

Talla the Dog

By Brian Cross

Cheikh Faye named his dog Talla. This would have been an unremarkable choice if his younger brother had not also borne that same name. No one in the village could be certain that Cheikh had intentionally named the one after the other, but everyone laughed anyway.

The two brothers had always been something less than bosom buddies. Some in the village were inclined to attribute this to their being suckled on different bosoms altogether. Both were sons of the village chief, but by different wives. Cheikh was the son of the chief's first wife Fatou, and Talla was the son of his much younger wife Soxna. Discord between half brothers was not unusual.

Others in the village pointed to differences in their individual talents and fortunes. Talla had completed school and taken up a cushy job in the post office in Diourbel, while Cheikh had dropped out at an early age and become a farmer and a shopkeeper. The dimness of Cheikh's wits was a common topic for the villagers as they stretched out on their plastic mats in the shade beneath the neem trees. Snide remarks and amusing anecdotes were passed around along with the sugary black tea. There was the time that Cheikh had borrowed a horse cart with flat tires from a friend in *Keur Gueye*, swapped out the flats with his father's spares, and then mistakenly returned the cart, new tires and all. It was a week before Cheikh realized what he had given away. '*Boppam, amul ndox,*' the villagers would say. 'His head doesn't have any water.' They did not say such things about Talla.

Whatever its cause, the tension in this semi-fraternal relationship was obvious to everyone in the village. Even though the two brothers frequently crossed paths, they almost never spoke. There was no overt hostility; they just neglected to exchange greetings or to converse as they did with others.

The feelings seemed to be particularly strong on Cheikh's side. For instance, there was Cheikh's attitude towards the television set. Talla had purchased the set for the family shortly after being hired at the post office. Every evening a dense pack of adults and children would gather to watch the slate of football games, music videos, and

recycled Brazilian soap operas served up on the 19" screen. People would come from all over the village to watch, but Cheikh, who could hear the broadcasts from his shop and his bedroom, had never once joined the crowd. Even when Senegal had played France in the World Cup, Cheikh had not watched.

And now there was the dog. Talla the dog was a typical specimen of the Senegalese mutt: jackal-sized frame, reddish brown coat, and pointed ear eaten ragged by the flies. He spent most of every day and every night tied to a tree in front of the shop he was expected to guard. This important responsibility notwithstanding, the dog never raised his hackles or growled at anyone. With those he liked, he panted happily; with those he didn't like, he cowered abjectly. The latter group seemed to consist almost entirely of the dog's owner himself. This was undoubtedly due to Cheikh's habit of lashing out at the dog whenever he was feeling angry or foolish. He would take off his sandal and beat the dog thoroughly, all the while making liberal use of his name. "Talla, bad dog. Bad, bad, dog, Talla."

If having a canine namesake bothered Cheikh's brother, he did not show it. In fact, he seemed to ignore the dog's existence entirely. Each morning, as he passed the shop on his way to work, he never so much as glanced in the dog's direction. Talla the dog would stand up and wag his tail, but Talla the man would stare straight ahead and continue on his way. The dog's eyes would follow him to the corner until he disappeared from sight. Cheikh never came out during these brief encounters. Instead, he would emerge from under the shop's awning when his brother was gone, give the dog a swift kick, and then resume his work.

When the dog disappeared one night, leaving the end of his tether still tied to the tree, Cheikh was sure that he had been stolen. A small group gathered around the tree and watched Cheikh squint at the chewed end of the rope.

"Your dog is gone," Ousmann Sagna remarked. He let his mouth hang open, exposing the crooked yellow teeth that everyone agreed were the worst in the village.

"Yes, my dog is gone," Cheikh responded, still squinting. He needed glasses but couldn't afford them.

"Where did he go?"

“Wherever the thief took him.” Sweat was beading up on the ebony dome of Cheikh’s head and on his wide, flat nose. It was only ten o’clock but already the sun was making everyone sweaty and lethargic. The air was thick with the gathering humidity even though the rains would not fall for another month.

“Cheikh, who would want that dog?” Ousmann demanded incredulously.

“I don’t know. He was a good dog.” Those with any sensitivity to irony chuckled; Ousmann and Cheikh ignored them.

