

**London School of Economics and Political Science**

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FAMILY,  
LIVELIHOODS AND WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIVES  
IN DAKAR, SENEGAL**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology  
of the London School of Economics  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
London, June 2013

*In loving memory of*  
**Mark Andrew Koller**  
*19<sup>th</sup> January 1984 – 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2010*

## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores competing meanings of being a woman in Dakar, Senegal. Above all, it is concerned with the relationship between livelihoods – how ordinary Dakarois make ends meet – and women’s gendered identities. It explores the full spectrum of Dakar women’s economic activities, all the while keeping the definition of what, precisely, qualifies as ‘economic’ or as ‘work’ as open as possible. Distancing itself from approaches that privilege the sexual aspects of gender, this thesis asks what kinds of gendered *economic* identities emerge in the context of the various roles and relationships that constitute women’s everyday lives. What do women *do* that enables people in this society to get by and to secure their day-to-day needs? How are these activities experienced, and what kind of values are they imbued with?

Based on three years’ fieldwork in low-income neighbourhoods across the Dakar region, the thesis advances an ethnographic analysis of women’s roles as wives and girlfriends, sisters and sisters-in-law, daughters, mothers and grandmothers, and members of extended family and community networks. It explores women’s activities as dependents, consumers, providers and informal-sector workers. Together, the chapters shed light on the complexities and contradictions involved in being a woman in this particular part of the world. Building on the ethnographic findings, this thesis argues that it is possible to identify two distinct, even competing conceptions of being a woman in Dakar. One of these can be framed in terms of ‘materialism’, the other around the emic concept of ‘mothering work’. Dakar women, this thesis suggests, draw on both in order to create, defend and challenge the meaning and the value of their everyday experiences.

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## Acknowledgements

This PhD project was generously supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship, Award PTA-031-2006-00137, for which I am very grateful.

I would like to thank my supervisors at the LSE, Rita Astuti and Matthew Engelke, for their guidance, patience, understanding and kindness during the journey that has culminated in this thesis. Rita's unparalleled attention to detail and coherence of argument has been invaluable, and Matthew has always encouraged me to push the boundaries of my research and think about broader theoretical issues. This thesis would not have been possible without their enduring intellectual and moral support.

My thanks also go out to all the other staff at the LSE Department of Anthropology who have assisted with and contributed to this project in various ways, especially Yan Hinrichsen. Particular thanks are due to Fenella Cannell and Mathijs Pelkmans, who provided constructive feedback on earlier chapter drafts. At St John's College, Cambridge, I thank Helen Watson, who first helped me find my way in anthropology, and Jack Goody, who provided me with an unforgettable introduction to the history and anthropology of West Africa. Additionally, I would like to thank Gudrun Lachenmann, who thoughtfully commented on sections of this thesis, and Zac Fall, for his inspirational Wolof classes in London.

I am immensely grateful for the many friendships I have forged whilst at the LSE. I have learned a lot from our anthropological discussions, but above all, I deeply appreciate the empathy and humour that you brought to our shared journey. Giulia Liberatore in particular has been a wonderful friend; she has engaged with this thesis more than anyone and has read numerous versions of my work, but has also contributed to its creation in less tangible ways. I feel lucky to have had her by my side these past few years.

Outside the world of anthropology, my London, Cambridge, Dakar and Germany friends have helped sustain me throughout the course of this project. They are too numerous to mention individually, but I would especially like to thank Krystyna Sonnenberg for being my lifeline in Dakar, and Laia Blanch and Rana Begum, with whom I have been able to share the ups and downs of being a 'working' mother in London. Liz Yarrow has been involved in this project since its inception, and I owe her a lifetime of gratitude, not only for her lasting friendship, but also for inspiring and

challenging me to think critically about feminism, anthropology and life in general.

My family has also been invaluable in the making of this thesis. I would like to thank my parents, Ildi Bellér-Hann and Chris Hann, for always taking me with them on their travels, and instilling in me a desire to learn more about people and the world. As I grew older, they encouraged and enabled me to pursue this desire further, and have supported me throughout this project in numerous ways – financially, intellectually, and most of all emotionally. I am grateful to my brother, Mark Hann, for his refreshing irreverence as well as his meticulous copy editing skills; no doubt both will prove indispensable to his own impending PhD experience. Thanks are also due to Reg, Katherine and Alexander Hann, who have, in recent years, welcomed us into their homes in South Wales and Bristol. Finally, I would like to express my immeasurable gratitude and love to Mark Mohammed ‘Muha’ Fall and Cheikh Ahmeth Tidian Fall, for making our house a home, in Dakar and in London, and making my life what it is.

My greatest debt, of course, is owed to all the people I met in Dakar, Senegal, who allowed me into their houses and lives with an openness that exceeded all my expectations. My commitment to preserving your anonymity prevents me from mentioning any of you by name. I am deeply grateful for everything you did for me when I was in the field, and I know I can never repay your generosity and kindness. I apologise and take full responsibility for any errors, infelicities or omissions this thesis may contain.

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## A Note on Transcription and Wolof Pronunciation

The Wolof transcription used in this thesis follows the official Wolof orthography using the Latin alphabet that became standardised during the 1970s by Senegalese linguists, as per the *Dictionnaire wolof-français et français-wolof* by Jean-Léopold Diouf (2003). However, I have chosen to retain the French spelling for proper nouns, as Wolof names of people and places tend to be transcribed in this manner locally, in newspapers, for example, or in people's identity cards. Apart from proper nouns, most Wolof words are rarely written down in practice.

The Wolof letters whose pronunciation differs from English, with approximate phonetic equivalents, are as follows:

### Vowels

<b>a</b>	absorb
<b>à</b>	cat
<b>e</b>	get
<b>é</b>	say
<b>ë</b>	bird
<b>i</b>	meet
<b>o</b>	hot
<b>ó</b>	or
<b>u</b>	as in the French 'ou'

A doubling of the vowel indicates that it should be pronounced for a little longer than the normal (short) vowel.

### Consonants

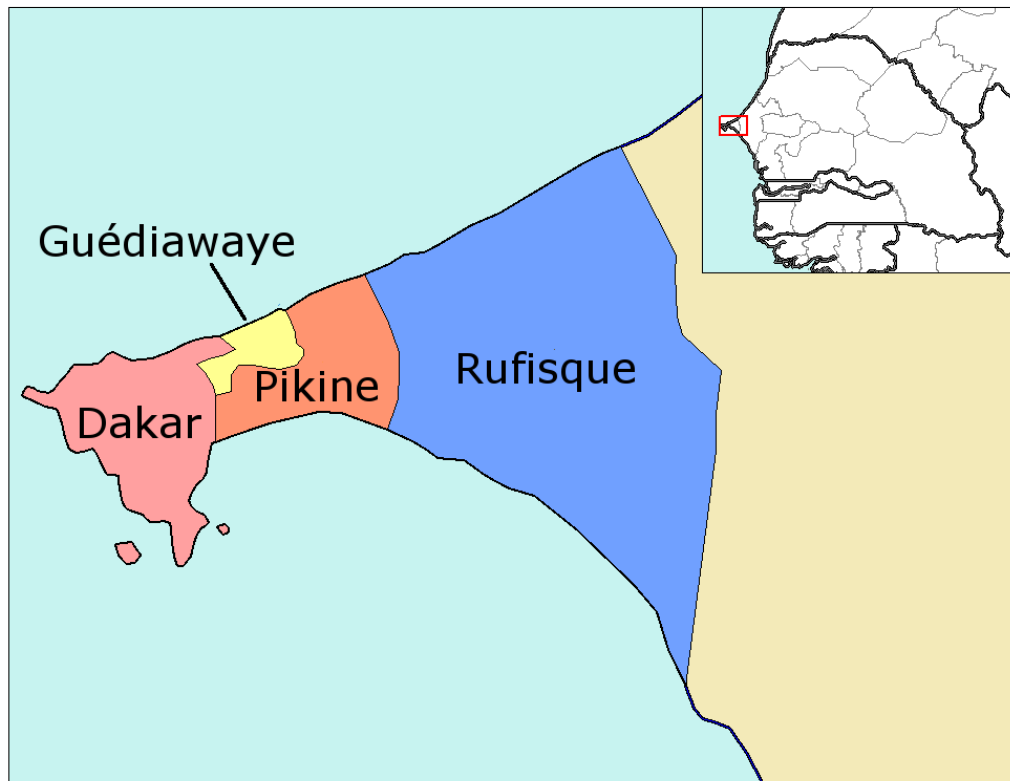
<b>c</b>	church, but closer to the French 'tiens'
<b>j</b>	job, but closer to the French 'dieu'
<b>ñ</b>	onion
<b>x</b>	between the English 'h' and 'k'
<b>q</b>	a more guttural version of the Wolof 'x'
<b>ŋ</b>	a more nasalised 'ng' (see below)

A doubling of the consonant denotes phonetic strength. The double consonants **mb**, **mp**, **nd**, **ng**, **nj** and **nq** are prenasalised.

Where I have used direct quotes, I supply the original, or parts of the original, only if I judge it to be significant, by which I mean that access to the original might add to a Wolof/French speaker's understanding of the argument.

## Maps

**Map A: The *région* ('region', 'state') of Dakar and its four *départements* ('counties'): Dakar, Guédiawaye, Pikine and Rufisque. Source: Wikimedia Commons.<sup>1</sup>**

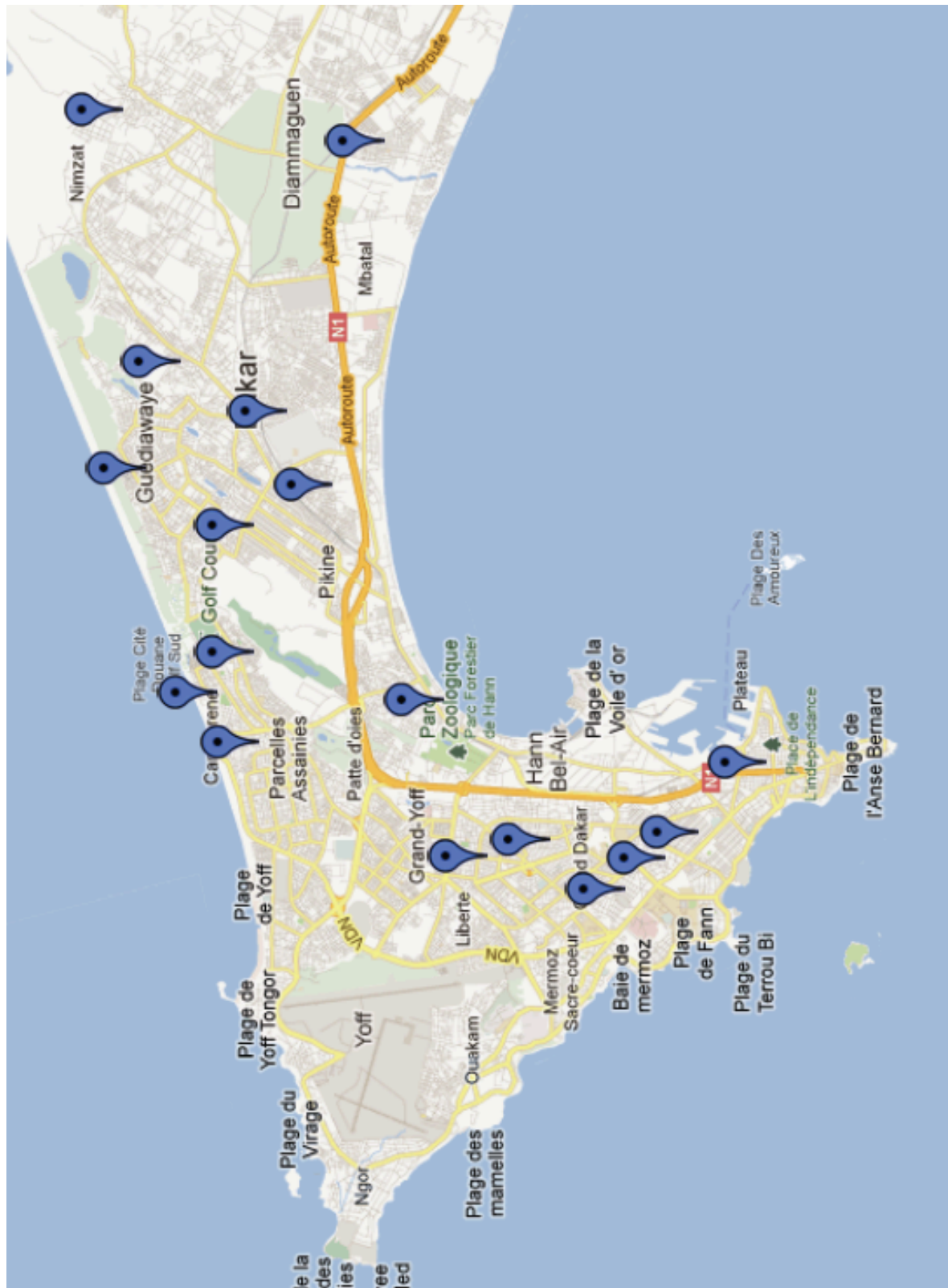


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<sup>1</sup> [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dakar\\_departments\\_big\\_print.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dakar_departments_big_print.png) (accessed on 27.06.2013)

[illegible]

**Map C: The *région* of Dakar, with pins indicating the approximate locations of my fieldsites, with the exception of Bargny, which is off the map. Copyright Google Maps 2013.**



### Introduction: Where Women Work in Dakar, Senegal

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*The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate, the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on.*

— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

#### 1.1 *Ca waañ wa ak ca waar wa: women's work and men's work*

One Saturday about six months into my fieldwork, I went to stay with my friend Amsatou and her family for a couple of days in Yeumbeul, a densely populated suburb a good twenty kilometres away from central Dakar. I had met Amsatou several months previously when she had been living with her husband's extended family a few streets away from my flat in Parcelles Assainies, another suburb that was not quite so distant. In the early evenings, I would sometimes pass her on my way home, sitting behind a low table outside one of the little shops on the busy side street. The first time I purchased the little sugary doughnuts she was selling, I was with a friend who did all the talking for me. After that, I stopped by her table regularly. Sometimes I had to wait for her to finish frying a fresh batch, and if she wasn't already talking to someone, she asked me questions about where I was from and what I was doing in Senegal. Our conversations were limited by my crude and inadequate Wolof, but somehow I muddled through, and one day, Amsatou invited me back to her house where I was introduced to her husband's aunt and cousins. She and her husband, who was a car mechanic, shared a room with their young children and Amsatou's teenage sister, who helped her with the housework and the care of the kids.

A few months after our first meeting, Amsatou told me that she was moving further out into the suburbs. There had been some sort of problem with the aunt and they had to vacate their room. She had found accommodation close to her maternal grandmother's house in Yeumbeul, and asked me if I would visit her there one weekend. I saved her husband's mobile number in my phone, and in due course we agreed upon a date for the visit. Several weeks later, I made the hour-long trip to Yeumbeul, notorious for its bad roads, especially during the rainy season when floodwaters make parts of it inaccessible to wheeled transport.

Amsatou had managed to get hold of two rooms in the same compound. The courtyard around which the rooms were constructed was not tiled and consisted of deep, fine sand. There was no running water or electricity, but at a monthly rate of CFA 10,000 per room, this was about as cheap as rented accommodation in late 2000s Dakar could get.<sup>2</sup> That night, Amsatou insisted I sleep next to her on the bed, and so her husband joined the children and the younger sister on the foam mattresses that were laid out on the floor of the second room. When we awoke the following morning, I could tell that Amsatou had things to sort out. After we had finished breakfast she began pulling out clothes and housewares from behind a curtain that concealed a large corner of the room, laying them out on the floor and separating them into piles as she put her possessions and living space in order. She pushed some items under the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room, and tied up the clothes that were soiled into a tight bundle to be washed later. I stepped outside into the quiet courtyard, and a few seconds later she followed me out and fetched me a plastic chair that sank deep into the sand

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<sup>2</sup> The West African CFA (*Communauté Financière d'Afrique*) franc that is used in Senegal as well as seven other Francophone West African states is pegged to the euro at a fixed exchange rate: 1 euro = 655.957 CFA. During my time in the field, CFA 1000 was worth, on average, £1.30, although my pounds were worth most in November 2007 when I started fieldwork, when CFA 1000 was equal to £1. By the end of 2008, the pound had plummeted in value and CFA 1000 amounted to £1.40. When I lived in Dakar, a very basic meal (e.g. a piece of bread and butter for breakfast) cost around CFA 100. A more substantial but unelaborate rice-based meal, which was almost always eaten communally, averaged out to a cost of CFA 200-300 per adult.

as I sat down obligingly. The children must have gone over to Amsatou's grandmother's house, and the other tenants were *célibataires*, young men who lived alone in Dakar – the term, in this context, referring to their residential rather than marital status – and they were visiting their families in the *régions* for the weekend. And so I sat on my chair undisturbed for almost half an hour, relishing the stillness.

Amsatou had disappeared, but suddenly there she was again, accompanied by Nguirane, her husband, and Cheikhou, her older brother, who lived in the grandmother's house with his wife and children. Amsatou was carrying a second chair, which she placed next to mine. The two men sat down, Cheikhou on the chair, and Nguirane on the concrete steps that led up to the room. I knew why they were here: Amsatou had already informed me that Cheikhou, who was ex-military and had attended high school, would be able to teach me many things [*dina la mëna jàngal lu bare*]. She was conscious of the fact that I had come to Senegal to learn something and, not surprisingly given my limited Wolof skills, believed that a French speaker would be better placed than her to help me achieve this goal.

And so I found myself explaining clumsily and circuitously that I was researching, amongst other things, women's work and men's work [*liggéeyu jigéen ak liggéeyu góor*]. Amsatou had vanished again, only to return shortly afterwards with a small box of black tea, a large bag of sugar and some fresh mint. She ducked inside her room and brought out the gas canister, tray, lightweight *baraada* teapot and two small tea glasses, which she placed at her brother's feet. Cheikhou and Nguirane patiently heard me out, and a lively discussion ensued as we prepared the *àttaaya* tea. Cheikhou took the lead and asked me whether I knew the difference between '*ca waar wa*' and '*ca waañ wa*'. Neither phrase sounded familiar – in fact, I initially believed them to be single words and jotted them down as such. Cheikhou and Nguirane, amused by my ignorance, raised the stakes by repeating the phrases several times, shaking their heads and asking me whether I was *quite sure* that I hadn't understood. Finally, having delayed the punch line

and heightened my expectations, Nguirane emphatically pronounced that '*ca waar wa, c'est l'homme au travail*' – *ca waar wa* is man at work. '*Waar* means 'work' [*waar mooy 'liggéey*'], I was told, and then the penny dropped and the Wolof phrases made sense. 'And *waañ* means 'kitchen'', I concluded, feeling a tinge of disappointment that this was what we had been building up to. Women's work is 'in the kitchen' [*ca waañ wa*]; you can also say 'in the house' [*ca kër ga*], but 'for men it's work only' [*góor, waar rekk*].

This introductory vignette is partly intended to give the reader unfamiliar with the ethnographic context a preliminary glimpse into life as lived for many low-income Dakarois, who, as I discuss later, constituted the majority of my informants. The brief and partial account of one woman's trajectory prefigures many (though not all) of the central topics to be explored in this thesis: small-scale earnings, assistance with housework and childcare, tensions with in-laws, fluctuating residential patterns and the continuing significance of natal kin following a woman's marriage. However, I have chosen to describe this somewhat contrived and in many ways unsatisfactory exchange with Amsatou's brother and husband because it succinctly captures a dominant local ideology about the way in which work is gendered in Dakar. My opening remarks about my interest in women's work and men's work elicited the response that men's work is *work*, whereas women's work is everything that is done inside the house, and especially in the kitchen. I had been expecting a more nuanced account from Cheikhou and Nguirane because they knew that I had come to know Amsatou as one of her best customers. I was therefore surprised that they did not immediately mention the fact that Amsatou, like so many other women in Dakar, was conspicuously earning money on a daily basis. Their words, however, reflected normative attitudes and beliefs about work that were expressed to me by countless women and men over the course of my fieldwork: women's 'work' takes place within the house, and it is clearly distinguishable from real work - men's work - which is directed towards fulfilling financial responsibilities.

Later on in the discussion, Cheikhou and Nguirane concurred with my observation that many of the women I was meeting were earning money in some way or other. They attributed this to external factors – the difficult times that the country was in [*dëkk bi mooy metti*] – and declared that ideally, men should be financially responsible for everything [*góor moo wara def lépp*]. They were pleased and amused when I communicated my belief that historically, both women and men had performed agricultural work in the fields. This much they already knew from their grandparents' anecdotes about how things used to be. As far as they were concerned, however, agricultural labour was a communal activity and qualitatively different from the employment opportunities available in contemporary urban Senegal. 'They all used to do it together – men, women and children', they explained, intimating that this had little bearing on the current state of affairs.

The fact that women's work is distinguished from work *per se* should not come as a surprise: as Olivia Harris reminds us, 'work as an abstract category arises in particular kinds of economy' (2007:143).<sup>3</sup> Anthropology's concern, she continues, is to understand 'how people in their particular lived worlds experience and value the expenditure of energy in pursuit of a livelihood' (*ibid.*). In this thesis, I attempt to document the various ways in which women in Dakar secure the livelihoods of themselves and others. I knew from the outset that I would need to push beyond normative accounts of what constitutes 'work' and how it is gendered, which, taken alone, do not appear to have much specificity to them. As across much of the world, this is a context in which women's 'work' is generally presumed to take place inside the house, their activities sharply distinguished from the role of the male breadwinner. For women, the social primacy of marriage and motherhood, and the activities associated with these roles, is seemingly unquestionable (Dial 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> It does not follow, however, that the existence of this abstract category of 'work' is unique to capitalist societies. Spittler (2009), for example, argues convincingly against the dichotomy of 'embedded' versus 'non-embedded' work, suggesting that it cannot simply be mapped onto the 'before' and 'after' of the great transformation.

At the same time, women's income-generating activities are a firmly established and widely accepted feature of everyday life in Dakar. Yet I knew from the start that it would be crucial not to limit my research focus to women's remunerated work. As I shall argue in the following sections, existing anthropological research on Senegalese women tends to focus *either* on women's income-generating work outside the house, understood as 'economic' activity, *or* on those aspects of women's lives that can be cast in terms of 'sexuality', kinship or community relations. Where the two spheres of enquiry overlap, the general consensus is that urban Senegalese women struggle to reconcile 'being a good woman' with their economic activities, although it may be possible to identify factors (e.g. income, education, marital status) that make it more acceptable for certain women to earn money (see Adjamagbo et al. 2004).

The problem with these approaches is that, taken together, they implicitly give credence to at least some aspects of the dominant gender ideology without fully and rigorously problematizing actual gender relations. The analytic distinction between (economic) work and (non-economic) family relations, between the 'productive' and 'reproductive' spheres of life, is tacitly upheld. The point of departure for this thesis is an explicit rejection of this division between economic and sexual/reproductive roles, not only theoretically, but also ethnographically. It seeks to shed light on the way in which gender relations and urban Senegalese livelihoods are interconnected in order to provide a comprehensive, ethnographically informed understanding of what 'being a woman' means in Dakar. Its overarching concern is precisely to investigate *how* gender – understood as both the intangible ideas and concrete practices that give meaning to bodily difference – operates across the *full spectrum* of women's participation in this society's livelihood strategies. Thus, it aims to address the broad themes of family and other social relationships on the one hand, and livelihoods, or how people meet their material needs, on the other.

In the following section, I set out in more detail the theoretical considerations that motivate and frame this dissertation (1.2). I explain why I believe it is important to reflect on how gendered identities can be understood in economic terms, developing my argument with reference to the Senegalese context in particular, but also in relation to broader perspectives on women in Africa, as well as the anthropology of women, gender and work more generally. In Section 1.3, I introduce Dakar as the setting for my study, situating my research not only historically, but also within the context of the current political economy of Dakar, and of Senegal as a whole. This discussion builds towards a consideration of women's socioeconomic positions in contemporary Dakar. I evaluate contrasting perspectives on whether the 'crisis' – the economic and political developments of the past three decades – has rendered Senegalese women increasingly 'empowered' or 'vulnerable' (1.4). I then examine scholarly perspectives on women and Islam in the Senegalese context, and clarify the extent to which this thesis incorporates religion as one of its frames of reference (1.5). In the subsequent section, I describe and reflect upon how I went about gathering my data and the methodological and ethical challenges that I had to negotiate along the way (1.6). Finally, in Section 1.7, I briefly summarise the subject matter of each of the ethnographic thesis chapters.

## **1.2    *Anthropology at the crossroads of gender and economic life***

Over the past half a century, anthropological scholarship on urban Senegalese women has undergone a gradual shift in thematic focus. Broadly speaking, the earlier research carried out from the 1960s to the 1980s resulted in in-depth analyses of urban women's economic undertakings (Le Cour Grandmaison 1969, 1972, Lecarme-Frassy 2000, Hall-Arber 1988, Heath 1988:45-78). The subjects of these studies were women who had established themselves as traders, mostly within the fish or market garden produce sectors, and their income-generating activities served as the

primary ethnographic lens through which women's circumstances and experiences were analysed. The studies described how traders' activities enabled them to meet their basic material needs, and occasionally even attain a degree of financial security, but they also drew attention to the structural, practical and ideological challenges that these women had to overcome in their economic endeavours. These ethnographic discussions were complemented by contributions from sociologists and historians who also examined women's remunerated work in both the colonial and postcolonial eras (Barthel 1975, Brooks 1976, Bonnardel 1988). Later, during the 1990s, there emerged a slightly different approach to women's participation in economic life, as scholars from a range of disciplines drew attention to the significance of women's financial activities, particularly their saving strategies, in the context of their informal networks and rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) (Mottin-Sylla 1987, Ndione 1994, Sarr 1998, Guérin 2003, 2006, Creevey 2004, Abdoul 2005, 2007).

These developments within the regional scholarship can be identified as part of a broader trend within the Africanist anthropology of this era that concentrated on examining women's roles in agricultural work and in trade (e.g. Boserup 2007, J. Goody 1976, Etienne and Leacock 1980, Obbo 1980). These approaches can be situated within the intellectual climate of the 1970s and 1980s, when a motley crew of Marxists, feminists and anthropologists were arguing that the division between the public sphere of economic production and the private sphere of biological reproduction emerged within a particular social, historical and intellectual context and was not applicable cross-culturally. From this perspective, the fact that non-Western women participated in both agricultural and remunerated work – work which, in the context of a capitalist division of labour, is generally perceived to consist of male-dominated, 'productive' activities – made their participation in these activities a highly appropriate subject of research during this period.

Since the 1990s, the emphasis on urban Senegalese women's economic activities has been eclipsed by a flourishing body of literature that privileges a focus on the way in which Senegalese women actively and creatively use their bodies in order to construct and perform gender identities, and, more specifically, 'sexuality'.<sup>4</sup> The analytic purchase of this concept owes much to Michel Foucault (1978), who historicised the way in which Western societies' understandings of difference and identity became formulated within discourses about 'sexuality', and those who drew on his ideas, notably Judith Butler (1988, 1990). This conception of sexuality-as-discourse, rather than sexuality as something that is located within the material body, was congruous with anthropological concerns about how sexual identities could be expressed in culturally specific ways, observable in the form of 'bodily practices, object preference and self-presentation' (Clark 2003:xii). Over the past couple of decades, studies of African women have increasingly examined women as gendered subjects through the prisms of bodies, sexuality, reproduction and agency. Here too, we see a focus on the sexual, eroticised aspects of gender, the performance of which can enable women to subvert and resist dominant gender ideologies (e.g. Arnfred 2004a, Grosz-Ngate and Kokole 1997, Hodgson and McCurdy 2001, Cornwall 2005). Although discussions of women's economic activities feature in some of these recent definitive edited volumes on African women, they appear to be of peripheral importance.

In the literature on Senegal, the topics that have received the most attention are the sensual and sexual aspects of practices such as dancing and dressing up, although there have also been a number of studies that examine Senegalese women's sexuality from a public health perspective (e.g. Poleykett 2012, van Eerdewijk 2007, Dellenborg 2004, Renaud 1997). Since the mid 2000s, there has been a surge of interest in women's dance, both as formal performance and informal practice, which emphasises the eroticism of women's careful accessorising and suggestive bodily movements

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<sup>4</sup> The other subject that has received increasing attention in recent years is Senegalese women and Islam. I shall discuss the implications of this research in Section 1.5.

(Castaldi 2006, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, 2007, Morales-Libove 2005, Gittens 2008, Sieveking 2006, Heath 1994). The literature on dance events, which highlights the importance of 'fashion, sexually explicit dancing and elaborate manipulation of the body' (Neveu Kringelbach 2005:276) overlaps considerably with diverse intellectual explorations of Senegalese women's cultivations of beauty and their attention to dress, appearance and self-presentation (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Mustafa 2006, 1997, Moya 2011, McNee 2000, Nyamnjoh 2005, Biaya 2000, Heath 1992, Rabine 2002, Andrewes 2005, Scheld 2003). In both cases, the focus is not so much on sexual relations *per se*, but rather on what is perceived to be women's 'erotic power outside the limits of sexual practice' (Mustafa 2006:29). Clothing, accessories and fabric are perceived to possess potent erotic qualities. Writing about fabric, Beth Buggenhagen explains how her informants gave 'tactile and sensual descriptions of their forms of wealth' (2012a:95), whilst Hudita Nura Mustafa explicitly insists upon 'the power of fabric and fragrance in the erotic repertoire of the Senegalese woman' (Mustafa 2006:21).

The economic dimension has not been entirely dispensed with, however, and the research on urban *sabar* dances in particular continues to pay close attention to the social and material significance of women's savings associations – understandably, perhaps, for the meetings of women's saving associations often double as dance events (Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, Castaldi 2006). Overall, however, the theoretical focus is on how the movement, adornment, manipulation and presentation of women's bodies can serve as a powerful means for negotiating, challenging, and sometimes redefining what it means to be a woman in urban Senegal. These approaches, which conceptualise Senegalese women as sensual, sexual and agentive gendered subjects, have yielded hugely valuable insights, especially in that they place women's ability to actively and creatively shape their life-worlds and sometimes even challenge prevailing gender norms and sexual moralities squarely at the centre of their analyses. Indeed, when I initially decided that I wanted to carry out research with

Senegalese women, I too was drawn to the *sabar* dances, which I had had the occasion to witness during my first short visit to Senegal in 2004. Along with so many other visitors, I was enthralled by Senegalese women's confidence and beauty, the way they spoke, the way they moved and the way they looked. This first impression was perhaps all the more powerful because it jarred with my preconceived, nebulous ideas about what African women and Muslim women were like. To me, dance epitomised this particular conception of Senegalese womanhood, in much the same way as it did for Castaldi, who writes that '[w]omen's stunning kinetic engagement through dancing materially and symbolically proclaims their power to mobilise and assert themselves' (2006:121). I only reformulated my research interests when I became aware that there were a number of researchers who were in the process of conducting, or had recently completed, ethnographic fieldwork on Senegalese dance.

From an *economic* perspective, however, the overall picture that emerges from much of this research is concerning. On the one hand, there is a widely held supposition that men have been particularly affected by the economic crisis that has been underway since the 1970s, which has threatened their economic standing as providers (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Perry 2005, Melly 2011, Mustafa 1997).<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, women are often acknowledged to be taking on more financial responsibility, made possible by their informal economic activities and institutionalised savings mechanisms (Neveu Kringelbach 2005, 2007, Bop 1996, S. Kane 2011, Castaldi 2006, Mustafa 1997, Moya 2011, Lambert 1999). Some authors, notably Beth Buggenhagen (2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001) and Ismaël Moya (2011) have emphasised that women's ceremonial activities, especially their expenditures on clothing and cash and gift prestations, should be taken seriously as displays of Senegalese women's wealth and worth.

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<sup>5</sup> Dakar women's socioeconomic position today will be discussed in more depth in Section 1.4.

Despite all this, however, the ethnographic emphasis within the recent body of work on ceremonies, dress, dance, and appearance and self-presentation in the most general sense, sees women's economic activities essentially reduced to the practice of consumption. The economic theme that is elaborated on most is women's materialistic behaviour and conspicuous consumption; it is clothing, accessories and commitment to 'leisure' activities such as ceremonies and dance events that contain 'the capacity to index women's prosperity and value' (Buggenhagen 2012a:95). The overarching narrative is that Senegalese women, who have a 'long and rich tradition of cultivation of self in relation to others through ceremonial exchange, expressive culture and the cult of personal beauty' (Mustafa 2006:23) have been able to create new meanings and fashion new identities for themselves through their excessive outlays on entertainment, especially ceremonies, dress, and appearance in general. This has enabled them to 'reassemble bodies and selves that are jeopardised or threatened by patriarchy and crisis' (*ibid.*).

The potential pitfalls of this standpoint, which resonates to an extent with popular local discourses that criticise women's unrestrained spending, shall be explored in more depth in Chapter Two. For the time being, however, I would like to stress that the new direction taken by the anthropology of women in Senegal, with its focus on women's bodies, agency and creativity in the realms of dance, entertainment, dress, and consumption, is problematic to the extent that, collectively, it glosses over the multiplicity of ways in which women contribute to securing the basic needs of themselves and others on a day-to-day basis. Significantly, it risks implicitly confirming the validity of dominant local dichotomies that posit men as economic *actors* who work (though they may not be particularly successful), and women as dependent, albeit powerful, *consumers* with important roles as mothers, wives, sisters and aunts, who figure prominently in family, neighbourhood, community and ceremonial life.

Consumption is, of course, an elementary economic activity, and in any case, the boundary between 'consumption' and other spheres of economic life such as 'social reproduction' or even 'production' is not clearly defined and absolute, but indistinct and highly variable across time, space and culture. Henrietta Moore (1994:101), for example, argues that production and reproduction alone are insufficient for understanding the relationship between households and broader economic and social processes, and calls instead for increased attention to what she terms the 'mechanisms of redistribution' within and between households. These are, of course, closely intertwined in practice with activities that have, in recent years, progressively become referred to as 'consumption'. David Graeber is highly critical of this new 'anthropology of consumption', asking why it is that 'we now call certain kinds of behaviour "consumption" rather than something else' (2011a:491), and warning of the dangers of seeing social life as divided up according to the categories of political economy. It is certainly not my intention to *dismiss* the sphere of women's 'consumption' as it has been treated by previous Senegal scholars as a legitimate subject of inquiry; indeed, such 'consumption' is a theme that bridges several of the chapters in this thesis (Chapters Two, Three and Six). I suggest, however, that a careful examination of the full range of women's contributions to Dakarois livelihoods may go some way towards redressing the balance between 'consumption' and other economic practices, and may also lead to a re-evaluation of the nature of Senegalese women's 'consumption' itself.

Since the 1980s, feminist theory has progressively uprooted 'gender' from biology - its physical foundation in bodies - and has come to the consensus that it can most usefully be understood in terms of bodily 'performance' (Butler 1990, Morris 1995). According to these theories, gender is defined as 'the effect of discourse, and sex as the effect of gender' (Morris 1995:567), but the focus is on the 'productive force rather than the meaning of discourse' (*ibid.*). Central to these developments has been a reconceptualization of the body, which, on this account, does not merely symbolise and reproduce dominant ideologies, but also offers opportunities

for resisting and changing existing systems of meaning and power. Building on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insight that 'the body is our general medium for having a world' (1962:146, quoted in Reischer and Koo 2004:307) and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of the *habitus*, the body has increasingly come to be recognised as an elementary feature of the acting subject with an inherent capacity for social action (e.g. Comaroff 1985, Csordas 1990, Haraway 1991, Lock 1993, Reischer and Koo 2004). Sexuality, or rather *discourses* about sexuality that become observable and analysable in the context of certain kinds of bodily performance, are easily identifiable ways in which boundaries between women and men are constructed and maintained (Moore 2012:2).

It has, however, been suggested that Western scholars have perhaps overemphasised these sexual aspects of gender performance (Clark 2003, Moore 2011:105, 2012:14-15, Roseman 2002:24-25). The cause of this theoretical bias can partly be traced to the crucial role of queer studies and queer theory in precipitating the 'performative' turn in gender analysis. However, it is also worth bearing in mind that sex and sexuality have always been of particular interest to anthropologists because 'the sexual behaviour of other people has been widely understood to be a point of irreconcilable difference between 'us' and 'them'' (Kulick 1995:4). Anthropological investigations of sexuality have often had colonial and racist connotations, whereby the anthropologist was presumed to be civilized at the expense of sexuality, and the native sexual at the expense of civilization (Kulick 1995, Mercer and Julien 1988:107-108, Arnfred 2004b:7). As I have noted, in more recent years, anthropological depictions of sexuality have focused on the scope for human agency afforded by alternative paradigms of sexual and gendered behaviour. It is important to remember, however, that these studies have also served to enrich Western creative possibilities by broadening the horizons of Euro-American intellectual thought and practice (Kulick 1995:4). Thus, a cynical appraisal of the broad patterns and tendencies within the Africanist and Senegal-specific literature on women and gender, from the earlier attention to economic production to the recent

shift towards sexuality and agency, might concur with Mudimbe's (1988) pronouncement that the Africa of anthropologists was 'invented' by the researchers, who could choose to emphasise either its difference or its similarity to the West at their own convenience (Fabian 2006).

Is there any way to circumvent or overcome this kind of poststructuralist critique, with its seemingly inescapable verdicts on the viability of our discipline? Johannes Fabian suggests that such critique is, in fact, 'not radical enough because it tend[s] to dismiss what it should ... confront ... for better or worse, our ethnographic, anthropological ways of producing knowledge about Africa [are] practices that [are] real even though they may [be] guided by ideology and directed at an invented Africa.' (2006:144). In this spirit, I would like my own work to build on, rather than dismiss, existing studies of Senegalese women and African women, as well as recent anthropological perspectives on women and gender more generally. I have suggested that we should be suspicious of the recent intellectual trends that privilege sexuality and the agentive body, inasmuch as they are partly shaped by an anthropological theorising that is a product of a very specific cultural and historical context, rather than being rooted purely in ethnography.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean, however, that I dispute the validity of the ethnographic knowledge presented in these studies.

Above all, I believe that there is much to be gained from performance-theoretical approaches to gender that not only explore how gender is socially and culturally constructed, but also recognise that the gendering of individuals' identities is a productive force that is acted out at the level of the body. It is crucial to recognise that agency is involved in even the most basic actions, that it should not be confined to the definitions advanced by those with progressive political agendas and that it may be possible to

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<sup>6</sup> Viveiros de Castro (2009) makes a similar point regarding 'relatedness', suggesting that the concept stems at least in part from historical and cultural transformations specific to the West. These include the perceived destabilization of nature by the advent of novel reproductive and biomedical technologies, but also contemporary social theory's increasing preoccupation with creativity, agency and 'self-fashioning' (see also Astuti 2009:230). In relation to this point, see also Chapter Five, 5.4.

identify alternative 'feminisms' that diverge significantly from mainstream Western feminist principles (Mahmood 2005, Mikell 1997), whilst acknowledging that agency is never boundless but always limited. I suggest that an appreciation of the agentic capacity of the body, in addition to its symbolic role in the construction of gender identities, can be productively deployed in order to understand how women and men may perform roles that are gendered without necessarily being sexualised (Clark 2003). Perhaps, as Moore has recently suggested, 'there are modes of self-making that do not make sexuality foundational to identity' (2011:105). Perhaps it is time 'to break a little with the ruses and seductive power of sexuality' (*ibid.*).

I have argued that, in the Senegalese context at least, what is at present unaccounted for, or only partially accounted for, is the way in which women perform gender roles economically. Sharon Roseman, a non-Africanist writing in the 2000s, observes that '[m]uch research has been done recently on women's bodies under the headings of sexuality and reproduction', yet there has been virtually no discussion of 'how labouring bodies become gendered' (2002:24-25). This is essentially the point made by Gracia Clark in her introduction to her 2003 edited volume on gender and economic life. In a way, this state of affairs is surprising given that, during the 1970s and 1980s, feminist anthropological theory was committed to breaking down the theoretical boundaries between the 'productive' and 'reproductive' spheres (e.g. Rubin 1975, Edholm, Harris and Young 1977, Benería 1979, Harris and Young 1981). Perhaps the most crucial development to emerge as a result of this scholarship was the revelation that existing theories about gender and economic roles had incorrectly assumed the theoretical validity and cross-cultural applicability of a Euro-American folk model that posited that reproduction was essentially sexual, and that families existed by virtue of their reproductive activities (Yanagisako 1979, Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako 1982, Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Since the 1970s, there has been a marked increase in ethnographic studies that have implemented these theoretical insights. Some have examined the connections between 'productive' work outside the house and women's roles within the family

(Sudarkasa 1973, Sanjek 1982, Westwood 1984, Benería and Roldán 1987, Lamphere 1987, Zavella 1987, Babb 1989, Collins and Gimenez 1990, Stichter and Parpart 1990, White 1994, Clark 1994, Wilkinson-Weber 1999, Berman 2003, Lee 2004), whereas others emphasised how women's 'reproductive' roles – generally at the level of the household – should be viewed as economic activity (E. Goody 1982, Sharma 1986, di Leonardo 1987, Hansen 1997). Despite this important progress, I suggest that it has proved remarkably difficult to disentangle our ethnography from anthropology's deep-rooted assumptions about gender, family life, and economic life. This has become especially problematic in the wake of novel approaches to the analysis of gender that have privileged a focus on sexuality. At least in the case of Senegal, a focus on those activities that are deemed to be 'sexual', on practices that establish women as subjects of desire (though not necessarily male sexual desire), has yielded a very partial account of urban Senegalese women's contributions to everyday economic life.

In light of these considerations, and in the vein of these ethnographic contributions, I expect my work to challenge widespread assumptions, particularly influential in mainstream economics, which often result in the underestimation of women's economic contributions (Folbre 1988, Waring 1988, G. Hart 1992, see also Chapter Four, 4.4). For a while now, there have been calls to 'engender' the sub-discipline of economic anthropology, as well as mainstream economic theory and practice more generally (Clark 2003, Babb 1990). Arguably, current perspectives on African women's economic contributions make this a particularly pressing concern in the African context (Imam 1997). The aim of this thesis is to contribute to this debate by carefully examining the full spectrum of Dakar women's economic activities, all the while keeping the definition of what, precisely, qualifies as 'economic' or as 'work' as open as possible.

Anthropologists of work directly exploring Marxist ideas have focused on the relationship between the value of commodities, the labour time required

to produce them and the social inequalities that result from the capitalist mode of production (e.g. Wallman 1979). In a slightly different vein, Marshall Sahlins (1972) isolated work-time from other activities in order to make the argument that hunter-gatherers were the 'original affluent society', able to meet their material needs with lower caloric expenditure than workers in industrial societies. However, as Sahlins himself conceded, Marxist approaches were ill-equipped to account for cross-cultural variation in the organisation of economic life, including work practices, which were analysed in isolation from the complex networks of social relations within which they were embedded (Harris 2007:154-156). It is perhaps more instructive to invoke Max Weber (1992), who illustrated so elegantly the way in which capitalist accumulation was suffused with the values of rationality, frugality and self-discipline and the way in which it shaped, or rather was shaped by, a Puritanical religious identity. His analysis of work resonates better with current anthropological perspectives that imbue tangible, materialist concerns about the ways in which people secure livelihoods with theoretical questions about the meaning, value and lived experience of everyday survival (Graeber 2001, Harris 2007).

It should by now be obvious that this thesis seeks to develop an understanding of economic life as 'embedded', paying close attention to local understandings of economic concepts and practices. This does not mean, however, that these local concepts will be unquestioningly reproduced at the level of analysis. For example, I consciously choose *not* to focus exclusively on women who are perceived locally to 'work', a group that includes public and private sector employees, domestic workers and established traders. Although one chapter of this thesis examines paid work, much of it is devoted to examining women's experiences as wives, mothers and members of the community. Is it possible to identify gendered *economic* identities in the context of these different roles and relationships that constitute women's everyday lives? What do women *do* that enables people in this society to get by and to secure their day-to-day needs? How are these activities experienced, and what kind of values are they imbued with?

### **1.3     *Dakar, Senegal as a setting for the research***

In this section, I introduce the city of Dakar as the setting for my research, contextualising my research interests with reference to the history and political economy of the Senegambia region. I pay particular attention to the role of women and gender relations throughout, and gradually zoom in to focus specifically on the situation of Dakar and its suburbs. I start by giving a rough sketch of the precolonial period and then proceed to examine the developments that came about following colonisation by the French in 1890. This is followed by an overview of the early years of Independence under the leadership of Senghor, which gives way to a discussion of the onset of economic crisis and ensuing social unrest from the late 1970s onwards.

Precolonial Senegambia was home to numerous kingdoms, the earliest of which can be traced back to the Empire of Ghana, an extensive empire that originated as early as the fourth century A.D. in what is now western Mali and south-eastern Mauritania. The Tukulóor kingdoms of north-eastern Senegal emerged as part of this empire and became an important nexus in trans-Saharan trade networks. They were also the points of entry of Islam into the Senegambia sub-region. Islamisation began as early as the eleventh century, but the majority of the peoples of Senegambia did not convert until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The central coastal areas of the present nation were populated by groups of Wolof and Séeréer peoples who also had complex, centralised political systems. By the end of the sixteenth century, there were four Wolof and two Séeréer kingdoms in these central zones (Forde and Kaberry 1967, Creevey 1996). Further to the north lived the pastoralist Pël, who, along with the sedentary Tukulóor, were Fula-speakers. The Wolof, Séeréer and Tukulóor, along with the Màndenɗ (Mandinka) and Saraxolle (Soninke) who lived further inland, had highly stratified social systems based on patron-clientage, traditionally composed of endogamous, hereditary occupational groups, sometimes

referred to as 'castes', that also included a slave group (Diop 1981, Irvine 1974, Forde and Kaberry 1967, Barry 1998, Dilley 2004). A notable exception were the Jola of the tropical Casamance region in Southern Senegal who had a more egalitarian system (Pélissier 1966). Although the rulers of the kingdoms were men, amongst the Wolof and the Séerér, aristocratic women, notably the king's mother, maternal sisters and wives, could also hold positions of political authority (Creevey 1996:272).

Historically, the organisation of economic life in the Senegambia sub-region differed significantly across and within its various ethnic groups, and it goes without saying that 'traditional' work patterns have always, in fact, been subject to changes over time. As was the case across much of West Africa, the Senegambian economy of the precolonial period revolved around subsistence agriculture – the cultivation of various cereal crops, notably millet, rice and sorghum – and trade, with members of some of the occupational groups fulfilling more specialised roles. In their valuable synopsis of the available historical sources, Callaway and Creevey (1994:119-123) write that land, the main resource, tended to be allocated to male household heads via the heads of patrilineages, and that all family members were expected to contribute their labour to the subsistence farm. However, women were sometimes compensated for their work on these plots, either in money or in kind. Alternatively, they had usufruct rights to separate plots of land that they cultivated independently, keeping the proceeds of their labour and engaging in trade. The patrilocal, bilineal Wolof and Séerer groups of the central and coastal areas in particular had this form of division of labour (see also Diop 1981, 1985).

The extent to which women were traditionally involved in the cultivation of the staple food crops has been debated; Venema (1986:84-88, quoted in Callaway and Creevey 1994:122), for example, suggests that Wolof women only began producing food crops for subsistence following the decline in local demand for their traditional produce, primarily cloth made of the cotton they cultivated, as a consequence of European competition. What

seems clear, however, is that communal obligations as well as individual entitlements were gendered, with women assuming responsibility for clothing and men for lodging (Callaway and Creevey 1994:121), and all the evidence suggests that the keeping of separate, as opposed to communal or household budgets, had been the established practice across the region for quite some time, and predated widespread conversion to Islam (Callaway and Creevey 1994, Gastellu 1981).<sup>7</sup>

The coastal regions, particularly the Cap Vert peninsula of present-day Dakar, the Petit-Côte coastline to its south, and the northern settlement of St Louis, became the locus of intense dealings between Africans and Europeans in the context of the transatlantic slave trade from the sixteenth century onwards (Curtin 1975, Barry 1998). The Wolof kingdoms in particular became embroiled within the projects of the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French, and it has been argued that the structures of dependence frequently associated with the colonial period originated, in fact, in the trading relationships that emerged centuries earlier between Europeans and Wolof aristocrats (Barry 1979). When the French trade in slaves started to decline towards the end of the eighteenth century, the European power's economic interests shifted towards the cultivation of the groundnut, or peanut, which had been introduced to the region from Latin America via the Portuguese, and was adaptable to the semiarid Sahelian climate of northern and central Senegambia.

The latter part of the nineteenth century was characterised by a complex power struggle involving the French authorities, the Wolof kingdoms and charismatic Muslim leaders. The French colonial conquest gained momentum as a result of conflicts between the various Wolof factions, some of which had already been weakened by their entanglements with the slave trade. In addition, the monarchy faced resistance from the interior of the region, where dynamic religious followings, or brotherhoods (*tarixa*), began

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<sup>7</sup> Callaway and Creevey connect the importance of keeping separate budgets to the widespread presence of polygynous households (1994:93); the link with polygyny is borne out by my own findings in Chapter Three.

to emerge around the figures of charismatic Sufi scholars, or *marabouts* (Searing 2002). The rise of one particular group in the Wolof hinterlands, the Murid brotherhood founded by Cheikh Amadou Bamba Mbacké, was intimately connected to the establishment of groundnuts as the main crop for world market export. The vast majority of groundnuts were cultivated on holdings controlled by the brotherhood, which flourished as the previous political structures started to crumble. It absorbed increasing numbers of adherents, offering an alternative livelihood to former slaves and others marginalised by the monarchic system. The relationship between the Murid brotherhood and the colonial authorities is far from straightforward: although Cheikh Amadou Bamba Mbacké became a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and was repeatedly sent into exile by the colonial regime, the brotherhood structure facilitated and benefitted substantially from the rise of the groundnut economy, and continues to do so to this day.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the French had consolidated their influence over vast swathes of West Africa, which they oversaw via their foothold in Senegal. In 1890, the key coastal trading settlements of Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée and St Louis were classified as *communes* and became directly administered by France, whilst the rest of the region was turned into a protectorate. St Louis, then later Dakar, was designated the capital of French West Africa. Within Senegal, the chief purpose of the colonial administration was to intensify the production of groundnuts, and the monocrop commodity colony generated employment for a substantial French settler population. However, France's colonial ideology of assimilation led to some African men, namely those who were initially resident in the four *communes*, being granted citizenship, thereby acquiring the right to vote. The *originaires*, as they became known, could also become direct representatives of the colonial administration, and in 1914, one of them, Blaise Diagne, became the first black African to be elected to the

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<sup>8</sup> There is a wealth of literature on the complex relationship between the Murids, the French and the groundnut economy; see for example Pélissier 1966, Behrman 1970, D. Cruise O'Brien 1971, 1975, Copans 1980, Coulon 1981, Gellar 1982, Villalón 1995 and Robinson 2000.

French Chamber of Deputies. Thus, there emerged in Dakar a Francophone African elite that had a significant role within the colonial political structure. Women, however, were largely denied access to these positions of influence. They were sidelined by both the colonial administration as well as the burgeoning expatriate business community, whilst some men were able to take up jobs in government and industry (Creevey 1996). At the point of Independence, there were no women employed by the government of Senegal, with the exception of foreigners who worked as secretaries or technical assistants (Callaway and Creevey 1994:111).

