Lamin's wish. Jainaba's father had been a good friend of Lamin's deceased father and moreover, it was not a day too soon she was married. She had not the strength to resist. They married and she immediately became pregnant.

Jainaba's parents explained to Fatou and Satou that Lamin said that he could not leave the police quarters, only to visit Jainaba because of her problems with the pregnancy. Therefore Fatou and Satou decided to accompany their parents to visit the sick Jainaba the next day. They

were shocked, Jainaba had a high temperature and she was delirious and weak, tears running down her cheeks and looking emaciated.

- There is unfortunately nothing else we can do, the doctor said. And Jainaba died that night, with her two friends and her parents watching over her.

The husband never came to visit. But six months later he asked to marry Jainaba's younger sister. But this time the parents said no. He married another young woman replacing Jainaba.

Fatou and Satou could never forgive him. And they discussed for a long time what they could have done more to help Jainaba to resist her parents' demands to marry. They wanted to be better prepared next time a woman in their neighbourhood would need their support to be able to choose her own path in life.

6. A neighbouring woman is visiting

Fatou had just come home from work. She was sweaty and dusty, after the journey in the overcrowded bush taxi from Serrekunda. She had not had time to wash herself yet. As soon as she entered the yard, one of her daughters approached her. She wondered if Fatou had money for a new bag of rice, as she had used up what was left in the old one.

At the same time someone was pounding on the grey metal gate. A woman slowly opened the gate and peered inside. Fatou recognized her as the neighbour a few houses away. She had a baby in a cloth on her back and a two-year-old by the hand. The little one, trying to follow her steps, was snotty but did not complain. The small one at her back had fallen asleep to the rhythm of her mother's steps.

The sun was setting and soon it would be pitch-dark a couple of hours before the moon would rise again. Now there was almost a full moon, so the night would not be totally dark. People, goats, monkeys and other animals would not become invisible in the darkness this coming night as they did the nights when the crescent moon was narrow. But one or two hours, until the moon rose, it would be so dark that you could pass both people and animals up close without discovering them.

Fatou invited her to sit down on one of the cement blocks that stood

in a small group in the yard and placed herself on another. An evening breeze caused rattle in the dry palm leaves outside the wall.

The woman heaved a deep sigh and said:

- I cannot give birth to one child every year any longer. This is my fourth child in five years. I'm so tired.

Fatou talked to her about various types of contraception she knew of.

- No, my husband would never ever agree, the neighbour said. God decides if and when to have children. It is God's gift. My husband always says people should not try to intervene.

- But, Fatou said, now it's about your life and your body. You already have four children, who need you in order to survive. I can accompany you to the health centre to get you some medication preventing you from getting pregnant for at least a few months anyway. That will give you time to recover.

- Tomorrow, I will not start working until late in the afternoon. So when your husband has left the house tomorrow morning, come here. Do you agree?

- Yes that would be nice. But, what if he finds out that I have been there with you?

- He does not need to know. Let it be our secret. I can take care of your health card. And if someone should tell him that you were there, we could say that I came with you to have you tested for malaria since you had such headache and felt sick. But you were healthy, a little tired, that's all. Ok? After those soothing words, the woman from the neighbourhood thanked Fatou and said goodbye.

Fatou was happy that her daughter Ami had been present during the conversation with the neighbour woman. One of the big problems was, according to Fatou, the silent female culture. Women kept silent and suffered far too much, she thought. There was rarely room for a woman to be angry, sad, or even engaged in her personal problems.

She was always expected to be supportive to others, especially towards her husband who otherwise would find another new affectionate wife. He was eagerly supported in this matter by his extended family and friends. A troublesome wife was never ranked high. Fatou appreciated this opportunity of being able to show good examples of how women may help and support each other. Reality was so much more educative than just words.

Now they could continue their conversation. Fatou felt that she wanted to excuse her suggestion to tell a lie. Since the daughters were toddlers Fatou taught them always to tell the truth.

- You know Ami, she said to her daughter, everyone is not susceptible to rapid changes and when an individual woman cannot wait for her man's maturity without damage, you must be able to use a white lie if it helps, I think.

- Please, Mom, you do not need to explain such an obvious thing to me. You cannot be a fundamentalist and you should not sacrifice another human being for your principles, however important they are for you. You did the right thing mother, as always. I am proud of you!

Fatou had put some money aside for a new bag of rice as she figured out that it would soon be time to replenish the supply. She felt an immense joy in being able to give Ami the 1200 dalasi, the price for a bag of rice nowadays. Prices increased all the time but without wages following at the same pace. But now there was not much money left in her palm. She was thinking, maybe she should buy a sack of wonjo-flowers in the market tomorrow and cook the juice, sell it and try to get the household money to last longer. She had quite a number of pet bottles now, collected during the last few months wherever she saw one.

7. On the way home at night

On a late night Fatou was on her way home to Brikama from work in Serrekunda, as usual in a bush taxi. Serrekunda was the Gambia's largest city with more than 300,000 inhabitants. Brikama was the second largest city with perhaps 100,000. The distance between the cities was about thirty kilometres but the settlements of the cities were slowly growing closer to each other.

The forest area between them had shrunk over the years. There was, however, a small area of rice fields and mango trees in an old river valley and a small forest around the airport. But most villages along the road had grown together. This was the busiest road in the Gambia. North of Serrekunda the road continued to Banjul, the capital city at the mouth of the River Gambia. South of Brikama the road led to Cassamance in southern Senegal. In Brikama the road east through the country's rural areas along the southern riverbank, also began. Brikama was additionally the main town of the entire west coast region - Kombo South. Nevertheless, there were only a small number of multi-store buildings in Serrekunda, and yet none in Brikama. The vast majority of the buildings were built of sand and cement, unpainted gray with corrugated iron roofs, each of them holding large numbers of people. Walls to keep snakes out surrounded most houses. During

the rainy season, there were many species of poisonous snakes slithering by everywhere.

- We have learned to live with them, but do not want them in our homes, Fatou used to say.

Young people from rural areas, moved to Serrekunda and Brikama each day in a never-ending migration. Mainly young men fled poverty and dreamt of better opportunities. Overcrowding was an issue in the cities. Therefore hospitality was a survival strategy. There was no social security system, thus one had to rely on each other's benevolence.

If you had to stay at another location, maybe for studies, you needed a big network. Often the extended family and its relatives were enough. Everybody carefully kept in touch with their relatives, and close friends, and helped them when needed. Of course they cared about each other but it was mainly regarded as a natural security system. Having a stranger living with you could result in a helping hand in everyday life and sometimes an extra income.

A bush taxi was an old minivan with benches where you sit packed like sardines. The buses were mostly old, decommissioned from Europe. The spring system was often completely worn out. Since a lot of people did not know how to read, there were no signs on the buses. Instead a young boy, commonly known as apprentice, made some noise and shouted out the final destination as soon as he saw people on the roadside. He also opened the door, charged the fare and helped passengers to stow their luggage in the bus or on the roof. Luggage might consist of big bowls, wrapped in pieces of cloth to keep the food warm, bags of vegetables, rice or dried fish, a living goat or really just about anything.

There were no bus stops other than at the main bus squares at the start and ending of the tour. A while before you wanted to get off, you simply told the apprentice to please stop at the next cross roads for

example. On the roadside passengers waved, if they wanted the van to stop.

Streetlights were sufficient near the airport and along the coastal road to the luxury hotels where international guests used to stay. On other roads, the black night surrounded drivers, passengers and pedestrians. In recent years, many villages had been provided with electrical wiring. Electricity comes from large diesel generators. All petrol, diesel and oil, were imported. Every now and then, often every day, power cut occurred for longer or shorter periods. You never knew why, sometimes for repairs sometimes because of lack of fuel. Sometimes there was no petrol, or diesel, at petrol stations, and all you could do was to wait.

Patience and tolerance in everyday life were what tourists often pointed out as astonishing.

- But what is the alternative? Fatou used to say.

This late evening the bush taxi, in which Fatou was travelling, was halted by a roadblock. These checkpoints were set up on all roads, more or less, depending on how the ruling government judged the necessity for various reasons on different occasions. Travellers should be certain that they were being monitored; the bus and the passengers' bags could be thoroughly searched at any time.

But this checkpoint's reflector standing on the road had an unusually weak light, so the driver discovered it too late and stopped after passing the reflector. The traffic policeman got angry. He saw it as negligence and as an insult and commanded the driver to park the bus and empty it of passengers.

Fatou was tired. She wanted to go home and sleep. She started discussing with the policeman. She said:

- Do you really mean that we should walk to Brikama in the dark? It's more than five kilometres. You cannot punish all of us! And by the

way, it was not the driver's fault but yours, because you have not enough light in your reflector!

- OK, the policeman eventually said to the driver. Give me your driving licence, bring them home to Brikama and come back here.

Once in the car, everyone, young and old, thanked Fatou for her courage and presence of mind. But Fatou replied:

- Do not thank me. I cannot be with you everywhere. You must begin to speak up and demand your rights yourselves, if you do not want to be pushed around all the time.

8. Apply for and obtain a passport

Fatou was invited to a conference in South Africa. The Palme Centre in Sweden organized a networking meeting in Cape Town for associations in Africa south of the Sahara, who collaborated with associations in Sweden. Fatou was elected to represent her organization, which collaborated with ABF and S-women Jämtland, Sweden. Therefore, she needed a passport. In good time before the trip, she went to the immigration department. She was told that they were out of passports. She should come back, they said. She did so, week after week, only to be told the same thing over and over. But one day she saw a man coming out of the immigration department with a new passport in his hand. Then she understood. There really were passports. It was a matter of paying bribes to get one of course. The officers had very low wages, like most others, she thought, so apparently they acted like many others and tried to earn a little extra on the side. Fatou went back inside. In vain she tried to talk to the immigration officer. But then a man with a big stomach came down the stairs from the upper floor. That stomach indicates that he is a man of importance, Fatou thought, and when he went upstairs again, Fatou slipped through the door before it closed. She told him what she had witnessed and she demanded her civil right to obtain a passport and that she had no intentions whatsoever to pay

more than the required amount.

- I am not leaving without my passport because I know it has been processed, so if I don't receive it, you should know that I will invite journalists and inform them about my observations here, she threatened.

In the end, the chief officer opened the door and called the junior officer and said:

- Give this woman her passport, so we can get some peace and quiet. She got her passport in the end, without paying extra.

The following Saturday Fatou came home from a meeting with some women from Brufurt that she tried to recruit to the party. The meeting had been successful. She had been able to answer their questions, and to give them name and telephone number to a female lawyer who could help them in an inheritance dispute. Fatou felt elated and delighted that she once again had met new sisters that were to become important in the struggle.

Her brother, who was a traffic security man, was sitting in the yard outside the house, in conversation with another man. When she got closer, she saw that it was the passport police officer, who finally had given her the passport. They were sitting drinking ataaya. When Fatou sat down with them, and had a glass of tea, and the brother introduced her as his sister, the visitor recognised Fatou from the immigration department, and said:

- But why didn't you say that you are Lamin's sister, if so we would have got you your passport immediately.

- Hey, it was not me, being a security officer's sister who needed a passport, but me, a Gambian citizen. Do you seriously mean that you have to be a relative of an officer to get a passport in this country?

She did not get any answer. The men made jokes and started talking about other matters.

- Damn, Fatou muttered to herself, always to have to fight like this against arbitrariness, nepotism, corruption, sexism and stupidity. But all is about popular education issues. You simply have to cope and not give up.

It is certainly not only the dictatorial president who is a problem in this country, the whole culture and the social pecking order need to be changed, she thought.

Kawsu, her sister's husband, interrupted her thoughts. He came into the yard accompanied by two other men. Kawsu wanted to speak to Fatou.

Fatou invited them to sit down on the cement blocks. Her brother offered them ataaya. It had been more than two months since Fatou had brought Bintu and their two children to her home after Kawsu had been beating his wife. The man explained that he wanted to apologize to Fatou and thank her for her resourceful intervention. He had had time to reflect and he deeply regretted his behaviour and he promised that he would be kind to his wife and children if they returned home. The two men in his company swore that he really wanted it undone. That he had missed his wife and children so much. They would also be available as neighbours thus ensuring security at her home, they certified.

- Now, you did not abuse me but my sister. If you really mean what you are saying, it is not me but her, you should ask for forgiveness. She is not at home today, but you can come back tomorrow Sunday. Then she will be here.

Kawsu and his two friends thanked her and left. They promised to come back the next day.

When her sister came home, Fatou and she talked for a long time. Fatou, who had participated in many conferences on violation against women, told her sister that statistically speaking, men who beat their

wives once statistically do not stop with that behaviour.

