Transnational Mouridism and the Afro-Muslim Critique of Italy

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Founded in the 1880s by Cheick Amadou Bamba, the Mouride brotherhood has its capital in Touba, Senegal, where Mourides have constructed the largest mosque in sub-Saharan Africa. The brotherhood’s vertical and horizontal ties and a culture of migration have been readily reproduced within transnational networks. Most Mouride migrants are men, who are involved in circulatory migration. They have left their families in Senegal where their transnational social networks are ‘anchored’. In addition to exploring their transnational networks in both receiving and sending contexts, I consider Mouride attitudes towards and discourses about the society of migration. Their Afro-Muslim critique of Italy offers methodological lessons. Indeed, it demonstrates the need to combine analytic anti-essentialism with the ethnographic exploration of prosaic essentialisms.

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In addition to demonstrating the variety of Islam (Gardner 1995), Senegalese Mouride migrants provide a particularly good example of the phenomenon usually called ‘transnationalism’ (see among others Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Grillo et al. 2000; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Vertovec 1999). With its culture of emigration as a training experience, the Mouride brotherhood’s vertical and horizontal ties have been readily reproduced within transnational networks. Such organisational features have helped migrants to organise business, and to engage in mobility as well as temporary settlement within the receiving contexts. Most Mouride migrants, particularly those working as traders, are men who are involved in circulatory migration. They have usually left families in Senegal where their transnational social networks are ‘anchored’ (Riccio 2002a).

As van der Veer has rightly emphasised, ‘transnational religious movements are hardly ever seen as instances of cosmopolitanism’ since secularism is the
commonsense trope of cosmopolitanism (2002: 103). However, here we want to embrace a recent popular tack: the plurality of cosmopolitanism (Werbner 1999). Indeed, as the historian Diouf wrote:

In the Murid case, there is neither a dissolution of the local in the global nor an annexation of the latter by the former. Rather, the Murid experience involves constructing original texts and images that establish themselves at the heart of the world, and by so doing create new forms of cosmopolitanism whose manifestations no longer refer necessarily and obligatorily to the acquisition of an identity through assimilation but, rather, to the display of a unique identity added to global temporality and not simply informed by the Western trajectory of modernity alone. The Murid diaspora in the world, precisely because it presents itself in the mode of a ritual community, participates in this plural representation of the world on the basis of unique achievements (Diouf 2000: 702).

In this paper I adopt a similar perspective, illustrating the insertion of this transnational community into public spaces in Italy. In the last 15 years, relying also on ‘tribal’ and ‘Sambo’ constructs characterising West African migrants in Italy (Riccio 2002b) which do not correspond to the diffused image of Islam as a threat, the presence of Mourides and their religious practices have been widely accepted in Italian society, actually stimulating more curiosity than fear. As I will argue, this outcome is partially the fruit of Mouride experiences being embedded in a transnational space and is partially facilitated by a sophisticated negotiation with the receiving context undertaken by those migrants who have lived in Italy for a long time. Instead of casting the relation between sedentarisation and transnationalisation in ‘either/or’ terms, as many scholars tend to do when reflecting on the future of transnational migration, I argue that the organisational solution behind the positive insertion of Mourides abroad is a specific blend of dwelling and moving. As I will show, if transnational connections with sending contexts ensure a certain degree of control within the community that facilitates acceptance in the migration context, certain Senegalese cultural brokers with Italian institutions also allow for successful insertion.

On the other hand, from a communitarian and more intimate sphere a critical gaze towards Italy and Europe already present in Senegal develops and constitutes at the same time a safety-net in the migratory experience within an intermittently hostile environment (Stolcke 1995). I begin with the Senegalese context, and then I consider transnational Mouridism in practice. In the second half of the paper, I take into account the critical narratives of Mourides, which instruct us to combine a commitment to analytical anti-essentialism with the need to contextualise rather than demonise the prosaic essentialisms characteristic not only of racist talk, but also the intimate discourses of the potential victims of racism.