“But a thief would have untied the rope or cut it with a knife. Look at this.” Ousmann took the rope from Cheikh. He held it in his left hand and made a sawing gesture with the right, demonstrating exactly how a thief would have done it. “No knife cut this rope. Something gnawed through it.”

“You don’t know anything. The thief wanted it to look that way.”

“Who would have gone to all of that trouble for a dog? There are dogs everywhere. A thief would have taken something valuable—a goat or a chicken. Not a dog.”

“You don’t know anything,” Cheikh said again and then snatched the rope back from Ousmann. “You’ll see.” Ignoring the smiles and the laughter, he returned to his shop.

For the next couple of days, Cheikh used his spare time to search the village and surrounding areas for the missing dog. The village children would follow him around on these tours, trailing along behind in hopes of being entertained. Two boys, Modou and his younger brother Tapha, were especially persistent. They followed him around everywhere and pestered him with questions. And when Cheikh failed to respond to them, they would taunt him. ‘Hey, Cheikh, maybe the dog’s just out looking for some food. *Faye begga lekk*. All Fayes love to eat.’ Cheikh would endure this treatment for varying lengths of time, but then he would always break down and chase them, switch in hand. They would scatter before his wrath, finding cover behind the nearest wall or in the branches of a tree. They could hardly believe their luck. An adult this amusing was a rare find.

As part of his search, Cheikh started visiting different compounds around the village. He would drink tea with studied nonchalance and peer about furtively for signs

of his dog. Unfortunately, these efforts were hampered by his poor eyesight. Unable to easily decipher the blurry images that his eyes provided, Cheikh would squint for a long moment at a goat or a plow ten meters away. He never asked any questions, but everyone knew what he was doing anyway.

‘What do you need? What are you looking for?’ they would ask him with only their grins to hide their laughter.

He would squint back at them suspiciously and then make up an excuse that he found clever and everyone else found transparent. ‘I was only looking at that new plow of yours. It’s very nice. You should give it to me.’

‘When it has a brother, then I will give it to you,’ they would respond, still smiling.

Before the week was out, the whole affair had ceased to attract much attention. The boys who had followed Cheikh, including Modou and Tapha, returned to playing football or to helping their fathers prepare the fields for planting. Every evening at dusk one could smell the smoke blowing off the fields, hear the crackle of old millet stalks, and see the orange light of the cleansing flames. The women, for their part, were occupied with household finances. This was the beginning of the lean times, and they had begun to look with apprehension at their dwindling grain stocks and at the coins and bills they kept knotted up in scraps of fabric. And both the men and the woman had other gossip, more interesting than Cheikh’s crime-solving activities, too mull over. Madeleine Ba had been kicked out by her rather and was now living with a neighbor. It was rumored that she had been receiving the attentions of an older man from Ndoulo, one with whom her father had once feuded. And after weeks of being taunted, Ibra Diene had finally blown up at the Gueye children. Unfortunately, he had not limited his attacks to the children themselves, but had expressed himself freely and profanely about the pedigree of the whole family. Ibra was now avoiding one whole corner of the village.

No one discussed the missing dog at all, except to observe that Cheikh seemed to have regained his meager senses more quickly than might have been expected. He bought a new dog, one that could have been the old dog’s twin, named him Talla, and tied him to the tree. Cheikh treated this new Talla in the same manner as he treated the first. Cheikh would stand out in front of the shop and scold him loudly, punctuating his

remarks by kicking the dog or by taking off a sandal and beating him. “Talla, bad dog. Bad, bad dog.”

Monday was the traditional day of rest for the farmers, and those who had a mind to drink usually did it on Sunday evening. Of course, many never drank anything stronger than *Double Gunpowder Saddam* or one of the other black teas sold in the village shops. They were all members of the Mourridh brotherhood, and most took their faith’s conservative ethos to heart. But more than a few occasionally deviated from the strict teachings of Koran and marabout.

Ousmann was one of these—nominally a Mourridh, but not too exercised about following the letter of the law. Ousmann’s father had come from the Diola, one of the few Catholic groups in Senegal. This heritage was plainly evident in Ousmann’s small frame around his face. It was also evident in his habit of slipping off to Diourbel every Sunday evening to drink red wine in the *Restaurant Ziguinchor*.

