

# Talkin' about migration - some ethnographic notes on the ambivalent representation of migrants in contemporary Senegal

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the ambivalent representation of migrants in one of the important West African emigration countries: Senegal.

Senegalese discourse emerging from popular culture and from the subjective constructions made by kin, friends and neighbours, is replete with the celebration of migrants as symbols of contemporary society. Migrants are celebrated for their solidarity and the efforts they undertake for the well being of their families despite being far from home. On the other hand, even if less often, migrants are also perceived as *modou modou*, as people able to trick who become rich only in a fraudulent manner. Ambivalent constructions also predominate in regard to Europe. Although it is seen as an "El Dorado", Europe is also viewed critically based on a historical consciousness. Many informants insisted on the impossibility of stopping migratory flows and the blindness of policies characterizing "Fortress Europe".

## **Introduction**

In countries of emigration, narratives about migrants as well as images about foreign countries and migration contexts often become metaphors for thinking about social and cultural changes, which characterize the local contexts themselves (cfr. Gardner 1995). The same can be said about Senegal. Emigrants are important in a number of ways for Senegalese society, with remittances being a cornerstone of the national economy and often a base of subsistence for thousands of families (Tall 2002). In addition, remittances are a fundamental symbol of migrant's loyalty towards their non-migrant family and their country beyond their immediate economic significance.

The representation of migrants is often shifting and connected to broader social and political changes. In his compelling study on "cultural complexity" in an era of globalization and transnational cultures (1992), Ulf

Hannerz provide us with the following cultural distinction emerging from Nigerians' talk of the 80's: the naïve "Bush" who is illiterate and ignorant because he never left the bush on the one hand; and the well respected "Beento" who is contrasted to the former and regarded as articulate because he has experienced life in global cities such as London and New York. Interestingly enough, with contemporary Senegal these constructs seem almost reversed. As we will see, it is the unskilled and sometimes illiterate who is traveling globally without losing touch with the beloved homeland whereas the white-collar or the graduate seems bogged down in what seems a failed path of social mobility inherited by colonial and postcolonial legacies and rhetoric.

However, the discourse on the migrant entails many different nuances, which are also reproduced in films, novels and music. As Barber reminds us, these cultural expressions should not be seen as "reflections" of an already constituted "world view" but as being part of the wider work of cultural production which produces consciousness (Barber 1997). Keeping this suggestion and its processual flavour in mind, in the following I will discuss the ambivalent constructs of migrants emerging from diverse narratives with the help of some popular songs. I will explore the opinions and perceptions of migrants held by their family members, and other outsiders among the people who stay at home as well as of migrants themselves. In addition to the objectivist typologies emerging from the gaze of social scientists, it is the subjective constructions made by "ordinary people" which are important sources of identity and provide migrants with recognition as well as with demanding expectations. These are telling, if not crucial, in acquiring a sense of the experiences of migration in Senegal.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on a broader multi-sided research project on Senegalese migration in Italy (cfr. Riccio 2001; 2002; 2003; Grillo and Riccio 2004). The fieldwork was undertaken over the course of eighteen months (1996-1998) starting in the region of Emilia Romagna (Italy) and then following Senegalese informants returning to Senegal in two further phases separated by another spell of fieldwork in Italy. I undertook participant observation in Senegalese accommodations and following migrants' paths in public places in Italy (at markets, on the beach, at cultural events, in trade union meetings, at religious meetings, within vocational training courses) and in Senegal (when visiting families, networking to organize import-export activities, implementing development projects in villages and towns, visiting religious guides, participating to baptisms). Together with field notes, the main core of my research consists on transcripts of sixty