- So if you want to forgive him and move back home, you have to be prepared that you may be beaten up again. But you must not accept that. You need to put pressure on him and say that you will take the kids and leave for good, as soon as he starts fighting again. And then you must do so. You can always call me, I will pick you up, she concluded.

The sister was awake far into the night. But the next day Bintu accompanied her husband home.

9. The bus square in Sanyang

Fatou had been visiting a sick relative in Sanyang, a village not far from Brikama. She was waiting for a bush taxi at the bus station to go home. People were entering two bush taxis, the first one for Serrekunda and the second one for Gunjur. But the Brikama bus had not yet arrived. A large baobab tree was standing in the middle of the square. A small wooden bench was standing in the shade under the tree. This bench just became available. Fatou sat down. There was a lot to look at while sitting here. To the right, women in colourful clothes were selling bananas, melons, nuts, onions and tomatoes. Small children were playing next to the stalls. The smallest were in pieces of cloth on their mothers' backs. To the left a woman was sitting, making small fried dumplings with smoked fish mash inside, which she sold to people passing by. She also sold small plastic bags with half frozen juice out of a yellow plastic bucket with a lid. On the other side of the street, several yellow taxis were parked waiting for customers.

The main street, leading past the square, was lined with low sheds where different kinds of goods were sold and they also contained services of various kinds next to the street with ordinary homes behind them.

There was heavy traffic. Many cars had dents and scratches in the

paint. Sometimes they were repainted in different colours. The wheels were old and quite worn. These cars had been shipped in containers after they had done their duty in Europe, and had got a second life in the streets here. Now and then a donkey passed by, dragging a cart with a few long wooden planks or anything else that would not fit in a regular car. Large lorries also passed by. From the left came vehicles, heading for the main street from the beach, and they had two different types of cargo. Either they were filled with light sand that would be driven to on-going construction work throughout the country, where the sand would be mixed with cement and become building blocks. Or there was black sand, which would be exported to Europe to become components in the computer- and telecommunication industry. The sand came from a mine managed by Chinese people. The lorries coming from the right were empty, but some workers always sat on the platform at the back of the trucks. Many of them were underpaid migrant workers from neighbouring countries.

Between all those cars, schoolchildren dressed in school uniforms walked in groups, to and from school. The children went to school in shifts. Now in the middle of the day one group went from school and the afternoon group was on their way to school. Some free-range goats, strolled across the road, forcing cars to slow down. Damages on the road surface and speed absorbing bumps in the street kept the speed down here in the middle of the village.

There Fatou was sitting, listening to the familiar sounds of traffic, exclamations, hammering and the squeaking from a mechanical repair shop nearby, music from the video club, cackling hens, singing from small birds of various kinds, and loud conversations between people.

An older gentleman sat down next to her on the wooden bench.

- Have you heard what happened here today? He asked her.

- No

- Did you hear sirens in the morning?

- Yes, but I did not hear what it was all about.

- There was a bloke who died, he said. It was a tragic story. You know, at the sand pit in Hawba, down at the beach, there were a few vehicles that a bunch of workers were filling with sand. Then another lorry reversed beside the workers who were digging. Suddenly a man ran up behind the lorry and the driver did not see him. Some of the work mates waved and shouted to the driver, who got frightened, stopped and drove forward when he realized that something was in the way at the rear of the vehicle.

But it was too late. He had already run over the man when he reversed his vehicle and now when he drove forwards, he ran over him again. The man was so badly injured that he died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. He had seen a black cobra coming up out of the sand. That was what had frightened him and in his fear, he never noticed the reversing lorry. It was a poor worker from Guinea. Now his family will have to pay for the transportation to get their son home in a coffin, to the funeral. I just say, you never know what God has prepared for you. So be careful in traffic, dear lady, he said, when he caught sight of a friend. He got up and left with his friend, eagerly talking and waving his hands.

Fatou sat there thinking about the accident. She knew that the president owned some of the vehicles that drove the sand. She thought he should take responsibility for the transportation of the corpse to the victim's home. She was interrupted in her thoughts when she saw Mbaej coming around the corner on the way to the bus station. Mbaej was a young woman from Guntur, Fatou's hometown. Fatou knew several people in Mbaej's family, thus it pleased her to catch sight of her. Now she would be updated.

- Hey Mbaej, so good to see you! How are things with you and your

family?

- Oh everything's just fine with everyone. But what do you do here in Sanyang?

- I have visited an aunt who lives here. She is sick and I got her some honey. I tried to persuade her to go to the health centre to get an injection. I think she has pneumonia. But no, she did not. She thought it was enough with the bottle of ashy water and the blessings she received from her Marabou. They are hopeless reactionaries, these old villagers.

- Yes, they are certainly not easy to influence. Honey, yes, you were busy with beekeeping and went out helping village groups starting beekeeping, if I remember correctly. Do you still do that?

- No, I left that many years ago, but I continued with a few hives myself.

- I've just got married and moved to my husband in Sanyang, Mbaeij continued. We had an absolutely amazing wedding that lasted for two days with a large number of wedding guests. It was great fun.

- Oh, congratulations! Who is the lucky husband?

- Jibril, he is a teacher in Tanji just like me. We met at our school. And I'll continue working as a teacher. That was my condition.

- Oh, that makes me happy, Mbaeij. But what will happen when the children start coming?

- I have thought of that, believe me Fatou; we had one really great teacher in teachers' college. The boys giggled all the time when she talked about gender equality. But I took it to my heart. Now I am a teacher and I have learned about different contraceptive methods for birth control. I will only have two children. Then I know that I can take care of myself and not have to put up with things I would not like, like a new wife in the house, violence or other oppression but I can speak up and actually leave too, should it become necessary. With more children it would be difficult. So two will be enough for me.

Fatou gave Mbaej an appreciative hug and wished her all the best before Mbaej entered as the last passenger on the bush taxi to Gunjur where she would visit her mother.

Fatou was still sitting on the bench, when her minivan came. Passengers poured out with bags, packages and bundles they had brought from Brikama.

One of the women passengers was a wellknown friend to Fatou. Her name was Bintu and she was a leader of a women's group in Sanyang.. They had worked a lot together and known each other for a long time. They asked each other about their children and how their common friends were doing. They gesticulated, talked loudly and laughed a lot now when they saw each other after this long time. Bintu said:

- I must tell you I won in court. My family and I could keep the house after my father died. My brother got another piece of land and now he is satisfied.

- Fantastic, Bintu, Congratulations! Oh, I'm so proud of you, Fatou answered before Bintu rushed home with all her bags and packages. When they had met once last year, Bintu had been so upset. One nearly ten-year- old nephew had come home to Bintu where her father had lived with her family, but had died recently. The nephew strolled around the yard saying that soon all this would be his. It had to be his dad, Bintu's brother, who had given him that idea. Where else could he have got it from? She scolded her brother, who, however, argued that it would be right that his son inherited the farm. Bintu had then turned to a female lawyer and sued her brother. It had become quite a stir in the village. You just do not do that to your brother. But Bintu did, because she had learnt about the rights of women and strengthened herself in the women's group where they had trained themselves to assert themselves, and she won!

Fatou felt light-hearted. Mbaeij's story and the meeting with Bintu were so uplifting. A breath of the winds of change, Fatou thought.

10. A ride eastward, upcountry

Fatou sometimes visited remote villages on behalf of her party. She had made many friends around the country. The party had a strong following in Wulli, a cluster of villages about 300 kilometres eastwards. Fatou had made many trips there. It gave her great satisfaction to know that she could stay in almost any village and find someone she knew, if she would need help of any kind. There were chats with people at every stop along the route. Sometimes they also traded with each other. Fatou received or bought agricultural or special products currently for sale in the area and the season and could in return hand over some document, gifts, information or greetings from relatives in the city.

In rural areas, people lived in compounds consisting of one or more houses, often with an extended family and perhaps hired people from outside. In total up to 25-30 people per farm was normal. Often, the only furniture was a large bed. Others slept on mattresses or mats laid out on the floor for the night. If their village had been reached by the electrification, those who could afford it had a sitting area, at times with a TV-set but no beds. Cooking and other household chores mostly took place outdoors. Sometimes they had a small outdoor building for storage of cooking equipment.

In the old villages, in the east of the country, there were still mostly

traditional round houses. There were the men's houses and individual houses for each wife and her small children and young girls. Young men would sometimes have their own house. So sometimes there were quite many small round houses on a farm. But in the larger villages and towns people used to live in large rectangular houses with different rooms for the various nuclear families.

It was rare that someone regularly slept alone in a bed or in a private room. Along the long side of a house there was normally a porch under a roof. That is where you were sitting to chat, often on cement blocks - the building blocks for everything, which you normally produced yourself.

On a drive from Brikama to Wulli, Fatou and her travelling companion made a first stop in the village of Kafuta. Here Fatou wanted to visit Maryama. She had brought a bag of rice from one of Maryama's sons who was now living and working as a taxi driver in Serrekunda. They were four in the car, Lamin, the driver, Sidiya Jatta, the former Honourable parliamentary member from Wulli. He lived in Serrekunda where he was also employed. The fourth person was an older male relative of Sidiya, on his way home after a visit to Serrekunda. After releasing Fatou with the bag outside Maryama's house, they went on to visit some elders a little deeper into the village. They were going to pick Fatou up in about an hour.

Maryama's husband had now been dead for twenty years. She was his first wife. He also had a second wife. The two of them and some of their children with families lived together. A third wife, however, had left for another village. No one ever talked about her. But one of her adult children still lived in the compound, more or less on charity.

Some years ago, in a confidential female conversation, Fatou told Maryama about a recent book release – *Silent Voices* – written by their friend Ami Sillah. The book was about violence against women. Then

Maryama told Fatou that her husband had beaten her, sometimes so severely that she had to flee home to her twin sister in Mansa Konko. None of her adult children knew about it. Everyone just looked up to their deceased father, who had been a hardworking and caring man believing in principles of all kinds and who made sure there was order in the house and that everyone did his or her best, something they all had missed after his death. Maryama had never spoken to anyone about this before.

Now, twenty years after his death, she had put a photo of her husband in the place of honour in the room, where they received guests, the only room that had a sofa, armchairs and a table. Otherwise there were only beds and sleeping mats in the house where about ten adults and countless numbers of children lived most of the time. It was through her relationship to her husband that she had achieved this position in the community. And the fact that she was the first wife, gave her some respect and influence. She made sure that there were always adult girls, suitable wives for the young men in the house, who took care of all the household chores. She herself spent her day from morning to evening in her vegetable garden a few kilometres from home.

But not today, because she knew Fatou would come with a message from her son in Serrekunda. On a previous occasion, Fatou had visited her in the garden. There she cultivated alternating rice, spices and vegetables depending on the season and water availability. She had several water holes dug in the garden. With a small bucket at the end of a rope she collected water for her products, at least 50 times a day during most of the year, the long dry season. By constantly moving in the garden she kept birds and other uninvited guests away from the precious production. She had built a tiny shed for rain- and sun protection. There, she would relax when the sun was at its peak in the sky and there she enjoyed her tea. She had a dried twig, which gave her good

tea, stashed under a piece of wood on the ceiling of the shelter. When the tea was boiled, she picked a new twig that dried for the next time.

The women in the village shared a large garden, where they helped each other to grow plants. They had their own areas where they planted and harvested separately. But Maryama was too old, she said, to cope with the co-operation of all the young people. She was happy that she had been designated an area not too distant from the village. There, during the rainy season, enough rain fell to make it possible to grow some rice that she harvested in November. After that she had to irrigate everything she sowed or planted.

Not a single drop of rain fell between October and May. The rainy season used to be longer in the old days and it also gave more rain. A lot of rivers and lakes from her childhood had disappeared. Just like forests with different kinds of monkeys, antelopes and hyenas. Now there seemed to be nothing but snakes left. And firewood for cooking that was traditionally picked without any problems in the forest was becoming harder to find.

When Fatou was sitting talking to Maryama, Isatou suddenly appeared on the road. She stopped and she and Fatou shouted of joy to see each other again. Fatou covered her mouth in sheer surprise and amazement.

- It certainly was not yesterday, Fatou sad. How are you? Oh, how I have missed you!

- I have been in Dakar with relatives for a few years. But now we are here, back to business.

She turned and showed a newly born baby, who was sitting, almost completely hidden by the fabric, on her back.

- I am not able to work as a circle leader anymore.

