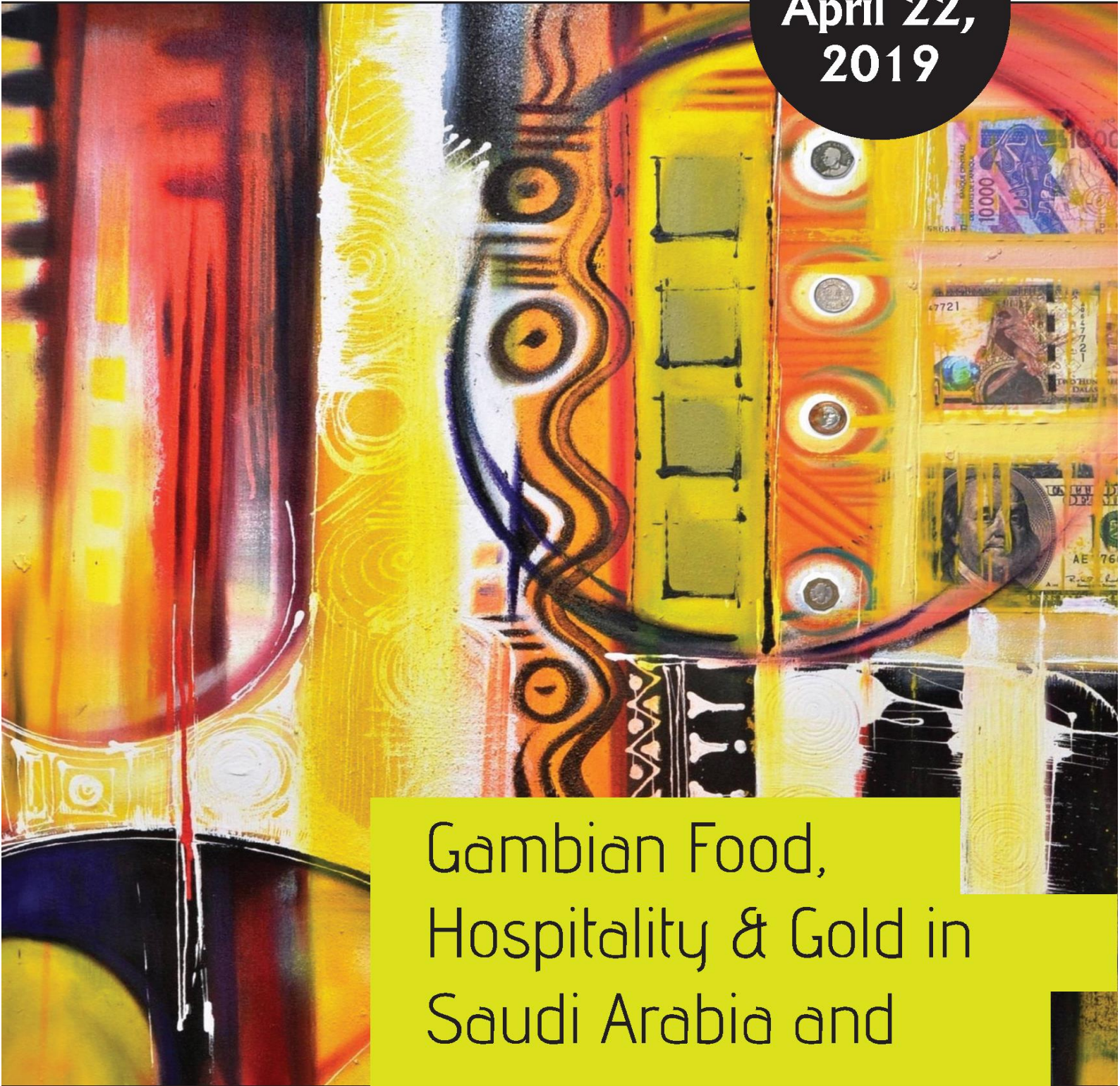


Karamo NM Sonko, PhD
Heeno Occasional Postings,

No 29,
April 22,
2019



Gambian Food,
Hospitality & Gold in
Saudi Arabia and

the Ivory Coast

Since 2005 I have been to Saudi Arabia more times than I can count. However, I was overwhelmed by the hospitality of Gambian friends I met during a trip to the kingdom in September 2018. I went that time as a guest of the Saudi Ministry of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources in order to address Saudis in Jeddah on investing in gold mining.