### **Migration from Senegal as a sign of success**

Thirty years ago, Senegal seemed full of hope, and especially in comparison to the experience of other African states could boast with a relatively strong economy and a stable political climate; since then, however, much has changed. Senegal now finds itself in much the same precarious economic and social situation characterizing other African countries. As other African countries, Senegal has experienced high population growth rates. As a corollary, the population structure is characterized by large share of the under-age population. This “youthfulness” of the population has socio-economic implications such as the large size of the dependent population. Like many African countries within the contemporary globalised economy, Senegal has been in a state of economic crisis and consequently government expenditure under the control of the IMF. The prospect of development based on the mainstay of the economy – agriculture - remains distant: groundnuts, which from the colonial period until now have been the basic product of this sector and which are crucial to budgetary and external revenue, no longer generate sufficient income for the peasant population. As a result of drought (1968 onwards)<sup>2</sup> and farmer’s dissatisfaction, production is irregular and often escapes the official marketing network; instead it is transformed for sale on the informal market. These are some of the immediate strategies of the peasantry vis-à-vis the pressures brought to bear on by a state that is widely seen as corrupt and inefficient and by a monetary policy adopted in the framework of the structural adjustment programs (market prices and limits on wages) that produce discontent among the poorer strata of society (cfr. Diop 2002a; 2002b). Furthermore, drought forced a large number of people to abandon their land, producing a rural exodus. In the hope of finding better living conditions in the urban

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long interviews and four focus group discussions amongst migrants, kin and neighbors and within relevant institutional settings in both sending and receiving contexts. Most of the interviews were conducted in French and Italian, but some of them in Wolof with the help of an interpreter. I want to thank Malick Ba and Nago Ka for their help in translating and interpreting lyrics.

<sup>2</sup> The cycle of droughts that began in the 1968-69 farming season constitutes the first one in a series of negative developments such as the disruption of production and the fall of prices that made the low growth rate in the rural sectors a constant feature in the recent history of the country (cfr. Diop 2002a).

areas, young people from the rural areas leave their home situation for the towns or abroad.

For instance, Babacar<sup>3</sup> originating in a village near Diourbel in the Baol, told me that he had left a place *“where if someone does not emigrate, it is because he has no legs to do so.”* Many young rural Senegalese feel they have no other choice, since the withdrawal of governmental involvement from the farming sector makes it very difficult to earn a living in the rural areas. Moreover, in the words of a young development worker expressing his worries about the rural exodus: *“desertification can be faced somehow, but if everybody just leaves it becomes unstoppable; the rural world is emptying itself and this makes us even more dependent on others.”*<sup>4</sup> *“Who remain are the very young, the elderly and the women”* says Assane,<sup>5</sup> a widely acknowledged expert on rural development. In our conversation he also underlined the importance of the return of migrants, especially when it is characterized by ostentatious spending - this plays on the imagination of the people staying at home and, in so doing, forms a symbolic push factor underpin the emigration from rural Senegal.

Also urban youth's dissatisfaction with politics and social movements produced new waves of emigrants. For example, Momar left university during the *année blanche* 1987-89 (a whole academic year interrupted by strikes). He went back and finally got a Master's in Law at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in 1992. Nevertheless, he had difficulties in finding a job although he had made several attempts: *“the labor market was too closed and corrupted.”*<sup>6</sup> He then decided to leave. The youngest brother of Awa, a migrant's wife, studies at University and personally experiences the problem of graduate unemployment and the growing difficulties in surviving to the end of his course: *“It is very hard at university because they have become very strict in the exams. It is the IMF and the WB which imposed these restrictions, precisely because afterwards there are no possibilities of finding a job.”*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> When referring to informants I use pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> Matar, a 25 years old development worker intervening in the Baol region.

<sup>5</sup> A consultant for various development organizations.

<sup>6</sup> Momar, 25 year old, a former student and later trader in Italy.

<sup>7</sup> Alioune, a 20 year old student enrolled at the UCAD university of Dakar.

Educated young people cannot hope to find employment in the formal sector: the public sector has been under structural adjustment for decades with severe constraints on hiring, and the industrial sector had been shedding labour since the mid 1980s (Fall 1997). As Donal Cruise O'Brien remarks: "Students often compare themselves with preceding generations, those who could count on a government job with their degree, and they tend to see themselves as an abandoned generation." (Cruise O'Brien 2003, 168).

Contemporary Senegal seems characterized by a fragile although enduring equilibrium of different crosscutting cleavages: religion, ethnicity, caste (although less relevant nowadays) and class (Diop 2002b). These separations shape a complex society from which various migratory trajectories developed at different stages. In addition to the long tradition of migration within West Africa, Senegalese emigration towards Europe started in the colonial period with the French enrolment of *Tirailleurs* at the end of XIX century and during World War I. After the independence of French postcolonial West African states (1962) and due to the high demand for unskilled foreign labor during France's economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s the emigration rate increased significantly. The most important French car enterprises recruited workers in the Senegal River valley (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali) and in the region of Tambacounda. This emigration concerned mainly *Toucouleur*, *Serere* and above all, *Soninké* (Timera 1996; Manchuelle 1997).