Groundnut cash-cropping fundamentally altered the precolonial production system described above and played a pivotal role in the development of a gendered political economy in Senegal. As across much of Africa, male farmers became incorporated into the cash-cropping system before women, leading to a re-allocation of resources and labour, although in Senegal, this largely took place within the emerging brotherhood structures (Creevey 1996). It has been widely argued that such transformations tended to increase inequalities between women and men, with the latter benefiting disproportionately from new economic opportunities (e.g. Boserup 2007, Etienne and Leacock 1980, Bay 1982, Amadiume 1987, Carney and Watts 1991). The credit, tools and training required for groundnut cultivation were made available to men rather than women, who nonetheless continued to have control over plots of land. As more land became set aside for men's groundnut cultivation, and some men began to migrate to Dakar in search of new employment opportunities, women's agricultural labour became increasingly central to family subsistence (Creevey 1996). At the same time, however, the overall decrease in the production of staple cereal crops meant that parts of the population became progressively reliant on food imports, especially rice. The importing of basic foodstuffs suited the economic agenda of the metropole, which benefited from the relatively high levels of consumption in the colony, especially amongst urban dwellers, and France consolidated its position as the colony's sole trading partner by continuing to purchase virtually all of the colony's monocrop exports at subsidised

rates (Y. Fall 1999, Boone 1992, R. Cruise O'Brien 1979a). We can see, then, that the transformations in gendered work practices during the colonial era are, in fact, implicated in broader relations of dependence and inequality between, but also within, the European powers and their colonies.

In spite of, or perhaps because of these relations of dependence, from the vantage point of Dakar and other urban centres, the colonial period was perceived to be one of relative stability and material, but also cultural, prosperity. Throughout much of the twentieth century, there was a prevailing sense that Senegal (along with Nigeria and Ghana) was one of the countries 'enriched most by colonialism' (K. Hart 1985:255). Dakar in particular became noted for its literary and scientific output, and scholars such as the celebrated historian Cheikh Anta Diop and other researchers at the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) achieved recognition for their contributions towards understanding the prehistory of the African continent (Abega 2006). The interests and concerns of the intellectual and political elite converged substantially, nowhere more so than in the figure of Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet-politician who led Senegal to Independence in 1960 and became its first president.

Senghor was one of the founding fathers of *Négritude*, an intellectual movement that became influential during the middle of the twentieth century, when many of the colonies were on the verge of becoming independent. It sought to redefine 'African-ness' in response to the impact of colonialism upon 'traditional' African culture, emphasising the value of what it perceived to be intrinsically African qualities, values and aesthetics in order to legitimise the position of an independent Africa in a new world order. Yet Senghor's pan-African identity was (re)constructed upon a vision of an idealised, romanticised African past, and he has been accused by many of indirectly giving credence to colonial racist stereotypes of African 'otherness' in order to legitimise the elite status of the Paris-educated *Négritude* literati (e.g. Fanon 1963). A specific ideal of femininity became central to the construction of this 'authentic' African identity, with Senghor

composing many poems about African womanhood that often depicted the black woman as 'Mother Africa', both the source and symbol of the nation (Ajayi 1997, McNee 2000). In his politics, too, Senghor emphasised that Senegalese women ought to prioritise their roles as mothers and wives, warning that a failure to do so, for example, by outsourcing domestic labour, would threaten the integrity of the nation (McNee 2000:97-103).

Despite its insistence on African distinctiveness, at the level of political practice, Négritude did little to alter the shape of Senegal's political economy in the years following Independence, and the interests of Senghor's *Parti Socialiste* (PS) government remained closely intertwined with those of the former colonial power. The Senegalese economy was little diversified, and although there was some import substitution industry, as well as phosphate and fish exports, it essentially carried forward its role as producer of groundnuts for export, and, in return, consumer for commodities imported by France (Boone 1992, R. Cruise O'Brien 1979a). It continued to support an expensive, top-heavy government, thereby preserving the status of the expatriate and African elite (D. Cruise O'Brien 1979). During Senghor's twenty-year presidency, Senegal was a *de facto* one party state, and in 1980, Senghor appointed Abdou Diouf as his successor. Nonetheless, during this period, Senegal was regularly referred to as one of the region's few stable democracies, with some observers going so far as to describe the Senegalese state under Senghor as 'a quite remarkable success story' (Coulon and Cruise O'Brien 1989:145). D. Cruise O'Brien (1996) suggests that the interventions of the powerful *marabouts* on behalf of their followers meant that during this period, Senegal was more democratic than its electoral history might imply.<sup>9</sup>

Towards the end of the 1960s, the Senegalese economy became affected by a gradual decline in world market demand for groundnuts, and also

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<sup>9</sup> Schaffer (1998) makes a similar point, demonstrating that the Senegalese concept of '*demokaraasi*' does not correspond to conventional Western political science definitions of democracy.

phosphates, a situation that was further aggravated by the oil crises of the 1970s and the resulting global economic recession. During the late 1970s, the entire rural economy suffered from a series of severe droughts that triggered the beginning of what would become a long-term rural exodus towards the towns, especially Dakar. The government, which was already struggling to support its vast bureaucracy – by 1982, wages took up 50% of the national budget – became obliged to boost spending on food subsidies (Somerville 1991). During the early 1980s, its foreign debt spiralled out of control as it took on loans from private banks in an attempt to keep its economy going, and eventually, it became subject to the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank (Y. Fall 1999, Somerville 1997). In order to secure IMF and World Bank loans, the government was required to implement massive spending cuts; it removed its various subsidies, leading to escalating prices of basic foodstuffs and gas, let go of around 20,000 government employees, and gradually pared down its public and social service provision.

This withdrawal of the state from public life, a feature common to many postcolonial African societies, has spawned the expression *vivre sénégalaisement* – to live in a Senegalese fashion without the state (Coulon and Cruise O'Brien 1989). In 1994, the CFA franc was devalued by 50% in order to further ease debt and restore the competitiveness of the CFA zone countries in the world market, but the purpose of these measures was lost on the population, whose purchasing power declined substantially as a result of the devaluation (Somerville 1997). The consequence has been a prolonged period of social and political unrest, which abated somewhat, if only temporarily, when Abdoulaye Wade of the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais* (PDS) challenged and defeated Abdou Diouf in the 2000 elections, thereby bringing an end to 40 years of *Parti Socialiste* rule.

The crisis has had a particularly severe impact upon the lives of Dakar residents, who have experienced a significant decline in living standards compared to previous decades (Somerville 1991, Antoine et al. 1995).

During my period in the field, my friends would sometimes look back with nostalgia to the Abdou Diouf era, reminiscing that there used to be more money around in those days and describing the vast sums – up to CFA 1 million! – that people would just happen to have in their pockets. As a result of the economic changes that have occurred over the past decades, everyday life in Dakar, as across other parts of urban sub-Saharan Africa and the developing world, is frequently described using the trope of ‘urban informality’ (Ndione 1994, Abdoul 2001, 2005, A.S. Fall 2007, see also K. Hart 1973, 1988, Hansen and Vaa 2004, Simone and Abouhane 2005). The structural adjustment policies of privatisation, deregulation and decentralisation have fostered the proliferation of informal economic endeavours – income-generating, but also social security provisioning – which occur outside of corporate public and private structures, tend not to be represented in national statistics, and are neither protected by, nor subject to, regulation at this level. They have also given rise to a remittance economy, underpinned by a dramatic increase in mostly unregulated transnational migration, especially, but not exclusively, of young men. Migration began as the crisis unfolded and continues to this day, despite Europe’s extensive and ever-increasing policing of its borders (Riccio 2005, Barro 2008, Melly 2010, 2011, Buggenhagen 2012a, 2012b, Andersson 2013).

During Dakar’s colonial and postcolonial glory days, many of its female inhabitants were the dependents of salaried civil servants. As the groundnut economy contracted, rural men were the first to migrate to the towns in search of employment, and women assumed even more responsibility for subsistence-oriented production. However, as the crisis intensified, more and more people, including women, started to leave the countryside, and gradually, women began to establish themselves within certain sectors of Dakar’s economy. Urban women in particular progressively turned to informal economic activities, notably small-scale trade or the preparation and selling of food items, as a means of securing the livelihoods of themselves and their families, although a minority were able to find

employment in the formal wage sector. However, women continued to comprise only a small minority of the formal job market, with positions most accessible to the highly educated, predominantly male elite. At the same time, women became increasingly involved in local-level networks of wealth circulation, setting up informal savings associations and maintaining extensive webs of social relationships that could be called upon in times of need (Mottin-Sylla 1987, Ndione 1994, Abdoul 2005).

Today, the Dakar region, which encompasses the capital city and all its suburbs, is by far the most populous and densely populated in the country, with 20.6% of Senegal's population – currently estimated at over 13 million people – living on just 0.3% of its territory (République du Sénégal 2013). The population of the country as a whole is growing at a rate of almost 1000 people per day; between 2002 and 2010, this amounted to an overall increase of approximately 3 million people, around one fifth of which was in Dakar (*ibid.*) The region is home to members of all of Senegal's ethnic groups, Wolof, Séeréer, Pël and Tukulóor (Fulani peoples), Mànden, Saraxolle and Jola, as well as Africans from further afield, Europeans and Lebanese.

Due to its particular history, however, Dakar, and urban Senegambian society more generally, has been particularly shaped by Wolof culture. The role of language has been especially central to the process sometimes referred to *Wolofisation*. In many ways a synonym for 'urbanisation', whereby non-Wolof assume a Wolof 'identity' upon migration to the towns, *Wolofisation* is also closely connected to the influence of the Murid brotherhood, which has its origins in Wolof country (D. Cruise O'Brien 1998, McLaughlin 2001). Wolof is now the *lingua franca* of Senegal, but, for precisely this reason, ethnic categories have become ambiguous in urban areas, where people are most likely to self-identify by way of nationality or religion. In my own experience, 'being Senegalese' and 'being Muslim' were the primary categories of identification. McLaughlin (2001) argues that Dakar Wolof, which differs significantly from the dialects spoken in the

countryside, chiefly by virtue of its massive lexical borrowing from French, is crucial to the construction of this self-consciously de-ethnicised urban identity. She argues that although people continue to use the 'ready-made terms of the old paradigms of identity, namely ethnicity and language ... they are in fact talking about a newly configured urban identity for which there is as yet no term' (McLaughlin 2001:158).<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the nature of social stratification has also changed since the precolonial era. Although some of the 'traditional' occupation-based distinctions continue to persist in urban Senegal, they are increasingly blurred; the aristocracy and the slave categories are no longer extant, and other occupations do not have the same practical relevance as before.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the population is recognised as 'noble', or 'un-casted' [*géer*], whilst a small minority is considered to belong to specific artisanal or performer groups [*ñeeño*], which do not necessarily correspond to their actual occupation. Arguably, these changes are partly due to the increased anonymity that the city affords its inhabitants, which perhaps goes some way towards explaining the increase in intermarriage, particularly in urban areas, between hypothetically endogamous 'noble' and 'casted' groups (see Chapter Two, 2.2).

Located on the westernmost point of mainland Africa, Dakar's suburbs sprawl over the Cap Vert peninsula and into the 'neck' that connects it to the rest of the country. The problem of space in Dakar owes much to its geographical location: a slim strip of land connects the triangular peninsula to the mainland, literally restricting the city's capacity to expand. The Dakar region's poorest suburbs, those in the *départements* of Guédiawaye, Pikine and Rufisque (see Map A) – now cities in their own right – are located within

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<sup>10</sup> In some situations, Wolof Dakarois referred to themselves in terms of their region of origin in order to differentiate themselves in this context of *Wolofisation*, often using the names of the precolonial Wolof kingdoms. For example, Bawol-bawol people are those who are originally from the Diourbel region of Senegal, which corresponds geographically to the precolonial kingdom of Bawol.

<sup>11</sup> The praise-orators (*géwél*) are notable in that they have managed to continue to adapt their activities with some success, although the stigma of low status remains attached to their livelihood (Panzacchi 1994).

and beyond this neck of land, and every day tens of thousands of people squeeze through it as they make the return journey from the suburbs to the more central areas, spending up to three hours each way in traffic jams on poor, often flood-damaged roads as they navigate Dakar's intricate, erratic and highly inventive public transport networks.



**Figure 1: Baobab, bird and downtown Dakar (Plateau) as seen from the îles des Madeleines to the west of the peninsula. Photo by the author**

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In November 2007, less than two weeks after I arrived in Dakar for my main period of fieldwork, President Abdoulaye Wade announced his intention to expel unlicensed vendors, hawkers and beggars from the city centre in a bid to 'clean up' Dakar, which was due to host the 11<sup>th</sup> summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) the following March. His announcement triggered a series of riots, the largest the country had witnessed in nearly two decades, and many accused Wade of being insensitive to the struggles of ordinary people and taking his agenda for

improving the image of the city a step too far. Nonetheless most people agreed that overcrowding was a real concern for those who frequented the Sandaga market area where, as one friend remarked matter-of-factly,

the vendors lay their wares out in front of the stalls and shops, which makes them difficult to access, but moreover, it means that people can't walk on the pavements, so they walk in the streets instead – but in the streets there are cars, and *they* are not willing to make way for pedestrians! It's a serious issue!

Every now and again, the colourful continuity of the rows of shops that lined the streets of Sandaga market was broken by a narrow passageway that opened up into a compound. Unlike compounds in the suburbs, which have been built on plots of land sliced up specifically for that purpose and which are clearly distinguishable from neighbouring residences, the boundaries between older downtown compounds, formally parts of Lébu villages, are not always evident.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes they are connected by passageways to other compounds and streets, and distinct (non-tenant) families may have houses, or several rooms, within a single compound. The way in which the rooms are constructed and aligned sometimes means that building additional floors is not viable.<sup>13</sup> These compounds are hubs of activity, from the reverberation of voices calling to one another, children playing, sheep bleating, the buzz of the TV and of noisy *mballax* pop music, the sharp 'scrubbing' sound of young women doing the laundry, the repetitive thump of a pestle pounding spices in the mortar, the hiss of food frying in hot oil,

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<sup>12</sup> Before Dakar became a colonial stronghold, the Cap Vert peninsula was scattered with Lébu (a Wolof sub-group) fishing communities. The exceptional situation of the Lébu of Dakar has been documented by Le Cour Grandmaison (1972), who details how much of the Lébus' land became exploited for downtown construction and the provisioning of Dakar's markets, but also notes that the compensation they received meant that they were in a relatively privileged position compared to other groups (see also Balandier and Mercier 1952). To this day there is some acknowledgement of the Lébus' status as Dakar's indigenous population.

<sup>13</sup> In the suburbs too, the compound/house will usually consist of a series of rooms arranged around, or to one side of an open space. Nowadays, the initial set of rooms will be designed with the anticipation of continued future construction of an *étage* (additional floor), although the further you advance into the suburbs, the fewer the number of *étage* houses.

the clatter of dishes being washed, and the splash of somebody cooling off with a bucket of water in the shower, to the barely audible bowing, straightening up and murmurs of prayer or the whisper of the lit gas cylinder and the controlled trickling noise as a small amount of strong, sweet *àttaaya* tea is poured from great height and with astounding precision from one tiny glass into another until it becomes sufficiently frothy. Nevertheless, I soon learned to appreciate these compounds as small havens of tranquillity, offering much-needed respite from the Sandaga crowds whenever I visited the downtown Plateau district.

Although I usually visited at least one of these Sandaga compounds whenever I made the trip downtown, an account of my experiences in Plateau would be incomplete without a mention of my dealings with government ministries, embassies, and private clinics and hospitals. They, along with the sparkling presidential palace, the vast *Place de l'Indépendance* and the charming *CCF – Centre Culturel Français* (recently renamed in honour of Léopold Sédar Senghor) are all within a twenty-minute walk of the Sandaga market area. The wide, occasionally even leafy boulevards of this southern part of Plateau are uncannily quiet. Starting at the *Place de l'Indépendance*, a stroll down *avenue Léopold Sédar Senghor* takes you past the presidential palace on your left and the government's primary administrative building on your right; eventually leading up to the main entrance of the extensive *Hôpital Principal*. As the road bends to the right, it becomes *avenue Nelson Mandela* and takes you to the *Assemblée Nationale*; from there, you continue along *avenue Pasteur* to get to the German and British embassies, as well as the *Clinique de la Madeleine*, which is where my son was born in April 2009. Many of my friends who complained of their discontent with the Wade regime and its disregard for people's livelihoods and well-being had never set foot in this part of their city, yet it seemed to me that these gated villas, tidy boulevards and respectable institutions represented the Dakar that the government wished to showcase to the international community.

The Dakarais have met the push to 'develop' the city centre with resistance, however, and, in the end, the unlicensed vendors, hawkers and beggars were allowed to stay. As I was due to leave Dakar in 2010 there was renewed uproar over an announcement that all forms of begging were to be prohibited, including in the areas around mosques, where disabled and otherwise vulnerable people gather in the hope of receiving assistance in the form of alms. This kind of begging is not merely tolerable, but, at least in the sense that it facilitates the giving of alms, has cultural and religious value, and people were indignant over these measures to criminalise the poorest of the poor.

Throughout its history, then, Dakar has been a city characterised by immense social and economic inequality, perhaps more so today than ever before. It has long been a bastion of elite society, international and homegrown, economic, political and intellectual.<sup>14</sup> Yet, since the 1970s, it has also become a magnet for a displaced rural populace, and its numbers have swelled. The majority of the newcomers made their homes in the more distant suburbs in Pikine, Guédiawaye and Rufisque, some in settlements that were designed by the authorities, others in areas that developed spontaneously. In contrast, the localities in and close to Plateau have tended to remain more prosperous. Many of the first residents of suburbs adjacent to Plateau, notably Médina, the 'African' part of French Dakar, were offered land ownership in the new suburbs such as Parcelles Assainies in order to free up valuable real estate close to the centre (Tall 1994). Despite this, most of Médina, and even a few parts of Plateau, have retained their *quartier populaire* dynamism, along with some other neighbourhoods on the peninsula, although many others, notably Fann, Point E, Amitié, Mermoz, Sacré Cœur and, above all, Almadies, are manifestly middle-class (see Map

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<sup>14</sup> One of the elite groups rarely discussed in the literature is the Lebanese community which, for many decades, dominated downtown commerce, selling Lebanese-produced goods such as foam mattresses, plastic containers and bags, and some dry and canned foodstuffs (R. Cruise O'Brien 1972, 1979b). However, they have faced stiff competition from new business elites, initially Murid traders who established new commercial circuits and gained control of certain sectors, and, in more recent years, from the Chinese. Leichtman (2010, 2005) has written extensively on the religious, ethnic and national identities of the Lebanese community in Senegal.

B). The former Lébu fishing villages of Ouakam, Yoff, Ngor and Cambérène have succeeded in preserving some of their distinctive character, with many Lébu still residing and working in these neighbourhoods.



**Figure 2: Second-hand clothing market along the boundary between the Médina and Gueule Tapée districts. Photo by the author**

#### **1.4 *Power versus poverty? Dakar women's socioeconomic position today***

Granted that Dakar is a city of inequality, the question remains as to how, precisely, the economic and political developments of the past three decades have impacted upon women as a social group. This is a matter that has, to some extent, divided commentators both within and outside of academia. According to one broadly identifiable view, it is men, both rural and urban, who have suffered most from the crisis, which has undermined their provider status, whether as land-owning heads of patrilineages or as salaried civil servants (Perry 2005, Melly 2011, Buggenhagen 2012a, Sarr

1998, Abdoul 2001, 2005). Perry (2005) articulates this view most succinctly, describing Senegal's 'post-colonial shift in patriarchal power' and 'the decline of male privilege in the aftermath of free-market reform' (2005:209). Although she is writing primarily about rural Wolof society, her position is corroborated by a number of the ethnographies discussed in Section 1.2 that explore Dakar women's 'consumption', broadly defined (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Mustafa 1997, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, 2007, Morales-Libove 2005). These studies focus primarily on women's dress, self-presentation, beauty and dance practices, which are then explicitly or indirectly associated with their ceremonial, savings and income-generating activities. Although each of these authors develops her own distinctive argument regarding the relationship between women's leisure and consumption practices on the one hand, and their overall socioeconomic status on the other, one of the underlying ideas that becomes central to the analyses is that women's creativity and agency hinge on, and may even contribute to, the deterioration of men's livelihood prospects. They observe that as Senghor's African Socialist project faltered, previous development programmes became displaced by a proliferation of informal associations and NGO-lead development initiatives, both secular and religious, foreign and grassroots, that frequently promoted women's microfinance.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even as these studies are highly critical of the neoliberal institutions and practices that helped create the crisis, they suggest that they have nevertheless advanced women's status and financial autonomy vis-à-vis men. Indeed, Fatou Sarr (1998) goes so far as to make an explicit argument for the radical overhaul of the Senegalese welfare system, suggesting that the successes achieved by women's networks and mutual aid organisations could lead to the latter replacing the state in the provision of health, social and other public services to the population.

Local popular and media discourses demonstrate some awareness of these shifts in economic and political strategising on the part of the Senegalese

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<sup>15</sup> These could take the form of GIEs (*Groupements d'intérêt économique*), general economic interest organisations, or GPFs (*Groupements de promotion féminine*), which focused specifically on assisting women in their entrepreneurial activities.

government, although this does not necessarily mean that ordinary people feel that significant changes or improvements are taking place. In one TV sketch, Senegal's most famous comedy character, Saaneex, is paid a visit by the president and the general secretary of a new women's association, who have come to ask for his permission to let his wife become a member. The women explain that the association, which is called 'Help Your Husband' (*jappale sa jëkkër*), supports impoverished children, provides young women with training, aims to improve women's literacy, runs microfinance and microcredit schemes and promotes access to healthcare. They explain that, as women, they do not want to have to constantly ask their husbands for money, and that the main purpose of the association is to 'help women manage their finances better'. Saaneex listens attentively, and then explodes that women are trying to 'kill their husbands', and that, these days, everything is *de la femme* – for women. He bellows that the government is responsible for introducing a discourse of equality (*parité*): 'Emancipation? They say "*de la femme*"! Ministère? They say "*de la femme*"! Journée mondiale (International Day)? They say "*de la femme*"! Microfinancement de la femme! Projet de la femme!'<sup>16</sup>

The alternative perspective is less sanguine, surmising that the policies of the colonial and postcolonial regimes have not only given rise to the phenomenon of urban poverty, but also to the feminisation of urban poverty. This is partly due to the aforementioned patterns according to which women were co-opted within, or rather excluded from, systems of agricultural production, and, later, denied entry to positions of economic and political influence in most spheres of urban life. Furthermore, so the story goes, women (and their children) are most likely to bear the brunt of austerity measures, as they are the ones who benefit most from social services such as health and education, and consequently suffer disproportionately when these are dismantled (Y. Fall 2009, Sow 2003, République du Sénégal 1993). Sociological research on female-headed

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZWpZuROFm8> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

households and women breadwinners lends support to the thesis that poverty in Dakar has a 'feminine face', identifying women's struggles to support themselves and their dependents (S. Kane 2011, Bop 1996). On this account, women's financial autonomy actually appears to *contribute* to their vulnerability, doubtless because they are viewed first and foremost as providers for *others*, in contrast to the more recent anthropological studies that have tended to concentrate on women when they spend money on *themselves*.

My own sense is that both perspectives, admittedly hugely oversimplified in this summary, entail risks that can best be avoided by identifying some kind of middle ground between them. In Section 1.2 of this introduction, I have argued that the first view has, in practice, led to a privileging of women's roles as 'consumers', without sufficient attention to the multiple ways in which they participate in economic processes. Above all, however, sweeping statements about women's agency, status or opportunities risk obscuring more than they reveal, masking very real ways in which women's agency may be restricted, both at the individual and structural levels, and perhaps even diverting energy away from perceptive and potentially potent critiques of existing structures of power and authority.

The same basic point can be made about the second perspective: the concept of 'feminisation of poverty' is similarly deceptive if used as a blanket term without adequate specification or substantiation, as an emphasis on women's 'vulnerability' has the potential to infantilise them by understating and belittling their economic contributions and social undertakings (Chant 2006, Sieveking 2008b, 2007). Rather, as Gudrun Lachenmann (2009:9) observes, it is worth remembering that women are never merely passive recipients of social security who suffer the 'impact' of crisis – they are also invariably active producers of social security who enable communities to meet the challenges posed by economic hardship. At the same time, it is surely possible to recognise that their projects of social security creation, which may include caring, earning, saving, circulating, spending, and, above

all, establishing relationships of short and long term reciprocity, may fall short of ensuring adequate standards of living. Elsewhere, Lachenmann (2010) urges against regarding the informal sector as a 'black box' – a phenomenon that is symbolic either of women's oppression and marginalisation, or of their empowerment and resistance. In the same vein, throughout this thesis, I endeavour to exercise great caution and careful consideration when attempting to make sense of any domain of life, activity, role or discourse that is strongly associated with women, whether this be, for example, financially dependent, demanding, perhaps 'greedy' or 'materialistic' wives, girlfriends, sisters, even matriarchs, or financially autonomous, 'self-sacrificing' mothers, daughters or informal sector workers.

### **1.5    *On researching 'women and Islam' in Senegal***

These words of caution pertain just as much to any discussion of Senegalese women's religious identities, a topic that I have not, as yet, devoted much consideration to in this introduction. There are two broad views as to how the mass conversions to Islam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected the status of women in the Senegambia region. On the one hand, it is often assumed that, whereas conversion to Islam may have improved women's positions in the Middle East, the opposite was true in Senegambia, since women's status before the arrival of Islam had been far from marginal. Women, who had been actively involved in ancestral religious practices (Coulon 1988, Diop 1996, Creevey 1996, see also Zempléni 1968), were generally excluded from positions of Islamic authority; the vast majority of Sufi *marabouts* are men, although there are some rare exceptions.

We should be wary, however, of overemphasising the all-encompassing, transformative nature of Islam, which may result in the exaggeration of the relationship between Islam and 'patriarchal' structures (Kandiyoti 1999). In

the Senegalese context, it has been suggested that Islamic law, underpinned as it was by an individualism that emphasised the complementarity and interdependence of women and men, effectively supplied women and children with a 'bill of rights' that they had not had recourse to before (Callaway and Creevey 1994). Previously, for example, there had been no laws limiting the number of wives a man could have, women had no claim to bridewealth or inheritance, and men were not obliged to support their children if they were no longer living with them. Islamic law, as it became adopted by most of the groups of northern and central Senegal, stipulated that, in principle, a man could have a maximum of four wives, daughters were entitled to their bridewealth and could inherit half of a son's portion of the father's assets, and a woman and her children would be provided for in the case of death, divorce or abandonment (*ibid.*).

Although Islam did, in this sense, provide some kind of safety-net for women, the extent to which these principles became implemented in practice is debatable. Most importantly, however, the rights conferred upon women and men were, and have remained, unequal. In contemporary Senegal, the government is secular but the Family Code encompasses a number of Koranic precepts that individuals may choose whether or not to take up. For example, when marrying, men have the option of 'monogamy' or 'polygamy', and in the case of inheritance law, the inheritance may either be distributed equally among all children, or divided unequally between sons and daughters, the latter receiving half the share of the former (Sow 2003, Creevey 1996).

It is important to bear in mind, however, that from its inception in 1972 through to the present day, many Muslim conservatives committed to the principles of *Shari'a* and the authority of Muslim tribunals have been hostile to the Family Code, which proclaimed to be secular and applicable to all Senegalese irrespective of their religious affiliation (Sow 2003, Creevey 1996, Sieveking 2007). Despite her profound reservations about the role of the Code in contemporary Senegalese legislation (Sow 2003, 1985, see also

Bop 2005, République du Sénégal 1993), the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow acknowledges that 'the code provided impetus for women's rights insofar as it represented a series of rules set by the legislator and not by the interpretation of customs' (2003:72). Callaway and Creevey go one step further, explicitly recognising the positive influence of ideas introduced via colonial engagements. 'Islamic leaders in Senegal' they write, 'were unable to establish political control over the region. They shared their power with the French, whose Catholic/secular influence balanced and diluted Muslim teachings' (1994:140). Callaway and Creevey hypothesise that although Sufi leaders in Senegal are conservative and 'promote a society in which women are more restricted than most women currently are in Senegal..., [they] are used to living in a dual world and used to interacting with and tolerating others whose ways are less strict' (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, there has been a surge of academic interest in Senegalese Muslim women, much of which aims to highlight precisely this tolerant, permissive attitude towards women commonly held to be characteristic of 'Senegalese Islam'. Indeed, virtually all of the Senegal-specific literature on ceremonies, dance, performance, consumption, dress, appearance and self-presentation discussed above positions itself in this manner vis-à-vis Islam. Even when this work does not engage in depth with the subject, the implication is that, in practice if not necessarily in principle, Senegalese Islam is especially accommodating of these particular formations of sensual and sexual (and expensive!) gendered identities (see Chapter Two).

Within the flourishing field of research that *does* focus explicitly on 'women and Islam' in Senegal, discussions tend to align themselves with contemporary debates within the anthropology of Islam that seek to challenge dominant stereotypes about Muslim women's agency in a context

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<sup>17</sup> In an important study on Senegalese attitudes towards Muslim family law and secularism, Konold (2010) argues that only the most elite, media-exposed Senegalese are likely to view Muslim personal law as incompatible with secular law and legal equality, as they are the ones most influenced by the dominant secular interpretative package disseminated by the media.

within which the figure of the oppressed and victimised Muslim woman has become increasingly evocative of Islam *per se* in popular and political discourses (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2002, Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, Mahmood 2005). Most of the work that looks at Senegalese women as religious subjects considers their roles within brotherhood Sufism. Some authors describe how Senegalese Sufism offers ample opportunity for women's active and visible participation in religious practices, notably in the form of local-level religious associations known as *daaira* that began to mushroom in urban areas from the 1950s onwards (Creevey 1996, Rosander 1997c, 1998, Mbow 1997, Piga 2002, Buggenhagen 2012a, 2012b). Although female *marabouts* are very rare, a number of studies have focused on the extraordinary women who hold these leadership positions, by virtue of being related to the original brotherhood founders, and/or through their exceptional mastery of esoteric knowledge and practices (Coulon 1988, Coulon and Reveyrand 1990, Gemmeke 2007, 2008, 2009, Hill 2010).

Finally, there has been some research on Senegalese women's membership within reformist movements, which have, in recent decades, become increasingly influential in Senegal, mirroring the revivalist trends across much of the Muslim world (Augis 2002, 2005, 2009, see also Sieveking 2007, 2008a, Loimeier 2003, Leichtman 2009a, 2009b). Here, the emphasis is not so much on resistance to, versus accommodation of, oppressive structures, but rather, on these women's religious subjectivities and embodied religious practices, which essentially serve as a basis for a rather different interpretation of religious agency, one that has been deracinated from its secular-liberal ideological foundations (see Mahmood 2005).



**Figure 3: Women at the Touba Mosque during the annual pilgrimage to the spiritual home of Muridism. Photo by the author**

We can see, then, that over the past two decades, Senegalese women's relationship to 'Islam' has been the focus of sustained scholarly attention. These efforts have resulted in some wonderful ethnographic analyses that have enriched and reinforced the timely and invaluable critiques that have become a cornerstone of the new anthropology of Islam. In this thesis, however, I have decided not to incorporate 'Islam' as a primary frame of analysis; there is no separate chapter dedicated to examining the role of religion in the formation of gendered economic identities. In doing so, I do not wish to trivialise the significance of faith in the lives of my friends and acquaintances. While most of the people I worked with did not have a high level of religious schooling, either Sufi or orthodox, some of them devoted a substantial amount of their time towards religious practice, such as daily prayers, a few were regular *daaira* attendees, and most people sought the services of various kinds of *marabouts* on an occasional basis. Moreover, they were reassured that Islam provided the answers to many of their fundamental questions; as in the case of Boddy's informants, they were

inclined to use it as ‘a sort of gloss, an ultimate but unelaborated source of significance’ (1989:4). When I asked people about ‘women’s work and men’s work’, for example, I would often be informed that the Qur’an stipulates that men should be breadwinners who leave the house to work, whereas women ought to be responsible for tasks within the house.

Highly clichéd statements such as these are by no means irrelevant to my research interests. However, I am reluctant to construct a conclusive argument concerning the relationship between Islam, gender and the way people organise their livelihoods and economic life solely on the basis of this kind of data. Instead, I discuss religious ideas and practices to the extent that they directly relate to the ethnographic findings I present in the subsequent chapters. This will, I hope, bring to light some of the complexities and contradictions that being Senegalese, Muslim and female may involve. Perhaps, as Schielke (2010) has suggested, the anthropology of Islam might benefit from more of a focus on the diurnal activities of practicing Muslims who are nevertheless *not* ‘committed activists’ – by which he means those who do not spend most of their time participating in religious practices, such as the majority of my informants (see also Soares and Osella 2010:11-12). With this in mind, I hope that my material might usefully complement some of the existing literature on Senegalese Muslim women that *does* privilege their religious activities and experiences.



**Figure 4: Temporary sheep marketplace in the run-up to Tabaski (Eid-al-Adha, the Festival of the Sacrifice). Photo by the author**

## **1.6     *Research methods and challenges***

I carried out my fieldwork in Dakar from November 2007 until September 2010. Although I formally interrupted my studies in order to take one year's maternity leave between March 2009 and March 2010, I remained in Dakar throughout this time and continued with my research, albeit slightly less intensively after the birth of my son in April 2009. I had been to Dakar on several occasions before embarking on long-term fieldwork. The first time was a holiday in 2004, when Senegal was one of many countries I visited as a tourist back-packing around West Africa. It was during this first short visit that I became fascinated by women's *sabar* dancing. Most importantly, I made friends with a number of Senegalese people, with whom I continued to stay in touch over the following years.

Before starting the MPhil component of the PhD programme in the autumn of 2006, I returned to Dakar for two months in order to achieve more of a sense of how I might carry out my research. I was greatly assisted by the people I had met during my previous visit, especially two young women, who took it upon themselves to show me around many of the neighbourhoods of the city and its suburbs. They introduced me to their families and friends, invited me to accompany them to savings association meetings and weddings, and even managed to arrange a series of informal Wolof classes for me with a university student. During this second visit, I became progressively more interested in women's economic activities, as I became conscious of the fact that virtually all of the women I encountered were earning money in some way or other, despite the fact that their economic ventures were often ad hoc or irregular.

I returned to Dakar again for just one month in the summer of 2007. By this time, I had finalised my research proposal on women, livelihoods and family, and had undertaken six months of Wolof lessons with a tutor in London. The main purpose of this visit was to make a decision about where I would live during my fieldwork, and also to put into practice the Wolof skills I had acquired during my MPhil year. Additionally, I was keen to participate in the annual organised swim from Dakar to Gorée Island, which I had already completed once in 2006. During this visit, one of my friends informed me that she would be happy to share a flat with me. Initially, I was concerned that her family might perceive this to be inappropriate for a young, unmarried woman, but she reassured me that it was acceptable because they knew who I was. She explained that they understood my reasons for coming to Senegal, that it was obvious that I was completely dependent on others, including my friend, for assistance with all kinds of everyday tasks, and that it therefore made sense to them that I would need 'looking after'.

We found a flat in a neighbourhood in the Parcelles Assainées suburb located on the north-eastern side of the peninsula, close to the border between the Dakar and Guédiawaye *départements*. Some parts of Parcelles are gradually

becoming more affluent, as migrants and the new commercial elite construct their houses there, but most of its residents belong to the low-income majority. It seemed like a good choice because, geographically, it is about halfway between the southerly centre of Dakar and the city's most outlying suburbs. I had realised by this point that it would be impracticable to try to limit my fieldwork to one particular neighbourhood, since Dakarais are connected to people in all different parts of the city (and beyond) in intricate webs of relationships, and tend not to limit their social activities to their neighbourhood of residence. Most of the people I worked with belonged to the majority low-income urban and peri-urban population. There were significant wealth disparities within this group, but I would proffer that none of my informants could be classified as 'middle-class', and they certainly were not members of elite Dakar society. The vast majority of my informants was Muslim and spoke Wolof either as a native language or at a level of bilingual proficiency.



**Figure 5:** *Car rapide* minibuses stationed down the road from a market in Parcelles Assainies. Photo by the author

We lived in this flat for just over a year, during which time we were joined by my partner, as well as two other women and their young children, who, for different reasons, temporarily needed a place to stay. After I became pregnant, I decided that it would make more sense for me to move in with my partner's family, for both personal and professional reasons. People enthusiastically encouraged me to do this, commenting that it was what a 'real Senegalese woman' would do. Thus, we ended up moving into two rooms in my partner's family's house, which was also in Parcelles Assainies. Not surprisingly, I developed especially close relationships with my partner's family, as well as with the women with whom I lived during the first year. Their individual stories and experiences feature to some extent in this thesis. However, I have been meticulous in my attempts to preserve their anonymity, which, as I explain shortly, has been a paramount ethical concern throughout the writing process. For this reason, I have generally opted to use data drawn from alternative sources, who are less likely to be easily identifiable by virtue of their relationship with me.

When I began my fieldwork, the people I knew best all spoke some French, a language I had studied for many years. Our extended discussions mostly took place in French, although we both made efforts to insert Wolof words and phrases into the conversation, and they helped me in my exchanges with others by translating from and into Wolof when required. Although many of the people I met had some knowledge of French, many others, especially the very old, the very young, and the very poor, did not speak more than a few words, and overall, women were less likely to speak French than their male counterparts. From the beginning, my aim was to achieve a level of proficiency in Wolof that would enable me to have fairly complex conversations with these people without needing an interpreter. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly when this happened, but it was probably during my second year in the field. Gradually, I began to carry out virtually all of my research in Wolof, including with people with whom I had previously only communicated in French. By the time I left the field, my Wolof was still far from perfect, but I did feel as though learning the

language to a reasonable standard had enabled me to push through some critical barriers. It meant that I could, in theory, communicate with virtually everyone I met. Not only did this increase the pool of potential informants, it also made me far less dependent on the assistance of others and boosted my confidence. Additionally, it elicited substantial social approval in contexts where my presence might otherwise have only been apprehended with scepticism and mistrust. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it enhanced my ability to pick up on those anthropologically meaningful details that were coded within linguistic subtleties that became lost when translated into French.

By the time I left the field, I had established close relationships with approximately two-dozen individuals, who had become intimate friends as well as 'key informants'. Most were women under the age of 45, but this group also contained a couple of older women, and a few men. In most cases, I knew many of their family members and friends, and I met more and more people as I navigated the social networks within which their lives were embedded. I had come to know some of them via my initial contacts as I 'snowballed' my way around households and neighbourhoods in different parts of Dakar. Others, such as Amsatou, I met independently – whilst purchasing vegetables at a stand, squeezing into a crowded *Ndiaga Ndiaye* minibus, or waiting patiently in a tailor shop. My research sites were scattered across Dakar, and typically, the inevitable introductions meant that I came to know people within several different households in the same neighbourhood. On average, I spent three days a week at or within walking distance of my home in Parcelles Assainies, and, on the other days, I would visit families who lived further away: in Plateau, Médina, Fass, Point-E, Biscuiterie, Dieuppeul, Yarakh, Cambérène, Golf Sud, Hamo, Guinaw Rails, Pikine, Yeumbeul, Thiaroye, Keur Massar, Keur Mbaye Fall and Bargny.<sup>18</sup>

My fieldwork was carried out at the level of the 'household'; however, the meaning of 'household' in this context is fairly fluid. In many cases,

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<sup>18</sup> See Map B, and also Map C for a visual overview of my fieldsite locations.

household members co-resided, but there were also many people who spent most of their time and took their meals with the family, yet rented rooms separate from the main family residence due to lack of space. Many buildings comprised a number of distinct tenant families or individuals. Quite apart from the more obvious 'family' divisions, a household might often not only contain its residents, but also friends, neighbours – children were especially mobile, moving between households to play or watch television – and temporary or long-term visitors. Thus, it is often difficult in practice to determine where one household ends and another begins, and, crucially, where to draw the line between 'private' and 'public' space. Additionally, many 'household' activities, such as cooking, laundry, washing, and even eating, took place in communal areas such as courtyards, rooftops or passageways, further complicating these divisions. For these reasons, I want to make it clear that I do not perceive a focus on 'households' to be tantamount to a focus on a 'private' or 'domestic' space. Some of my chapters focus on activities that are, arguably, more recognisable as belonging to a 'public' sphere, for example ceremonies and savings association gatherings (Chapter Two) or income-generating work (Chapter Six) – although even here, one of the types of work I explore *does* actually take place within the confines of the home. I want to emphasise, however, that even at its most 'private', the Dakar home has the capacity to be a 'public' space.

During the daytime, then, when I wasn't in a vehicle on my way somewhere, I was usually inside a house, in the open-air courtyard of a house, or sitting in the street in front of a house. I spoke to people as they went about their everyday activities, making myself useful where I could and taking care not to disrupt people's tasks. Most of my data was gathered via informal exchanges and interactions that I participated in directly, or simply witnessed taking place. I always had a vocabulary notebook with me, which I also used to scribble down key words or ideas that would help me to write my fieldnotes. During the latter half of my fieldwork, I carried out semi-structured, recorded interviews with most of my 'key informants'. These

were generally geared towards drawing out detailed life histories, but I was also interested in broader family histories and background information about individuals whom I did not know particularly well, such as husbands or sisters who were not normally residents of the household, but who nonetheless played an important part in the household's livelihood strategy. These more focused interviews took place at a stage where I felt that my interlocutors would be comfortable answering very specific questions and had suspended some of their initial judgements about the appropriateness of my inquiring into what were often very personal aspects of their lives.

I frequently attended wedding and name-giving ceremonies, and sometimes funerals, with friends, and became a member of several savings associations. When I visited neighbourhoods that were further away from Parcelles, I sometimes stayed the night, as I found return trips consisting of several hours in a single day to be exhausting.<sup>19</sup> I preferred to visit these families on weekends, especially Sundays, so that I would be able to speak to people – typically men – who had regular jobs outside the house on working days. Although a degree of gender segregation does exist in Dakar, with women and men most likely to sit and chat in groups containing members of their own sex, for example, it is neither strict nor consistent, and I observed much mixed-sex familiarity and friendship. It was, therefore, quite easy for me to become friends with men, especially once I had had my son and became looked upon as the wife of a Senegalese man.

All in all, I think that being seen in this particular light smoothed the way for much of my research. Although I did, occasionally, sense some scepticism and hostility from people when they realised that I had a Senegalese partner, I also experienced similar reactions from people who knew nothing about my personal life. I appreciated that people would be suspicious of my motivations for being in Dakar; many had clear assumptions, not necessarily unfounded, about what *tubaab*, or white people, were like, and were often

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter Six for more on the social importance of visiting people who live outside of one's residential neighbourhood.

disillusioned with expatriates' and tourists' attitudes and behaviour towards ordinary Senegalese people. On the whole, however, I felt that having a Senegalese partner and son made it easier for people to 'position' me in relation to themselves; at any rate, it was considered to be a more legitimate reason for being in Dakar than 'studying Senegalese women and culture'. In saying this, I do not wish to deny the relevance of factors such as wealth, race, religion and nationality in shaping my relationships with people in the field, nor absolve myself of responsibility for my decisions, actions and behaviour when engaging with my informants. I shall reflect further on some of these issues in a moment.

In some respects, I was always an 'outsider', who would, one day, return to where she had come from. However, the distinction between 'outsider' and 'insider' – much as the distinction between 'public' and 'private' – cannot be maintained in practice, as *everyone* shifts between different roles along this continuum. Sometimes, people would emphasise my 'insider' status, referring to me as 'the mother of Mohammed', praising my efforts to speak Wolof, complimenting me on my Senegalese clothes, or remarking on the fact that my surname, 'Hann' (my Welsh father's surname), is actually also a common surname in Senegal. However, to give just one example, I was regularly questioned as to whether I had become a Muslim, and people were disappointed when I replied in the negative. There is a significant Christian, predominantly Catholic, minority in Senegal, and people readily assumed that I, too, was Catholic. However, my close friends were aware that I was not Catholic either, and found the idea that I did not in fact have any religious affiliation strange and disconcerting. It is not easy, therefore, for me to assess how people actually thought of me, and, in many cases, whether they even liked me at all. My hope is that, at least at times, people regarded me as a friend who enjoyed visiting (and being visited), because she had more spare time than most, and as a friend who asked lots of questions, because she was more ignorant and also more curious than most. It could well be that the closest I ever came to being treated as an 'insider' was during those moments, sometimes frustrating, sometimes illuminating,

when people appeared as oblivious to my presence as they were to the presence of young children, who were not perceived to have anything of value to contribute to the proceedings.



**Figure 6: Braiding hair and chatting with the children in Keur Mbaye Fall. Photo by N.D.**

This final observation points directly to questions about ‘informed consent’ and the ethical implications of my research methods. Whenever I met someone for the first time, I was quick to disclose that I was in Dakar for research purposes. But in my day-to-day fieldwork, I soon learnt that the less I reminded people that I was primarily there to do research, instead playing up my other roles such as that of ‘mother of Mohammed’, the more valuable the data I was likely to obtain. As I carried out my research, I was conscious of the fact that there was a sense in which I was accessing information under false pretences. I was never entirely comfortable with this state of affairs, but my ambivalence regarding my research methods has intensified since I began the writing-up process back in London.

This feeling of unease is closely connected to the fact that people in Dakar had a tendency to be quite secretive about certain aspects of their lives. Generally, it was considered preferable to avoid too many people knowing too much about you. I became aware of, and sometimes annoyed by this early on in my fieldwork, as I started to realise that people often deliberately 'lied' or concealed the truth about all kinds of things in their conversations with me. Accusing someone of lying is one of the most severe acts of insult possible in Dakar, and I would therefore like to clarify what I mean when I say that people 'lied' on a regular basis. At first, the severity of the insult seemed to be at odds with my own perception that people lied all the time, not just to me, but also to each other. However, I came to the realisation that the word '*fen*' (to lie) is used, more than anything, to indicate that what is being said does not comply with general moral standards of appropriateness and acceptability, and accurate correspondence to 'reality' is not always the principle measure of 'truth'. As Boubakar Ly observes, 'the social lie is about politeness and social beauty, and as such it takes precedence over realism' (1966:361, quoted in Moya (2011:102), translation from French my own).<sup>20</sup> Most of the 'lies' that I observed and experienced were not, therefore, perceived as such by my friends and informants.

During and after my time in the field, I struggled to understand why people who were otherwise open and approachable could also be so secretive, and why they often lied, especially in situations where they must have known that I (or anyone for that matter) already knew, or was likely to hear, a different account of the matter. For a long time, I attributed it to a widespread belief that gossip or rumour had the potential to act as a type of 'witchcraft' (see Stewart and Strathern 2004). This kind of gossip, known as *cat*, could disadvantage, harm, or even kill the subject being spoken about, even if the speaker's intentions were not necessarily malicious, and anxieties about *cat* were consonant with moralistic exhortations to behave

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<sup>20</sup> '*Le mensonge social est politesse et beauté sociale, et en tant que telle prévaut sur le realism.*'

with discretion and reserve [*sutura*] (Irvine 1974, 1989, Sylla 1994, see also Chapter Two, pp. 83-85). In practice, this meant that it was advisable to limit the degree to which personal details were in 'public' circulation.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, however, I have begun to reflect on the extent to which I, too, was evasive in my dealings with my informants in order to further my own research agenda. I have also reflected critically on the ways in which people here in London, and everywhere else I know, lie and embellish or avoid the truth on an everyday basis. Some of my experiences in Senegal may well have been caused by people's fear of witchcraft, such as when one informant did not appear to know exactly how many children each of the women in her large extended family had. In this case, which took place early on in my fieldwork, one of my friends explained to me later that of course this interlocutor had known the answer to my question, but that she feared that by uttering precise numbers, she might put some of these children at risk of harm, illness or even death. Overall, however, I am reluctant to conclude that secrecy, and, as a consequence, lying, are somehow cornerstones of Senegalese or Dakarois culture, although a degree of discretion may well be.<sup>22</sup> Rather, I have come to the tentative conclusion that if I experienced Dakarois as evasive and secretive, it was probably mainly because I was probing and intruding into people's lives in ways that were culturally (but perhaps also cross-culturally) inappropriate. Matters that were normally considered *not* to be other people's business were my business.

These problems are inherent in the practice of doing anthropological fieldwork, and although in some contexts informants may have vested interests in wanting to reveal and make public certain parts of their lives, I did not find this to be the case in my own research. Rather, I realised that I should read attempts to conceal information as a means of redressing the tremendous imbalance between my presence in my informants' lives, which

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<sup>21</sup> Malevolent gossip and other forms of witchcraft are discussed further in Chapter Two.

<sup>22</sup> In his ethnography of initiation rituals in the Casamance region of southern Senegal, de Jong (2007) does precisely this, insisting that the people he worked with deploy secrecy as a way of reaffirming local identity in the face of external influences and pressures.

was no doubt unwelcome and intrusive at times, and the (minimal) interest or stake that I could expect them have in my research (Visweswaran 1994). For these reasons, preserving my informants' anonymity has been one of my overriding concerns as I have written this thesis. In order to achieve this, I have changed many details, thereby compromising somewhat on ethnographic accuracy, but without, I hope, undermining the validity of my arguments. I have also obscured the identities of the people who feature in some of photographs that illustrate this thesis by cropping images and blurring faces if necessary.

The wealth disparity between my informants and myself was particularly difficult to negotiate. As a strict vegetarian, which was problematic in itself because it meant that I was usually unable to eat with people, I tried to stay healthy whilst I was pregnant by buying fresh milk and cheese, items that most low-income Dakarais cannot afford, and eating lots of eggs, which are, for many people, a luxury purchase. I bought myself an expensive imported mattress, as opposed to the standard sponge mattresses that most people have, I had a wardrobe full of beautiful tailor-made Senegalese outfits that should have taken many more years to accumulate, I took taxis far more frequently than most of the people I knew, and I flew back to Europe to visit my parents at Christmas time. I knew that I could go some way towards compensating for the unfairness of my vastly privileged situation by agreeing to people's frequent requests for money, but the uncertainty over who, when and how much money to give created a lot of stress and anxiety. I couldn't say yes all the time, I wanted to avoid situations where I was obviously 'paying' for information, and I was fearful of being deceived and manipulated by people whom I had grown close to.

I felt from the beginning, however, that refraining from financial generosity was far more morally dubious, and, despite my misgivings, I regularly gave people, especially my closest friends, money and gifts. Initially, I avoided giving cash, concerned that it would undermine the integrity of the relationships more than non-monetary gifts. I soon came to realise,

however, that patron-client relationships that depend on cash transfers are the norm, and that money does not have the same negative connotations that I had learnt to associate with it as a result of my own cultural background and experiences and, more generally, its portrayal in Western societies and philosophical thought (Parry and Bloch 1989, Zelizer 2005, Barber 1995, Guyer 1995). Rationalising it in this way assuaged some of my concerns that my relationships in the field were exclusively viewed in transactional terms, and even helped me analyse the data that I present in Chapter Three, where I explore how material support and emotional attachment are mutually constitutive in marital and romantic relationships. It was still difficult for me to make decisions about when I should give, and although I could sometimes resolve the issue by pre-empting requests and giving people money *before* being asked, there were still situations where I felt pressured to give, or guilty for withholding resources.

In spite of my efforts to be generous, materially but also in other small ways, I came back from the field with an overwhelming sense that I was deeply indebted to so many people in Senegal, who invested so much more in my life and future than I did in theirs. Two and a half years after returning from the field, the feeling of indebtedness remains, especially now that I am not 'helping' nearly as much as I did when I was in the field, and am simultaneously growing closer to accomplishing my personal ambition of completing this thesis. The thought of going back fills me with longing, but also anxiety about the magnitude of this debt. But perhaps, as Graeber (2011b) has recently suggested, the key is to recognise that debt is not intrinsically anti-social, but that it rather has the potential to pull people together in distinctly human ways.

## **1.7     *Outline of the thesis***

My ethnographic focus on women's everyday economic activities begins in Chapter Two by building on the arguments developed in the first part of this

introduction concerning Dakar women's 'consumption', especially their attention to dress, appearance and self-presentation. I suggest that women's attention to dress and appearance should be considered in relation to the general phenomenon of what I term 'keeping up appearances', which is not gender specific. I also suggest that the Senegalese association of consumption and ostentatious behaviour with women can at least partly be explained by the way in which work time and leisure time are gendered. Subsequently, I offer an ethnographic account of a family ceremony I attended in the field in order to argue that low-income Dakaroises' consumption is far more understated than the existing literature, and dominant local discourses, would have us believe. I contend that a focus on the highly *personal* nature of these 'communal' events can help us to see that the rather modest ceremony that I describe is probably more representative of life cycle celebrations in Dakar than is generally assumed to be the case, by locals and external observers alike.

