

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS OF A TRADING DIASPORA : THE MOURIDES OF SENEGAL ABROAD

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores questions of identity among Senegalese immigrants who belong to the Islamic brotherhood known as the Mourides. Within the past two decades, these Sufis have abandoned an agricultural way of life in the rural regions of Senegal to enter the world of international trade. Throughout the brotherhood's expansion from the countryside to urban employment and now to international migration, the Mourides have maintained a strong identity and highly centralized organization which has extended to new communities outside Senegal and continues to attract converts, both Senegalese and non-Senegalese. This paper examines how throughout major relocations in place and in occupational focus, the Mourides have retained their specific identity and world view and strong sense of community.

MOURIDE HISTORY

The Mouride brotherhood emerged in post-conquest Senegal. Dispersed groups of Wolof peasants, whose social organization had been disrupted by the

French conquest and years of internal warfare, gathered around Cheikh Amadu Bamba, the founding saint of the brotherhood (Cruise O'Brien 1971).

The French initially viewed this emerging group as a threat to their fragile hegemony and sent Amadu Bamba into exile for many years. Towards 1910, relations eventually improved and the Mourides became actively involved with the French agricultural projects ; their relationship became mutually advantageous. Followers of the Mouride saint (talibes) were organized by Amadu Bamba's associates into work groups. Due to the brotherhood's emphasis on physical labor as a way to salvation and the talibes vow of obedience to their cheikhs, the Mourides were well suited to carry out French agricultural projects. They formed collective work groups, the dara, in which groups of young men dedicated their labor to their cheikhs. They lived and worked together to clear and cultivate vast areas of land in the name of their cheikhs (with sometimes disastrous consequences for the pastoralists who formerly had used the land). After several years each talibe received his own land to farm.

Thanks to improved relations with the French, Mouride leaders were first to receive information about transport routes and other special privileges. The Mourides produced 2/3 of the country's total crops and acquired a political power in the colonial administration (Cruise O'Brien 1971 : 2).

As the historian Mamadou Diouf has pointed out, the Mourides emerged in a particular set of historical circumstances. The existence of a large untapped labor force at the disposal of the Mouride cheikhs converged with the French offer of economic incentives to form a particular fruitful partnership - factors which have been key in shaping Mouride identity and modes of behavior ever since.

After the death of Amadu Bamba, the brotherhood became increasingly bureaucratized. The founders' kinsmen and associates assumed positions of authority within the brotherhood, their descendants inherited their disciples and, it is believed, their baraka. The cheikh is still a source of material as well as spiritual aid. In spiritual affairs, he is a religious broker, acting as the disciple's intermediary with God and in worldly spheres, is again a middleman, negotiating on the talibe's behalf.

The cheikhs maintain contact with their talibes through the urban da'ira

(religious meetings) where Mourides gather and chant the qa'saids. The important cheikhs, the khalifes of various lineages and the khalife-general, have their own da'ira, composed of their talibes, in the immigrant communities. Each da'ira has elected office holders who are in contact with the cheikh's other da'ira and the cheikh's appointed representative transmits messages from Touba. These da'ira are crucial in providing a focus for Mourides abroad and unifying dispersed Mouride communities. The cheikhs are actively involved in Mouride life abroad through the da'ira and make frequent visits to attend da'ira of their immigrant talibes.

The brotherhood today has its capital at Touba, the site of Amadu Bamba's revelation, where Mourides have constructed the largest mosque in sub-Saharan Africa. The highest office in the brotherhood is held by the Khalifa-General who is the eldest surviving son of Amadu Bamba.

Within the last decades, as the land has become less fertile, Mourides have begun to migrate to towns. In their search for a new livelihood, trade has offered them new opportunities. Mourides have become Senegal's primary trading group; they have virtually taken over Sandaga, Dakar's principal market, and have established complex international networks linking major trading cities all over the world.