The Senegalese Background

Senegalese religious organisations are amongst the most important actors in filling the gap produced by a precarious economic and social situation and a fragile and complex equilibrium of different crosscutting cleavages (Diop 2002). Mouridiyya is one of the
four main Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal. The other three are the Tijaniyya, the Qadiriyya and the Layenne (see Piga 2003). The Mouride order was founded in the 1880s by Cheick Amadou Bamba and has its capital at Touba, the site of his revelation, where Mourides have constructed the largest mosque in sub-Saharan Africa. The highest office in the brotherhood is held by the Khalifa-General who is the eldest surviving son of Amadou Bamba. Relying upon relations of personal dependence and a deeply rooted organisational tradition, the Mouride brotherhood offers a training and solidarity system well adapted to situations of change and crisis. Indeed, it has exhibited an impressive institutional capacity for transformation according to socio-economic change.

The core of Mouride morality and organisation is represented by the relationship between the marabout or serin (the saint and guide, ‘the one who wants’) and the talibe (disciple). Although it is an asymmetric relationship, there is reciprocity: the former is a spiritual guide who guarantees grace or blessings (baraka) and, through his economic and political power, also provides the latter with help on practical matters; the talibe obeys and works for the marabout and his service is considered to be like prayer (Copans 1980; Cruise O’Brien 1971; A.B. Diop 1981). Such an ideology of work has been key to the success of Mouride migration abroad (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

We wake up early in the morning and we reach Touba by bush taxi in a couple of hours. When we arrive Abdou says ‘do you see. It is another world; it is beautiful’. For me, it was not really so different. Everybody was working, and there was an enormous market. But I could not appreciate the differences from Kaolack. Nobody could smoke though. And the music one could hear was not Youssou N’Dour any more, but religious chants instead, especially sung by the kids begging everywhere and wishing the best to you. Amongst the favourite was to go to Italy (almost a synonym of paradise!). First of all we went by taxi to the house of his marabout but he was not there, we waited a bit and then we went to the big mosque of Touba (which is constantly being perfected: one reason why money is collected all over the world among Mourides). We tried to see the main Khalifa Sailou M’Backé who blesses the believers waiting to see him in the public audience hall of the residence. Despite the presence of an excited crowd we could see and touch the Khalifa who blessed us. When we went back to Kaolack, nobody was talking about anything but this major chance we had.

What struck me and interested me the most is the emotional power this relationship had on Abdou. He constantly came out of these encounters full of energy, earnest and determined to face his life with courage and trust. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Riccio 2001), the Mouride succeeds in life because of his marabout; this is why every member of the brotherhood tends to be devoted to his marabout and must surprise him with special, unexpected gifts.

According to one of my informants, an outsider sometimes finds certain behaviour very irrational. For instance, in 1996, there was a rumour that an emigrant Mouride had bought an expensive car for the Khalifa of Touba. At the same time, he ‘exploited the solidarity of his family each time he returned to Senegal, for example, relying upon
the use of his brother’s car without ever sending any remittances from abroad. Only a Mouride is able to do something like this. What shocked my informant was the priority of the Mouride’s bond with the brotherhood and his marabout over the bond with his family. For Mourides, such a person is a hero. From the perspective of Mouride morality, such behaviour is not only perfectly rational, but also might even benefit the Mouride’s family in some way. Indeed, such an ostentatious gesture might help to make the migrant even more well-known and respected and, thereby, possibly open up future opportunities for business.

However, talking about Mouridism’s relationship between marabout and disciple, another informant stressed somewhat cautiously that: ‘the marabout asks nothing of the talibe. ... If there is a promise from the talibe then it is the value of your word that counts. It is the fact that you do not want to lose face that links you more tightly to your marabout’. Along with the vertical solidarity towards the personal marabout and the Khalifa-General, there is a bond and solidarity between disciples via the identification with Amadou Bamba, which greatly affects the organisational shape of Mouride followers abroad. However, this strong mythical identification with the founding saint does not imply blind irrational support for all the brotherhood’s marabouts in Senegal and abroad. If ‘Serin Modoubousso Dieng said that he managed to obtain visas from government acquaintances and required in exchange to vote for Diouf at the election’, it does not mean he will be believed or his requests followed. Actually he might even lose some credibility and legitimacy. ‘Not only can marabouts not count on the blind obedience of their followers, but they must be careful of their stated positions—to the point of ignoring “the truth”—in order to avoid losing them’ (Villalon 1995: 148).