Chapter Three seeks to deconstruct another aspect of the 'materialistic Senegalese woman' trope by arguing that material support and emotional attachment are often inseparable within marital and romantic relationships. I explore how women's sexual practices, demands for material support from husbands and fierce jealousy are perceived to be central to these relationships; taken together, they provide a narrative of Dakar women's desire for and competition over men's money. I demonstrate, however, that women's material concerns and demands cannot be easily disentangled from broader notions of love, care and responsibility.

In Chapter Four, I turn my attention to a different type of conflict that may arise between women, suggesting that tensions between women and their female in-laws are frequently caused by housework. I contrast normative ideas about the performance of housework in Dakar and the expected behaviour of a wife who has married into her in-laws' house with the deep-seated antagonism that the burden of housework may elicit. In particular, I juxtapose the ideal of the deferential, hard-working married-in wife with the

figure of her idle resident sister-in-law who has abundant leisure time, in order to draw attention to the broader 'pecking orders' according to which housework in Dakar is outsourced.

Chapter Five considers the role of the mother in Dakar. I examine the contradictory nature of motherhood in this context, as biological motherhood is accorded enormous value but informal fostering, often long-term or permanent, is widely practiced. I suggest that we can make sense of this tension by attending to the multiple facets of motherhood, emotional, but also, crucially, economic. In particular, the recognition that foster mothers as well as birth mothers are financially responsible for young children highlights the way in which the role of the mother can be performed economically, and is not solely defined in terms of the biological relationship.

Chapter Six is concerned with Dakar women's income-generating activities, and focuses specifically on two very common ways in which my informants earned money, which I refer to as 'selling' and 'trading'. I explore how these two types of work are valorised, demonstrating that whereas the former is associated with the household and is perceived to be directed towards the needs of others, the latter responds to particular ideas about consumption and leisure-time, and tends to be justified in terms of being able to look after oneself. Finally, I suggest that these two kinds of remunerated work, so commonplace in Dakar, reflect and contribute to two distinct emic conceptions of 'being a woman'.

It is this final point that I develop further in my Conclusion, weaving together my ethnographic findings in order to relate women's 'trading' activities to ideas about desiring money, 'consumption', keeping up appearances, and leisure time. The value of 'selling', on the other hand, is explicitly derived from its link with ideas about being a submissive, diligent wife in the house of the in-laws, and a devoted mother who performs sacrifices in order to provide for her children. I suggest that, in seeking to

understand the full spectrum of women's participation in everyday economic life, we come to see that there are two distinct, even competing conceptions of what being a woman means in contemporary Dakar.

## Keeping Up Appearances, Ceremonies and the Communal Face of Women's Consumption

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*People say sometimes that Beauty is superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is. To me, Beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*

— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*Why should I not say to the world which lives with its eyes fixed on great men and women, that it is the unimportant, modest folk who support and carry the weight of the great?*

— Nafissatou Diallo, *A Dakar Childhood*

This chapter builds on some of the key issues raised in Chapter One concerning Dakar women's 'consumption', particularly their attention to dress, appearance and self-presentation. This is considered to be of particular importance in the context of family ceremonies, but also at other social occasions such as religious holidays or savings association meetings. My argument is twofold. On the one hand, my aim is to demonstrate that low-income Dakaraises' consumption in these contexts is far more understated than much of the existing literature, as well as dominant local discourses, would have us believe. However, I also seek to push beyond this verdict in order to critically reappraise the parameters within which Senegalese women's consumption takes place. What is the relationship between investing money and resources in keeping up appearances and local understandings of 'being a woman' in Dakar?

I begin by reflecting on some of the existing studies and relate these to local-level perceptions of women's materialistic behaviour (2.1). In Section 2.2, I suggest that women's consumption, and especially their attention to dress and appearance, should be considered in relation to the more general Dakar phenomenon of what I term 'keeping up appearances', which, crucially, is *not* gender specific. I explore how the high value that urban Senegalese women and men place on appearance is related to specific cultural and historical factors, which include fear of harmful gossip, hierarchy and patron-clientage, the development of urban identities, and the influence of Islam. I then consider why it is that so many Senegalese associate consumption and ostentatious behaviour with women, and suggest that it can at least partly be explained by the way in which 'work time' and 'leisure time' are gendered. Section 2.3 consists of an in-depth case study of a wedding that I attended in Dakar. In it, I describe how women and men worked together to manage the economic pressures of keeping up appearances at a ceremony that was far more modest than the events that tend to feature in the academic literature and hold sway over the Dakarois imagination. In the final section (2.4), I contend that a focus on the highly *personal* nature of these outwardly 'communal' events can help us to see that the ceremony that I describe is probably more representative of life cycle celebrations in Dakar than is generally assumed to be the case.

## **2.1 *Dakar women as conspicuous consumers***

Writing in 1985, the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow declares that in Senegal '[s]ocial life is set up and animated in reference to the women. They organize and dominate baptisms, marriages, funerals, and other ceremonies' (1985:565). As I discussed in the previous chapter, the key themes to emerge from much of the more recent anthropological literature on Senegalese women include the eroticism and expenditures associated with dress and appearance, particularly, though not exclusively, in the context of family ceremonies (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Moya 2011,

Mustafa 2006, 1997, Mottin-Sylla 1988, Heath 1992, Castaldi 2006, McNee 2000, Sarr 1998, Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, Biaya 2000, Grabski 2009, see also Nguyen van Chi-Bonnardel 1978 and Ndiaye 1984). Strikingly, many of these works, along with a remarkable number of studies that are primarily concerned with distinct topics such as women's financial or religious activities, foreground the *communal* aspect of women's undertakings, exploring the ways in which groups of women mobilise via familial, neighbourhood, associational or religious networks (Moya 2011, Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Sarr 1998, Sow 1985, Creevey 2004, Heath 1992, McNee 2000, Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, Guérin 2003, 2006, Rosander 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998, Mbow 1997, Piga 2002, Lecarme-Frassy 2000, A. Kane 2001, Mottin-Sylla 1987, Ndione 1994, Abdoul 2005, 2007, Faye 2000, Mustafa 1997, 2006, Nguyen van Chi-Bonnardel 1978). These studies describe women's practices and interactions with one another not only at life cycle ceremonies, but also at economic or religious association gatherings. They pay particular attention to the meanings and significance of women's relationships with one another, exploring the ways in which these female spaces and practices constitute the setting for the enactment of these relations or, in some cases, are the very mediums through which the bonds between women are created and negotiated. Although these relationships may involve competition and hostility between women (see Chapter Three), this tends to be subsumed analytically to female solidarity and mutual assistance.

Beth Buggenhagen (2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001) and Ismaël Moya (2011), whose research constitutes the only recent, in-depth analyses of family ceremonies in urban Senegal, offer rich descriptions of the costliest occasions – name-giving and wedding ceremonies – that involve copious amounts of food, drink, paid entertainment and elaborate gift exchange.<sup>23</sup> The female hosts and attendees invest enormously in these events, in the provisioning of the guests, in their own appearance, and also as participants

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<sup>23</sup> Diop (1985) provides a comprehensive account of earlier customary practices; see also Le Cour Grandmaison (1971), Mottin-Sylla (1988), Dial (2008:41-98) and Nguyen van Chi-Bonnardel (1978:474-491)

in conspicuous exchanges of cash and gifts of cloth. Buggenhagen argues that women's investment in their appearance and their lavish gift giving is 'not directed at demonstrating individual wealth or personal vanity, but rather [makes] visible the strength of women's social networks' (2012a:26). She adds later that 'women increasingly rely on qualities such as feminine beauty, underscored by conspicuous consumption, to convey the possibilities of engaging in reciprocal gift exchange and the social relationships that such reciprocity would engender' (2012a:180). Buggenhagen builds on Annette Weiner's (1985, 1992) concept of women's 'inalienable wealth', proposing that women's unrestrained spending on their own appearance at ceremonies is a way of 'keeping-while-giving'. Drawing on Nancy Munn (1992), she argues that the practice of displaying wealth on the body is integral to the 'crafting of reputations' as women strive to influence others' views of themselves and succeed as social beings (see also Buggenhagen 2011).

Although Buggenhagen acknowledges that women's ceremonial activities and their quests for status and reputation may contribute to the creation of relationships of competition and inequality, her overall emphasis is on the 'strength of women's social networks', a theme that becomes symbolically and visually represented by the image of scores of impressively dressed women collectively taking over Dakar's houses and thronging into public spaces during family ceremonies. It is this particular image of women that is perceived to represent the power and status of urban Senegalese women in contemporary society at large.

Moya's argument is similar, although his focus is on the precise costs incurred by these ceremonies. He documents how women have elaborate mechanisms in place that enable them to raise vast sums of money for ceremonies – amounts, he argues, that would not normally be available for any other purpose. They mobilise a range of social relationships in order to obtain money, through participating in Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) – groups which, following Ardener's classic

definition, are 'formed upon a core of participants who make regular contributions to a fund which is given in whole or in part to each contributor in turn' (1995:1) – that are specifically intended to finance family ceremonies, but also by relying on various institutionalised forms of assistance from friends and family members when they have an impending ceremony.

Buggenhagen, who also emphasises the importance of savings associations and mutual assistance between women at ceremonies, explicitly frames her argument around the premise that extensive transnational migration has created new possibilities, 'wealth' and 'worth' for Senegalese women, especially more senior women (see also Melly 2011, 2010). She focuses primarily on Murid families whose male members wield influence within extensive transnational trade networks. The women, she argues, are able to channel migrants' remittances into family ceremonies, accruing social prestige as they spend money on their appearance and engage in elaborate and ostentatious gift exchange. 'Clad in the cargo of their male kin, female elders participate in exchange contests driven by ostentatious displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption' (2004:49). In urban Senegal, at least, they have dislodged senior men from the top of the gendered and generational hierarchical matrix.

This interpretation of the situation hinges on a particular understanding of the way in which broader economic and political changes have impacted upon Senegalese women (see Chapter One, 1.4). Buggenhagen links the phenomenon of women's consumption to male migration, the move away from farming and ongoing urbanisation, and, crucially, to the decentralisation and feminisation of development in the neoliberal era. She contends that it is intimately connected to the advent of neoliberalism and 'hard times', as does Hudita Nura Mustafa (2006, 1997), who views urban Senegalese women's preoccupation with beauty and appearance as a symptom of acute financial instability and the 'crisis' that has been underway since the 1970s.

Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (2005, 2007) and Jessica Morales-Libove (2005) make similar points in their studies of women's dance at Dakar *tuur*, a particular type of savings association meeting with an important social component. They observe that, in addition to being sites of leisure and pleasure, these events provide women with occasions to mobilise with other women and expand their support networks. They help women attain a degree of financial security, not only enabling them to save money, but also potentially facilitating their entry into small business activities. As a result, argues Neveu Kringelbach, women have witnessed a relative improvement in their socioeconomic status. She situates these changes within an economic climate that, she argues, has had an adverse effect on the fortunes of most men. However, the changes have enabled women to advance into certain social spaces, notably the dance events/ROSCA meetings, as well as the informal economic sector (see Chapter One, 1.4).

Neveu Kringelbach and Morales-Libove pay considerable attention to women's *spending* on their appearance at these events – which ostensibly, of course, function as mechanisms for *saving* (Mottin-Sylla 1987, Guérin 2003, 2006, Creevey 2004, Hall-Arber 1988:117-124, see also Geertz 1962, Ardener 1995, 1964 and Ardener and Burman 1995). Morales-Libove's focus is on how 'beauty, consumption and sexuality are enacted in women's dance at *tours*' (2005:24); she details how a particular group of women, who, it is worth noting, live in the wealthy SICAP suburb and belong to Dakar's socioeconomic elite, spend hours preparing themselves for these meetings. Neveu Kringelbach itemises the estimated costs associated with bodily adornment, and contends that 'for Senegalese women the importance of being beautiful (*rafet*) is taken to the extreme' (2005:136).

Mustafa (1997, 2006), whose research explores the ideas and practices associated with 'beauty' in Dakar from a number of different angles, argues that although both men and women are often accused of desiring money, it is only in the case of women that this can be attributed to an innate feminine

quality, one that is inextricably linked to ideas about beauty and bodily adornment. A number of other authors (e.g. McNee 2000, Nyamnjo 2005, Biaya 2000, Heath 1992 and Rabine 2002) have made similar observations. The implication is almost always that, relative to average incomes and the resources available to people, Dakar women today spend 'disproportionate' sums on clothing and personal appearance (although the broader context of the comparison is not made explicit).

It is somewhat ironic, perhaps, that in the Senegalese context, discourses about women's materialism have figured prominently in discussions of women's *communal*, rather than individualised practices. It is almost as though ideas about emancipatory consumer practices (cf. Miller 1995, Appadurai 1986 and Friedman 1994a) have converged, on the one hand, with feminist agendas that value 'strength in numbers' and female solidarity, and on the other with persisting assumptions about 'African communalism' in order to create a notion of Dakar women's 'communal' materialism and consumption. This contrasts somewhat with the concept of a highly individualistic materialism that is identifiable within many 'Western' discourses.

It is important to note that reports of urban Senegalese women's conspicuous consumption and their excessive spending on appearance are not restricted to the academic literature – they are also deeply ingrained in the Senegalese consciousness. Indeed, it is fair to say that there is a degree of overlap between the dominant themes in academic writing about Senegalese women and local attitudes towards women's consumption in Dakar, in terms of content, if not moral evaluation. I frequently heard both women and men criticise women's ostentatious behaviour, and especially their ceremonial spending. There was a strong sentiment that the general shortage of money in Senegal was somehow connected to women 'eating' it, thereby pulling it out of circulation. This feeling was neatly summed up by Cornelia Panzacchi's (1994:195) informants, who explained that money smells of perfume because women handle it more than men.

Of course, academic observers do not take these discourses at face value, but engage critically with them. Buggenhagen, for example, argues that critical attitudes towards women's spending, as opposed to an appreciation of the numerous ways in which different people rely on it for their livelihoods, are a defining feature of the neoliberal moment (2012:126, see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). It is widely acknowledged that women's consumption, particularly in the context of family ceremonies, has been the target of a range of criticisms within Islamic, political and development discourses. The Western/secular and religious voices are in agreement as to the wastefulness of spending on ceremonies, denouncing it as un-Islamic, and linking women's behaviour to pre-Islamic *cosaan*, which translates roughly as traditions, culture or origins (Sieveking 2008a, Bop 2005, Buggenhagen 2012a, Sow 2003).

Since the late 1990s, Islamic reformist movements in particular have pressured the government to implement stronger restrictions on ceremonial spending, which is perceived to be incompatible with Islamic notions of restraint and modesty.<sup>24</sup> However, attempts to limit expenditures have historical precedents that can be traced back to the time of the colonial administration. Indeed, the 1972 Senegalese Family Code formally limits the payments that may be made at ceremonies, although most ordinary Senegalese are ignorant of these directives. All this has led some observers to interpret ceremonies that mark the life cycle as examples of women's control over kinship and biological and social reproduction – a power that calls into question, or at least presents an alternative value system to the authority of the male Muslim leadership (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001, Moya 2011, Bop 2005, Sow 2003). I suggest, however, that despite these attempts to link women's ceremonial activities with 'social

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<sup>24</sup> However, we shall see in the following section that spending on appearance is compatible with ideas about high status that pertain to the system of social stratification that was widespread in the Senegambia region. Moreover, I shall argue that there is an extent to which investment in appearance resonates within an Islamic belief system (Biaya 2000, 2001).

reproduction' at the symbolic level, the powerful master narrative of 'consumptive Senegalese women' emerges directly from the various ethnographies discussed above. The symbolic strengthening of blood relations leads, in practice, to *thwarted* social reproduction, which becomes delayed as *men* are unable to keep up with *women's* demands for expensive ceremonies.

Accounts of extortionate spending on family ceremonies and women's excesses resonate to an extent with my own experiences in Dakar, although Islam was rarely invoked spontaneously by my acquaintances, who merely described these practices as unnecessary and wasteful. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I gradually started to realise that it would be a gross misrepresentation to imply that the type of ceremony discussed by Moya and Buggenhagen was the *normal* way of marking births and marriages, especially amongst low-income Dakarais. It is indeed the case that Dakar is becoming a 'consumer city' in the sense that, in recent times, it has witnessed a sharp increase in the volume and variety of imported consumer goods (Scheld 2003, 2007, Nyamnjoh 2005, Lambert 1999). However, in the remainder of this chapter I attempt to modify the master narrative that posits Senegalese women as excessively materialistic by attending, on the one hand, to the broader cultural context within which women's alleged consumption takes place, and on the other to the precise material circumstances that characterised such 'ceremonies' as I experienced in the field. I take on the thesis that women are spending 'disproportionate' amounts on ceremonies and on their appearance, a statement that, it is worth noting, is entirely subjective. In short, I contend that although a minority of Dakarais may indeed be preoccupied with excessive spending on appearance and ceremonial gift exchange, we should be cautious about extrapolating from these specific instances to *women* in general. My own data indicates that low-income Dakarais' consumption is far more understated than the literature would have us believe, often involving more modest expenditures and little or no gift exchange.



**Figure 7: Cooking the food for the guests at a large (and relatively costly) name-giving ceremony. Photo by the author**

## **2.2 *Maanaa and the importance of keeping up appearances***

In this section, I explore urban Senegalese women's consumption, and local attitudes towards it, in relation to broader historical and cultural points of reference. I suggest that in order to do so, it is instructive to take a step back from the concrete question of women's consumption and investment in appearance and reflect more broadly on the phenomenon of what I term 'keeping up appearances' in Dakar.<sup>25</sup> Scholars who have addressed the topic of Senegalese women's consumption offer various interpretations of this phenomenon. Lisa McNee (2000), for example, argues that for Senegalese women, fashion is not intended to convey individuality or originality, but more a sense of personal dignity. Wearing the 'right' kind of clothes, she says, is not about accruing individual status or prestige; rather, it enables

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the importance of beauty and dress in other African contexts, see for example Popenoe (2004), Allman (2004), Friedman (1994b), Ferguson (1999), Hendrickson (1996), James (1996), Burke (1996) and Martin (1995).

the wearer to become a dignified and complete human being. She writes that in Senegal, 'clothing 'makes the woman' in a very obvious way' (2000:4).

Virtually all those who have commented on women's consumption in Dakar are at pains to point out that women's concern with the superficial is anything but.<sup>26</sup> However, as I explained in the previous section, some analyses tend to view women's consumption primarily in terms of the social relationships it creates, how it reinforces the 'strength of women's networks' and how it symbolically underscores women's collective agency. My own findings support McNee's thesis that dressing well engenders, more than anything, a sense of personal dignity and self-respect. It is not at all evident that individual distinction and status are not *also* part of the picture – a point I shall return to in 2.4. In this section, however, I argue that this sense of personal dignity applies to men as well as to women: in urban Senegal, clothing should be understood to 'make the *person*'. In the discussion that follows, I draw attention to several, related factors that underpin the high value urban Senegalese place on appearance. I examine the ways in which my informants conceptualised attention to appearance and illustrate how ideas about dignity and personal character are closely connected to physical appearance, dress and bodily cleanliness.

Concerns with physical appearance were closely linked to Dakarois anxieties about a certain form of 'witchcraft' that manifested itself as malignant gossip (see Chapter One, pp. 66-67). The belief in the negative power of gossip, or *cat*, was widespread amongst my informants and neatly encapsulates the conflicting ideas and practices concerning dress and appearance that this chapter attempts to unravel. The 'black tongue' [*làmmiñ bu ñuul*], somewhat comparable to the 'evil eye', had the potential to disadvantage, harm, or even kill the subject being spoken about, even if

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<sup>26</sup> Francis Nyamnjoh is an exception, observing darkly that whereas some Dakarois 'seek refuge in fundamentalisms, others sacrifice anything, including morality, dignity and ultimately even their humanity, just to be consumer gatecrashers and zombies' (2005:295).

the speaker's intentions were not necessarily malicious.<sup>27</sup> Although anybody could be the victim of malignant gossip, those who were most vulnerable were those who stood out from the crowd, lacked discretion and drew attention to themselves. Certain types of people were particularly vulnerable, for example twins, and children especially needed to be protected (Gamble and Ames 1989:147-149). However, falling prey to this type of harmful gossip was most strongly associated with financial success and ostentatious behaviour. For this reason, the content of the gossip itself tended to be complimentary, referring to an individual's wealth, beauty or achievements (Irvine 1989:260-261). As a consequence, *cat* was often cited by women as a reason *not* to get dressed up and attend ceremonies.

In one case, I remember waiting with a friend until after dark before finally leaving to attend a name-giving ceremony. My friend explained that she did not really want to go, but that it would look bad if we failed to attend. It was better to wait until it was dark before leaving the house, she warned, because 'people know how to look'. When I asked her what this meant, she touched her tongue and said 'this is not good, the tongue is not good', adding that 'people know how to talk' [*nit ñi, dañu mēna wax*]. Judith Irvine (1989) writes that speech can expose the addressee to the attentions of witches. In my experience, *cat* was usually not attributed to a specific individual – when I asked people who might have caused a particular instance of *cat*, they explained that there was no way of knowing whose tongue had caused the unfortunate event.<sup>28</sup> On just one occasion, a friend related to me how an acquaintance he had not seen for some time had repeatedly commented on how much weight he had gained, speculating that he must be eating well. My

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<sup>27</sup> See Irvine (1974, 1989), Sylla (1994), Ames (1959) and Gamble and Ames (1989:148) for more on the fear of the 'tongue', the powers of speech and how these are related to social stratification and the traditional Wolof occupational categories, and Favret-Saada (1980) for a comparable manifestation of witchcraft in rural France.

<sup>28</sup> However, a different form of witchcraft, *liggéey*, which was carried out by a *marabout* on behalf of his client, was more likely to be attributed to particular individuals, usually family members (see Chapter Three). It is worth bearing in mind that according to earlier anthropological terminology, *cat* would fall under the heading of 'sorcery', defined as a mystical or innate power, rather than 'witchcraft', which was understood to be an evil magic deliberately inflicted upon others (Moore and Sanders 2001:3). 'Witchcraft' is the most common term for both in contemporary academic usage, although to complicate the matter further, in French both are widely referred to as '*sorcellerie*' (*ibid.*).

friend felt that his acquaintance had overdone the compliment, and muttered 'it made me think, are you a witch or something?' explicitly identifying a potential perpetrator of *cat* as a witch [*dëmm*].

I encountered only a very small number of instances where individuals, or families, were accused of being witches. The accusations were indirect, and I was always told that *other* people suspected this particular individual, or family, of being witches. In all of these cases, being a witch was linked to extreme poverty. This reflects the general pattern of contemporary witchcraft accusations across much of Africa, which tend to be directed at the poor and the marginalised.<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that my acquaintances also cited fear of gossip as a reason for taking time over their appearance and dressing *well*. They observed that an appearance of poverty could give people reason to 'talk', and that 'talk isn't good' [*wax baaxu*]. Times were tough, but it was not other people's business to know this. In these cases, they did not speak of *cat* or the powers of the tongue, and although they never said so explicitly, I suspected that the motivation for dressing well stemmed from a concern that an appearance of poverty could give the impression of being a *perpetrator* of *cat*, or a witch, and could render them subject to a different kind of gossip that could also have severe social consequences. We can see, then, that it is considered advisable to dress 'well enough' without dressing 'too well' (see Heath 1992, Mustafa 1997).

Scholars of Senegal have remarked that an appearance of wealth acquires specific meaning within a highly stratified social system based on patron-clientage (Diop 1981, Heath 1992, Irvine 1974). In the precolonial era, this form of social organisation traditionally took the form of endogamous, hereditary occupational groups ('castes') and characterised the ethnic

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<sup>29</sup> Accounts of witchcraft in Africa frequently surmise that it is a response to millennial capitalism, consumption and the social inequalities these give rise to (e.g. Geschiere 1997, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000, Moore and Sanders 2001). However, it is not clear that the case of *cat* entirely maps onto this model, even though it *is* arguably a social criticism of conspicuous consumption. Judith Irvine (1974, 1989) convincingly argues that beliefs in the negative effects of speech are closely linked to the traditional hierarchical ('caste') system.

groups that dominated the Senegambia region (see Chapter One, 1.3). Put simply, wealth [*alal*] is associated with the capacity for largesse [*teraanga*], and therefore the high status of a patron. However, this is complicated by the fact that an appearance of wealth can also be interpreted, depending on the context, as a reflection of somebody else's high status, for example one's patron, husband or father (Irvine 1974, Heath 1992, Scheld 2003). A degree of fluidity has probably always characterised patron-client relations in Senegal – a Wolof proverb reminds us that 'one person's sheep is another person's lion' [*xarum waay, gaynde waay*].

As we have seen in the previous chapter, social stratification in the Senegambia region has undergone significant transformations since the precolonial era. Over the past century and a half, the region has witnessed the dismantling of the precolonial kingdoms, French colonial rule and eventual independence, mass conversion to Islam, and the rise of a cash crop economy followed by severe economic decline. These transformations have precipitated an on-going process of urbanization. Although some of the 'traditional' occupation-based distinctions continue to persist in urban Senegal, they are increasingly blurred.<sup>30</sup> The aristocracy and the slave categories no longer exist, other occupations do not have the same practical relevance as before and there is more intermarriage across groups. Arguably, as noted earlier, these transformations can partly be explained by the increased anonymity that the city affords its inhabitants.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on Erving Goffman (1959), I suggest that the importance of appearance in an urban environment where identities are often partial and anonymous is especially salient when we consider that traditionally, social identities were more rigid and differentiated, and social mobility more restricted. Suzanne Scheld (2003:47-100) reinforces this argument further by explaining that during the earlier days of urbanisation, clothing served as a marker of status for an emerging urban elite, usually employees of the colonial

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<sup>30</sup> See Panzacchi (1994) for how this has occurred in the case of the praise-orator 'griot' [*géwél*] group.

<sup>31</sup> Geschiere (2003) and Bonhomme (2012) explore the relationship between this increase of scale of social relations and witchcraft in the African context.

administration, and that in contemporary Senegal clothing still functions as a signifier of 'urban' and 'rural' identity (cf. Ferguson 1999, James 1996).

My informants in Dakar would often use the terms 'dressing well' [*solu*] and 'being clean' [*set*] in a single breath. Scheld observes that in Senegal 'correct, respectful and civilised dress and appearance ... have Islamic religious signification' (2003:163), arguing that dressing correctly is a way of disciplining the body comparable to the completion of ritual prayers and associated purity and bodily cleanliness.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting here that scholars of Islam have argued that Islamic understandings of the self tend to reject the mind-body dichotomies characteristic of Judeo-Christian and Cartesian ontologies and tend to view 'interior' dimensions of selfhood, such as character, as closely linked to 'exterior' features of the body.<sup>33</sup> Both are essential aspects of selfhood, and bodily practices are perceived to influence internal states, as well as the reverse (see for example Mahmood 2001). My informants, however, did not usually refer explicitly to Islam when talking about the importance of physical appearance, but simply stated that being clean and dressing well amounted to normal, correct behaviour that demonstrated 'love for oneself' [*bëgg boppam*]. Interestingly, these understandings of the self not only resonate with Goffman's theories about the formation of complex identities, but also with performance theoretical approaches to gender (see Chapter One), which famously attempt to collapse the appearance/reality dichotomy when it comes to questions of gender and sex (e.g. Butler 1990).

*Bëgg boppam*, which literally means 'love for oneself', or *gëm boppam*, which translates as respect for, or belief in oneself, were the most common ways in which people spoke about the strong cultural expectation of dressing well. This merging of internal dignity with external appearance was also signified

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<sup>32</sup> For most of my informants, 'dressing well' was not synonymous with 'Muslim' dress. Although modesty was a concern for most of the women I knew, it generally precluded the wearing of short skirts, but not of jeans or tight tops. Only a minority of my informants habitually covered their hair.

<sup>33</sup> Biaya (2000:707-710) observes that in Islam, the erotic body is not considered to be a nude body, but rather one that is appropriately accessorized.

using the term *maanaa*, which ascended into fashion in 2009, when I was halfway through my fieldwork. This Wolof word, which, as far as I am aware, bears no relation to its homophone in the Pacific Islands, was popularised by a song by Fallou Dieng, a young male *mballax* singer. *Maanaa* dominated Dakar's airwaves and TV stations for a good half a year: it was played in houses, streets and cars, at parties and ceremonies, and on people's mobile phones. Its *clip*, or music video, features a crowd of well-dressed men and women, most wearing 'European' garb, some wearing 'Senegalese' or 'traditional' ensembles, dancing as they watch Dieng perform.<sup>34</sup> The video spawned a distinctive dance step that was quickly mastered by all Dakarois under a certain age. The song opens with the following lines:

A person who has *maanaa* loves herself/himself

[*Nit ku am maanaa, day bëgg boppam*]

A person who has *maanaa* loves her/his country

[*Nit ku am maanaa, day bëgg réewam*]

A person who has *maanaa* loves her/his traditions/culture/origins

[*Nit ku am maanaa, day bëgg cosaanam*]

Where a person lives should be very beautiful

[*Dëkku waay, day rafet loolu*]

What a person wears should be very beautiful

[*Colin ga, rafet loolu*]

A little later, he adds that:

A person who has *maanaa* respects/believes in himself/herself

[*Nit ku am maanaa, day gëm boppam*]

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVDyqCQgRK8> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

And:

A person who has *maanaa* respects/believes in God

[*Nit ku am maanaa, day gëm Yalla*]

Following convention, the song descends into praise-oratory, and Fallou Dieng names individuals who have *maanaa*, singing, using the French words, that they have *personalité*, and that they are *civilisé*.<sup>35</sup> Backing singers regularly interject with '*personalité*', and indeed, when I asked people to describe what *maanaa* meant, this was the first word they offered. Clearly, I was expected to know what *personalité* meant and, during one conversation with a small group of friends, there was confusion when I said that I believed that *everyone* had *personalité*. I then asked my friends what a person who has *personalité* is like and they replied that it is someone who is clean [*set*], dresses well [*solu*] or wears nice clothes [*sol lu rafet*] – someone who loves herself/himself [*bëgg boppam*].<sup>36</sup>

In *Maanaa*, Dieng equates love and respect for oneself and being a good person with cleanliness and beautiful, correct clothing. Interestingly, however, the song does not lend itself easily to the interpretation that *maanaa* involves embodying individualistic or selfish principles. The lyrics indicate that *maanaa* is a quality of the self that simultaneously incorporates a strong sense of national, cultural and religious identity. The definition of *maanaa* is extended beyond the appearance of the body to include the

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<sup>35</sup> Morales-Libove (2005:185) and Scheld (2003:163) also note the use of *civilisé* for complimenting on someone's appearance.

<sup>36</sup> Throughout this thesis, I occasionally draw on popular culture, especially songs and their music videos, in order to enhance my analysis of social reality in Dakar. Following authors such as Johannes Fabian (1978) and Karin Barber (1987, 1997), I maintain that 'the most obvious reason for giving serious attention to the popular arts is their sheer undeniable presence as social facts' (Barber 1987:1). In contemporary Dakar, music is the popular genre that people are the most exposed to, generally in the *mballax* style that was popularized by Youssou N'dour during the 1980s. Television has become a key medium through which songs become disseminated, and music videos provided the soundtrack to my fieldwork. As we shall see, and as Barber and Fabian have argued, popular culture may sometimes reflect, or become co-opted by dominant interests and voices, but also has the potential to take an anti-establishment stance in the vein of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and realm of the unofficial (Barber 1987:64, Fabian 1978:330).

appearance of physical surroundings. Although people did tend to foreground the importance of proper attention to the *body*, I am disinclined to agree with analyses that suggest that this should be viewed as a reaction to a 'disintegrating urban environment (Rabine 2002:35) or as an 'act of resistance against the squalor of poverty' (Castaldi 2006:93). My informants were quick to point out when their surroundings were dirty, but did not perceive them to be uniformly or permanently so, and in Chapter Three, I describe how intimate spaces can also become sites of beauty.

People who did not meet these appearance-related expectations could be openly criticised, and sometimes an explicit connection was made between an individual's character and their attention to appearance, or lack thereof (Heath 1992:22-23, Buckley 2001:73). During another attempt to make sense of *maanaa*, one of my friends, Anta, shocked me somewhat by referring to her husband as an example of someone who does *not* have *maanaa*. She spoke candidly about her disgust with her husband's appearance. 'He's dirty,' she sniffed. 'That's not good. A man should be clean. He should wash until he's clean and wear clean clothes.' I knew that Anta's husband performed particularly unsanitary work – he slaughtered cows and sheep at the main livestock market – and I knew that their marriage was marred by frequent disputes that, according to Anta, were provoked by her husband's inability to satisfactorily provide for Anta and their four young children. So I suggested that perhaps he didn't dress well because of where he worked, or because he lacked the means. 'That doesn't take anything,' retorted Anta. 'You get home from work, wash until you're clean and put on a clean shirt. He's not the one who washes his clothes! And he doesn't even shave. Is a person supposed to do that? [*Nit, day def loolu?*']

I witnessed a similar accusation being levelled at a young woman as she was sprawled on the sofa late one afternoon. She had been to the market in the morning, cooked a large meal, prepared the tea, swept the floor after lunch and had just finished washing up the cooking utensils and dishes. 'You!' Her sister-in-law wagged her finger at her and spoke in a tone that was

somewhere between scolding and joking. 'You are not good. You should love yourself! When you've finished your work you should wash, moisturise your body and put on some nice clothes and a headscarf. Even if your husband is not here, you should do it. This is not good in a woman.'

Drawing on these two exchanges, I suggest that analysing the value of cleanliness with reference not only to Islam, but also to *work*, further illuminates the importance of dress and appearance in Dakar. Anthropologists commenting on the phenomenon of 'dressing well' in Dakar tend to overlook, or perhaps take for granted, the fact that it only occurs during *leisure time*. 'It was astoundingly rare,' writes Morales-Libove, 'to see women clad in the typical American summer uniform of shorts, tee-shirts and flip-flops or sneakers, because women were expected to present themselves elegantly, and the American idea of "dressing down" was simply not acceptable' (2005:91). True as this last point may be, I found that the majority of Dakar women and men, who perform domestic, menial, or other kinds of 'dirty' work on a daily basis, are certainly *not* expected to dress well when they are working.

Work clothes usually consist of second hand European clothing, or clothing that was new when purchased but now shows severe signs of wear and tear. Wearing ugly, worn clothes whilst working does not lower the wearer's status, nor does it render the worker vulnerable to any kind of negative gossip.<sup>37</sup> Although an individual may be quite dirty and wearing stained clothes whilst working, this uncleanliness is not perceived to impact upon the interior self, and consequently, there is no loss of dignity or *maanaa*. However, appropriate attention to appearance is expected *outside working hours* – although the distinction between work and non-work is not always easily drawn, especially in the case of women's work inside the house. Most women and men will wear 'nice' clothes for just a few hours in the afternoon

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<sup>37</sup> A minority of (elite, mostly highly educated) Dakarois perform work that is not primarily physical. The few jobs that do not involve dirt and heat, which generally take place in air-conditioned offices, are accorded a higher status than the types of labour that the majority of the urban population engages in.

or evening when the work of the day is (more or less) finished. Some men may do so just once a week, on a Sunday, when they have a full day off work. Generally speaking, cleanliness and proper dress demarcate the activity that is being undertaken as leisure, not work.

I would add here that a consideration of urban Senegalese ideas about the gendered division of labour, and conversely, the 'gendered division of leisure', can deepen our understanding of local discourses about women's conspicuous consumption in urban Senegal. Men's work is expected to consist of a daily routine of leaving the house, allowing for only limited leisure time. This is not to imply that all men are actually earning money, but rather that there is a strong gendered requirement that they do so, which means that even men who have no fixed employment make an effort to leave the house in the morning. Conversely, although many women in Dakar are earning money, in many cases, their remunerated work, for example vending snacks or braiding hair, will not take them far from the house (Chapter Six). Even when it does, it is often on more of an ad hoc basis, such as informal trade in consumer goods via networks of friends and family (*ibid.*). For now, it is worth noting that women's primary roles are perceived to be as wives and mothers, rather than breadwinners. Although women's housework and childcare responsibilities can be time-consuming, there are acceptable ways of outsourcing them (see Chapter Four), and consequently, women may at least legitimately *aspire* to live a life of leisure in a way that men may not.

I suggest that this contributes to the dominant association of women with leisure time, which includes religious and family ceremonies as well as community events such as savings or religious association meetings. These are high-profile 'leisure' occasions that have profound religious and social meanings, and as a consequence of the 'gendered division of leisure', it is women who have become primarily associated with the expenditures occasioned by these events, especially family ceremonies. These events require particular types of tailored clothing to be worn, and when people

talk about ‘dressing up’ [*sañse*] for such events they are referring to more than simply being clean and correctly dressed. The word *sañse* is derived from the French *changer*, and refers to the changing of outfits by the key players at lavish ceremonies. Much as the dramatic transformations of hostesses at Western award ceremonies, the act of changing clothes evokes a particular sense of opulence and extravagance.

Crucially, discussions of dressing well in Senegal have tended to focus on ‘dressing up’ [*sañse*], as opposed to ‘dressing well’ [*solu*], ‘being clean’ [*set*] and the more *everyday* attention to appearance that has been the focus of this section (Buggenhagen 2012a, 2011, Mustafa 2006, 1997, Morales-Libove 2005, Moya 2011, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, McNee 2000). Most analyses that deal with dress and appearance tend to emphasise particular feminine ideals of appearance such as the voluptuous, elegantly-dressed senior women [*diriyanke*] or the fashionable, modern, slender young girls that frequent Dakar’s nightclubs [*diskette*] (e.g. Biaya 2000, Buggenhagen 2012a, Mustafa 2006). Scheld (2003, 2007) is one of the few who acknowledges that keeping up appearances is similarly important for men. In this section, I have sought to demonstrate that an understanding of women’s dressing up and conspicuous consumption at high-profile occasions would be incomplete without an appreciation of the importance of *maanaa*, dressing well [*solu*] and being clean [*set*] for men, as well as for women, in the context of ‘everyday’ leisure time as well as ‘exceptional’ leisure time. Spending money in order to look good at certain communal events is, I suggest, at least in part an extension of the everyday importance attached to physical appearance.

In the previous section, I mentioned that Panzacchi’s (1994) informants told her that money smells of perfume because women handle it more frequently than men, reflecting popular discourses about women’s spending on their appearance. I would complicate this statement with my own observation that men in Dakar were constantly borrowing their sisters’, wives’ and other female relatives’ perfumes, deodorants and moisturising creams. Initially, I

found it amusing that men could wear ‘women’s’ scents. However, upon reflection, I would suggest that this practice perhaps symbolises, or reveals, the extent to which ideas about keeping up appearances (if we extend the definition of ‘appearance’ to include the olfactory, as well as the visual), and the expenses it incurs, are gendered – or not: men frequently *borrow* perfumes and certain other cosmetics products that *belong* to women.

I shall now proceed to offer my own analysis of Dakar family ceremonies, which constitute the primary setting for *sañse*, exploring how ordinary people negotiate the pressures of keeping up appearances at high-profile leisure occasions that have profound social and religious significance.

### **2.3 *Lamine and Marietou’s wedding***

By Thursday, it had become clear that Uncle Lamine would be getting married that weekend, and talk of the marriage began to circulate amongst family members and neighbouring households. About a month earlier, Lamine had told me with a glint in his eye that there was a girl that he liked, and that he was looking into the possibility of getting married, yet I had not believed that a marriage was imminent. Most of the single men that I spoke to expressed their desire to marry, and although some claimed they had not yet found someone that they liked, others, like Lamine, had. Vague plans for facilitating a union were usually afoot, which, for men, generally entailed satisfying certain financial and material conditions. For many men, the process of becoming ‘marriageable’ was ongoing and of indeterminate duration. Following Uncle Lamine’s announcement one afternoon that he intended to marry in two weeks’ time, family members merely remarked that he was no longer a youth, but did not ponder the issue further. There was no general discussion of Uncle Lamine’s marriage, and certainly no preparation of any kind, until later the following week, when it became clear that the marriage would indeed take place.

Lamine was a cousin of Mère bi<sup>38</sup>, the matriarch of one of the households I frequented in Guédiawaye. His mother's relatives lived in another part of Dakar, but no one knew them well, and he had always been close to Mère bi, to whom he was related on his father's side. Previously, he had lived in Mère bi's house, sharing a room with several other single men who were all part of the same extended family. However, he had been accused of smoking marijuana, and had subsequently moved into rented accommodation. For many years now, he had rented small rooms in the vicinity of Mère bi's house, remaining close to the family and taking his afternoon and evening meals with them several times a week. Lamine was a tailor, and was usually employed by more senior tailors who ran *ateliers* of their own to assist with commissions, although he would simultaneously try and secure direct orders through personal contacts. He always seemed to be in and out of employment, and was routinely criticised and mocked behind his back for his perceived idleness and concomitant financial insecurity. Perhaps this is why, initially, the announcement of his impending nuptials was not taken seriously, but rather was met with indifference. It was only when Lamine's plans began to take concrete shape that this indifference became displaced by a mood of approving surprise and contained excitement.

Lamine confided in Mère bi and one of her elder daughters that although he envisaged that his wife would share his room, she would spend her days and have her meals in Mère bi's house, where she would participate in a cooking roster alongside Mère bi's daughters-in-law. By the same token, Mère bi's house would be her destination upon leaving her own home in order to start married life – this is where she would 'disembark' [*wàcc*] from her journey. This was to occur on the Saturday night. The following day there would be a *yendu*, or a daytime celebration of the marriage, at Mère bi's house, which would include lunch for the guests. The family was receptive to these suggestions, and seemed to agree that Lamine's wife would be lonely if she were to spend her days in her room by herself whilst Lamine was working.

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<sup>38</sup> Literally 'the mother', this term is used to refer to senior women by people of their children's generation.

The younger women in particular emphasised that during the day, their own house was quiet, indicating that they would be glad to have company. In all probability, they also realised that they would benefit from the labour contributions of another 'married-in' wife (see Chapter Four). One of the brothers insinuated that the main reason that Lamine had proposed this arrangement was to avoid committing himself to a routine of monetary obligation towards his wife, who would normally expect a small sum from her husband every morning for food. In Mère bi's house, this was invariably allocated by Mère bi's eldest sons and usually covered breakfast, lunch and dinner. Although other family members assisted in various ways, Lamine had never contributed towards this daily food expenditure, but remained a *surgë*, someone in a position of dependence vis-à-vis the family.

The women in the household knew very little about Lamine's wife-to-be, including her name, but, as the weekend approached, some details emerged. She was a Jola from the Casamance region who had been living with her paternal uncle's family close to where Lamine rented his room. She had recently moved to a different relative's house in another Dakar suburb, and this is where the first part of her marriage celebration, also a daytime *yendu*, would take place. None of Lamine's family was expected to attend this celebration, although Mère bi's husband and eldest son were to accompany Lamine on the Saturday morning when male representatives of both families would 'tie' [*takk*] the marriage at a mosque near the bride's home. Lamine had prepared two outfits for his bride, one for each celebration. I tried to find out more about how Lamine might have obtained the outfits without offending him by asking him directly (as he wished to convey the impression that he had purchased and sewn the clothes himself), and the daughters explained that, as a tailor, it would not have been difficult for him to procure the fabric and arrange for the creation of an ensemble, as he could count on favours from others in the tailoring business. Lamine had also spoken to Mère bi and her elder daughters about the arrangements for the Sunday. He explained that very few of his bride's relatives would attend the Sunday celebration, probably only the few women who would

accompany her on Saturday night, and emphasised that, on their own part, it was to be 'the people of the house only' [*waa-kër gi rekk*]. Following a general discussion, they agreed that Mère bi's youngest daughter, who was an amateur but talented hairdresser, was to take charge of the bride's hair and make-up, and an older cousin who had access to a car reluctantly agreed to be the wedding car driver.

On Saturday, Mère bi's daughters and daughters-in-law purchased the food that would be required for the rice and meat dish the following day. Lamine had supplied CFA 20,000 for this purpose; this amounted to roughly five times the cost of a regular lunch in Mère bi's house, which would generally feed 10-15 people. By the evening, the house was busier than usual, but only slightly. A couple of Mère bi's daughters who were married and lived elsewhere were present, and a few neighbours lingered around as the night set in. The pile of onions had been chopped and set to one side in a large aluminium bowl, and the youngest daughter was in the girls' bedroom, deciding which outfit she was going to wear the following day. Lamine had set off with Mère bi's husband and the driver in the wedding car several hours earlier. Even though it was only a 30-minute drive to the other house, there was still no sign of the wedding party, and as midnight approached, some phone calls were made, although the reason for the delay remained unclear. Shortly before the phone call came through confirming that the car had departed, there was a fluster among the younger women, who had been moving back and forth between the living room and the kitchen. The youngest daughter explained, her eyes downcast, that there was not enough sugar to sweeten the curdled milk for the *laax*, a sweet millet-based dish that was customarily served when a new bride entered the house. Her elder sister asked how much more was needed, then stretched out her hand, palm down, concealing the folded note it contained.

The wedding car finally arrived, honking its horn as it wound its way through the deserted, sandy streets. It was followed by two taxis carrying some of the bride's female relatives. As the cars pulled up, people moved

downstairs and crowded into the narrow corridor by the doorway, craning their necks to see more clearly. The bride and her wedding party gradually manoeuvred themselves out of the cars, ducking their heads and holding their wrappers in place. They were visibly self-conscious in their glittering clothes, high-heels and shimmering make-up. The bride herself was wearing a white long-sleeved ankle-length dress made of stiff white damask fabric, embellished with delicate gold and silver embroidery. Her coiffure was stacked high on her head and was adorned with silver hair jewels. As she moved towards the door, there was a short burst of frenetic clapping and animated discussion, and eventually, the young women and some neighbours shouted out a couple of chants [*taasu*], phrases that were to remind the new bride of her position vis-à-vis the other women in the household, encouraging me to partake in the put-downs (see Chapter Four, pp. 150-151).<sup>39</sup>

Everyone started to move upstairs again, and I spotted Lamine. ‘Agnès! Come and eat some *laax* with us’, he beamed, and disappeared again to share the dish with his bride. Mère bi, her husband and the cousin who had driven the car had disappeared into a bedroom, where they were joined by one of the daughters, who gestured to me that I could come in. The men explained that the delay had occurred because Lamine’s bride’s family had complained that he had failed to bring them any kola nuts, which are normally supposed to be presented to the bride’s male relatives during the religious marriage ceremony. This had led to ill feeling and some tense negotiations, but eventually, the kola nuts materialised, the entente between the two families was re-established, and Lamine and his male relatives partook of the *cere* (couscous) that had been prepared for the guests. Mère bi’s husband sighed wearily that he had been obliged, in the end, to pay the drivers of the taxis, who had agreed to squeeze in more people than the cars were allowed to hold only on the condition of advance payment. It had been a long day for everyone involved, and after the *laax* had been offered

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the abusive poetry, or ‘bride insults’ that young women may encounter when they marry into a new household, see Irvine (1993:114-119).

around, the gathering dispersed abruptly and everyone went to sleep. The bride and her female relatives spent the night in Mère bi's house, where a room had been cleared for them and extra mattresses laid down on the floor. Lamine had agreed to postpone consummating the marriage until after the Sunday celebration, as his new bride was extremely tired, and he returned to his room for the night.

It was late morning by the time I arrived at the house the following day. The bride and some of her female relatives were sitting in the living room along with several of the men of the family, and people drifted in and out. The other visitors were still in the bedroom getting ready. The bride was wearing a two-piece outfit today, also made of white damask fabric, this time with pink and green embroidery. Her name was Marietou, I was told, as the youngest sister formally introduced us. The latter had already attended to the bride's hair, slightly modifying the previous day's style, and wide semi-circles of pink and green eye shadow dominated her face. Her relatives were also dressed up, some also wearing embroidered damask outfits that were dyed in bright colours, others wearing robes made out of shimmery, beaded and bejewelled materials. Marietou was short and rather stout, and as a consequence looked older than her nineteen years. She was sitting up very straight, but appeared more relaxed than she had the previous night. She had a ready smile, and laughed as she teased the young children of the house whose names she had not yet learned. She was quick to participate in the brief conversations those around her struck up, and engaged in light-hearted chatter on a range of topics, although her relatives were more reserved. She spoke Wolof fluently, but with the distinctive accent of a *làkk-kat*, someone from the Southern regions.

At one point Lamine appeared, accompanied by a neighbour who was a photographer. Lamine was wearing the same royal blue damask outfit that he had worn the previous day, and was in high spirits. The photographer took several photographs of Lamine and Marietou, of Marietou by herself,

and of Marietou and some of those present, including Mère bi.<sup>40</sup> Lamine instructed him to come back again later to take some more photos, as some of the key family members were cooking and had not yet changed into their smart clothes. As lunchtime approached, the number of people in the living room increased. Most of those present were wearing *yére Wolof*, or 'traditional' clothing, consisting of a tailored ensemble made from a single fabric, although some, mostly men from neighbouring houses, were wearing European style clothing. At lunchtime, the majority of the people in the living room were, as Lamine had reckoned, members of the household. Those who were not were nonetheless so close to the family that they would likely have stopped by even if there had not been anything going on. There was enough food for everyone, and the women had also purchased some fruit squash mixture when they had gone to the market, which they made up and served chilled after lunch. As the afternoon progressed, the group thinned, although people continued to trickle in communicating their good wishes until the early evening. Marietou continued to sit in the living room, whilst Lamine came and went. Marietou's relatives made their preparations to leave before dusk set in, and by the time the evening meal was served at around 10pm things were almost back to normal at Mère bi's house.

Marietou spent a second night at Mère bi's house and declared the following morning that she wished to start cooking straight away. Her red rice and fish received many compliments. However, there was no sign of her the day after, and Lamine explained that she had fallen ill, intimating that this had been caused by the consummation of the marriage. An elderly woman who lived in the house in which Lamine rented a room was looking after her, rubbing her body and bringing her hot meat soup. She was unwell for a period of roughly ten days, but after that she started coming to Mère bi's house almost every day, as Lamine had indicated she would, cooking in rotation with Mère bi's daughters-in-law. Although she was regularly ridiculed for talking too much and sometimes accused of being lazy, she was

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<sup>40</sup> Buckley (2001) and Mustafa (2005) have written about the social importance of portrait photography in Gambia and Senegal respectively.

welcomed into the family, and often slept in the house for extended periods of time when she and Lamine were having arguments.

#### **2.4    *To each her own: the cost of kinship***

In this section, I reflect on Lamine and Marietou's wedding in order to advance an argument both about the social meaning of such events as well as about their more tangible, economic dimensions. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, I take issue with the contention that women in Dakar spend 'disproportionate' amounts of money on ceremonies. In section 2.2, I noted that the cultural expectation of dressing well during leisure time – which is gendered, but only to a degree – applies especially to family ceremonies, which are quintessentially social, or leisure activities. In the above section, however, I have sought to show that women and men have multiple strategies for negotiating the pressures for women in particular to 'keep up appearances' on such occasions.

Lamine and Marietou's wedding was far more understated and involved significantly less expenditure than the ceremonies discussed in previous studies by anthropologists working in Senegal. Although this is probably partly due to differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds of our respective informants, I propose that it is also instructive to consider the way in which these occasions are personalised or individualised. I suggest that by recognising the highly *personal* nature of these events, we can draw some conclusions about the general patterns of spending at family ceremonies, which are not simply contingent on socioeconomic factors. By 'personalised', I mean that weddings and name-giving ceremonies are ascribed *ownership*; in other words, they are perceived to be 'the day of', or belong to, a particular woman, rather than a couple or a newborn baby. There is a tendency, especially amongst low-income Dakarais, to view a relatively costly ceremony as a 'once in a lifetime' experience for a particular woman. Drawing on my knowledge of the celebration of events such as

marriages and births in Dakar, I suggest that the notion that ‘every woman has her day’ produces a pattern whereby the majority of marriages and births are celebrated with only minimal expenditure; and indeed, some may incur virtually none whatsoever.