MOURIDE TRADE

Nowadays, Mourides are involved in trade at all levels. Senior traders travel to New York, Djeddah, Hong Kong to buy wholesale goods, generally electronic and beauty products, which they re-sell, both wholesale and retail, in Senegal and in other countries.

Those with less means work as street peddlers and whether in Dakar, Marseille or New York, they deal in whatever they can sell. For economic and practical reasons - quick turn-over and small size - most Mouride street sellers specialize in Asian-made watches, "fantasy" jewelry, novelty items and American beauty products.

MOURIDE EXPANSION

Migration has been a common theme in Mouride history since the founding of the brotherhood. In the early days of the brotherhood, in their search for new land, they settled territory in the hinterlands of Senegal. Nowadays their most recent travels have led them to Europe, America, the Middle East and beyond, greatly extending the brotherhood's frontiers. Throughout these moves, the Mourides have maintained strong internal ties and a highly centralized organization which is now active in new communities outside Senegal and which continues to attract converts, both Senegalese and non-Senegalese. In the next section, I will examine how throughout major relocations in place and in occupational focus, the brotherhood has maintained its shape. First, I will look at the horizontal ties linking the talibes (followers) to each other.

HORIZONTAL TIES

Mourides tend to migrate in groups, they live in households with other Mourides and gradually create new communities, in apartment houses in the Bronx and neighborhoods in Dakar.

These communities, wherever they are, are characterized by a striking homogeneity. Groups of young men live together. A large number are unmarried or, if they are, their wives remain at home. Their lives are organized communally, whether they live in welfare hotels or share rooms in Dakar. They gather together to eat and frequently they have devised work strategies which provide employment for the group.

Their lives are organized around work and their affiliation to the brotherhood. Though these migrants are no longer under the cheikhs' direct authority, parallels with life on the da'ira are inescapable. Groups of young men living together, out off from the larger society in communities where work has an extra dimension - it is not just a way for immigrants to support themselves and their families; it also has a religious aspect, given that hard work improves one's chances of going to Paradise.

Such communities form the base for the establishment of international networks. These communities are linked, one to the other, by the complex trading activities of their members and by their centralized form of organization which revolves around their cheikhs.

Immigrants to Dakar from the village of Khabsu, about 50 km. from Touba, provide an example of an on-going group migration which has been growing steadily for twenty years. Due to a well-organized network which provides work and lodging for Khabsu young men who come to town, these migrants have created a channel for migration¹. In Senegal's present economic crisis, money sent home by these immigrants has, in large part, kept their village alive.

The first Khabsu migrants came to Dakar in the early 1970's. Until recently they all lived and worked together in a house in central Dakar. By 1990, their numbers had grown too large and five members of the original group moved to an area of drained swampland in the Medina section of Dakar. In this new site, there are now 16 of them working in the "atelier", a shack they built themselves from cardboard boxes and wooden slats.

One of the earliest arrivals from Khabsu and the founder and acknowledged chief of the group is Balla, also known as "Robot" because, they say, he is never tired. Now in his 40's, he came to Dakar alone in 1972. At first, he lived with an aunt who was his principal contact in town. She found him work with a Lebanese merchant, and later with an uncle. After a time, when the uncle did not seem interested in helping Balla improve his position, the aunt gave him permission to strike out on his own.

Balla taught himself basic tailoring and, at the same time, discovered the second-hand clothes market. In his wanderings about the town, he met people at

(1) These immigrants are from the Baol region of Senegal and are believed to be particularly astute and hard working. One Sandaga merchant described how they took over Sandaga market. He says, "In the 1960's a Senegalese could not even imagine selling in the market. People were mystified by commerce and the Lebanese and Moroccans controlled the trade. Gradually, those closest to Cheikh Amadu Bamba, from the Baol region, came to Dakar. They began by selling anything - old bottles, one shoe, empty rice sacks. Then two years later they are selling vegetables; then they get another "Baol-Baol" to take over for them and they begin to travel. Three years later people are saying, "That block of flats rise over there, it belongs to the Baol-Baol who used to collect old bottles. Now he's rich but he's still wearing that old boubou".

the port who wanted to buy new clothes but could not afford the prices. Putting his skills and this important information to use, Balla created a niche in Dakar's informal sector by repairing and re-selling second-hand clothes.