Isatou had been appointed the post of study circle leader by WODD

- Women Organization for Democracy and Development - whe-

re Fatou was a board member. They had organized literacy classes in Mandinka in women's groups several years earlier. Mandinka was the main language spoken in the village. Isatou herself was not Mandinka but Jola. The first language she learnt was Jola. But like most people in the Gambia, she spoke more than one of the local languages fluently. In the schools all teaching was in English. They never learned to read or write in their native language. Half of all adult women in the Gambia had never been to school. But Isatou went four years as a young girl. As an adult, in a previous project, she had learnt to write and read in Mandinka.

When they met at the circle leader training, several years earlier, the two women immediately got to understand each other and had fun together. Isatou then had a newly born baby on her lap.

- This is my sixth child, she said at that time, but now I am done, she said a little defiant. I'm tired; this will be my last child. She was glad to be able to be seen as a resource in the development of the women in the village.

Next time, a year later, Fatou visited her briefly in the house, on a trip like now. Then she saw an unknown woman and asked who she was. She was introduced as Isatou's husband's new wife. Fatou felt that the twinkle in Isatou's eyes was gone. She was quieter this time. Her husband was a leading person, an influential man in the village and in addition well educated. It was quite logical to the world that he took care of one more woman.

Three or four years passed. She was restored to the family, after years spent with relatives in Dakar. The second wife, Fatou had been told, had died. Isatou had recently given birth to her seventh child and everything was peace and joy in the family. WODD had to find a new study circle leader in the village.

After the stop in Kafuta they continued the car ride eastwards along

the southern riverbank. Fatou was sitting with a large scarf wrapped around her head and shoulders as a protection against the sandy wind that swirled around them, because they had to leave the windows open in order not to perish in the heat. She was absorbed in thoughts of Isatou whom she had been separated from earlier that day. As usual, Fatou thought, the woman always has to adapt to the husband's will, never the opposite. She sent a thought of gratitude to her guardian mother, her aunt, who had nagged at her never to allow herself to be completely dependent on a man, because she had to be prepared to be able to take care of herself if suddenly she was left alone one day.

- Thank you, dear mother, she murmured.

They had since long left urban Gambia and the fresh westerly wind from the sea behind them. The heat kept building up, the more further east they came. Recently almost the whole road had been paved, one part at a time, with the help of aid money and international bonds.

They were to visit comrades in Wulli, evaluate a study initiative and discuss the formation of a co-operative bank.

Shortly before Bansang they had car trouble. The driver was also technically experienced and heard what was the problem with the engine, but they lacked spare parts. They stopped in a village some miles before Bansang. There, under a giant baobab tree, was a mechanical workshop in the open air, where they received help. It took a few hours, but then they could continue.

In Bansang they stopped for lunch at a restaurant housed in a tiny shed. It smelled good of seasoned rice and various sauces. They ate until they were full and drank until they were not thirsty anymore. They drank wonjo, juice boiled from the dried flowers of a bush. Fatou used to buy those dried flowers on the market in Serrekunda and cook the juice, which she brought to work and sold or gave to colleagues and friends there.

She always picked up empty plastic bottles, like so many others, for the sake of recycling. Plastic bottles were coveted. They were never littered like other waste everywhere.

In Bansang, which was a fairly large village, there was a hospital. Here they planned to visit a friend from Wulli, who recently had had an accident riding his motorcycle. They were met by dismal news. The friend, Lamin, was still unconscious even after two days. It was decided that same day that he should be sent by ambulance to the main hospital in Banjul, the capital. They spoke with Fatu Lamin's first wife. She now had to go to Banjul and stay there until he recovered. Hospitals in the Gambia gave patients suitable medical treatment but personal care and food were not included. The families had to supply that. The wife was calm. She told Fatou that she had already spoken to another woman who would care for their child and that they had relatives in Serrekunda who would help her with anything to support her husband at the hospital in Banjul.

They continued their journey, following the river Gambia's southern bank all the way and crossed the river, some miles from the eastern border, on a ferry that took five or six cars. Here at the ferry station was Basse, the most populated centre in the east with banks, shops and governmental offices. After Basse there were only small villages, agricultural fields and forested areas around the road that most of the time was nothing but a sandy road, full of potholes, difficult to pass, especially during the rainy season. It was easy to get stuck in the mud when using a car, tractor, motorcycle or an animal-drawn wagon.

Here most of the homes were still round and stood in groups. They were made of mud and grass, ventilation worked perfectly as it had done for centuries and it was nice and cool indoor. However, the rectangular concrete buildings were more resilient during rainy seasons with heavy rain and flooding. Not because they were square,

but because they were made with more cement. But otherwise the old houses were quite as good.

Lamin and Fatu whom they met at the hospital in Bansang, came from this area. Fatou was the most common female name and Lamin the most common male name in the Gambia. The first-born used to get these names in practically all families.

Fatu and her husband both had a good education, but neither of them had any employment. He owned the land they had built on. It was on one side of the main village road. She used to spend the days out on the groundnut fields. They had only one child so far. They were around thirty years old, but he had already managed to acquire a second younger wife. When you had big houses, land and crops in the fields and were looking for wood and food from the forest and river, it could be great with additional hands in the household. As there were more women than men in rural areas, most men still took several wives, a practical way of getting free labour, a more lively sex life and more children. But people seldom stated other reasons than the necessity for women to be taken care of and that they wanted to copy Muhammad – the Prophet, who had had several wives.

But all was not exactly as in the old days. Villagers had joined forces and had purchased agricultural tools, which they owned collectively. They paid a minor amount to use them successively. There was a local organization that had a joint development fund organizing literacy classes among women, when they could find support from various quarters to pay a leader of the circle. Many people here read opposition newspapers, which were delivered from Serrekunda normally a couple of times a week. Some read loud to others who had not yet learned to read or did not see well enough anymore. They had a well-functioning political network and had managed to choose their own area manager and to say no to the government-appointed representative.

In one village area, they collected all the taxes based on the houses they owned. They told the authorities that they would submit the collected tax but only if they were allowed to choose the regional leader they wanted. This was unique. In the rest of the Gambia, local leaders were appointed by the government, more than ever before. Any democratic influence locally was almost nowhere to be found anymore. When they arrived in Sotokoba late in the afternoon, they directly had a meeting at the bantaba, the village square. Some forty adults, mostly men, were sitting there waiting to discuss the issue of the formation of a co-operative bank. Fatou had been in contact with the authorities as well as with an organization in Sweden that wanted to assist and she could inform them what was required if they wanted to form their co-operative bank. There was a lively discussion, participants of the meeting wanted to know the complete picture, how and by whom it would all be managed and organized so that they would have full control. After a couple of hours when darkness began to descend upon the village, a group of women were passing on their way home from work in the fields. They all carried large loads on their heads, had a child by the hand, and many of them also had a small child on their backs. They explained that they had not had the opportunity to participate and asked Fatou to come to a meeting with them later in the evening when they were finished with dinner, so they would also be informed.

- Of course, Fatou said, and they set time and place.

When Fatou came to the agreed meeting the women were eager to make her understand that they really longed for their own branch of a bank in the village. One of them said:

- Now we keep our hard-earned money from our different small businesses, wrapped in bundles in our dresses. Then it is too easy to use the money and when the kids need school uniforms we may be out of money.

- It is a long way to the bank in Basse, and expensive to get there, another participant remarked.

- In addition, one could never trust the bank in Basse, a third person said. Sometimes they say that there is no money that day, or maybe the bank branch has closed for some reason, just as they arrive there.

Another one continued to tell her story:

- Once when a relative in Europe sent money, the man at the bank said he bought rice for the money and she could get a bag of rice instead of money. No, we really need a local bank, which we can control ourselves.

- What if we could take care of the transfer of currency from Europe all by ourselves without expensive middlemen, the speculations went on.

Fatou could tell that there was an organization based in Bakau, which would account for the training they needed to run the bank. They would also receive guidance and support for six months after the training. If they passed the management training they would have their banking licence.

But first they would have to register at least one hundred members, select a board and adopt the association statutes of the co-operative. The Swedish organization would contribute with the base plate, 10,000 Dalasi, that was required. The women were confident that there would be no difficulty to recruit members.

When Fatou walked home to her temporary residence in Sotokoba, darkness had descended on the area. It was still excessively hot, not the slightest evening breeze yet. The sky was starry and the crescent moon was like a hammock in the sky. People, mostly men, sat in clusters outside houses and talked and drank ataaya in the dark. Children ran around seemingly unplanned. Women sat and cleaned wonjo flowers from leaves or were involved in activities, like preparing food. Others

sat engaged in discussions with the men for a while.

The next evening everyone gathered at the village square again. The local women's group would play a theatre piece. This was a method developed in the women's groups in WODD. They began by telling their life stories to each other. They chose some of the stories they wanted to make a play from and if there was anyone who could write Mandinka, they wrote it down. They discussed the details of the drama and how they would perform it. Then they distributed the different parts and started training until they were ready to perform. This time it would be about the importance of being able to read and write and that the old tradition of marrying off young girls instead of letting them continue to go to school, had to be questioned.

Over the years Fatou had seen numerous touching stories of women portrayed at squares in the villages around the country. Fatou considered that there was no better way to process and break the silent female culture. She had helped to set up a play about HIV-AIDS and the problems with the old tradition that men have multiple wives. She had played the role of a proposed cunning third wife, who made her husband look like a fool. It was a role that amused her. They played the piece at events organized by foreign embassies and aid organizations.

Before bedtime, Fatou was sitting outside the house discussing, cleverly leading the conversation into the important role of culture.

- Yes, we could really do with more questioning in all issues and increase the awareness elevating culture. But normally culture in the Gambia means praising the president or old tribal conservative patriarchal traditions.

- Yes, unfortunately, said Omar, a man in his thirties who had never been to school and could neither read nor write. But he spoke five local languages fluently and he understood spoken English, if it was not too complicated. He had lived a couple of years in the town of Serrekunda

in his youth, where he earned his living doing all kinds of odd jobs. He became actively involved in party political work in PDOIS. This continued when he moved back to the family estate here in Wulli, when his parents were getting old and needed his help.

- Yes, it's so sad, Fatou continued. One brother of a friend in Sanyang, where they organize a cultural festival every year, told me a while ago that he wrote a song about how difficult life can be in the Gambia. He plays the drums and sings in a band. Happily he came to the group and performed his song and hoped they would like to sing and play it at the approaching festival. But they gave his proposal a thumbs down. Self-censorship hit his dreams.

- We cannot sing such critical songs about life in the Gambia. Nah, it is impossible. We would risk the entire festival's existence, the band-leader said. No one spoke against him. Now the lad is sitting dreaming of being in another country, where he would be able to sing from the heart, Fatou concluded.

11. Polygamy

Once back in the big city of Serrekunda, Fatou visited her friend Fatu from Wulli, whom she had met at the hospital in Bansang, when Lamin, her unconscious husband had been taken to the Royal Victorial Hospital in Banjul, the capital. The hospital had recently changed its name to Edward Francis Small Hospital because the president wanted to mark his break with the British Commonwealth. Fatu from Wulli and her younger co-wife Maryama took turns to look after their husband who was still in hospital. They lived in an uncle's apartment in Serrekunda during the time they needed to be near the hospital. That was when Fatou came to visit. Other than Fatou and Fatu from Wulli, a sister from Farafeni and her sixteen-year-old daughter were also present. The co-wife was out. They had taken the opportunity to visit the large market in Serrekunda but at the same time they wanted to give their sister Fatu from Wulli their support in her effort to help the care process of her husband. The three almost equally old women were sitting there chatting on a carpet on the floor. They exchanged information about what their common acquaintances had been up to, since they last met. It was a while since they had had time to talk properly, thus there was news to be exchanged.

Fatu from Wulli told them that her friend Ami, widowed only last

year and feeling lonely for a couple of months, gratifying told her that she had found a fiancé, a military in a neighbouring village and an old friend of her late husband's. But now, when they met the other day it had also been revealed that he already had a wife and several children. He lived with them during the working days and came to Ami over the weekends to enjoy the sweetness of new love.

- Surely it was said in his home village that he took care of his deceased friend's poor family, Fatou from Wulli, continued.

- I would never do that, the sixteen-year-old daughter suddenly said. She had been sitting quietly in a corner of the room, hands in her hair ornaments, which she had bought at the market earlier in the day.

- What? her mother said.

- I do not want a man who already has a wife, her daughter explained. The girls in my class have talked a lot about it. We believe that the only way to end men's polygamy habits is that we refuse to accept it. But then all the girls must be allowed to go to school and learn to take care of themselves so they do not have to chase already married men to take care of them. Fatou clapped her hands out of joy and appreciation.

- Oh, you young people are so wise, she said. If we old-timers were half as smart as you, we might already have come a long way.

- Yes, the overjoyed mother said, the young are the future and if many are as wise as my daughter, we must be prepared for changes, indeed!

