

Laundry

by Karen Eisenbraun

Published in *Potpourri* literary magazine, Volume 15, No. 1 (Spring 2003)

I should have done my laundry again before I moved.

This is what I am thinking as I stand over my trunk, staring at my dwindling supply of clothing. I am down to a couple of T-shirts, a *pagne*, and a pair of pants that is dusty but still suitable for biking. In this country, with its sweltering heat and pervasive dirt and dust, it is impossible to wear anything more than once between washings.

As a Peace Corps volunteer newly arrived in a small West African village, I know I have much to learn about the culture and social customs of my new home. Over the next year, I will make countless social *faux pas* and be continually amazed at the attitudes and expectations of my Malian friends and neighbors. But nothing will astound me as much as the circumstances surrounding my dirty laundry.

I arrived in my village after three months of training in the capital city of Bamako, where thirty other new volunteers and I attended language, culture, and technical classes. My village, Tabakoro, is situated directly on the one paved road that runs through southern Mali, connecting Bamako with the city of Sikasso. Across the road from the village is a large textile factory; the hum of the generators and machinery is audible from my yard. I am here to work as a natural resource management extension agent, which is a fancy way of saying I am here to teach people the importance of recycling and planting trees.

My house is a two-room mud hut with a corrugated tin roof. A low mud-brick wall surrounds the house, latrine, and yard, which is actually dry, grassless, hard-packed dirt. Fifty yards away is my host family's compound. Although I do not live with them, they are my caretakers, my *jatigi*, the "keeper of my happiness."

In the Bambara culture, life is very communal, and every outsider is accepted into a family. The Bambara have a proverb that says, "If a man goes into a village and he has no mother or no father, it is because he has not adopted one."

My *jatigi* are my closest neighbors: Ousman Sangare and his wife, Mama Togola. Ousman is jovial and unfailingly helpful, always laughing through his crooked, yellow

teeth, but Mama is an unfriendly, sour woman who rarely smiles. She often steps inside my house without being invited, which is extremely rude in this culture, as houses are considered private, used only for sleeping and dressing, and all social business is conducted outside. If I stand in the doorway to block her entrance, she peers past me into the dim room, trying to look at my belongings. I know she is only curious, but her intrusiveness makes me uncomfortable.

It is my second day in the village, and I am inside my hut, unpacking and arranging my belongings. The state of my laundry is troublesome. I had planned on having my clothes washed as soon as I arrived in the village, but now that I am here, I am not sure whom to ask for help. During training, our *jatigi muso* – our host mothers – had washed our clothes. This was their duty as our host mothers. The sense of duty is strong in Mali: people perform their roles without question, without complaint, without even expecting thanks. Their language doesn't even have a word equivalent to "thank you." Whenever we tried to express our thanks to our host mothers for washing our laundry or fetching our water, they would laugh at us. They didn't feel that they deserved acknowledgement for simply doing the job that was expected of them.

Having learned all this, I assume that my host mother in my new village is responsible for my laundry. But now my host mother is Mama, and her squinty eyes and sour countenance make me nervous. I am not comfortable asking such a favor of her, even if it is her duty to perform it. Perhaps she would resent me for giving her the extra work; maybe she would chastise me for being unable to do it myself. I am considering this when I hear shuffling footsteps in my yard, followed by a voice calling out *Ko ko ko*. This is the Malian way of knocking. I go to the door and draw back the colorful *pagne* I have hung up as a curtain.

A woman stands in front of my door. She has round, healthy cheeks, and her smile shows unusually straight and white teeth. She is wearing a colorful head wrap and a green blouse with gold buttons, puffy sleeves, and a lacy collar. She has a baby strapped to her back and a small wooden stool balanced on top of her head. She introduces herself as Mariam and asks me if I've eaten lunch yet. When I tell her no, she motions for me to follow her. I grab my water bottle and lock the door behind me.

Mariam leads me past Ousman's house and alongside the cotton field until we come to a compound where several women are gathered around a single bowl of rice and a smaller bowl of sauce. This is the *so kura*, the new house, where Ousman's mother lives.