On the Sunday after Cheikh’s dog turned up missing, Ousmann had been out drinking at the bar. Around midnight, a friend who owned a taxi dropped him off on the side of the highway that passed through the village. As the orange and black car sped away, Ousmann sat on the edge of the asphalt and shook his head to clear away the wine and the noise of the bar still ringing in his ear. Surrendering to the heaviness in his head, he lay back and felt the hard, cool asphalt against his body. The bats were landing and taking off noisily in the neem trees nearby, rustling the leaves as they searched for the night, and these too played their soothing refrain upon the trees. Ousmann looked up at the full moon over his head, sighed contentedly, and shut his eyes.

He awoke with a start and turned to see the back end of a ghostly white *car rapide* retreating into the night. The sudden crescendo of shrill religious chanting that had awoken him was now fading into the distance, a small staticky voice being swallowed by the gloom. He wiped at his face and then raised his eyebrows in an effort to keep his eyelids from closing again. The moon had dropped halfway to the horizon.

Ousmann stood up unsteadily and stumbled down the steep shoulder of the road. It was a precarious maneuver in his intoxicated state, but he nevertheless managed an awkward but upright descent and arrived safely on flatter ground. He thought about the trek back to his compound, more than half a kilometer away. It would be a long trip,

especially if he had to carry his thirst with him all the way. His mouth and throat were dry, and his tongue felt thick.

In the center of the village, between Cheikh's shop and the village mosque was a shade structure where the chief typically passed the day in sleepy observation of the village. Nearby, nestled between the roots of a neem tree, was a concrete cistern that cooled the chief's water. It was to this cistern that Ousmann took his thirst.

The cistern's lid was a gray Pugeot hubcap whose concavity happened to fit nicely into the large round opening. Ousmann removed the hubcap and fished out the plastic cup floating inside. He drank deeply, letting the water spill out around the corners of his mouth and down the front of his T-shirt in two lines. He dropped the cup from his lips and stood limply, panting in satisfaction. After a few seconds, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and started to dip the cup into the cistern for a second draught, but a rustling in the tree above distracted him. A few neem fruits landed on his head. He looked up expecting to find a troop of bats, but instead saw a dark black form crouching on the branch above his head.

"*Serigne Fallou Mbacke,*" he exclaimed, jumping back and cowering against the white wall of the mosque. He stared up at the tree in terror, the yellow-white of his eyes shining in the moonlight, his shaking hands pressed against the cool concrete for support. "*Yalla na ma Yalla samm.* God protect me."

"Ousmann, Ousmann," a voice called out from the tree. "It's me."

"It's me, who?"

"It's me, Cheikh."

"Cheikh? What are you doing up there?" he asked, wary of relaxing his guard too soon. As a child he had been told stories about the jinn, evil spirits that came out at certain times of the day and night. Many of them had the power to assume different forms and could not be easily distinguished from humans. Normally, he did not give much thought to such notions, but alone in the empty night, he was willing to believe, or at least fear, many things that seemed fanciful in the full light of day.

In response to Ousmann's question, Cheikh dropped from the tree with a thud, lost his footing in the same, and fell sideways onto one knee. As Cheikh righted himself,

Ousmann pressed his body against the white wall as though with God's help and enough force he could slip through the solid concrete into the sanctuary of the mosque.

"Ousmann, it's me, I tell you," Cheikh said as he advanced on his cowering friend. "Don't be such a baby. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid. You're crazy," Ousmann replied, relaxing enough to tip quickly from fear to anger. He leaned forward from the mosque and stood up. "What are you doing? Normal people do not hang out in trees in the middle of the night." He waved his arm in his agitation, betting the air above his head with the back of his hand.

"I'm keeping an eye on my property. Up there, I can see everything, and no one can see me," Cheikh replied, as he squinted at Ousmann through the gloom.

"Sa bopp, mattul. No one is coming to steal that dog. No one stole the first dog."

"You'll see. Everyone is going to see the truth."

"Xale yegg ci kaw garab, gisul dara; magg tuddi ci suuf gis lu bare. A child in a tree sees nothing, but an adult on the ground sees much."