12. A board meeting

The board of the association WODD - Women for Democracy and Development - had gathered for a meeting in the People's House in Churchilstown, Serrekunda. Seven women were sitting around a large table on chairs that had seen better days, but well served their purpose. A curtain fluttered in an open window. There was a large tree right outside the window and from there bird song entered the room. Recently the rainy season had been over, thus nature was green and moist. It was never more beautiful than this time of year. Fatou missed Satou and asked for her. Binta, a young woman who lived near Satou, told her that she had fallen ill with malaria. Ndey, a woman from the Lamin area, who was a particularly good friend of Fatou's since she lived in Lamin for some years, had said that she wanted to discuss FGM, female genital mutilation. They had got to that part of the agenda now, and she spoke.

- I want to tell you a story, which I heard from a friend of my brother's the other day. Since then I cannot stop thinking about how hard it is to save future generations of girls from this harmful tradition. He got married a few years ago and they had a baby girl. He and his wife had agreed that the daughter would not be mutilated. But then he went to Ghana for a month. The Port authority, where he worked, sent

him there for a course. When he came home, his mother-in-law had seen to it that his little daughter had undergone female genital mutilation. His wife had not been able to withstand family pressure. He was quite upset and asked for a divorce.

- I do not want to risk putting more girls to this world if I cannot protect them against such abuse, he said.

- If older people's power is as influential as this, how can we ever get out of misery, she asked her board colleagues.

Everyone around the table had been circumcised in their childhood. The clitoris, and in some cases parts of the labia had been cut off. Some of them still, though they were adults, had traumatic memories of the event.

The parents had explained to them that it was for their own good. It would be difficult for them to get married otherwise. No established man would want a woman who was not circumcised. They meant well, knew so little and did so wrong. This was what they had agreed on once before when they had discussed their experience in this field. Several of the board members had managed to stop attempts to circumcise their daughters. Some had testified that the support from this group had strengthened them when attacks from the family were at their worst. In all the women's groups they had formed in the villages, the issue of FGM was lively discussed.

No indication from the president that FGM should cease was heard. And as a consequence, nothing was heard from parliament, government or imams. But there were those who worked hard to change this harmful and degrading practice. Isatou, the leader of the organization GAMCOTRAP, was the foremost advocate for girls' rights not to have to be sexually abused like this. Now Cady, one of the older leaders of WODD, took the opportunity to inform them what Isatou's standpoint was. Cady was as old as Isatou and her good friend since school.

They had followed each other in the women's struggle through the years and had met at many meetings and conferences. But Isatou had been brought to justice. The court case had been going on for several years now. The government had accused Isatou of embezzlement of Spanish aid money. With cunning intrigues, forgery and embedded corruption in the form of grand dinners at the presidential palace, Gambia's female vice president appeared to have been successful in wrapping the Spanish organisation's representatives around her finger, and had persuaded them to believe in the embezzlement allegations. The crime was supposed to have occurred during 2009. The charges were issued early 2010. The 2009 activity report and bookkeeping had not yet been audited and thus not treated democratically in the co-operating organisations. But that did not stop the Gambian government. They had decided to chastise those women who thought they could get away with anything without presidential involvement.

Because of her amazing and longstanding struggle for girls' rights, there were discussions in the international social media about Isatou as a potential presidential candidate in the Gambia in the election 2011. The power seemed to think that it was necessary to act before she had grown too respected in the world. They had to set an example, and she had to be kept away from the election. A trial was then a safe and proven method. Anyone who is convicted by a court of law cannot contest for an election for five years unless being pardoned. This trial lasted some years.

- But now she had finally been acquitted, Cady revealed. Her lawyers had throughout the process been paid by the Swedish Save the Children, which Gamcotrap had collaborated with for years. And now they had finally managed to get her free due to lack of evidence.

- But I was too sad when I read her public statement yesterday, in which she thanked the President for his gentle handling of her case!

How could she do that? Was it really necessary? Fatou objected.

- She thought so, yes, said Cady. Now she can continue the training of lawyers, police officers, teachers and not least the circumcisers and thus be able to save many girls from humiliation and damage. It is her priority, and I think we have to accept that, even if we as political activists might have acted differently.

- OK then, Fatou said, but it makes it much harder for us to demonstrate how unscrupulous and dangerous the president is.

- We should not underestimate people's capacity to draw their own conclusions, Cady said.

- Yes, Isatou has seen so much suffering, Hady, a younger woman from Banjul, added. Think of the pictures she showed us when we visited her at Gamcotrap. You saw, all these girls who had been completely disfigured by infections and errors when being cut. One must understand that she is prepared to do almost anything in order to continue her work and thus save more individuals and slowly work towards changing the tradition. It's really fortunate that she lives and works here! She cannot stand up to the president. We have to do that. But we also have to keep our heads cool, be balanced, and this even if we can never go as far as to thank him for his wrongdoings.

- Despite all attempts, it seems impossible to get the president and his lackeys to speak out against FGM. Our current members of parliament create no new laws and do not take any initiative unless the president expressively so desires. So what remains is advocacy, co-operation and support of Gamcotrap and others who work in that direction, and for us, above all, to mobilize for the presidential election in 2016 and our parliamentary election in 2017, Cady summed up. This is how we can get a government and a legislative body worthy their names. Yes, and the best opinion formation is going on in local women's groups who use literacy classes and theatre plays as tools, Fatou, said, right?

- The others agreed. Cady was commissioned to specifically work on seeking partners to finance the creation of new women's groups in more villages.

- And it is important that Ami Sillah continues to write her family serials in the newspaper Foroyaa, Ndey said, with the other women's full consent. The sun had begun to go down, it was time to end the meeting.

The participants had to hurry to get home to get the day's final meal ready for their large families. But Fatou and Ndey did not go straight home. Instead they wanted to check how the condition was for their friend Satou who lived in Latrikunda just over half an hour's brisk walk from the meeting room in Churchill's Town. When they reached Satou's home, they met her lying on a mat on the cement floor right outside the house with a bucket beside her. Satou was completely washed out and her hair was matted with sweat. She had vomited for two days and had not been able to eat or drink. Fatou knew this state very well. This time of year there was nothing else to count on. Fatou herself thought the headache was the worst to endure when she had her malaria attacks.

Satou had a sister staying with her and she took care of the children and the cooking. Ndey started helping her in the process of getting the kids to bed. But Fatou was filled with such tenderness when she saw her tormented friend. She helped her to move to the bed inside and there she lay down beside her and held her hand for a long time. If you cannot drink water tomorrow morning, you must go to the hospital and get an IV said Fatou. I will check with your sister if I can help you to get to the hospital. She put a thin piece of cloth over Satou's hot body, wiped her forehead and said goodbye. See you in the morning, said Fatou, and the two friends hurried away in the night. It was just

about an hour before they would be at home with their families in Brikama and Lamin respectively.

13. Poverty

When Fatou was visiting Sweden, she had been present at an association meeting where she was asked to give a speech on what poverty meant to her. This had helped her gather and express her thoughts on the topic, in a way that westerners would understand. What had Fatou told them?

- According to international statistics, nearly two-thirds of Gambia's population survive on less than 1.25 dollars a day, so they are extremely poor by international standard. But what does it mean?

- For me personally, the struggle is about being able to give all in my household water and soap so that they can keep themselves clean. Nothing is more destructive than not being able to keep the filth away. And to have a roof over your head where everyone gets a place to sleep. Not necessarily in a bed by themselves, but in a way so that everyone knows that they belong.

To afford to organize two cooked meals a day for my family and being able to keep the children in school until they reach their graduation, is my goal. This last task is impossible for many families in the Gambia today. More and more prepare meals once a day and that's it. More and more people go to bed hungry, particularly in large urban areas, to which large quantities of people migrate. In the villages, wo-

men are working from morning to evening in the fields and in the gardens to provide for their families. Different times of year fortunately there are various wild fruits that children can pick and eat when they are out and about. Someone in the household must have an income every month. He or she must be able to find a second source of income, buy and sell all kinds of things. They need to have a social network so they do not stand alone when disaster strikes i.e. if you need to take a family member to hospital or when a child needs accommodation to attend school away from home for a few years. All households that do not have a fixed income and do not have any opportunities for additional revenue cannot handle all these tasks.

But I think the worst thing is to see what poverty does to people. They lose hope in the future. They believe that all is about being on good terms with those sitting on wealth and power. They question nothing, accept and tolerate everything. They bow to the supremacy and are silenced. They learn to adapt the description of reality to enhance themselves in a better light. They lie and speak behind other people's backs. In the end nobody dares to trust anyone, and everyone gets stepped on. Corruption, nepotism, sexism, tribalism etc. thrive.

This is where we are today. The ruling classes, or administrations, for 20 years, do not seem to be interested in creating better conditions for the population but want to enrich themselves. All highly paid officials believe or pretend that they are entitled to better conditions than the poor. The truth is, though, that they live under the same oppression, but enjoy higher standard of living. They give in for all the president's whims, lie and intrigue not to lose their privileges. At least one big official is giving marching orders every month, I think. They are either accused of corruption, negligence of duty or abuse of office. Many of them have felt compelled to leave the country in haste, like many journalists.

All this, the lack of freedom of expression, democracy and trust, I think is actually our greatest poverty in the Gambia, Fatou concluded.

14. Background to the current political situation

Many in the country believed that the coup in 1994, would lead to a better future. The coup makers said that they would bring democracy and development back and put an end to widespread corruption. Political parties were banned for some years. But PDOIS –People’s Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism- continued to operate. The coup general soon took off his military uniform and lined up in the presidential election. Just a few weeks before the presidential election, opposition parties were also allowed to register their candidates. Obviously, it was impossible to organize and mobilize the opposition in such a short time and coup general Yahya Jammeh was elected Africa’s youngest president. He was then merely 29 years old.

PDOIS analysed what happened and was never impressed or taken for a ride by the general who took power. Leaders of PDOIS were invited to join the government, but as they understood the general’s ambitions and approach, they declined politely but firmly. They would never have been allowed to stick to their democratic values. They understood that the reason they were invited was that he wanted to buy and silence them.

The conditions for the political process deteriorated gradually, but the party never gave up. Leading party members ran the newspaper

Foroyaa, which appeared regularly during this time, a few days a week, and later as a daily newspaper. Fatou was hired by the magazine in the early 2000s and was taught to run the work on layout. It had been a delicate task to make the magazine survive with the objective to inform people so that they themselves could take power and create freedom, dignity and prosperity for all.

Many newspapers and radio stations were vandalized, burnt down or forced to close.

There were many Gambian journalists and reporters in involuntary exile in Europe and the United States. The most well-known editor, that later was murdered in the Gambia, was Deyda Hydera. He had been critical of the president and his government and their abuse of human rights. The authorities had never been able to provide a statement to prove how. Even though they had tried to make it look like an act of passion. The bullets that killed him were said to have originated from a gun of the type that the presidential guard used and other circumstantial evidence indicated to the public that the president had ordered the murder.

Since then Fatou participated each year in December at the honoring of Hydera's memory, along with many other journalists and opposition politicians of various kinds.

Over the years Foroyaa had developed knowledge and a way of expressing themselves so that the truth came out. In most cases the president could not accuse them of spreading false information and agitation. Sometimes this was the case anyway. New charges for private media houses and new regulations that reduced the freedom of speech were introduced all the time. But the newspaper Foroyaa stubbornly continued its struggle for public education and its constructive and very balanced criticism of the government and parliament.

15. The role of the diaspora

Many Gambians in the diaspora were worried. As often as they could they transferred money home. But they saw no development. All the money was spent on the daily livelihood of their large families in Gambia. Several had tried to launch various forms of businesses in the Gambia by sending money and advice to family members back home. But most attempts were thwarted. Money disappeared, the needs at home were so many and with sudden money in your pocket the pressure was great. Moreover, all the time new levies and taxes were added. For some, the situation became precarious because of the fact that the president also started private businesses within each rising new industry. Through his tax- and fee waivers, corruption and domination he worsened the competitive position for all the others. Anyone with big dreams knew that the only chance of success was to do business with the president. He would then require a large payback for his support. A threat of confiscation was always in the background. As the years went by, the examples grew in numbers.

Gambians overseas criticized the opposition parties and called them inefficient and sometimes even of being accomplices of the president. They campaigned on the Internet for popular uprisings in the Gambia

that they had left. This intensified after the Arab Spring. Some had fled in fear of retaliation, life prison or death penalty for something they had done or simply were falsely accused of. They could have written or said something critical and some had committed financial crimes, or in acts of violating in the Gambia before they escaped. Others had moved only to have a chance for a better life. Some high-ranking people had left in fear of being forced to adopt habits or perform activities incompatible with human rights measures in which they believed.

