

Rim of the New World

Two Jobs and a Sense of Hope

A Young Man From Mali Discovers a Tough Life on a Time Clock

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ATLANTA -- The toilet is stuffed with paper and flooded. Adama Camara retrieves the mush from the water. He's assigned to clean the men's restrooms on Concourse A of Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport. Swabbing the floor, he's always careful not to let the strings of the mop touch the wingtips and loafers around him. He puts in new paper towels. He wipes down the latrines and then mucks out the stalls.



Adama Camara, center, took his American girlfriend, Machika Lowe, to his aunt Oumou Keita to get her hair braided. (Photo credit: Sarah L. Voison/The Washington Post)

Adama does not complain. He will only say, "The people stink."

He speaks four languages but works quietly. He's often mistaken for a black man in the Deep South's sense instead of a newly arrived immigrant from west Africa. One day he's scouring the men's bathroom across from Gate A-19 when a black American walks up. The stranger looks at him and asks, as if to shake Adama awake, "Man, why do you work in here? This is nasty."

It took Adama a while to figure out what the man meant, why he was so bothered.

Displayed under glass at the Atlanta airport is Martin Luther King Jr.'s preacher robe, his watch and his handwritten letters with words scratched out, the words begging for a new day to dawn.

Here it is almost 40 years later and a young black man is scrubbing toilets in the gateway to the South.

For Adama, an immigrant from the threadbare country of Mali, cleaning bathrooms for \$6.23 an hour is better than marching off to the diamond mines of Sierra Leone.

"You've never tasted collard greens?" This question has been asked of Adama many times, and the asker is always shocked, as if Adama has failed a test.

When Adama came to Atlanta, part of the past decade's wave of immigration to the South, he was swept into a narrative he was unprepared for. He stepped off the Greyhound with just one suitcase but with two centuries of baggage.

He didn't realize that his job emptying garbage cans was full of symbolism. It wouldn't occur to him to be angry. He has no antenna for racial slights.

One afternoon, a black American co-worker of Adama is sitting in a motorized cart parked on the busy concourse. A white man comes rushing up and gestures to the car. "Where do these things get dispatched?"

"Dispatched?" the worker says.

The man's face falls. "I'll use another word," he says, condescendingly.

Adama is unbothered by such exchanges. "No problem," he'll say, which can irritate his co-workers, who have suffered such exchanges for years.

With a workforce of 44,800, Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport is the largest employment center in Georgia. Such a huge job bank is not lost on the flood of new immigrants. But after the terrorism of 9/11, the airport adopted tighter security measures, and anyone without the right documents couldn't get security badges. Many Latinos vanished. Africans are filling the void.

Africans make up only 2 percent of the 4.1 million people in metro Atlanta, but their numbers are increasing. They come from Ethiopia and Nigeria, Somalia, Mali and Sierra Leone, all parts of the continent affected by war, famine or political upheaval. They are wresting the airport taxi business away from American cabbies, many of them black. They're working fast food and customer service.

Some are hesitant to share details of their past. "I ran from a dictator," says an African wheelchair pusher. Most are young and just desperate for work. Adama's home of Mali in west Africa has been tormented by drought and dictatorship. Mali was once a kingdom on the gold route and later a French colony known as French Sudan. Democratic since 1991, Mali is an impoverished country of 10 million people.

Adama is from the capital city of Bamako. But if asked he will say Nara, because the custom is to claim the village or city where your father was born. In Bamako, Adama lived in a cement house with his father, his father's two wives and their 13 children. No phone, sporadic electricity and not much of a future.

In 1999, at age 19, with a high school education, Adama left Mali for New York. He had relatives in Brooklyn. He worked at a car wash during the winter, earning \$3.75 an hour. He was called "nigger" for the first time, by a black customer who didn't like the way Adama buffed his car. In the spring, Adama took a bus to Atlanta. He had remembered it from watching the 1996 Olympics, and it seemed like a place where his hands would thaw.