At the outset, it is crucial to recognise that Dakarois clearly distinguish marriages and births that are celebrated *with* a ceremony [*xew*] from those that are not (Moya 2011). A marriage ceremony may have various components, including a Western-style reception [*réception*, or simply *mariage*] held for the bride’s friends and family, involving food, dancing and presents from the guests, and a *céet*, which marks the arrival of the bride in her husband’s family’s home. Part of the *céet* entails the display of the bride’s trousseau, which would normally be purchased using part of the bridewealth payment.<sup>41</sup> In contemporary Dakar, the trousseau consists primarily of household utensils such as colourful plastic tubs for doing the laundry, large dishes to serve food in, glassware, and sometimes cloth. All of these items would be distributed amongst the bride’s new household.

Marietou, however, did not have a ceremony to mark her marriage to Lamine – there was no *xew*, no *réception/mariage* and no one referred to her arrival in the house that Saturday evening as a *céet*, since there was no trousseau. It became clear that Lamine had not paid any bridewealth whatsoever, and he himself had organised his bride’s outfits, which would ideally be purchased by the woman’s family using part of the bridewealth payment. Mère bi’s family relayed news of the impending event to neighbours by saying that ‘Lamine’s wife is going to be married into our house’ [*jabaru Lamine suñu kër lay séysi*], adding that this is where she would ‘disembark’ [*wàcc*] after leaving her family home, but making it clear that there would be no ceremony.

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the traditional forms of bridewealth payments see Diop (1985), Dial (2008), Moya (2011), Buggenhagen (2012a, 2004, 2001) and Le Cour Grandmaison (1971).

Sometimes, marriages in Dakar were finalised following a conversation [*waxtaan*] between two families in the presence of someone who was considered to have religious authority (not necessarily an Imam), and accompanied by a symbolic gift of kola nuts, without any additional bridewealth payment. One of my friends described to me how when she was married to her husband 'he didn't give *anything*'. She and her husband had decided that they wanted to marry, and she was pleased that it had been straightforward because 'my mother's lot, they didn't ask for anything; [so] I didn't ask for anything either. We didn't do anything. They [the two families] just had a conversation [*waxtaan rekk la woon*]. There was no ceremony. I was just given away.'

In the case of name-giving ceremonies [*ngénte*], some expense is usually inevitable, since a sheep must be slaughtered for the newborn – although I encountered rare cases where lack of resources meant that the sacrifice had to be postponed indefinitely, or where people had to make do with a smaller animal such as a chicken instead. Generally, however, a birth entails the preparation of a special meal with meat from an animal sacrificed exactly one week after the child is born, the day that the religious naming of the child takes place. Guests will partake in this meal – and with guests comes the expectation that the mother will wear a new outfit and visit a salon for her hair and make-up. As with weddings, however, people distinguished between ceremonies [*ngénte*], which would be attended by many guests and feature music, dancing, elaborate outfits and possibly gift giving, and simple 'namings' [*tuddu*], which might only be attended by a small group of people, and where expectations concerning appearance would not be so high.

Early on in my fieldwork, a woman in one of the families I was spending time with gave birth to her second child. Her cousin, to whom I was closer, phoned me that same day to announce the news, and I quickly explained apologetically that I might only be able to attend the name-giving, which I knew would be exactly one week later, late in the day, as I had already made plans for an out-of-town visit that day. I promised that I would come by in

the evening, if only for an hour or so, to congratulate the mother and see the baby. My friend kept saying that it didn't matter, 'they're just naming' [*daño tudd rekk*]. The difference between a 'naming' [*tuddu*] and a 'naming ceremony' [*ngénte*] became clear to me when I arrived at the house the following week. I knew that I would be arriving later than most of the other guests, but my experience of previous ceremonies had lead me to believe that the music and dancing would only just be getting underway. When I arrived, the house seemed quiet, and my friend lead me to the bedroom where the mother and her newborn had been installed. She was wearing a long, bejewelled gown and her face was carefully made-up, but she was alone in the bedroom, cradling her tiny, tightly swaddled daughter in her arms. 'Where are the people?' I asked. 'Everyone's gone,' she smiled, as she passed me the baby 'You came late'.

Marietou's marriage to Lamine was modest and did not involve a *xew*; however, it consisted of more than just a conversation [*waxtaan*] between two families, as there were some guests, and a *yendu*, or a daytime celebration, was held at both houses. *Yendu* literally means 'to spend the day'; used with regards to life cycle celebrations, it conveyed that the festivities would consist primarily of lunch, but would not continue into the evening and would therefore not include music, dance or gift giving. Lamine, Marietou and Mère bi's family had negotiated the situation so that there would not be many guests in attendance. Lamine had explicitly emphasised that it was to be 'family only', and his instructions were carefully implemented by the family, who were careful to ensure that people knew that there was *not* going to be a ceremony. Because there would not be many guests in attendance, Marietou was not expected to wear an outfit made of the most valuable cloth or the most expensive embroidery, and it was acceptable for her to have her hair and make-up attended to by a family member in the confines of the house, rather than make a trip to a salon. Although a photographer stopped by to take a few photos, he had not been engaged for the day to photograph all the guests and produce an *album*. At large ceremonies, in contrast, the hosts engage the services of a full-time

photographer and a cameraman who will create an *album* and record a *cassette* (DVD) of the ceremony for posterity (see Figure 9, below).<sup>42</sup>

When I visited women in Dakar for the first time, I was often presented with this type of album, containing photographs of a woman's wedding or name-giving ceremony. I always looked through these albums attentively, although in my eyes they appeared to be very similar. In general, the first half of the album consisted of pictures of the bride or the new mother by herself striking a variety of different poses, often almost unrecognisable to me with her elaborate hair and heavy make-up. There would be many full-length portraits that would display the outfits worn for the occasion in all their glory, and usually also close-ups of the coiffure, shot from above. The second half contained photos of the woman with her relatives and friends, including her husband. This 'showcasing' of the woman, her dress, her hairstyle and her make-up was characteristic of even the more modest weddings and name-givings, as evidenced by Marietou and Lamine's wedding, where Marietou took centre stage. This, I suggest, reflects the highly personal nature of these occasions, which centre on the presence and appearance of a particular woman, namely the bride, or the mother of the newborn. It is this 'showcasing' of the woman that becomes the stuff of memories, not just for the woman herself, who may well experience the day of the event as a bit of a blur, but also to those in attendance, who often seemed more attuned to the excitement of the occasion.

A ceremony [xew] in particular is perceived to be 'the day of', or belong to, a particular woman. McNee (2000:28) observes that the language people use to talk about these events is itself indicative of the way in which they are personalised: people will refer to 'Adja's name-giving', 'Fatou's wedding' or 'Saly's ceremony'. They are never perceived to be the event of a couple, a family, a lineage or a neighbourhood. I add to this observation by noting that there is a strong tendency to perceive these ceremonies as 'once in a

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<sup>42</sup> When I looked through my own photographs from the field, I realised that they too were mostly a testament to the splendid, ostentatious aspects of Dakar life – all the images in this chapter (Figures 7, 8 and 9) were taken at large-scale ceremonies.

lifetime' experiences for women. I suggest that in Dakar, there is an expectation that every woman ought to have her day, that is to say, have a *xew*, a high-profile wedding or name-giving ceremony with many guests in attendance. This ideal is vocalised by another popular young Senegalese singer, Abdou Guité Seck, in his song *Bës bi* (The day), which was also released while I was in the field.<sup>43</sup> *Bës bi*, I was told by several friends, is primarily about ceremonies, and Seck is singing to Senegalese women. Its opening lines are as follows: The day has come, your day has come, the day has come, the day of happiness has come. The song features a short chant [*taasu*] that proclaims that 'everybody has her/his day' [*ku nekk ak bësam/ku nekk bësam la am*].

McNee (2000:28) puzzles over the fact that external observers have a tendency to de-personalise these occasions. This de-personalisation is manifest in analyses of women's ceremonies such as Buggenhagen's (2012a, 2011, 2004, 2001) and Moya's (2011) that perceive them to principally reflect the 'strength of women's social networks', as opposed to interpreting them as exceptionally personal, 'once in a lifetime' experiences that 'belong' to individual women. At this point, I return briefly to Buggenhagen's analysis of gift exchange at such ceremonies. The implication throughout her work is that this type of gift exchange occurs at *all* weddings and name-givings in Dakar, and although Moya explicitly acknowledges that life cycle events are *not* always marked by large-scale ceremonies with gift giving, in his ethnography, he chooses to focus exclusively on those that are.

Buggenhagen writes that gift exchange at ceremonies primarily consists of the practice of *ndawtal*, whereby every woman who attends a ceremony is expected to give a gift of cash or cloth to the bride/new mother, or the latter's mother, depending on which generation the guest belongs to. Buggenhagen emphasises the competitive nature of this gift giving, as the precise sums received are carefully recorded, and the recipient is expected to return a gift of double the value, either immediately, or at a later point,

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<sup>43</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooQUU\\_q6Sag](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooQUU_q6Sag) (accessed on 27.06.2013)

when the giver has a ceremony. Gift giving, she argues, is a competitive exercise for prestige and status amongst women, and a strong sense of shame is attached to not being able to reciprocate a *ndawtal* gift. There is a tension of sorts, then, between the 'crafting of reputations' that is facilitated by the gift giving and the 'communal' aspect of women's ceremonial activities.

What Buggenhagen does not mention, however, is that the most significant gift exchanges at life cycle ceremonies are between the family of the woman and the family of her husband, and specifically, the senior women in the two families such as the mothers, or representatives of the mothers (Moya 2011). As far as I could tell, this exchange, which my acquaintances referred to as *yebbi*, was 'competitive', but in a clearly prescribed way. The man's senior female relatives present the woman's family with gifts of money and cloth, which the woman's family are then expected to return, doubling the value of the gift. These events are lengthy and carefully orchestrated, and usually the woman's family will have a rough idea of how much they will need to have on them, although they may have to borrow money once the exchange is underway. Female relatives in both families will usually receive some of the donated cloth following the event, although the man's female relatives will receive more.

The mother (biological or otherwise) of the woman, or the woman herself, will typically rely on assistance from friends and relatives in order to finance this gift giving, which everyone agrees burdens the woman's family more than the man's, although sometimes a bridewealth or other payment from the man will be transferred to his wife's mother to help with the costs. This is how I perceive the role of the *ndawtal*, gifts between individual women at ceremonies. Before the exchange between the two families takes place, a go-between/praise-orator will itemise the various gifts made by guests, which may take the form of either cloth or money. These may then be placed in the 'pool' of gifts that will be redistributed to the other family. In this way, we can see that the *ndawtal* is not just about the status of an

individual woman giving a gift, but rather should be understood as another technique by which Dakarais share the burden of the cost of ceremonies. At smaller ceremonies such as Marietou's, it is normal for the woman's friends to give the woman, or her senior female relatives, small amounts of money as a gift – this occurred both at the *yendu* held at Marietou's relatives house on the Saturday, as well as at Mère bi's house the following day. However, these sums, mostly CFA 1000, were *not* considered to be *ndawtal*, as the amounts were handed over discretely and informally, with no recording of how much was offered. Rather, they were small gestures of friendship between Marietou and her age-mates, and her senior relatives and their peers respectively, with each individual giving what she could afford.

Buggenhagen also cites the *ndeyale* – a practice whereby an honorary mother is chosen to assist the bride/new mother's mother in the hosting of a large-scale ceremony – as a practice that promotes excessive spending and competition between women. This is because the honorary mother will be presented with a small sum, often drawn from the bridewealth/name-giving payment received from the husband, and expected to repay five times this amount as a participation towards the costs of the ceremony. However, I suggest that the *ndeyale* should also be viewed as a way of easing the burden of ceremonies on individual families. In addition to the honorary mother, at several ceremonies that I was witness to there were also roles for honorary elder sisters [*mag*], of which there could be several. These women would also assist the 'real' mother with the cost of the ceremony, and would receive recognition for their participation. Although they were indeed expected to give back a much larger sum than they had been presented with, they in turn had techniques for distributing the financial responsibility further. They could divide the sum into much smaller amounts, for example CFA 250 or CFA 500 coins. They would distribute these to their friends, explaining that they had been designated an honorary mother or an honorary elder sister, and could expect each friend to return five times this amount, which would often still be small enough for women to be able to

procure. This would help the honorary mother or sister to raise the amount required for her participation in the ceremony.

Crucially, this relatively costly gift exchange between two families [*yebbi*] is an event that is only expected to occur *once* between the families of the wife and the husband. Families carefully negotiated these occasions, with the husband taking on the role of a go-between. Men were expected to assist their own families with the expenses, especially if the *xew* was to take place at the man's family's house, but they would also be expected to transfer a sum to the woman's family. This would be used to raise more money via the practices of naming honorary mothers and elder sisters, which, along with *ndawtal* contributions, enabled poorer Dakarois to distribute the financial responsibilities occasioned by the gift exchange.

A *yebbi*, even more so than a *xew*, is an exceptional, once in a lifetime occasion, that often takes place immediately after the name-giving ceremony of the first child born to the couple, but may never take place at all due to lack of resources. The only other form of gift exchange with clearly prescribed rules is the *fóot*, which is usually scheduled after the birth of a child, and involves the new mother and her 'designated sisters-in-law' [*njèkke*] (see Chapter Four, pp. 151-152) wherein the former must offer twice as much as the latter. This form of gift exchange is also considered to be a one-off event and will only occur at a large-scale name-giving ceremony (see Moya 2011:238-239; 293-295).

Most name-givings (of subsequent children) and many marriages are finalised with minimal, or virtually no expenditure. Arguably, this is because a relatively high proportion of marriages in Dakar result in divorce, with the likelihood of this decreasing significantly the longer a marriage lasts and the more children it produces. For this reason many families prefer to 'postpone' [*aj*] the costly ceremony until the birth of the first child, and it is acceptable to delay it further still. If there is a general perception that a ceremony ought to be held, then families may explicitly announce that they

are postponing the ceremony. Sometimes, a ceremony that is postponed will actually take place several weeks or months later. This may be due to a Ramadan birth, since it is not appropriate to hold a ceremony with music and dancing during this month, or, for example, if the mother suffered complications during birth. Sometimes, individuals and families genuinely need a little more time to obtain the sums required for a ceremony, especially when a baby is born prematurely. However, in many cases, 'we're pushing it back' [*dañu koy aj*] means that actually, no ceremony will take place at all. In other cases, two ceremonies might be merged into one; for example, the arrival of the bride in her husband's home [*céet*] might be celebrated in conjunction with the birth of a child. Typically, however, a woman's 'large' ceremony will be held soon after the birth of her first child, which is the time in a woman's life that she is considered to be at her most beautiful (Lecarme-Frassy 2000:158).

I attended many ceremonies in Dakar that were splendid affairs, involving lots of food, gift exchange, music and dancing that continued into the night. Sometimes, I barely knew the woman who was holding the ceremony, but was invited to accompany a friend who wished to attend. This was a normal practice in Dakar, and the general attitude towards these kinds of ceremonies was 'the more the merrier'. It was quite different with smaller events such as Lamine and Marietou's wedding, or the naming of the newborn described above. Although I failed to understand that I was not expected to attend the naming ceremony, in the case of Lamine and Marietou's wedding, I realised that it was to be a small-scale affair, and that guests were not expected to attend. Consequently, I felt as though I was there in the capacity of a close family friend or neighbour rather than as a 'guest' at a wedding, and tried to behave accordingly. I was especially careful about the framing of questions relating to the cost of the occasion, as I did not want it to be obvious that I was making any kind of comparison between this modest marriage celebration and a costly ceremony. Life cycle events such as Marietou and Lamine's wedding would be announced so as to make it clear that large numbers of guests would not be expected to attend.

Indeed, many people would only hear about an event retrospectively, finding out many weeks later that X had been married off, or that Y had had a baby. For these reasons, it is important to stress that the arguments I have made in this chapter have as much to do with celebrations of marriages and births that I did *not* participate in – because there was no ceremony to attend – as with my ethnographic observations of the events at which I was present.

Before I left the field, Marietou gave birth to her first child, a boy. The birth was marked with a ceremony of sorts at Mère bi's house. It was referred to by most friends and neighbours as a *ngénte* rather than a *tuddu*, as it was considerably larger and costlier than her wedding. Her mother and other senior female relatives attended this event, but there was no *yebbi* or *fóot* gift exchange between the two families and no *ndawtal* or *ndeyale* payments. It was Marietou's day, however, and she did visit a salon for her hair and make-up and wore more expensive clothes. Some of her peers grouped together and ordered new outfits made from the same fabric so they could be 'hostesses' [*hôtesses*], adding glamour and prestige to the ceremony (see Figure 8, below). Marietou is still married to Lamine, but they have yet to have another child. She is still in her early twenties, however, and may well give birth to another four or five children in her lifetime.<sup>44</sup> Unless Lamine and Marietou's financial circumstances improve – and, perhaps, even if they do – it seems highly unlikely that any of these births would be celebrated with an expensive *xew*.

In this section, I have explored some of the ways in which Dakarois negotiate the high pressures of keeping up appearances at family ceremonies. I have shown that many marriages and births are *not* marked with a ceremony [*xew*] at all, but celebrated more modestly. There may indeed be some Dakarois who are preoccupied with excessive spending on their appearance at ceremonies and frequently participate in costly gift

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<sup>44</sup> The estimated fertility rate for the country as a whole in 2013 is 4.61 children per woman (CIA 2013).

giving practices, and it is probably fair to suggest that it is these elites who have been the focus of previous ethnographic analyses.<sup>45</sup> I have argued, however, that we should be cautious about extrapolating from these specific instances to Dakar women in general. Instead, I have suggested that we recognise that ceremonies are about individuality, not in the sense of women vying with each other for status through competitive gift giving, but rather in the sense that these events are perceived to be ‘the day of individual women. They are personalised because they belong to a particular woman, but it is not about one-upmanship or distinction, but rather about the fulfilling of the expectation that ‘every woman has her day’. This recognition, I suggest, sheds light on the overall pattern of life cycle events amongst low-income Dakarois, which, I have argued, are far more understated than the existing literature, as well as popular local discourses, would have us believe.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that women’s concerns with dress, appearance and self-presentation should be considered in relation to the more widespread phenomenon of what I term ‘keeping up appearances’, which is not gender specific. I have also suggested that the association commonly drawn by Senegalese people between consumption and ostentatious behaviour on the one hand and women on the other can at least partly be understood in terms of the way in which work time and leisure time are gendered. Subsequently, I presented an ethnographic case study of a

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<sup>45</sup> Buggenhagen’s (2012a) principal informant, who is the matriarch of the family that is the subject of her monograph, is the head of scores of NGOs and women’s associations, and literate *in Wolof* – something which is unusual even amongst very well-educated Senegalese. Mustafa (1997) and Morales-Libove (2005) explicitly acknowledge that their informants are drawn from the upper/middle classes (although the latter also worked with women from low-income neighbourhoods), whilst Neveu Kringelbach observes that many of her informants ‘enter the game with resources that most Senegalese can only ever dream of’ (2005:155). Interestingly, Jean-François Werner, in his ethnographic exploration of the life of M., a vulnerable young woman from the impoverished outskirts of Dakar, mentions in passing how marriage is becoming *simpler* as young urbanites and their parents make fewer financial demands (1993:168).

wedding ceremony that I attended in the field in order to argue that low-income Dakarois' consumption is far more understated than the existing literature, as well as dominant local discourses, would have us believe. I contend that a focus on the highly *personal* nature of these ostensibly 'communal' events can help us to see that the rather modest ceremony that I describe is probably more representative of life cycle celebrations in Dakar than is generally assumed to be the case, by locals and external observers alike. Every woman has her day, her ceremony, where she is the most beautiful and the focus of everyone's attention. The high value attached to 'keeping up appearances' during 'everyday' leisure time is amplified in the context of exceptional leisure time, above all for the woman who 'owns' the day.

This thesis is about the full spectrum of women's economic activities, of which 'consumption' and 'social reproduction' (see Chapter One, pp. 25-26) are an integral component. In Dakar, ceremonies, or rather, life cycle celebrations, are frequent occurrences and therefore arguably part of the 'everyday'. There are, however, other social and economic activities and relationships that are equally important, such as relationships between spouses, housework, mothering work and income-generating activities. One of my key interests throughout this thesis is urban livelihoods and how people in Dakar make ends meet. In this chapter, I have sought to set the record straight, as it were, about the widespread perception that women are draining the Senegalese economy by 'eating' all the money, investing it in ostentatious displays of the self and in lavish gift exchange at family ceremonies. The symbolic reproduction and honouring of kinship relations is perfectly possible without extortionate spending.<sup>46</sup> There is, however,

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<sup>46</sup> In any case, statements such as 'in Dakar, people would rather dress well than eat well' (Gemmeke 2008:52) and the notion that women spend 'disproportionate' amounts on ceremonies and their appearance are entirely subjective. As the Kenyan novelist Mukoma Wa Ngugi (2010) wrote in an article for the Guardian in 2009: 'spending money on festivals, weddings and funerals gives the poor a sense of community. The coming together fulfills the human need for fellowship ... That the poor may choose immediate pleasure over long-term security appears counter-intuitive and illogical. Until you factor in the pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right, something as innately in us as the need for food and shelter; it

another dimension to the 'materialistic Senegalese woman' trope, one that is primarily identifiable within the context of marital, or romantic relationships and the material exchanges that form part of the basis of these relationships. It is the issues surrounding these 'economies of intimacy' that I explore in the following chapter.



**Figure 8: 'Hostesses' with matching outfits preparing for a friend's wedding at the salon. Photo by the author**

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defines who we are as human beings. We cannot ask the poor to prioritise one unalienable right over another.'



**Figure 9: The bride (at the same ceremony as Figure 8) being photographed before the festivities commence. Photo by the author**

### Money, Jealousy and the Economies of Intimacy

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*Marriage is not about choice, it is about luck*

*And if there is choice involved, that choice is accompanied by luck.*<sup>47</sup>

— Coumba Gawlo Seck and Souleymane Faye, *Séy du Choix* (Marriage is not a Choice) (Song)

I was sitting on a breezy rooftop at a friend's house in Médina one afternoon, playing with our babies as my friend went about her work in the kitchen, when Ibou, a young man from one of the neighbouring houses dropped by to greet the family. I knew Ibou, but not well, as up to this point we had never exchanged more than a few basic greetings. For several minutes, he leaned against the kitchen door, chatting with my friend, and then he came and sat down next to me. He immediately started talking and playing with my friend's baby, who giggled with delight. Even though I only had half his attention, I began to ask him the kinds of questions that I normally asked people when I spoke to them for the first time: where he lived (he was able to point out his house), where he worked (at a tinned food factory), and whether he was married. As usual, it was not easy for me to gauge how old Ibou was, but he looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, an age by which many men were married, and those who were still single were seriously thinking about it.

As Ibou placed the baby back down on the soft mattress, he explained that he did not yet have a wife but, much like Uncle Lamine in the previous chapter, had plans to marry soon. 'I think I know who it's going to be [je

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<sup>47</sup> *Séy du choix, séy chance la. Walla bu di choix, choix bu ànd ak chance la* (translation from Wolof/French my own).

*pense que xam naa kan la*]. She's a relative, and she's a good person. But nothing is certain yet.' I asked him whether he had thought about living arrangements, and he explained that he was very lucky because he had a room in his uncle's house that he did not have to pay any rent towards. Ibou had lived in this house since he was a young child; his uncle was quite well off and had been able to support some of his siblings' children. His uncle, Ibou added, always gave the *deppaas* (from the French *dépenses*) or daily food expenditure for the communal afternoon and evening meals.<sup>48</sup> Other family members, including Ibou, sometimes helped out with less frequent payments such as water or electricity bills. 'When I have a wife,' continued Ibou, 'she will cook on rotation with my uncle's wife, but I won't have to give the *deppaas*. If I want to give it sometimes then I can, but I won't be required to.'

Ibou explained proudly that he had been working hard, going to the factory every day. He described how, over time, he had refurbished and decorated his room so that it would befit a married couple. He had bought a new bed and had put down the money for a wardrobe, which would be completed soon. All that remained was a television and DVD player. 'It's going to be beautiful,' he said, and then, looking rather more serious:

But I never let any of my girlfriends see how my room is coming along – not like most men! Because I don't want the girl who I marry to know that if she becomes my wife, she will have this nice room. I want her to marry me because she loves me, not because she thinks that I am someone with money.

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<sup>48</sup> The *deppaas* can be organised in a multitude of ways. Sometimes, different family members are responsible for providing it on a rotational basis, but in other families, one wealthier individual, who may live abroad and send back remittances, will take on the full responsibility. Generally speaking, extended families eat together from a single bowl, and so although ideally, it will be the husband/father who supplies the daily food expenditure, complex residential arrangements mean that this is not necessarily the case in practice. Moreover, it is common for the woman who goes to the market and cooks on a particular day to 'top up' the amount on her cooking days with her own or her husband's income. Families that are slightly better off and have a regular monthly income or remittance they can rely on frequently buy items like rice and oil in large quantities at wholesale prices, thus significantly reducing the cost of the *deppaas*.

And then, as an afterthought: ‘but just because my girlfriend doesn’t come into my room, it doesn’t mean that I can’t be alone with her, you know what I’m telling you!’

It seems clear that Ibou believed that it was his duty to ensure that he fulfilled certain material conditions before he married. Indeed, he spoke critically about those men who took wives without thinking about the material practicalities this entailed, such as an appropriate standard of accommodation and the money for the *deppaas*. However, he stated emphatically that he did not want his future wife to be *aware* of the fact that he had a room which was ‘worthy’ of a wife, although he recognised that she would inevitably know in advance that she was marrying into a house where the *deppaas*, at least, was already taken care of. Despite acknowledging the importance of economic considerations, however, Ibou wished to avoid these becoming the sole motivation for marriage, prioritising, instead, the value of ‘love’.

This brief conversation points directly to questions concerning the meaning of marital and romantic relationships, and the extent to which these are embroiled with emotions such as ‘love’ on the one hand, and practical considerations such as ‘money’ on the other. In this chapter, I explore local understandings of marriage in Dakar, describing how they engender particular feminine ideals and practices. In the first section, I describe marital practices in contemporary Dakar, observing that younger people especially have a tendency to draw on the globalised idioms of romantic love and companionate marriage (3.1). I go on to suggest that the dominant ideal, which is perceived to be distinctly ‘Senegalese’, is slightly different: women are expected to strike the right balance between subservient and seductive behaviour when dealing with their husbands. If they are successful, their husbands will be generous in providing materially for them and their children (3.2). In Section 3.3, I analyse women’s manifestations of jealousy when it comes to their husbands and boyfriends, demonstrating that this

jealousy is directly shaped by concerns about economic provision and therefore security. I seek to show, however, that material support and emotional attachment are often inseparable within marital and romantic relationships, and suggest that the idea that women have the 'right' to men's money and support cannot be easily disentangled from broader notions of love, care and responsibility (3.4).

### **3.1 *Marriage in contemporary Dakar***

Marriage is a fundamental right of passage both for women and men in Dakar that very few can, or indeed wish to avoid. For the unmarried, hopes for the future will almost certainly be constructed around marriage, and a permanent *célibataire* (unmarried person) of either sex is unheard of as a concept and rare in practice. This has much to do with the religious significance of marriage, and the expectation that all people will have children within marriage. Additionally, the traditional lineage structures and associated conceptions of kinship and inheritance mean that great value is attached to having biological children, whose status within these structures is established by virtue of the public recognition of their parents' union (Diop 1985, Dial 2008).

Despite the enduring social primacy of marriage, women and men in contemporary Dakar tend to marry later than in previous generations (Adjamagbo et al. 2004, Dial 2008:11-17). Women are increasingly likely to marry when they are in their early twenties, rather than in their mid to late teens, and men when they are in their thirties, rather than twenties. Adjamagbo et al. (2004) posit that for women, this corresponds to an expansion of their education opportunities, whereas young men tend to postpone marriage due to the increasing difficulties involved in achieving an adequate level of economic security. I frequently heard men describe a lack of resources, in particular appropriate accommodation, as the main factor that prevented them from marrying, even if they had found someone that

they liked. Girls and young women, on the other hand, often alluded to postponing marriage for a couple of years, especially if they were still in school, but they also frequently indicated that they would like to have a husband immediately if only they could find someone suitable.

For young women in Dakar, marriage is widely considered to be the only or the most desirable means of improving their individual economic standing. This is a context in which women's extra-marital romantic or sexual relations are strongly discouraged and garner substantial social disapproval. For this reason, it is highly unusual for an unmarried woman not to be living with her parents or other members of her extended family, and a woman who chooses to do so is likely to be considered to be of dubious moral character – a prostitute (Dial 2008:36-43). There are fewer social constraints, however, on men living independently from their families before they get married, especially if they leave their natal home in order to earn money elsewhere. Attitudes to male promiscuity vary considerably, but overall it is much more acceptable for men to have romantic and sexual relations outside of marriage, which are legitimised to an extent by the legally endorsed and socially accepted practice of polygyny.

Marriage, therefore, occupies a more prominent place in people's understandings of what it means to be a woman than in their perceptions of what defines a man. Having a husband is considered to be the primary marker of what 'makes a woman' in Dakar – even more so than having children, perhaps, since a woman is only supposed to have children after she is married. For women, marriage is crucial for obtaining a potential measure of independence from their natal family; it is the point at which a girl begins her life as an adult woman (Le Cour Grandmaison 1971, 1972, Dial 2008). The institution of arranged marriage is one of the social practices that facilitates the realisation of this ideal.

As Fatou Binetou Dial and Colette Le Cour Grandmaison observe, however, there is something paradoxical about the centrality accorded to marriage, as

many marriages are short-lived and Dakar in particular is characterised by high rates not only of divorce – which approximately one in three marriages culminate in – but also of remarriage (Dial 2008, Le Cour Grandmaison 1971, 1972, Adjamagbo et al. 2004, Bop 1996, Lecarme-Frassy 2000). Strikingly, women who may have been under intense pressure to agree to a first marriage which would mark their entry into adulthood are often able to exercise more choice when it comes to negotiating divorce and a subsequent remarriage. In other words, a pattern of female serial monogamy emerges, which deviates from the ideal of a lasting marital union, and instead allows for increasing female decision making in the choice of partner and the terms of marriage negotiations. This ‘serial monogamy’, together with the accepted practice of polygyny as well as the widespread existence of pre-marital relationships amongst both women and men, and extra-marital relationships amongst the latter, mean that, in practice, many women and men have children by several different partners as a result of a combination of factors: children born outside of marriage, multiple wives, and the high rates of divorce and remarriage. There is clear stigma associated with a woman having a child out of wedlock; this is connected to religious notions of female purity and propriety, and may severely hinder a woman’s prospects of marrying well in a context where virginity is a highly valued ‘good’. It also has consequences for inheritance; such a child will not be entitled to her share from her father – if there is anything to inherit – even if he acknowledged paternity in his lifetime. Despite all this, children born out of wedlock are far from uncommon: according to one recent estimate the current rate is three out of every ten first born children (van Eerdewijk 2007:1).

Although there *are* women who remain unmarried for extended periods of time, the normative preference for women in particular to be permanently married is made manifest in the institution of the *takkoo*. This entails marrying a divorced or widowed woman who is no longer able to have children to a man of a similar age, who may already have several wives. The woman is not expected to move in with the man’s family, but continues to

live with her children or other relatives, who had typically taken the initiative to broker the arrangements for the union. I was told that in the case of a *takkoo*, which does not involve a bridewealth payment or a ceremony, the man rarely spends the night at his wife's residence; they may have intimate relations 'if they want to', but it is not obligatory. He is not expected to financially support this wife, although he may leave some money with the family on the occasions that he visits as a token gesture. 'Takkoo' is derived from *takk*, which refers to the Islamic wedding ceremony, but is only used to refer to unions such as these that do not bring into being the usual sexual and financial obligations. The word refers both to the contracting of such a marriage, as well as to each of the partners. People recognised that this type of union differed significantly from those of younger women and men, but insisted that it was valuable simply because it rendered the woman 'married'. Ismaël Moya describes how the *takkoo* may be justified in religious terms, with some believing that a woman who dies will only be able to reach Paradise if she has a husband at the point of her passing, who will serve as her guide (2011:376).

Marriage in Senegal is made up of several ritualised components. Of these, 'takk' refers to the religious ritual that usually takes place at the mosque and consists of a conversation [*waxtaan*] or agreement between male representatives of both partners according to Islamic principles. The result of the *takk* is 'séy', which is both the noun 'marriage' and the verb 'to get married', and also translates somewhat more evasively as intimacy and sexual relations. However, when people spoke about getting married, they tended to say that a man had 'secured a bride' [*takk jabar*], or that a woman had 'been given away' [*maye*]. If the marriage had taken place some time ago, people would simply say that '(s/)he has a husband/wife'. As we saw in the previous chapter, the *takk* may be followed by a ceremony [*xew*] or a Western-style wedding reception [*réception*]. Later, a woman is expected to *séyi* – literally 'go and be married' – which entails moving away from her natal family to join her husband and/or his family's residence (Chapter Four). Most women will experience *séyi* at some point during their marriage,

although as we shall see in the following chapter, there are exceptions. 'A child who is female is not a child' [*doom bu jigéen du doom*], goes a Wolof proverb, because one day she will no longer be part of your family, but belong instead to her affines' household.

Polygyny, although on the decline,<sup>49</sup> is widely practised, especially amongst the older generations, and is supported by Senegalese family law, which draws upon elements of Islamic law (Chapter One, 1.4). A man with more than one wife is expected to be able to run as many separate households, and these economic constraints supposedly prevent many men from entering into multiple marriages. The practice of polygyny is deeply embedded in the history and economy of West Africa and is often associated with male power, prestige and status as well as with economic considerations (J. Goody 1976, Ames 1953, Clignet 1970, Burnham 1987). Although not uncommon, and arguably perceived by many to be the natural state of affairs (Augis 2002:236), polygyny is widely acknowledged to foster systematic jealousy and competition between women, giving rise to potential conflicts within the elementary family structure (Bâ 1981, Ames 1953, Fainzang and Journet 1988, Diop 1985). The question of whether Dakarois consider it to be acceptable practice is one of the issues that this chapter seeks to unravel.

Over the course of numerous informal conversations in the field, I found that younger people such as Ibou were especially likely to draw on particular, arguably globalised idioms of romantic love and companionate marriage when talking about their conceptions of marriage, romance and intimacy (see van Eerdewijk 2007).<sup>50</sup> They claimed that there was an increasing shift towards marriage as a voluntary union between two individuals based upon love and intimacy. This was contrasted with forced or arranged marriages

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<sup>49</sup> Callaway and Creevey (1994) estimate that fewer than three out of ten men in Dakar have more than one wife. This is confirmed by more recent figures obtained by Sow (unpublished data set for the *Programme des Nations Unies de Développement* 2000, cited in Augis 2002:236).

<sup>50</sup> Werner (2007) discusses how these are mediated by popular genres such as the Latin American telenovelas, which attract large viewing audiences in Dakar.

(typically to a relative), which were consigned to the realm of tradition. Family interference was especially unfashionable with the young, but also increasingly with members of the older generations, some of whom explained to me that they would never urge their children to marry against their will. In line with these trends, couples were increasingly likely to reject conventional virilocal residential practices in favour of more nuclear family-like living arrangements (see also Chapter Four). The extent to which this is a 'new' phenomenon, however, is debatable – David Ames (1953) and Le Cour Grandmaison (1972) report that similar ideas were articulated by their Wolof informants in the 1950s and 1960s respectively (see also Oppong 1974).

In recent years, an influential body of ethnographic work has explored the ways in which the idioms of romantic love and companionate marriage have become central to the crafting of 'modern' persons and relationships, as particular imaginations of intimacy that are globally mediated become appropriated in a range of local settings (e.g. Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Padilla et al. 2007, Jankowiak 1995, Ahearn 2001, Masquelier 2009, Spronk 2009). As Lynn Thomas and Jennifer Cole remind us, 'to study love is to address head on the problem of universality and difference' (2009:2). Whilst some scholars have substantiated their argument that love is a human universal ethnographically (e.g. Jankowiak 1995, 2008, Yan 2003, Gell 2011), others, such as Anthony Giddens (1992), have preferred instead to trace the historical emergence of a particular form of romantic love. Giddens links this conception of love with the cultivation of a modern, individual self that engages in what he terms 'pure relationships' that are primarily governed by desire, pleasure, choice and satisfaction (see also Shumway 2003 and MacFarlane 1987). Even though the more recent ethnographic literature aims to depart from such 'modernisation' theories about the development of romantic love and companionate marriage, Thomas and Cole (2009) argue that attempts to frame the issue in terms of globalisation, whilst productive, run the risk of confining analyses of intimacy to the realm of political economy. They emphasise that these studies should be

complemented by contextualised, localised and historical approaches in order to avoid reducing analyses of love and marriage to the worn-out, yet perennially popular dichotomies of 'modern' versus 'traditional' ideas and practices, or 'individualistic' versus 'relational' persons.

For many of my friends, 'romantic love' was just one of a range of ideas about love and marriage that they drew on creatively in specific ways. It was particularly visible in the context of practices such as Valentine's Day cards and gifts, as well as at the Western-style wedding party [*réception*] that was occasionally held as part of a marriage celebration (see Figure 10, below). On the surface, these celebrations are very similar to wedding parties in the West: the bride in her white dress will walk down a makeshift 'aisle' accompanied by her 'bridesmaids' carrying flowers [*hôtesses*] and the 'groom' and his 'groomsmen' [*garçons*] in identical suits. The crucial difference, however, is that the 'groom' is *not* the bride's husband-to-be, but one of his male friends, who simply plays the part of the newlywed – the groom and his family are not even expected to be in attendance at this part of the marriage, which is very much about the bride and for the benefit of her family and friends (Chapter Two).<sup>51</sup> As Hirsch and Wardlow (2006) point out, privileging a narrative of romantic attraction and companionate marriage in some contexts does not necessarily establish the affective primacy of the conjugal couple; parents and siblings, for example, may dispute the centrality of the marital bond in various ways (Chapters Four and Five).

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<sup>51</sup> This arrangement is somewhat reminiscent of the Islamic marriage where *both* parties are represented by others.



**Figure 10:** The inside of a 'wedding tent', erected in the middle of a street to host a reception. Photo by the author

### 3.2 *Humouring the husband*

In Dakar, people regularly declared, often with reference to Islamic precepts, that men ought to be undertaking remunerated work [*liggéey*] in order to support their natal kin, and, above all their wives and children. 'The man should be doing everything' [*góor moo wara def lépp*], people explained, by which they meant that he should ideally be able to singlehandedly support [*yor*] his wife and children. Whereas some men felt that they were unable to marry due to lack of resources, many others who were married, but were not perceived to be fulfilling their financial obligations towards their wives and children, became subject to fierce criticism from women and men of all ages within the wider community (cf. Melly 2011). Although men were unlikely to self-identify as inadequate, and women also avoided directly alluding to their husband's shortcomings, men's failings as husbands were frequently discussed by third parties in the absence of the couple. For example, following the birth of Lamine and Marietou's first child

(Chapter Two), comments such as the following were bandied about during a heated discussion within the extended family at Mère bi's house:

'He didn't even pay for the hospital fees – he asked his brother-in-law to pay it for him.'

'Both mother and baby need medicines from the pharmacy, but he disappeared over 24 hours ago to buy them, and I just know he's still hanging around some relative's house hoping to get some money.'

'His wife needs special attention right now, and special food to help her to keep her strength up, and he didn't leave any money with her before she left.'

'Even when he married her he didn't do anything, there was no ceremony.'

'He never gives her any money – she has to go and beg from relatives'.

'He's lazy and doesn't work properly.'

'He shouldn't have married someone else's child – no one should do this to someone else's child, the poor thing.'

'Just wait till he gets back, he has it coming to him.'

Lamine was considered to be particularly useless because he was not perceived to be a conscientious worker, and because he engaged in the un-Islamic, harmful, and squandering pastimes of drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. It was this, rather than the fact that he relied on the support of relatives *per se*, that was considered to be inappropriate. As illustrated by Ibou's story, we can see that it is possible to rely on somebody else for help with living and food expenses, and still be considered a hard-working, responsible man who is in a good position to take a wife.

Some men are genuinely in a position of economic superiority compared with their wives, especially when the latter's capacity to earn money is constrained by childcare and housework responsibilities (Chapters Four, Five and Six). However, as we shall see in Chapter Six, many women engage in some form of remunerated activity, even if they do not refer to it as 'work', and some men do not earn much, or any money at all. It is worth remembering that the handing over of money is, generally speaking, neither embarrassing nor shameful in this context of widespread need (cf. p.69). People are interconnected in myriad networks of assistance that are determined by the level of want, level of means and personal inclinations, which permit many Dakarais to survive on sporadic and insufficient incomes (Ndione 1994). Women routinely provide material assistance to their children as well as their families of origin (Chapter Five). What is significant, however, is that the support provided by women, or lack thereof, is much less likely to be a cause for discussion, disapproval or scandal than men's.

In principle, a man who is able to adequately provide for his wives and children can expect to hold a position of complete authority over his family; this is supported by Koranic precepts that impel women to submit to their husbands. Upon marrying, a woman is ritually advised by senior members of her natal family to obey and defer to her husband and in-laws (Dial 2008, Ames 1953, Lecarme-Frassy 2000, Moya 2011). Moya (2011:89-90) observes that the submissive relationship between a wife and a husband bears a strong similarity to the relationship between a *marabout* and his disciples. This type of comportment is frequently referred to as the 'work of the mother' [*liggéeyu ndey*] which, despite its name, is understood to consist of a woman's submission to the authority of her husband, which is causally connected to the future wellbeing and success of her children (Lecarme-Frassy 2000, Dial 2008, Moya 2011, see also Chapters Four and Five). Many of my acquaintances explained that *liggéeyu ndey* involved enduring or resisting [*muñ*] the ordeals of marriage, for example the neglect or betrayal

of a husband who marries an additional wife, for the sake of her children. Others cited Mame Diarra Bousso, the mother of Cheikh Amadou Bamba Mbacké, the founder of the Murid brotherhood, who is often depicted as the embodiment of *ligéeyu ndey* in her total submission to her husband, the Saint's father.

However, it is clear that the darker side of submitting to a husband's authority and performing *ligéeyu ndey* is the potential of violence and abuse. Submission dictates that a woman must be sexually available to her husband at all times, and is a key example of the way in which society and individuals attempt to limit and control women and their sexuality in this particular context. Dakar women, like women in so many parts of the world, are frequently victims of rape and domestic violence, which often take place within marriage and intimate settings, where they are less likely to be taken seriously by others as a form of wrongdoing. Moreover, the practice of female genital cutting, though illegal since 1999 and traditionally not practiced by the Wolof and Séeréer groups, has been undergone by significant numbers of Dakaroises from other ethnic backgrounds. According to one recent estimate, the total rate of female genital cutting for the country as a whole is 28% (van Eerdewijk 2007:9), with marked regional and ethnic disparities: the prevalence is about 60% in the southern Casamance region (CRLP/GREFELS 1999:152, cited in van Eerdewijk 2007:9), and 62% among the Fulani Pël and Tukulóor peoples (EDS-IV 2005:33-34, cited in van Eerdewijk 2007:9).<sup>52</sup>

As noted above, women's submission is widely acknowledged to be contingent on men's economic and financial clout. We have seen that Dakar men readily acknowledged their financial responsibilities, but they also frequently complained about 'materialistic Senegalese women' who prioritised money and commodities over genuine emotional attachment. The most cutting remarks were directed towards young, unmarried women

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the practice of female genital cutting in Senegal, see for example Dellenborg (2004) and O'Neill (2011)

and the way in which they conducted themselves in romantic relationships, although married women could also be accused of being too demanding, expecting their husbands to buy them new clothes and household furnishings. A woman who is not yet married, however, has considerable freedom to manoeuvre between partners, and this is widely perceived to encourage certain aspirational forms of consumption that centre on the body, and above all on a woman's physical appearance and clothing (Nyamnjoh 2005, Biaya 2001, Scheld 2003, Buggenhagen 2004, A.S. Fall 2007, van Eerdewijk 2007:131-170, Poleykett 2012:83-93).

The term *mbaraan* refers to the female practice of forging close relationships with several partners, whom she views, at least in part, as a source of money, gifts and other attentions. There is a general view that the *mbaraan* relationship is characterised by the exchange of money for sex, although this is complicated by the fact that unmarried women, even those who are no longer virgins, are not supposed to be engaging in sexual relations (van Eerdewijk 2007). Thus, a man who frequently transfers money to a girlfriend is playing the role of the provider-husband who is entitled to sexual privileges, but is simultaneously trying to ensure his partner's fidelity, which cannot be taken for granted outside of marriage. Many people vocalized their unhappiness over this perceived state of affairs, claiming that women were profit-orientated and capitalised on their relationships with men. Women, however, justified their concerns with the commodification of their appearance by explaining that looking good was necessary in order to find a husband (see also Biaya 2001, Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005). They also despaired that 'all men are the same', that is to say that they are naturally adulterous, and that it was impossible to be certain whether they were interested in a committed relationship and eventually marriage, or whether they just wanted short-term satisfaction (see van Eerdewijk 2007:131-170). When a relationship broke down due to the infidelity on the part of the woman, it was always purported to be caused by her desire for (another man's) money. By

contrast, if a boyfriend was found to be unfaithful, this was attributed to his innate desire for other women.

A married woman, unlike one who is single, does not have the same freedom to move between partners, but husbands still feel the burden of being the 'provider', as people emphasise how women have the 'right' to men's money for the purposes of accommodation, food and clothing (cf. Ferguson 1985, Schroeder 1996). It is not clear, however, that material considerations are the only factor in the conjugal equation from a woman's perspective, although I shall argue that they are, without a doubt, central to Dakarais conceptions of marriage.

Whereas a man is supposed to financially support his wife [*yor sa jabar*], a woman is expected to 'look after her husband' [*toppatoo sa jëkkër*] in other, distinctly feminine – and perhaps distinctly Senegalese – ways. A woman's relationship to her husband is fulfilled in part through respectful, deferential behaviour, but also more specifically through the performance of household chores, especially cooking. Cooking delicious meals was considered to be a crucial component of good wifely behaviour, along with keeping the marital bedroom ordered and beautiful. Both, however, tended to be described, somewhat jokingly, as conducive to the achievement of good sexual relations that would, in turn, be reciprocated by the transfer of money from husband to wife. As we shall see in the following chapter, housework is principally associated with the broader context of a woman's relationship to her husband's *family*, and only secondarily with the figure of the husband.

Above all, a wife is expected to ensure the emotional and physical wellbeing of her husband by implementing a range of techniques of seduction that Senegalese women consider themselves to have expert knowledge of. This involves careful attention to detail, including the appearance of the conjugal bedroom, which ought to be spotless and smell of sweet incense, but above all to the woman's body. Various erotic paraphernalia such as revealing undergarments, wrapper skirts with large gaps in the fabric, and strings of

beads, often scented or glow-in-the-dark, which are tied around the waist to draw attention to the buttocks (see Figure 11, below), were considered to be of particular importance (see also Mustafa 1997, 2006, Nyamnjuh 2005, Biaya 2000, 2001, Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005, Moya 2011 and Le Cour Grandmaison 1972). However, people also emphasised the type of language that a woman should use to 'humour' her husband: she should encourage him to talk about his day and help him to relax if he has been working hard. She should also be conscious of her bodily movements – if a husband appeared tired and distracted, making particular gestures or walking past him with swinging hips ought to secure his full attention (Castaldi 2006, Gittens 2008). The ideal Senegalese wife, then, spends money on her appearance in order to satisfy her husband sexually; consuming in a particular way is perceived to be both a consequence of, as well as a precondition for, a successful marriage.

People referred to this combination of physical appearance, soothing words and sensual movements with the word '*nax*' – which I have translated as 'to humour'. However, *nax* can also mean 'to sooth or calm down a child who is upset', or, most commonly, 'to trick, cheat, or deceive someone'. I suggest that it is instructive to pay close attention to the varied semantic field of this word when trying to make sense of the intricacies of the conjugal relationship. It is worth noting that although men tend to be anagraphically older than their wives, sometimes considerably so, women are perceived to age, or mature, faster than men.<sup>53</sup> When I asked a group of female friends to explain to me why it was rare for a woman to be married to a man roughly her age, they explained that girls always 'overtake' [*rawante*] boys; this would mean that such a woman would, in fact, be 'older' than her husband. One friend added that this had to do with the fact that, from birth onwards, girls grow a little bit every single day, whereas boys only grow once a week, on a Friday.

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<sup>53</sup> Bledsoe (2002) describes similarly gendered interpretations of aging in Gambia, where age has more to do with events such as childbirth that inscribe themselves on the body than with linear conceptions of time.

When people alluded to wifely respect and deference, it tended to be in a context in which a woman was perceived to have been deviant – for example when she and her husband had fallen out. Respectful, subservient behaviour was generally depicted in terms of *refraining* from certain actions – from disagreeing with one’s husband in public, for example, or making a fool of him in front of other people. In contrast, *humouring* your husband involved actively taking charge of a situation in order to achieve a very specific goal: I often heard people joke that if you humoured your husband skilfully enough, you could ask him for the title deeds to the house [*këyitu kër gi*], and he would hand them to you. Neveu Kringelbach also observes that local popular discourses sometimes explicitly infantilise men and transform them into passive intimate and sexual partners (2005:134).

Although husbands were expected, and in practice often did, give money to their wives, it is not useful to view such donations as being directly proportional to a woman’s erotic expertise. Although people did sometimes appear to make this association, I never heard anyone suggest that the reason that a husband was failing to provide for his wife was because she was not seducing him properly – although the opposite scenario – a couple who did not have good sexual relations because of financial difficulties – seemed somewhat more common. However, in situations where couples were perceived to be experiencing marital problems, whether this consisted of a lack of intimacy, a lack of material support, or both, those concerned would be strongly encouraged to modify their behaviour. As I discuss in the following chapter, a sister-in-law is supposed to be a woman’s first port of call if she has sexual problems with her husband, since it is said to be inappropriate for married couples to discuss these issues openly (see Chapter Four, pp. 151-152). Other family members may become involved if the root of the problem is about the maintenance of wives and children.

In Dakar, knowledge of how to ‘humour a husband’ is integral to being a woman, and meeting a wife’s material needs is part of what makes the man. When I was in the field, the fashionable way of alluding to these wifely

activities was the phrase '*defar ba mu baax*', which means 'to do until it is good', or 'to do it well'. This is a euphemism not only for sexual relations, but for the full spectrum of 'humouring' behaviour described above. After the standard salutations and enquiries after the health of family members, it was not unusual for one woman to say to another (typically married) woman: 'Are you doing it well?' The reply was invariably an emphatic: 'Yes, *of course* I'm doing it well! I'm looking after him very well!' accompanied by grand gesticulations and laughter.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes, the dialogue would continue:

Are you doing it well? [*Yangi defar ba mu baax?*]

Building it until it is high? [*Tabax ba mu kawe?*]

Cleaning it until it gleams? [*Fobeere ba mu liis?*]

Living upstairs, renting out downstairs! [*Dëkk ci kaw, luwe ci suuf!*]

Aside from the obvious sexual connotations, the popularity of this *façon de parler* reveals the link between good 'wifely' behaviour and young people's aspirations to live apart from the extended family, which shall be discussed further in the following chapter. Men dreamt about being able to afford a plot of land, as they hoped to construct houses of their own, though as time went by, they knew they would have to settle for plots that were located further and further away from central Dakar. Women, in turn, aspired to these neo-local living arrangements, convinced that marriages stood more of a chance of success without the interference and demands of the in-laws. Eventually, when the upper floors were completed, the family would be able to move upstairs and rent out the lower floors to tenants, thereby gaining a valuable source of income.

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<sup>54</sup> If a woman is unmarried, it is only appropriate to say this in the presence of close friends, or in an unambiguously light-hearted manner. However, in some contexts a man may also be said to *defar ba mu baax*.



**Figure 11:** Strings of waist beads for sale at the market, including the glow-in-the-dark variety on the right. Photo by the author

### **3.3     *The importance of being jealous***

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I interviewed Khady Ndiaye, one of the older women whom I had grown to know well, and who had always been exceptionally kind to me, explaining that I wished to learn more about her life trajectory. I asked Khady Ndiaye to talk about her childhood, which she had spent in a small town located a couple of hours drive south-east of Dakar, and her years as a young married woman in the city during the 1960s and 1970s. It soon became clear to me that this woman, who was in her late fifties, had been deeply affected by her husband's marriage to his second wife some thirty years earlier. Khady Ndiaye's co-wife, who was about ten or fifteen years her junior, lived in a different part of the city, but she and her adult children frequently came to visit Khady Ndiaye, whose own children were close to their half-siblings.