The women eat in the shade of a straw awning, seated low on their stools, their right sides facing the bowl. Their left elbows rest on their thighs, hands dangling between their parted knees, *pagnes* hiked up to reveal cracked, dry shins. With their right hands, they scoop rice into their mouths, licking their palms, their tongues flattened wide to catch the runny sauce. A young girl wearing only underpants appears behind me and hands me a stool. The women reposition themselves without standing, reaching their left hands down between their knees to grab their stools, shuffling forwards or backwards to make room for us in the circle.

The sauce is too hot for my hands; I draw back my fingers, and one of the women picks us a woven fan and begins waving it violently over the bowl. There is loud chatter and laughter, and I do not understand what they are saying, but I know they are talking about me. The old woman next to me holds up her callused, dry palm, slick with sauce and saliva, then motions to my own smooth skin. More laughter follows, and the woman grins toothlessly.

Eat, white woman, they tell me. Fill yourself.

On our walk back to my house, Mariam chatters incessantly. I have to ask her to repeat most of what she says, but I am able to piece together that she is married to Ousman's brother Amadou. This makes her part of my family, part of my *jatigi*.

When we part just past Ousman's compound, she looks at me gravely and asks, "Assa," – my name in this county – "can you wash your own clothes?"

I shake my head no. As it is not considered proper to give our host mothers our underwear, I am used to washing this myself, along with smaller items such as socks and handkerchiefs, and an occasional T-shirt. But the process is time-consuming, and the strong soap makes my hands burn. I use four different buckets: soak, scrub, rinse, rinse again. My clothes still always look dirty and feel stiff with soap.

"When your clothes are dirty," Mariam tells me now, "give them to me, and I will wash them."

I nod to show my understanding, relieved that an answer to my most immediate problem has surfaced. I ask her if *keme* is sufficient. I am offering her five hundred West African francs, roughly equivalent to one dollar, enough money for her to buy sauce ingredients for a week. She shakes her head.

“No, you are our guest, and you should not work. We will do your work for you.”

Her response does not surprise me. We had been told that it would be an honor for the villagers to have a foreigner living among them, and that as an honored guest, we would not be expected to do any of our own housework. So I am not surprised when Mariam turns down the money, but I am not entirely comfortable with her refusal. I wonder what made Mariam broach the subject in the first place, and wonder if she wants something from me. I would prefer to pay her for her work, but I don't argue with her. I haven't been here long, and I don't want to offend anyone or cause trouble. So I nod and tell her that I have some clothes in need of washing. She tells me she will come by my house tomorrow to pick them up.

My dirty clothes are not plentiful, but when Mariam comes to my house the next day, I give her only half, aware that my sparse wardrobe is probably more than clothing than her entire family owns.

I hand Mariam a bar of soap, and she hoists the laundry basket onto her head. She walks to the water pump and is there all morning. I can see her from my yard, bent at the waist over her buckets. When she returns later that afternoon, my clothes are immaculate and dry. Mariam even hands me the remaining sliver of soap, and I feel guilty for questioning her motives.

A week after Mariam washes my laundry, I buy a new water cannery at the market: a twenty-liter clay jug, surprisingly light but awkward to carry, so I leave it with Baba, who works down by the road, selling cigarettes and flagging down passing vehicles for travelers. At the house, Mama is pounding millet for dinner. I try to talk to her, but she only laughs at me. “You never study,” she says. “You can't speak Bambara.”

Mama says something else to me, but I shake my head, not understanding. She speaks too quickly, her words are indecipherable. But I am spared from further chastisement when Ousman rides his bicycle into the compound. He has been out in the rice fields all day.

“Assa, it’s going to rain.” I look up; the sky is clear. He notices my puzzlement and chuckles. “It was too hot today. When it is this hot, it always rains.”

I tell Ousman about my cannery, thinking he will send one of the girls – Fatumata or Batuma – to fetch it. But they are at the *so kura*, helping with the chores. “You and Mama will go get it after dinner,” he says. “She can carry it on her head.”