Adama landed on Buford Highway, the heart of immigrant Atlanta, crashing at a cousin's apartment. On his second day, he saw a group of Mexican men standing on Buford Highway and joined them to wait for pick-up work. Next, he got a job at a car wash, where the boss made the immigrant workers clock off during slow spells and clock back on when business picked up. Finally, Adama heard that Africans were getting hired at the airport.

Now the airport is his whole existence. He has two-full time jobs on Concourse A. He begins at 6:30 a.m. as a janitor for Initial Contract Services. From 3 to 11, he works at the Budweiser Brew House and Smoking Lounge, where he is a member of the utility crew.

His 16-hour work days are numbingly boring and physically grueling. He sleeps four or five hours most nights and takes 300 milligrams of Motrin for his aches. In seven months of working two jobs, he has never called in sick.

"On my day off, I have tea," he says, which means that when he has the morning off, he walks to Publix to buy a baguette and returns to his sparsely furnished apartment and boils water. He drinks his tea from a small glass tumbler, Arabic-style, with lots of sugar.

He is 6 feet 3 with dark skin and a round scar on his right cheek. He walks in a forward-leaning way. He wears a leather choker threaded with an African shell. His English is lilting and accented by French. His smile is so wide it consumes his face. The young women who work at the airport volunteer their phone numbers, and he ducks his head shyly, without bravado, and they find this totally exotic.

On Buford Highway, he shares an apartment with three other Malians. Adama's bedroom is military neat. He sleeps on the floor because that's what he did in Africa. A large digital clock is beside him. When the alarm goes off and he is nauseated with fatigue, he fixes one thought in his mind.

"I think about the American dollar," he says.

He splashes water on his face, says his morning prayers and then throws himself into the blades of another day on Concourse A. The Atlanta airport is the busiest in the world, with 220,000 fliers arriving, departing and connecting each day. Adama is right: The people stink. They ball up dirty diapers, leave blood in the sink and use Starbucks cups as spittoons.

Ron Willis is a corporate vice president of Initial Contract Services, the cleaning company hired to oversee most of the 5.7 million square feet of the Atlanta airport terminal complex. To Willis, a strapping Southerner who loves University of Georgia football, cleaning is math, and math is profit. Twenty years ago, it took an hour to clean 2,500 square feet of commercial space. Now, 5,000 square feet can be cleaned in an hour. Riding vacuums and trash compactors have become more efficient, but the main reason is that people are working faster. They have to. Flights are departing earlier in the morning and landing later at night than ever, shortening the window of cleaning time for the overnight crew.

"Think of America in the last 20 years," says Willis, his voice rising with passion. "We've improved in the world because of our productivity." At ICS, the janitorial crew has gone from what Willis calls "traditional" -- mostly single black women -- to 70 percent immigrant.

"Adama's from Mali," Adama's black American supervisor says one morning to a higher-up boss, who is white.

"It's a town called who?" the boss asks.

Adama is assigned the two busiest men's bathrooms on Concourse A. This is Delta territory, with monstrous ebbing and flowing of crowds. It takes Adama 15 minutes to clean a bathroom. He cleans each of his two bathrooms 12 or 13 times a shift.

Clocking in at dawn, Adama walks through the airport, which still has its night calm. The wide concourse gleams from a fresh cleaning. Yawning passengers are just starting to arrive.

Adama passes the Cinnabon, wafting sweet and floury, but he is oblivious, silent, beaten back by exhaustion from his late job.

By mid-morning, he emerges from one of his bathrooms and the concourse is thick with travelers. Adama steers his cart carefully. His khakis are splattered with toilet water and sink water. He bumps into Lucille, a gray-haired Initial worker who's pushing her own yellow Rubbermaid bag on wheels. "Roll on my foot so I can go home," she says to him, and he smiles. A man walks up to a trash can between them, leans over and spits.

Adama goes off to clean Gate A-19. He sweeps around the feet of a man eating a Twix bar. When it's time for his 15-minute break, Adama takes off his plastic gloves and walks down to the Initial office. It's behind one of the scuffed, unmarked doors that line the concourse. Inside are lockers, two vending machines, a desk, some chairs. Mostly it is a refuge from the public.