Khady Ndiaye spoke quietly as she recalled that, following her husband's second marriage, she had gone through a prolonged period of despair and anger that lasted many years. She used to cry every day, because before he married his second wife, she and their five children had lived in complete comfort, she explained nostalgically. After her husband's second marriage, their standard of living declined. She could not prevent herself from reminding him why things had changed, and whenever she was confronted with any kind of financial difficulty she would pour scorn on him for having married a second wife, when he lacked the means to adequately maintain his first family. Their relationship became marred by constant arguments, during which Khady Ndiaye would shout at her husband and insult her co-wife using the most vulgar language. 'Even my children would implore me to stop the quarrelling,' she added. I asked how her husband reacted to these fights. 'He never said anything,' she replied. 'He just listened to me. He knew that everything I said to him was true.'

Apart from this one occasion, I never heard Khady Ndiaye speak unfavourably about her co-wife, and indeed, they appeared to have a very friendly relationship. Younger women, however, were often openly and proudly jealous [*fiiir*] and I was told on many occasions that jealousy [*fiiiraange*] was important because it encouraged appropriate wifely behaviour – the humouring of the husband discussed above. Crucially, making explicit demands for material support would deter men from having relationships with other women. If your husband or boyfriend is not giving to you, goes the logic, then he will be giving to some another woman. This reasoning was almost redolent of the Wall Street dictum that 'greed is good': jealousy is positively viewed, in the sense that the more financial pressure a woman puts on her husband, the fewer opportunities he will have to be unfaithful. Instead, he will provide for, even spoil, his wife and their family unit. Jealousy thus has the potential to stabilise and improve a relationship. Yet men, but sometimes also women, warned that women's jealousy should be within reason, and that extreme jealousy, the type that was typically

characterised by active attempts to sabotage relationships using witchcraft, could be dangerous.

The extent to which witchcraft is considered to be an appropriate means to achieve a desired result depends on the context. Although seeking the services of a *marabout* to secure the affections of a spouse or lover, actual or prospective, was widely acknowledged to have potentially harmful consequences, there were situations in which it was not necessarily negatively viewed (cf. Kuczynski 1988). I remember when an acquaintance confessed, half-laughingly, that he suspected that his girlfriend may have put something in his food or drink because he simply could not stop thinking about her. He had never felt this strongly about anybody else before, he added, and wanted to give her everything that she asked for. I was sceptical, until the day that a close friend of mine conspiratorially suggested that I should consider visiting a *marabout* of her recommendation to give me 'something' that I could use to prevent my own partner from going astray. Although she spoke with discretion, she was not ashamed to admit that she, too, was planning to visit the same *marabout* once she had saved up enough money in order to protect her own marriage, because 'it's just not safe, you can't trust anybody'. By this, she meant that other women were capable of going to extreme lengths to sabotage others' relationships (cf. Smith 2009), and that any action taken would be a preventative measure. This is a context, then, in which jealousy is normalised: wives (and girlfriends), especially those who do not yet have adult children, are constantly preoccupied by the fear that much of a husband's resources may be going to a love rival, that is to say another wife or a girlfriend. They draw on a range of techniques that include humouring the husband, making explicit requests for money, and sometimes also witchcraft as a means of acting on these anxieties.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the relationship between witchcraft practices and love in the Senegambian context, see for example Ames 1953, Diop 1985, Rabain 1979 and Lallemand 1988a. Gell (2003), Niehaus (2002) and Douglas (1970) are examples of anthropological work that addresses these topics theoretically and comparatively.

Of course, there are all sorts of other situations in which jealousy can arise, and it goes without saying that men can be jealous too.<sup>56</sup> In the Senegalese context, however, where women are perceived to have a fundamental claim on their husband's money, it is female jealousy that dominates. Men's jealousy with respect to their wives and girlfriends is more explicitly about control over their movements and appearance, with a view to ensuring modest and respectful behaviour, but only indirectly, or secondarily concerned with fidelity, and men were much less likely than women to express jealousy of their partners. Overall, I felt that when it came to wives, this attitude was justified, as the social constraints on married women's movements make it fairly difficult, though by no means impossible, to get away with adultery. But in the case of unmarried couples, my impression was that men were more likely to believe – often mistakenly – that their partners were faithful, whereas women were more realistic about the prospect of men's infidelity.

Jealousy between a woman and her in-laws, and other types of jealousy, are less likely to be well thought of and considered justifiable than jealousy in the context of marital and romantic relationships. Women who might proudly declare themselves to be jealous wives were unlikely to self-identify as jealous mothers, jealous sisters, or jealous daughters-in-law. In practice, however, concerns and disputes over a man's money between women and their in-laws were also common, and such conflicts were also frequently associated with accusations of witchcraft. On a day-to-day basis, both the wife-husband relationship and the wife-in-law relationship were characterised, albeit in different ways, by persistent concerns over money, and concomitant manifestations of jealousy.

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<sup>56</sup> David Ames (1953:49) observes that amongst the Wolof, marital problems may sometimes be attributed to the individuals' jealous 'personal spirits'. If a husband's female spirit and a wife's male spirit are not in harmony, their union will not last. During my own fieldwork, I occasionally heard people make allusions to these jealous spirits, notably in the case of women who had been widowed on more than one occasion, which was believed to be caused by the jealousy of a male spirit-suitor [*rabu-far*].

Another friend, a younger woman named Sadia who was in her mid-thirties, had consistently maintained to me that polygyny was an acceptable practice, but only on the condition that none of a man's wives or children would be in a position of hardship. The previous year, Sadia's husband had married, and then, for reasons that were not entirely clear to me at the time, quickly divorced a second wife. At around the same time, he had suddenly acquired a substantial sum of money from his business activities overseas, and the family's standard of living drastically increased as new rooms, including a separate, luxuriously furnished suite consisting of a private living room, bedroom and bathroom for Sadia, were constructed on the roof of his family's house. Soon after most of the work had been completed, Sadia's husband decided to marry a second wife for the second time. Sadia was left in a position of material comfort – everyone agreed that his investment in accommodation for her and their children demonstrated he was committed to the continuation of the marriage – but emotional vulnerability. She told me how she would know when he was speaking to his second wife on the phone, and that it bothered her, even though she would pretend not to notice or mind. On a separate occasion, I stopped by her house late one evening and found her crying in her beautiful new bedroom, visibly frustrated because her husband had, she explained, left the house late at night yet again with a group of male friends. Weary and downcast, she muttered that sometimes she wanted to leave him, but she knew that if she did, she would 'lose out' [*perte*]. One might assume that being in the position of a second wife, or that of a girlfriend of a married man, might involve less jealousy, because at least in this case the relationship would have been entered into with the knowledge that there will be a rival, but this is not necessarily the case in practice. I later learned that Sadia's husband had divorced his previous second wife because she was so jealous of his close relationship with Sadia, his first wife, and was unhappy about how much time they spent together. His current second wife was also jealous, Sadia told me, not of Sadia, whom she had decided to ally herself with and confide in, but at the prospect of another rival.

I suggest that these various manifestations of female jealousy in Dakar can be usefully analysed in relation to Unni Wikan's (1990) ethnographic explorations of Balinese personhood. In her monograph, Wikan attempts to push beyond the cultural conventions that dictate that Balinese must always appear unemotional, graceful and poised, 'making one's face look bright and clear' and 'managing the heart'. Doing so, she argues, will yield a deeper understanding of people's relationships with one another, rendering their lives meaningful in terms that convey their lived experiences as emotional persons. Wikan's analysis makes for a useful comparison and helps shed light on my own material. Although on the surface people in Dakar tended to claim that polygyny was an entirely acceptable, even natural state of affairs, the public normalisation of female jealousy reflects, I suggest, a deep-seated female contestation of male infidelity and, by extension, the social acceptance of certain male prerogatives embedded in patriarchy. This counter-discourse becomes legitimised with reference to the ideal of the male breadwinner and the humouring of the husband: jealously insisting on material support is good, so the story goes, because it stabilises and improves the quality of the marital relationship.

Although this attitude is very much ingrained in the Senegalese consciousness, there are, perhaps, moments when even this veil shifts for a moment, revealing a rather different type of jealousy, one that is not merely contingent on the satisfaction of material needs. In the last case I described, Sadia's husband's second marriage took place at a time when his financial circumstances had suddenly changed for the better. Our mutual friends agreed that his first wife was in a favourable situation; her living arrangements had been upgraded and she received many new items of clothing, accessories and furnishings for her rooms from her newly wealthy husband. All this, however, did not preclude the feelings of private pain caused by her husband marrying a second wife, as well as by the suspicion that he was potentially engaging in further extra-marital affairs. In the section that follows, I proceed to draw on this discussion of women's jealousy further in order to reflect on the extent to which *both* material

support and emotional attachment are embroiled within marital and romantic relationships in Dakar.

### **3.4     *The economies of intimacy***

Thus far, I have argued that jealousy is, at one level at least, closely associated with concerns about economic provision; it both causes and results from the ideal that wives are entitled to their husbands' material support. In this section, I build on this observation in order to suggest that a consideration of the contexts in which women's jealousy manifests itself can help us see that this entitlement to material support cannot be easily disentangled from broader notions of love, care and responsibility.

One of my motivations for advancing this particular line of argument is my conviction that deconstructing the 'wifely' aspect of the 'materialistic Senegalese woman' trope is politically worthwhile in addition to being analytically productive. Accounts of 'transactional sex' that depict African women in particular as having sex solely for material gain, without intimacy, affection or pleasure, are frequently situated within master narratives that emphasise the 'otherness' of African sexual practices (Chapter One, p.27, Arnfred 2004b). Most notable in this regard is the Caldwell thesis (e.g. 1989) on African libertinage, which makes sweeping generalisations about the 'permissive' sexuality of Africans based on a few case studies and surveys (Spronk 2012, van Eerdewijk 2007). As Thomas and Cole (2009) point out, such generalisations are often well-aligned with Western folk theories that imply that, whereas love is the emotion that makes us the most altruistic, money and commodities are its opposite, representing individualistic, self-interested behaviour that does not place high value on personal human connections (see also Parry and Bloch 1989, Zelizer 2005). Drawing on Gayle Rubin's (1999) notion of 'sex hierarchies', Anouka van Eerdewijk (2007:21-22;160-164) argues that, in the Dakar context, sexual categorisation and normativity in the context of heightened inequality and

the increasing monetisation of social relations, have tended to lead to the conceptual opposition of love and money as the motivations for 'good sex' and 'bad sex' respectively.

One of my younger friends, Awa, who was in her early twenties, described herself as being completely in love with her boyfriend, a very good-looking young man who was an aspiring amateur sportsman. When I had first come to know her, she spoke irreverently about her multiple boyfriends, whom she referred to either using the word 'boyfriend' [*far*] or *mbaraan*, indicating that money and gifts were her main incentive for being in the relationships. Now, however, Awa claimed that she was completely faithful to her *chéri* and had broken up with all of her previous romantic interests. I asked whether she expected her boyfriend to give her anything, and she explained that she knew that he was in difficult financial circumstances as he was an unpaid athlete who was trying to become professional, and only infrequently managed to find odd jobs in the informal sector on the side. She really loved him, she explained, and because he had very little money, she only asked him for small amounts when she was genuinely stuck. Sometimes Awa would give her boyfriend money too, if he asked and she happened to have something on her. Later, as we walked around her neighbourhood, she pointed to a house and laughed: 'one of my *mbaraan* lives there'. 'But he's not your boyfriend?' I enquired. It turned out that he *wasn't* her boyfriend – because she was faithful to her *chéri* – he was just under the impression that he was.

Sometimes, however, the difference between a *mbaraan*-type relationship and one which would result in marriage was not so well-defined. For example, another younger friend, whose boyfriend was much older and already had a wife and adult children, habitually contradicted herself as to her wishes for the future. Sometimes she hinted that she would stay with him only until he had fulfilled his promise to pay for an array of clothes and accessories that she had acquired on credit. Yet there were other moments when she indicated that if he substantiated his claims that he loved her and

genuinely wished to marry her, by, for example, initiating a conversation with her family, or finding her an apartment so that she would not have to live with his extended family, then she would marry him. If he could demonstrate *his* love, long-term commitment and sense of responsibility towards her, then perhaps *she* would start to care for him more too.<sup>57</sup>

We can see through Awa's example that in their daily lives, people in Dakar are perfectly able to consciously distinguish between different types of intimate relationships, those that are for 'love' and those that preclude any form of affection or pleasure, those that are 'good' and those which give cause for social criticism. At the same time, however, I suggest that the exchange of money and material goods within marriage or romantic relationships should be viewed as part of an interconnected whole 'through which the meaningfulness of the relationship as well as the gendered sexual identities of both partners are constructed' (van Eerdewijk 2007:160). Material support and emotional attachment are, in other words, not only interrelated, but mutually constitutive; each is implicated in the other, as well as in the formation of specific gendered and sexual identities. It is time, as Thomas and Cole argue, to 'complicate models of intimacy by emphasizing the power of material exchanges not just to reflect but to produce emotionally charged relationships' (2009:21; see also Cornwall 2002, Vaughan 2010, Spronk 2012, Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2005, Helle-Valle 2004 and Venables 2008).

Although *mbaraan* relationships are undeniably common in Dakar, they coexist alongside an understanding that companionship and care may, indeed *should* also be expressed materially. In Awa's case, she did not mind that her boyfriend did not provide her with regular financial assistance, but this was only because she knew and accepted that he lacked the resources.

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<sup>57</sup> There is a Wolof proverb that states that 'a woman does not love – she learns/gets to know very well/becomes familiar with/becomes well-acquainted with' [*jigéen du nob, dafay miin*]. As far as I can tell was, this proverb is applicable to both women and men, depending on the circumstances of their union.

My older friend, Khady Ndiaye, made it clear that she had suffered emotionally when her husband married his second wife, even as she spoke mainly of the material aspects of the betrayal. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the story of Sadia, who tried to conceal her unhappiness at her husband's second marriage despite her new-found material comforts. Her example shows that sometimes, material care is not *sufficient* to guarantee a harmonious relationship, even though it is viewed as a *necessary* condition for such a relationship if the resources are perceived to be there.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored competing meanings of marriage and romantic relationships in Dakar, tracing how these engender specific ideas and practices associated with 'being a woman'. I demonstrated that a balanced perspective on Senegalese womanhood calls for reflections not only on female, but also male rights and obligations in the context of conjugal relations. I began with a discussion of marital practices in contemporary Dakar, describing how these practices are characterised by a number of paradoxes. These include the central significance attributed to the institution of marriage in the female life cycle and the simultaneous fragility of the same institution, or the normative ideas surrounding dating and fidelity on the one hand, and the large proportion of extra-marital relationships and children born out of wedlock on the other. I observed that younger people especially tend to draw on globalised idioms of romantic love and companionate marriage, but subsequently suggested that there also exists a rather different understanding of what constitutes good 'wifely' behaviour. This involves 'humouring' the husband in order to secure the latter's sustained material generosity. The explicit emphasis on the interdependence and even entanglement of sex, companionship and money within intimate relationships is often considered antithetical to the

ideologies of romantic love and companionate marriage (see for example Giddens 1992).

I then proceeded to examine women's manifestations of jealousy of their husbands or boyfriends, which were typically framed with reference to the duty of male breadwinners in ensuring their wives' and children's material wellbeing. I suggested that this discursive normalisation of women's jealous behaviour poses a deep-seated contestation to the socially upheld 'naturalness' of polygyny and male infidelity, exposing also some of the considerable social pressure men encounter to live up to the expectation of the provider. Crucially, an ethnographic focus on female jealousy also sheds light on the interconnectedness of material support and intimacy in marital or romantic relationships and the way these structure conjugal relations and – somewhat paradoxically – ensure male dependence on and even commitment to their partners. Furthermore, this approach challenges prevailing notions about the 'otherness' of African sexual relations and African women's vulnerability as they have sex solely for material gain. These are particularly salient within the context of Western folk perceptions about the nature of love and sexuality, but also feature in some of the academic literature.

In this chapter, I have hinted at how intimate relations, material exchanges and jealousy are typically situated in broader social contexts that are constituted and framed by institutional, communal and kinship relations. The following chapter takes up some of these themes in more detail, as it seeks to explore a rather different aspect of the 'wifely' role in Senegal, namely the relationship between a woman and her husband's relatives and the tensions and conflicts that are often an essential, perhaps even inevitable feature of this relationship.

## Woman of Needle, Woman of Blade: The Politics of Housework

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*Here lies a poor woman who was always tired,  
She lived in a house where help wasn't hired.  
Her last words on earth were: 'Dear friends, I am going  
To where there's no cooking, or washing, or sewing,  
For everything there is exact to my wishes,  
For where they don't eat there's no washing of dishes.  
I'll be where loud anthems will always be ringing,  
But having no voice I'll be quit of the singing.  
Don't mourn for me now, don't mourn for me never,  
I am going to do nothing for ever and ever.'*  
— Anonymous, Epitaph for a Tired Housewife

This chapter takes up one of the issues that the previous chapter touched upon briefly, namely the conflicts that arise between women and their female in-laws. I noted how discourses about female competition over men's money, which may involve suspicions of witchcraft, may affect the relationship not only between love rivals, but also between a woman and her husband's relatives. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the widespread phenomenon of women leaving, or trying to avoid joining, the in-laws' household. There is an extent to which these tensions can be understood in terms of a global trend that idealises romantic love and companionate marriage (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Padilla et al. 2007). This ideology, with its emphasis on the primacy (and the privacy) of the conjugal couple, seeks to minimise interference from the extended family and the associated financial obligations, thereby privileging a neo-local, nuclear family residential arrangement. In this chapter, however, I suggest

that there is a further dimension to conflicts with the in-laws that should not be overlooked: they are frequently, and at least in part, conflicts over women's work within the house. The theme of housework also made a brief appearance in the previous chapter, where it was noted that ideal wifely behaviour included the performance of certain select household tasks for the benefit of one's husband. The emphasis was on cooking, with its erotic undertones, and the ingredients included a blend of subservience and seduction. In this chapter, the theme of housework is explored in more detail, and the image of the subservient wife reappears in the context of a woman's relationship with her in-laws. I describe how women are expected to conduct themselves when they move in with their in-laws, and demonstrate that the relationship to the mother-in-law is constructed upon the performance of housework in the in-laws' house. In practice, however, this relationship often becomes strained due to the housework demands of the husband's family, and the situation is frequently aggravated by the presence of a woman's sisters-in-law, who, although belonging to the same generation, are generally *not* expected to partake in the most labour-intensive tasks. In some cases, conflicts over housework may result in a woman exiting her in-laws' house, without necessarily divorcing from her husband. In other cases, they may lead to a renegotiation of the allocation of tasks within the household.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine normative ideas about the performance of housework in Dakar and the expected behaviour of a wife who has married into her in-laws' house (4.1).<sup>58</sup> In the subsequent section, I recount the story of a young woman named Coura, and the turn of events following her marriage into a Dakar household (4.2). In Section 4.3, I analyse this ethnographic case study and highlight the deep-seated antagonism that

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth mentioning here that I have not deemed it appropriate to draw on my own experiences as a Dakar 'married-in wife' in this chapter in any direct way, as my own circumstances were radically different from those encountered by most of my informants. Even though I lived with my partner's family for part of my fieldwork, I maintained a degree of independence from the extended family, financially and otherwise. We lived on a separate floor from the family along with various tenants, and I was never expected to partake in the communal household tasks.

the burden of housework may elicit. Here, I juxtapose the ideal of the deferential, hard-working married-in wife with the figure of her resident sister-in-law, who 'does nothing but sleep and eat'. This, I suggest, helps shed light on the broader 'pecking orders' according to which housework in Dakar is outsourced. Finally, drawing on these findings, I argue for the broader importance of rigorous and sustained anthropological attention to housework, a topic that has all too frequently been neglected, both within the discipline and elsewhere (4.4).

#### **4.1 *Woman of needle, woman of blade***

In Senegal, marrying into the house of the husband and/or the husband's family is arguably part of the process of becoming a married woman. As we have seen in the previous chapters, virtually all women and men in Dakar aspire to marry at some point in their lives, and a permanent *célibataire* (single person) of either sex is extremely rare. As the previous chapter indicated, women experience the moral imperative to marry more intensely than men, partly due to the unacceptability of women's sexual relationships outside of marriage, and partly because marriage and motherhood unequivocally signify a girl's entry into womanhood.

The first part of the marriage process, whereby a woman 'is given away' and a man 'ties a wife' is distinct from a woman's marriage into her husband's and/or in-laws' house. The latter, referred to as *séyi* in Wolof, may occur quite sometime after the 'official' union, or not at all. *Séyi*, which literally means 'to go and be married', denotes both the ritualised process and the state of being married into a house. Up until *séyi* occurs, almost all women live with their families, and they often continue to live there for some time after they are married. Although it is the first part of the marriage process that is the precondition for a girl's transition to adulthood, there is a sense that this transition is not fully accomplished until a woman has moved out of the family home to *séyi*. *Séyi*, I was told, is 'when you are no longer in your

mother's house. You are veiled [*dañu lay muur*] and you go to live in your in-laws' house, or your husband's house.' Although some women in Dakar marry into their husband's own house, the more common pattern, especially for younger women, first-time wives and first wives will be a marriage into the house of the husband's extended family, typically because the husband himself does not have a separate house. Marriage into an extended family household becomes less likely amongst wealthier Dakarois, but was considered the norm by most of the people I knew.

In order to *séyi*, a woman must be veiled before making the trip from her family's house to her husband's/in-laws' house, an event that may be honoured with a ceremony [*céet*] attended by family and friends (Chapter Two). Although I came across cases where a woman was living with her husband and/or his family before *séyi* had taken place, I was told that at some point in the future she should return to her own family in order to be veiled before making the journey back to the house, in order that her status as a married-in wife be publicly acknowledged.

There is a strong normative expectation that, once a woman has married into her husband's and/or in-laws' house, she shall remain there. The Wolof proverb that 'a female child is not a child' [*doom bu jigéen du doom*] attests to this expectation – she is not a child because one day she will no longer be part of her family. Another saying hinges on the similarity of the words *séyi* and *seey*, which means 'to melt' and states that *jigéen séyiwul, dafa seeyiji* – a woman does not go and marry, she goes and melts – thereby implying that *séyi* is irreversible. However, we shall see that in practice, *séyi* is often but a short-lived episode in a woman's life trajectory, despite the fact that most Dakaroises do experience *séyi* at some point during their lifetime.

The behaviour befitting a wife after *séyi* is exemplified by the concept of the ‘woman of needle’ [*jeegu puso*].<sup>59</sup> A woman of needle is said to sew the members of the family into which she has married together; she is responsible for the cohesion of the household. Her antithesis is the ‘woman of blade’ [*jeegu lañset*; from the French *lancette*], who cuts the household apart by causing arguments with her mother-in-law, sisters-in-law and her co-wives or husband’s brothers’ wives. The moral implications and symbolic weight of the woman of needle/woman of blade dichotomy are striking, and in this section, I examine the emic elaboration of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ wifely behaviour in more detail.

In a song from the early 2000s entitled *Jeegu Puso* (Woman of Needle) the late *mballax* singer Ndongo Lô begins by singing that *séyi* is something that every woman ought to do. Then, singing from the perspective of a husband, he describes his hopes and expectations for married life: ‘I thought that when I married you, brought you into the house, you would be a woman of needle who sews relationships together’ [*yaakaaroo naa ni suma la takkee indi la ci kër gi, jeegu puso ngay doon ngay ñaw diggante*]. He continues: ‘ever since then, arguing here, arguing there, fights during the night, fights during the day, that’s what we are experiencing here’ [*boobu ba léegi jàppal fi jàppal fee, coow guddi coow bëccëg rekk lañu fi dëkkee*]. Lô does not explicitly refer to the in-laws in the song, but it becomes clear that the woman he is singing about has married into an extended family. He advises her to ‘treat everybody as if they were one’ [*ñépp booloo doon benn*], and the music video, which depicts the woman of needle and woman of blade in opposite corners of the screen, shows the latter quarrelling and physically fighting with female family members.<sup>60</sup>

The hugely popular singer Coumba Gawlo Seck similarly gives women guidance on how to behave when they *séyi* in a song recorded in the late

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<sup>59</sup> *Jeeg* refers to a woman who is married, and is distinct from the generic word for woman or female, *jigéen*, as well as from the word *janq*, which refers to a young, unmarried girl who is a virgin.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmuMaBHksO4> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

1990s. Seck's song *Bin-Bin* is explicitly concerned with a married-in wife's attitude towards her husband's mother and sisters; the verb *bin-bin* implies calm, gentle behaviour and the avoidance of arguments. She sings 'you should *bin-bin* with your mothers-in-law...you should *bin-bin* with your sisters-in-law' [*deél bin-bin ak say goro...deél bin-bin ak say njëkke*] and adds that 'you should view your husband's mother as your own mother' [*sa yaayu jëkkër, yemale ko ak sa yaay*]. Popular discourses about *séyi* almost always allude to the potential arguments between married-in wives and the extended family and advise on how to prevent these conflicts. The disputes that pertain to *séyi* may involve co-wives or other married-in wives, but are considered most likely to erupt between a married-in wife and her resident mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. This is because, in Dakar at least, it is increasingly the case that those men who are able to marry several wives either live independently of their parents, or they have one wife who lives in the in-laws' house and another who lives with her natal kin or in rented accommodation.

Although it is widely conceded that the relationship between a woman and her sisters-in-law is usually fraught with tension, in its ideal form, this relationship is supposed to be based on intimacy and confidence. It is a relationship of reciprocity, made manifest above all by the ceremonial role of the sisters-in-law at the *fóot* gift exchange (Chapter Two, p.109) that may take place after a woman's name-giving ceremony (Moya 2011:238-239;293-295). When a woman marries, her husband, with the advice of his family, will designate two of his female relatives or friends 'first sister-in-law' [*premier njëkke*] and 'second sister-in-law' [*deuxième njëkke*]. The first sister-in-law is customarily the husband's eldest half-sister by the same father, if she exists, and the second is another close female relative or friend. The first sister-in-law can look forward to the honour of being 'given the name' of the first daughter born to the couple, who becomes her namesake. If a woman has a large-scale name-giving ceremony following the birth of a child, her first sister-in-law and second sister-in-law may assist with the financing of the ceremony and may also bring items such as soap, washing

powder, bleach, body lotion, cotton buds, nappies, a baby bathtub and some clothes for the newborn. Later, during the ceremony itself, the mother of the newborn will show her appreciation for these gifts and financial assistance by offering these sisters-in-law money, fabric, jewellery or other gifts. This exchange at a name-giving is known as the *fóot*, or 'laundry', since many of the gifts to the new mother will be used for the frequent washing of the infant's clothes. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous chapter, these particular sisters-in-law, who are not usually full-sisters of the husband, are supposed to be a woman's first port of call if she has sexual problems in her marriage, since it is said to be inappropriate for married couples to discuss these issues openly.<sup>61</sup>

We can see that the *ideal* relationship with a sister-in-law hinges upon issues and incidents – the birth of one's child, sexual problems with one's husband – that are somewhat extraordinary and not in principle part of everyday life. This is perhaps not surprising, given that a sister-in-law is expected to marry into another family's house, and is therefore not a permanent resident in the house into which a woman marries. The relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law, however, is rooted in daily interactions, most significantly the performance of housework. Certain household tasks are as central to the concept of *séyi* as the conflicts between a woman and her in-laws described above. A married-in wife's work in the house is primarily directed towards pleasing her mother-in-law, who is invariably depicted within normative discourses as the deserving beneficiary of this work. Although we saw in the previous chapter that some household tasks, above all cooking, with its sexual connotations, are an element of good wifely behaviour towards one's husband, satisfying one's husband is not integral to *séyi*. This is because *séyi*, as we have seen, is distinct from the first part of the marriage that marks the union between husband and wife, and their sexual and financial relationship exists independently of it. Moreover, it is not uncommon for a woman to *séyi* to

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<sup>61</sup> The fact that the 'first' and 'second' sisters-in-law are typically not full siblings of the husband is perhaps significant here, as the sexual taboo that exists between them may not be as pronounced as it would be in the case of full siblings.

her in-law's house even if her husband is not present, because he spends most of the year working elsewhere, for example.

The gifts that a woman brings with her if her entry into the new house is marked with a ceremony [*céet*] consist mainly of household utensils such as bowls, serving dishes, casseroles, glassware and plastic tubs for laundry. As Buggenhagen observes, these items stand for hosting and feeding others, and creating social relations (2012a:118-120, see also 2011). In many cases, these items do not merely symbolise the production of social relations – they are the material means by which ‘social reproduction’ at the level of the household takes place. The most important task of a married-in wife consists of cooking the main rice dish of the day, which is served in the early afternoon. In many cases, she will also prepare a second, simpler meal in the evening, although poorer families often reheat the midday rice again in the evening. The other task that is frequently mentioned as being constitutive of *séyi* is doing the laundry for the mother-in-law and father-in-law, alongside that of the husband. In her song *Bin-Bin*, Coumba Gawlo Seck instructs women who have married into the in-laws' house to do all those things that could possibly bring pleasure to the mother-in-law. Laundry and cooking are cited as the main examples of how to satisfy mothers-in-law – ‘you should do the laundry for your mother-in-law, and cook her delicious things’ [*deél fóotal sa goro, di ko toggal lu neex*].

A woman who has married into a house will cook the early afternoon and evening meals on rotation with other women who have married into the house. This can include co-wives, although as I mentioned above, it is often the case, in Dakar at least, if not in the countryside, that men with several wives either live independently of their parents, or they have one wife who lives in the in-laws' house and another who lives with her own family or in rented accommodation. Women who live with their co-wives cook on rotation with their co-wives, and the husband spends the night in the room of the woman whose turn it is to cook. Women rarely live with both in-laws and co-wives, so women who are married into the in-laws' house generally

cook on rotation with women married to other men of the family. The competitive relationship between co-wives [*wujj*] who take it in turns to cook for and sleep with their husband is mirrored among women who are married into the same household but to different men, a relationship that is denoted by the kinship term *peccargo*. Sometimes, the relationship is also referred to as *wujj peccargo*, with the word *wujj* conveying the sense of rivalry that is perceived to characterise it (cf. Irvine 1993:114-119). Ndongo Lô hints at this rivalry and one-upmanship in his song *Jeegu Puso* when he sings ‘when it’s your turn, cook something delicious, serve up something delicious, combine it with pleasant conversation, everything that you do when it’s your turn, you won’t be left behind my woman’ [*bu ayee, togg lu neex, yakkal lu neex, boole can ak wax ju neex, lépp looy ay-ayloo te do ko mujje sa ma jigéen*].

This excerpt from *Jeegu Puso* reiterates the centrality of cooking as the ‘economic base’ of *séyi*, but it also points towards the importance attached to the overall comportment of a married-in wife when she is carrying out her work. It is not enough to simply cook meals and wash clothes – these duties must be ‘combined with pleasant conversation’ [*boole can ak wax ju neex*], Lô admonishes. Completing the work is important, but it must be performed in the right spirit. Absa, who had been married for almost ten years and had an unusually close relationship with her mother-in-law, exhibited this attitude when she informed me with pride: ‘I do *everything* for my mother-in-law. Nobody else touches her room, especially not my *wujj peccargo* (the wife of her husband’s younger brother) – I don’t let her! And I am always the one to wash my mother-in-law’s clothes. That is what *séyi* is about.’ This positive attitude is encapsulated in the concept of *bin-bin*: a married-in wife must always speak calmly and gently with her in-laws, and she must never lose her temper. Unlike the daughters-in-law in Julia Pauli’s (2008) study of in-law relations in rural Mexico, whose voices were muted upon entry into the mother-in-law’s house, a married-in wife in Dakar is expected to be a companion and conversation partner to her mother-in-law, caring for her if she is elderly or unwell, but also keeping her entertained. The latter’s own

daughters may be living with her, but they are expected to marry out; as the proverb goes, one day they will no longer be her children. Of course, the mother-in-law should regard her son's wife as her own daughter and treat her accordingly, but the responsibility for establishing a harmonious relationship rests primarily with the younger woman.

Despite the emphasis on the active role that the married-in wife plays in the forging of this relationship, and the insistence, for example, that she ought to be able to entertain her mother-in-law with enjoyable conversation, there are some similarities between the situation of married-in wives in Dakar and the dominant mother-in-law/submissive daughter-in-law paradigm found across many parts of the world (e.g. Wolf 1972, Inhorn 1996, Brown 1997, Dickerson-Putman and Brown 1998, Pauli 2008). It would not be inaccurate to state that women are often viewed with mistrust when they first *séyi*, as strangers whose 'first entry into the house is a threat to the fullness of the world inside' (Bourdieu 2002:170). They may embrace a subordinate role as a means of overcoming the liminal position they hold in the in-laws' house, thus enabling them to make the transition from 'outsider' or 'visitor' [*gan*] to a fully integrated 'child' of the family.

Married-in wives are expected to respect and defer to the husband's family members, who, in this respect, could almost be perceived to be extensions of the husband himself inasmuch as they are entitled to control her sexual behaviour and keep tabs on her movements. In this, the senior family members treat her as they would their own daughter, whilst the husband's male and female siblings and cousins consider and refer to her as their wife [*jabar*], the terminology reflecting the fact that the role of the wife in Senegal entails more than just the relationship between a woman and her husband. The discourse and imagery of Islam is also used to reinforce the importance of modesty as a feature of a woman's comportment following *séyi*: in the video for *Jeegu Puso*, the woman of needle is wearing modest clothing and a hijab, whereas the woman of blade is pictured first in jeans and then a

glittering ‘traditional’ (locally tailored-made) outfit, her hair uncovered.<sup>62</sup> In practice, the extent to which a married-in wife’s movements are restricted depends on the degree of her familiarity with the area into which she has married. A woman from the *régions* who marries into a Dakar household may find that she rarely leaves the house during the initial months of *séyi*, in contrast to a woman who marries into a household a few streets away from her natal home, who will likely visit her own family every couple of days.

Although household chores may constitute the building blocks of the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relationship, the cement that binds them together into a positive affective relationship consists of conversation and companionship on the one hand, and deference and submissiveness on the other. Towards the end of *Jeegu Puso*, Lô refers to the concept of the ‘work of the mother’ [*liggéeyu ndey*] discussed in the previous chapter, quoting the popular proverb that ‘a mother’s work is her children’s lunch’ [*liggéeyu ndey, añub doom*]. This proverb, and the concept of the ‘work of the mother’, are normally considered to express the causal connection between a woman’s submission to the authority of her husband as a young wife and the future wellbeing and success of her children. I suggest that, in the context of a song about *séyi*, it also serves to draw attention to a woman’s progression from a young married-in wife to her future positions in the life cycle. As a woman of needle, who cooks and washes clothes, and is calm, respectful and pleasant as she *bin-bins* with her in-laws, she sews the household together over the long term. Upon demonstrating her fertility and becoming a mother, her status in the household gradually starts to improve (cf. Inhorn 1996), and eventually she will become a mother-in-law herself to a new generation of incoming wives (see Wolf 1972). At the normative level, at least, the performance of housework not only constitutes, but also is symbolically subsumed to, the long-term reproduction of the household.

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<sup>62</sup> Biaya (2000) argues that Dakaroises wearing the hijab inside the house has less to do with piety and should rather be interpreted as an outward demonstration of the submission and self-censorship that is perceived to be integral to being a good wife and mother.

Thus far, I have suggested that *séyi* and the relationships it engenders should be considered as part of the marital process that is nonetheless distinct from, though not independent of, the relationship between a woman and her husband. I suggest, however, that there is an extent to which the two sets of relationships overlap, and the in-laws are considered to be an extension of the husband. One young woman was categorical in her response when I asked her to describe the relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law: 'everything that you do for your husband, you should do for your mother-in-law [*li ngay defak sa jëkkër lépp ngay defak sa goro*]. 'Everything?!' I teased, but she remained solemn: 'you cook well for your husband, cook well for your mother-in-law. You do the laundry for your husband, do the laundry for your mother-in-law'.

As we have seen in Chapter Three, however, although a woman's relationship to her husband partially entails the performance of certain household tasks, they are construed as, and overshadowed by, the achievement of good sexual relations, which in turn are closely associated with material exchanges. The achievement of good sexual relations is primarily a woman's responsibility, and ought to be reciprocated by the transfer of money from husband to wife. I mentioned how this material support of wives by their husbands could sometimes bring about conflict between women and their female in-laws, as they compete for access to their husband/brother/son's money. Building on this point, I now suggest that the role of the 'wife-of-husband' and the role of the 'married-in wife' are also at odds because they turn on rather different interpretations of the performance of housework.

The wifely ideal that was discussed in the previous chapter was of a woman who seduces her husband into giving her everything she wants with her movements, conversation and most of all with (im)proper attention to her appearance. She may make him happy by looking after the house and cooking delicious meals, but the relationship is only fully realised in the bedroom, not in the kitchen. She spends money on her appearance in order

to satisfy her husband sexually, and consuming in a particular way is perceived to be both a consequence of, as well as a precondition for, a successful marriage.

The ideal 'wife-of-husband' in present-day Dakar bears some resemblance to a wifely ideal that emerged in nineteenth and twentieth-century Euro-American social, political and economic thought and practice. Nancy Folbre (1991) identifies this figure as the 'unproductive housewife', a woman whose status shifted from a productive worker caring for her family in 1800 to an unproductive dependent performing the same tasks a century later. 'Ironically, the moral elevation of the home was accompanied by an economic devaluation of the work performed there', she observes (1991:465). Betty Friedan (1963) coined the term 'feminine mystique' to describe the impossibly perfect domestic goddess ideal for 1960s American women. As Jennifer Loehlin remarks in relation to the same ideal in *Wirtschaftswunder*-era Germany, '[t]he notion that the home should be a place for the husband to rest from the cares of the hostile world meant that the hustle and bustle of housekeeping should be confined to the times when he was off at work. For women of the twentieth century, emphasis on women's beauty and charm, on their loving nature as wives and as mothers produced a feminine ideal opposed to, and more attractive than, the image of woman as domestic drudge, unpaid maid-of-all-work...' (1999:146).

In the context of the wife-husband relationship in present-day Dakar too, housework is rendered virtually invisible. It is confined to the daytime hours, when a woman's husband is normally absent from the house. At the end of the day when he returns from work, she will be ready and waiting for him in a clean and orderly room, showered and dressed in a fresh, crisp outfit and styled, made up, and perfumed to perfection. Countless TV advertisements for cooking ingredients and washing detergents reflect the limited extent to which housework is a part of this ideal. They often depict a beautiful, well-dressed and smiling woman presenting her husband with a lavish platter of food or a pile of freshly laundered clothes. This woman

never appears tired or dishevelled, and certainly does not resemble somebody who has just finished cooking an elaborate meal or scrubbing, wringing out and ironing clothes. In contrast to this ideal of the 'unproductive housewife', in the context of *séyi* it is housework that constitutes the bedrock of the core relationships. Popular discourses do not portray these activities as particularly hard or tiring forms of work, let alone as 'drudgery', but housework is nonetheless perceived to amount to a productive activity, rather than pleasure or leisure time. Thus, the wife of *séyi* is a hard-working, 'productive' housewife, as opposed to the jealous, (ideally) materially comfortable but 'unproductive' homemaker devoted to the pleasing and seduction of her husband who was the subject of the previous chapter.



Figure 12: Cooking the afternoon meal of red rice with fish. Photo by T.K.



Figure 13: Clothes drying on rooftops. Photo by the author

#### 4.2 *A tale of two séyi*

In this section, I describe the experiences of a young woman named Coura following her marriage into one of the families that I frequently spent time with in Dakar. For the purposes of this chapter, I begin Coura's story not with her own marriage, but with the marriage of her husband's younger sister, Absa, which had come to pass about ten years earlier, long before I arrived in Dakar for fieldwork. Nonetheless, we shall see that this background is crucial to understanding the way in which inter and intra-familial negotiations over the allocation of housework come about. We met Absa, who was in her early to mid thirties when I lived in Dakar, briefly in the previous section. It was she who regarded the work that she did for her mother-in-law as a source of pride, and saw the performance of certain tasks such as tidying her mother-in-law's bedroom and washing her clothes as a privilege that was not accorded to the wife of her husband's younger brother, who was a more recent addition to the extended family. Absa had a close relationship with her mother-in-law, who openly condemned Absa's husband's actions when he married a second wife and supported, consoled

and spoke up for Absa during this difficult time. However, Absa's relationship with her mother-in-law had not looked so promising ten years earlier, when Absa first set foot in her in-laws' house.

Before her marriage, Absa used to do most of the cooking in her natal home on behalf of her own middle-aged mother. When the plans for her marriage had been finalised by the two families, she consulted with her husband-to-be, whom she had met through a friend and who had no pre-existing relationship or connection with Absa's family. He agreed to her suggestion that *séyi* should be postponed for at least several months. Absa disclosed that her main reason for wanting to wait was that she needed some time to help her younger sister, who was only about ten years old at the time, prepare for taking on the responsibility of cooking two meals a day; there were some dishes that she had not yet mastered. However, on the night of her wedding ceremony, her husband's parents insisted that she must come and live with them immediately.<sup>63</sup> Absa recalled that her own family was upset and worried when she moved to her in-laws' house. As one of her older sisters explained to me on a separate occasion: 'that house had many people, and we knew that she would be tired because there were no other women married into the house. We knew that the sisters-in-law would let her cook every day, that they would not help her with anything'.

When Absa left her natal home, her younger sister Fatou was obliged to start cooking. During this period, the household consisted of Fatou's unmarried brothers and male cousins, her parents, and several elderly relatives. During the school holidays, young female relatives from the *régions* would sometimes come to stay, and for a couple of months over the summer period, they might help Fatou with the cooking, alternating with her every few days. Fatou herself had stopped attending primary school around the same time that Absa moved out, and her siblings and other relatives

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<sup>63</sup> In this case, the reason this occurred was probably due to the general structural position of assumed superiority of wife-givers versus wife-takers, although in other situations differentials in wealth, class, level of education and residential circumstances, could also influence if and when *séyi* takes place.

frequently remarked that she was not bright and had never shown any aptitude for learning. Over the years that followed, there were long periods when Fatou was cooking both the afternoon and the evening meals every day. However, the influx of young girls from impoverished rural areas looking for work in Dakar meant that even low-income Dakarois families such as Fatou's could afford to employ a young girl [*janq*] to assist with housework. Although Fatou was responsible for purchasing and preparing the food every day, the hired house-worker would be expected to sweep and wash the tiled floors in the mornings, ensure that the toilet area was kept clean, and wash the food bowls, cooking pots and utensils after each meal. She would also wash and iron the senior household members' clothes every other week.

While I was in the field, Absa and Fatou's eldest brother got married, and his bride, Coura, a distant relation from one of the northern *régions*, duly moved into the family's house. Coura was young, possibly slightly younger than Fatou, who was in her late teens by now, and she had a small child, though she had never been married. Her family had been anxious to find her a husband, aware that a child born out of wedlock would hinder her marital prospects. A Dakar family was looked upon especially favourably, and Coura's grandmother had instigated talks with Fatou's parents. The latter were also eager for the marriage to come to pass. Their son was generally not considered to be an eligible match, 'catch'; he earned very little and was financially dependent on his extended family. Perhaps more importantly, he was considered to be a bit simple and, according to his siblings and cousins, he had never had girlfriends and simply did not know how to romantically pursue women. Furthermore, as Fatou and her siblings explained, their brother's bride would be a companion to their mother, who was often alone during the day whilst Fatou was occupied.

Coura's arrival was honoured with a modest ceremony. A group of female relatives and friends had accompanied her on her journey to Dakar, although her child had not. The youngest of these was a girl who looked

around twelve, and I was told that she would normally be expected to stay for several weeks to help Coura with the cooking during the early days of *séyi*. This girl was at school, however, and so she returned home after a couple of days. Instead, one of Coura's older cousins remained in the house in Dakar for well over a month and was soon on friendly, joking terms with Fatou, her family, and dozens of friends and neighbours. Coura, however, spoke very little. She came across as intensely shy and rarely smiled or laughed. She kept her gaze lowered as she responded with brief but polite platitudes when she was spoken to. This was promptly picked up on by the family, neighbours and visitors to the house, who described her amongst themselves as 'someone who is simply silent, who just doesn't speak' [*dafay noppi rekk*]. I sensed that this ambiguous, almost neutral characterisation, which is neither complementary nor critical in and of itself, indicated that the jury was still out on whether or not Coura was going to be a 'woman of needle'.

Coura started cooking the day after her ceremony, and for the next few days those who partook in the meals she prepared waxed lyrical about how tasty and flavoursome they were. During the subsequent weeks, Coura, assisted by her older cousin, prepared both the afternoon and evening meals every day. Gradually, the novelty wore off, and by the time the cousin was due to return home to her village, it was taken for granted that Coura, as the married-in wife, would continue to cook both meals on a daily basis for the foreseeable future. Every morning, she received the *deppaas*, the daily food expenditure, from Fatou, who collected it from her father. Before handing over the *deppaas*, Fatou would purchase breakfast from one of the local street vendors for those family members who did not leave for work early in the morning, including Coura and Racky, the hired house-worker. Before she had breakfast, Coura, by now familiar with her new surroundings, took a *car rapide* to the nearest market, a drive that might take five or ten minutes. Here, she would purchase fresh, smoked or dried fish, or sometimes meat, and a few different vegetables. These were the key ingredients required for the stew or sauce element of the main rice-based dish of the day. While

Coura was at the market, Racky would sweep and then wash the tiled floors of the living room, Fatou's mother's bedroom and the partially open-air courtyard and corridor. She would also scrub the toilet and bathroom areas. There were often days when Racky's first duties consisted of cleaning the kitchen and washing up the bowls and pots from the previous evening's meal. This meal tended to be served late at night, and Racky, I was told, was often too tired to clean up before she lay down to sleep.

An hour or so after leaving for the market, Coura would arrive back at the house. After depositing her bucket with its pungent contents in the courtyard, she would heat up some water for her coffee and have breakfast, usually bread with butter, tuna or bean stew. Then she took half an hour to put her bedroom in order before making her way to the kitchen area that was located in the far corner of the courtyard. This is where she spent the next three hours, preparing the rice dish that would feed the six to ten people who were likely to eat at home, as well as another five who took their lunch at their workplace. These cousins and brothers worked together, and every day a separate bowl was allocated for them. If the food was ready early, Fatou might take this bowl to her male relatives, returning before lunch was served at the house. Otherwise, a young child from one of the neighbouring houses would be instructed to deliver the food.

Coura and Racky would serve the lunch together, and after everyone had finished, they would clear away the bowls, shake out the cloth and sweep up the scraps of food scattered on the floor. As Racky started washing up and cleaning the kitchen, Coura would quickly bring out the heavy gas canister that she had used to cook the rice. Then she would begin to *àttaaya*, or brew the strong sweet tea that serves as dessert in Senegal. The process of *àttaaya*, which involves several rounds of brewing, is unhurried, and it usually functions as an opportunity for family, neighbours and visitors to relax and engage in conversation. By the time Coura had concluded the *àttaaya* and tidied up the communal living spaces, there were usually only a few hours left to go until dusk. Depending on what she was planning to cook

for dinner, Coura might make a second trip to the market around this time, but most evening dishes were relatively simple and did not require fresh ingredients.<sup>64</sup> Instead, they could be prepared using foodstuffs purchased from the corner shop or the nearby dry foods merchant. Before she started on the evening meal, Coura would shower and change her clothes, and spend some time with the senior members of the family, Fatou, Racky and other neighbours or visitors as they sat around the television.

This daily pattern was broken up by laundry days when Coura would gather the dirty clothes belonging to herself and her husband. She would tie them together into a big ball using one of her wrappers and carry them into the courtyard. On these days, Fatou or Racky would cook lunch, and sometimes dinner. Coura would need to start early in the morning so as to be finished before lunch, thereby allowing plenty of time for the clothes to dry on the lines in the scorching afternoon sun. There was a water tap in the courtyard that Coura used to fill up several large plastic tubs, and for the rest of the morning she would be hunched over one of them as she scrubbed each item vigorously. Every now and then she would move back and forth between the tubs as she rinsed the clothes thoroughly in fresh water before twisting them tightly over and over again in order to squeeze out the excess water. The day after a laundry day, Coura would resume her regular cooking duties, finding time to iron the clothes in the afternoon in between lunch and dinner.

As the weeks and then months elapsed, it became clear that something was wrong. Coura remained conspicuously quiet and her exchanges with others became increasingly abrupt. During my regular visits, I could tell that her behaviour was, by this point, starting to border on rude, and I was not particularly surprised to learn that her mother-in-law and Absa, her sister-in-law, had been communicating with Coura's grandmother via mobile telephone. Fatou had explained to Absa, who was a frequent visitor at her

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<sup>64</sup> As in the case of many of the families I worked with, Coura's frequent trips to the market were at least partly driven by economic short-termism. Often, the funds for each meal would only be made available half a day before it was due to be served.

mother's house, that Coura had suddenly stopped greeting her in the mornings.<sup>65</sup> When Absa confronted Coura with these allegations, Coura denied they were true and claimed that Fatou had started ignoring *her*. Both young women accused each other of '*fas kanam*' – scowling and giving the other 'dirty looks' without making eye contact.

Things did not appear to be going well between Coura and her husband either, and people gossiped that Coura had told one of the neighbours that she would 'never have a child in this house'. At the same time, a rumour surfaced that a wrapper drenched in blood had been spotted in a pile of rubbish further down the road. Then Coura fell ill and remained in bed for several days, and over the subsequent weeks there was hushed speculation that she had self-aborted upon discovering she was pregnant. The family started to accept that Coura's behaviour signalled her desire to discontinue the marriage. 'She's not going to stay!' said Absa with exasperation. 'But the problem is, she doesn't talk. She should just say what it is that she wants.' Eventually, Coura's grandmother journeyed down to Dakar, accompanied by Coura's two-year-old son. Coura's grandmother stayed in the house for over a month, and during this period, Coura and Fatou exchanged pleasantries and appeared to be on more amicable terms. Although Coura still spoke very little, she seemed better, and was clearly pleased to have her son and grandmother around. Her child served as an icebreaker of sorts, facilitating conversation between Coura and other adults.

Several weeks into her stay, Coura's grandmother requested to speak to Absa, her parents, and other senior members of the household. Later on, Absa gave me an account of this meeting. She explained that Coura's grandmother had proposed that Coura and Racky, the hired house-worker, should cook on rotation, each doing two days at a time. At this point, Absa herself had intervened and pointed out that Racky was already overworked. She was responsible for the big daily clean, the twice daily washing up, as

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<sup>65</sup> The continued significance of natal kin even after a woman moves away from her own family shall be considered in more depth in Chapter Five.

well as for the laundry of the senior household members; she could not be expected to cook regularly on top of this. Indeed, I frequently heard Racky complain that she was asked to run errands or perform little favours for individual family members, and that this slowed her down in her work. She insisted that she wasn't paid well enough to deserve that kind of treatment. Coura's grandmother accepted that her suggestion was not reasonable, and when it was time for her to depart, she assured Coura's in-laws that Coura had changed and that she would not provoke any more problems.