As there is no gold mining in The Gambia, my trip had nothing to do with home. Nevertheless, I discovered that our country has a mini “gold mine” in the kingdom – the impressive skills and experience of well-trained and well-paid Gambians. Their number is small by the standards of the Asian and big country nationals in Saudi Arabia, but it is significant for a very tiny African country and the fact that they hold many senior positions in the same (and a very prominent) international development finance institution.

About 20 of them work at the Triple A-rated Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in Jeddah. They are engaged in various fields, ranging from electrical engineering to law. They include a former Managing Director of the National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC) and two former ministers. In addition to their technical skills, some of them speak more than four languages.

Owing to constraints, I was able to spend time with only four of them, plus two others briefly, through the four. They treated me with great hospitality. I was offered delicious Gambian meals (including natural juices).



Figure 1 The famous *bennachin* or Jollof rice, now international

Musa Sillah (DESS, Panthéon-Sorbonne), Director for Africa and Latin America, who speaks seven languages, invited me to eat *futoo* and *njamboo* (spinach-substituted) at his home.



Figure 2 Mrs Sillah's ginger

Omar Touray (PhD, Geneva), who speaks five languages and whose book on the African Union I reviewed three years ago in the US-based *African Studies Quarterly*, Lead Resource Mobilization Specialist at the IsDB, took me to one of the best seafood restaurants I have ever been to. He made sure that he ate more than I did! He also asked me not to tell the people of Kiang, because he is from Baddibu!

Excellent seafood, but not as nice as Marie's Gambian-style fish. Marie is the wife of my dear friend and brother, Demba Bah, who believes that his wife is the best cook in The Gambia!

Musa was Minister of Trade and Industry and Omar was Minister of External Affairs in The Gambia. Musa was my senior at high school and I remember him for his prowess in French, although he went to a different but neighbouring high school (Gambia High).

Abou Jallow (MBA, Maastricht), Adviser to the CEO and General Manager of ITFC, also took me home for brown rice with beans, grilled chicken and fish. His wife added steamed

vegetables that I had to take a picture of. Tamsir Cham (PhD, Howard), Research Economist, honoured me with a visit at my hotel with his wife and lovely little kids.

Airline Captain Waleed Alkahtani, a Saudi of Saudi Airlines, whom I met during my first visit to Saudi Arabia, in June 2005, extended the list of those who spoiled me in Jeddah last September. When I tell friends about my relationship with Waleed, including the kind attention I have received from him, his mother, wife, sisters and son since 2005, they ask: “Is he Saudi?” “Yes, he is really Saudi!”

My Saudi Gambian experience reminded me of Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), where



Figure 3. Mrs Jallow's steamed vegetables

Gambian friends treat me with hospitality from the heart, each time I visit. In fact, Abidjan has become the most socially active city in the world for me, because of them. They all work at another Triple A-rated international development finance institution — the African Development Bank (AfDB). Incidentally, there are about 20 of them there too. They are engaged in various fields, ranging from electrical engineering to law and also include a former Managing Director of NAWEC! In addition to their technical skills, all the ones I know are multilingual. Only former Ministers are missing there!

When I visited Abidjan in October 2017, Ousman Jammeh, a Chief Legal Counsel, invited me for *findoo*, peanut stew and okra with palm oil stew. As I am no longer fond of palm oil, because of reports of its high cholesterol content, his beloved wife, Fatou (PGC, Oxford),



Figure 4. Mrs Lisa Drammeh's bissap, ginger & coconut juices

cooked a separate stew without palm oil just for me. Sadly, she suddenly passed on in March 2018. She was an elder sister to Lisa (MBA, Mediterranean) (wife of Lamin Drammeh, Chief Trade Officer at the AfDB) and Tida (the wife of my dear nephew Alhaji Marong (PhD, McGill), Senior Legal Adviser and Head of Legal Affairs at the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The two sisters treated me as if there were four Tidas cooking! May the Almighty God grant Fatou *Jannat-ul-Firdaus*!

When I returned to Abidjan in May 2018, my chief host, Yero Baldeh, who incidentally is a native of my home village, and my sister Rougie Thomasi (MA, Malta) had both left. Yero was transferred to Ghana to become the AfDB’s Country Manager there and Rougie, who was Head of the Legal Unit at AfricaRice, returned home where she is now Director General of the Gambia Law School. The rest of my good friends made sure that they stepped in to fill the gap

their departure created. The delicious meals (including natural juices) in their homes kept on coming.