Two janitors are talking about bottled water, a concept that still astounds. "I throw it away all day long," says a worker named Banita. "Water, water, my, they waste it." Another employee named Pamela reports how a man yelled at her earlier in the morning for tossing the remains of his food in the garbage. "One little crumb," Pamela says, shaking her head.

They are the invisible, and it bothers them.

"These people, they walk on the concourse; they don't see you; they don't move," Banita says. Adama silently eats his Chick-fil-A biscuit. He checks the time. One minute left on break. He crumples his wrappers and returns to the concourse. He likes his co-workers but feels no solidarity at living in history's shadow together. "We are different," he says, diplomatic enough to say this in private.

Most of the Americans think the Africans are arrogant. "They want to be authoritative," says a janitor named Viola. "You are supposed to look up to them. They say, 'no problem,' but they still got this attitude. Now, that's a problem."

Viola glances toward Adama, who is rolling his cart into a gate area. "Adama, though, he sweet."

The plane to Boston has just left the gate. Newspapers are everywhere. Fried rice is scattered on the floor. A Seattle's Best Coffee has spilled and Adama bends over the mess. CNN drones overhead. "In terms of tech, the chip sector is a mixed bag today." Two fast-food workers on break discuss employment options. Wall Street Deli is holding a job fair.

Quitting time is 2:25, but by 2:15, most of the Initial workers are in the office staring down the time clock, their purses wrapped around their wrists and their bags bundled for the fleeing. Adama is still out there cleaning.

After he clocks out, he returns to the men's bathroom he has just cleaned. He goes into a stall with his backpack and strips out of his blue Initial T-shirt. He puts on a green polo with a logo from the Budweiser Brew House and Smoking Lounge. That job starts in 28 minutes.

"Adama, number eight, Bud Lite!"

The Budweiser Brew House and Smoking Lounge is an escalator ride up from Concourse A. Adama works on the utility staff, changing kegs, washing glasses and busing tables. Set among Anheuser-Busch and St. Louis Cardinals souvenirs, there's a lively bar, nachos, good music and an endless supply of ashtrays, all of which Adama wipes out a hundred times a shift. A strange atmosphere for a Muslim. But familiar.

He takes a mop into the men's room. "There is pee on the floor," he says. "Sometimes when you drink, you don't know what you do."

A blonde lights a Marlboro Gold as the bartender slides her a Cape Cod. A big man talks on a cell phone while wolfing two chili dogs. Some guys on stools order another round of Sam Adams.

The majority of the bartenders and servers are black American. The majority of the utility staff is African. Adama's two closest friends work here, Yacouba Goita and Malick Diallo, both from Mali. Their sense of duty is out of proportion with their lowly tasks. They act like maitre d's, not busboys. They patrol the tables, speaking in Bambara, Mandingo or French, their white rags through their belt loops.

A boss lays a hat on Adama's head that says "Budweiser King of Beers." The sound system blasts Grace Jones's "Pull Up to the Bumper" as rain pelts the tarmac outside. The back walls are all glass and jets circle like shark fins. Bad weather means flight delays. The bar is hopping. "Adama, white zinfandel," the bartender shouts and Adama turns for the stock room. He has tried to explain to his father what he does, but how do you explain this? By 10 p.m., he has been working for nearly 15 hours. His back and arms throb from bending over a low sink to wash beer glasses. His clothes and skin smell like ashes.

Last call at the Brew House. Adama mops out the place. Getting back to Buford Highway where he lives requires a train ride and then a bus ride that take an hour. It's nearly 1 a.m. when he lies down on his lion blanket on the floor, the alarm clock set for 5:05 a.m.

"Dynasty" is the curse of Adama's life. With reruns of the TV show broadcast in Mali, Adama's family thinks he is living high in America. In reality, he earns \$1,800 a month after taxes. He saves \$800 and sends \$300 back to Mali, where he's essentially supporting a family of 17.