Dinner is millet porridge, *to*, an ashy, gray substance the consistency of half-dried Play-Doh. To eat *to*, I must break off a piece from the communal bowl and dip it into a slimy okra sauce. I share a bowl with Ousman. Men and women usually eat separately, but since I am an honored guest, I am always invited to eat with the head of the household. We eat without speaking, and I notice the sky growing dark well ahead of sunset. A chilling breeze sweeps through the yard.

“Go look at the clouds,” Ousman tells me. I step out from under the awning, and I am amazed by the sky. In our language class, the professors taught us weather terminology. I never understood why they taught us to say, “the sky is black.” *San finnen don*. Now I can see that it is no exaggeration. A mass of black clouds is approaching from the west, bulbous clouds blacker than Mama’s eyes.

One raindrop rustles the leaves of Ousman’s mango tree, then another, and then a downpour as if someone has opened a trap door beneath the clouds. Ousman waves me inside, but I stay under the awning, even though the rain is so heavy that water is seeping through the thick straw mats above my head. Puddles form instantly in the dirt, the earth so dry it cannot absorb the water. Ousman and Mama sit inside, uninterested, but I am mesmerized. Flashes of lightening illuminate the yard, the mango tree, the free-roaming goats that wander by, bleating forlornly.

Soon it will be raining like this every day. The lowlands, the rice fields, will flood. I know Ousman is worried that they will not finish planting before the rainy season. But this storm is a fluke, a mango rain, the heat breaking. It will be at least two weeks before the rains really begin.

When the rain stops, the sun has set, and there is no moon. In the complete darkness, I cannot even see two feet in front of me. I take Ousman’s lantern to my house and return with my flashlight. The baby strapped to her back, Mama leads me to the road. She does not speak. We can see the glow of lights from the factory and hear trucks driving by on

the road, carrying cotton and fabric to other towns. Water flows through the path like a tiny river, and we walk beside it, over patches of dry, fallen millet stalks. I keep my flashlight trained on the ground. Three steps behind Mama, watching her cracked, black heels meet with the slick mud, I realize I am lost. I know only one path through the village: through the soccer field and past Mariam's house. But Mama is taking me the long way around, because she knows already what I will discover weeks later: the soccer field floods with each heavy rain.

I have never been down to the road at night. Lanterns mark every boutique. Tables are set near the road, stationed by women selling beans and *brochettes* and greasy spaghetti to meandering factory workers. Young men are drinking strong tea and smoking cigarettes and talking loudly. Bob Marley plays from several radios. Baba sees me and hands my cannery to Mama. She lifts it onto her head, a rolled-up *pagne* beneath it for cushioning. She steadies it with one hand. "Let's go."

We are no more than twenty paces from the road when Mama stops so abruptly, I almost collide with her. Her hand still steadying the cannery, she turns to me.

"Assa, I heard that you gave your laundry to Mariam."

She speaks quickly. In my mind, I slow down her sentence, isolating each word and then piecing them back together. Finally, I nod.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because ... she asked for it."

Her eyes fixed on mine – something the Bambara rarely do – she speaks deliberately, slowly. "Give it to me next time. I'm your *jatigi muso*. I'll do your work. No one else. *I y'a famuu?*" Do you understand?

I nod and begin to chuckle at her earnestness, but her cold eyes stop me, and I tell her yes, I will give my laundry to her. I am puzzled but somewhat relieved. Why is Mama so concerned about my laundry? But if she wants to do my work, maybe she likes me after all.

Two days later, Mariam is at my door. Her own laundry basket is on top of her head, making her appear taller than she already is. Her bare feet are planted firmly on the ground, her stature majestic. I shrink a little inside when I see her, feeling as if I'm betraying her. I take a deep breath and plan my words.

“Mariam ... Mama asked me if she could do my laundry. Since she’s my *jatigi muso*, I told her she could.” This is her custom, and she understands it better than I do, so I do not expect an argument.