This occupation has become the main source of revenue for immigrants from his village. Ever since, the young men of Khebsu have been coming to Dakar to take up this line of work. They each develop their special set of clients and territory; some sell on the streets, others go to the port, while some have clients who are civil servants and they sell to them in their offices.

They call themselves "Dakar-Bongo", after a military camp in Dakar because the new recruits work so hard and there is no space to sit down so that many are standing at attention all day long.

The 16 now working in this "atelier" present a common profile. Most are between the ages of 20-30 with a couple of older members. One is a "forgeron" but the others all list their occupation as farmers. With the exception of Balla, their wives and children have remained in the village. They still consider the village as their home, they all return to harvest the family's vegetable garden.

The migration from the village seems to take place in stages. Perhaps because of Senegal's worsening economic situation, the trajectory of older migrants differs from that of younger ones. The more senior men, those who are over 35, describe that initially they left home for a few months to look for work in Dakar. After saving some money they returned home, only to set out again, generally within a year. For some time, they may continue to alternate residences between the village and the town before finally spending the majority of time working in Dakar. Younger men now in Dakar claim they will not go back to the village except for the harvest and for visits.

The village however seems to remain, at least in their minds, their home. Though none of them has yet married an outsider (not from his village), one could do so, they say, as long as she is not the first wife. One described his family's reaction if the first wife was not from Khebsu. "They would say, «A stranger came today», that's how they would talk about my wife".

Another index of their continued attachment to the village is that their

recently-revived da'ira is still seen as a branch of the village da'ira. They meet monthly and send their contributions to the cheikhs in Touba under the name of the Khabsu da'ira. Their concerns continue to revolve around the village - when the president's mother in the village died, their collections went to her funeral.

A strong sense of community and mutual assistance pervades the group. High value is placed on helping others. The senior members teach newcomers the trade. They accompany them to the old clothes market to buy items. To help them earn some money, they give them repaired clothes to re-sell. If the newcomer can sell the article for more than the price set by his mentor, he can keep the profit. Eventually, new arrivals go to the market alone and are taught to repair clothes. Once they have learned all the steps of the trade, they work independently but provide help for others when it is needed.

In order to become more profitable, they all agree that they need to send someone to New York to buy second-hand clothes wholesale for them. Now they are too much at the mercy of the wholesalers who are too expensive. Given this avenue, they could achieve their dream of creating a cooperative where each individual would receive a salary.

The household provides a crucial base of security for village immigrants. The multiple ties - place of origin, friendship, kinship and Mouridism - create a closely-knit structure. Though everyone works for himself, the communal life-style ensures that each has enough to eat and a place to sleep.

Households such as these tend to group together, forming small settlements, which take over small blocks in Dakar as well as apartment buildings in the Bronx. The internal solidarity within the household, a cushion against the outside world, is reinforced by the presence of Mouride neighbors who gradually gather around them. These groupings of Mouride households create larger Mouride communities which, even in New York, acquire their own identity within the larger society. They provide a strong source of security for immigrants and give them a solid base in confrontation with the external society.

In the Khabsu case, the local Mouride coalition has come to their rescue more than once. When their Tidjane landlord wanted to evict them because of their nightly

qa'said singing, neighbors gave them an adjacent plot and threatened to take the landlord to court if he continued to complain, an effective threat because it is well known that a Mouride millionaire uses his influence with the local magistrate to help Mourides win their court cases.

While immigrants from Khabsu are not yet linked to the international market and still need to "place" one of their members abroad, migrants from the town of Darou Mousty have established households in Dakar, New York, Marseille and Rome. The Darou Mousty household in New York was one of the centers for my research on Mourides in the US and it was one of the key sites of the network linking all immigrant members of the village. I could observe how all the households composed of immigrants from Darou Mousty were linked together. Each group sends out video cassettes of important events which circulate among their dispersed communities and frequent visitors, in particular, the cheikhs from Darou Mousty who seem to travel constantly, keep their talibes informed and in close touch with home. Such close, strong ties are, of course, a crucial element in their trading activities (3).