Abuse by the government in the Gambia was revealed step by step by radio stations from abroad on the Internet. Despite the fact that the government in the Gambia blocked websites, many still managed to find ways to bypass these attempts to close Internet, and information leaked out and reached more and more Gambians. But the people of the Gambia could not be led to believe that they could make a change by going out demonstrating in the streets. They were convinced that they would be shot down on the orders of the president, whenever they tried.

Many still remembered how the military fired on students in a demonstration at the turn of the century. Fourteen students were shot down at that time, despite their peaceful attempt to show their disgust over an imprisoned student's death, in what was obviously torture and murder. His crime was said to have been taking part in an entirely peaceful demonstration against the sale of a plot of land, which constituted the schoolyard football field.

Coup attempts, at least one every other year, was brusquely subdued and subsequently there were harsh reprisals. This intimidated most of the Gambians not only to obedience but also to silence. But they gave much fuel to endless discussions and revolutionary dreams among some Gambians in the diaspora.

The newspaper Foroyaa continued its statement that the future must

be built by means of ballot, not through a coup, as when the current president came into power in 1994, completely unconstitutional. The Gambian people must be informed and understand that they have the power to make a change, and shape their own destiny. It requires an overall popular support for a social system to function sustainably and democratically. Any future government must represent its citizens instead of controlling them. This was the essential content of Foroyaa, which over time had developed into a daily newspaper.

Fatou maintained a continuous dialogue via the Internet with about thirty party members in Europe and the United States. She had many conversations with impatient Gambians in the West who wanted to compare the struggle in the Gambia with the black Civil Rights struggle in America that required civil disobedience. But Fatou did not give up until their conversation ended with:

- If we really want to create a different society in the Gambia, the majority of the electorate must be persuaded to believe in the popular power to freely choose government leaders and take the unanimous responsibility for the future.

- Widespread voter apathy is our greatest threat, Fatou used to say. One of those who lived in Europe became fond of Fatou and wanted them to meet and marry. Fatou was attracted by the idea. They were the same age. He looked good, had been married and had a teenage son in Europe. He was witty and serious. They shared the same political values and he had lived in Europe for a long time. That is why Fatou assumed he was a modern man.

- What if it would work, Fatou dared to think.

But she would be disappointed yet again. He had succumbed to his father's pressure and agreed to remarry his wife, the mother of his son. He had, however, promptly found out that they could never become a functioning family again. But he knew that his father would take acti-

ve measures against a divorce and a marriage with Fatou, so he asked Fatou to give him some time.

But, Fatou said:

- Now that the truth has been revealed, I do not want to have any contact with you any more, neither by telephone nor Internet. What would your wife say, feel and think, if she knew? After all, she is your wife. And I'm not going to interfere and be a problem in a Gambian family, never ever. I thought you were an independent man. But it turned out this was not the case so I must say goodbye. Fatou had gradually started to dream of a working relationship. But everyday life took over.

- I am, after all, a Gambian woman so I won't cry or complain. What would be the point? Fatou thought and since hardly anyone had known their plans they would soon be dead and buried.

16. Lack of freedom of expression and the legitimate fear

There were not many citizens in the Gambia who dared to spread opposition propaganda or to comment on what they thought was wrong or even problematic.

Private radio stations were invited to broadcast music and Koran readings or church services, but not critical news. The radio stations that attempted to read articles from various newspapers translated into different local languages between music programs were promptly shut down.

The Independent, a private daily newspaper, had in the early 2000s expressed distinct criticism of the president's actions and one night, masked men in a car without number plates entered the premises of the paper, poured petrol on its printing machine, set it ablaze and ordered its workers at gunpoint to jump into the fire. But one of the reporters looked at the gun and then at the fire and decided rather to die by a bullet than to be burnt to death. He took one unsuspected leap towards the man with the gun. The man staggered and they both rolled towards the fire. The gunman ended up in the fire, and the gun fell from his hand. During the scuffle, everybody ran from the scene. This story was told by one of those who later managed to flee the country. The newspaper got its licence revoked. It was later reported from a de-

fecting military person in America that an unnamed military soldier close to the president, had been treated for burns on his hand shortly after the incident. And the gun that was found in the ashes was one of the type used by the presidential guards. But no one was ever held accountable for the crime.

A male friend of Fatou in Sanyang passed a paramilitary guard and complained to them that the lorries driving from the mine destroyed the road outside. The police officer got angry, and took him to the police station in the village. But the senior officer said:

- Why are you bringing this man? This is a hard working family man who is not a problem. And so he was released.

It was important to be known as a good citizen who did not create any problems if you were to survive in the Gambia. Ideally, one would also have a relative who in one way or another served the president, but not too close, because then the risk was great that you would fall from grace.

Some men visited the village head, the alkalo, and asked him to put a question about where the money from the mine went and demand to get some of it to the village to repair the roads. But the alkalo just answered, I cannot do that, they would probably put me in prison or at least sack me from my post and put a tougher one on the post and you do not want that do you?

Silence was spreading. They had to put up green pennants and the president's image in homes and in offices, stores, restaurants, at health centres and police stations. They kept up appearances.

One afternoon Fatou attended a meeting where a minister would speak. The decision that you could launch a political campaign only

during specified campaign days, prior to an election, did not apply to the president's party APRC, only to the opposition parties. Fatou got angry when she heard him say that the tourists, the white visitors, look down on the Gambians when they throw sweets from vehicles to children along the roadside. Fatou stepped up and asked kindly to say something. They thought she would agree furthermore or thank the president. That was the usual procedure. The microphone was handed to her. She grabbed it and turned away to speak undisturbed for a while.

- What hypocrisy, she began. Who's throwing biscuits and sweets from cars in this country? Well, the presidential convoy, on all their tours through the country for people to meet up in masses along the roads. Several children and even entire families have been injured and some have even died due to your degrading habits. So be sure to stop that immediately if you mean what you are claiming instead of complaining, putting all the blame on the tourists and the whites all the time, to avoid receiving criticism yourselves.

She did not have time to say anything else before party people snatched the microphone from her hand.

- Who do you think you are, expressing yourself like this? the minister asked.

- You should not worry about that, what is important is that I'm a Gambian citizen and am fully within my rights under the Constitution to speak about the truth. She turned around and walked away. For a moment her heart skipped a beat because of excitement but nothing happened. Most people were too afraid to do something like that and that fear was justified.

One of Fatou's friends, Yusupha, was a man who lived near her workplace. He used to run errands for the staff of the newspaper. One day,

as he sat outside a tailor shop near his home he was provoked by a man on a motorcycle, who stopped and wanted help to place a poster with the president's image. In spite of the fact that he knew very well that Yusupha was an opposition supporter he asked him to help. Yusupha replied full of indignation:

- As far as I'm concerned, you can put that poster in the sky if you want. Political comments were exchanged between some men who happened to be in place. The man with the poster did not get any help. He reported Yusupha to the police and accused him of having uttered derogatory opinions about the president. He was imprisoned and a lengthy process started. After several months in jail and appearances in court about his comments and how they could be proved, he was finally released due to lack of evidence. Thanks to the industrious and talented lawyers that worked partly completely voluntary and were partly financed by Fatou's party colleagues who always had to collect money for various unforeseen political costs, such as this.

As repression increased, trust between people decreased. Everybody reckoned that people, who were friends today, could at any time turn against you and go behind your back to benefit from their new opinions, supporting the president.

Many were illiterate. In the 2011 elections, a biometric registration of voters was introduced. Information to the public was very sketchy. A woman said to Fatou closely before the presidential election:

- Now they have such technical power that they can see who you are voting for, so I don't dare to do anything else than to vote for the president.

Control was tough. To set an example, it was reported on state radio immediately after Election Day, despite the fact that the President was

re-elected, that thirteen military servicemen were dismissed because they had been registered as non-voters. The reason was that they were employees of the defence and should have voted for their employer, the president, to whom they had sworn allegiance. And these thirteen had obviously not done that, as they had not used their right to vote.

Prior to the recent presidential election, opposition parties were allowed to conduct election campaigns eleven days before the election. Fatou travelled around with her party colleagues to several villages and held meetings in the village squares. Although they divided themselves into two caravans, most villages still were not visited. But wherever they came and started conversations with people they received great response. In those days Fatou was happy. She fell into bed late at night and slept deeply until she was up early again to attend as many meetings as possible.

17. Folklore, superstitions and political despair

At the 2001 election, Fatou had read in the Observer, the government-controlled newspaper, that the president warned the opposition that their spiritual ceremonies would harm the country. In one of them they supposedly buried the remains of a killed lion and attempted to create an invasion of locusts in the country. How to deal with such allegations?

- The rumour must have come from somewhere, they murmured in the villages. There may be something to it. You'd better watch out.

One night when Fatou was walking home from work she saw a small group of women coming through the village along a dirt road. They appeared to be naked and they were chanting and using violent gestures and frightening screams. Everyone believed that if those witches were seen on the road, you should run away and certainly not look at them. If you did, evil would fall upon you. But Fatou, the curious one, and a shopkeeper were standing in his shop watching. Even today, almost fifteen years later, they ask each other laughingly whenever they meet, if there have been victims of any accident. Both realize that so far they have not.

Fatou mentioned the incident to her colleagues and some had en-

countered such groups. They agreed that it was probably best not to talk about it. Many would be even more scared if they heard about such a thing.

In December 2008, both Satou and Fatou attended a training course for female politicians. It was organized by the women's bureau with assistance from the UN. Most of the participants were members of the APRC, the president's party. But participation from opposition parties, were also required according to the demands from UN.

Fatou and Satou were both active members. They often referred to the Constitution, which they always used in their political everyday life and therefore knew better than any of the others. At the seminar, participating ministers and leaders of the APRC attempted to win them over. They were taken aside individually and were offered houses and fancy cars if they decided to support the ruling party. The two friends laughed when they talked about this afterwards. They had both responded almost identically.

- No, I am a member of PDOIS and that is my constitutional right. Should we become a democratic nation, it requires an opposition. I do not think and work the way you do. You would soon take back your gifts, as soon as I open my mouth. No, you can neither buy nor silence me. Thanks, but I'm not interested in your bribes.

They had both roughly answered like this and they were quite proud of themselves. They knew that many people had allowed themselves to be bought. But they thought those were people with less knowledge of the political situation, and those who did not have a firm belief or political ambition, but only wanted to achieve higher standard of living for their families.

When they were ready to go home from the seminar it was very late, so Satou asked Fatou to accompany her to a military friend who was currently stationed as a guard in the president's home village. She said they could spend the night there, as it was too risky to travel back home at that late time of night. She had already called the military man and he had arranged a hotel room for them. Fatou agreed.

The military man drove them in his car. As they were about to go to bed the man came and asked them to follow him to the village square to witness what was going on. At the village square they saw a crowd at an open place. In the middle there was a group of people standing tightly together while the surrounding people jumped and danced around them casting a spell while calling them witches and wizards. The military man tried to play it down as something natural and turned their attention to other topics. But when Satou and Fatou came back to the hotel to sleep, they lay for a long while talking about what they might have witnessed.

When they returned to their office, they told the reporters what they had seen. Weeks later, sympathizers began to give their versions of what they had witnessed, i.e. Marabous accompanied by military security forces and APRC –activists, coming to pick up people from their homes and taking them away. But when the reporters asked if they could write their stories they said:

- No, we dare not.

But then an agitated young man called and said that his mother and many others had been abducted from their homes in his native village in Foni.

PDOIS's party leader, Halifa Sallah, travelled out to the village, interviewed people and wrote in the newspaper about the shocking news. This was how these events got documented and known both in the Gambia and internationally.

The people, mostly elderly women and men, had been accused of being witches, who with the help of an evil spirit had caused the unexplained death of the president's aunt. They had been taken away in buses, forced to drink hallucinogenic drugs, were humiliated in various ways and did not remember much afterwards. After a few days they had been released. Someone got life-threatening liver damage, one got kidney failure, two were said to have died shortly afterwards. But no one was ever taken to court for this. Instead Halifa Sallah was arrested for writing about it. He was charged with sedition and spying.

Fatou and the other party members now had a busy time. They were in constant contact with the party's friends abroad. Many contacted government representatives in Europe that led to a joint statement coming from the EU. Amnesty International were active, but perhaps most important was, after all, that presidents and other leaders in Africa, put pressure on the Gambian government to release Halifa Sallah. There were also rumours that Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State, wrote a personal letter to the President of the Gambia and threatened him, if he did not immediately release her personal friend Halifa Sallah from prison.