Batchi Baldeh, Director of Power Systems, invited me to eat *bennachin* and *super kanja*. He was one year behind me at high school and I handed over the Head Boy's badge to him when I graduated from our Catholic High School (St. Augustine's). He was a genius who took all the science prizes hands down. Lamin Barrow (MA, Boston), Director in the President's Office, invited me for Ivorian *acheke* and salad, with a Gambian touch. Lamin Drammeh offered me grilled fish (among many other delicious dishes by Lisa), which I had to take pictures of. Batchi and Ousman took me to greet the "big brother" of the community, Alhaji Ceesay (MA, Salford), Manager, Language Services Division, who and his wife offered us very nice local juices – baobab, coconut and pineapple.

Malick Niang, a dear Senegalese nephew of mine, expert on private equity funds and Chief Transactions Officer at the AfDB, extended the list of those who spoiled me in Abidjan. I met Malick in 2008 and he has since become "a sister's son" to me.

For decades I have travelled and lived in environments with few or no Gambians. I have become used to this. Mauritania was an exception, but about 99% of the Gambians there were students who needed me and with whom I spent a lot of time. Abidjan and Jeddah did not only change this, but brought back old high school friends who are now all successful international professionals.

Our years at high school were wonderful years of simplicity and natural joy and the memories of those years create not only nostalgia but comfort with, and confidence in, each other. I must admit though that I am no longer the "social activist" they knew me to be at high school. In fact, my orientation for direct public engagement or gatherings has diminished significantly over the years. However, I still enjoy the company of old friends as well as those of the simple and sincere males and females of this world, particularly children and the aged.

In writing about Gambian food and invitations, I cannot forget Dr Isatou Touray, Vice President of The Gambia, although my interest in this article is in sharing my experience in the Ivory Coast and Saudi Arabia.

In December 2017, I met her for the first time in The Gambia, after TafCon 2017, when she was Minister of Trade and Industry. She invited me home for dinner and I went with my friends, Lamin Jobarteh (a relative of hers) and Mustapha (Taf) Njie. We were accompanied by my two "able-mouthed" assistants (Lamin Sanneh and Mustapha Sanyang). She cooked so much and so many that I almost thought she was expecting her boss from State House and not my humble self! The



Figure 5. Mrs Drammeh's plasas

delicacies were diverse and showed the best of Gambian cuisine. Unfortunately, I did not take any picture of the dishes. The Gambia has excellent cuisine! However, it is not decorated, dressed and commercialized, as in the case of French cuisine, for example, which some

(Including the French, definitely) say is the best in the world. This is largely because professional local cooking schools and restaurants are in *very* short supply. You may be amused to hear that I learnt to cook *Gambian* food in the house of a *Danish* family in *Swaziland*! It also does not take full advantage of local herbs, grains and ingredients, many of which have disappeared from daily diets, because of imported substitutes, which create new tastes, ailments and a dependency on scarce foreign currency. Appetizers and desserts are often missing too, although I can easily count at least a dozen items that can qualify for a menu.

Nevertheless, it remains the best cuisine on earth for me. I used to tell my French students in Paris that Gambian food was nicer than theirs. They agreed, but I think that was only because they thought their grades were at stake! The truth about food though is that what tastes best in our mouths is what we are used to. I once landed with a group of American students at the Paris Charles de Gaulles Airport from Twin Cities, Minnesota, USA, and the first thing they asked was: “Where is *KFC*?” An English friend told me decades ago: “English truck drivers eat their fish and chips even when in Calais, France!” I had breakfast in Mecca in March (2019) with a Pakistani financial risk manager and I was amazed at how he devoured a chili-infested omelette that almost made me jump out of my chair when I tasted it!

I enjoy properly cooked food in general, except *haraam* and an extremely few others, such as frog legs, which I could not swallow in Paris, yes Paris, for psychological reasons. Monkey heads, cats, dogs and snakes, which I have come across in other parts of the world, were difficult for the same reasons. In spite of these, I am not a “foodist” (an uncommon word for a most common attitude!), but as an Ivorian friend once made clear to me: “I will never sacrifice our food for any other!”

Enough about food and taste buds. Let us now look at the implications of The Gambia’s mini “gold mines” in Jeddah and Abidjan. First, there is the obvious importance to the Gambian economy of the hundreds of millions of dollars that they and others in the diaspora send home each year, equalling more than 20% of our GDP.

