

Salif's Last Trip to Africa - by Hassan Lotfi of Drumzkool



Given the somewhat unusual nature of my trip to the Gambia and Guinea, I thought a newsletter of this kind might be useful and also necessary to those who knew Salifou.

Salifou, Peter (another student of Salifou's), and I flew to the Gambia from Gatwick at 7 am on Wednesday 23rd January 2008. We arrived at Banjul Airport early in the afternoon (13.30 local time, in the same time zone as the UK).

After acclimatising in the Gambia for three days, we set off on a gruelling forty-hour road journey which the Rough Guide calls 'an endurance test'. This route took us over two rivers and along a track cut through the jungle. This track, more often than not, resembled anything but a road. To travel on it, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is a must.

Yet, the car we travelled in, which carried nine people (Salifou, Fama, Soda, (our teachers and members of a band called Tamala, led by Salifou), Peter, Jack, Yuki, Pablo, myself and the driver) plus all our belongings stacked on top and fastened with a net, was not four-wheel drive. It broke down a few times but every time our able driver solved the problem. We arrived in Boke on the morning of Monday 28th January.

Drumming lessons began for two hours every morning and two hours every afternoon, although this timetable was not strictly adhered to. Meanwhile, we attended two street parties called Sabar. One of these was organised by some of the local women and the other by musicians including our teachers. Jack and I were the first non-African people to have danced and played in the Boke Sabar. We organised a third Sabar in the house where we stayed in order to celebrate Jack's and Yuki's birthdays. The same musicians as before attended and the same wonderful music, singing and dancing followed.

One Saturday, Salifou took Ousmane (his brother), Yuki, Sara (a Tamala dancer), Peter, Jack, Memed and his Finnish wife, and me to a place called Bell Air which was by the Atlantic Ocean. We had taken our drums for a day of drumming in a most beautiful spot where the river joins the sea and the flow of the river takes you into the sea. We had a marvellous day of drumming and dancing. There was also a newly built luxury hotel there in which we enjoyed the pool and some coffee.

The highest point of the trip came on the Thursday morning of February 14th when, by previous arrangement, we played for the local school (CRC Elementary), which was located opposite our house. The school's normal day was suspended for this event. All the children came and for about three hours they danced to our playing. All this was recorded by Salifou and his commentary can be heard on the videotape.

Then, only a few hours later, in the early hours of Friday 15th February, a terrible tragedy occurred. Salifou had been involved in a car accident. The car he was driving had crashed straight into a tree at high speed. The news was brought to the house at around 3 am. Ousmane, Salifou's mum, Yuki, me and some other friends started walking to the hospital. After a while more friends with a car arrived and gave us a lift to the hospital.

On arrival, Yuki and I walked straight into the room where those involved in the accident had been brought. Guinea is a very poor country and the hospital had no emergency facilities. It was basically a room where the injured and dying were taken to be watched over. I searched for Salifou and found him lying unconscious on the floor along with the others. I looked at him. His breathing was abnormal. I looked around the room and then I knew I was witnessing Salifou's last breaths.

Yuki, meanwhile, had gone out and was frantically trying to arrange transport to a better hospital (one with facilities) in Kamsar, another town about an hour away. I looked at Salifou again but had to leave the room. I am prone to passing out in emotionally/medically shocking situations and I knew what was coming so I took myself into a corner and passed out. I came to again a few minutes later to the sound of cries at Salifou's passing.

From this point on, the joy, happiness and exuberance of previous days was turned on its head. The following day was spent in Salifou's village where he was buried immediately, as is traditional, in the place of his birth.

Salifou and I had been supposed to start our real work a few days after the day of the accident (when drumming for Jack and Peter in Boke would have finished). We were then to travel to Conakry, the capital. As it was, we had done little about any of our plans, except carry out some preliminary information gathering about various things. I stayed on in Boke until the third day after Salifou's passing and travelled to Conakry on Monday 18th February. I flew from Conakry to Paris on the evening of Friday 22nd February and arrived in London at 8.30 am the next day.

I went to Africa with Salifou as we had begun working together on several projects. But more importantly, I began working with him because I liked, respected and trusted him enormously. He was a walking encyclopaedia on the subject of our mutual interest and always gave of his knowledge so readily and generously. He considered it a duty to pass on the joy and happiness that his music generated. This is why Drumz Kool has been able to develop at such an accelerated rate during the last few months.

We are all devastated by the loss of Salifou from this world. We have lost an amazing partnership with an outstanding musician, teacher and very dear friend. We feel his empty space in our hearts. Ironically, our one solace at this difficult time is to play the music that we learned from him and through which we shared so much joy.

If Salifou could affect us so much and so quickly, (it was in his character to make an immediate, deep impact wherever he went), I cannot imagine what impact his loss must have had on his family, both here and in Africa. He leaves behind his wife, Hannah, and their two young sons, Ousmane (4) and Daniel (2), who live in London. Also, there are his mother, grandparents, sister and brother, his 26-strong band, Tamala, not to mention a large number of friends in London and Africa (and, knowing Salifou, dotted all over the world).

In Boke, Salifou was a local hero and respected by everybody. Our hearts and condolences go out to Hannah and her children and to all of Salifou's relatives and friends. Hannah is in Guinea at the time of writing this newsletter. Upon her return (early in March), I shall discuss with her Drumz Kool's desire to organise an event celebrating Salifou's life and music. Similarly, through Ousmane (Salifou's younger brother in Guinea - also an accomplished drummer and a member of Tamala),

Drumz Kool will attempt to keep alive the contact with Guinea that was made possible by Salifou. After all, apart from our emotional attachment to the culture and birthplace of our friend and teacher, Salifou's shining personality and vast knowledge and skills had become a great asset for Drumz Kool.

Hassan