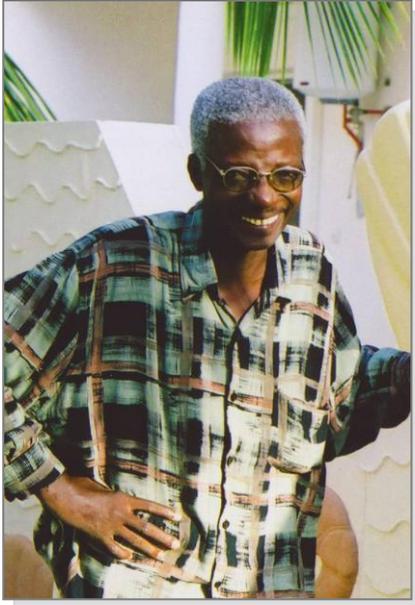




A Profile of Peace: Mathias Bassene

By David Blair

A peace process is underway in Senegal to end the 20-year civil war between the Casamance region and the national government. In Casamance, Karuna Center is working with civil society leaders to build their peace leadership and conflict resolution skills to enable them to contribute to a lasting peace settlement. Matthias Bassene is the local leader of this project and co-trainer.



While in southern Senegal this past November, Karuna Center Program Specialist Adin Thayer and I worked with Mathias Bassene, an activist in the peace movement and in civil society in Senegal. Mathias shared his personal story with us on a day trip out to his home village, a trip that showed me not only his particular story but that of many people raised in a traditional life and now living in a different way.

Mathias was born in a small village on the edge of a tributary of the Casamance River in southern Senegal. Rice paddies fringe the river below his house, and a flooded causeway leads over to the pirogues, or dugout canoes, moored among the mangroves. Mathias grew up with the river, the forest and his family's farm. He knew which trees gave the sweetest fruit, and his parents and grandparents taught him about healing plants. Malaria was not even seen as a disease, it was just something you got and then cured with the right plant.

Mathias's family name means "Those who have and who give"; his family was traditionally a wealthy and generous one. He remembers that his grandfather would hear a knock on the door at 2AM, wait a few minutes, and then go to the door and bring in an empty basket. He would fill it with rice, put it back outside the door and, in the morning, the basket was gone. Often, at harvest time, they would find a basket of rice on their doorstep; the gift had been returned.

Mathias's father's house was always full of people, relatives, friends, and visitors. It was not uncommon for 50 people to be in the family compound. As the oldest son, he was present when his father had important guests, such as the local "king" or religious leader. These guests invited him to go hunting and fishing with them and to accompany them on their business.

Mathias tells us a couple of stories that challenge my mind to open to the possibility of magic in the world. Once, his father told him to paddle the king back over to the other side of the river. They set out and part way across the skies opened. Mathias was drenched to the skin. Not one drop of rain touched the king.

A delegation of women once visited the king to beg for help in ending a drought. He sent them packing, warning them that they'd better hurry home or they might not get there in time. Half an hour later, torrential rains arrived and continued for one week.

I hear these stories from a man who left the village to go to middle school and high school in the regional capital; university in Dakar, the capital of Senegal; to England to teach French literature, to Mali to work for USAID, to Vermont to study conflict transformation. Mathias lives fully in the modern world without abandoning his traditional culture. He tells us what he has seen, not just what he "believes"!

During our tour of his home, he shows us the spot where he was born – that house has long since been taken down in favor of a more modern structure. His aunt now lives there, and she still tends a garden, keeps pigs, and makes the best cashew wine in the region. Mathias returns as often as he can from town to visit her. She is a widow, living with her widowed daughter-in-law. He feels sad for them; he also respects their choice to live in a traditional way.

That has not been Mathias’s choice. He walked to primary school for five years, about 5 miles every day, but then was sent to the regional capital for middle school. He lived with a friend of his father’s, sleeping with five other boys on a straw mat on the floor for six years. The boys from the country were very motivated to succeed – they were determined to leave these hard conditions. And so they did move on, with the blessing of their families who sent them out into the world to succeed.

I am reminded of the story of Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman), born a Sioux in 1858 and raised in a traditional, nomadic way to become a warrior: “Ohiyesa” means “the Winner”. His father sent him to white schools to become a “warrior” in white culture. He told his son: “it is the same as if I sent you on your first warpath. I shall expect you to conquer.” His grandmother had instructed him: “When you see a new trail, or a footprint you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing.” Ohiyesa did conquer, graduating from Dartmouth and medical school, becoming a doctor, author and eloquent spokesman for the Native Americans and their culture.

Mathias has been on a similar journey, leaving a traditional world to know the world outside, and yet not losing his connection to the land and village that raised him.

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Scenes from Mathias’s village.



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