When his case went to trial, the courtroom was packed with spectators. Even in the street outside the courtroom, sympathizers gathered. Fatou was among those who had not been on time to get in. She was grateful for it afterwards. She was worried that she would not have managed to remain calm, but would have got violent in there. But there never was a judgment. Halifa was released quite easily. Without any court hearings, his case was closed.

Halifa himself had not been worried. He knew what a celebrity he was and how many honest and influential real friends he had around the world. He had for many years been a hardworking Member of Parliament in the Gambia and also in the African Union and EU had

made him its envoy to Darfur. He had also served as environmental policy manager in ECOWAS, the West African co-operation. He had been the head of UN-election-control-groups to several countries. He was a real political celebrity internationally. The president's accusations were completely untrue and the president was totally marginalized in the world because of his mismanagement of the Gambia, which had become internationally known in recent years.

Whilst in prison, Mile 2, Halifa took the opportunity, and spoke to as many of the other prisoners as possible. The big prison was called "the president's hotel" among the opposition. Joke had it that doing time in Mile Two, was something you should include in your CV. Halifa Sallah learned that a lot of people had a lot worse time than him in prison.

Some stayed there indefinitely without trial, others for life. Some had obviously been tortured; others were sick and did not get adequate treatment. To this situation he would often return in his continuing political and journalistic work.

This was not the first time that Halifa saw the inside of Mile 2. Prior to the 2006 elections, when opposition parties joined forces to establish NADD, the National Alliance for Democracy and Development, the president arrested the three leaders, that he suspected had a possibility of being elected as presidential candidates for NADD: Halifa Sallah of PDOIS, Hamat Bah of the NRP and Omar OJ Jallow from PPP.

The reason why they were out of the way during the upcoming election campaign was this. And the president was able to demonstrate his strength. With the low literacy level and the one-sided information available to Gambians, there were many, who said:

- Of course they must have committed some offence, as they are in prison. There was even an exiled Gambian in Denmark, who called Fatou and asked her:

- Is it true that Halifa Sallah has murdered a human being and is brought to prison? Fabricated rumours get wings and fly over the world easy. But this was too absurd to be able to fly further. There were many people in the Gambia and internationally who over the years had got to know Halifa Sallah as an all throughout good man, who could not hurt anyone. This malicious fabricated rumour could not take hold, and died quickly in Denmark.

The fact that some opposition parties met and tried to organize the appointment of one single opposition candidate to stand up against the president in the coming elections, was treated as conspiracy to commit a criminal offence and treason against the fatherland.

The leader of the largest opposition party, the UDP, was not imprisoned. Perhaps it was pure tactics to make it appear that the three detainees actually had other plans than the more established UDP, which alone could never be a government alternative and thus posed no threat by itself. The leader of the UDP withdrew from NADD just before the election of the presidential candidate. One minor party, the NRP, joined forces. Perhaps UDP and NRP did this in a misguided ambition that the two could win together or maybe because the parties were more important to them than a possible opposition victory together, even with the other opposition parties. Or could it be of fear?

The result was that the president in office was re-elected and the co-operation within NADD, which had offered hopes and dreams for many Gambians, faded away.

At about this time the president suddenly appeared on TV every Thursday where he received patients infected with HIV/AIDS. He claimed to have divine powers so that he, with the aid of healing and natural medicine, could cure the infected, but only on Thursdays and on television. He was so excited that he began treating asthma patients

and infertile young women in the same way on television. The Health Minister and Chief physician were standing by the president. They certainly had no choice. He gave hope to those in despair and at the same time strengthened his political position. Those who tried to criticize his actions or even expressed doubts ended in disgrace and were silenced in various ways. He refused to test their methods scientifically. Later, over the years, no one that had been healed was presented. But evidence is not necessary for believers. Many were strengthened in their belief that what the president actually said on television was true. That God alone, no election results or coups, could remove him from power in the Gambia.

18. The political process after the election in 2011 and before 2016

Fatou participated in election analyses after the presidential election of 2011 within her party, PDOIS.

They concluded that there were two major structural problems. One, that the entire state apparatus was used as the ruling party's campaign organization, two, that all opposition was treated as anti-state. Both the EU and ECOWAS had stated that the elections had not been free and lawful, considered what had preceded the elections.

The united opposition now required a discussion with the electoral authority and all political parties before the upcoming parliamentary election. For this to be possible, they suggested a slight postponement of parliamentary elections. All opposition parties agreed on this. But they were given the cold shoulder by the electoral authority, i.e. the president, who appointed the same old Electoral commissioner, even though he already had served longer than the constitution allowed. All opposition parties therefore felt that they were not respected and refrained from participating in the parliamentary election, except for the NRP.

In the effort to form the United Front, before the presidential elections, PDOIS refrained from putting up a presidential candidate. Instead PDOIS's leadership focused on and spent time and money on

the proceedings for the co-operation in the coalition United Front, to work democratically and smoothly and to be successful together. At a meeting with representatives from all areas in the country and all the co-operating opposition parties, the NRP's Hamat Bah was elected as the Coalition's, United Front's, presidential candidate. UDP, the biggest Mandinka-based party, chose to leave the co-operation before the election took place. It was supported by the small party, Moral Congress, which really only consisted of an eloquent exiled Gambian, who travelled around the world in his own presidential campaign, his family and a few close friends. The president in office won again.

Self-righteous, and proud of the fact that he had been chosen to be the opposition's compromise candidate for president, Hamat Bah pulled out his party from the coalition, and put himself as the representative from his region for his party in the parliamentary elections that took place three months after the presidential election. The second trial to form an opposition coalition had failed.

Hamat was the only representative of his party to enter parliament, even though it was the only opposition party that contested. A dozen independent candidates managed to get into parliament. But they accounted for a too small minority to have any influence. Parliament continued to operate only as the president's cheerleaders, without taking any initiative at all, as usual.

All opposition parties now agreed to work together for a number of years in an effort to bring about a change of the presidential election system. The mission was to get an election process with two rounds so that only the one who ultimately got the majority of votes would become president, starting as of the election in 2016, in an attempt to be like neighbouring Senegal. Then all parties would be able to set up their various candidates in the first round. In the second round all opposition would rally behind the opposition candidate who had got

the largest number of votes. Then he would have a real chance to win over the current president.

One day late 2012, a number of Fatou's party colleagues gathered in the People's Centre in Churchillstown, Serrekunda. This building had been rented by the PDOIS and used as the opposition's headquarters during the NADD days, before the 2006 elections, as well as during the United Front days, before the election of 2011. Now it was once again the headquarters of the political opposition party PDOIS. This delighted Fatou. She had always been sceptical about the possibilities to co-operate with the others and warned her followers of the damage it would cause their own party. She felt she had been right in so far that it was only their own party PDOIS that invested wholeheartedly in the two uniting co-operative efforts for the presidential elections in 2006 and 2011. Only PDOIS had invested financial and human resources of large dimensions. The others had simply taken part dutifully in this co-operation, trying to benefit from the situation. The biggest party UDP and its small supporting party Moral Congress in 2011, had in both cases pulled out of the partnership shortly before the elections and thus ruined any chances for success in the elections for the opposition. They had clearly not benefitted from it themselves either. The only change they accomplished was voter apathy.

Now to hear the leadership of PDOIS, Fatou's party, proposing an Agenda 2016 for the party's own path towards the election in 2016, sounded like music to Fatou's ears. She thought that their party leader Halifa Sallah had been too diplomatic. They allowed themselves to be exploited by others for a good cause without others taking the same responsibility as he did. All the power they had invested in co-operation in NADD's and United Front's names to effect change, had also resulted in the no-existence of PDOIS in people's minds as a strong political force, Fatou claimed.

- We have a huge mobilization work ahead, Fatou said, but I look forward to it with great confidence and will do everything I can for as long as it is positive for the party!

- As we do not know the outcome of our ambition to get to a second round, we must have two alternative courses of action, the party leader, Halifa Sallah, declared. If we manage to get to a new electoral system, then all we have to do is to continue with adult education, as well as oral and written information to make our party and our ambitions known to as many as possible. But if we do not succeed we must try to agree with the other parties on common alternatives to the sitting president. Our mission will be to talk to the other parties, make them all ready in 2014 to set their programmes and their candidates and go out and talk to the people about it the way we will do. And later on choose a joint candidate if it becomes necessary. The party meeting agreed. They gave him that mission.

The party also decided to try to organize a congress by the end of 2014, to adopt a final election programme and hopefully be able to appoint the party's presidential candidate. In the work to develop the party's election programme, there was a question that particularly appealed to Fatou and it was women's representation. So far only one woman served at the party's highest level. And as far as the government is concerned, almost all women who once were appointed ministers had been exchanged for men. Only the female vice president had become a sort of permanent female hostage in the government. About half of all women in the country had no schooling and therefore could not follow discussions in English about the few details and stories that were reported in the media about what was going on. The women were also accused by many in the opposition that they brought the president to victory in every election. Logically they were being praised by the president.

- We must press the authority responsible for information to the people about the constitution and election procedures, to do their work and inform the people, Fatou stressed. When I talked to them they said that any programme they want to broadcast on state radio and televise on national television costs money and they do not get funds from the government. It cannot be our minor party that should do all the work and also pay for the information and education about the voting process. We need our recourses to communicate our own programmes and ideas.

- Sure, we'll try to stress that. But if no one else runs all the information work, we will have to do it, right? And we have to work tirelessly to reopen the private radio stations that have been closed, so that they can do their part.

After the meeting, a few friends were staying to have a conversation under the big tree in the yard. A tap on the other side of the tree was leaking. Some tiny beautiful sunbirds in many different bright colours danced in the droplets in a pure whirl of happiness. Fatou thought it was nice to linger a while after the meetings. She was so full of energizing political thoughts. Daily chores had to wait. Fatou could allow herself thinking like this because she had two almost adult daughters at home who took care of the practical chores. Fatou just had to provide them with some guidance and the necessary money to spend. That was all. But most of the women had to hurry away home to prepare the day's last meal and get everything ready for the night. Thus Fatou was seated with some of the men, something she was more accustomed to than most women. She had worked at the newspaper with mostly men for many years.

Lamin a member from Brikama began the conversation with what concerned him most; how they could reach out to people.

- There is no point in applying for police permits for public me-

etings, he said. It will only be rejected or we will get no response at all. And if we try without permission, it will only lead to prison, remember the UDP's organizer. It's pointless.

- No, said Fatou, Halifa believes that we must go out on conversation tours without loudspeakers. We'll travel around the villages and meet small groups of people and have conversations without the loudspeaker. It is not prohibited and it requires no permit. It puts a strain on us but is perhaps even more efficient. Conversation in small groups can be more based on the participants' conditions and perceptions and maybe much better than meetings with loudspeakers.

- Yes, of course, Usman from Latrikunda said. But everyone wants to hear and meet the presidential candidates. We will face a tough job, especially Halifa and Sidiya. They must go from village to village throughout the whole country! The rest of us can only help. People are not accustomed to the fact that regular members even might be worth listening to. But it must be like that in the future. We need to establish local party groups in the villages to serve as information channels for the people there.

- Oh, it really feels great, Fatou said. Finally we can start working to build up the party again.

- But the main point still is, Lamin continued, to get the message out, that it was not with any great majority the president's party -APRC - won the latest parliamentary elections. They must learn to understand that there certainly is a possibility to vote for a new president as well as a new parliament.

- Yes, Usman agreed, and added, although the president always says that it is God who made him president and he cannot be dismissed. It's pure luck that we managed to derail his plans to get crowned King, anyhow.

- Well, that is so crazy, Lamin said. Previously I heard that in an

international interview, the president remarked that there is no need for democracy in Africa. I know what my people needs, he said. They need food and I can give them that, he said. Do you remember that?

- Yes yes, he has uttered such a lot of nonsense, Fatou continued, like two elections ago, when he claimed to have God's gift to cure HIV-AIDS, but only on Thursdays and on television. He also claimed to have a gift for curing allergies and infertility with his godly power before an audience. But we have not seen any healed citizens.

- But his speech about homosexuality as the greatest threat to Africa will surely get the highest score when it comes to stupidities, Usman said. And he went to a meeting at the United Nations and said so! He is a disgrace to his people.

- But I think, Fatou said, that the most dangerous thing he said and says all the time is that opposition in any form is a threat to the state, stability and peace.

Many uneducated people get frightened and dare not do anything else but continue to vote for the oppressor. We are such a peace-loving nation.

- But now, let's not get depressed, Usman said, it's up to us to show that change is possible. Remember what low voting figures the president's party received in the last parliamentary elections. His support is steadily declining. And now it's up to us to mobilize for the next election. We have over two years in which we can only hope that no revolutionary romantics take to violence in the streets, although some Gambians in the US and Europe promote that idea on the Internet. There are plenty of weapons in circulation and frustration is so high among many, that it would be enormously dangerous. Many lives would be wasted and just imagine what could replace it!