Yet, in the mid 1980s the downsizing and restructuring of these enterprises badly affected Senegalese workers in France, while a new type of migration developed which was characterized by family or individual initiatives, by a broader variety of destinations and the important role that access to trade had for the success of migratory strategies. Nowadays, with the crisis of the Groundnut Basin, Senegalese young people from the Baol (Touba, Diourbel), Djambour (Louga), Cayor (Kebemer), Sine (Kaolack) and Dakar leave for new receiving countries such as Spain, the USA and Italy and, through their circulatory movement, shape new transnational spaces (Riccio 2001; Stoller 2002).

Most of the emigrants who leave for Italy belong to the *Wolof* ethnic group and to the *Mouride* Sufi brotherhood. The Mouride brotherhood was founded in the 1880's by Amadou Bamba and has its capital in Touba, the site of his revelation, where Mourides have constructed the largest mosque in sub-Saharan Africa (Gueye 2002). The core of Mouride morals and organization is represented by the relationship between the *Marabout or Serin* (the saint and guide, "the one who wants") and the *Talib* (disciple). The former is a spiritual guide that guarantees grace (*baraka*) and through his economic and political power also provides the latter with help on practical matters; the talib obeys and works for the marabout and his service is considered as prayer (cfr. Copans 1980; Cruise O'Brien 2003). This meaning of work is also a key to the success of Mouride migration abroad (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

The brotherhood's vertical and horizontal ties provide an organizational solution able to reproduce in transnational networks and a distinctive culture of migration as a training experience (Ebin 1996). These features often help the migrants in organizing business, mobility as well as temporary settlement within the receiving contexts. Most of them are unmarried or married men, who left back their families in Senegal and, especially those involved in trade, tend to shape a circular migratory mode and to construct transnational social networks (Riccio 2003).

The success of returnees and of migrants stimulates emulation as well as the popular imagination (cfr. Appadurai 1996). This may seem a commonsense stereotype, but in villages one may find young people who do not want to work anymore because they are just waiting to leave (idem). "*Why work for years to acquire what you can earn in one year by leaving the country*" said one rural Senegalese to Assane, who comments: "*waiting to leave, young people do not invest in the value of the land.*"<sup>8</sup>

These comments would confirm the structuralist dependency theory about emigration and remittances (Meillassoux 1981). However, it is too early to judge the long term effects of migration. The same can be said about village associations and transnational organizations of migrants abroad competing

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<sup>8</sup> See note 5

for the construction of public services at home. If “associations not always produce development, they often invest in rural infrastructure; sometimes not functional but very visible with the label”, one may counter-argue that improving the services and infrastructure of one's locality of origin enhances one's status and may contribute to structural features indirectly conducive of development (Quiminal 1991; Grillo and Riccio 2004).

Beside public wells and other projects as well as the construction of private houses, weddings are important symbols of success. They mean settlement. As, Babacar, a councillor of a town who has siblings abroad says: “*the migrant does not have a precise global project, he is an adventurer ... only the signs of success can be aimed at as a general goal.*”<sup>9</sup> Migrants' wives are always very visible in town; they wear the same *Bou Bou* (traditional clothes) and the same fashionable jewelry. Visibility is a sign of success, which is why migrants are important actors in creating new fashions. The overall economic success of migration and the development of the culture of migration produce shifts in stereotypes too. For instance, before “*a district full of migrants was considered a ghetto but now their inhabitants are seen as idols and heroes*” explains Babacar.

### **Modou modou: heroes or tricksters?**

Economic independence and having enough resources to marry and set up one's own family are the fundamental aspirations of young people. In this respect, there is a shared discourse comparing the *maitrisards*, the graduates, who stay behind in Senegal and work very hard at school only to find themselves eventually unemployed, and the *modou modou* (abbreviation of mamadou mamadou) or *Baol Baol* (coming from the Baol region) who are the rural migrants who only know how to trade but nevertheless manage to earn enough money abroad and come back showing off new houses, clothes, big weddings and all the symbols of success.