"So I'm a child, am I?" Cheikh demanded taking a step towards Ousmann and pointing a quivering finger at his nose. "You don't know anything. I'm the only one who really sees the truth about him."

"The truth about whom?" Ousmann asked, taken aback by the vehemence of Cheikh's reaction.

"About Talla," he replied before turning away.

The next day, word of Cheikh's nighttime vigil spread rapidly, and the saga of the missing dog once again captured the attention of the village. Ousmann himself informed Cheikh's brother.

"Your brother has lost his mind, Talls. He's completely paranoid. I think he believes you stole his dog."

Talla was a large man, over six feet tall, with a long face and a prominent forehead. Unlike most of the villagers, who had teeth stained yellow or reddish-brown, Talla's were perfectly and inexplicable white. Talla smiled his broad white grin at Ousmann and shrugged. "Well, it *was* a really fine dog," he said.

“It’s not funny, Talla. Cheikh’s unbalanced. Last night, I found him hiding in the tree beside your father’s shade structure. He expects someone, probably you, to come after his new dog.”

“I know,” he replied without losing his expression of mirth. “But what am I supposed to do about it? Let him sit in the tree for as long as he wants.”

“You could talk to your father. He might be able to resolve things, bring Cheikh back to his senses.

“Cheikh already despises me. If I go to my father and embarrass him, will that make him despise me less?” Ousmann looked up at the tall man uncertainly. His words sounded reasonable, but the persistent smirk on his face gave Ousmann pause.

“It’s not good, Talla. No good can come of this.”

“Don’t worry so much, Ousmann. It will blow over. Cheikh won’t catch me, and he will get tired.” Talla turned away and disappeared inside his bedroom.

For the next few nights, Cheikh maintained his vigil in the same tree where Ousmann had discovered him. He did this in spite of the ridicule that he drew upon himself and in spite of his diminished prospects for success.

When Ousmann arrived at the boutique on Thursday morning to buy coffee and *jara* spice for his *café-Touba*, he found Cheikh yawning and blearily-eyed. In exasperation, Ousmann tried to reason with him. No one wanted to steal the dog, he argued. And even if someone did, why would he do it now? Everyone knew that Cheikh was keeping watch.

To Ousmann’s surprise, Cheikh seemed to agree. With his brow furrowed and his eyes reduced to two fleshy slits, he listened attentively as the small Diola man struggled to convince him to abandon his vigil. And then, when Ousmann had finished, Cheikh’s face relaxed and brightened. He gave every indication that Ousmann had done him a genuine service. “Thank you, Ousmann. You are right. There is no point in keeping watch now.”

Ousmann eyed him warily, as though not sure of his sincerity. Cheikh’s rapid capitulation had thrown him off. “Good,” he said after a long pause. He turned to go, but then hesitated once again, feeling that he should say something more. “You must be reasonable,” he continued. “It’s a waste of time.”

“You are right, Ousmann. *Magg tuddi ci suuf gis lu bare.*”

“Yes, that is true.”

On Friday night, Modou and Tapha sneaked out of their compound and made their way to the center of the village. They had not discussed their specific objective or the wisdom of slipping out in the middle of the night, but that wasn't really necessary. Modou had a plan, and he was almost as sure of that plan as Tapha was of his older brother's brilliance.

When they arrived, the whole area appeared deserted, but Modou wanted to make doubly sure that they were really alone. He set about climbing the tree that had become known as “Cheikh's Perch.” In the climb, he scraped his arms and knees, and tore his already tattered football jersey, but after a few minutes' struggle he made it to a branch ten meters above the ground, one that provided a panoramic view of the village center.

“Modou, what do you see?” his brother whispered nervously from below. Modou did not immediately respond but continued to scan his surroundings—trees, nearby buildings, and the walls of the chief's compound. “Modou, let's go,” Tapha whispered fervently.

“Hold on,” Modou snapped. “I'm still looking.” Tapha was always begging to come along, but then he lacked the nerve to see anything through. The same thing happened every time. In irritation, Modou peered about himself even more methodically and deliberately than before, refusing to be hurried by his brother's cowardice. Tapha continued to beg him for haste but received only silence in reply. Eventually, Modou relented and climbed down to his nervous brother. He dusted himself off slowly and carefully to emphasize his serenity and composure.