The Darou Mousty immigrant household in Dakar is a stepping-off point for international migration. At present, it is composed of seven men who live together in a rented room, however the inhabitants are highly mobile. When a newcomer from the village arrives, he is given a place in this central house and an inhabitant with more experience in the town moves to one of the villages' "annexes", usually, a smaller room in another house. The "mother" house seems to be a sort of training center for newcomers and is still the central place to gather during the day, even though one may sleep elsewhere at night.

They refer to their "elders", the first men from the village who came to Dakar to work as street sellers in the 1970's, who are now mostly abroad. Due to the present difficulty in acquiring visas and the economic crisis, the present group says they will just keep working until God gets them out of Senegal, but they admit that their chances are pretty remote.

Members of this household sell "fantasy" jewelry which they obtain from a wholesaler, also from Darou Mousty. They set out together each day with their fold-up display cases and the older, more successful ones also sell women's lingerie. Like the Khabsu group, they work independently but pool their resources to buy

wholesale goods. When someone is in need, they help him out and also provide generous assistance to help newcomers get started.

One member described his introduction to Dakar by immigrants from his home town. He arrived here 10 years ago and though he came alone he had the address of someone who lived near the lorry station who led him to the house of village kin and friends. He found his best friend there, now in Italy, who gave him some jewelry to sell and with the days earnings Ibrahims bought merchandise from the wholesalers and began selling on his own.

Some have "retired" back to the village where they live on the earnings accumulated abroad, though since no new income is being earned, they will probably emerge from retirement soon. While this group generally refers to their elders with respect, their voices take on a certain edge when they talk of the effect these rich returning migrants had on local bride prices. The price has quadrupled since the return of those who earned cash abroad.

The members of the household have not established a da'ira here. They say the old men in the village want them to keep the da'ira at home and they add it is not really necessary to create another one in Dakar. If they want to give money to Serigne Touba, the traders' daira at Sandaga market meets every month and money is collected every Wednesday.

THE CHEIKH AND THE TALIBES

The key structural link between cheikh and talibe which was so crucial to the origins of the brotherhood when the cheikhs organized their followers into agricultural work groups has lost none of its strength with urbanization. As Fatton has pointed out during the colonial period Mouride success was not simply due to the talibes' hard work but also to the cheikhs' successful negotiations between the peasant farmers and the colonial authorities (Fatton 1987 :98). Today, the cheikhs continue to provide organizational direction to the community and have demonstrated a remarkable resiliency with the extension of the Mouride community to new sites.

Mouride leaders have taken an organizational role in promoting Mouride trading activities. Mourides credit the cheikhs and "Mouride millionnaires" with the

expansion of Sandaga market well beyond limits set by urban planners and zoning officials. This expansion came about when, according to Mouride stories, some traders went to see Serigne Falilou, a former Khalifa-General to ask for his help. He gave them a handful of sand from Touba and said to sprinkle it around the market, wherever they wanted to carry out their trade. The traders, added more sand and scattered it all over town and the innumerable Mouride kiosks, repair shops and stores which have sprung up in Dakar are taken as evidence of Serigne Falilou's powers and Mourides acumen. Another explanation of how Mourides came to dominate commercial activities in Dakar is that the two notable Mouride millionaires made a vow to encircle Mouride businesses around Dakar. One of them donated a large section of Dakar's principal market to Mouride traders who had no where to sell their goods.

The cheikhs also help their talibes by giving them capital to buy goods wholesale; they intervene to help traders' acquire the increasingly rare visas for the US and provide them with introductions to influential Mourides abroad. The immigrants from Darou Mousty reported that their cheikhs often provided funds to enable groups of 4-5 talibes to start up as street peddlers.