- Yes, Lamin proceeded, we should have learned from North Africa and the Middle East that popular uprisings without a complete plan

and organization for the running of a country can only result in other power groups such as religious extremists. They will be ready to exploit the chaos that occurs to create a new hell for the people.

- Nah, let us hold the banner of optimism high and encourage each other to do great deeds in the mobilization work for the next election and build our new Gambia on a peaceful and democratic foundation, Fatou said. And with those words, the friends parted for this time.

19. An aunt pays a visit

One day an aunt suddenly appeared at Fatou's home. It was a rare but cherished visit for both of them. Aunty was over 50 years old and lived in a small village in the Foni district, over 100 km east of Brikama. She had not been to Brikama many times in her life. Most of the villagers travelled to their childhood village for funerals and other family gatherings now and then, but otherwise travelling was not a natural part of women's lives.

Now she proudly said that she had been in Banjul to demonstrate. APRC, the president's party, had been driving around all over Foni, from village to village, and brought them to Banjul in buses and lorries. This time she had chosen not to join the others on the trip home but stopped to spend time with her dear nieces and nephews and their children when she was in the neighbourhood for once.

- Well, Fatou said, what made you want to demonstrate?

- Oh, the aunt answered, the Alkalo in our village gathered us and told us to make it clear that we stand behind our president when he alone dares to defy the whole of Europe that wants to exterminate the African race. They demand of us to stop making children, that women should only have sex with each other and the men only with other men. It's just not wise!

- No, exactly, Fatou responded. Can you really believe that the Europeans want something so totally stupid? How can you believe that kind of rubbish?

The first evening aunty simply waved all objections aside. She was indignant. Her basic ideas about the meaning of life had been shaken to its foundations, and now she had to speak up. She was proud of herself and her President. But Fatou did not give up. The following day when they were sitting in the courtyard, she continued the conversation. Aunty was cleaning rice, one of the daughters picked a chicken, another washed clothes and the landlady was drinking atayaa that Fatou had prepared. Fatou began to read aloud from the newspaper Foroyaa, which discussed the issue. She translated from written English to Mandinka, the largest of the many local languages and one that her aunty knew best.

For the first time now her aunt had the opportunity to hear a different version. Fatou read that the requirements from the EU were simply a discussion with the government on seventeen points that violated human rights in the Gambia. These changes were to be made before the EU would grant a prepared development scheme of 70 million Euros from the EU to the Gambia. She read the seventeen points. One of the points was that the EU did not accept the law that the Gambia had recently reinforced, stating that homosexuality was a criminal offence and homosexual acts could lead to life imprisonment and possibly to death penalty. The other points were about restrictions on freedom of expression, imprisonment without trial, torture and disappearances of dissidents etc. Fatou asked her aunt why she thought the president had neglected to comment on all the other points, only talking about the issue of homosexuality and that he distorted the requirement altogether in order to frighten and deceive ignorant citizens.

- However, asked her aunt, why does the EU want us to have homo-

sexuality in Africa?

Fatou was rereading that piece again and said:

- It's not what they say. Perhaps some five percent of all people in each country may be homosexuals. That is, they are attracted to people of the same sex. They cannot help it! If God has made them like that, why on earth should we put them in prison for that? They harm nobody. They just want to be with others alike. No one will force anyone to anything. You do not want to be forced to be homosexual, why do you want to force the few that are, to live in a way that is unnatural to them? What people do at home in bed, we do not need to worry about. They do not hurt anybody. The rest of us can populate the world. Don't you think that's enough?

Fatou also told her that the Gambia like many other countries had signed an agreement within the UN that all countries must discuss the situation of human rights when other countries within the UN make a request.

So why was the president so angry? Why did he not sit down, listen and discuss? Instead, he went to a UN conference and delivered a fiery speech that homosexuality was humanity's greatest danger and the West's latest way to colonize and govern Africa. Furthermore, he stated that the Gambia had had enough and would leave the British Commonwealth. English as the official language of the Gambia would be replaced with the old local spoken languages, perhaps a mix of all of them.

- He isolates us from the world, Fatou said, in order to enslave us totally. He wants to be a slave owner, as opposed to the outside world, Fatou completed her lecture, which had erupted spontaneously. Had she spoken too much? she wondered. Her Aunty had not heard any criticism of the president as such before. Perhaps it's best to let her digest this and talk about other things for a while.

The small boys came home from school. They went inside straightaway and changed out their uniforms into T-shirts and jeans, which Fatou had received from European tourists. The youngest came up and began to cling affectionately to Fatou, who answered by wrestling and tickling him. He laughed out loud like a dog with two tails and Fatou smiled. The other sat next to Fatou's aunt, who asked what they had been up to at school.

- Nothing special, he replied, and began drawing with a stick in the sand.

Now, here at home, they talked Mandinka, but at school English was the only language.

- What do you enjoy most then? she continued.

- Geography, the boy replied. I dream that I will be able to travel abroad when I grow up. He began to name the countries of Africa and the capital of each country. He stumbled just a bit a few times and took the assembled applause with his head held high, when he was finished. The younger boy smiled big with pride of his talented older brother. Aunt said thoughtfully:

- Our young people are truly our future, certainly those who know so much and can read and write English like these children. No leader will be able to entice the people in the future.

Fatou touched her hand slightly. Her hand lay resting in her lap as she was finished with the picking of the rice. Their eyes met in warm consensus.

Last night before aunty had gone home, she thanked Fatou when they were alone, for her hospitality, but also mostly for the information that Fatou had shared with her about the issues that she had not understood before.

- You are younger than me, the aunt said, but you've gone to school longer and you have learnt a lot more than I and now you have shared

important wisdom with me, stupid old woman. Thank you, my beloved Fatou.

- I understand now that the powerful men at home have cheated my sisters and me. They have been lying right to our faces, used us for their purposes. But you should know, Fatou, that they have done that for the last time. It will never happen again, she said, and stretched her back a little. I shall never again believe in the men who have power over us at home. If I do not understand what is going on, I'll call you Fatou.

- Oh, you make me hopeful about the future, Fatou said. Old and young have to work together if we are to have a better world, and we want that, right?

- Amen, said the aunt.

20. The three friends philosophize on the beach

It was not often that the three girlfriends, Fatou, Satou and Ndeyi, took the time only to socialize. There was always something to do, always someone who needed their attention. But on a Monday afternoon late January 2014, they managed to make themselves available. They met at Tipa garage, close to the Serrekunda market and took a bush taxi to the coastal road and then southwards. They got off in Brufut and walked down to the beach on a sandy trail through a small forest. The path then continued through grass, which extended higher than their heads. In the grove, they encountered a whole troop of monkeys in various sizes. They disappeared into the trees excitedly chattering when the women came walking. The sound from traffic was diminishing continuously the further they went on the trail. Instead, they heard more and more different bird sounds. Ndeyi informed the other two of the birds she recognized. She knew a man who earned a little money by bird watching and he had helped her to recognise many of the local birds.

- That's a flycatcher, and over there a shiny blue starling and that sounds like the sunbird, this colourful bird. Oh, that sound is from a Senegalese kingfisher. It has been a long time since I heard one of those. They are usually not heard in Serrekunda.

When the grass ended, they found themselves standing on the white sand dunes with the rolling Atlantic waves behind them, crashing against the shore. To the right a couple of fishing boats were on their way home after today's fishing. Some women met the boats with large buckets on their heads. They got their buckets filled and began to clean and sort the fish. Buyers were waiting to start bidding and part of the catch would be transported to the new fishmarket in Brikama. The men helped each other to pull the boats up on the beach, which was a heavy task. To make work easier, they used logs to roll the boats on.

The three friends strolled slowly to the other side along the beach. But the sun was still quite high in the sky, so they walked a little towards the inland. They saw a tree with a large crown that offered a pleasant shade. They sat down on the sand after having checked that the place was not populated by large numbers of ants. They enjoyed a gentle breeze from the Atlantic Ocean and looked out over the horizon.

- Oh, how nice it is merely to exist and escape the hectic place of Serrekunda with its noise for a while, Satou said, filling her lungs with fresh sea air. When running around the way we do, it is quite natural, but agree that we should allow ourselves to enjoy this more often than we do!

- Hm, said Ndeyi, so typically women, forgetting to indulge themselves the good things in life instead of only serving others all the time. I wonder if life is the same in other countries.

- As you know, I was in Sweden for a visit a few years ago, Fatou said. There I was surprised to see all these men with prams in the streets of the capital. And thought, oh, equality has come far here. I had heard that Parliament was composed of nearly 50 % women. But you know, they still have a long way to go in Sweden too! Although most women work, the women are still paid less than men, despite the fact that there is a law on equal pay for equal work. I also visited a women's

shelter. What a fantastic job they do! But is it not strange that in the highly developed Sweden, there are still a lot of men who beat their wives, so they have to seek refuge in shelters!

- But how can you go about to end violence against women and other kinds of oppression of women? Ndeyi asked, unless laws or gender balance in decision-making bodies will be enough.

- I think, Satou continued, that it has been inherited by men from generation to generation across the globe for so long that they have developed into those who decide and hold power, that it requires constant work of individual women, women's groups, women in politics, women's cross-border co-operation for many years, before women can find themselves fully equal anywhere on the globe.

- Yes, pondered Fatou, but it's somehow nice to know that we are not alone in this struggle. We are together with all women on Earth, and I can really feel the sisterhood, especially when we arrange our sixteen days of activism for women's rights, every year in November and that this takes place in many places around the globe ever since the Women World Conference in Beijing 1995. That makes me optimistic.

- But listen, we must not forget the men. We cannot improve our living conditions by fighting them. We do not believe in war, right? Ndeyi reminded them.

- No, Satou continued, our party leadership has, after all, concluded that there will be no changes in the Gambia unless the women are involved in party politics.

- The party leadership yes, Fatou said, but what is the situation like among the members? How many have more than one wife for example? And how controversial isn't it when we try to raise the issue as a matter of respect for equal human rights even among party members!

- Yes, but you probably cannot get everything at once, Ndeyi com-

mented, and for the next Congress we have the proposal that was presented in Agenda 2016, that all elected representatives should be at least 30% women. If decided at the Congress, we have taken a giant leap. Don't you think so?

- Well of course you are right when it comes to that question, Fatou said. But that proposal is a challenge in our work as well. We must gain a lot of women's support to make it clear that they are needed as party members. So there are enough women to choose from. It is certainly not a small task! There's no tradition at all, and most people are afraid of politics. They think that politics will mean conflicts and problems.

- But we must try, Satou continued. We should indeed make a scetch on this work as soon as possible.

The sun had moved further down in the sky and glittered like silver in the sea. They got up from their place under the tree and walked slowly towards the shore. They took their shoes off and held them in their hands and let the waves wash over their feet. They strolled along the seashore. As far as they could see both ways, the white sea-shore-sand met the waves' white sea-foam on top of the blue sea waves.

- Remember that in this beautiful scenery, people suffer from poverty and oppression. We struggle and toil just to survive, Fatou reflected and continued. I give all I can before the next elections, but if we do not manage to replace the current president this time either, I might give up. I do not think I can live like this for another five years. I think I would try to make it to Europe if we do not make it in the next election, like so many others have done. But no back way, with smugglers and dangerous boats and a totally uncertain destiny even if you make it to Europe. No, it is not a possibility for me. A cousin has gone now. We did not know anything before he phoned from Niger yesterday. First stage completed and now he wanted money for the next stage. The neighbour's three sons have all travelled north through the Sahara

earlier this year.

- Oops, said Ndeyi, so those are your thoughts. I cannot think like that, at least not as long as my brother is in prison. I have to look after the whole big family as long as he is not in place. Therefore I have to keep a low profile when it comes to public policy work. Every New Year, I hope that the president will probably release the political prisoners. But no, every year I get disappointed.

- I think that if it is impossible to remove the president this time also. I hope that my husband will be able to bring our children and me overseas to him. But if we manage to drefeat the president, my husband will have to move here! We would all be needed here, Satou stated.

- Yes Dear God, what joy, to be able to think that it could be possible. My brother and all other political prisoners would be released immediately! Ndeyi said.

- And we would have so much work building the country that all other thoughts would simply fly away, Fatou said with a big smile on her face.

As the party showed, when analysing the voting figures in the last parliamentary election, the support for the president was not great at all and it's declining! So there is actually a possibility. Although very few believe so. It is certainly very important to get this fact into the people's minds.

- Yes, I rely on the radio station Taranga FM, which has now got its licence back, Ndeyi said. They are arguing that they do not produce any news, which is prohibited. All they do is to translate news that is printed in newspapers in the Gambia.