If in the past they were stigmatized for their ignorance, now migrants are seen as contemporary heroes and these characters are to be found within

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<sup>9</sup> A 50 year old councillor who has brothers and nephews in Italy and Spain.

the most widespread phenomenon of everyday life: music. Many famous musicians (Youssou N'Dour, Ismael Lo, Ouza) sing about migrants and peddlers as symbols of contemporary society, because of their solidarity and the efforts they undertake for the well being of their families despite being far from home. For instance, Ismael Lo's song *Baol Baol* can be read as an example of the shifting meaning of the rural migrant:

Baol Baol, come here son, do not be afraid; if you are blessed by Serin  
Touba you may come  
Baol Baol, come here son, do not be afraid; if you are blessed by your  
parents you may come

The archetype of the rough ignorant, Hannerz's "bush", should not fear the urban gaze anymore, he is protected by the blessing of his family which will benefit from his efforts and by the membership to the Mouridiyyia whose founder is evoked with the name of Serin Touba.

As we will see, according to the opinion of various informants, if one wants to picture an ideal type of migrant we should think of an unskilled person who knows trading well, who is very good at saving and who invests in glamorous things when back in Senegal. All this pushes others to take their chance as well. Oumar, a worker in a hospital who has siblings abroad, reflects on the typical *modou modou*: "He is interested in earning money, building big houses, marrying the most beautiful girls, driving big cars, opening boutiques and leaving again to do more trading abroad."<sup>10</sup> As Sall, a migrant himself, many think that "without *modou modou*, Senegal will be on its knees. Remittances are the real source of development of the country."<sup>11</sup> In one of the first songs dedicated to migrants by Youssou N'Dour, *immigrés*, the singer promises:

We thank you and we pray for you;  
Yes, Senegal is our country and when back we will sing about you.

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<sup>10</sup> Oumar a 35 year old worker in a hospital, coming from another town and living in Dakar.

<sup>11</sup> Sall, a 28 year old migrant who lives in Italy and often visits Senegal twice a year.



Within popular culture migrants are seen as “gold mines” and the “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson 1999) and of social mobility shifted accordingly. For instance, as Tall recalls: “*mothers now want to marry their girls to rich migrants; they do not want to marry them to the brilliant students any more.*”<sup>12</sup> Migrants become models to be imitated and a source of inspiration, as stated in the already mentioned song of Ismael Lo:

Baol Baol, I know you are a resource, you inspire me.

One key aspect of this success is saving. If investments are made they are always of very safe character. In a conversation in a district of Dakar, Cheikh revealed his view about this matter:

“A characteristic of the Baol Mouride is that he is always careful in his investment; he invests little. He is discreet about his sources, he does not trust anyone in business; this comes from the school of the street ... He will carry on like this, working hard and saving the maximum until he is 40 years old and then he will retire, praying and focusing on god in Touba.”<sup>13</sup>

Another characteristic related to this type of migrant is their *ruserie* (cunning), usually known as a “national quality”. Even in the traditional oral stories of Leck (the rabbit) and Buky (the hyena), the main quality of the small Leck is her craftiness. She knows how to get out of difficult situations. This is the main quality of popular heroes and is also a characteristic of the *modou modou* as they are migrants who are conversant with the art of surviving in any situation.

Furthermore, they are strongly identified with their home. A well-known journalist who is also active in a local NGO talked about this aspect:

“They come from the countryside with their carts and they travel in different places like New York or Honk Kong, speaking different languages and yet they do not lose even a small piece of their identity.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A primary school teacher who married the sister of two emigrants.

<sup>13</sup> A 40 year old white collar, brother-in-law of a migrant.

<sup>14</sup> Boris, a journalist working for radio as well as newspapers.

They go around the world without betraying their origins, which is another quality often emphasized in popular songs. The solidarity is expressed and performed in a trans-continental way, as evoked by a more recent song of Youssou N'Dour (*Solidarité*):

Solidarity towards America and Europe and Asia and around...

