

Senegal

Samia was a famous actress from Senegal who dressed in glamorous flowing clothes. I met her on a trip to Paris. She and her French husband, Pierre, were members of a group of artistic intellectuals who drank barrels of cheap wine and who discussed everything and everybody, from Nietzsche to James Baldwin.

I fitted into the Parisian assemblage comfortably. We all preened about our youth and talent and intelligence as if we had created the gifts ourselves, for ourselves.

Samia said she and her husband lived most of the year in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, and I would always be welcome in their home. Years passed before I did visit Senegal, but the telephone number they had given me still worked. I was invited for dinner.

I entered a beautifully furnished living room to the sound of people laughing and glasses clinking with ice. The guests were integrated. As many Europeans as Africans were enjoying a full-blown party. Samia introduced me to a small group near

the door and stayed talking to us until a server offered me a drink.

I wandered from group to group. Samia's first language was Serer but I did not speak Serer and the Senegalese accent made the French which was spoken, hard for me to comprehend. I passed an open door where people stood along the wall, careful not to step on the beautiful Oriental rug in the center of the room.

I had known a woman in Egypt who would not allow her servants to walk on her rugs saying that only she, her family and friends were going to wear out her expensive carpets. Samia plummeted in my estimation. Obviously she had informed her guests that she would not look favorably on them if they stepped on her rug. I wondered what words did one use to inform a guest how to behave? I decided to find out.

I went into the room and in the guise of looking closely at some paintings on the wall, I walked across the center of the rug, then turned and walked back to another painting. I must have stepped on the rug four or five times. The guests who were bunched up on the sidelines smiled at me weakly. They might be encouraged to admit that rugs were to be walked on.

A Senegalese woman in a white brocade gown smiled at me and engaged me in conversation. She was a writer and we began talking about books. I became so interested I nearly missed the next scene. Two maids came and rolled up the rug I had walked on and took it away. They returned immediately with another equally as beautiful. They spread it, and patted it until it was smooth.

They then put glasses on the carpet and huge serving spoons, folded napkins and silverware, wine and pitchers of

water. Finally a bowl of steaming rice and chicken was placed on the carpet.

Samia and Pierre appeared and clapping their hands they called for attention. Samia announced that they were serving the most popular Senegalese dish, "Yassah, for our sister from America." She waved her hand at me and said, "For Maya Angelou" adding, "Shall we sit?"

All the guests sank to the floor. My face and neck burned. Fortunately, because of my chocolate brown complexion, people could not know I was on fire with shame. Clever and so proper Maya Angelou, I had walked up and down over the tablecloth.

I sat, but I found swallowing hard to do. The food had to force its way over that knot of embarrassment.

In an unfamiliar culture, it is wise to offer no innovations, no suggestions, or lessons.

The epitome of sophistication is utter simplicity.