Lately, family members have been calling more frequently with their wish lists. He is a human hotline in the land of plenty. One morning he's cleaning the men's bathroom across from Gate A-19 when his cell phone rings. "Alo?" he says. It's his brother calling from Mali. Daddy says send more money.

Africa occupies a unique psychic space in Atlanta, a city known as the black capital of the South and home to the nation's fastest-growing black middle class. At the airport, the underground walkway to Concourse A features a permanent exhibit of art from Zimbabwe. Adama rides the escalator past the photos of wild hippos and giraffes, untouched by the gesture to the motherland. "In Mali, the animals are in the zoo," he says.

The cultural disconnect works both ways. Schree Potts-Ramsey is the operations manager of the Budweiser Brew House and Smoking Lounge. Two years ago, when she hired her

first African employee, Potts-Ramsey, a black American, didn't know what to expect. "Have you ever seen 'Coming to America'?" she says, referring to the Eddie Murphy movie about a fez-wearing African prince who visits America. "Okay, I'm thinking that, and elephants."

As Potts-Ramsey hired more Africans, it fell to her to give them a crash course on American customs. They may speak four languages and know obscure facts about the 53 countries in Africa, but someone had to tell them about deodorant.

"No, sweetie, not once a week, once a day," Potts-Ramsey explained. And women? "Never dinner on a first date. Always lunch or brunch."

What is brunch? they wanted to know.

They are always setting out to explore America. Once they asked for directions to Indianapolis. They claimed they were going on their day off. "Yeah, right," Potts-Ramsey said. The next time they clocked in for work, they presented her with a coffee mug that said "Indianapolis."

A few of the black American employees complain to Potts-Ramsey about hiring so many Africans, citing their weak English.

History may have split them up centuries ago, but there is no natural cleaving back together here at the Brew House.

Attempts are made. One afternoon, an American waitress named Yvonne says to a Nigerian employee, "Did you hear about that lady from Africa who they tried to bury up to her neck and then stone her?"

"No, I didn't hear about that," the Nigerian says. "Well, Oprah's gonna help her," Yvonne says.

Potts-Ramsey is a more revered figure than Oprah in some parts of Mali. Her photo hangs in several houses, sent home by the Brew House Africans. They are grateful that she gave them \$8.75-an-hour jobs and coached them through life here. One Saturday, she was at home in the suburbs when the doorbell rang. There were Yacouba and Malick. "We are here to clean," Yacouba announced. They even took down the ceiling fans and cleaned the blades.

The next day, the doorbell rang again. This time, Yacouba and Malick were dressed in African garb, brilliantly colored grande boubous and silk hats. "Where y'all goin', all like that?" Ramsey asked. They were accompanied by 15 platters. "We have prepared dinner for you," Yacouba said.

Adama has "the grip." Aching, fever, soreness everywhere. He is exhausted. His one-hour commute to the airport from Buford Highway adds an extra two hours to his double-shift workday.

He decides he must leave the immigrant life of Buford Highway and move closer to the airport. He settles on a black neighborhood on the perimeter of the airport in the city of College Park. The move takes him deeper into the experience of being a black man in America. He's walking home from the bus stop one night when a white police officer stops him. Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Show me your I.D.

Adama isn't scared or angered by the incident; he is more unnerved by the occasional sound of gunshots. His apartment complex has steel bars and dyed-red bark thrown on the ground instead of grass. Jets scream overhead.

Adama lives with two other Malians who split the \$650 monthly rent. Across the street, a Nigerian runs a convenience store called Quick and Cheap with bullet-proof glass and gouging prices: \$1.29 for the can of peas Adama buys. Adama is so careful with money that he examines a pack of Wrigley's before buying it. But he wants to buy a car. With a car, he would be able to take a girl to dinner instead of meeting her at Plane Delicious at the airport food court.

Raiding his savings account, he buys a 1994 Mazda. The car conks out while he's driving home from work. The problem is grave, he learns the next day, when a shade tree mechanic from the Ivory Coast comes over with Yacouba and Malick to diagnose the car. It's the engine. No one told Adama that a car engine requires oil.

