



MIGRANT AND DIASPORA  
CONTRIBUTIONS

# 22.

## Senegalese migratory strategies: adapting to changing socioeconomic conditions in the long term<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This chapter analyses the reasons given by Senegalese migrants for their decisions to emigrate, through personal life histories. It is based on the author's research since 2003 on the migrant networks formed through what he calls "multi-sited villages", social units comprising both the inhabitants of a rural site and the members of their families living in different places. The reasons for leaving are mostly linked to essentially economic contextual factors: financial considerations, the rural exodus, a slump in urban areas and educational aspirations.

### 22.1. Introduction

Senegal is one of West Africa's largest contributors to international migration: according to official statistics, about 533,000 of its citizens have emigrated (UN DESA, 2013) out of a population currently estimated at 16,209,125.<sup>3</sup>

The emigrants' destinations vary widely.<sup>4</sup> In Africa, they have travelled to countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Morocco, Egypt, Cameroon, Gabon, the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (and, to a lesser extent, to Angola). In Europe, for many years until the mid-1980s, most Senegalese settled in France. Later, they started to settle in countries in Southern Europe, in particular Italy and Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal and Germany. Some have moved to the Americas: the United States of America, Canada, Brazil and Argentina. Recently, a fair number have migrated to Asia, notably China. The Arab countries have also long been a destination (Fall, 2016; Dia, 2015b).

Most Senegalese migration is for labour, and for many years it was a male phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> A small proportion is nonetheless qualified, comprising students migrating to Europe and North America, the countries of the Maghreb and the Gulf States, occasionally the countries of the former Soviet Union, and increasingly China (Kane, 2019; Dia, 2015b; Bredeloup, 2014).

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "in the long term" refers to the time markers defined for this text, from the end of the colonial period to the present day.

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<sup>3</sup> See the website of the Senegalese national statistics office, the *Agence nationale de la statistique et de la démographie*. Available at [www.ansd.sn](http://www.ansd.sn) (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>4</sup> According to UN DESA (2013), 49 per cent of Senegalese emigrants have settled in Europe, 47 per cent in Africa, 3 per cent in North America, and 0.6 per cent in other parts of the world.

<sup>5</sup> According to UN DESA (2013), 63 per cent of Senegalese emigrants are men.

Emigration from Senegal has regional (Manjacks from southern Senegal, Soninke and Haalpulaar from the river valley) and religious specificities,<sup>6</sup> and is structured by the brotherhoods: (a) the Mouride Brotherhood, founded by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké; (b) the followers of Sheikh Ibrahima Niass, a branch of the Tijāniyyah order founded by Sheikh Ahmad al-Tijani and present in other Senegalese urban centres; (c) the Omarian disciples of Sheikh Omar Al Foutiyou Tall; and (d) the epigones of Seydi El Hadji Malick Sy in Tivaouane and of Sheikh Mamadu Saidu Ba in Médina Gounass, founded in 1936. Today the phenomenon has spread to all parts of Senegal, including the capital, Dakar (Beauchemin et al., 2013; Kane, 2019).

This chapter explores the reasons given by Senegalese migrants for leaving. It is based on the ethnographic research I have conducted since 2013 among the networks of acquaintances spawned by what I call “multi-sited Senegalese villages”,<sup>7</sup> networks established through migration and spread over several national, continental and international areas, involving several generations of individuals sharing the same area of origin, in this case a rural site (Dia, 2013 ; 2015b). It uses four case studies to show how the socioeconomic situation has driven individuals and areas permanently to reinvent themselves through migration, for want of domestic solutions.