But Mariam shakes her head, unfazed. “No, Mama will not do a good job. She’s lazy. She won’t take good care of your clothes. It’s better to give them to me.”

I think Mariam might be right, but I have to keep my word to Mama, have to try to improve our relationship. “but she is my *jatigi muso*,” I tell her half-heartedly.

She is insistent. “No, we are all your *jatigi muso*. We are all your family. Give it to me; it’s better.”

Not wanting to offend her, I retreat into the house and bring back half of my laundry. I can give the rest to Mama, I think. She’ll never know. Then they will both be happy.

For several weeks, I give half of my laundry to Mariam whenever she requests it. To appease Mama, I take the rest to her. I never know if they are aware of my tactics; they could be laughing behind my back the entire time. Every time my dirty laundry begins to pile up, I grow nervous. I secretly begin washing just what I need from one day to the next. I hang a clothesline inside my bedroom – unheard of when the midday sun can dry clothes in minutes – so no one will know I am washing my own clothes. Mariam continues to tell me that Mama is lazy, and Mama continues to watch me through narrowed eyes. When Mama does my laundry, she asks to use my water buckets and sometimes forgets to return them. Sometimes it is two days before she returns my clothes, and there is never any leftover soap.

After several weeks, tired of dividing up my laundry and washing my own clothes in secret, I begin to look for a moment alone with Ousman so I can ask for his advice. I find my chance one day when Mariam and I deliver lunch to Ousman and Amadou, who are working in the family’s peanut fields.

Mariam tells me the fields are not far, but we walk along the paved road for what seems like miles. Finally we turn off the road onto a path and break through a cluster of trees. We see Ousman and Amadou bent over at the waist, weeding the peanut fields with tools called *dabas* – wooden handles like hammers, flat metal blades protruding from the heads.

Mariam takes the large metal bowl from atop her head. It is wrapped in a large scrap of cloth, which she unties to reveal a mound of *to* with a sauce bowl nestled in the center. She unties her daughter, Abi, from her back, and we sit in the shade of a *shi* tree. Since there are only four of us, we all eat from the same bowl. We have no stools, so we squat in the dirt.

When I have had my fill of *to*, I give thanks by saying “*A barika*,” and rinse off my fingers with water from my bottle. Mariam straps Abi to her back again, and she and Amadou pick up *dabas* and move away into the fields, leaving Ousman and me under the tree, talking.

I tell him I have a problem and explain my situation. He laughs.

“You do not have a problem, Assa,” he tells me. “Mama and Mariam do not get along, but that is not your problem. They can both do your laundry. They are both your *jatigi*. Do not worry about it.” He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. He does not approve of their behavior, of the dissention between them. He is angry that they are making me choose sides.

Amadou returns to the *shi* tree to get a drink of water from his canteen. He makes a joke about my laundry. When I give him a puzzled look, he tells me that our conversation carried clearly over the still air to where the two of them were working. They heard every word.

I look over at Mariam, bent over, driving her *daba* into the ground, Abi on her back. She does not give any indication that she can hear us. In this culture, the men are the problem solvers, so she probably thinks nothing of my conversation with Ousman. But I feel as though I have betrayed her by involving him. I should have made my own decision long ago.

If Mariam is upset by my conversation with Ousman, she gives no indication. She appears at my door the following week, her own laundry basket perched on her head, and asks for mine. I feel as though I should apologize. She and Mama have both acted inappropriately, but Mariam was a genuine friend to me. Her offer to help me with my work was sincere.

But there are no appropriate words for expressing my regret. If they even exist in this language, I do not know them. I simply meet her eyes as I hand her my basket and hope

she can see that, even though Ousman said I do not have to choose between them, I have. I hope she can see that my basket is fuller than usual. I have held nothing back to give to Mama, have kept nothing to wash in the concealment of my hut, other than what culture dictates. As always, she takes the load without complaint. And as always, she returns my basket the same day, my clothes folded neatly inside it, the sliver of leftover soap resting on top.