Yet, as the singer often remembers and as Ismael Lo (*Baol Baol*) stresses categorically:

They do not need to speak nasaran to be understood;  
Baol Baol, you have dignity.  
They do not need to pretend to be Americans they are already in America;  
Baol Baol, I am inspired by you.

A sense of inferiority does not exist; no need of an a-critical mimesis like with the "Beento" of Hannerz or the "Nasaran" (French) or *Toubab* of Senegalese common talk. "*Toubab*" means "European", it was, and is, the term used in Senegal for primarily French, white people. The term acquires a broader meaning, though, when used as an archetype. "*Toubab*" becomes synonym for acting and thinking as the westerner, without god but with *Xalis* (money), lacking solidarity, tolerance, moderation, hospitality and dignity (the main Senegalese values). In other words, it becomes the negative symbol summarizing all the faults condemned in popular culture. As I have shown elsewhere (Riccio 2002), this ideology of essentialising the *Toubab* can be an identity safety-net in the migration process. The point I want to stress here concerns the social construct of Senegalese migrants as being able through their practical sense to make them understood without losing their sense of identity. They represent an example of what the historian Mamadou Diouf calls "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (2000), which recalls the plurality of ways of social mobility but also of attitudes towards others and towards foreign contexts (Werbner 1999).

Mor, a graduate student with many friends living abroad, confirms the popular heroic representation of migrants, but, at the end he displays a critical reading which proposes a cautious attitude towards these new champions of Senegalese society:

"The people who leave are becoming a point of reference here. Even fathers choose migrants as an example for their children: "look what he did for his parents and his family". Look who is getting married now, they are all Mouride migrants. They are the example, but also people are judged for what they have, sometimes we do not think about how they got it anymore."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, there are also negative opinions regarding *modou modou*, and this point of view becomes more explicit when talking with Abdou, a migrant himself, who would be regarded as a *Toubab* or as a corrupted "Beento": "*they are closed, and ignorant. Street selling does not pay enough, people from the city have higher expectations and easily become businessmen.*"<sup>16</sup> More specifically, like with other archetypes of success (Banégas and Warnier 2001), some people argue that migrants succeed only because they "trick", they become rich in a fraudulent manner.

These comments are connected to another criticism of people wasting money on big weddings and houses instead of investing it in more entrepreneurial ways, producing jobs for others. "*The problem in Senegal is that money does not move.*"<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as a social worker of Gwedawaye suggests: "*the modou modou have given a vision of Europe as an El Dorado and that is false. They do not work as they do in Italy when they are in Senegal. The returnee has only money when he comes back, but nothing else, because he did not live abroad if he would have done so in Senegal.*"<sup>18</sup> According to this last opinion, abroad seems easier, because when one is far from home, he is ready to do things that he would refuse in his own country. This last reflection introduces us to another ambivalent representation, which refers to Europe as context of immigration.

### **Europe: El Dorado or Fortress?**

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<sup>15</sup> Mor, a 24 year old postgraduate.

<sup>16</sup> A migrant who left a post in an office and migrated to Italy in mid 90's.

<sup>17</sup> Matar, a migrant involved in import-export activities.

<sup>18</sup> Ass, a social worker working for an NGO in the suburbs of Dakar.

The celebrative representation of unskilled migrants who manage to learn many languages and to survive abroad, saving a lot of money and coming back very rich, sometimes reverberate a mythological background: *“Once a child managed to pass the frontiers of Senegal and France, he was as if invisible, no-one could notice him, but in France he was discovered because of the cold, yes he could not bear the temperature this is why he was discovered”*.<sup>19</sup> This story reveals the magic character that surrounds the migrant protected by marabout's prayers and amulets (*gris gris*), but also the difficulty he might encounter abroad. He has to be helped to hide, to “become invisible” and he should bear the “cold” of Europe.