Every Mouride trader has a story of how the cheikhs and other patrons helped him get started. The example of the Fall family provides ample illustration of how one cheikh shapes the career of an important talibe who, in turn, gives a helping hand to another and so on, until the trickle-down effect is manifested in the appearance of the youngest bana-bana (street-seller) hawking American lipstick on the corner.

The five Fall brothers own several stores in Dakar and specialize in imported cosmetics and electronic goods from Europe, Asia and America. The brothers have particularly close ties with the former Khalifa-General, Serigne Abdou Lahatte. Some worked on his daara, one brother is named after him and they claim he has provided important material assistance - introductions to businessmen, credit and loans.

In turn, they have developed an elaborate network of relations based on patron - client ties with the numerous individuals who cluster around them. While there are a few salaried salesmen in their stores, the rest are linked to them by a chain of services rendered and favors returned.

One of the brothers said that since they have been helped by Cheikh Amadu Bamba, they have a responsibility to help others. As he said, "Il faut généraliser" which, translated into Sandaga terms, means you have to share the good fortune. One example of their "generalizing" the wealth is illustrated by their relationship with a young street peddler.

Fifteen-year old Hassan has been selling cosmetics on the street since he was eleven. He worked on a cheikh's dara who continues to give him clothes and money for the Mouride feast days. The Fall family launched him in business by giving him a supply of cosmetics to sell, Hassan then repaid the family for the goods and kept the profits to re-invest the following week. He still gets merchandise from them on credit; the Falls feed him and he can call on them for any emergencies. As in the example of the second-hand clothes sellers, the elders provide an essential boost in becoming independent. While initially, this assistance may take the form of a cash investment, the essential part of the help is credit and confidence.

MOURIDE CHEIKHS ABROAD

Copans has noted that early Mouride migration took place for many different reasons among sociologically varied groups but the brotherhood, nonetheless, succeeded in providing a channel for these diverse individuals (1980 :102). Present-day Mouride immigrants have also come from varied backgrounds and for different reasons, but due to strategies implemented in Touba, many find social and economic security.

The organizational role of the cheikhs in the brotherhood is especially well illustrated by their activities in the New York Mouride community. The circumstances they found gave them an opportunity to exercise their skills which they had not been able to utilize fully as immigrants in France.

As Amin (1974) has pointed out, people develop forms of organization and then take them elsewhere where they can flourish. In New York, the relative freedom from external control was reminiscent of the early days of the brotherhood under the colonial government. The Mourides found a situation where Mouride traders could exercise fully their entrepreneurial skills and energy. Unlike France where the

government exercises rigorous control over employment, housing, and the organization of immigrant associations and where immigrants are subject to frequent identity checks, New York offered unexpected freedom.

Also within the Mouride community, in France, a greater number of restraints inhibit Mouride enterprise. The community is of long-date, senior members of the community survey and control younger members. Senior cheikhs have established their da'ira, leaving little room for young dynamic cheikhs to initiate their own projects.

New York, by contrast, at least in the mid 1980's, offered an unprecedented freedom to early Mouride immigrants, Senegalese entered the country with little difficulty since American immigration authorities were then more concerned with restricting other sorts of migrants. There are no identity checks which target specifically black men in New York, no dormitories for immigrant workers and there is greater opportunity for clandestine employment. Moreover, New York's wholesale districts offer enormous scope for Mouride trading strategies. A new enterprising spirit emerged in the brotherhood which is demonstrated by their increased trading activities. The low prices and variety of goods available in New York played an important role in Mourides taking over Sandaga market and the addition of these products has given a boost to Mouride traders in Europe as well.

Just as import as the lack of real controls is the Senegalese image of America; in contrast to France, it is not overlaid with memories of a colonial past. The popular image of America as the land of freedom and opportunity chimes perfectly with Senegalese perceptions.

