

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hello, everybody, I am so excited to be joined today by Mamadou Jawo, JD candidate at the University of Wisconsin Law School. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Mamadou Jawo**

It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So first, can you just give us a super general overview of your educational and linguistic background and why you decided to pursue law?

**Mamadou Jawo**

Yes. So to start, my name is Mamadou Jawo, as you rightly said, and I'm a second year law student, JD candidate, at the University of Wisconsin Law School. And background on my education and linguistic background. I am a native of the Gambia, West Africa. So I was born and raised in the Gambia. And I moved to the United States in 2013, in my junior year of high school, but prior to that, I went to school in Gambia. The official language in Gambia is English, thanks to colonialism. So, our curriculum was similar to the British curriculum in terms of teaching in English and some of the subject matters that we touch on. But I also belong to an ethnic group called the Fula ethnic group. It's a large ethnic group in the West African region. I think it's the second largest one in Gambia, second to Mandinka. And I speak — and Fula is spelled F-U-L-A just for help to help you out. And then I also speak Mandinka, another West African language spoken primarily in Gambia M-A-N-D-I-N-K-A. And, as well Wolof, W-O-L-O-F. I'm beginning to lose some of my Wolof because there's not a lot of people my age here from Gambia, Senegal, so, but anyways, I went to school. And when I moved to the United States, I've always had aspirations of becoming a lawyer because of some of my personal experiences and interaction with the criminal legal system back home, because my dad was a cop in Gambia and I got to visit the police station quite often. And you see in the conditions the inmates were in and it was just horrendous. And I knew I wanted to do something with respect to defending people that come into contact with the legal system. But it was never clear how that would be. Until I came to the United States and got to know you first I took a class in college. I majored in criminal justice and political science. And one class that was really fundamental in my pursuit of law school was a juvenile delinquency class that I took my sophomore year. And with that, we visited some organization called Briarpatch Youth Services, I got to know what type of work they do with working with court order dudes that have to complete their community service. And I don't know if I'm going all over the place right now. So feel free to jump in at any moment and redirect where the question was asking.

**Claire Darmstadter**

I think you've covered all your bases. And so if I did my internet research, correct prior to interviewing you, I believe you're going into international law. And do you think your language background is going to figure into your law career at all? Or is it kind of separate where it'll be

an English-medium only career and then you will obviously still speak those additional languages?

**Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah, so the thing about law school is that your internet search is probably correct, because I've had, I want to dabble in so many things with the law, because there's so much with the practice of law, there's international law, criminal law, human rights, law, family and all that. So I think, prior to coming to law school, definitely that was one of my areas that I wanted to practice in was International, human rights or whatever. But I think coming into law school, taking some classes and just being exposed to more, because with law school, the classes that you take really do define, like what type of work you can see yourself doing. I think that has changed a little bit. I still have aspirations to become an international lawyer in the future. But right now, I don't know if that's the path that I'll be taking right away. But with regards to whatever legal practice I do take on, I think, definitely my language experience in you know, Fula, Mandinka, Wolof are definitely fundamental especially if, for instance, immigration right now at the Immigration Law Clinic as well, at the law school, and we get a lot of we do these things called community clinic consultations, I think every other Friday, so so we actually had one today. And we get folks that have immigration questions from around the world calling for consultations with us and our supervising attorneys about immigration cases. And I think I haven't met up with someone with the languages that I have spoken yet. But I noticed that a decent number of Gambian immigrants or West African immigrants that do speak these languages that I speak, and it's really, really helpful instead, as a lawyer to be able to relate personally with your prospective clients or your clients, and not having that language barrier, because sometimes that does play as an obstacle for people that they want to go for legal representation, but they can't communicate with their lawyers. And sometimes it's very hard to find interpreters, especially for these types of languages that are very specific to your region.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And can you tell us a little bit more about what those languages are in terms of how you acquire them? Are they all very similar as a kind of like Spanish and Portuguese where they have a lot of overlap? Or are they completely distinct, and you're learning them at different points in your life and just like totally different areas of your brain?

**Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah, so it's, it's actually funny, because traditionally, these languages, they are not written languages, as most African languages are, it's all learned orally. And so the best way to do it, the best way to learn these languages is actually to be immersed in that culture. And well, I'm Fula because that's, that's just my family, we speak Fula. And that's how I became fluent in that language. But for the other two languages it's primarily because Gambia is also a very small country, like 2 million people or so. And my neighborhood was very diverse in terms of ethnic diversity. And we have a lot of people from different ethnic groups that speak different languages. So just growing up as a kid, interacting with friends, your neighbors, and speaking, that's how you become accustomed to it and get to know the language. So they do have a lot of similarities in that. In the language. I don't know the dialect, even within the specific language,

for example, Fula, they have different dialects with that it comes with hundreds of dialects, depending on which region in Africa you're in. So while there are similarities within the languages, I think they're still distinct enough that if you can't speak it, you won't be able to pick it up from just hearing one because you know, another language.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah and so you mentioned that you grew up in that school system where they might have had like the British system, and the English language is kind of the medium of instruction. When you arrived in the United States, do you find like it was a pretty seamless transition into US schools? Or was it like wow, the English we grew up speaking is not the English they speak here. This is totally different and I feel really out of my element?

### **Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah, actually, I think more of the latter, because like I said, coming in, I already had the English background when I went to school, the primary mode of communication was in English I guess, with the teachers. With students we just speak in our own languages, but the mode of teaching was an English. I think the difficulties in the transition was not essentially just the English language, but more so with communication with understanding different accents. I found myself thinking sitting in classrooms like I do not know what you're speaking and I know for sure I can speak English. And it will be the same when I opened my mouth to answer a question. The teachers like come again, I just found a constant going back and forth, repeating ourselves, miscommunications happening because of the accents. And, you know, the British English language and American have their differences a little bit in terms of how to spell certain words, how to pronounce certain words, is not to the extent that you wouldn't be able to communicate with someone that can speak English, but it was just difficult. It was just difficult in that regard. And I think that also played a role. In my first year here I was put into English as a second language classes. And those classes were really meant for folks that couldn't speak English, even though English is my second or third or whatever language, I grew up in schools that taught English so I was really proficient in the language. And it had to take like, a couple of months, I was like, well, I've already learned this, what is a noun, what is a pronoun? You know, I noticed this, I know, this is definitely not up to par with what I'm capable of. So, you know, I could have just stayed in those classes and just rode an easy A, but I will not learn anything new. And it took the help of, you know, my, one of my teachers in high school that really advocated on my behalf to go to the ghettos cancel, like, you know, you really need to switch out his classes. He's way advanced from the classes that you put him in.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah and I think that's a reality that a lot of students face, it's like, okay, you look a certain way, or your heritage, or some country or some background. And the assumption is, well, of course, putting them in ESL, but they don't factor in like your background and what you actually experienced growing up. Can you talk a little bit about how, whether high school or college, how they kind of viewed your additional languages that you spoke? Frequently, for a lot of students, it's like, okay, I come with this language background, but there isn't a class in high school, right, your languages are not offered as like a regular high school course. So you couldn't just take

them, get that easy A and just kind of like, prove your language ability. So in high school, or even in college wasn't like, you still have to take additional language courses, because we're not going to validate these languages that you speak because we don't have classes in them, or how do they view your language background when determining credits and all the bureaucratic side of things?

**Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah. Also, another thing to note, I did also, you know, in Gambian schools, here, normally you take Spanish as, you know, your second language in classes, like your language class. In Gambia it is usually French, and I took French from elementary to middle school. And in high school after the first year, I didn't take it. And the school the way they divided schools is different, because elementary is from first grade to sixth grade. And then Middle School is seven to nine. And High School is just those three years 10 to 12. So, I did speak. I was a I was, you know, I took French class, I can't speak French now for sure. But I think that when I came to high school that was validated as a, you know, another language. So I didn't need to take any, any language classes in high school. And it was the same for college as well, I don't know which, which one they factored in. But I didn't I wasn't required to take another language class because I already had those criterias I think maybe it might be because of the languages that I speak. But there was no, like, you rightly mentioned, there were no classes or ways to, quote unquote, validate that this language that you know, the Fula, Mandinka, Wolof language.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So, yeah, and perhaps looking now outside of language directly. Are there any things that the wider community may not be super aware of about students who immigrate to the United States later on in their youth? Any challenges or like stereotypes or misconceptions that you think people have?

**Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah, that's a good question. And I'm trying to just think of it in my experience, what I will want, like coming in from a different country with different culture and languages. I think like you said, there needs to be some resources that are directed towards different types of immigrant groups that are well tailored towards them. So for instance, with me, I didn't need that ESL class, but another person from another country that might have that language barrier definitely needs it, and that would meet their needs. But for me, what I think would have benefited me more is with that cultural competency piece and learning about you know, the ways of the country because there's a new place you get that culture shock, everything is new. So just find some immersion program or whatever it is to be able to introduce you to all these things that teenagers already know that are in high school, so you don't have to feel weird or feel left out there. You don't know what's iCarly I don't know I didn't grow up here. I grew up watching SpongeBob. I grew up watching Tom and Jerry and other cartoon shows that are relevant in my home country. So I think those would definitely be helpful, as a new immigrant in the country.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And I think that goes the other way too, right? Like the onus is on us as students to learn about our fellow students as well, because I feel like even for me, I grew up in high school where where we did have a lot of students who are immigrants or refugees, or just have backgrounds that weren't necessarily like Wisconsin, and we never really learned about it, or there wasn't really a for that conversation. I think it's really important to have those conversations to learn about your classmates, because people just don't know about it. And that's really sad. So looking at the Madison community, whether it's in your youth growing up or on campus, do you think Madison is generally hospitable to individuals who speak a non-English language, does it kind of depend on where you are, what the language is? How do you kind of feel in Madison, as a speaker have an additional language that's not English?

### **Mamadou Jawo**

Yeah, I think it definitely is on a case by case basis. With regards to how people react to you speaking a different language out in public, I don't mind, I speak my language, wherever I'm at when I'm with family or friends, I speak the same languages as I am. I think most of the time the reaction that I get is just people curious, or just looking at Oh, you know, I don't hear people speak in this or whatever. As you know, I think certain languages are met with more friendlier reactions. Like, for instance, if you speak French or whatever that oh, you know, you speak French and all that. That's pretty cool. But I don't like even an interview sometimes when they're asking like, Oh, do you speak any additional languages? And when I mention my languages, it isn't that internationally known, so they don't see it, you know, impressive or whatever. It's not held to the same standard as some of these most prominent international languages like French, Arabic and Spanish since ended, like, but I think the Madison community, I haven't had a bad reaction or bad experience from speaking my language in public where I mean, I've heard a lot of stories where people are like, you know, why are you speaking this language right now? You know, you're in America right now. So you should be speaking English and not fortunately, or unfortunately, because I would have confronted those types of issues. I have not experienced those personally.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, it was good to hear. But like you said, right, too many people experience it. Well, anyone who has experienced that is horrible. So I'm glad that you had a positive experience. But it's sad to know that others don't necessarily all the time. So to end this and kind of a positive note, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer English, you can answer in another language, a mix of languages, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

### **Mamadou Jawo**

I can speak in English, and then just give a brief remark in my native language as well. But I definitely think it's a superpower to be able to speak more than one language. It allows you to connect with a variety of people, and really gives you the tools to communicate more than one in different ways. You know, you can, you can be a global citizen in that way as well. If you travel to a different country, different part of the world and they don't speak English, because English is not the only language spoken in the world. You don't feel as left out or out of place, because

you have that additional language that you can rely on to be able to communicate with people from different parts of the world. So I guess I'll say in Fula [answer in Fula]. So that's just a way like if you know, if you speak a different language like Fula, and you go to a different country where they don't speak English, or whatever language it is that you speak, you can be able to easily communicate with folks of that country.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you giving us answers in both languages. And I really appreciate all the stories and experiences you had to share because I think it's really valuable and people don't necessarily think about this perspective. So thank you so much, and I hope you have a great rest today.

**Mamadou Jawo**

Awesome. You're doing great research here Claire. I appreciate your time as well, and I'm happy to help.