Not long afterwards, it transpired that Coura was pregnant, and day after day she complained that she was feeling unwell. On the days that Coura was too ill to cook, Racky took her place. This pattern continued for some time until one day Racky walked out, announcing her intention to return to her home village indefinitely. By now, everyone knew that Coura was pregnant, and some family members attributed the progressively unsavoury dishes she was serving up to the altered sense of taste that can accompany pregnancy. Others were less charitable, however, and hinted that she was deliberately spoiling the food by adding too much salt. She had assumed most of Racky's duties following her departure, and her general conduct had reached an all-time low. The situation escalated during the month of Ramadan, when Fatou's father asked to speak with Fatou and Coura. He informed them that Fatou was to cook until the end of the month. During Ramadan, he explained, it was especially important for the main dish of the day, which was served in the early evening after the fast was broken, to be palatable, as people had been fasting all day and needed a satisfying meal. Fatou seemed happy with this arrangement, whilst Coura remained subdued. Towards the end of Ramadan, however, Coura started cooking again, and this time there were fewer complaints about the quality of her dishes. As Coura's belly swelled, Fatou started to take on more of the morning cleaning and assisted Coura with the washing up as the family searched for a suitable replacement for Racky. A couple of young girls were recruited to work in the house during this interim period, but they did not last much longer than a week, and Fatou, Absa and their mother complained

of the trouble of finding a hard-working, physically robust girl who was willing to work for CFA 20,000 a month.

Shortly after Coura's baby was born, one of her husband's brothers expressed his intention to marry soon, and the family was given to understand that his wife would marry into her mother-in-law's house and cook on rotation with Coura. Within a couple of months, the new bride moved in, and her arrival coincided with a marked change in Coura's attitude towards her in-laws. Happier and more confident, she had a spring in her step that contrasted starkly with the aggrieved mannerisms of her former weary, withdrawn self. She was still comparatively timid and soft-spoken and never much of a conversationalist, but she smiled and laughed more often, and sometimes even broke into a little dance. She was very affectionate with her children – her son had remained in Dakar following the grandmother's departure – although they made for a lot of additional work, and her interactions with her husband, Fatou, Absa and her mother-in-law were noticeably warmer and more sincere. The family and their acquaintances agreed that, contrary to the indications earlier on in the marriage, it did not appear that she was likely to opt out any time soon.

### **4.3    *The pecking orders***

I shall now attempt to unpack this ethnographic case study with a view to making sense of Coura's behaviour following her marriage into her in-laws' house. In particular, I suggest that Coura was fiercely resentful of the fact that she was compelled to carry out a significant proportion of household chores, whilst her husband's younger sister, Fatou, had virtually no responsibilities. Coura, in other words, felt as though she was working too hard and too much. To be sure, the question of what constitutes hard work, or too much work, is relative, and the answer must be sought in the social and cultural context in which the work is undertaken (Graeber 2001, Harris 2007). Predictably, I found almost all household tasks in Dakar difficult, and

I was routinely ridiculed for my incompetence. Whenever I swept the floor, for example, I would have to bend my knees instead of keeping my legs straight and bending over from the waist down, and I was never able to rapidly slice onions holding them in my hand, but would invariably end up finding something that I could use as a chopping board.

Arguably, taking care of a household requires less effort in present-day Dakar than it did even twenty years ago. People I spoke to were quick to acknowledge the relative ease of keeping house in Dakar compared with the struggles faced by rural Senegalese women, especially in the more remote inland areas. Women and men alike informed me that work in the houses of Dakar is no longer difficult, and that Dakar women are no longer tired. The biggest difference, I learned, was between cooking rice dishes and cooking millet dishes. Millet, which remains the staple in the regions in which it is cultivated, requires vigorous pounding in order to transform it into couscous, as do other agricultural products; this is always the responsibility of women and girls. In Dakar, however, millet couscous is almost never prepared for lunch, and although it is an occasional evening dish, millet-pounding mills are widely available in residential areas and at markets. Other differences include the proximity of the nearest water source, which in Dakar tends to be located within or very close to one's house, and the availability of gas, more convenient than wood or charcoal, for cooking – although some poor families frequently relied on the latter when they could not afford to buy gas.

Notwithstanding this widespread recognition that the strain of housework has been considerably alleviated in contemporary Dakar, it is still possible to identify certain types of arduousness with certain activities. Cooking is considered to be difficult because it is time-consuming. Certain steps of the cooking process, such as pounding up spices, are strenuous in and of themselves, and others, such as slicing large quantities of onions, are considered disagreeable for other reasons – in this case the smell they leave on the hands. However, cooking, especially for a large family of a dozen or

more people, is primarily regarded as hard work because it takes up a substantial part of the day. Nonetheless, we have seen that cooking, more so than any other household task, is accorded a certain prestige that other activities lack.

Washing somebody else's clothes also has some cachet, but this is mitigated by the fact that doing laundry in Senegal – which involves hunching or bending over whilst scrubbing and then wringing clothes by hand – is considered to be by far the most exhausting type of work. Cleaning activities such as washing-up, sweeping, washing floors, scrubbing toilets and shower areas, and disposing of rubbish are arguably the least prestigious activities (cf. Horsfield 1998).<sup>66</sup> This is due to wider socio-cultural and religious ideas about dirt, in both its physical and symbolic manifestations (Douglas 1966), but perhaps also because, unlike cooking and laundry, cleaning activities have no obvious or immediate beneficiaries. Some of these tasks are considered to be less strenuous than others: although sweeping is easy enough to be a small child's responsibility, washing the floors with a rag is much harder, as it involves bending from the waist and exerting sustained pressure on the floor. Scrubbing the bathroom areas and washing-up after meals fall somewhere in between. It is these cleaning tasks, closely followed by laundry, that are the most likely to be outsourced to paid house-workers, much more so than cooking.

Coura, of course, was not primarily responsible for the cleaning in her in-laws' house. This was Racky's job, and the task of washing the senior family members' clothes also fell to Racky, although Coura washed her own clothes, her husband's, and later, her children's. Before her marriage, Coura had been working as a hired house-worker herself, spending her weekdays with a family who lived in a nearby town and returning home to her village every other weekend. Given this back story, one might surmise that she would perceive herself to be working less intensively in her capacity as a married-

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<sup>66</sup> Fredericks (2011) has written an insightful analysis of the politics of rubbish collection in Dakar and the way in which discourses about dirt and rubbish are framed with reference to gendered, generational and religious identities.

in wife than in her previous role as a household employee. Perhaps there was a part of her that recognised this to be the case, but it is clear that these were not the sentiments she conveyed to her husband's family. I have already noted that there is no objective gauge of 'hard work', and that in order to appreciate the circumstances under which work becomes regarded as difficult, it is necessary to examine the context in which it is carried out. In Coura's case, I suggest that her discontent was at least partly connected to the presence of Fatou, her resident sister-in-law, who, upon Coura's arrival, became absolved of virtually all of her previous housework duties. However, I do not wish to deny that there may have been issues other than housework at stake, for example, the extent to which Coura herself had desired to marry, her ensuing relationship with her husband, and the initial decision to leave her child behind.

For a long time, Coura refused to offer an explanation for her low spirits. Neighbours had hinted from the start that Fatou and her mother's decision to let Coura cook every day 'wasn't normal', and that Fatou should offer to help. But it was only following the arrival of Coura's grandmother, who had travelled down to Dakar to resolve the situation, that the family was confronted with a direct request to modify the pattern that had established itself following Coura's marriage into the house. Coura's grandmother's suggestion that Coura and Racky should cook two days at a time goes some way towards showing that Coura's unhappiness in her in-law's house was partly to do with her daily cooking responsibilities. Coura and her grandmother could be certain that Racky would not agree to alternate cooking with Coura, and hoped that the family would realise the unfairness of the situation.

Fatou spent most of her mornings lying in the living room in front of the television, and in the afternoons and evenings she would often dress up nicely and go and visit her friends, and sometimes boyfriends, in the neighbourhood. Everyone, including Fatou's own family, agreed that she was lazy, but whereas neighbours and acquaintances privately criticised her

parents for their lax discipline in not demanding that she cook on rotation with Coura, her parents and siblings implied that she should take the initiative to find a paid job or an apprenticeship. On one occasion during the early months of Coura's marriage, I discreetly, yet innocently, asked Coura whether Fatou ever helped her in the kitchen. She laughed dryly and replied impassively 'Fatou, she's too lazy to do anything' [*Fatou, moom, dafa tayale defdara*].

As we can see, a woman's physical labour in her in-laws' house is often a great convenience to any resident sisters-in-law. Until Coura's arrival, Fatou had been responsible for the vast majority of the cooking for many years. As soon as her brother's wife was installed in the house, she was excused from housework on the basis of conventional conceptions of housework that link it to *séyi*, or marriage into the in-laws' house. When Absa, Fatou's elder sister, married many years earlier, her own family was concerned that she was marrying into a big house where the sisters-in-law would 'let' her do all the cooking. Yet Absa and her family did not balk at the prospect of Coura cooking day in day out, whilst Fatou enjoyed abundant leisure time.

In many instances, conflicts between a married-in wife and her in-laws precipitate the young woman's exit from the house into which she has married. In Coura's case, her husband's family, as well as neighbours and friends, speculated when she was 'causing problems' that she had privately resolved to leave her in-laws' house. However, we saw that her relations with her in-laws started to improve with time, and she continues to reside there to this day. I shall consider the factors pertaining to these developments shortly, but would like to stress that it is extremely common for women in Dakar to move out of the in-laws' house because of problems and fights with the extended family. Women usually return to live with their own family, not only because this is the most economically viable option, but also because they face strong social disapproval if they live alone. Le Cour Grandmaison's (1971) earlier research in Dakar confirms that this practice was widely accepted as far back as the 1960s. The long-term goal is for the

husband to secure his own property, but in practice, few younger men can afford to build, and neo-local residential arrangements are the exception.<sup>67</sup> Women often put pressure on husbands, or prospective husbands, to secure rented accommodation so that they can avoid living with the extended family. However, the feasibility of this alternative depends on a variety of factors, most importantly income, but also, for example, the distance between the in-laws' house and the husband's workplace.

I encountered dozens of women who had left the house into which they had married for a number of days, weeks, months, and even years. In some cases, the departure was temporary and short-lived; in others it was of a longer duration, sometimes even permanent. Occasionally, a woman's departure might culminate in divorce from her husband, but in other cases, her relationship with her husband could remain intact despite her exit. This scenario often involved a husband who was himself not normally resident in his parents' house, usually because he worked in a different part of Senegal, or abroad.

One day, I accompanied a friend, Mimi, when she visited her younger sister, Ndeye, who had recently married into her in-laws' house in another part of Dakar. The younger woman's sister-in-law, Saly, was present, and after we had been introduced and had withdrawn into Ndeye's room, Mimi explained to me that Saly was married to a Senegalese man who lived in Italy. She had been living with her in-laws, but had recently returned to her parents' house following months of animosity between herself and her female in-laws. Saly had declared to her own family, as well as to her husband, that she would not move back until the latter returned from Italy to arbitrate between his wife and family in person. Later during our visit, Mimi rebuked her sister for consenting to cook for her in-laws every day. 'You let them get used to it!' she scolded Ndeye, and, turning to me: 'She was too eager to please them at the beginning, and now look! She made a mistake, she allowed them to get

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<sup>67</sup> Uxorilocal residential arrangements are uncommon but not unheard of. In this case, a woman will not be considered to *séyi*, and the assumption tends to be that this is a temporary arrangement and that the couple will eventually secure accommodation of their own.

used to her cooking every day!' When the Ndeye left the room, I asked Mimi if she thought that Saly might sometimes lend a hand with the cooking now that she was living at home with her parents. 'That one?' Mimi pursed her lips. 'That one, with her big arse? Why do you think she wanted to bring about problems in that house? So she wouldn't have to work in the house! This is her mother's house, she's not going to do anything here!'

In this instance, the family of the returned sister-in-law was not putting pressure on her to reconcile and move back in with her in-laws. In Coura's case, however, I could sense that her own relatives, particularly her grandmother, were anxious that she should persevere with the marriage, despite the underlying tensions with her husband's relatives. Their strong interest in preserving the union prompted the grandmother to intervene, although her direct attempt to renegotiate the terms of Coura's participation in household tasks was swiftly rejected by her husband's family.<sup>68</sup> As the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Binetou Dial (2008) observes, the extent to which married-in-wives are in a position to contest the injustices of *séyi* depends primarily on their circumstances prior to marrying. Coura came from a relatively disadvantaged background. Before her marriage, she had been working as a house-worker for another family, and she already had a child from an extra-marital relationship. The prospect of divorcing and returning home, then, was not in itself a desirable course of action. Other women, however, have more room to negotiate their situation in the in-laws' house, especially if they can live comfortably with their parents or other relatives. As Dial argues, marriage for women in Dakar is unavoidable. It is the rite of passage *par excellence*, and the associated social and familial pressures and expectations mean that many women have little say in the circumstances of their first marriage. However, they have more control over the process of separation or divorce, as well as, I suggest, moving out of the

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<sup>68</sup> I did, however, come across a case that strongly resembled Coura's, in which the married-in wife's family staged a similar intervention on her behalf. Following three years of being the only married-in wife and bearing the responsibility for the lion's share of the housework, the young woman's parents agreed with her mother-in-law that she and her unmarried, unemployed sister-in-law should divide the work between them.

in-laws' house. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, other Senegal scholars such as Le Cour Grandmaison (1971) and Dial (2008) concur with this view, opining that it is almost a paradox that women are under such immense external pressure when they marry for the first time, when separation and divorce are so common and socially accepted.

Coura's grandmother's request to reduce her granddaughter's housework duties was unsuccessful, and as her sojourn drew to a close, she simply promised the family that Coura had changed and that her behaviour would improve. As soon as the grandmother left, however, Coura's relationships with the others rapidly deteriorated, and things came to a head during the month of Ramadan when Fatou's father called on Fatou to temporarily take charge of the cooking. The tensions started to subside towards the very end of Coura's pregnancy when, following Racky's departure, Fatou took over most of Racky's cleaning work whilst Coura resumed cooking. However, the most remarkable transformation occurred several months later, following the birth of her child and the arrival of the new married-in wife. Coura's attitude towards her husband's family and towards her everyday tasks changed dramatically soon after the arrival of her brother-in-law's wife. The reason for this, I suggest, is simple: the other young woman relieved Coura of almost half of her housework responsibilities, thereby sharing the burden of being a married-in wife.

Coura was still busy on her days off. She often used the time to wash her baby's nappies and both young children's clothes, which needed more frequent washing than adults' clothes. On other days, she might clean out her room and wash the bed linen and curtains. But following the other woman's arrival, Coura had more time to look after herself. She could drop around the house next door to have her hair done, for example. More generally, she had more opportunity to socialise and make friends in the neighbourhood, and sometimes, when I visited, she would accompany me on a walk to the nearby beach. These were the kinds of things that her sister-in-law, Fatou, had the freedom to do.

Coura and Fatou appeared to be on much friendlier terms now, and Coura no longer seemed resentful of the fact that Fatou spent a large part of her day stretched out in front of the television. Fatou and the new married-in wife both helped look after Coura's baby when she was cooking. There was some ill feeling when Coura revealed to her mother-in-law that Fatou had been asking Coura to wash one or two of her tops whenever she noticed that Coura was washing the children's clothes. Coura had become irritated, but Fatou only stopped when her mother told her that this was unacceptable. For a couple of weeks, the two young women were not speaking, but eventually the tension abated. One morning, Coura and the new married-in wife had a serious falling-out that resulted in a prolonged and furious exchange of words. It transpired that the quarrel had started when Coura, who was not cooking that day, had removed the large pot containing the rice for lunch from the gas in order to heat up some water for a late breakfast coffee. The other woman promptly removed the small kettle and replaced it with her cooking pot. Everyone agreed that Coura was at fault, and that she been disrespectful in not asking for permission to remove the cooking pot. When Absa discovered what had happened, she observed that the last thing that Coura should be doing was picking fights with the new married-in wife. 'If she leaves, it will be difficult for Coura' she warned.

I suggest that Coura's predicament during the initial months of her marriage lies in the ambiguity of her position as a married-in wife, an ambiguity that becomes manifest as a result of the lifestyle and status enjoyed by Fatou, her unmarried sister-in-law. As a married woman who lives with her in-laws, Coura, unlike Fatou, is qualified to fulfil the feminine ideal of the 'woman of needle', the hard-working, companionable and subservient woman who safeguards the wellbeing of current and future generations. She is supposed to devote herself to her mother-in-law, as well as her husband, by looking after the senior woman's house and preparing her delicious meals. She is not, however, expected to be at the service of her sister-in-law in this manner, but here, the pecking order of housework poses a challenge to the

'woman of needle' ideal. The sister-in-law occupies a similar structural position to the married-in wife, and indeed, there is a sense in which, if she is an unmarried woman who has not yet made the passage into adulthood, she is considered junior to her husband's wife.<sup>69</sup> As one of my close friends explained in the context of an extended discussion about the problems that Dakar women have with their in-laws:

A mother-in-law might dislike her daughter-in-law because she wanted her son to marry someone else. Some mothers-in-law are wicked. But 95% of the time, if the problems start after the woman has married-in, they start with the sisters-in-law. The woman will start to compare herself [*wujjee*] with the sisters-in-law. She will think 'this one is a child, I am older than her...I have a husband but this one hasn't got a husband' and she will see the sister-in-law dressing nicely, doing her make-up. She will think 'why is this child doing this, and I am doing everything in the house?' And then the problems start between the woman and her sister-in-law...the mother-in-law will always side with her own child, and then the husband will side with his mother. Even problems with the *wujj peccargo* (other married-in-wives) often come from problems with the sister-in-law; one will say 'the sister-in-law likes her best'...That's how the problems start.

Here, my friend offers her own analysis of the lived realities of women who marry into the in-laws' house. It is noteworthy that she identifies the sister-in-law as the root cause of conflicts with other members of the extended family, including the woman's mother-in-law and husband. Her interpretation of the situation in Dakar differs from other interpretations of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflicts, where the problem tends to emerge directly between the senior woman and the junior woman. In Pauli's (2008) account of daughter-in-law/mother-in-law conflicts in Mexico, the

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<sup>69</sup> Karen Sacks (1975, 1979) was one of the first to draw attention to the significance of the differentiation of women's roles into those of 'sister' and 'wife'.

initial dispute tends to occur between wife and husband, prompting the mother-in-law to take the part of her son, but the sisters-in-law are more likely to offer support to their brother's wife.

As Buggenhagen (2012a, 2004) observes, young urban Senegalese women often erroneously expect marriage to enhance their personal autonomy. Above all, my friend's insightful account of the potential consequences of *séyi* reveals how women's sense of autonomy and wellbeing can be undermined by the disparate everyday experiences of the married-in wife, who is preoccupied with housework, and her sister-in-law, who has ample free time to attend to her appearance and socialise outside the house. In a short theoretical essay that reflects on the nature of 'home', Mary Douglas writes that the 'home as a virtual community is often absurd, often cruel' (1991:305). In this chapter, I have argued that the absurdity, even cruelty of the situation of married-in wives becomes manifest above all through the figure of the resident sister-in-law. It is the presence of this other woman, of the same generation but at a different stage in her horizontal life cycle, that disturbs and unsettles the 'woman of needle' ideal, making visible the overall structure of society and women's varying positions in it. Young women appreciate the social significance of space and the advantages of living in one's own house, as opposed to with the in-laws. They have clear ideas about what their labour is worth and how hard they are willing to work.

The 'woman of needle' ideal is firmly entrenched in the popular imagination, meaning that it is socially unacceptable to openly protest against the housework demands of the husband's family. Instead, conflicts tend to be explained in terms of 'bad' [*bon*] or 'wicked' [*soxor*] female in-laws, who have a pre-existing dislike of their son's or brother's new wife, or who are jealous of the material support that they perceive the latter to be receiving (Chapter Three). Young married women deploy indirect techniques in order to challenge the trying conditions they encounter. I came across dozens of women who explained that they had moved out of the house into which they

had been married because of problems with ‘wicked’ mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, without providing any further clarification as to what, precisely, had happened. Less frequently, I heard similar accounts from the perspective of the in-laws’, as members of a family recounted how their son’s wife had left because she was bad, wicked or, most commonly, insolent or bad-mannered [*reew*]. We saw how even vulnerable women such as Coura, who were ill-placed to simply pack their bags and leave, could pose a challenge to the family’s expectations by failing to conceal their discontent. Indeed, the avoidance of housework in the in-laws’ house was a concern for Fatou herself, who enlightened me as to her reasons for not wanting to marry her long-term boyfriend using the expression ‘that house has many people in it’. For women in Dakar, *séyi* into the in-laws’ house may be the ideal ‘path’ that marriage should take, but, as Catherine Allerton remarks with regards to marriage patterns and movements in eastern Indonesia, ‘this pattern of gendered movement is an ideal form, not always matched by reality’ (2004:342).

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how women often fail to live up to the ‘woman of needle’ ideal for desired wifely behaviour – in fact, they often come closer to embodying her ‘woman of blade’ antithesis. Their behaviour can be usefully compared to Holly Wardlow’s (2006) analysis of Huli women’s ‘negative agency’ in Papua New Guinea. Wardlow defines the ‘negative agency’ of sex worker ‘passenger women’ who defy local gender and kinship structures as ‘a refusal to inhabit the subject position allocated to one and a refusal to cooperate with projects initiated by others’ (2006:66). These structures, contends Wardlow, entail ‘the subordination of [women’s] sexuality to the larger project of social reproduction’ (2006:16-17). Although it is not obvious whether women like Coura were consciously attempting to break out of the ‘woman of needle’ template for wifely behaviour, it is clear that in the case of the Dakar ‘woman of needle’, it is above all her labour within the in-laws’ house that is subordinated to the project of social reproduction. This chapter has sought to highlight how women in Dakar have some scope for contesting the ‘woman of needle’ ideal

whilst remaining within the limits of acceptable social behaviour. Although the ‘woman of blade’ who picks fights with her in-laws and cuts the family apart is publically vilified, women who behave in this manner are not social outcasts – they are not considered to be ‘wayward’ in the sense that Wardlow’s informants are.

One day, arriving at the house of one of the families I regularly spent time with, I opened the gate to hear shrieks of laughter from one of the bedrooms. I pushed aside the curtain to find most of the children gathered around one of the more senior women of the household. She had her mobile phone in her hand, and the children appeared to be listening to a recording of some sort. They could not hold back their mirth, and when it finished, the owner of the phone played it to me several times. I had difficulty identifying its content, so she went through it slowly with me, pressing the pause button every few seconds. Some of the children became bored and disappeared, but a few stayed to witness my reaction. The recording was from a *taasu* chant that the woman had heard a *gégél* (praise-orator) perform at a ceremony. It included the following lines:

A mother-in-law who talks too much, you should shove her!  
If she talks too much, strike her with a pestle!  
A sister-in-law who talks too much, who says things that are unripe [lies],  
You should shit on her!  
You should shit on her!  
You should shit on her!  
But if she’s good, you should be grateful to her.  
A sister-in-law is part of *séyi*, you should care for her.<sup>70</sup>

Much to everyone’s delight, I was genuinely shocked as the meaning of the indistinct words became clear, and more hilarity ensued. I mention this incident here because I suggest that the fact that the ‘woman of blade’ can be

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<sup>70</sup> *Goro bu bare wax, dee ko rëkk. Bu baree wax yen ko kuur. Njèkke bu bare wax, lu ñorul mu wax, dee ko day. Bu baaxee, dee ko gërëm. Njèkke ci séyi bi la, dee ko bégál.*

the subject of a joke, her clearly unacceptable actions trivialised, perhaps ultimately serves to legitimise this kind of behaviour. This comedy sketch reflects a conception of what women should be like that contrasts starkly with the one that turns on the notions of 'woman and needle' and *bin-bin*. It is worth mentioning here that since the release of Coumba Gawlo Seck's song, the word '*bin-bin*' has taken on a completely new meaning, in urban Senegal at least. In the music video to the song, Seck's lyrics about having a pleasant and calm manner with one's in-laws are accompanied by images of her and her female dancers wearing rather revealing, Senegalese-style underclothing and waist beads (see Chapter Three, Figure 11).<sup>71</sup> The waist beads worn by the women were smaller and more delicate than the kind that had previously been in fashion, and the video helped popularise this particular style of waist beads, which to this day remain more fashionable, especially with younger women, than the larger, chunkier varieties. When I was in the field, the word '*bin-bin*' was mainly used to refer to these small strings of waist beads, and it took me a while to learn the pre-Seck meaning of the word.

I suggest that this shift in the meaning of the word '*bin-bin*' perhaps symbolises how women in Dakar today aspire to only have to take care of the 'nuclear family' consisting of husband and children. In practice, however, nuclear living arrangements are often unaffordable, meaning that returned sisters-in-law, as well as married-in-wives, often provide social security for the older generation. This raises interesting questions about the nature of social security in Dakar – who will take care of the elderly? Regardless of the family set-up, many tasks will become delegated to children, mainly girls, as they become older, and various factors, include birth order and presumed intelligence, determine their rank within the pecking orders of housework. These issues, which include the widespread practice of informal fostering which may involve young girls being circulated within extended families, or lineages according to the housework demands of individual households, shall be discussed further in the following chapter. Thus far, we have seen

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGfW95Wr9xo> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

that in spite of the fact that the performance of housework is firmly tied to the role of the married-in wife, in practice, the performance – and avoidance – of housework is a central concern for Dakar girls and young women more generally.

Although this chapter has shed light on how the ‘woman of blade’ becomes incorporated into Dakar imagination, the wider implications of the processes I have described remain complex. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which individual women’s actions can impact upon the overall structure of society. For married-in-wives, the solution may be separation, or divorce and then a subsequent remarriage (often as an additional wife) whereby the woman will continue to reside with her own family and yet still have the status of a married woman. In these situations, she may take on the opposite position in the horizontal life cycle – that of the ‘lazy’ sister-in-law, whose brother’s wives bear the burden of housework. In some rare instances, women’s attempts to secure a more even distribution of household labour may be successful, despite the fact that the idea that ‘the women do it’ remains unchallenged. More often than not, however, the solutions to the conflicts caused by housework consist in outsourcing this work to others, often to women and children who are even more vulnerable.

As we have seen, even relatively poor Dakar families are able to secure the services of young girls, usually from rural areas, to assist with housework, and it is usually the dirtiest, toughest and least prestigious tasks that are the first to be delegated. In many cases, the boundary between a hired houseworker and a fostered-in rural relation is hazy (cf. Chapter Five). As Le Cour Grandmaison (1969) observes, the precariousness of this kind of work is often directly due to the nature of personal connections, which result in the reduction of monetary compensation on the pretext of benefits in kind. Ultimately, every woman’s aim is to outsource housework along established familial, local and regional pecking orders, thus producing a vicious cycle that leads to the perpetuation of relations of authority and exploitation, most notably in terms of Senegal’s rural-urban divide. In the case study

discussed in this chapter, it was Fatou, who later became the 'lazy' sister-in-law, who was obliged to leave school when her elder sister married – because she was not considered to be 'intelligent' enough – and, for many years, did most of the housework by herself. She, too, is part of this vicious cycle, and her personal history helps shed light on her behaviour when other women married into her family.

#### **4.4    *For an anthropology of housework***

'The home shared by a man or men and female partners, into which men bring the food and women prepare it, is the basic common picture the world over' (Mead 1950:190, quoted in Boserup 2007:4). Ester Boserup, writing in 1970, engages critically with Margaret Mead's exposition of the sexual division of labour, deeming it a 'dubious generalization', for although '[s]he is right in describing the preparation of food as a monopoly for women in nearly all communities ... the surmise that the provision of food is a men's prerogative is unwarranted' (2007:4). Boserup's main objective, of course, was to investigate the factors that influence the nature and extent of women's participation in agricultural production in the developing world, but her assertion that cooking is 'a monopoly for women in nearly all communities' is indicative of anthropological and other scholarly perspectives on housework.

As we have seen, it would not be incorrect to say that 'in Dakar, women do the housework'. I was told early on in my fieldwork that women's work [*liggéeyu jigéen*] is 'in the kitchen' [*ca waañ wa*] or 'in the house' [*ca kër ga*]. The majority of household tasks – cooking, washing dishes, laundry, sweeping, washing floors and ironing, to name the most time-consuming, were almost exclusively performed by women or girls. Men or boys would occasionally sweep the floor or do small amounts of laundry, but adult men in particular were perceived to do such work out of choice, and not

obligation.<sup>72</sup> Men and boys also frequently prepared tea, although the tea that followed the communal lunchtime or evening meal tended to be the responsibility of the woman who had cooked the meal. Men were often in charge of caring for animals that were being reared inside the house and cleaning out their enclosures. Women and men of all ages could be responsible for watching over young children, but women were more likely to hold and carry infants for long periods of time, and only they would strap infants to their backs when they needed comfort or sleep.

In Dakar, then, women do the housework, or at least, they perform the vast majority of household tasks, including cooking. Indeed, my point in this chapter is not necessarily to challenge the veracity of Boserup's pronouncement that nearly everywhere, it is women who are responsible for the preparation of food. Shanshan Du (2002, 2000) argues that it is possible to reject a biological determinist account of what she terms the 'sex/gender allocation of labour' whilst acknowledging that this allocation of labour responds to biological and ecological constraints which may result in cross-cultural similarities (2000:523). Her insightful ethnographic exposition of work practices amongst the Qhawqhat Lahu in southwestern China reveals how the majority of activities, both within and outside the house, are performed according to a principal of unity between wife and husband – they share, rather than divide, the tasks between them. Du argues that the sex/gender allocation of labour amongst the Qhawqhat Lahu minimises, though it does not negate, the impact of bodily difference: only a minority of tasks are the exclusive province of either women or men. She notes that in other contexts, the tendency may be the opposite – i.e. the meanings that are given to bodily differences serve to maximise the practical impact of those differences. Arguably, this is the case in Dakar, where, as across much of Africa, the institution of the family appears to be rooted in sex/gender role differentiation (Sudarkasa 1982, Mikell 1997). Du opts for the term 'allocation of labour' rather than 'division of labour'

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<sup>72</sup> Lecarme-Frassy also observes that Dakar men may assume household chores, but always on a voluntary basis (2000:185).

because she feels that the latter does not fully convey the possibility of the *sharing* of tasks between women and men. In relation to my own findings in Dakar, I would add that theories about the sexual and/or gendered *division* of labour tend to disregard the possibility that women (or men), as a social group, often *do not participate equally* in so-called gendered work activities. In Dakar, housework, and especially cooking, is 'women's work'. But, crucially, it is not *every* woman's work.

I argue that Boserup's assertion that it is a 'dubious generalisation' to suggest that men are responsible for the provision (or production) of food, but her acceptance that it is generally women who do the cooking, is symptomatic of a worldview that perceives women's 'reproductive' activities to be uniform and unchanging. The problem is not whether or not her assertion is factually true – a point I shall return to in the Conclusion of this thesis – but rather that it too easily lends itself to the view that women's work in the house is easily comprehended and consequently not really worthy as an object of academic enquiry.<sup>73</sup>

Feminist anthropologists and economists have succeeded in forcefully questioning assumptions about the nature of economic relations within the household that were entrenched within both liberal as well as Marxist economic theory. Crucially, they argued that households are not harmonious units with shared interests (Whitehead 1981, Harris 1981, Folbre 1988, G. Hart 1992, Dwyer and Bruce 1988, Wilk and Netting 1984, Guyer 1984, Moore 1992, Waring 1988). They were effective in showing that not only cooperation and altruism, but also conflict and self-interest, could motivate the behaviour of individual household members. These authors were critical of economists such as Gary Becker (1981) who endorsed what became known as a 'black-box' model of the household that presumed that the division of labour and the allocation of income was the result of a common consensus to which all household members had subscribed. Nancy Folbre

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<sup>73</sup> Boserup and those who followed her were, of course, at pains to emphasise the value of women's unpaid work.

(1988) reflects on the work of Sahlins and Polanyi, who conjectured that capitalism had led to the demise of the 'moral economy', and proposes that 'it might be better said that the invisible hand swept the moral economy into the home, where an imaginary world of perfect altruism could counterbalance the imaginary world of perfect self-interest in the market (1988:262). She remarks that it is 'entirely inconsistent to argue that individuals who are wholly selfish in the market...are wholly selfless within the family, where they pursue the interests of the collectivity' (1988:252).

These critical perspectives on economic relations within the household have been far-reaching, but remain somewhat limited in scope. First, these studies tend to focus on conflicts concerning the acquisition and distribution of income or other productive resources, and tend not to examine the way in which housework or 'reproductive' resources may be subject to contestation and negotiation. This, as I have suggested above, comes about precisely because women's reproductive work is generally perceived to be 'every woman's work'. When it comes to housework, the black-box model of the household continues to be influential in anthropology – it is too often simply a perfunctory acknowledgement that 'the women do it'. A second, related point is that the focus of these studies is usually the conjugal couple. This has arguably led to the analytic privileging in the literature of economic relationships between husbands and wives, which then become extrapolated to relationships between 'men' and 'women' more generally. Correspondingly, there has been scant attention to other meaningful economic relationships in the household, including most of those that are intimately tied to the performance of housework.<sup>74</sup>

Evelyn Blackwood (e.g. 2005) has critiqued the biases of our discipline's theoretical frameworks, drawing attention to anthropologists' enduring

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<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting here that there is a significant body of feminist sociological literature that addresses housework arrangements in Western societies (Oakley 1974, Malos 1980, Shelton 1992, Treas and Drobic 2010, Weeks 2011). The general tendency has been to draw attention to the way in which women's work within the house has been undervalued, and to consider the factors that would lead to a more equitable division of housework between men and women.

propensity to concentrate on heteronormative relationships (see also McKinnon 2000). She observes that in order to make sense of gender, we must look at more than just the relationships that exist between women and men. Pauli advances a similar line of reasoning in her ethnographic analysis of daughter-in-law/mother-in-law hostilities in Mexico. She notes that even when female-only relationships are an object of intellectual enquiry, the general tendency has been to highlight the cooperative, supportive aspects of those relationships and the rhetoric of solidarity that sustains them (2008:172-173; cf. Chapter Two). However, as Jane Collier (1974) and others observed decades earlier, conflicts between women are just as constitutive of gender relations as female solidarity, and indeed, they have the potential to shed light on broader sociocultural issues.<sup>75</sup>

The focus on discord as opposed to harmony is also in keeping with intersectional feminist critiques of the universalism of earlier feminist approaches (e.g. Collins 2000), which emphasise that gender ideologies may generate division and antagonism between women as gender intersects and interacts with factors such as race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age, position in the life cycle and socioeconomic status (see also Moore 1994). We have seen how Dakar women, when confronted with the injustices of the division of household labour, are sometimes able to challenge normative expectations about appropriate wifely behaviour. In practice, however, this often results in the outsourcing of housework to more vulnerable women along pre-existing familial, local and regional pecking orders, which leads to the perpetuation of highly gendered relations of authority and exploitation.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

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<sup>75</sup> For other examples, see Brown 1997, Dickerson-Putman & Brown 1998, Wolf 1972, Inhorn 1996, Burbank 1994 and Gallin 1998.

Whereas the previous chapter focused on the interconnectedness of sexuality and material exchange within the wife-husband relationship, this chapter has sought to emphasise a rather different, non-sexualised aspect of being a wife in Dakar. As I argued in Chapter One, an overemphasis on sexuality can lead to a neglect of the economic aspects of gender roles, which, in Dakar – as across much of the world – involve women carrying out household tasks. I have suggested that it is important to distinguish between the role of the wife that is derived from the conjugal role, and the role of the wife in relation to the in-laws (see Sudarkasa 2004). In the first part of the chapter, I described normative Dakarois expectations concerning wifely behaviour when women join the household of their in-laws. I showed how a woman's relationship to her mother-in-law in particular is based upon the performance of housework. Through an analysis of the experience of one young woman, Coura, who married into a Dakar family, I then proceeded to show how conflicts over housework may arise, at least in part, because of the figure of the resident sister-in-law who 'does nothing but sleep and eat'. Although vulnerable women such as Coura were limited in their ability to improve their situation within the household 'pecking order', they were able to challenge normative expectations about good wifely behaviour using small but effective strategies and failing to hide their unhappiness (cf. Scott 1985).

Although this chapter has shed light on how outwardly 'unacceptable' wifely behaviour may become normalised, acceptable practice, the broader implications of the processes I have described are difficult to ascertain. As we have seen, for married-in wives, the solution may be separation, or divorce, followed by remarriage, often as an additional wife. In this case, the woman will often continue to reside with her own family and yet still have the status of a married woman. In these situations, she may end up becoming her antithesis in the horizontal life cycle – the 'lazy' sister-in-law, whose brother's wives carry the burden of housework. More often than not, however, the solutions to the conflicts caused by housework consist in outsourcing this work to others, often to women and girls who are even

more vulnerable. This outsourcing of household labour often involves the informal fostering of young children. The practice of informal fostering, along with broader questions about the meaning of 'nuclear' versus 'extended' families and concepts of 'relatedness', are some of the themes that the following chapter on 'being a mother' in Dakar seeks to address.

### Material Maternities: In Search of the Mother

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*In search of my mother's garden, I found my own.*

— Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*

The previous two chapters have focused primarily on the multiple meanings, social, emotional and economic, of 'being a wife' in Dakar. This chapter, by contrast, seeks to understand the nature of motherhood. I begin with an ethnographic case study that highlights the multifaceted nature of being a mother in a context where being a birth mother is accorded enormous social value but informal fostering, often long-term or permanent, is widely practised (5.1). I consider the implications of this story for understanding mothering practices in Dakar, first by weaving together scholarly perspectives on the role of the mother in African contexts with local idealisations of the figure of the mother that privilege the physiological processes and practices of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding (5.2). I then proceed to complicate this picture by returning to my initial case study in order to reflect on the significance of social motherhood, which becomes manifest above all through the widespread practice of informal fostering. I argue that the recognition that foster mothers (as well as birth mothers) are financially responsible for young children highlights the way in which the role of the mother may be performed economically, and is not solely defined in terms of the physiological relationship (5.3). Finally, I reflect on recent reconfigurations of kinship studies that depart from the assumed analytic opposition between the biological and the social, and debate the extent to which these provide a useful framework for understanding the complex, at

times even contradictory nature of motherhood in Dakar, as well urban kinship relations more generally (5.4).

### **5.1    *Arame and her grandmother***

Arame was born into a Wolof Dakarois family in the mid-1970s. Her maternal grandparents, who were from different villages in the Diourbel region of Senegal, moved to Dakar shortly after they were married, probably in the early 1950s; her grandfather was a trader. The grandparents, who subsequently had eight children (six of whom survived into adulthood), were able to construct three rooms on land that had been made available to them by local Lébu near the Sandaga market in the Plateau district of Dakar, located at the southern tip of the Cap Vert peninsula (see Chapter One, p.44). These rooms formed part of an extended compound inhabited by various other non-Lébus who had negotiated similar arrangements. Yama Diop, Arame's grandmother, explained that living conditions became increasingly cramped as her family grew and that the 'house' itself was poorly constructed – 'it was made of *wood* – you don't see houses like that anymore' – and lacked basic sanitation, which meant that the family shared their neighbours' bathroom.

Arame was her mother's eldest child; her mother, Diarra, who was in her mid-fifties when I came to know the family, was Yama Diop's eldest child, and Arame was the first-born grandchild on her mother's side of the family. Arame's parents divorced when Arame was a baby, and Arame continued to live with her mother. She had no memories of her father, who died when she was about eight years old, and barely knew her father's family, who were not based in Dakar. However, her paternal relatives notified her when her namesake (one of her father's female relatives) died, and she attended the funeral, commenting afterwards that she only recognised a few of the faces there, even though there were probably many of her relatives in attendance.

After her divorce, Diarra remarried and had another daughter; however, this marriage also quickly culminated in divorce. After her second daughter was weaned, she was sent to live with her father's family, which is where she continued to live as an adult woman. Diarra's third marriage was to an officer [*gendarme*] with whom she had five further children. Before Diarra's husband retired, he was expected to relocate every couple of years, and the family spent time living in various parts of Senegal, including several years in one of the Dakar barracks. Arame, however, who was probably about three when Diarra married for the third time (she was four years older than Diarra's first daughter from this marriage) did not accompany her mother when the latter joined her husband, but remained with her grandmother, grandfather (who died when Arame was still a small child) and her mother's younger siblings in the Sandaga compound.

As far as Arame and everyone who was privy to these circumstances were concerned, Arame was 'raised' [*yar*] by Yama Diop, her grandmother.<sup>76</sup> From very early on in our acquaintanceship it became clear that she appreciated that her grandmother played an elemental, unique role in her upbringing. Initially, and before I was able to converse comfortably in Wolof, our conversations were peppered with casual references to '*ma grand-mère*'. When I first got to know Arame – as a married woman living with her husband's family – she wanted me to meet her grandmother as soon as possible. One day, as she described to me a period of prolonged illness she had endured, she explained that her grandmother had been especially worried about her. When she needed to buy phone credit, she often remarked that it had been a while since she had called her grandmother.

As my language skills improved Arame (who, unlike most of my informants, had her *Baccalauréat* and consequently spoke excellent French) began to find it less tedious to converse with me in Wolof. It was around this time that I noticed that she consistently referred to her grandmother as '*sama*

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<sup>76</sup>The word '*yar*' may also mean 'to educate', 'to discipline' or 'to punish'.

*yaay*’ – ‘my mother’, and to her mother simply as ‘Diarra’. When I asked her why, she shrugged and smiled, and replied that ‘she is the only one who I have ever called ‘mother’ [*moom rekk laa doon woowe ‘yaay*’]. Arame was deeply attached to her grandmother and regularly spoke of how grateful she was for all that she had done for Arame when she was a child. Arame explained that her grandmother had lost a baby, who was born at around the same time as Arame, and that in the years to come Yama Diop, as well as other family members, commented that if this baby had lived, some kind of difficulty could have arisen, since Arame, who was the same age, had become so adored by her grandmother.

Arame regularly stated that her grandmother, or rather, ‘mother’ used to do *everything* for her [*sama yaay moo ma doon defal lépp*]. Whenever Arame needed small change for new pencils or a notebook for school she used to ask her grandmother, who could be found in front of their Sandaga house selling sandwiches every morning. When Yama Diop did not have the money, she would tell Arame to take whatever she needed from a small stationary seller; the latter knew Yama Diop well and knew that he could count on her to repay the credit she owed. Her grandmother never refused her granddaughter these requests, explained Arame, and would also always ensure that she had food to take with her to school. Arame completed both primary and secondary education in state schools, and although there were no school fees that needed to be paid, there were many smaller expenses involved. Arame explicitly links her educational success to her grandmother’s efforts. She recalls that she was a diligent, focused and quiet pupil, and that her academic achievements were partly due to her personal character, but she also believes that if her grandmother had not made these, and other more general economic provisions for her, then she would never have been able to complete secondary school, not least because there would have been greater pressure on her to find a means of covering her own day-to-day expenses as a teenager.

Arame remembered her childhood as one characterised by economic hardship, and described how she often felt like she was disadvantaged compared to her peers. Mostly, she conveyed the impression that she and her family had all been in the same boat, affected in similar ways by circumstances that were beyond anyone's control. She and other family members expressed their surprise that none of her maternal uncles had managed to emigrate and/or obtain moderately well-paid work, in contrast to those families in which one individual's upward social mobility effectuates a gradual improvement in the living standards of the extended family. Yet she never insinuated that this was due to her uncles' shortcomings, surmising instead that the family had just been very unlucky.

There were moments during our conversations, however, when I could sense that Arame felt a degree of resentment towards her uncles, who were perhaps not always as generous to her as they could have been. She explained how one *Korite* (Eid al-Fitr, the holiday which marks the end of the Ramadan fast) she was obliged to avoid her peers during the daytime because, unlike everybody else, she did not have a new 'traditional' outfit to wear. Her uncles had purchased new clothes for their own children but not for their niece, she explained wryly. When I asked her why her grandmother had failed to buy her new clothes, she curtly replied that all of the new clothes she ever received had been given to her by her grandmother.

On another occasion, Arame revealed that upon receiving her *Baccalauréat* she had been set to go to university. Because she lived too close to the university to be eligible for university accommodation, she would have had to take public transport to and from the campus every day, but her family, specifically her uncles, refused to assist her with transport costs (and presumably also other expenses relating to her studies which she would not have been in a position to assume responsibility for). Arame was very close to her uncles, their wives and her cousins, especially to her youngest uncle, whom she got along with particularly well and described as her 'true friend'

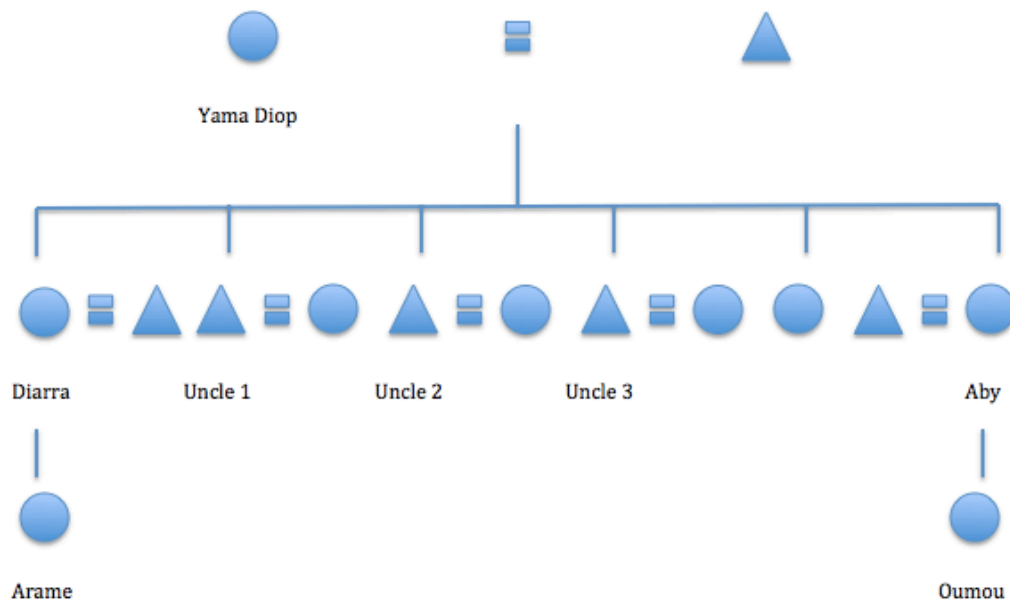
[*xarit bu dëgg*].<sup>77</sup> However, she did not elaborate on the nature of her relationship with her uncles in the way that she did when she spoke about her grandmother, although she made it clear that, as close family, and, specifically, as her mother's brothers, they represented an authority that must be respected. Yet, whereas Arame spoke at length of the emotional and material support she received from her grandmother when she was a child, she sometimes spoke cynically about her uncles, implying that they had not always been sufficiently generous towards their sister's daughter.

In terms of household structure, Arame's extended family was somewhat exceptional in that it constituted what many Senegalese regard as the cultural or traditional ideal. This was because all three of the uncles' wives were Yama Diop's nieces and first cousins to their husbands, and they had all 'married in' [*séysí*] to the family.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, Yama Diop's three daughters no longer lived at home, but with their husbands. For many years, however, Yama Diop's youngest child, a daughter named Aby, had continued to live with her mother, despite the fact that she was married. When Aby was about fifteen, she had a baby with her boyfriend, whom she did not marry, and who, for a long time, refused to acknowledge that he was the child's father. Aby and her daughter, Oumou, continued to live in the Sandaga house until, about five years later, Aby married and went to live with her husband, leaving Oumou with Yama Diop. Soon after the birth of her second child, Aby's husband died, and she returned to her mother's house with the baby. Roughly seven years later she remarried, but her husband, who worked in the Sandaga area but was from outside Dakar and already had a first wife who resided with his mother, did not have his own room, so Aby continued to live with her parents after her marriage.

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<sup>77</sup> She attributes the strength of this relationship partly to the fact that, due to his age, he was less involved in disciplining his niece than his older brothers, and partly because he had a higher level of education than anyone else in the family (with the exception of Arame herself) and was therefore a fellow '*intellectuel*'.

<sup>78</sup> Although cross cousin marriage to first cousins remains an ideal, it is becoming more uncommon in contemporary Dakar (see Chapter Three, 3.1).



**Figure 14: Arame and her family**

Oumou referred to her grandmother as ‘*sa ma maam*’ (my grandmother/grandparent) and to her mother, Aby, as ‘*sa ma yaay*’ (my mother), but, like Arame, discussions of her childhood were punctuated by more specific references to her grandmother than to her mother. Like Arame, Oumou frequently commented on how much her grandmother loved her; sometimes she would add that this also applied to Arame. Unlike Arame, however, she did not make specific references to financial support coming from a particular source. When I asked her directly who had been ‘doing things for her’ as a child, she replied, rather abruptly, ‘my mother, my uncles, everyone – we were all living together’ [*ñun ñépp ñoo dëkkoon*].

Oumou and Arame used to mention their grandmother, as well as each other, so often when they spoke about their childhood that I started to feel that perhaps there was a sense in which Yama Diop and her granddaughters formed a unique unit within this household at that particular time. This may have been due to the fact that Yama Diop’s youngest child was quite a bit older than Arame, and there were not many grandchildren in the house yet – the uncles’ first children were all born after Oumou – and also because Arame was explicitly being ‘raised’ [*yar*] by her grandmother, whilst

Oumou's mother, though physically present, was considered to have had her daughter in unfavourable circumstances and at a particularly young age.

One day, I was trying to console Arame, who had become very upset after we had been talking about her impoverished childhood – she was, at the time, experiencing severe problems with her husband, and was generally feeling down. I reminded her how lucky she was to have such a good grandmother. Her face brightened a little and she promptly agreed with what I had said. However, Arame objected to my subsequent suggestion that things must have been similarly difficult for Oumou. 'Oumou and I – it wasn't the same situation *at all!*' snapped Arame, 'because Oumou's mother was *in the house*; every day she was there' [*chaque jour mu nga fa woon*].

During the time I was in the field, Arame saw her mother, Diarra about as often as she saw her grandmother; the two houses were not too far from each other, and she usually went to her grandmother and uncles first, followed by a visit to her mother's house. She was regularly in touch with Diarra, the two of them exchanged important family news, and Arame showed a lot of concern for Diarra's health, as she suffered from diabetes and was often admitted to hospital. When I attempted to ask Arame, usually so approachable, direct questions about her relationship with Diarra she withdrew from the conversation and I sensed that she felt uncomfortable. When I broached the subject with Diarra, she responded, in a very formulaic way, that Arame was such a good child and that all she wanted was for *Yalla* to do good things for her. In the context of numerous other conversations with Arame, however, she indicated, for example, that she felt very bitter about the fact that even when her mother's husband was based in the Dakar barracks, she was only sent to stay with her for a month over the summer holidays, and spent the rest of the year in Sandaga. Moreover, Arame had a very strained relationship with her mother's eldest daughter from her third marriage and privately attributed partial responsibility for this rift to her mother for showing preferential behaviour towards this daughter.

Arame was married to a civil servant and lived with his family in one of Dakar's more upmarket districts, and her standard of living differed markedly from that of her extended family. Arame's husband gave her an allowance which she mostly dispensed at her own discretion, and she regularly gave money to her grandmother, as well as passing on no longer needed clothes, furniture or electronic items to other family members, and, for example, paying for the floor of her grandmother's bedroom to be tiled. She never mentioned that she was under pressure from her grandmother to provide financial assistance, although I could tell that she felt a very strong sense of obligation, as she often talked about projects she had in the pipeline that would directly benefit her grandmother.

However, she did complain occasionally when her uncles, whose economic circumstances had deteriorated as Arame's had improved, due to a combination of factors, not least the arrival of additional children, asked her for money. Most of the time, she indicated that she had no choice other than to get hold of the sum, or at least part of it, and did not go into further detail, implying that it was simply her duty because they were close family. Only on one occasion, upon questioning, did she sigh and reply 'Agnes, you know, when I was a child they were doing *everything*; I can't refuse him this'. This was the first (and only) time in our conversations that Arame had mentioned that the responsibility for shared expenses incurred by the family, in particular the daily amount required for food, the *deppaas*, as well as water and electricity payments, and perhaps other items such as fuel (coal or gas) and housewares was, at least for certain periods, primarily borne by her three uncles.

Arame also assisted her mother, but not nearly as much as she helped her grandmother. She explained that although her mother was not wealthy, she could count on consistent support from her eldest daughter from her current marriage, who was married to a *tubaab* (white person). Oumou, on the other hand, prioritised giving money to Aby, her mother. She explained

that there was no one else to help her mother and her younger siblings, since she did not have any adult brothers.