Within the community, young, dynamic cheikhs could stake their claims to new territory and undertake ambitious projects for the Mouride community. In New York, for example, a great-grandson of Cheikh Amadu Bamba, organized a da'ira and founded a school to bring Mouridism to the American Muslim community. The two groups which created projects to provide work for Mouride immigrants become part of a larger Muslim trading community in New York which I have described at length elsewhere.

The cheikhs, in their role as "courtiers politiques" have also made attempts to

act as middlemen with the host countries of their immigrant talibes (Coulon, cited in Faton 1987 :99). On one occasion, a young cheikh paid an official visit to Mayor Koch to ask for better treatment of Mouride street peddlers and to propose a joint business venture. The mayor's response that Mourides should pay some taxes has echoes of earlier Mouride encounters with state government. More to the point, the cheikhs' intermediary role continues to the present and contributes to their talibes' ability to work.

As leaders of the community, the cheikhs are actively involved in the community. They provide a focus for their followers' spiritual lives and aid them considerably in their occupations. For this highly mobile and dispersed community, the existence of a strong center is an important factor in the brotherhood's continuity and growth.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the brotherhoods, transition from the countryside to urban employment and now to international migration, the Mourides have maintained a strong identity and highly centralized organization which has been extended to new communities outside Senegal and continues to attract converts, both Senegalese and non-Senegalese.

In this transition to urban life and international migration, Mourides have emphasized certain themes and appropriated aspects of their history to form a continuity with the present. For example, their present migrations are compared with Amadu Bamba's periods of exile, a parallel which provides a frame for their experience as immigrants. This identification with the founding saint is an empowering statement for an immigrant to make.

Forms of social relations also support affiliation to the brotherhood. Relations among talibes are characterized by cooperation and assistance, and (ideally) a diffuse warmth encompassing all fellow Mourides. These "horizontal" ties with peers are criss-crossed by "vertical" ties with spiritual guides, the Mouride cheikhs, and other influential individuals. While these patron client ties are a particularly pervasive

idiom in Senegal, Mouridism, in particular, seems to configure relations according to that model ².

The resiliency and strength of this social fabric is reinforced by the "multi-stranded" nature of links uniting the individuals. Not only do they have a common faith, they are also linked by kinship, friendship and proximity (Mithcell 1974 :283). These fluid horizontal ties, combined with permanent vertical ones, create a tightly woven, yet supple social fabric (a trampoline covering Mouride portions of the globe) which is particularly well-suited to a highly mobile population. It provides a secure source of identity and also permits fluid, easily negotiated social relations among itinerant traders. Wherever they are likely to go, this structure is a source of support.

This paper attempts to show that although the Mourides have undergone profound changes on one level since their days as peanut cultivators, on another level, little has changed. The first Mourides were largely landless peasants who became part of the cheikh's work force; today, a large proportion spend most of their working lives as immigrants.

Though today's Mourides have greater independence from their cheikhs, the forms of social organization which developed at that time still exist : close-knit communities composed of men who must leave Touba in order to find work; cheikhs who provide some occupational direction; and ideology of solidarity against a somewhat hostile outside world - whether it is colonial French, Senegalese authorities, or immigrants' host countries. While the outside world may have changed greatly, Mourides, through a combination of a highly centralized, conservative social organization and very flexible behavior, continue to be Mourides.

As Abner Cohen (1971) has noted, a study of a present-day trading diaspora can help understand how the African trading communities of the past were organized. It will also clarify how a community lives outside its traditional boundaries, with no fixed residential or occupational focus and continues to maintain its identity. In today's world, where economic crisis forces many people to live outside their home countries, the Mouride example provides some original solutions in maintaining a sense of community and identity.

(2) It should be noted, however, that the categories are not clear-cut since the cheikhs bestow material help and rich successful Mourides, such as the "millionaires from Louga", are perceived to possess substantial baraka (for how else could they have succeeded). Another precaution in this diagrammatic view is that classifications of horizontal or vertical are relative - one man's patron is another's client.

Sous la direction de
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La Ville à guichets fermés ?

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