- But remember that the president was trying to intimidate them not to translate from Foroyaa! Satou reminded them. Luckily they were so steadfast and said that as long as Foroyaa is published in the Gambia

we will continue translating articles from them like the ones from the government-controlled Observer newspaper.

- Have you heard how the online radio stations quote Foroyaa more and more? It is really hopeful, Fatou continued. They all agree to the petition Foroyaa published, indicating that the latest prisoners must be released. It was unconstitutional to arrest and imprison people simply because they were relatives of suspected coup plotters from the attack on December 30.

- They have even arrested a thirteen -year-old boy, Ndeyi added.

- Yes, it's crazy, Fatou continued. But I heard that ECOWAS would send representatives to the Gambia now, to control what is taking place in the aftermath of the coup attempt.

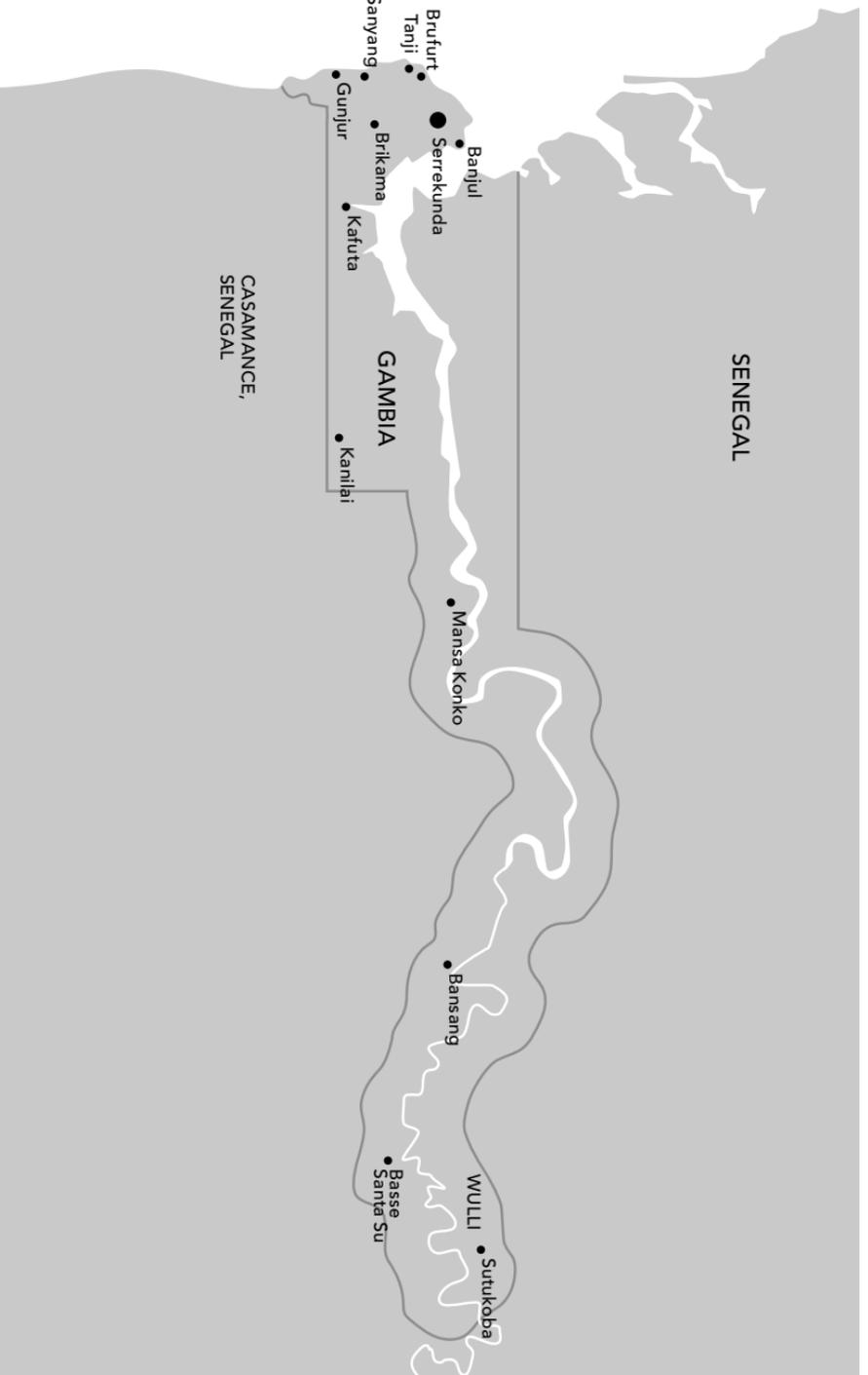
- Good! No one has heard of all those who were picked up by security police and that occurred several weeks ago now. And really, nobody knows how many people have been arrested, continued Ndeyi. But hey, we have to start thinking about returning home. The sun is going down and I have no desire to walk in the forest out to the road in total darkness, and I have to get home and make sure everyone gets dinner before going to bed.

They turned around and enjoyed the increasing fresh evening breeze that came straight towards them now. They pulled their shawls tighter around their shoulders and body, no longer as protection from the burning sun, but against the cool winds from the Atlantic. Crabs began crawling out of their holes in the sand at the water's edge. Soon, as the sun would go down completely in the sea at the horizon, the shore would be dotted with small crabs everywhere. Some vultures absently looked up from their meals, when the women passed by, but then continued feasting on the fish remains, which they had set beaks and talons on.

The three friends veered off the path onto the busy street and the

sound of civilization became increasingly strong as they hurried away, each lost in their thoughts and feelings, but invigorated by this moment of tranquillity and communion. Fatou, who went in the middle, took the hands of the two others. Here, with these close friends, she felt at home. They really understood her and gave her confidence and inspiration. With them she dared to open her heart and mind without fear of being misunderstood, betrayed or mocked.

Was it happiness she felt?



SENEGAL

CASAMANCE,
SENEGAL

GAMBIA

WULLI

Banjul
Serrrekunda
Brufurt
Tanji
Sanyang

Brikama
Kafuta
Gunjur

Kanilai

Mansa Konko

Bansang

Basse
Santa Su

Sutukoba

Abbreviations and explications of all the organizations mentioned in the book

APRC

Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction. Led by Yahya Jammeh, the country's president, since the military coup in 1994. He has been elected and re-elected three times after that. The elections have been deemed undemocratic by election monitors from the EU and ECOWAS. Many feel compelled to support the party, in order to keep a job, for their children to stand a chance at school or work, for a bag of rice or a tractor for the village, or a thousand other reasons that have nothing to do with politics. The president, also party leader, has a group of young aggressive supporters, many of them uneducated, and the majority from the Jola tribe, the green youths. They are really willing to do anything for the president, without questioning or understanding anything.

AU

The African Union, in which the Gambia is a member state along with the other 47 African countries. African protocol about human rights adopted by the AU. But no monitoring of how countries are complying with this implementation.

Commonwealth

The Gambia, an old British colony, belonged to the British Commonwealth but in the Presidential conflict with the EU, the leader announced that the Gambia as of that day would leave the Commonwealth, at the time when work between the Gambia and the Commonwealth would commence about human rights.

Ecowas

The Economic Cooperation of West African States. This includes all West African countries: France's, England's and Portugal's former colonies as well. Jammeh had hoped that he would become chairman of ECOWAS, but it was never possible. Instead they recently elected the former President of Senegal. The ECOWAS has advised all members to introduce two term limits for a president to hold power. All countries except the Gambia and Togo have agreed to this. But later, according to reports, Togo has assented to it.

EU

European Union. The EU envoy in the Gambia was sent home after criticizing the president. The EU urged the government to discuss the 17 points of human rights and proposed improvements, before further financial contributions to the country would be possible. The president dismissed EU's contributions as "chicken money", which they could do without and refused to discuss anything.

Foroyaa

Is a Mandinka word meaning Freedom. It is a private newspaper, close to the political opposition party PDOIS. The magazine has managed to survive by developing a specific form of journalism. It is hard to ac-

cuse them of lying or exaggerating since they continuously write about what the government and those in power should do instead of what they are doing. The responsible editor-in-chief has been put in prison on some occasions, but has later been released. Their awareness, carefulness and international good reputation also secure them.

FLAG

Female Lawyers Association of the Gambia. They provide, inter alia, free support and advice to indigent women who end up in legal trouble.

Gamcotrap

The Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices affecting the health of women and girls.

An NGO, non-governmental organization, established in 1984 in order to counteract harmful traditional practices such as genital mutilation and violence against women and to promote the good traditions like breast-feeding. They have had extensive international co-operation, e.g. Swedish Save the Children.

The Independent

A private daily newspaper which was banned to operate and had its premises and equipment burnt down twice after having written critical articles about the president's policies. The leaders now live in exile, like many other Gambian journalists are compelled to do.

GMC

Gambia Moral Congress

A moral conservative and market liberal party, with only few members in the Gambia. Party leader Mai Fatty lives in Europe and has travelled extensively to obtain support for himself by political parties

and leaders in Europe. In the last election in 2011 the party supported the UDP.

NADD

National Alliance for Democracy and Development

A multi-year collaboration between the opposition parties ahead of the presidential election in 2006. A great deal of commitment and resources were invested in this collaboration. Problems were negotiated and solved. Popular support was strong. Shortly before the election, however, the leader of the UDP withdrew from the coalition followed by Hamat Bah of NRP. The dictatorial president emerged victoriously from the elections for a second term. The coalition slowly faded out.

NRP

National Reconciliation Party

One of the opposition parties, with a large support base only in the particular local area where the leader of the NRP was born and grew up, a certain Hamat Bah. He was jointly nominated as United Front's presidential candidate, when UDP had left the United Front in 2011. But immediately after the presidential elections he also left the coalition and contested the parliamentary elections under his own party NRP, as the only opposition party taking part in that election.

PDOIS

People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism

The PPP government under the leadership of President Jawara, the first government since the Gambian independence in 1964, which lasted until the military coup in 1994 - depicted PDOIS as communists, a stamp that survived among the elderly, even though it was more or less intimidation propaganda.

Their goal is a mixed economy with democratic governance nationally, regionally and locally and wide international co-operation. Liberty, dignity and prosperity have been their ambition and slogan since the formation of the party.

It has a conscious democratic member base, regardless of tribal affiliation in the Gambia. Their congresses decided on political programmes and now has work in progress on how to get at least 30% women of active party members introduced at all levels. Party leader is sociologist Halifa Sallah. They have over the years, since the millennium, invested a great deal of engagement, work and money in trying to unite the opposition parties around a common programme for the elections, at least a joint plan for a transitional government that would prepare the infrastructure for a multiparty democratic system.

PPP

People's Progressive Party

It was the ruling party from the Independence in 1965 until the coup of 1994 when the president Sir Dawda Jawarra was deposed after six electoral terms in power. Today it is a tiny marginalized party. Its leader now is Omar O.J. Jallow, former Minister of Agriculture in the PPP government before the 1994 coup.

UDP

United Democratic Party

The historically largest opposition party, formed in 1994, with Ouisainou Darboe, a lawyer, as party leader. They have not launched any party programme, but have criticized the current president of undemocratic practices and violation of freedom of expression and human rights. Their base is primarily the largest tribe, Mandinka. They have, when reality meets dreams, refused to co-operate with other opposi-

tion parties about a joint programme, but instead demanded that the UDP as a party must lead the coalition, without agreements on programmes of co-operation. The current party leader is over-age for the elections in 2016 and cannot stand as presidential candidate, unless the law is changed.

U.N

United Nations

The UN envoy in the Gambia was sent home after she criticized the Gambian President 2006, after having claimed that there was no science that backed up his statements of his ability to cure HIV/AIDS sufferers with healing and herbal remedies, and also because he refused to allow scientific tests. Later, the UN envoy was refused access to certain parts of prisons when the delegation finally was invited to check allegations of torture, which they nevertheless concluded was the terrifying case.

United Front

This was the collaboration formed by opposition parties for the presidential election in 2011. All the opposition parties decided to send representatives of the parties from the different regions in the Gambia, who would meet and choose a joint candidate. UDP and GMC, withdrew their co-operation, and did not attend the meeting and election of a single opposition candidate.

Voters lost hope and many refrained from voting. The president in office strengthened his position.

WODD

Women for Democracy and development

An independent civil society organization with the in the Gambia still

unorthodox ambition to be a bottom-up democratic organization, where leaders are elected by the members and not appointed from above. Its main task is civic education and literacy by introducing local workshops, often with the drama and theatre as method.

Feel free to read the Amnesty Annual Report at: **[amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org)**