## **5.2     *The revered mother***

Since the 1980s, African and other black feminists have called for greater ethnographic and theoretical attention to motherhood and matriarchy in African societies (Sudarkasa 1996, 2004, Amadiume 1987, 1997, Oyewumi 1997, see also Nnaemeka 1997). They observed that classical accounts of African women's positions within institutional, communal and kinship structures, as well as relations of power and authority frequently neglected the status they were often able to achieve as mothers. Above all, their critiques applied to structural-functionalist approaches such as those of Fortes and Evans Pritchard (1940, 1949) that emphasised the centrality of kinship relations, in particular the patrilineal descent group, in assuring the long-term stability of the social group.

Niara Sudarkasa (1996, 2004) observes that motherhood is above all defined by the type of family grouping or kinship structure within which it is located. She explores the differences between conceptions of motherhood in the idealised 'Western nuclear family' and the idealised 'African extended family', using ethnographic data from her fieldwork with the Yoruba to support some of her generalisations. Her central argument is that in African societies that place emphasis on unilineal descent groups, becoming a mother confers power and influence upon a woman in a way that becoming a wife does not. The opposite, she suggests, is true in the Western nuclear family model, in which a woman will acquire more status as somebody's wife than as a mother. Indeed, in this context, motherhood may sometimes be experienced as having a constraining effect on women's roles as wives. Moreover, in the Western nuclear family ideal, the position of a wife improves with age, whilst the position of a mother decreases in importance:

a wife can expect to grow old with her husband, but without her children, who will have long since flown the nest. In the African extended family, on the other hand, where the conjugal family is just one unit within the lineage, an individual woman cannot expect to wield much influence as a wife, especially not as a young wife who has married into her husband's lineage. As she becomes a mother to members of the lineage, however, her status will gradually improve, and she can look forward to growing old surrounded by her children and grandchildren.

Esther Goody (1982), in her comparative analysis of fostering practices in various West African societies, argues that egalitarian, segmentary societies that are structured politically around unilineal descent groups rarely have institutionalised delegation of parent roles. On the other hand, simple state societies with basic social and economic differentiation favour the fostering of children to close kin, and complex, hierarchical states with sophisticated divisions of labour are more likely to practice fostering to distant or non-kin, as it becomes more of a priority in this context for children to acquire specialist skills associated with particular occupational and social roles.

Sudarkasa (2004), however, contends that it is the extended family structure itself that promotes multiple mother-child relationships, with women acting in practice as mothers to their biological children, their co-wives' children, other children in the extended family, as well as any assumed or assigned children. She suggests that in this context, no one other than a Western researcher would be insensitive enough to ask whether a child is a woman's 'own', or whether a woman is a child's 'real' mother. Biological motherhood, she argues, is valued only in the sense that it is simply taken for granted that every woman of a certain age will have given birth to children, and infertility is highly undesirable. She does, however, acknowledge that there exists a particular bond between women and their biological children. The issue of what it is, precisely, that constitutes this

bond in the Dakar context, is one of the questions that this chapter seeks to explore.<sup>79</sup>

The story of Arame, raised by her grandmother, whom she regarded in many ways to be her mother, yet clearly troubled by her relationship, or rather lack thereof, with her birth mother, suggests that the bond between a mother and her biological child is considered to be deeply meaningful in Dakar. Every childless girl or woman I encountered was certain that she wished to give birth to children in the future – within marriage, of course – and there were diverse remedies and treatments available for those who had difficulty conceiving (see Rabain 1979:226). Sometimes, my acquaintances would directly invoke Islamic precepts when I asked why it was so important to give birth to children, stating that that is what *Yalla* requires everyone to do.

Both women and men often framed the matter in terms of being remembered by one's descendants after one's death. As one friend put it: 'someone who dies childless will soon be forgotten. Perhaps their immediate family will think of them and pray for them, but eventually no one will remember. But if you have a child, then every time someone sees her/him, they will see you.' I was present one day when a close friend who was in her late thirties, childless and on her third marriage – her second marriage had failed because she had been unable to conceive – initiated a debate with friends and family, including women and men, as to whether the prayers of

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<sup>79</sup> This bond is elaborated on most extensively in contemporary Euro-American discourses concerning motherhood, where the fact of giving birth is assumed to necessitate an instinctive and unconditional 'maternal' love towards a newborn (Howell 2007). In Europe, the development of these ideas can be traced to the nineteenth century; prior to this period informal fostering and adoption, as well as hiring wet nurses, had been common practice (Gillis 1996). The emergence of the ideology of the nuclear family went hand in hand with a change in attitudes towards children and childhood itself: in addition to their physical and intellectual inferiority, children started to become perceived as *emotionally* vulnerable, requiring focused and unbroken attention and education, preferably from the biological mother, in order to fulfil these emotional needs (Rogoff 2003). Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1985, 1993) was one of the first to provide what has been perceived as a highly controversial counter-example to these assumptions about motherhood, arguing that maternal thinking and practices are not universal, but culturally variable, a position that is gradually becoming more accepted within anthropological scholarship (e.g. Ram and Jolly 1998).

people *other* than biological children could be as valuable to a deceased person as the prayers of biological children. She appeared somewhat reassured and comforted when the overall consensus was that they were.

The significance of the biological relationship becomes meaningful within a cultural and historical context within which kinship relations were traditionally embedded within elaborate systems of social stratification. As we saw in the opening chapter, these consisted of endogamous groups ranked according to occupational specialisation, frequently referred to in the literature, as well as by some of my informants, as 'castes' (Diop 1981, Irvine 1974, 1978). The Wolof interpretation of this social stratification involves a belief that distinct groups of people have different characters and therefore different ways of behaving, and that these moral qualities are biologically transmitted to a child from both its mother and father. As Judith Irvine explains, 'an individual's birth and genealogical background are primary determinants of his character and future behaviour; genetic substance and moral nature are culturally viewed as the same thing' (Irvine 1978:653). For example, people belonging to the lower-ranked groups are presumed to be more emotional and vocal than the 'nobles', and physical and verbal restraint is positively associated with high social status (see also Irvine 1995). There are, however, other hereditary character traits independent of those associated with caste, most notably the capacity for witchcraft; birth mothers in particular are assumed to be the cause of a child's good and evil conduct.

The question of biological inheritance was not, however, a central concern for my informants, who rarely spoke about the mother-child relationship in terms of transmitted or genetic substance. Nonetheless, there was a general consensus that both genitors pass on their blood to their offspring, who, as a consequence, are considered to share blood with both matrilineal and patrilineal kin. People, especially men, would sometimes imply that the man should have a more active role in the conception process: a man tended to be congratulated if he had a son, for example, but might be teased by his

male friends if he had a daughter, the implication being that he had failed to try hard enough and that his wife had ‘won over him’ [*moo la gañe* – from the French *gagner*, to win].

In the previous chapters, we learned that there is a dominant view that holds that a mother is responsible for the success and moral behaviour of her child, which is determined by her comportment vis-à-vis her husband. As I have already mentioned, many people alluded to the importance of the ‘work of the mother’ [*liggéeyu ndey*] and quoted the Wolof proverb that ‘a mother’s work is her children’s lunch’ [*liggéeyu ndey, añub doom*] (Chapter Three, pp. 128-129 and Four, p.156).<sup>80</sup> My acquaintances explained that ‘the work of the mother’ consists of a woman’s obligation to show respect and deference towards her husband, and ‘children’s lunch’ refers to a child’s good moral character – the words ‘work’ and ‘lunch’ were thus not to be interpreted literally. Some people suggested that the practice of good wifely conduct was tantamount to being an inherently good person; therefore a woman who performed *liggéeyu ndey* would necessarily pass on her good character to her children. Others, however, emphasised that *liggéeyu ndey* entailed enduring (*muñ*) the ordeals of marriage, for example the neglect or betrayal of a husband who marries an additional wife, for the sake of her children (see Chapter Three). I rarely heard people say explicitly that an individual’s bad character was due to the failure of her mother to perform *liggéeyu ndey*.<sup>81</sup> However, I did occasionally hear complimentary remarks about someone’s moral character phrased, often jokingly, in terms of this idiom, for example: ‘your mother worked!’ [*sa ndey liggéey na!*].

Although the concept of *liggéeyu ndey* was indeed significant, I found that on a day-to-day basis, Dakarois discourses about the value of the (birth) mother did not privilege ideas about the transmission of moral character from mother to child. Although there was some positive emphasis on the suffering a mother may endure within her marriage for the sake of her

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<sup>80</sup> The Séeréer have a virtually identical proverb (Kalis 2000).

<sup>81</sup> In contrast, Kalis (2000) finds that amongst the Séeréer, mothers are held responsible for certain types of childhood illnesses that they should, in theory, be able to prevent.

children, most people, when asked directly, chose to speak about the centrality of the physiological processes and practices of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. The discomforts and pain of pregnancy and childbirth in particular meant, I was told, that you should love your mother above every other person. As one friend put it: ‘No one can repay that [*kenn mēnu ko fey*] – she was pregnant for nine months, then birth, she was the one who breastfed you’. When I asked him about the relative importance of mothers and fathers, another friend reasoned that he owed his life to his mother more so than to his father, ‘because when my mother was pregnant with me, if my father had died, then I would still be here, but if it had been my mother then I wouldn’t’. I was somewhat surprised at another friend’s comparable take on the topic: ‘The mother is stronger than anyone else, because if she had wanted to, she could have destroyed the pregnancy’.<sup>82</sup> The bond between a mother and her biological child, I suggest, is derived from a mother’s sacrifice to her child in enduring the fatigue and suffering associated with pregnancy and childbirth, and, to a lesser degree, breastfeeding. The practical consequence of this bond, which applies to the child rather than to the mother, is the obligation to feel and express boundless gratitude and love towards one’s mother, especially as one grows older (cf. Browner and Lewin 1982).

The sacrifice of the mother occurs mainly when a child is still an infant, and the strains she endures are expected to decrease as weaning progresses and the infant becomes a child (Rabain 1979). The relationship between a mother and a young infant is entirely one-sided. From the beginning of pregnancy onwards, a mother is expected to adhere to a precise repertoire of caring practices that will ensure the physical wellbeing of her child (see also Kalis 2000). Pregnancy itself is often not publicly acknowledged, and women are expected to conceal the physical signs of pregnancy to the best of their abilities, and to refrain from telling too many people. In practice, this meant that acquaintances would often be surprised by the news that

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<sup>82</sup> I found this surprising because of the strong taboos that surround the termination of a pregnancy. Abortion is illegal in Senegal, although large numbers of women undergo it, often with harmful and devastating consequences.

someone that they had seen just a couple of months previously, and spoken to even more recently, had had a baby.

This secretiveness stems above all from a fear of *cat*, the malevolent consequences of speech (Chapter One, pp. 66-67, Chapter Two, pp. 83-85). It is just one of many mechanisms of safeguarding the wellbeing of the baby, which also include adhering to a series of scheduled appointments at health clinics (cf. Foley 2009). In addition, expectant mothers and newborns are advised to receive particular types of massages using various lotions. Most importantly, perhaps, many people seek assistance from *marabouts* and other healers who offer a range of specialist prayers, herbal remedies to consume and to wash with, talismans to wear, and advice that either endorses or recommends avoiding specific types of food and bodily movements. Pregnant women and mothers of newborns are actively encouraged by others to make sure that they respect these practices. After the baby is born, a great deal of attention is devoted to the correct care of its body, to its spiritual protection, to the establishment of successful breastfeeding patterns, and to the health of a new mother. At the same time, however, there is a sense in which young infants are not yet considered to be human beings worthy of full emotional investment; it is widely agreed that the death of a small child – a distressingly frequent occurrence – is easier to cope with than the death of an adult.

In Dakar, solid foods tend to be introduced when babies are relatively young, around three months, and sometimes even earlier, but most babies are breastfed until they are eighteen months to two years, and often for longer. However, once children are able to walk, they generally begin to spend more time in the company of other children and non-specific adults, slowly becoming more independent. Gradually, the child spends less time being carried on the back of an older person [*boot*], a practice which often starts when the infant is just a couple of weeks old.<sup>83</sup> Although in many

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<sup>83</sup> The verb *boot*, which means ‘to carry [a child] on one’s back’ is the root of the word *njaboot*, which refers to the family comprising a mother and small children who may still

cases, the birth mother continues to be responsible for the day-to-day care of the child, this is also the age at which more aspects of the mother role may start to be delegated to others. At around this time, the education and moral wellbeing of the child become more of an explicit concern. From the age of around three or four, small children become a useful resource as they start to help with childcare and simple household tasks. Even very young children can watch over infant siblings for short periods of time, be sent on small errands, and sweep the floor, for example.

Overwhelmingly, the responses to my questions about the importance of the mother were expressed in terms of gratitude, because the debt owed to a mother is impossible to repay. Although people favoured having strong relationships with both genitors, the term for parents, *waa-jur* (literally 'those who produced/created') was rarely used; the genitors were not represented as a unitary whole. Even informants who had strong relationships with both parents, and whose parents had both been present when they were growing up, would say that they were grateful to both of those 'who produced me', but would subsequently expand on the pain and fatigue of pregnancy and childbirth, often adding, formulaically, that 'mother is the mother of one person, father is the father of many people' [*yaay, yaayu kenn la, baay, baayu ñépp la*], or 'if you lose your mother, you have lost everything' [*boo ñàkke sa yaay, ñàkk nga lépp*]. These sayings reflect the fact that polygynous unions mean that a child will share her father with many more siblings than she does her mother. They imply that a mother is considered to be more significant to a child than a father, and, conversely and as a consequence of this, adult children are expected to be more valuable resources to their mothers than to their fathers. In practice, these types of phrases were used especially as a way of explaining why mothers were particularly deserving of children's support, more so than fathers.

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need to be carried. This contrasts with the other more general word for extended family in Wolof, *mbokk*, whose root is the word *bokk*, which means 'to share', and which evokes the sense of equality amongst its members.

It was only in the context of conversations in which people reflected on their relationship with their *own mother*, rather than on *the role of the mother* more generally, that they sometimes made a direct association between motherhood and the material support of children. In the following section, however, I shall argue that the story of Arame and her grandmother, and many others that resemble it, demonstrate that people implicitly acknowledge that motherhood is constituted by the economic work that mothers perform for their children. I suggest that the prevalence of informal fostering is a useful lens through which its significance becomes manifest. The practice of fostering provides analytic leverage, revealing that, in contrast to ideological discourses about motherhood, a crucial aspect to the role of the mother is that it may be performed economically, and is not solely defined in biological terms.

### **5.3 *Fosterage and material mothering***

Initially, I found it difficult to reconcile people's insistence on the value derived from the physiological aspects of motherhood – pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding – with my frequent observations of relationships such as Arame and her grandmother's that existed between children and their 'social' mothers. As the opening case study makes clear, these relationships were understood to be, in some sense at least, mother-child relationships, especially in cases such as Arame's, where long-term fostering had occurred at a very young age.

The fostering of children, especially to close kin, has a long tradition in Wolof society (Irvine 1974, Diop 1985).<sup>84</sup> However, my acquaintances did not refer to it explicitly as a culturally valuable institution that had a long history. It was often difficult for me to find an appropriate way of inquiring into the practice of 'fostering' in general, as there is no local word that is equivalent to the English 'fostering'. However, the kind of fostering I was

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<sup>84</sup> Dupire (1988) describes similar fostering practices amongst the Séeréer.

most interested in corresponds approximately to what local people referred to as '*yar*'. *Yar* in this context primarily means 'to bring up' or 'to educate', in a social rather than academic sense, but, as noted above, it can also mean 'to discipline' or 'to punish'. However, since adults other than birth parents could be said to raise [*yar*] a child, I had to find other ways to broach the subject, and I felt uncomfortable asking people about their practice, or tradition, of 'giving their children away' [*maye seen doom yi*]. Whenever I tried to ask direct questions about specific instances of fostering, both birth mothers and foster mothers, as well as others, would simply reply that 'there's nothing to it' or 'it's no big deal' [*loolu du dara*]. In my questioning, I always tried to remain sensitive to the fact that the main motivation for fostering out a child often involved difficult personal or financial circumstances.

Children in Dakar may move between families for a number of reasons without being considered to be raised [*yar*] by a member of the household in which they reside. *Yar* tends to occur in cases where a child is relatively young, from the age of around two or three until adolescence. It is therefore less likely to be said to apply to older children, who nonetheless also frequently move between families, for example for schooling, apprenticeship or employment purposes. Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan's (2002) quantitative study confirms that in Senegal, older children tend to be fostered out – at least ostensibly – for educational purposes. They also note that young children under the age of six are less likely to be fostered out than their older counterparts because at this age, the care that they require exceeds the resources they can contribute to the in-fostering family. Nonetheless, during the course of my own fieldwork I encountered dozens of cases such as Arame's where fostering had taken place when the child was very young. Amongst my informants, those who were most likely to consider themselves, or to be considered by others, to be, or to have been brought up by somebody other than their birth mother were those who had been fostered at a young age, and for an extended period of time.

Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan's findings point directly to the fact that young girls especially are often fostered into families as a source of household labour. As we saw in the previous chapter, many low-income Dakarais families rely on the labour contributions of young girls from the countryside, who help with housework and childcare for minimal compensation. Sometimes, these girls have no pre-existing relationship with their employer, but in many cases, they are kin, sometimes even close relations such as first cousins. Although people clearly indicated when a girl was a relation, in terms of the actual work performed and the girl's treatment by the foster family, the boundary between a hired house-worker and a fostered-in rural relation is often blurred. Indeed, as Le Cour Grandmaison (1969) remarks, the exploitation that often characterises this type of work is due precisely to the existence of personal connections, which result in the reduction of monetary compensation in the guise of benefits in kind, and may give rise to patterns of systematic abuse of fostered children (see also Argenti 2010, Lallemand 1994).

Almost all the cases of fostering I encountered were between close kin, usually maternal, although I came across some cases of rural-to-urban out-fostering to more distant kin.<sup>85</sup> The most common patterns involve grandmothers fostering their grandchildren, such as in Arame's case, and mothers 'giving' a daughter to a younger sister, often when the latter has recently married and does not yet have any children. Alternatively, elder (usually married) daughters may assume responsibility for their younger siblings.<sup>86</sup> Paternal aunts sometimes bring up their nephews and nieces, usually in cases where the father and mother of the child are not, or no longer married.

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<sup>85</sup> According to Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan (2002), out-fostering is equally common in urban and rural areas, although more rural households foster in.

<sup>86</sup> This was what had happened in Amsatou's case (Chapter One). Upon marrying, she had been 'given' her young sister, who was about four years old at the time, to raise [*yar*] until she reached adulthood.

Marriage is a significant factor in determining patterns of fostering: mothers often leave children with grandmothers when they marry, or remarry, and in scenarios where young girls are 'given' to maternal aunts or elder (female) siblings, it is often because the latter has recently married, the expectation being that the child would soon be able to assist with various household tasks and help look after soon to be born babies. Fostering, as Goody (1982) compellingly argues, is a form of culturally embedded social redistribution (see also Lallemand 1988b, 1994). In Dakar, there is a strong sense that 'it's good/nice to have children around' [*xale dafa neex*] and that 'children make a house less lonely' [*xale day weetali kër gi*]. Moreover, it is widely held that the presence of children can aid an in-fostering mother in conceiving.

Generally, the initial fostering takes place when the birth mother, or parents, are in a difficult situation, and giving the child to someone else is the most viable option. Financial considerations were the main motivation when Maama and her husband decided, during her fourth pregnancy, that if she had a girl, they would name her after Maama's maternal aunt. This aunt had been married for many years, but she had never had children, and had already raised [*yar*] one of Maama's younger sisters. Maama explained that she had correctly predicted that the honour of becoming a namesake would guarantee that her aunt would be willing to 'take' the little girl after she had been weaned. She added that her aunt assumed full responsibility for the child's food and clothing and sent her to school. Overall, she was able to provide her with a more comfortable upbringing than Maama and her husband, who often struggled to feed their family, would have been able to assure.

Another young woman, Nabou, who was originally from northern Senegal, had been fostered out as a teenager to relatives living near Dakar. She had become pregnant whilst she was living with her foster family, but her son's father was not willing to marry her. After the child had been weaned, he was sent back up north to live with his maternal grandmother, Nabou's mother,

whilst Nabou continued to live in Dakar. Five years later, following extensive negotiations between Nabou's family and her son's father's family, Nabou married her son's father and moved into her in-laws' house. During the following years, she gave birth to three more children. However, their first-born son, who was about ten by this time, remained with his grandmother. Nabou explained that her son's maternal grandmother was 'the only one who he considers to be his mother', and that he had no wish to come and live with his birth parents, although he sometimes visited Dakar during the long summer holidays.

In their survey of quantitative data on fostering in Senegal, Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan (2002) consistently refer to the 'out-fostering mother' and the 'in-fostering family'. Although I, too, found that fostered children tended to live in a family, often extended family, setting, especially when fostered by their grandmothers, my data suggests that fostering in a child, as well as giving away a child, is viewed as being performed exclusively by one woman. A woman may purposefully 'give' her child *to another woman* until the child is an adult, and, in the case of girls, ready to marry, as in the case of Maama and her daughter. On other occasions, the act of giving away is not formally established, as in Nabou's case: when Nabou's son went to live with his grandmother, Nabou did not use the word 'to give away' [*maye*] but explained that he had 'gone to stay at his grandmother's house'. The fostering was not, therefore, presumed to be permanent, although Nabou recognised that since her son was settled and her mother also happy with the situation, there would be little point in relocating him to Dakar. Like Arame, Nabou's son was considered to 'be with his grandmother' [*mu ngi ci maamam*]; his grandmother was bringing him up [*maamam moo ko yar*].

In cases where a child, often a boy, does not stay with his mother following the separation of the parents, or the parents never married, he might be raised by his paternal grandmother or aunts [*bájjén*]. In this case, from the boy's maternal relatives' perspective, he may be described as 'being with his father' [*mu ngi ci paapam*], but as being raised [*yar*] by his grandmother or

aunt. One of my acquaintances, Mareme, moved in with her brother and her brother's wife following her divorce; her son was a baby at the time. When he was three, he was sent to live with his middle-aged *bájjén* [paternal aunt], who lived with *her* husband, quite far away from Mareme's ex-husband's extended family home.<sup>87</sup> The *bájjén* had adult children of her own and she mainly stayed at home, whilst her husband worked. However, according to Mareme, it was her son's *bájjén* who was single-handedly providing for the boy. Mareme explained that she sometimes visited her son, or he would come to visit her, though never for longer than a couple of weeks. Whenever she saw him, she would try and buy him some new clothes or a pair of shoes. I asked Mareme whether her son's father made any contribution to his upkeep, and she replied that that wasn't any of her business, adding that 'most of it is done by his *bájjén*' [*li ci ëpp, bájjénam moo koy def*].

The examples described above, together with the initial case study of Arame and her grandmother, highlight the significance of economic support, whether actual or assumed, of foster mothers (rather than foster families) towards small children. Drawing on these findings, I suggest that a consideration of fosterage serves as a productive analytic lens that reveals that women in Dakar have important *economic* roles as mothers, although it is not yet clear how the role of the mother as economic provider is related to that of the birth mother. For the time being, we can note that the role of the mother may be performed without the existence of a biological relationship. Fostered children know perfectly well that their foster mothers, who they usually, though not necessarily, refer to as 'my mother' [*sa ma yaay*] did not 'produce' [*jur*] them. I suggest that there is an aspect to mothering that can be understood, above all, in terms of providing materially for a child. This

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<sup>87</sup> Mareme explained that this arrangement had come about because her son was a particularly difficult child who misbehaved frequently, and she used to have to focus entirely on looking after him. Now that he was with his aunt, she was able to sell dinner outside her house in the evenings, which she would not have been able to do if he were around. However, the other children I knew of who were with their fathers and paternal relatives were there either because their mothers had felt they had no option other than to insist that the father's family take them in, or because the father and/or his family were resentful that the separation had occurred and viewed custody of the children, which the father is legally entitled to in Senegal, as a way of punishing the mother.

entails barring the responsibility for their day-to-day upkeep, making sure they have, first and foremost, food and clothing, and, secondarily, providing for their education, whether secular or Koranic.

Thus far, I have shown how the economic dimension of being a mother becomes most visible in contexts within which long-term fostering has occurred. This is because in these situations, there is no biological relationship, with its attendant ideological discourses concerning the pain and sacrifice of pregnancy and childbirth, to fall back on. I suggest, however, that the economic dimension is significant even when there *is* a biological relationship. For most of the children I knew, and if the recollections of my adult informants such as Arame are anything to go by, mothers – whether birth or social – were the first port of call for everyday needs and wants, although children, being children, did, of course, try to get small change out of anybody with whom they felt at ease. And, as we shall see in the following chapter, from the perspective of the mothers themselves, the idiom of motherhood frequently becomes used as a justification for engaging in certain forms of income-generating activity.

Coumba, who was three when I first met her, came to Dakar from a village in the east of Senegal to move in with her mother and her mother's new husband, six months after they married. She had been living with an older maternal aunt since she was eighteen months old, as it had been time for her (unmarried) mother to return to a nearby town to work as a house-worker. When Coumba arrived, she was probably about three. She was very shy, and refused to speak to anyone other than Soda, her mother. Soda explained to me that she missed her aunt, whom she referred to as 'mother' [*yaay*], and all the other children in that household. Coumba always referred to Soda by her first name, and never as 'mother', but as the months went by, she became more talkative and confident. Every week or so, she proudly showed off her new accessories: a colourful plastic bracelet or necklace, some hair beads, a toy mobile phone or a pair of new sandals. She always stated that 'Soda bought it for me'. Coumba used to fantasise about the various outfits

that her mother had told her were being sewn for her at the tailors, informing me that 'Soda says tomorrow we'll go to Ndiagga and pick up my new clothes'. When she noticed that my son had a new toy or item of clothing, she immediately interjected with 'Soda says that tomorrow when she goes to the market she's going to buy me one'.

Soda was, in fact, financially completely dependent on her new husband. Most mornings, the latter would leave her CFA 500 to CFA 1000 for the little everyday expenses that were distinct from the *deppaas*, the daily food expenditure, which, in this family, was supplied by an older brother who sent money back from Italy once a month. Soda's personal expenditures included little snacks for her daughter and for herself, washing powder and charcoal for cleaning, laundry and ironing, and simple beauty products. When it was her turn to go to the market and cook, she sometimes needed an extra couple of hundred CFA to 'top up' the *deppaas* in order to make a specific dish; this would also come from her husband. Soda was one of the few women I knew who did not engage in any form of income-generating activity, probably because she was an outsider, freshly married and new to Dakar, and also, perhaps, because her standard of living had dramatically improved as a result of her marriage.

In Coumba's eyes, it was her mother, Soda, rather than her step-father, who paid for those items that belonged exclusively to her, as opposed to the food she shared with the rest of the family, the gas used to prepare it and to heat the water she washed with when the weather became cooler, or the electricity that powered the small television that was switched on for most of the day. Coumba was not interested in the origin of the money; as far as she was concerned it was her mother who made the trip to the market and came back with little gifts or clothes for her daughter.

In Dakar, the general markets, which sell food, clothes and housewares, are almost exclusively frequented by women, although many of the traders, especially of clothing and other consumer items, are men. Although a man

may occasionally be spotted buying a new outfit for a child before *Tabaski* (Eid al-Adha) or *Korite* (Eid al-Fitr), only women crowd the streets of second-hand clothing markets, which often rotate from one neighbourhood to another during the week (see Figure 2, p.47). They sift through endless piles of used clothes of varying quality for hours on end, trying to get their hands on those that show the least signs of wear and tear. Women, especially those who have small children, or are the main caregivers of small children, are those most likely to be around during the long afternoons, when little tables vending home-made snacks are set up in front of houses (see Chapter Six). Small children become hungry quickly, especially between the afternoon and evening meals, which can be up to eight hours apart. As we shall see in the following chapter, some women sell a range of hot and cold snacks to fill this gap, and their tables are often surrounded by groups of children clutching CFA 25 or CFA 50 pieces. It is important to note that the expenses associated with children are small amounts that need to be dispensed throughout the day; it is therefore difficult, though not impossible, for someone who is physically absent to be perceived to be directly responsible for providing them.

A mother who works outside the house may still be perceived, by her children as well as by others, as the primary caregiver, although as we shall see in Chapter Six, this kind of work is often difficult to reconcile with a woman's household responsibilities. Social mothers who are assigned or assume the care of non-biological children are less likely to carry out this type of work (see Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan 2002). However, several of my friends who had secure and relatively well-paid work, for example as nurses or midwives, hired other women or girls to assist with childcare and other household tasks. In situations such as these, the children often form close relationships with the hired house-worker, but the mother is still considered to be the main caregiver.

Adja, who was in her forties, sold vegetables at a small market in one of the most upmarket parts of the city. She took her infant daughter with her to

work every day until the latter was eating well enough to be left at home with her older sisters, brothers and other extended family. Adja's three elder daughters looked after their younger sister together, and she spent her time in the company of lots of other small children, including many of her cousins. Sometimes, Adja's daughters would ask for disposable nappies, biscuits, and the little girl's favourite corn snacks from the local shop, and Adja would pay the shopkeeper for these purchases in the evening. Alternatively, she would leave a small amount of money with the eldest daughter that was earmarked for the younger children, or distribute a few coins to the younger children in the evening. Although the younger children generally turned to their big sisters for their daily needs, Adja, who only saw her children late in the evenings and on Sundays, since she had to leave the house before dawn every morning to get to work, carried out a large part of the 'mothering'.

I do not wish to underestimate the real contributions men as fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers make towards the upkeep of young children. It was often difficult for me to gather precise data on how much individual family members contributed to shared expenses; in many contexts, wives were secretive about how much of their earned income they contributed, and overemphasised their husband's role as breadwinner, belittling their own contributions (see Chapter Six and Bop 1996). I have argued here, however, that women *as mothers* are socially acknowledged to be financial responsible for *children*, even when this is not matched by their actual income-generating capacity. Arame's uncles, let us remember, were working when she was growing up with them, yet she only rarely implied that she felt obligated to them in any way, emphasising instead that she only had her 'mother' – or grandmother – to be grateful to. Adult sons, both married and unmarried, are under more explicit pressure to earn money in order to assist their parents than daughters, although daughters who have access to income are also expected to contribute. And as we saw in Chapter Three, following marriage, men are frequently under pressure to provide for

their wives, and indirectly children, by supplying the *deppaas* as well as money for rent and bills.

Occasionally, men as fathers do contribute directly to their children's day-to-day expenses; one little girl's father would give her CFA 50 every morning before school, which she would save until she returned home to buy an afternoon snack, usually two slices of hot fried sweet potato. But men are generally more likely to be out of the house due to work, migration, divorce and polygyny. As we saw in Chapters Two and Three, due to the gendered division of labour even those men who are temporarily out of work tend to leave the house every morning to try and 'sort out' some money, by helping someone out with a small job, or asking a friend or a relative for assistance.

Gracia Clark (1994, 1999), who has worked extensively with Asante traders in urban Ghana, argues that for the Asante, 'being a mother' involves going back to work as soon as possible, and continuing to trade in order to meet children's basic needs. Hard work within the informal sector is a means of showing devotion towards one's children, rather than staying at home and caring for them whilst they are little. The underlying logic, explains Clark, is that no one will let a child go hungry or thirsty, or ignore a crying infant, but only a mother will work tirelessly to support her children. Ramona Pérez (2007) identifies a comparable form of 'economic mothering' in her study of female ceramic artisans in Oaxaca, Mexico, who use their craft to redefine their value as independent economic provider mothers. The distressing reality in this context, explains Pérez, is that women's prestige and economic independence as artisans has resulted in high infant mortality rates and a range of other health concerns due to the toxicity of the lead that is used in the production process.

In this section, I have suggested that the situation in Dakar is somewhat similar to these contexts. One noteworthy difference, however, is that women as mothers – whether birth or social – are socially recognised as being providers for their children, even in instances when there may be

evidence that this does not correspond to their actual 'productive' contributions – although we shall see in the following chapter that some women do justify engaging in certain forms of income-generating activity with reference to providing for the children.

In the previous section, I described how the ideological elaborations on what constitutes a mother emphasise the physiological; the economic remains concealed. In this section, I have attempted to push beyond the ideological level and tease apart the biological and economic aspects of mothering, which frequently (and ideally) come together. I have already hinted at how there may be tensions when these two elements of mothering do not coincide in the figure of a single person. The ethnographic vignettes I have presented in this section have mostly focused on the successful, positive relationships between mothers and children, but there are also cases in which the mother-child relationship is strained. I sometimes heard about children's negative experiences in the house of a foster mother, where they had been mistreated and exploited. In these situations, people sometimes observed that this would not have been the case had the child remained with her birth mother. Nonetheless, people would still recognise that the foster parent had 'done everything' for the child, even if they had sometimes been 'bad' [*bon*] and overworked or beaten their charges. However, as Arame's experience demonstrates, relations with the genitor may also be complex and fraught, even when the fostering is positively experienced – Arame had a very loving relationship with her grandmother.

Usually, only one woman at a time is acknowledged to be 'raising' a child, but there may be cases in which it is not quite clear who this person is. Whereas Arame, for example, was clear about the fact that she had been 'raised' [*yar*] by someone other than her birth mother, with others, like her younger cousin Oumou, it was not immediately evident who was 'more' of a mother to her when she was growing up. Oumou, as we saw, was also very close to her grandmother, but her mother was mostly present in the same house while she was a child. I felt that it would be insensitive to ask Oumou

the question ‘who brought you up?’ [*kan moo la yar?*], although it was easy to ask ‘where were you brought up?’ [*fan nga yaroo?*] – the answer was ‘my grandmother’s house’ [*sa ma kër maam*] or ‘our house in Sandaga’ [*suñu kër Sandaga*]. If I had asked her, I suspect that Oumou would probably have replied that she was brought up by her mother, since if the birth mother is present, people tend to privilege the physiological aspects of mothering. I was concerned, however, that Oumou might interpret the question to mean that I doubted that her birth mother, who had given birth out of wedlock at a very young age, had provided for her adequately as a child. As I have sought to show in this section, the fact of giving birth, taken alone, is not a sufficient condition of being a mother.

#### **5.4    *Kinship and the city***

In this final section, I offer some further reflections on the complex and outwardly contradictory nature of motherhood in Dakar, suggesting that the issues I have raised thus far point to broader questions about the nature of kinship relations in this context. I described how the biological relationship between mother and child is considered to be central to the formation of the relationship. There is great emphasis on the suffering involved in pregnancy and childbirth, and people stressed that no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to repay a mother for what she endured in bringing you into the world. This idiom of a mother’s ‘sacrifice’ (cf. Lambek 2007, Browner and Lewin 1982) is sometimes associated with the concept of the ‘work of the mother’ [*liggéeyu ndey*], which alludes to the deference of a wife towards her husband and the suffering that a woman potentially experiences in her marriage. In practice, however, there are many relationships between children and social, or foster mothers, which are characterised by similar forms of love and emotional attachment. Arame was devoted to her grandmother, and verbally expressed this emotional bond either by simply saying that she loved her grandmother, but, more frequently, referring to

how much her grandmother loved her.<sup>88</sup> Above all, she emphasised how much her grandmother had done for her in material terms.

The underlying issue, then, is the question of what, precisely, is essential to 'being a mother' in Dakar. I have suggested that although it is the biological functions of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding that are most strongly associated with motherhood, there are situations such as Arame's in which the *behaviour* associated with being a mother in practice – economic as well as emotional – exists in the person of someone who is not a birth mother. Yet although we have seen that they may sometimes be a source of tension, the two concepts of motherhood, biological and social/economic, coexist comfortably for most people in everyday life.

This apparent flexibility is reflected in the application of kinship terminology in everyday life, not just in relation to the word 'mother', but more generally. I frequently struggled to make sense of how people were genealogically related to one another, and it often seemed to be more of a concern to me than to my informants (see Sudarkasa 2004). People often knew very little about their own families and genealogies. One friend described how, for many years, he had believed that a family of cousins, whose mother had the same surname as my friend's father, were the children of his paternal aunt. It was only when he was an adult that he found out by chance that, in fact, there was no known relationship at all – my friend's father and his 'aunt' had been neighbours many years ago when they were living in a small town outside Dakar. They had remained close friends, such that when they had children, they referred to each other as 'aunt' and 'uncle' of the children.

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<sup>88</sup> I never heard mothers explicitly speak of how much they loved their children, presumably due to concerns about the latter becoming the victims of malevolent gossip (see above, and also Chapter One, pp. 66-67, Chapter Two, pp. 83-85), but it was not problematic for people themselves to speak about how much they were loved by their mothers.

To give another example, one day, a close friend of my partner's family phoned to inform us that his mother had died. Later that day, we happened to bump into one of his sisters, and began to express our shock and condolences. She looked at us in disbelief and said that we must be mistaken, for she had just left her mother alive and well at home. It transpired that the woman who had died was our friend's birth mother; despite having known him well for well over ten years, my partner and his family were not aware that the woman that he always referred to as 'mother', in whose house he had lived ever since they had known him was, in fact, his foster mother. Similarly, they did not know that his sister was not a sibling through birth.

The idea that only a select few with specialist knowledge should know about genealogies is deeply rooted in Wolof society (Irvine 1974, 1978). Judith Irvine (1978) argues that Wolof genealogies are more accurate than those of many other African societies due to the fact that only a particular social group – the praise-orators [*géwél*] – traditionally assumed responsibility for genealogical knowledge, which was only required at special occasions such as life-cycle rituals, and upon which they depended for their livelihood. However, she explains that this gives rise to a situation in which many ordinary people can afford to be ignorant of genealogies. Moreover, although the praise-orators may sometimes be called upon to demonstrate their knowledge, and certain individuals might be in a position to judge whether or not their grasp of a particular genealogy is accurate, they also have substantial scope for creating ambiguities about kinship relations.

Drawing on Irvine's arguments, I suggest that although traditionally, most Senegambian societies were highly stratified, with many aspects of social status determined by birth, there is, and perhaps has always been, scope for a certain ambiguity and flexibility. It is plausible, too, that the complex movements of people, both into and within Dakar, contribute to a situation in which increasing numbers of people may not be aware of genealogical relationships within their own extended families, let alone those of friends

or neighbours they are close to or have dealings with on a regular basis (see Chapter Two, pp. 86-87, Goffman 1959).

In recent years, reconfigurations of kinship studies have challenged the necessary existence of a dichotomy between the biological and the social that was once the hallmark of our discipline. Kinship studies now emphasise that people may conceive of their 'relatedness' to one another in a multitude of ways (e.g. Carsten 2000, 2004, Franklin and McKinnon 2001). On the face of it, my own material, which seeks, above all, to show that women have important economic roles as mothers, would appear to lend itself to this analytic approach.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, however, it is clear that people in Dakar definitely *do* make the conceptual distinction between birth mothers and economic mothers. Arame's insistence that Oumou's childhood was, in some ways, easier than her own due to the presence of Oumou's birth mother indicates that there remains a level at which genealogical relations are not merely the concern of the anthropologist. My material suggests, however, that mothers have the capacity to compensate for the lack of a biological relationship through taking on the role of the breadwinner. They have the potential to succeed in this role to the point that, outwardly at least, the difference may become insignificant.

## 5.5 *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have explored what it means to be a mother in Dakar. I began with an ethnographic case study that highlighted the complexities and tensions that may characterise the mother-child relationship. This is a context in which physiological motherhood, framed with reference to pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, is accorded enormous ideological

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<sup>89</sup> Fullwiley's (2010) medical anthropological study on sickle cell anaemia in Dakar also suggests that the concept of relatedness might be productively deployed to make sense of certain aspects of Dakar life. She argues that the reason that Senegalese sicklers are recognised to suffer from a milder form of the illness is biosocial, and is shaped not by genetics, but rather by the networks of care they create for themselves with other sufferers by drawing on a Wolof idiom of 'shared blood'.

value, yet informal fostering is very common. A less visible feature of motherhood, I have suggested, becomes manifest above all through the widespread practice of fostering. When there is no biological relationship to fall back on, it becomes clear that foster mothers, as well as birth mothers, are widely perceived to be financially supporting young children. The role of the mother, then, may be performed economically, and is not solely determined by the existence of a biological relationship. Here, as in Chapter Three, the economic and the emotional are, at least from the perspective of children, or adults reminiscing about their childhood, closely entangled and perhaps even mutually constitutive. In addition, I have noted that the role of the mother as breadwinner is sometimes perceived to exist in situations in which a mother's actual financial contributions towards her child do not appear to match up to others' perceptions of her role as a provider.

The answer to this chapter's 'search for the mother' is not a straightforward one. For most people, the two concepts of motherhood, biological and social/economic, coexist comfortably, because the birth mother can perform both roles. We have seen, however, that problems may arise when these two aspects of mothering do not come together in a single person. In spite of the multifaceted nature of motherhood in the Dakar context, I have suggested that it is important not to overlook the fact that, in certain situations, it is precisely its flexibility that becomes a source of tension and negative emotion.

In this chapter, I have at several points alluded to the fact that some of my acquaintances actively deployed the idiom of mothering in the context of their income-generating activities. As I noted at the beginning of this thesis, Dakar women's income-generating activities are a firmly established and widely accepted feature of everyday life; virtually all of the women I knew while I was in the field were earning, or had previously earned money in some way or other, though their economic endeavours were often ad hoc or irregular. In the subsequent, and final chapter of this thesis, I demonstrate how one particular type of remunerated work, which I call 'selling', is

intimately connected with motherhood and the material support of children. However, there is a different, and equally common type of work, 'trading', which becomes meaningful with reference to a rather different set of womanly ideals.

## Selling and Trading: The Value of Women's Remunerated Work

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*Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.*

— Woody Allen

This chapter investigates Dakar women's remunerated work. Although Senegalese women's participation in the urban workforce is readily acknowledged by Dakarois and has received attention within the scholarly literature, *liggéey* (work; also: to work) continues to be conceptualised as a predominantly masculine activity.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, as we have seen in several of the previous chapters, it is a crucial component of men's gendered identity. Anthropological accounts of urban Senegalese women's income-generating activities have focused almost exclusively on market traders, whose work normally falls under the rubric of *liggéey*. However, almost *all* of the women I encountered in Dakar were earning money, or had earned money at some point during the span of my fieldwork. Their activities – often intermittent, short-lived, unstable and not very profitable – were overwhelmingly *not* considered to be *liggéey*.

In this chapter, I focus on the two most common instances of 'non-*liggéey*' work: selling [*jaay*] and trading [*commerce*]. Women who 'sell' generally vend food items from the vicinity of their homes, whilst women who 'trade' sell small quantities of consumer goods, for example clothes, shoes, perfume or mobile phones, on credit through networks of family or friends. The

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<sup>90</sup> Throughout the chapter, I continue to use the word *liggéey* in order to reflect local ideas about work and its valorisation, and also to avoid blurring emic and etic conceptions of what normally counts as 'work'.

chapter seeks to situate these ubiquitous yet overlooked types of remunerated work within cultural and historical frameworks, rendering them visible alongside the more familiar narratives of Senegalese women's work that were discussed briefly in the introductory chapter. In the first part of the chapter, I provide an overview of the relationship between women and income in the Senegalese context and examine those types of women's work that *are* generally considered to be *liggéey* (6.1). The subsequent ethnographic case studies of selling (6.2) and trading (6.3) enable me to construct an analysis of their relative valorisations. I demonstrate that whereas selling is associated with the household and is perceived to be directed towards the needs of others, especially children, the practice of trading responds to particular ideas about appearance, consumption and leisure-time, and is more likely to be justified in terms of being able to look after oneself. I will then suggest that these two kinds of income-generating activity, so commonplace in Dakar, reflect and contribute to two distinct emic conceptions of what it means to be a woman in this context (6.4).

### **6.1 *Women and income in the Senegambian context***

Historically, the organisation of economic life in the Senegambian sub-region differed significantly across and within its various ethnic groups, and it goes without saying that 'traditional' patterns of production have always, in fact, been subject to changes over time (see Chapter One, 1.3). In this section, then, I attempt to offer no more than a sweeping overview of the history of women and income in the sub-region, before zooming in to focus on what we already know about Dakar women earning money in more recent times, incorporating brief examples from my own fieldwork.

As was the case across much of West Africa, the Senegambian economy of the precolonial period revolved around subsistence agriculture and trade, with various occupational groups fulfilling more specialised roles. Callaway

and Creevey (1994) describe how land, the main resource, was generally allocated to male household heads via the heads of lineages, and all family members were expected to participate in subsistence farming. However, women were sometimes compensated for their work on these plots, either in money or in kind, or alternatively, they had usufruct rights to separate plots of land which they cultivated independently, keeping the proceeds of their labour and engaging in trade. To borrow Coquery-Vidrovitch's (1994) expression, local and long-distance trade, as well as agriculture, were integral components of the West African 'feminine habitus' and the keeping of separate, as opposed to communal or household budgets, appears to have been well established across the region for quite some time (see Chapter One, 1.3).

In present-day Senegal, urban women in particular are increasingly turning to informal economic activities as a means of surviving, although a minority manage to find employment in the formal wage sector. Writing in the mid-nineties, Callaway and Creevey (1994) note that women are increasingly represented in the formal job market and are improving their overall positions in it, being particularly able to compete for second or third level positions such as administrators, managers, secretaries and clerical workers. The government, they note, has become an important employer of women, above all in the ministries of health and education, and their presence in the private sector is of a similar proportion to that within the civil service.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that their data reveals that women comprise only a small minority of the formal job market, with positions most accessible to a highly educated elite.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the impact of structural adjustment policies over the past twenty years should not be underestimated; the push to reduce government spending has caused public sector employment opportunities to contract sharply. Finally, Callaway and

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<sup>91</sup> Diane Barthel's (1975) analysis of the education system during the colonial period shows how it excluded all but a minority of women, whose fathers often held positions in the colonial administration.

Creevey do not appear to take paid domestic work into consideration, which in all likelihood accounts for a large proportion of women's waged work (Le Cour Grandmaison 1969, 1972). They surmise that relatively speaking, fewer women participate in Dakar's informal economy than in other urban centres such as Kaolack or Diourbel precisely because the former affords more salaried job opportunities. It is not obvious whether their claim held true at the time of my fieldwork, but either way, it should not detract from the reality that for most Dakar women, the most likely prospect of earning money is to be found within the informal sector.

Knowledge about the scale and nature of women's informal sector work is often patchy, partly due to the nature of the work itself, which does not lend itself easily to regulation or external monitoring (Hart 1973) and partly because scholars of the informal sector *per se* often focus on more complex, formally structured enterprises in which men outnumber women. Van Dijk's (1986) study of Dakar's informal sector is a case in point: the 467 business owners he interviewed fell into the occupational categories of electrician, watch-fixer, mechanic, mason, upholsterer, blacksmith, brick moulder and carpenter, with a few listed as 'other'. Needless to say these entrepreneurs were all men who recruited other men or young boys as apprentices. Women, on the other hand, are less likely to be employed as waged workers in the informal sector and more likely to be self-employed, engaging in food vending, trade and hairdressing.<sup>92 93</sup>

Colette Le Cour Grandmaison (1969, 1971, 1972), who conducted fieldwork in Dakar during the 1960s, argued that successful women traders were prominent within particular spheres of trade that symbolically preserved their 'traditional' feminine roles of providing for the family (cf. Horn 1994). These consisted of trade in fishing produce, cloth woven by artisans who

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<sup>92</sup> Here again, Callaway and Creevey make the point that women are best represented at the upper levels of the informal sector, and worst at the level of the unskilled worker, but only *without* taking the service sector into account (1994:133), whereas evidence indicates that this is the sector in which women predominate. M.D. Diouf (1981), for example, notes that women predominate in the informal catering sector.

<sup>93</sup> The exception is informal sector waged domestic work (cf. Chapter Four).

were financed by the women, and market garden produce. She observed that only a small minority of women were able to become *successful* traders: women wage earners made up less than one tenth of the working female population, and the trader population that she drew her data from amounted to *half* of the number of women wage earners. In aggregate, however, the incomes of the wage earners and the successful traders were roughly the same, indicating the relative success of the latter.

Le Cour Grandmaison identified several key factors that facilitated the traders' success, above all the length of time they had spent in Dakar, and the strength of their familial and social networks. The majority of her informants traded in market garden produce that was cultivated with family assistance on fields that were located at the outskirts of the city. The traders' success depended firstly on having access to the fields in the first place, and secondly on being able to obtain stalls at the most established markets through their social networks. Those women who traded in fishing produce, on the other hand, tended to be married to fishermen; here too, the business was family based, and was connected to the prevalence of fishing in the region in precolonial times. The women who patronised casted weavers, too, were integrated into social networks that permitted such established relationships with the latter.

Le Cour Grandmaison emphasised that only a minority of Dakaroises were able to attain these levels of prosperity; her focus was restricted to an exceptional and somewhat elite category of traders.<sup>94</sup> Mireille Lecarme-Frassy's (2000) well-researched and nuanced ethnography of Dakar fish-sellers offers more insight into the obstacles encountered by poorer women struggling to maintain their trading activities. Her monograph, based on

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<sup>94</sup> Her analysis, especially in its contrasting of informal sector with waged work, is characteristic of approaches to the informal economy that emphasise that informal sector ventures may deliver higher returns than formal sector jobs. The informal sector, therefore, is deemed to have the potential to confer a degree of autonomy on the urban poor (K. Hart 1973, 1988, Mintz 1971, Chapter One, 1.4). These considerations, combined with influences from feminist anthropology, have arguably lead to disproportionate attention being paid to those women whose informal economic endeavours are relatively successful (see Chapter One, 1.2 and 1.4).

data gathered in the 1980s, focuses on a small group of women, mainly originating from the Casamance region, who sell fish at the market in Dalifort, Pikine. They explain their activities in terms of their 'personal needs', and, she contends, are de-facto family heads, at least in the economic sense. Her main argument centres on the relationship between trading and social reproduction, and she demonstrates that the former is made possible by the housework performed by daughters and other young girls who circulate within the lineage (see Chapters Four and Five).

Fatou Sarr (1998), who admittedly focuses on a select group of über-successful owners of officially recognised small and medium enterprises (whose capital amounts to at least CFA 20,000,000, or roughly £25,000; see footnote 1, p.15), advances a comparable line of argument. Decades earlier, almost all of her informants had dedicated many years of their youth exclusively to running their households, and their success has been contingent on striking a balance between family roles and entrepreneurial ones. She cites the multitude of negotiations they enter into and obligations they must meet, with their husbands, kin and other members of the community, in order to avoid putting their business at risk. Interestingly, she draws attention to the fact that their roles at the level of the household, and in particular their long-established participation in neighbourhood Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs – see also Chapter Two) and ritual associations have actually assisted in the development of their business expertise.

Like the subjects of these ethnographies, some of the women I met in Dakar *were* considered to be working. None of the women I knew well were in the same league as Sarr's traders, although I had fleeting encounters with a couple, who imported large furniture items, flat-screen televisions and other consumer goods from Dubai and China respectively. My access to them was limited by the contexts in which we met – it would be fair to say that from the outset, they were out of my league as well. As for the remainder, identifying specific factors that have determined their economic

circumstances is not straightforward. Holders of the high school certificate (*BFEM*) or the more advanced *Baccalauréat* were more employable within the middle levels of the formal sector, as were those who had specific qualifications, for example as nurses and midwives. Those who were market traders often had the good fortune of having family or contacts who had helped them obtain an advantageous *place* to sell from.

The common denominator that characterised these different types of work as *liggée* seemed to be twofold. Firstly, in all of these cases, the women either did not have major housework responsibilities, or if they did then they had arrangements in place that relieved them of these tasks, because *liggée* almost always occurs *outside* the house. This point is illustrated by the work patterns of members of one particular family who specialised in the trade of market garden produce. Although one of the sons owned and oversaw the cultivation of fields near Dalifort, Pikine, three of his sisters, two of his nieces and his brother's wife generally purchased their vegetables from the wholesale market at Castor every morning and re-sold them at stalls that were favourably located in wealthy Dakar neighbourhoods, in front of a busy supermarket or a restaurant, for example. They had obtained permission to sell on these premises decades earlier through personal contacts, and there was little opportunity for competitors to set up similar enterprises in these particular locations. The two nieces were in their late teens and unmarried; their mother also traded, but there were other grown-up daughters and female relatives who were at home every day and shared the housework. One of the other sisters also had grown-up children, all sons, who, along with her husband were out working every day. The third sister had never been married and lived in her natal home, in which her sisters-in-law were responsible for the cooking. The sister-in-law who traded had a baby who she took with her to the market for many months until she was old enough to stay at home with her siblings, the eldest of whom was a teenager who cooked on behalf of her mother. The son who owned the fields had also recently married, and his wife shared the cooking duties with this girl, each doing two days at a time. When I asked this young 'married-in'

wife whether she would ever consider trading like all of the other women in her husband's family, including another woman who had married in to the family, she replied that it wasn't possible because she had small children – and no one to help her look after them or cook on her behalf.