Indeed, another repeated argument relates to the receiving context. I found many informants insisting on the impossibility of stopping the migratory flow to Europe and the blindness of policies of closure, which in migrants' view are ultimately bound to fail. There is a demand for respect. In the Youssou N' Dour' song as quoted above (*Solidarité*), after having taken into account the society of origin and the migrants themselves, the singer confronts the receiving western societies by evoking their postcolonial contradictions:

Nasaran (French) it is you who told us we should live within equality  
Your aid does not suffice and is not clear  
Do not address your harsh policies (Immigration control) towards my people

This kind of opinion appeared in public discourse around the time when the *sans papier* movement became strong in France, and a campaign was undertaken by the EU to convince Senegalese people to remain in their hometown and to contribute to its development. The slogan of this campaign sounded: *pour s'en sortir n'est pas nécessaire sortir*, using a French language game with *sortir* meaning going out and *s'en sortir* sorting out one's life. Such arguments shape a representation of the phenomenon of emigration. Souleymane, who had been to Italy in the past said: *“the Italian government is doing an anti-immigration campaign. This policy cannot work until the conditions of livelihood change here. Even the parents will push children to emigrate because this is the only chance to survive. Italians should understand this, because they have made their wealth through emigration, in this respect Senegalese*

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<sup>19</sup> Badiane, a 55 year old uncle of a migrant from Kaolack.

*and Italians are the same.*"<sup>20</sup> Matar, a development practitioner in a more critical vein wonders why:

"If Europe became rich, also through African slavery and colonialism, now they do not accept us when they are overdeveloped, we will invade them and export our poverty to them. ... Here and in other African countries there are many foreigners: French, Italian, German and nobody bothers them. Actually there are many aid officials and retired people who really want to stay here, we do not understand why Senegalese should confront many problems when staying in Europe. What I want to stress is the xenophobic and exclusionary culture developing in Europe. When Europeans come to Senegal they enjoy our hospitality, whereas when Senegalese go to Europe they are treated as "negroes" and encounter racism and exclusion."<sup>21</sup>

We can appreciate a certain degree of ambivalence in the way the receiving context is viewed and talked about in Senegal. On one hand, Europe still represents the 'El Dorado', on the other, a critical view also based on a historical consciousness is held. Migrant themselves, although celebrated as idols and heroes, may be the target of suspicion and critique.

### **The migrant and the non-migrant**

Social duties are very heavy for the returning/visiting migrant, but perhaps even heavier for those who remain. As Katy Gardner has cogently shown for Sylhet in Bangladesh, here too, emigration is "a metaphor for power and advancement" and social division is more and more expressed in terms of access to emigration. Migration becomes the pole around which inequalities are clustered. "Not only has it helped to create them, but so too has it become a metaphor for thinking about them" (Gardner 1995, 16-17). In Senegal it is a question of "dignity" (*jom*) to try to catch up with the ostentatious power of the migrant. Displaying prestige is also linked with rivalries between different branches of a family to gain the blessing of the father. A large family is also a major factor in imposing certain norms and expectations on how migrants use the capital they accumulate abroad. As Mar, a teacher in small town of the Cayor, explains:

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<sup>20</sup> A 46 year old trader, former migrant in northern Italy.

<sup>21</sup> See note 4.

“When he comes back the migrant is fleeced by his large family, or even by the district or the town where everybody is expecting something, and by the need to show off the success with expenses of prestige and afterwards he is obliged to leave again. Now there are less traditional weddings and more where the partners choose each other. This is a good thing, but if they are based only on the pursuit of money this is a bad thing. Like for instance with the migrants who always get the nicest girls. But this is beginning to change now, women understand that life married to a migrant is not fabulous: they send money more and more rarely, only for festivities, and women do not see a lot of them whereas they have to fulfil many obligations with their parents.”<sup>22</sup>

The effects of migrants on the people who stay at home can sometimes be severe. Their occasional ostentation (one can recognize migrants easily in the town by their sports clothes which are known to be particularly expensive) provokes bitterness on the side of other people. Moreover, migrants' spending behaviour and the resulting inflation sometimes results in real difficulties for those who stayed behind, as Mar stresses: *“migrants push up the price of this kind of celebration to a level that is difficult to reach or imitate.”* One example is the baptism of Mar's son, which entailed the total emptying of his and his mother-in-law's pockets. *“Everyone asks for his or her bit.”* Yet, even more disappointingly, some days later through gossip as well as directly, he heard many rude criticisms by relatives or friends who did not find themselves well treated and received. Mar was shattered; he did not know what to say or do about it, he felt he had done more than he could actually afford.