## 22.2. Monetization

The multi-sited villages discussed here have emerged over time in the Senegal River Middle Valley, an area currently divided between the Saint-Louis and Matam Regions. They are populated for the most part by Haalpulaaren, and their economy was long based on agriculture in what is fertile terrain (Kane, 2004). As a result, the region was relatively self-contained. Colonial hegemony (1850–1960) led to a paradigm shift in economic exchanges: recourse was increasingly had to an external currency, possession of which was required due to the changes in the economy (Manchuelle, 2004). It is from that point on that increasingly large waves of young people started leaving the villages to work in the major towns at the time and in other agrarian regions. The idea was to work for a brief period in order to save money and return to the village, using the savings to pay taxes and finance a marriage or the constitution of a herd, to name but the most common events. At the time, rural families were not entirely dependent on migration. They considered it important to honour the obligations imposed by the colonial administration and then to enter the commercial circuit arising from new needs that altered consumption patterns in the broad sense: food, clothing, ceremonial expectations, new ways of building that led to a change in architecture overall, and the technological innovations revolutionizing the domestic space.

Demba is a former migrant, now retired. He was born in 1940 and still lives in the village of his birth. He recounts that he started going to the city to look for work in the 1950s. He is one of seven siblings (four brothers and three sisters). His father was the village chief and in charge of collecting taxes. It was he who asked Demba to go to Dakar to work for four months, giving him money for the journey, and to bring back cash. In the capital, Demba was taken in by an uncle who was in business and who helped him find work as a day labourer in a cement factory. He returned home with what was a considerable sum at the time, enabling him to honour his father’s wishes and to meet other needs: he bought livestock, built a house with a zinc roof – they were popular at the time – and helped two of his brothers buy light agricultural implements, so that they could grow millet and maize, in addition to vegetables, for the family’s food needs.

For four years in a row, Demba travelled back and forth between Dakar and his village of origin in present-day Matam. He emigrated to France in 1961, where he lived until his retirement in the early 2000s, and returned to the village. There, he is looked on as a respected elder providing counsel to all, in particular one of his younger brothers, who is currently the village chief. The role played by Demba in his family in the late 1950s – the wage earner, in particular to pay taxes and other expenses – was not unusual. Many people of his generation from the Middle Valley had the same experience at the same time. It was the context back then – monetization and the obligation to meet

<sup>6</sup> Manjack emigration dates from after the mobilization of the colonies during the First World War: soldiers who had left to fight in France stayed there. Emigration by Soninkes and Haapulaar was more closely related to the need for wage-earning workers during the *Trente Glorieuses* in France. Religious migration, for its part, occurred, in a manner of speaking, concomitant with trade and entrepreneurship.

<sup>7</sup> The multi-sited village encompasses a social scene embodying practices and representations, thus precluding an approach via the concept of transnationalism.

the requirements of the modern administration – that prompted the inhabitants to adapt their economic behaviour and change their mobility habits, which had previously been shaped by their ties to animal husbandry.

## 22.3. Rural exodus

The Senegal River Middle Valley and its villages have long been associated with the land, home to both rain-based and flood plain agriculture. That picture was shattered by the droughts of the 1970s, which destroyed farms and damaged the local economy (Lavigne-Delville, 1991). Livestock, the region's other source of food, suffered collateral damage: the locals tell of daily discoveries of the corpses of cows, bulls, sheep and goats on the tracks and fields, dead of starvation. Several families lost all their possessions and were forced to find other solutions and above all to profoundly change a number of economic habits. The State reacted, adopting new measures for the agriculture sector: mechanization, subsidies and loans. However, the extreme politicization of the process by which farmers were selected meant that those with the least support in the higher echelons of the clientelistic regimes that successively governed Senegal – the majority – found themselves swept aside by this new, biased form of modernizing agriculture (Diop, 2008). In fact, it was during the 1990s that departures for places near – the countries of the subregion – and far – the countries of Europe in particular – picked up pace, ingraining modern migration in the social and economic mores of the region's inhabitants.