As we saw in the previous chapters, arrangements for outsourcing housework, especially cooking and childcare, often involved younger female members of the family (although childcare on its own could sometimes be carried out by older women), and occasionally waged domestic workers could be hired. This relates to the second, crucial point, which is that these women's earnings were significant relative to the needs of the household and other dependents, as well as to the earnings of other household members, especially their husbands, in the cases of those that were married. This is perhaps an obvious point, revealing only that work, or at least this kind of work, is framed in terms of necessity and as a means of survival. A young man, a tailor, explained to me how his wife had previously worked as a cleaner (but not as a live-in house-worker). She used to earn CFA 30,000 per month, and he explained that during this period, he had been employed by another tailor, since he didn't have the skills or the funds to set up his own business. After he had established himself independently and had reliable clients, however, he told her to give up her cleaning work and stay at home with their children, who had previously been cared for by their paternal grandmother, because 'what she was being paid wasn't good'. We can see, therefore, that earning 'relatively well' is a necessary, albeit not sufficient condition of women's *liggéey*. Being able to *liggéey* depends additionally on the availability of assistance with housework, something which, as we have seen in Chapter Four, cannot be taken for granted, as well as a combination of good connections, good fortune and sometimes education. However, during the course of my fieldwork, I found non-*liggéey* activities such as selling [*jaay*] and trading [*commerce*] to be the income-generating endeavours that Dakaroises engaged in most frequently. These kinds of work, however, are largely absent, not only from the scholarly

literature pertaining to Dakar women's income-generating activities, but also from popular representations of women's *liggéey*.

'*Jigéen ñi ñoo ko yor*' ('the women have got it') is a song by the queen of the older generation of Senegalese *gével* (praise-orator or *griot*) recording artists, Fatou Guéwel Diouf. In it, she sings 'Senegal, I am asking, who has got it?' [*Senegal, maa ngi lacee, ana ñi ko yor?*], and replies that it is the women. The song is effectively asking, as per the description of the music video on YouTube, whether women or men are 'better'.<sup>95</sup> Fatou Guéwel sings that everything that is 'happening' in Senegal is due to women, referring primarily to their roles as mothers and wives.<sup>96</sup> She also emphasises that she is singing to those women who *liggéey* [*jigéen ñu am joóm nangoo liggéey laay woyal*], and at one point she alludes directly to women's income generating work: 'women are in the offices, women are at home with the children on their laps, women are in the markets buying and selling' [*jigéen ña nga ca bureaux ya, jigéen ña nga ca kër ga toog di uuf njaboot ja, jigéen ña nga ca marché ya di jënd ak jaay*]. Although there are numerous popular Senegalese songs that deal with marriage, motherhood and the status of women in Senegalese society, this was one of the few that I could find with an explicit reference to women's income-generating activities.<sup>97</sup>

A more recent example can be found in Coumba Gawlo Seck's *Femme Objet*, also a song about the status of women in society at large, which was released while I was in the field. 'Woman is in the army, woman is in the fields, woman is leading the country' [*jigéen a ngi armée, jigéen a ngi tool ya, jigéen a ngi jiitlé réew*], and a little later 'You are in the fields, you are in the

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<sup>95</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA7Y\\_by3qgs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA7Y_by3qgs) (accessed on 27.06.2013)

<sup>96</sup> The song features male superstar Mbaye Dieye Faye who interjects using metaphoric language: 'Fatou Guéwel Diouf, everything that you say is true, but if you think that you are the only ones who matter, then that is all you will be able to see' [*Fatou Guéwel Diouf, li nga wax yépp dëgg la, waay ku racc jemale sa kanam, dall dina dëll*]. Several of my friends, women and men, confessed that this reflected how they felt about the matter. Fatou Guéwel has another song about gender equality ('*Parité*'), the lyrics to which, I heard her explain one day on a radio programme, she didn't entirely sympathise with— she had agreed to record the song as a 'favour' to a women's rights organisation.

<sup>97</sup> Songs in praise of mothers, however, frequently allude indirectly to women's income-generating activities, citing mothers' material support of their children (Chapter Five).

offices, you are at home with the children on your laps' [*yeen angi ci tool ya, yeen angi ci bureaux yi, yeen angi ci kër gi di uuf njaboot ji*].<sup>98</sup> The lyrics are strikingly similar to Fatou Guéwel's: in both cases the allusion to women's income generating work is inserted alongside a description of women at home with the children on their laps. Although many people echoed Fatou Guéwel's and Coumba Gawlo Seck's proclamations that women are and should be engaging in *liggéey*, often borrowing from the language of rights and equality propagated by NGOs, their voices played second fiddle to a discourse within which women's primary obligations were framed in terms of being good mothers and wives.

## 6.2 *Sokhna the seller*

It was a sweltering afternoon in early August as I strolled down my sandy side street in Parcelles Assainies. I turned onto the main road, which I crossed at the disused cinema, and walked purposefully up through the adjacent market along the Cambérène road until I reached the sparkling white-tiled two-story house on the corner where several of my friends lived. The house was constructed at an angle to the intersection, which meant that there was a larger than average triangular patio-like space in front of the building. My friend Sokhna's children were there, playing with a group of other kids, yet, unusually for this time of day, Sokhna herself was nowhere to be seen. Her table and footstool were there however, as was the cardboard cylinder that enclosed her blue gas canister, serving as a makeshift windshield. The contours of her bowls, containers, pestle and mortar were visible through the chequered tablecloth that was protecting their contents from the dust and flies.

I pushed hard against the unyielding glass door of the second of three shops that formed part of the ground floor of the house, squeezed through, and

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<sup>98</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYNVBdlAyXM> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

poked my head around the screen that stretched across the width of the room to greet Bamba, the tailor, his colleague, and their apprentices. They were bent over their machines, sewing furiously in the run-up to *Korite* (Eid al-Fitr). I asked after Sokhna, and Bamba explained that she had gone to a neighbourhood *tuur*, a savings association meeting, and that she had asked him to keep an eye on her children when they returned from their afternoon studies, since she would not be long. We sat on the small sofa that was sandwiched between the screen and the shop-window and after a sartorial preamble, the conversation shifted to my research, which, as Bamba knew, was all about *afeeru jigéen* – women’s matters. Bamba asked whether I was making any progress and I replied with a cautious ‘so-so’ [*tane na rekk*], before deciding to take advantage of the situation and proffering that one of the things that I had learned was that there were many women who, when asked, would reply that they did not *work* [*liggéey*], when, in fact there *were* ‘things that they were doing in order to get money’ [*am na lu ñu def ndax ñu mēna am xalis*].<sup>99</sup> ‘That’s true,’ Bamba nodded his head in agreement, ‘now all women are trading [*commerce*]’. I was about to explain that I was, indeed, referring to women who traded, but that there was another group of women, the sellers, whose activities I was equally interested in when Bamba tilted his head upwards and gestured towards the patio. Sokhna had returned from her *tuur*, and was busy pouring bags of oil into the heavy casserole: ‘And that one,’ he joked, ‘is a trader [*commercante*] of *fataaya*!’<sup>100</sup> We laughed as we watched Sokhna prepare her *beñe*, *akara* and *fataaya* for frying and then I stood up to step outside and say hello.<sup>101</sup>

This exchange is illuminating because it draws attention to both the similarities and differences between selling and trading. When I admitted

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<sup>99</sup> See Chapter One for a considered reflection on how I communicated my status as a researcher to my informants. It is worth noting that as research progressed, I realised that not only had I been asking my female (and some male) informants the ‘wrong’ question (‘do you work?’), I had also mistakenly assumed that the interchangeability of different forms of work extended to my own work as a researcher (cf. Harris 2007).

<sup>100</sup> *Fataaya* are deep-fried fish or meat dumplings, served with a spicy tomato flavoured onion sauce and sold either in a piece of newspaper or in bread, available at additional cost.

<sup>101</sup> *Beñe* are sweet doughnuts that come in different shapes and sizes, and may be made from wheat or millet flour. *Akara* are savoury deep-fried bean-dough balls; they are served like *fataaya*.

my initial failure to realise that many women who did not consider themselves to be working were nevertheless earning money, it was trading [*commerce*] that sprang to Bamba's mind. Seconds later, upon catching sight of Sokhna through the shop window, Bamba made a connection between trading and the kind of work that Sokhna does, which he articulated in the form of a joke – that Sokhna is a trader [*commercante*] of *fataaya*. The humour derives from the existence of both similarities and differences between the type of work that Sokhna does, which I refer to as selling, and the trading that Bamba was referring to. Women like Sokhna sell [*jaay*] food items from within, or close to their homes, whilst the traders [*commercantes*] that Bamba alluded to shift small quantities of consumer goods such as clothes, shoes, perfume or mobile phones through networks of family and friends to whom credit can be extended. The latter do not have a fixed *place* and shift their merchandise exclusively through their social networks. Although the words for selling and trading may be used interchangeably, as traders may say, for example, that they are *selling* shoes [*jaay ay dall*], the activities of women like Sokhna are definitely *not* considered to be trading.

Sokhna was in her mid-twenties and mother of three small children. Her husband was employed as a driver and they were one of three families who rented rooms on the ground floor of the large white house in Cambérène. Her elder children attended Koranic school most days, returning for a lunch break and a nap, and after Sokhna had cleared up, it was time for her to finish preparing her afternoon snacks, a lengthy process which started the evening before. She had to soak and peel the beans for the *akara*, which required vigorous pounding until the dough became soft and fluffy. The flour-based *beñe* and *fataaya* were not as time consuming, but she also had to chop the onions for the spicy red sauce that complemented the savoury items. Depending on the season she sometimes took a car to *Marché Syndicat* in Pikine before lunch to buy fruit at the wholesale price, which she would then sell alongside the hot food. She did not do this frequently though, she explained, because it was tough, all the way to Pikine and back

with the little one on her back, and moreover, she didn't always have the time.

Whenever we spoke about her work, Sokhna emphasised that 'selling is difficult' [*jaay, dafa metti*], and that she did it because of the children, who were always asking for something or other. The money she earned went 'straight back into the house', she explained. Her husband gave her the daily food expenditure [*deppaas*] but it was never enough, and she needed to supplement it with her own money. Sokhna explained that she often did not have time to go to ceremonies because she had to sell, and that she only took days off on exceptional occasions. When I asked Sokhna roughly how much profit she made, she laughed that 'sometimes it pays' [*lée-lée mu dox*], adding that she had never tried to calculate her profit or loss. Sometimes, she explained, she didn't sell everything, but as long as there was not too much left over it didn't matter, because she could give it to the children in the evening. The problem was the local kids who pleaded with her for a couple of *fataaya*, and others, even adults, who failed to return to pay for their long since devoured *akara* sandwich.

Many women like Sokhna worked from within, just outside, or in the vicinity of their houses, balancing their income-generating activities with housework and childcare. Sometimes they did not even sell from a specific table or stool, especially if they produced chilled items such as homemade juices that needed to be kept in the fridge. In these cases, children would simply be sent around to the house of the seller with small change. Elderly women or women without significant housework responsibilities were more likely to sell right through the day, presiding over tables of fruit, bags of nuts, and sweets as they kept an eye on the youngest members of the family. Others, like Sokhna, limited their activities to particular times of day, selling breakfast, afternoon snacks or dinner. Some were assisted in the preparation or the vending by their children or grandchildren, but many worked alone.





Figure 16: A vegetable seller's table. Photo by T.K.

### 6.3 *Dieyna the trader*

The second case study I present is that of Dieyna, a sometime trader of consumer goods. Dieyna's personal circumstances have evolved during the years I have known her. Initially, she was married and living with her in-laws, then married and renting alone, then re-married and living with her husband, baby and in-laws, and finally, as I recently discovered, separated and living with her natal family – pregnant, and with her small child assigned to the care of her mother. She traded intermittently throughout, but was more consistent during those periods when she was not living with her in-laws, and therefore had fewer domestic responsibilities.

Dieyna described herself as a trader [*commercante*], and her occupation was listed as such in her national identity card. One of her more memorable projects involved purchasing two dozen men's shirts from a downtown wholesaler friend who accepted a partial initial payment, and then re-selling

them on credit at a 100% mark-up on the wholesale price to the officers at the central police station, where she had become a popular presence. On another occasion, she travelled to Gambia with a friend who was a more established trader and returned with a small holdall full of women's shoes. However, she generally purchased her wares on credit from wholesalers in Dakar, or obtained them through personal connections to sole traders importing from abroad. For several months during her second marriage, she had dozens of brightly coloured thick-soled flip-flops, which had come straight off a container at the port, and which *were* actually 'perfect for the rainy season', which she sold via a friend's clothes shop.

Mostly, however, Dieyna combined business with pleasure, carrying her merchandise with her as she visited friends, many of whom she had not caught up with for a while. Less frequently, traders would carry their wares with them when they attended family or community events such as life cycle ceremonies or association meetings.<sup>102</sup> Of course, they also sold to household members, visitors and neighbours. But social visits outside the residential neighbourhood expanded the pool of potential clients enormously – these women had few other ways of bringing their merchandise to potential clients' attention. Although selling on credit was always risky, by selling to friends' friends or neighbours, the trader had some leverage when it came to extracting payment. When she had stock, Dieyna would make arrangements to visit friends in various parts of Dakar, many of whom she had not caught up with for some time. Her visit might be eagerly anticipated – 'Dieyna, she's been to Gambia and she's got some beautiful shoes with her; she's coming here with the merchandise later on'. Sometimes, however, a client might feel pressured into purchasing because she was already indebted, financially or otherwise, to the trader.

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<sup>102</sup> References to this type of trade in the literature tend to describe it as a sideline activity at family ceremonies (Buggenhagen 2012a) or at women's association gatherings such as *tuur* dance events (Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu Kringelbach 2005). However, I found it to occur more frequently and systematically during social visits that had no religious, ceremonial or associational purpose, perhaps because there were fewer distractions and practical hazards involved.

In the context of transactions such as these, if clients were not eager and impatient to purchase, traders and their friends would take time to catch up and socialise before the merchandise was brought out. Even though discussions about the style and quality of the goods were often lengthy, they were never the only topic of conversation. Negotiations about prices were swift and subtle, especially if the trader did not expect immediate payment, which was usually the case. 'Just take it' [*jélal rekk*] – the trader would tell her client, in a way that made it sound as if she were giving it away for free. Later, of course, there would be follow-up visits, sometimes involving new goods, whereby the trader would discreetly attempt to secure payment for items sold on credit months earlier. The crucial point in all this is that the nature and atmosphere of these visits, from the content of the conversation to the snacks and beverages consumed and the television programme running in the background, strongly resembled a social visit that did not involve commerce.

Social visits in Dakar are visits to friends or family that involve a distance that is usually too far to walk and requires some form of motorised transport. Neighbourhood visits that are within walking distance of one's house are different, as I explain shortly. Urbanisation and shifting residential patterns, as well as the sheer magnitude of extended family and social networks contribute to the prevalence of social visits; in Dakar, visiting and being visited by friends and family are essential aspects of social relationships. Despite the fact that they are frequent, sometimes even everyday occurrences, these visits require a degree of preparation and considered attention to one's appearance, especially dress, that may take quite some time. Although it may seem obvious that appearance is always a meaningful part of self-presentation and social interaction, it is worth remembering that, in Dakar, the importance of 'keeping up appearances' is, as I argued earlier, rooted in particular religious, cultural and historical frameworks (Chapter Two, 2.2).

During a period when Dieyna was making the hour-long journey from the suburbs into central Dakar almost every day with her merchandise, she was always immaculately turned out. Carefully made-up, she often wore tight jeans and a bejewelled top, colour coordinating her accessories with the latter. Occasionally, and especially on Fridays, the 'Western' outfit would be replaced by a locally tailored ensemble, which would also be enhanced by matching jewellery, shoes and handbag. Sometimes, she incorporated the items she was selling into her outfit. When I asked her why it took her so long to get ready, she made no reference to her trade. Instead, she explained how important it was for people in general to think that she had no financial worries – times may be tough, but it wasn't good for other people to know this. It could give people reason to 'talk', or gossip, and, as we saw in Chapter Two, being the subject of gossip could potentially be very dangerous. Although she did not say this, I thought that it might also conceivably lead people to think that her trading wasn't going well because her merchandise was not of a high enough quality.

In Chapter Two, I argued that there are several, related factors that underpin the high value urban Senegalese place on appearance. First, people take measures to avoid becoming not only the targets, but also the presumed perpetrators of malignant gossip, and dress well in order to avoid attracting negative attention. Second, attention to appearance is arguably especially important in an urban environment where a degree of anonymity characterises much social interaction and where identities are often only partially revealed (cf. Chapter Five, 5.4). In Dakar, this manifests itself against a backdrop of the relatively rigid and differentiated social identities and constraints on social mobility engendered by the traditional hierarchical occupational categories. Third, ideas about cleanliness and correct dress resonate within an Islamic belief system. Finally, I argued that the cultural expectation of 'dressing well' is a way of distinguishing leisure time from work. Social visits to friends and family outside the residential neighbourhood are one of the most frequent 'everyday' leisure activities in Dakar; they are also the primary setting for women's small-scale trade.

Dieyna kept meticulous records of her sales in a worn black notebook, which she occasionally asked me to update for her, dictating the name, item purchased, price of item and, if applicable, the payment already received. On rare occasions, she asked me to read out a sale that she could no longer recall the details of, but most of the time the information was in her head. Sometimes I felt frustrated and angry on her behalf when she explained that so-and-so had told her, yet again, to come back again at the end of the next month, but she always remained resolute that the person *would* pay up and reprimanded me for my negative attitude. Even when she had no stock, she would speak about her next project, which was usually far more ambitious than anything she had previously undertaken, involving more valuable merchandise, such as mobile phones, and far-flung destinations, such as Morocco or, unsurprisingly, the United Kingdom.

Despite Dieyna's insistence to the contrary, there were always clients who refused to pay their debts, and who either disappeared off her radar or who had to be forgiven for the sake of maintaining good relations. Sometimes she ended up 'eating' the money that was earmarked for her business, diverting it to meet other needs. More successful, less vulnerable traders were able to inject more capital into their projects, worked with larger amounts of stock, and found it easier to keep their business and personal accounts separate, and therefore avoid 'eating' the money [*lekk xalis bi*] they made from sales. They were thus in a better position to enforce payment, or at least to be more selective about who they did business with. Many women in Dakar, however, were not able to join the ranks of these 'big' traders, and followed a path similar to Dieyna's.

Dieyna was one of the most enthusiastic 'little' traders that I knew, and she only rarely attempted to earn money in other ways, whereas others worked, for example, in hair salons, shops or restaurants, and did not necessarily self-identify as traders [*commercantes*]. However, they always spoke about their trading with a sense of pride. They took pride in the items they were

selling, which were from Europe, not China, and if they had 'Made in China' written on them then they were '*chinois original*' (Chinese manufactured, but good quality), as opposed to '*chinois*'. They aspired to become like the prominent Dakarois traders who import from the Middle East and China, and who employ salespeople to work in their numerous stores. Trade, Dieyna explained, was all she had ever *wanted* to do. She argued that it was important for a woman to have her own money in order to be able to 'do things for herself/take good care of herself' [*defal sa bopp*], although like everyone, she was quick to heap scorn upon men who were not perceived to be satisfactorily providing for their families, especially for their wives and girlfriends (Chapter Three).

Some people spoke disapprovingly about women like Dieyna, and an accusing 'she likes money' [*dafa bëgg xalis*] was a common refrain, especially from former or potential clients who felt that these women were greedy and ripped people off. Others defended them, agreeing that the item in question really was very nice and good value for money. The traders themselves justified the mark-ups in various ways, primarily in terms of the public transport costs involved in buying and selling their wares. Dieyna herself once explained that the trick is to find merchandise that is new and not yet readily available in Dakar, in which case the price will be a function of its scarcity. If the merchandise is widely available and everybody knows the standard price, a higher price may be agreed upon on the condition that payment is delayed. According to Dieyna, there was nothing immoral about any of this – it was 'no big deal' [*loolu du dara*], it was normal business practice and it certainly did not follow that she was greedy.



Figure 17: A trader's merchandise, consisting of shoes, bags, South Asian *salwaar kameez* outfits and a bedspread. Photo by T.K.

#### 6.4 *The value of women's remunerated work*

The two case studies I have described above suggest that there are some fundamental differences between selling [*jaay*] and trading [*commerce*]. I was acquainted with numerous sellers and traders in Dakar, and it did not seem to me that the difference between these two types of work could be usefully explained in terms of actual economic gain. Both groups of women came from similar socio-economic backgrounds, sometimes from the same family, and in some instances, women who traded later began selling, or vice versa.

Someone like Sokhna could expect to make roughly CFA 1000 daily profit, or CFA 28,000 a month, allowing for a few days off, whereas Dieyna, when she was selling the shirts for example, would have made roughly CFA 24,000 a month (two dozen shirts, CFA 2000 profit per shirt, sold over a period of

two months). Of course, the frequency at which work is remunerated must be taken into consideration, but contrary to my expectations, and their own assertions, I found that the traders' payments were more likely to trickle in throughout the month than to be concentrated around the end of the month – reflecting the more general patterns of distribution and circulation of money amongst Dakarais.

Traders needed to save, borrow or otherwise obtain a one-off initial investment with which to start up a project that was at least four or five times the amount required for embarking on selling, but the higher investment did not, as far as I could tell, generate higher profits. Sellers, for their part could find a way to save up larger amounts from their daily earnings by belonging to neighbourhood ROSCAs that collected small payments (usually less than CFA 500) from their members on a daily or weekly basis. This indicates that the distinction between selling and trading cannot be easily explained in terms of actual income and profit. Instead, I argue that in order to fully appreciate its significance, we must move beyond a materialist analysis and attend to the way in which these activities acquire value when brought into connection with other cultural idioms and practices.

David Graeber (2001) postulates that the concept of value, when applied to individual action, holds the promise of resolving some of the fundamental theoretical problems in anthropology, reconciling the contradictory tenets of economism and functionalism by emphasising the symbiotic relationship between individual action and society. He sets out by asking how the value of an action or a practice is derived, and his argument is persuasive insofar as it ultimately articulates a rather intuitive, commonsensical sentiment, at least among most contemporary anthropologists, that 'individual action and 'society' always feed back into each other' (2001:76). Graeber recognises that 'society' exists as some kind of whole, but adds that this must be a provisional, ever-changing one. However, it is his synthesis of a range of ethnographic material in which he fleshes out the relationship between

individual action and the meaning and value attributed to it within a broader social context has inspired my own reading of my data on women's income-generating work in Dakar. In particular, it has enabled me to appreciate, through sustained attention to the actual work processes themselves, the significant differences between selling [*jaay*] and trading [*commerce*] that were not immediately evident to me, performed as they are by women from similar socio-economic backgrounds and generating comparable profits.

Selling, let us remember, is depicted as tough, tiring work, which some women are *obliged* to do because their preferred sources of income are unavailable or insufficient; it is an undesirable necessity. Trading on the other hand, is something that women *desire* to do, because they *want* to be able to 'take good care of themselves', because they *aspire* to be successful business owners, or, perhaps, because they are materialistic and excessively fond of money. I shall now proceed to examine the differences and similarities between the ways in these two types of work were experienced and valued in greater detail.

Selling, spoken about using the language of necessity and obligation, though not coercion, was frequently described using negative adjectives: it was tough [*metti*], and its performance left one feeling tired [*sonnu*]. I never heard my trader friends speak in this way about their work. They might complain that a 10-hour drive back from a business trip to Mauritania left them exhausted, or that they were tired after having spent the day touring their friends' houses with their merchandise, but in these cases, only one particular aspect of the work was identified as being difficult. In any case, people frequently complained about exhaustion caused by walking around in the hot sun, or by spending hours stuck in public transport, regardless of their reasons for doing it. Although the traders did not explicitly describe their work as pleasurable, trade did not have the same negative connotations as selling. Above all, people agreed that women who traded did so because they *wanted* to.

It is not my intention to suggest that selling is objectively 'tougher' than trading, that it involves longer work hours or heightened work intensity. Selling itself was not considered to be tough compared to working as a house-worker, for example. The main reason that it was considered to be difficult is that women who sold were more likely to be doing it in addition to housework duties. But trading could also be hard: arguably traders had to work a lot harder than sellers in order to complete a sale and secure payment.

First, it is important to recognise the conspicuous presence in Dakar of wealthy female traders who provided small-scale traders like Dieyna with a goal to aspire towards (Sarr 1998). Food sellers did not have similar role models – although one of the rags to riches myths I heard about a successful trader was that her beginnings had been as humble sandwich seller. The traders articulated their desire to become part of a global capitalist economy using the neoliberal vocabulary of business and entrepreneurship, profit and loss, rationality, individualism and freedom of choice, often borrowing from French and English in order to do so. They often expressed their motivations for working in terms of self-interest or self-care, using the idiom of 'being able to look after oneself' [*defal sa bopp*].

Sellers, on the other hand, tended to downplay these aspects of their work, some going so far as to claim, as Sokhna did, that they had never tried to calculate their profits. There were others, however, who *were* able to provide me with estimates of how much they earned. Crucially, the beneficiaries of women's selling activities were usually presumed to be dependent *others*, specifically a woman's young children, who were often invoked as the main reason that a woman would take up selling in the first place.

Whilst it is true that many of those who sold *were* providing for their families, particularly their children, there were exceptions, such as Sokhna's

neighbour, Ngoma, who explained that the reason that she had fostered out one of her young children was that she had found it difficult to keep up her selling when he was around. Similarly, although I found that women were more likely to trade if they did not have heavy housework or childcare obligations, the majority of traders *were* financially supporting other family members, often children; their profits were not exclusively devoted to self-care. Although a woman's position in the life cycle was a significant structural factor, I found it impossible to generalise about the kind of work that women performed on this basis alone. The flexibility and changeability of residential patterns, including after marriage, meant that, for example, many younger married women with children were living with their natal families, rather than with their husbands, where they benefitted from fewer housework responsibilities (Chapter Four). Other married women fostered older children into the household in order to assist them with housework, and older women who were no longer expected to do the cooking were nonetheless often primary caregivers for young grandchildren, which restricted their opportunities to leave the house on a regular basis (Chapter Five).

Second, a focus on the materiality of selling and trading sheds light on the different values that they are imbued with by Dakarois. The products that are being exchanged, edibles on the one hand, consumer goods on the other, are symbolic of the association between selling and the household, and trading and the global economy respectively. The value of selling is explicitly derived from its link with ideas about being a good mother who has the duty to sacrifice in order to provide for her children (Chapter Five).

Consumer items, especially clothes, are the principal means by which women and men achieve an appearance that signals that they are not working, and meet the cultural expectation of dressing well in the context of leisure time (Chapter Two). Given this general demand for consumer items, and a high demand for buying on credit, we can see that women's small-scale trade fulfils the maxim of supply and demand. It is striking, however,

that these female traders do not have male counterparts. Although many men in Dakar trade in similar kinds of consumer items, including women's wear, they do it more systematically, in shops, markets or as ambulant traders. This is because as men, their work is expected to take the form of a daily routine that involves leaving the house and allows for only limited leisure time.

This is not to imply that all men are actually earning money, but rather that there is a strong gendered requirement that they do so, which means that even men who have no fixed employment make an effort to leave the house in the morning (see Chapter Three). Conversely, although many women in Dakar are earning money, we have seen that in many cases, their income-generating activities will not take them far from the house.<sup>103</sup> Women's primary roles are perceived to be as wives and mothers, and although their housework and childcare responsibilities can be time-consuming, there are acceptable ways to outsource them. Consequently, women may at least legitimately *aspire* to live a life of leisure in a way that men may not (cf. Chapter Two). For these reasons, I suggest that for women in Dakar, trading is a feasible way of earning money precisely by virtue of its guise as a leisure activity. The traders are selling more than just consumer products; they are, I suggest, selling what could be called an *image of leisure*. It is their image as well-dressed, comfortable and leisurely women, consuming in accordance with cultural and gendered expectations, that helps make their wares attractive, as well as signalling to potential clients that business is going well.<sup>104</sup>

The traders epitomise an ideal of prosperity and leisure that contrasts strikingly with the practice of selling. Traders usually wear fully

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<sup>103</sup> This is why, practically speaking, it makes more sense for the traders to sell to other women: in addition to the fact that socialising is generally characterised by a degree of gender segregation, women are more likely to be around the house than men. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter Two, it is also more appropriate for women to purchase consumer items than men. Men are also expected to consume and dress well when they are not working, but they are presumed to have fewer occasions to do so than women.

<sup>104</sup> See Scheld (2003) and Buggenhagen (2012a) for further examples of how consumed clothing can be converted into future gains.

accessorised Western outfits, especially if these are what they retail, and if they don local dress then they might not look out of place at a ceremony [xew]. Women who sell, on the other hand, usually wear second hand or mismatched clothes that are also worn for housework, or Senegalese outfits made of inexpensive, insubstantial fabric. Sokhna the seller was quick to point out that she did not even have time to attend most of the ceremonies she was invited to, let alone to make social visits. Her work was a long way from the world of leisure time, ceremonies and keeping up appearances.

## 6.5 *Conclusion*

In her studies of the Asante traders of Kumasi, Ghana, Gracia Clark (1994, 1999) argues that it is not paid work that is the gendered category, but rather work that is associated with gainful profit and accumulation. This type of work is associated with men, since fathers are expected to be responsible for larger, one-off expenses such as housing and bills. The ability to accumulate capital is not characteristic of a mother, since she is responsible for the day-to-day upkeep of her children, and, as a result, is unable to save up large amounts. These gender roles, argues Clark, are not determined by biological activities, but are rather *performed* through classic 'economic' behaviour (cf. Chapter Five). This means that it is possible for gender roles to become transferred between men and women: in the Asante case, a father who is happy to spend lots of money on the children's everyday needs, such as food and clothing, is described as a 'good nursing mother', whilst a mother who is able to accumulate capital is described as a 'manly woman'. This does not, however, have implications for their maleness or femaleness.

Although I did not observe such a transferring of gender roles in Dakar, in this context, we can also see that the practice of selling symbolically

enhances women's position as mothers who become mothers by virtue of the work they do for their children (Chapter Five). Trading, on the other hand, links up to ideas about women's roles in the context of leisure time, both 'everyday' leisure time (Chapter Two, see also Chapter Four), which includes social visits, as well as 'exceptional' leisure time at family ceremonies (Chapter Two). We have seen how there is also an extent to which ideas about keeping up appearances and consuming in a particular way are perceived to be both a consequence of, as well as a precondition for, a successful marriage (Chapter Three). We can see, then, that these two different kinds of remunerated work, so commonplace in Dakar, reflect and sustain two distinct emic conceptions of what 'being a woman' means in this particular part of the world.

## Between Materialism and Mothering Work: Dakar Women, Livelihoods and Emergent Agencies

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*We shall not cease from exploration,  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

— T. S. Eliot, Little Gidding, Four Quartets

*My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field  
of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are  
ever-present, and male egoism resists.*

— Mariama Bâ, So Long A Letter

It was an afternoon in the summer of 2010, a few months before I was due to leave Dakar to return to London, and I had opted to spend the day with a friend in Fass, one of the districts that was not too far from downtown Dakar. Together with a couple of female neighbours who lived in the same cramped apartment block, and an aunt who was also visiting for the day, we took refuge from the scorching July heat for a couple of hours in her dim, windowless room, our children asleep on one corner of the bed. Music videos were showing on the television and, overwhelmed by the lethargy that often struck around this time of day, especially during the hot season, we paid more attention to the screen than usual, conversing only quietly and sporadically. During a lull in the conversation, a *clip* by Adiouza, a newcomer whose breakthrough hit the previous year had been a *mballax* adaptation of the Habanera aria from Bizet's *Carmen*, started playing. It was one of the follow-up singles from her debut album, and I was already familiar with, and

enjoyed its catchy tune, yet was somewhat puzzled, I realised later, as to its lyrical intent and accompanying music video.<sup>105</sup>

The song, performed in a mixture of Wolof and French, was entitled *À qui la faute?* (Whose fault is it?). In it, Adiouza sings about the sexual objectification of women, primarily in the media and in advertising, where women's bodies are presented as objects, commodities whose purpose is to sexually gratify men. She elaborates on the ideal of the sexy woman [*la femme sexy*] who wears a bikini, bares her midriff, dances seductively, and appears on billboards and in television advertisements. The music video further drives home the theme of men's sexual objectification of women; its protagonists are two suited, evidently moneyed men who sit together in a plush suite ogling and leering at women who take it in turns to dance for them. The woman in the slinky, low-cut cocktail dress gets a big thumbs up and high five slaps, along with more lascivious gestures, as does the slender girl wearing nineties-style skin tight trousers and a crop top. The large woman with the baggy T-shirt, in contrast, garners ridicule and disgust. When Adiouza herself walks in, dressed in Senegalese women's typical 'housework' clothes (see Chapters Two, Four and Six) – a long plain wrapper and a simple T-shirt – and attempts a few dance steps, the men make their revulsion clear: they pull faces, turn their backs, gesture for her to go away, and wave their hands in front of their noses as if fanning away an unpleasant smell. Then, as the rhythm of the song accelerates and the drums become more pronounced, a different Adiouza enters the room, this time dressed in a black sparkly top that reveals her midriff and a short, tasselled skirt. She begins to dance in a sexy, provocative manner, and the men burst into applause; in addition to the lewd gestures, they take off their jackets and move in to dance with her as she sings the following lines, in French:

The modern woman, the liberated woman, the emancipated woman  
[*La femme moderne, la femme libérée, la femme émancipée*]

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<sup>105</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZwSW7SgTdo> (accessed on 27.06.2013)

This is the new generation, born from 1968 up until the present day

*[C'est la nouvelle génération, née de 1968 jusqu'à nos jours]*

Sexist ads, sexist billboards, sexist dancing, sexist clothing

*[Les pubs sexistes, les affiches sexistes, la danse sexiste, l'habillement sexiste]*

Did we want it, or was it imposed?

*[Nous l'avons voulu, ou on l'a imposé?]*

We sat in silence, watching and listening as these final lines were repeated and the *clip* drew to a close. My friend glanced at me quickly out of the corner of her eye and then, her brow slightly furrowed, turned to the others and asked 'What do you think of this?' The two neighbours ignored her, and only the aunt, who was in her early forties, replied nonchalantly 'it's alright' [*neex rekk*]. No one seemed to have anything to add, including my friend, and I too remained silent.

Back at my own place several days later, I reflected on this non-incident, and I started to think that perhaps my friend's question regarding our opinions about the song was either posed for my benefit, or actually directed at me. Perhaps she had hoped that her aunt, who was quite well educated, would make some impressive statements about gender equality [*parité*] and women's emancipation. Or perhaps, I thought, feeling slightly annoyed, she expected me, as someone who was studying Senegalese women, to express my approval at the song's (conceivably) feminist message. I was annoyed because I self-consciously avoided using the language of women's rights discourse in my exchanges with my informants, and, from fieldwork through to writing up this thesis, have sought to remain sensitive to the cultural assumptions that often underpin campaigns for women's liberation or emancipation (see Chapter One, 1.4 and 1.5). I did not welcome the prospect of being pigeonholed as a particular kind of feminist.

I can only speculate as to my friend's reasons for asking this question, as I never followed up the matter and asked her *why* she had asked. For all I knew, she had merely been making small talk. Perhaps it was my own paranoia that led me to attribute such meanings to an innocuous, throwaway question. Or maybe she was genuinely seeking others' opinions because something about the song troubled or intrigued her. All I had to go by was my instinct that there was *something* significant about this discussion that never was.

The one thing I could establish for certain, however, was that up until this point I had not given this particular song, which was briefly popular but not one of Adiouza's bigger hits, much consideration. Upon hearing it for the first time, it must have swiftly registered that it was about women's objectification and oppression. But I had not been anxious to decipher each and every Wolof word, like I was with other popular songs or visual media, where I sensed that they had the potential to shed light on or enhance my knowledge of social realities in Dakar. I thought about why this might be, and decided that perhaps it was because the things that Adiouza was singing about did not really resonate with my understanding of the condition of being a woman in Dakar. Based on what I had learnt during my years in the field, I sensed that the majority of my informants would not have been able to relate the song to their everyday lives in any meaningful way. It seemed to me that its concerns were more relevant to women and men in the West – in countries such as the United Kingdom, for example. In these parts of the world, I would argue, one of the greatest challenges that women today face is being treated as objects to be looked at, valued above all for their physical appearance. In much of the Western world, the sexual objectification of women in mainstream culture, and above all in the media and advertising, is endemic. It does, of course, coexist with a multiplicity of condemnatory, moralistic discourses, but these frequently aggravate the problem by resorting to 'body-policing', 'slut-shaming' or 'victim-blaming' tactics. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of feminist initiatives that seek

to respond to these challenges and negotiate their way through these feminist minefields.<sup>106</sup>

A full exploration of these issues would extend far beyond the scope of this thesis. I would like to suggest, however, that the type of sexual objectification that Adiouza sings of in *À qui la faute?* – in media, in advertising, in mainstream culture, and in popular, normative discourses – is not nearly as applicable in the Senegalese context as it is elsewhere. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, prior to breaking into the Senegalese music industry, Paris-educated Adiouza had been studying ethnomusicology at Masters level in France, the country that experienced the most memorable of all the 1968 protests.<sup>107</sup> I argue that in Dakar, somewhat different conceptions of what it means to be a woman prevail, although as we shall see, there are also many similarities between the challenges faced by Senegalese women and women in other parts of the world. In this conclusion, then, I weave together the ethnographic findings discussed in this thesis in order to advance an argument about the condition of being a woman in Senegal, offering some comparative reflections on the possibilities and challenges it entails.

As I argued in Chapter One of this thesis, my research has sought to distance itself from approaches that privilege the sexual aspects of gender, focusing instead on the gendered *economic* identities that emerge in the context of the various roles and relationships that constitute Dakar women's everyday lives. Nonetheless, the themes of women's sexuality and the value of physical appearance have emerged within the context of several of the thesis chapters, notably in Chapters Two and Three, but also, to a lesser extent, in Chapters Four and Six.

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<sup>106</sup> In the UK, examples include UK Feminista, SlutWalk, The Everyday Sexism Project, No More Page Three and the imminent re-launch of feminist magazine Spare Rib.

<sup>107</sup> I happened upon this information during an unanticipated encounter with one of Adiouza's close relatives, who explained that initially, her attempts to make it as a singer back home were confined to the long summer holiday period. I do not know whether Adiouza continued with her studies, or abandoned them in favour of a full-time career as a recording artist in Senegal.

In Chapter Three, which explored what I refer to as the 'economies of intimacy' within which marital and romantic relationships become meaningful, we saw that for a Senegalese wife, appearance-related spending is viewed as a means of sexually satisfying one's husband. Consuming in a particular way is perceived to be both a consequence of, as well as a precondition for, a successful marriage. One of the key points that the chapter emphasised, however, was that Senegalese women are not just sexually available *objects*, to be admired and enjoyed. Rather, they actively influence, take charge of and benefit from the relationship by 'humouring' their husbands in a number of ways. I also sought to demonstrate that the discursive normalisation of women's jealous behaviour poses a deep-seated challenge to the socially upheld 'naturalness' of polygyny and male infidelity and unquenchable sexual desire, as well as exposing the significant social pressures men face to live the male breadwinner ideal. Finally, the focus on female jealousy also showed how these relationships should not be construed as a straightforward exchange of sex for money, thereby rejecting perspectives that problematize the vulnerability of women within constructions of 'African sexuality'. Instead, I emphasised the way in which material support and intimacy in marital or romantic relationships are mutually constitutive.

From an economic perspective, the woman-as-wife (or girlfriend) is dependent on her husband – a dependence that, in certain contexts, may become construed or interpreted as jealousy, envy, greed or materialistic behaviour. Deconstructing the powerful master narrative of the 'materialistic Senegalese woman' was also the leitmotif in the preceding chapter, Chapter Two, which explored the communal face of women's consumption. In that chapter, I argued that the importance of physical appearance *is* gendered, but only to a certain extent, since 'keeping up appearances' is culturally valued for men, as well as for women – and in any case, the distinction between external appearance and internal moral character is not always obvious. I then expanded on this observation in

order to suggest that low-income Dakaroises' consumption in communal contexts such as family ceremonies is far more understated than much of the existing academic literature, as well as dominant local discourses, suggest.

In both of these chapters, it is certainly possible to identify the figure of a demanding, consumptive and materialistic Senegalese woman – she exists within marital and romantic relationships, as well as in the context of women's communal events and spaces. Crucially, however, I sought to demonstrate that the extent to which this ideal translates into the level of everyday practice is varied and highly complex. In Chapter Two, I suggested that existing understandings of women's communal or ceremonial activities tend to emphasise women's *communal* materialism, and what has remained overlooked is the *personal, individualised* aspect of relatively costly family ceremonies, which are perceived to belong to one particular woman. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated how women's demanding, jealous and materialistic behaviour as wives and girlfriends is, in fact, closely linked to ideas about love for, intimacy with and care of *others*. It should be clear, then, that the platitudinous yet persisting dichotomies of 'individualism' versus 'African communalism' add little to our understandings of what I call, for want of a better word, the ideal of the 'materialistic' Senegalese woman.

I suggest that this particular feminine ideal also becomes actively deployed by Dakar women in the context of small-scale trade in consumer goods [*commerce*], discussed in Chapter Six. Traders explicitly draw on the concepts of individualism and self-interest, justifying their work by stating the importance of being able to do things for oneself, or taking care of oneself [*defal sa bopp*]. I described how this particular type of income-generating work links up to some of the ideas discussed in the aforementioned chapters, notably the broader significance of women's physical appearance (Chapters Two and Three). The importance of leisure time was also relevant, however – both 'everyday' leisure time, which includes social visits (Chapter Six, see also Chapter Four), which are the

primary setting for Dakar women's small-scale trade, as well as exceptional leisure time, for example at family ceremonies (Chapter Two).

In Chapter Six, I juxtaposed women's small-scale trade in consumer goods with another type of remunerated work that was equally popular amongst my informants, namely the selling of foodstuffs from the vicinity of the home [*jaay*]. I demonstrated how the practice of selling, performed by women from the same socio-economic backgrounds as the traders, and generating comparable profits, is made meaningful with reference to the idiom of motherhood. Sellers emphasised how their work was 'because of the children', and how their earnings went towards household, as opposed to personal expenditures.

The practice of selling highlights a rather different aspect of what it means to be a woman in Dakar, one that can be linked, I suggest, to the emic concept of *liggéeyu ndey*, which translates as the 'work of the mother'. As I explained in Chapter Three, *liggéeyu ndey* is generally defined as a woman's submission to the authority of her husband. Her submission and deference, which may involve enduring or resisting [*muñ*] the ordeals of marriage, for example the neglect or betrayal of a husband who marries an additional wife, is held to be causally connected to the future wellbeing and success of her children. In Chapter Four, which focused on the performance of housework, I suggested that similar notions of submission to authority, and patience and endurance when faced with injustice or exploitation, underpin the ideal of the 'woman of needle' [*jeegu puso*], the married-in wife who labours in the house of her in-laws. Her antithesis, of course, is the woman of blade [*jeegu lañset*], who, I suggested, is often embodied in practice by a married-in wife's resident sister-in-law, who dresses in nice clothes and has abundant leisure time.

In Chapter Five, we saw how Dakarois understandings of motherhood also turn on a notion of endurance and suffering. Central to this is the biological mother, who experiences the fatigue and suffering associated with

pregnancy and childbirth, a sacrifice for which she can never be repaid. However, I also discussed the widespread practice of informal fostering which, I argued, brings to the fore the significance of social and economic mothering. Foster mothers and, to a lesser extent birth mothers, are widely perceived to be financially providing for young children, a practice which also entitles them to the latter's love and gratitude. It is this aspect of mothering, I suggest, that is symbolically enhanced by the practice of selling [jaay] by women-as-mothers who make sacrifices for their children.

This 'mothering' ideal that turns on the concept of *liggéeyu ndey* is, I have argued, identifiable in the context of Dakar women's roles as the submissive and deferent wife-of-husband, as the hardworking and respectful married-in wife in the in-laws' household, as the mother who has suffered and 'does everything' for her children, and as the tired seller of small food items who only works because 'times are tough' and because she is the mother of young children. Again, however, I wish to emphasise that this is an ideal that is only ever partially deployed or fulfilled in practice. I have already noted how wives contest these expectations through their jealous, humouring and materialistic behaviour. In Chapter Four, we saw how married-in wives are able to challenge normative expectations about good wifely behaviour and the performance of housework. In Chapter Five, it became clear that the mother-child relationship can be abusive – and even in the case of biological mothers, it can be less than harmonious. We also saw how mothers may receive all the credit for the financial support of a child even if other individuals also help with her upkeep. And in Chapter Six, I emphasised that it is not always the case that the sellers are earning money exclusively for their families, the traders for their personal needs. In most cases, *both* sellers and traders were providing for their families, and I knew some sellers who were not financially supporting their children. With regards to selling and trading, it is worth stressing again that the individualism/communalism opposition does not appear to be particularly useful: the traders, who speak of self-interest, rely much more on personal

relationships for their success then the sellers, whose work is generally more impersonal, as they do not necessarily know all of their clients.

Having thus reviewed the ethnographic contributions of the thesis chapters, I would like to suggest that in setting out to explore the full range of Dakar women's contributions to economic life by collapsing the political economy categories of 'production', 'reproduction', 'social reproduction' and 'consumption', this thesis has succeeded in identifying two distinct, even competing conceptions of what it means to be a woman in Dakar. One of these can be framed in terms of 'materialism', the other around the emic concept of 'mothering work' [*liggéeyu ndey*]. Dakar women, this thesis suggests, draw on *both* in order to create, defend and challenge the meaning and the value of their everyday experiences: as wives and girlfriends, sisters and sisters-in-law, daughters, mothers and grandmothers, members of extended family and community networks, and as dependents, consumers, providers, house-workers and informal-sector workers. I have also sought to emphasise in this Conclusion, however, that on the ground and in people's everyday lives, the two ideals of 'materialism' and 'mothering work' that I have conceptualised here rather neatly, are, in fact, complicated and messy. They can never do full justice to the complexities and contradictions involved in being a woman in this part of the world.

I shall now return briefly to some of the issues provoked by the discussion of Adiouza's song about the sexual objectification of women with which I opened this Conclusion. I have argued that, in Dakar, the problem of women being treated as objects or commodities valued purely on the basis of their physical appearance is perhaps not quite so pronounced as it is in many Western contexts. I have suggested that it does not pose the same level of challenge to Dakar women as it does to their counterparts in countries such as the United Kingdom, for example. There are, however, many aspects of being a woman in Dakar that appear to have cross-cultural currency. For example, at the very beginning of the thesis, we learnt that 'women's work' is discursively undervalued and not even regarded as 'work'. In Chapter

Four, we saw how in Dakar, as across most of the world, it is women who perform household tasks such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. Chapter Five showed how women are perhaps most highly valued for their quintessentially 'reproductive' role as mothers, which, in turn, underpins one of the more acceptable ways in which women from low-income backgrounds are able to earn money – selling [*jaay*] foodstuffs from the vicinity of the home. Let us not forget that trading [*commerce*] was revealed to be morally problematic, as traders, whose work is symbolically and materially associated with the 'materialistic' female ideal were frequently accused of 'liking money' too much. These accusatory, condemnatory discourses reverberate across much of the ethnography that deals with this ideal – women are accused of being spendthrifts in the context of ceremonies, jealous and greedy as wives, lazy as sisters-in-law who avoid doing the housework, and shrewd, avaricious businesswomen in the context of their trading activities. It is clear that the 'mothering' female ideal is much more acceptable and far less morally problematic than the one which I have discussed in terms of 'materialism'.

These considerations point directly to questions about the value of analytical dichotomies in the anthropological study of women and gender. Pioneering feminist approaches claimed that dichotomies such as 'nature vs. culture' (Ortner 1974), 'domestic vs. public' (Rosaldo 1974) and 'reproduction vs. production' (e.g. Harris and Young 1981) structure relations between women and men across all societies and cultures. Individually and collectively, these approaches provided a narrative of universal sexual inequality leading to the cross-culturally subordinate position of women. The political and popular backdrop to these intellectual debates included, of course, the civil unrest, protests and counter-cultural movements of the sixties and seventies, of which women's liberation movements were an integral component.

In her song, Adiouza draws attention to the struggles of earlier generations of women, implying that their battles for liberation and emancipation have

not yet been won. I have suggested that her emphasis on the sexual objectification of women, primarily in the media and in advertising, does not fully capture the meanings of, and challenges involved in being a woman in contemporary Dakar. However, this Conclusion argues that Dakar women, too, have their battles, which they fight by drawing, in complex and varied ways, on two distinct understandings of what it means to be a woman, which I have framed in terms of 'materialism' and 'mothering work'. I suggest that the fact that the 'mothering' ideal is far more socially acceptable than the 'materialistic' ideal indicates that we should not entirely discard the old analytic dichotomies, whose rejection has become anthropological orthodoxy, in our theoretical analyses. Of the three I mentioned above, women's association with 'reproduction' (and men's with 'production') appears to be particularly relevant to my own findings.

In this thesis, I have sought to show how women in Dakar draw on these two competing conceptions of being a woman in order to create, defend and challenge the meaning and the value of their everyday experiences. Faced with the inequities of differing attitudes towards male and female sexuality and the concomitant widespread acceptance of polygyny, they sometimes find ways to reassert their control over marital and romantic relationships. However, society's attempts to limit and control women's sexuality run deep, as evinced by the continued existence of polygyny and the practice of female genital cutting, which, although illegal since 1999 and traditionally not practiced by the Wolof and Séeréer groups, has been undergone by significant numbers of Dakaroises from other ethnic backgrounds (Chapter Three). Related practices, such as domestic violence and rape, are also widespread, although here, the challenges faced by Senegalese women are very similar to those faced by women across the world. Confronted with the injustices of the division of household labour, Dakar women challenge normative expectations about good wifely behaviour, but this leads, in practice, to the outsourcing of housework along established familial, local and regional pecking orders. Again, this pattern is not unique to Senegal, and

as across much of the world, it produces a vicious cycle that leads to the perpetuation of highly gendered relations of authority and exploitation.

What does all this mean for the future of women in Dakar, in Senegal, and across the world? It is impossible to predict the directions that social change will take, and, as I hope has become clear throughout this thesis, it has not been my intention to stage some kind of development intervention based on my education or whiteness. But I hope that this thesis has the potential to usefully play a part in debates about women and social change, which are very much underway in Senegal, as they are everywhere else, and involve a plurality of voices.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps it could contribute to providing a basis for change that is both culturally acceptable and socially progressive (cf. Sudarkasa 1982).

Finally, I would like to emphasise that the gender concept can, and should be used to make sense of what it means to be a man, as well as what it means to be a woman. There is a certain logic to starting with the category of 'woman' in the context of feminist struggles for women's emancipation. But men, just as much as women, are gendered beings, and an understanding of their identities and agencies is inseparable from making sense of what it means to be a woman. Although I have sought to include men's voices in this thesis, and offer some descriptions of men's gendered identities, for example, as husbands or as earners, I have not been able to explore masculinities in Dakar in as much depth as I would have liked. There have not, to date, been many rigorous academic enquiries into this topic in Dakar, and I hope that this will prove a fruitful direction for future research in the region.

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<sup>108</sup> See Sieveking (2007, 2008a, 2008b) for more on the multiple perspectives on women's rights in Senegal (cf. Sow 2003).

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