I could feel a profound ambivalence in all these discussions and experiences: toward migration there was a mixture of envy and scorn, toward tradition a blend of nostalgic respect and unconstrained intolerance, toward money a mixture of contempt and unutterable desire. These ambivalent tendencies tell a lot about the everyday difficulties in making sense of a life which is constantly stimulated by the international economy through transnational migratory channels, tempered by profoundly felt Islamic ethics and still rooted in constantly readjusted, although almost unquestionable, traditions.

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<sup>22</sup> A 30 year old teacher

A comparison with a visiting migrant in a similar town of the same region will help to clarify these reflections. Ibrahim is actually an example of a returning migrant who can allow himself to show off. When he was in Italy, he supplemented the money saved in three years of regular work, by doing irregular work to accumulate enough money to feel ready to return.

For him, as for many migrants, a house is one of the first investments. He had already built all the enclosures for cattle breeding and for his future house: *"It will be an Italian model, with two floors, not like ours which are too hot inside."*<sup>23</sup> During my fieldwork, the importance attached to houses of two or even three floors appeared frequently in interviews. Stylish houses are almost becoming a status symbol and even a symbol of identity. Many migrants, especially of the first waves, belonged to the low castes and classes, yet if successful, they came back with enough money to show off and hold economic as well as symbolic power. They use other signs of identity as the following anecdote illustrates: an informant coming back from France introduced himself to the person sitting next to him on the plane who replied: *"My name is Mamadou Lo, and I have built a house with three floors."*<sup>24</sup> He found this striking and he assured me that this is a peculiarly new phenomenon. Houses with two or three floors are a symbol of economic achievements but also indicate that people went to Europe or the USA. In other words, they represent the success of the migratory mission.

Ibrahim was "hunting" many women late at night in the club where his brother intermittently works. When we went to visit the central market he seemed quite tense because he had to be very careful that nobody should be forgotten: everybody must be greeted otherwise unpleasant inconveniences could arise. After having passed through the market he started to complain:

"Everybody wants money, but I have changed in Italy, I want to do things and I cannot distribute everything ... I have brought 80 football T-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibrahim, a 32 year old unskilled migrant who worked in Italy as mason and trader.

<sup>24</sup> Malick, a long term migrant in France.

shirts with me and gave all of them away, but I still find people complaining because they did not receive one.”<sup>25</sup>

On the one hand, he is very happy to have met his family and friends whom he missed so much after four years abroad, but on the other hand he feels choked by all their requests. He parades his sportswear every day and he acts big in the club, yet he fears the envious feelings and the expectations, which others can have. Ibrahim seems to share some of the characteristics of migrants to the *Gulf* coming back to Kerala studied by Osella and Osella (2000). The typical Keralan migrant to the Gulf seems to tread between two extremes: “he must not squander and lose accumulated wealth; he is also under pressure to spend, both for fulfilment of moral obligations and to keep up status”.

If we compare Ibrahim to Mar in Kebemer we may say that the second has less financial means and thus the weight of demands and expectations is less ambivalent and much heavier. For the former, the migrant, the difficulties are also tempered by the potential to demonstrate success and prestige, in other words: power.

### **“Solidarity” and autonomy**

However, the representation of migrants will shift according to social changes and with the transformation of migration itself. Since the devaluation of the CFA franc (1994), emigration affects all social groups, not only the Mouride street peddlers or the intellectuals who had been the object of numerous research studies. Many informants talked about waves of migration, stressing that nowadays, after the big wave of unskilled traders, a new wave of the elite such as ex-officials is emerging, in which even people with more sophisticated jobs (though salaries and wages are not guaranteed) leave because they are influenced by the traders who come back and buy big houses showing off their success. Here an example provided by an informant, a director of a professional training centre:

“I have a friend who had a very good job, a labour inspector who left his job to go to the USA and become a trader. Now he is selling electric

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<sup>25</sup> See note 22.



household appliances, even though he had been trained in a highly regarded training school, but he found his salary was not enough to live well. He saw that people, whose intellectual level was not very high, had migrated to Europe or the USA ... but these people, when they came back on holiday, he saw that they have a lot of money, nice cars etc. This is why he decided to quit and go there. And there the solution was to become a trader. People do not migrate because they are attracted by western ways of life but for economic reasons. People prefer to do small jobs abroad than prestigious ones here ... The best re-integration is the one of traders, the Baol Baol who reinvests in other trading activities. The intellectual finds it rather more difficult, because when he comes back he will find that his degrees are not recognized, this is why they leave again. It is easier for traders because the informal organization works well, here they come back not to settle but to buy or sell and leave again. They always have options open in the sending and receiving countries. The problem of intellectuals is bad because it produces the brain drain."<sup>26</sup>