“What did you see?” Tapha asked him.

Modou shrugged his shoulders. Even with the light of the moon, it had been difficult to see anything amidst the shadows.

“Modou, let's go. I don't like this. We're going to get into trouble.”

“Don't be such a baby, Tapha. What are you afraid of? Do you think the *jinn* are going to steal your breath?” he asked derisively.

“Of course not,” Tapha declared with as much dignity as he could muster. His pride, however, could not prevent his eyes from darting around to check the shadows. “But if our father catches us out here . . .”

“No one is going to catch us. Come on, this is going to be great.” Modou led his reluctant brother over to the tree where Talla the dog was tied up. The dog had watched them with a furrowed brow since their arrival, but he had so far remained silent.

“Modou, don’t” Tapha begged him. “He’ll bark and wake everyone up.”

“This dog is too afraid to bark,” he replied with exasperation. “Cheikh has beaten his voice out of him. Besides, he knows both of us. Don’t you, boy?” he asked, turning to the dog. Talla greeted them both with a muffled whine and a wagging tail. “There, you see. No problem.”

Modou turned away from Tapha and busied himself with untying the rope. “Modou, what are you doing?” his brother asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I’m going to take him out to school and hitch him to the gate. It’ll be hilarious. Cheikh will have a fit.”

“Modou, no! What if someone finds out?”

But Modou, having had enough of this whining, did not respond. He ignored his brother and continued to fight with the knot. After a minute or so, he stood up, rope in hand, and smiled at his brother. “You see. No problem.”

“Okay, okay, that’s great. Now let’s get out of here before someone catches us.

Modou was sneering disdainfully at his brother when the shadow broke away from the general gloom and descended on them from above. He heard a dull thud, and then the shadow was lunging towards him. Modou felt something cold grip his arm. He gazed up in terror at the shadowy *jinn* that had seized him by the arm. Going both rigid and mute with fright, his ears barely registered Tapha’s screams as the smaller boy tore off into the gloom.

“Dirty, little thief,” the angry-eyed *jinn* said to him.

Cheikh had been keeping watch all night from a new perch atop the village mosque. Having nodded off some time before, he had remained oblivious to the presence of the boys until they had awakened him with their careless arguing. He had peered down at them from atop the whitewashed walls just as Modou was beginning to untie the

dog. In his grogginess, Cheikh imagined that he had at last caught his brother red-handed. He leapt down in a rush of adrenaline to lay hands upon his miscreant sibling. But at this moment of triumph, he found with despair that he had only laid hands upon a dirty, poorly behaved little boy.

It was this disappointment at not having caught his brother, as much as any genuine outrage at Modou's prank, that explained the severity of his response. He marched down to Modou's family compound, boy in hand, dog in the other, shouting, "*Japp naa sacc! Japp naa sacc!* I caught a thief!" Modou would have been only slightly more terrified had a real *jinn* descended from the sky to steal his breath. He went limp and threw all his weight into slowing Cheikh down, but he had neither the strength nor the mass to affect his captor. When they finally arrived at Modou's family compound, half the village was awake to see his father beat a chorus of sobs and wails out of his son's backside. The next morning, Tapha was found cowering behind the school and given a similar hiding.

By that time, Cheikh had already returned to his shop and begun to grumble his way through the morning routine of opening for business. He unbolted each end of the metal crossbar and then swung the bright blue doors open. He entered the shop, stepping over the threshold and under the magic charms hanging from the lintel, and busied himself with setting out all the essentials. As he did so, he produced a steady stream of grumbles punctuated by outbursts of angry cursing, as though his agitated thoughts were a broad river that occasionally passed through a narrow gorge.

By the time the bakery truck had arrived and the young man clinging to the back had jumped off to hand Cheikh a bag of fresh baguettes, his grumbles had subsided to barely audible murmurs. It was in this agitated, but subdued, state that Ousmann found him when he arrived to buy breakfast.

"In spite of his friends grim demeanor, Ousmann greeted him enthusiastically, his crooked yellow teeth exposed in a smile of triumph.

"So you caught your thief."

"So it would seem," Cheikh agreed sullenly.

"But you do not seem happy?"