Djibel has four sisters and two brothers, and was born in 1953. He is retired, and currently divides his time between France and Senegal. He has an apartment in a public housing unit in a Paris banlieue, two houses on the outskirts of Dakar – one of which he rents out – and a third house in the village of his birth. In the late 1970s, both his parents were old and his sisters were still minors and living at home. With his younger brother, he tried to make a go of farming, but they were unable to hire enough men to work the family field and did not have the capital to buy the agricultural implements needed to increase their yields, at a time when the river failed to flood, leading to water shortages. With the agreement of the members of his family, Djibel sold two sheep from what little remained of the family herd and went to Dakar. He was taken in by a paternal uncle, a cook in a restaurant of the Senegalese administration. He said of this time:

The 1970s were very difficult years. It was hard to find food. People wore the same clothes for several days, even more than a week. We rarely ate more than once a day. It was very hot in our homes, but even hotter outside. It was unbearable; I had to talk to the family. I couldn't take it anymore. I decided to leave. Papa, Maman and the whole family prayed for me. I left.<sup>8</sup>

Djibel worked as a street vendor in Dakar before deciding to leave for France, having realized that his earnings would not allow him to build himself a house, provide for his family back in the village and meet his basic needs in the Senegalese capital in the long run. He arrived in Yvelines, a department near Paris, in 1983. A short time later, he found a job in a car factory, guided and led by members of the multi-sited village who had travelled to France before him. He would continue to provide for his family back in the village; he also took advantage of his stay in France to buy the properties mentioned above. He is very proud of what he has accomplished; while very critical of some aspects of migration, he is overall satisfied with what it has brought him at the end of his working life:

I had a house built in the village, I have two here near Dakar. I helped all my sisters until they got married. I no longer had to support them, because they married people from the village living here in France. Three of them live in the Paris area with their children. The fourth is married to a cousin, a wealthy businessman, who emigrated to Gabon. He takes good care of her, so no worries. If I hadn't left, maybe things wouldn't have turned out this way.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from an interview with Djibel at his home in Pikine, on the outskirts of Dakar, 14 March 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Consequently, it was in reaction to a situation spawned by agricultural crises that Djibel, with his family's agreement, gradually became part of an emigration strategy that took him from Dakar to the Paris region and that led him to take charge of the house on the original site of his multi-situated village, and to make investments that give him financial and material security today as a retiree in France and Senegal.

## 22.4. A slump in urban areas

The multi-sited village also has an urban component, made up of some of the inhabitants who left the original site and settled in Dakar, where they raised families, in the late 1950s. Today, some multi-sited villages from the Senegal River Middle Valley have no fewer than four urbanized generations: the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the original settlers put down roots and reproduced the multi-sited villages as places of meaning (Dia, 2013 and 2015a). The first arrivals settled on the outskirts of Dakar, in particular in Pikine. Over time, some of them became socially mobile, notably thanks to trade and study. In the 1980s, however, Senegal was convulsed by a multifaceted crisis and had to turn to donors, who would impose draconian structural adjustment policies that resulted in the dismissal of civil servants and cuts in the education budget; the newly urbanized families from the multi-sited villages entered a cycle of tension, their difficulties compounded by the arrival of relatives from the original site and by the fact that some of their children were unable to complete their studies, which were financially onerous and for which the public authorities offered no scholarships.

Ramata was born in 1980 in Dakar to parents who had arrived from the Middle Valley in the mid-1970s. She is the oldest of three sisters and three brothers. Her father started out as a street vendor before opening a fabric stall in a large market on the outskirts of Dakar. Her mother stayed at home, raising the children and looking after the household. All the children went to school, an outcome of their father's desire to see his children move up the social ladder. His business allowed him to feed the family, consisting of his wife and children and relatives arriving from the village. Ramata stayed in school until eighth grade, but encountered difficulties in obtaining the diploma that would have enabled her to continue on to secondary school. The two brothers following her in age both dropped out, one after the *baccalauréat*, the other after two unsuccessful years at university. In 1999, Ramata married a cousin in France who was originally from the same village but whom her parents had housed during his years in Dakar as a carpenter. In 2001, she benefited from the family reunification procedure and joined her husband in the Paris *banlieue*. She took advantage of the fact that she could speak some French to take courses, and found a job in a restaurant. Two years later, she brought the brother who had dropped out of university to France; he married a French-born cousin a year later. Later, Ramata and her brother brought over the second brother, who had not started university in Dakar for want of a scholarship, his parents being unable to cover the cost of his studies. Ramata and her two brothers subsequently paid for the two youngest sisters to study at private universities. The sisters found work in Senegal in the private sector, and are now married to managers. The youngest brother successfully completed medical studies financed by Ramata and her brothers, and is currently practicing in a public hospital.