Second, their skills and experience are impressive. On 23 January, this year, during another visit to Abidjan, Batchi invited me to a dinner, at a Lebanese restaurant for a change. Yero surprised us by flying in from Accra that week to reclaim his position, but he failed because he landed in my hotel without his excellent cook and became a guest like me! Bubacarr Sankareh, Manager for Investigations, a former Auditor-General of The Gambia, joined us. Alfa Robinson, a high school contemporary, an engineer trained in China and Germany, who works in the UK and consults for the AfDB, was also present. Altogether, there were seven of us, and the shiny credentials were as bright as the light bulbs over our heads.

The qualifications were FCCA, MBA, MSc, MA, MPhil, and PhD. The subjects were accounting, economics, business, finance, engineering, law, public administration, politics, urban planning and sociology. The countries of higher education outside The Gambia were Barbados, China, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Swaziland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The universities include Boston, Cambridge, Karlsruhe, New Castle, Oxford and the West Indies. *Never* before have I ever joined a better trained and more cheerful group of Gambian professionals. I was proud and pleased to be in the company of such fine gentlemen!

Before leaving Abidjan on 24 January, 2019, I met two more Gambian professionals – Oley Dibba-Wadda (MA, East Anglia), Director of Human Capital, Youth and Skills Development, and Baboucar Sarr (PhD, Sussex), a retired consultant in Oley’s department. Batchi, Lamin

Barrow and Oley head three of the most important departments at the AfDB and in Africa's development.

Lamin Barrow came for a two-hour conversation at my hotel. He was recently promoted to the post of Director, Joint Secretariat Support Office for the African Union Commission, African Development Bank and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and Permanent Representative to the African Union. I call him "the Super Director for Africa (SDA)"!

No wonder a Tunisian expatriate I met, during a visit to the IsDB a few years ago, called the Gambian diaspora "the jewels of Africa"! Obviously, he saw the gold mine before I did, although he is not in mining as I am.

During the donor conference on The Gambia in Brussels in May 2018, which I was honoured to attend in service to my country, I recommended the establishment of a Gambian Capacity Reinforcement Institute (GCRI). There are competent Gambians almost all over the world and some desperately want to go home. The GCRI can tap into their skills and experience in several ways: 1) helping those who want to return home to do so; 2) filling capacity gaps in both the public and private sectors; 3) using them as advisors/consultants; and 4) tapping into their networks to mobilize resources for our country.

Fatou would have liked the idea, because she loved the Gambia so dearly! At the lunch in their house in October 2017, she never stopped talking to me about the importance of leading a delegation of all my friends at the AfDB (including her husband, Ousman) to The Gambia, in order to support the new coalition government. She really wanted the government to succeed in making The Gambia a success story. "Uncle, please take all of them and go! Take them, all!" she pleaded. Ousman and I did go to The Gambia in December 2017 and have since then each continued to help in our own modest ways to the development of our country.

Whilst in Brussels, I had a lengthy discussion on the GCRI with our Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs at the time. He expressed much interest in the idea. However, he was moved to another ministry about a month after our meeting.

That brings me to something I almost forgot to tell you. When I was in Jeddah preparing for my presentation, I learnt that the African Minister of Mines, who was to co-chair our investment forum with his Saudi counterpart, was missing. It turned out that he was fired by his boss whilst on his flight to Saudi Arabia!

Fortunately, he was a good Muslim, so he decided to head for Mecca instead to perform 'Umrah (the mini *hajj* (pilgrimage)). Without the Minister as scheduled, can you imagine the rumbling of my stomach as I walked up to the podium to tell the Saudis that our beloved Africa is "the continent to invest in"?

Can you see a reason why I have no appetite for the hotchpotch of political office? I do not have it, although Gambians who do not know me may be surprised to hear this. I prefer to cook my contributions to our country's development on the sidelines as an independent chef. I have no interest in joining the endless queues of people across Africa who seem to enjoy the tastes of "Honourable" and "Your Excellency" and scoring goals into their own pockets or those of certain interest groups, even for a short while. With due respect to all who have tried to convince me to think otherwise since high school, I do not have interest in such sour dishes, although (actually) I love fresh lemons!



Figure 6. Mrs Drammeh's Kitchen



Figure 7. Mrs Lisa Drammeh's Kitchen.