



Director, Jeremy Teicher, just a few years older than the village students whose stories inspired him when he began production on this film. This interview was made in 2012.

What inspired this film and how was the story developed?

Tall as the Baobab Tree builds on work, I began when I traveled to Senegal, Africa to direct a documentary, later nominated for a Student Academy Award. I worked with a group of first-generation students from the village of Sinthiou Mbadane, using pocket cameras to create short stories about their everyday lives. One of the students, a teenager named Dior, shared a story about the girls in her village who are forced to marry between the ages of 8 and 12. As the first generation with access to formal education, Dior and her peers are divided between those whose parents sent them to school and those whose parents chose to follow the deep-rooted tradition of arranged marriage. Dior's experience living between the world of school and the world of tradition deeply resonated with me.



“Dior and I kept in touch. We worked together, along with some of the other students, to develop a fictional script that spoke to their personal experiences on the leading end of this cultural change. Through a narrative story, we felt we could most effectively capture the emotions of the old and new worlds colliding.



Filming your first feature film in a rural African village. How did that go?

The filming process itself was an adventure that our cast and crew navigated as a team. Beginning with the ritual slaughter of a goat for good luck – as recommended by the village elders – principle photography started in early July 2011 in a remote village about 2 hours south of Dakar (don't worry, the goat was cooked and eaten later that day). The village, typical of most rural areas in Africa had no electricity or running water.



As we traveled by horse cart to the village every morning, I wondered if filming my first feature length narrative at such a challenging location was an act of total naiveté. But in the end, the openness of the villagers, the beauty of the landscape, and my desire to tell this story far outweighed the challenging logistical concerns.

“C’est l’afrique” became our mantra. When we realized the roads were too muddy for cars, so we loaded up our cameras and lenses on a horse cart... c’est l’afrique! The cart driver, Simon, ended up becoming a major player in the most adventurous night of our shoot. With the sun setting and a rain starting, Simon’s cart got a flat tire. We were stranded out in the village, trying to protect our expensive film equipment from the torrential rain dripping through the hut roofs.



How does the film speak as a voice of the young generation in the developing world?

Our film speaks truthfully to what countless families in the developing world are experiencing today: the passion, frustration, and hope of young people who dream of building their futures through education. In this way, Tall as the Baobab Tree speaks powerfully as a voice of the young generation in Africa and across the developing world.



How does the film portray the sensitive human rights issue of forced early marriage?

Despite the proven negative outcomes*, the practice of early marriage continues to persist. Tall as the Baobab Tree addresses this disconnect by exploring the multitude of perspectives on this seemingly black-and-white issue within the framework of a narrative story.

In rural Africa where the reality of poverty is at its harshest, it is the time-tested traditions – including early marriage – that are often the villagers' only sure means of survival. Although the film's young protagonist clearly supports the path of education rather than marriage, we come to understand that for her parents, the modern world of school is mysterious and uncertain whereas the agrarian world of marriage and farming is stable and proven, generation after generation. By contrasting these two worldviews, Tall as the Baobab Tree poignantly reveals a family's struggle to find its footing at the edge of the modern world.

*For more information refer to the international organization [Girls Not Brides](#). Note, too, that Senegal, where we filmed, is not one of the top twenty countries where early marriage is occurring.



What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

In *Tall as the Baobab Tree* I really strove to truthfully represent the villagers and their culture, countering the one-dimensional approach taken by many other media representations of rural Africans. Rather than contributing to the “othering” of rural Africans, my hope is that the film will spark positive cross-cultural dialogue and help us embrace our shared humanity.



On my first trip to the village [in 2010], I brought with me all the lingering, uncomfortable feelings of guilt that I’d picked up from the Western media portrayal of “poor Africans.” These feelings dissipated as my relationship with the villagers quickly shifted from one of pity to one of respect—respect for their culture, their optimism, and their work ethic. Respect for the students, only a few years younger than me, who were pursuing a formal education against incredible odds. The contrast between my expectations and the reality I encountered was profound. *Tall as the Baobab Tree* shares this reality.

Why did you film a fictional narrative instead of handling this as a documentary?

I felt a documentary would be too black and white — with fiction, I felt I could create a more intimate sense of empathy with the various characters. What interested me was the larger picture; village life is in the midst of a transformation. A new generation, with access to school for the first time in history, is coming of age. I wanted to tell a story that captures the emotions of the old and new worlds colliding. I felt a narrative structure could better explore the tensions, quiet victories, and heartbreaks that come with this change.



But I didn't just write a script. I worked with the students. For example, I would say — who would you go to for help? They would respond the teacher — well what would the teacher say — and so on. The script reflected the realities of their world. The film blends the divide between fiction and reality. The two main characters are actual sisters in real life. The girl who plays Coumba is indeed the first person in her family to ever go to school and the woman who plays the girls' mother was herself a young bride. A young man who never had the opportunity to get an education plays the older brother, a character who has never gone to school. So, the actors really brought their personal experiences into their performances.



What can you tell me about the music in the film?

We were incredibly honored to have world-renown musician Salieu Suso perform for the movie with the traditional 21 stringed Kora, the West African harp. Salieu Suso was born into a family of farmers and traditional Gambian musicians/historians that extends back nearly 1000 years. He is a descendent of the inventor of the Kora.



Why make the first feature length film in the local dialect of the Pulaar language?

The actors really wanted to bring their personal experiences into their performances, and this is their first language. I also wanted the story to be told with all the quiet nuances contained in the Pulaar language.

How did we communicate? Well, I communicated directly in French to those younger cast members that spoke French, but had to rely on my local translator, who did not speak any English, to translate from French to Pulaar for the other cast members. Then I would translate any instructions into English for my American camera crew, who were unable to speak directly to my Senegalese crew. Gestures and smiles saved us.