

Dakar 10

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Abstract

The idea of representing a city in 10 word descriptions comes from a writing workshop that I led in the Senegalese capital of Dakar in 2015, on the invitation of the Dakar Women's Group. The pairing of the ideal 10 word descriptions with the ideal 10 images developed as a result of multiple revisions for various occasions, over the course of a year. I hope that the selection here gives a glimpse into but also a feel of a place rich with color, vibrancy, hospitality, and contradiction.

Upon my first visit to Dakar, Senegal in May of 2015, I was invited by the then-President of the Dakar Women's Group, Mrs. Sharon Nossiter, to conduct a "writing the urban" workshop for the members. In a breezy beach restaurant in Les Almadies, we jotted down the 10 most important things that represented Dakar for each one of us—sounds, smells, places, food, music. Then we put our lists aside and worked on step-by-step writing prompts on public spaces in Dakar. In the end, we revisited our original list of 10 typical Dakar things—replacing, refining items...That's how "Dakar 10" was born.

As the wonderful participants put pen to paper, so did I, in an attempt to wrap my head around the most fascinatingly contradictory city that I had ever set foot in. 10 items? I am not sure how the number 10 came about. Somehow, it felt sufficient and manageable. It was a good way of organizing multiple impressions, of prioritizing, of making choices. When we shared our lists, I realized that locals and tourists make somewhat different lists: with more or less the same items, seen and felt differently. Already at the workshop, I revised my list several times over. Then, I revised it a few more times, for a conference presentation that I was working on.

When I decided to submit my "Dakar 10" list for publication, I revised it at least 20 more times, changing items, developing the descriptions, shifting the order around. When my list was finalized, I proudly showed it to my friend and co-editor Prof. Jorge de La Barre: I had the perfect selection of 10 descriptions encapsulating Dakar! Jorge took one look and said, calmly—"But how about the images?" And then it hit me: the 10 descriptions of Dakar would be all the more interesting if accompanied by 10 carefully selected images...My "final" list was turned upside down. I now faced the daunting task of matching descriptions with images: a great word description had no good image to match it; a terrific image could not go with any of the descriptions...Worst of all, at times a single image would contain most, if not all, of my 10 descriptions; or, a single description would contain all images. What to do?

I began a different process, going between loads of images and loads of words, back and forth. I searched my camera for travel images—the Presidency, Gorée island, Car Rapide transportation—my initial attempts to bridge word with image were the accounts of a tourist. I revisited my travel journal and found memories more akin to a resident—trying (unsuccessfully) to beat the bats to the mangos on the mango tree in grandpa's backyard; my sandal falling apart during my first neighborhood walk but then getting it repaired by the street shoe maker (lucky me!); the very early morning call to prayer from the green mosque nearby; Demba Guisse's song "Jigeen" blasting at the all-night graduation parties in the school yard next door; accidentally finding Bulgarian yogurt in the local supermarket; the delicious, warm, salty peanuts, freshly roasted by the neighbor...There I was, stranded between image and word; between being a tourist and being a resident; between seeing and feeling...

This selection is far from perfect and far from complete. But it is a selection of 10 word-image pairs, which attempt to depict how a city impresses itself upon those who walk its streets. Perhaps you will find that image and word sometimes complement each other, sometimes don't. Indeed, to be stranded between image and word means to occupy a space of vulnerability. But it also means to occupy a space of infinite curiosity, as image and word continuously reach for one another, in hope and in desperation, at times almost touching each other, only to instantaneously drift apart...over and over and over again.

1.

Car Rapide: you are neither a car nor rapid. What are you—so colorful, so stuffed to the brim with sweaty people? You are a brave little bus, maneuvering among motorists with no helmets, lonely horse carts, careless street joggers, pesky street-sellers, begging children, bold pedestrians...On your front, painted in large black letters, a gratitude to God who helps you make it through each day, unharmed—“ALHAMDOULILAH.”



Fig. 1. Car Rapide transportation in Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

2.

Fine reddish sand running through your toes everywhere you go, like water. No need to wear shoes here, only flip-flops...sand on hair, clothes, skin, baobabs, billboards, traffic lights, sidewalk shoe displays, fruit carts, strolling cows, but NOT on the grand government buildings...How can they resist the almighty sand that sticks to the back of my throat?



Fig. 2. The Presidency, Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

3.

Head Carriers: Women and men dressed in colorful African clothes stride with pride and grace through traffic, noise, crowds...despite the impressive loads that they carry on top of their heads.



Fig. 3. Head carrier of baskets and fans. Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

4.

Cyber cows: The nice Volkswagen parked on the side of the road right next to the cow resting in front of the cyber café, as a horse cart approaches from the opposite direction...what a precarious mix of city and country in one of Dakar's central neighborhoods...



Fig. 4. Cyber café, Cow, Volkswagen, Horse Cart in Rear-View Mirror. Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

5.

Keep moving! Sachets with dried fruits, nuts, or candy; plates; bed pillows; utensils; lighters; bed sheets; lamps; toilet brushes...oh, the things you can buy from the swarms of street sellers, without leaving your car or changing lanes! But, if you want to stay untouched by this lively street commerce, do not slow down, come to a halt, or linger: with stillness comes vulnerability! You have to keep moving!



Fig. 5. Sidewalk Shoe Seller, Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

6.

Thiebu djen: Senegal's most famous dish of fish, tomato rice, and veggies: elaborately cooked and served, it gathers large-sized families and visitors around a single large plate. A hostess takes pride not only in the taste of the food but also in its presentation: its meticulous arrangement on the large plate.



Fig. 6. Thiebu djen: Senegal's national fish-rice-veggies meal. Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova

7.

Flies, flies, flies on the piles of sweet mangoes sold in the streets and on everything else...pedestrians, sellers, motorists...everyone waves hands against the flies, all day long...except for the worshippers...dressed in impeccable white robes and pointy-toe slippers, these men stroll to and back from the mosque, completely unbothered by them.



Fig. 7. Mango stalls, Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

8.

Billboard Affairs! The King of Morocco is currently visiting Senegal, as is evident by the portraits of the Senegalese President and the Moroccan King, side by side, on the yellow billboards displayed on every major street: an efficient way not only of spreading news but also of acknowledging political activities affiliations.



Fig. 8. Politics on Billboards: The Senegalese President and the King of Marocco, the latter is currently visiting Senegal. Dakar, Senegal, May, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

9.

Skinny horses pulling decrepit horse carts try to match the speed and efficiency of the cars, vans, buses, motor bikes, stubbornly resisting urbanization...



Fig. 9. Horse cart by a gas station. Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

10.

Bissap: The hibiscus juice made fresh on a daily basis, stacked in the fridges of every house and restaurant. Sometimes mixed with ginger or mint, you drink it instead of eating desert. More, give me more bissap, please!



Fig. 10. Homemade bissap. Dakar, Senegal, 2015. Photo credit: B. Momchedjikova.

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About the author

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