If one considers the multiplicity of trajectories shaping a disaggregated transnational community (Riccio 2001), the ambivalent nuances informing the social construction as well as the self-representation of migrants become clear. *Islam, Solidarity and Work* is the title of Ottavia Schmidt di Friedberg's monograph on the Mourides in Italy and it summarizes accurately some of the main values that shape Senegalese self-representation (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994). Islam is indeed invoked to legitimize migrants' lifestyle decisions, suggests Perry (1997), drawing on her life histories collected among the Wolof in New York. Although Islamic identity connected to *ndibellante* (help and reciprocity) conflate in the everyday construction of personal and collective identity, as many singers confirm in their migrants' portraits, I argue that the dominant narrative of solidarity and hospitality (*teranga*) coexists with one of autonomy.

The dialectic between personal success and the obligations and opportunities of communitarian belonging is more complex than the simple acclamation of group solidarity. Momadou was talking about the importance of solidarity among Senegalese claiming that they are "*different from other African groups, where episodes of exploitation can be noticed*".<sup>27</sup> Not

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<sup>26</sup> Abdoulaye, director of a training school.

<sup>27</sup> 30 year old migrant in Italy, working as a welder.

long afterwards, he was complaining about his friends always needing loans and never managing to be independent as he is.

More specifically on *teranga* and hospitality Khadim told me the story of someone from Mali coming to Dakar looking for a friend. He did not find him, but telling his story to Khadim's neighbour he managed to be lodged for a while. *"He remained there for two years! ... I tell you this story because it shows two important things: first the hospitality (Teranga) of Senegalese people, second the opportunism that this can stimulate"*.<sup>28</sup> Thus, *Solidarité* is certainly a major theme in Senegalese self-representation, but it is sometimes balanced by a criticism of the exploitation of this moral code and an orientation towards personal success.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the real significance of solidarity networks and a widely shared moral code of reciprocity, when it comes to succeed in trading activities, everyone plays his own game (Riccio 2003). Despite strong communitarian linkages, the Senegalese peddler tends to live and represent himself as an independent trader with his own stock of products chosen according to his own opinions and selling capacities. Even if they share the apartment, the car or the trip to the wholesaler with others, Senegalese sellers do not share the economic risks and successes of their own business. This seems to be partially confirmed by the Senegalese sociologist Malick Ndiaye who contends that the *modou modou* symbolizes the emergence of a modern mentality which considers individual success a social value, and economic competition as an opportunity to produce results (Ndiaye 1998). Paradoxically, this individual and entrepreneurial feature coexists with and is embedded within the more visible communitarian and collectivist code of social solidarity, which has been emphasized by so many master narratives.

## Conclusion

Considering the argument that personal ambitions can be realized only through the group (family, village, brotherhood), I would add that, although certainly dominant, this tendency coexists with an orientation

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<sup>28</sup> Young migrant in Italy working as a trader during the summer.

towards achieving autonomy from the group. The important recognition of inter-dependence (reciprocity, mutual aid, solidarity) overlaps with a personal desire for independence which may sometimes even conflict. Senegalese solidarity and group internal reciprocity do not prevent the development of different individual trajectories and ways of representing oneself as autonomous individual with self-worth.

This is one among other ambivalent nuances characterizing the representation of migrants in Senegal. I wanted to convey a sense of this ambivalence surrounding the discursive mediations in people's understandings of migration. By looking at the most important "audience" for many Senegalese migrants I have shown the complex "symbolic baggage" they bring with them abroad. They are the "heroes" but also the "tricksters", leaving for the "eldorado", but also for an unfair place to live in. These ambivalences are some of the reasons why one needs to disaggregate the so-called Senegalese community (Riccio 2001), which, having an ambivalent audience to respond to and a multi-polarised sending context to leave from, can manifest itself in many different ways.

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