The mechanic advises that a used engine will cost \$800. Adama goes upstairs to his roachy apartment. Condoleezza Rice is on TV. Adama turns off the sound and plays his music. He is homesick. He looks out the window and sees run-down apartments identical to his own. He puts his head in his hands.

He calls Yacouba and says he's catching the train up to Buford Highway. Yacouba, who has recently discovered bowling, goes to the Asian market and buys a frozen lamb's head. Soup is on the way. Malick comes over. They all watch the news in French on satellite TV. They pop in bootleg dance videos from home, the bouncing sounds of Salif Keita competing with the accordions from the Mexican apartment next door. Ten miles from Turner Field, the tiny seeds of Mali.

When it gets late, Yacouba makes a pallet for Adama on the floor and hands him an alarm clock.

"He is lonely where he lives now," Yacouba says.

In Mali, Adama knew one white person, a Mormon missionary. That's one more than he knows in Atlanta, after 14 months of living here. His neighborhood, with its gospel roller rink, neckbone specials, fish houses and tabernacle churches, begins to feel more familiar. He recently saw two skinny boys from Togo kicking a can down the sidewalk.

"More Africans be staying over here now," Adama says, the schoolhouse English he learned in Mali giving way to the local blend. Adama begins dating an black American woman named Machika Lowe, who's 23 and works at the Oscar Mayer Hot Dog Construction Company at the airport. "You want to go to a '70s party with me tonight?" Machika calls to ask on a Saturday night.

Adama has no clue what she's talking about but somehow their relationship works. He takes her to Buford Highway and treats her to an African hair braiding.

Ask Yacouba what his future holds and a look of total peacefulness crosses his round face. "We are going home," he says. Adama? He's not so sure. Maybe he will save enough money to open an African merchandise kiosk in Underground Atlanta. One thing is certain. He wants only one wife. In America, how could you ever afford two?

Instead of the '70s party, he sleeps for 12 hours and arrives at the airport the next day at dawn. Sunday mornings on Concourse A have their own gentle rhythms. Master Shine the shoe shine man plays gospel music. *Can we get some church in here?* Shirley Caesar sings.

A janitor who works with Adama rolls his cart of trash by and tips his chin. "Hey, doctor," he says. Adama knows every inch of this place, dirty or clean. He's taking classes at the airport to apply for a job as a \$10-an-hour customer service assistant.

But for now he bends over a garbage can slimed with Manchu Wok noodles. Just as he removes the bag to put in a new one, a man dumps a plate of food into the unlined can. Adama picks it out by hand.

The world of garbage is unrelenting, but pride is still eked out wherever possible. One of Adama's colleagues comes to work with a set of French wrap nails and a beauty parlor 'do. In the Initial break room, a supervisor tries to advise another woman on what kind of car to buy. She's tired of the bus. He suggests an economical Kia. "I won't ride in a Kia," she says.

By the time Adama clocks off, Concourse A is knotted with travelers and strollers and rolling luggage. It's Sunday and that means no second job at the Brew House. Adama disappears into the men's room and comes out wearing a T-shirt that says "Dirty Dirty," a reference to the rap genre known as the Dirty South. He walks through the terminal and then up the MARTA train platform, where he boards a car. Except for two Dutch tourists

with backpacks, everyone has on a stained uniform. The 3 o'clock shift workers have punched out. Adama sits next to a contingent from Popeyes.

After one stop he gets off at College Park and waits for the bus. A young man with a gold tooth gives him a nod. "I like your shirt, man," he says.

"Thank you, man," Adama says, giving a smile that is unreturned.

The day is wan and pale. Summer is gone but there is no fall, only a lack of color and heat. On the bus to Flat Shoals, Adama sits under a Church's Chicken ad. Three pieces and a biscuit for \$1.99. Someone has scrawled on the seat in front of him, DA SOUTH.

The bus passes pines and red clay, and rumbles over railroad tracks. The windows are open. A breeze blows across the silent passengers, anesthetized by fatigue. Adama closes his eyes and falls asleep.