The story of Ramata and her siblings is illustrative of a mobility that is both geographical and social, attributable in part to migration, to active solidarity between brothers and sisters, and to the creation of conditions enabling the youngest among them to complete their studies and find local middle-class jobs. Here again, thanks to migration, the family was able to stave off a decline in the father's activity and scholastic failure. Ultimately, within this multi-sited village, this family is among the most respected, because its members demonstrated great solidarity and a capacity to face up to events that could have had a lasting damaging impact.

## 22.5. Mobility for education

The first schools were opened fairly early in Senegal, as of the nineteenth century, initially by Christian missions, before later following the spread of the colonial administration (Bouche, 1975; Dia, 2018). It was some time, however, before schools covered the entire national territory. This is why, for a long time, they were reserved for the elites, especially in the Senegal River Middle Valley. As the schools showed that they could lead to upward social mobility in some situations, they started to become attractive for people in general, including those farthest from them. When the droughts wreaked havoc on agricultural structures and the inhabitants were driven from the land because they lacked the capital needed to buy agricultural material, some played the education card, if not for all, at least for some of their children.

Seydel was born in the Senegal River Middle Valley in 1985 to parents who were earning a sporadic living from agriculture. He attended classes there until his final year of secondary school. In 2007, a *baccalauréat* in hand, he was oriented towards law school, where he obtained a master's degree in 2012. From 2012 to 2014, he looked for an internship and sat several competitive exams, to no avail, despite having good academic transcripts. A former classmate who had settled in Nice suggested that he try to register at a French university. Seydel arrived in France in 2016 to do a master's, found work as a legal adviser and married a Senegalese woman who had also come to France to study – she had studied marketing and was working for a large corporation. Seydel looks on the change in his life as follows:

It was my friend's idea that saved me. In Senegal, it's very difficult, unless you have a networks Skills don't count. I knocked on every door in Dakar. I didn't give up, but nothing doing... Now I'm happy. I'm earning a living and I'm helping my family back in the village. I'm also helping my younger brother, who's at university. I hope to help him come here as well, because I don't believe in their emerging Senegal. They may be emerging, but not people like us.<sup>10</sup>

Seydel's journey shows that education is one door to professional integration, such openings being few and far between in Senegal. Leaving becomes a solution when the local situation appears to be at an impasse. The result is an exit towards social emancipation and the acquisition of a status that would be much more difficult to acquire locally, in a country riddled with political–business clientelism.

## 22.6. Conclusion

One form of academic constructivism – the product of an overview – tends to focus on the miserable or degrading nature of migration (Lagrange, 2013). Generally speaking, it takes no notice of how the migrants themselves represent their practices, and makes no effort fully to assess the contexts of departure and what they tell us about blood ties, the economy, politics, the social majority and respectability. A long-term relationship, forged in 2003 and consolidated as part of a periodic survey, reveals other ways of looking at migration. The Senegalese from the Middle Valley we met generally consider that they are successful once they are able to meet a number of basic needs and support their next of kin by funding a trip, studies, daily food or health. The cases considered in this chapter also show that it is often the socioeconomic situation that prompts a person to consider emigration as an alternative to what can be termed social death – a life without work, with no income or status – or as a strategy for diversifying revenues, or as a means of gradually working one's way up the ladder, for one's own sake or for the sake of one's relatives, when possible. This is why migration remains, especially in the Senegalese context, an eminently economic affair.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from an interview with Seydel in Dakar, during a vacation there in April 2019.

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