Moreover, Touba, the Mourides’ sacred capital, which symbolises Bamba on earth (Amadou Bamba is often called ‘Serin Touba’ by Mourides) is not only a very important sending context, but also the receiving context for an international as well as an internal flow of people and investments (Gueye 2002; Ross 1995 for further description). Bara Lo, an old blacksmith and life-long resident of Touba; describes the changes in the city:

Investments in local trade and houses are examples for others who leave. Touba is a peculiar place, it is above all a holy city and must be an example for the rest of the world. It is the Mecca of West Africa, all good things must converge on Touba. This explains the luck of Touba. Migration is good. Migrants are in contact with other people: enlargement of the field of knowledge and experience. You see this in the urbanisation of Touba, old houses are different from new houses, which are similar to the European ones. Satellites are another sign. Touba’s changes have been very fast: every five years there are new districts founded by people from Baol, but also from other regions (Cayor, Djamboyr). Another big change has been the installation of electricity in Touba. Touba is becoming the second city of Senegal and, indeed, a major economic and financial centre. ‘Touba is growing thanks to the talibe migrants. Touba will become the biggest economic centre of Western Africa’ (Bana Lo: personal interview). In addition to the organisation within its headquarters, one may appreciate the Mouride institutional flexibility by considering Mouride urbanisation.
With desertification, drought and subsequent urbanisation, Mouridism ‘invented’ new ways to carry on the marabout–talibe relation within the urban environment. Instead of the religious, economic and residential unity of the Mouride villages, the city is characterised by non-agricultural economic activities, the diversity of social status and ethnic origins, and the spatial dispersion of the faithful, who were no longer able to provide their leaders with gifts. The dahira, the circle where all disciples of a marabout go to pray and discuss religious matters, developed as an adaptive answer to these problems: in the new urban setting, it has taken over the functions of the rural daara, assuming the same aims (M.C. Diop 1981).

In Mouride urbanisation, Cruise O’Brien distinguishes two models: one of introversion and the other of extroversion:

the organisation of Mouride traders, sociologically inward-looking, neglects the understanding that the brotherhood’s commercial community thrives best with the most limited social contacts outside of the brotherhood’s own networks (Cruise O’Brien 1988: 136).

The ritual activities within the dahira (communal singing of poems or kassais written by Amadou Bamba) strengthen the bond of a commercial association and its boundaries. The extroverted model of organisation is that of the ‘modern Mouride intelligentsia. Here proselytism is the central purpose to make the founder “better known” through the written and spoken word, through the magazine and the public meeting’ (Cruise O’Brien 1988: 137). It is interesting to note how this distinction has been reproduced abroad. The success of Mouride transnationalism resides partially in the fusion of the contrasting models of closure and outward negotiation already seen with urbanisation.

Transnational Mouridism

Many Senegalese with whom I worked explicitly stated that their ideal organisation is a transnational one: ‘living part of the year in Italy and the other part in Senegal, making the best of the two countries’. However it is only when the official permit to stay in the country is obtained and the re-entry to Italy guaranteed that Senegalese can start going back and forth and manifest transnational mobility. Although diminishing with the growth of employment and self-employment, a Senegalese characteristic occupation in Italy remains street-selling. The first Senegalese immigration into Italy was already the product of a transnational logic. Indeed, when France was closing its borders in the early 1980s, unlike the Soninke who relied upon family reunification (Timera 1996), many Wolof Mourides went to Italy and were later joined by others directly from Senegal. Many of the Senegalese with whom I talked explained their emigration in terms of labour migration, either because they could not find a job at home or because of economic differentials.

At the beginning I could not understand why people moved abroad, it was only when I left for Italy that I understood. Once people with education could find jobs, now this is not the case anymore. Secondly, because of the hostile climate in the rural world too, people collect just enough money to leave the country. It is the difficulties in Senegal that
justify the presence in Europe, there too it can happen that people encounter difficulties, but the little savings that one manages to make constitute survival for the relatives, because it is through this small amount of money that people manage to live nowadays.

Yet, I came across a more empowering self (as migrant) image: ‘one does not emigrate only to look for jobs. To emigrate is also to know new things, to broaden one’s horizons in such a way that one can bring back home what one discovered and learned’. Economic differentials and labour are sometimes cast as secondary to the importance of learning as for one of my informants: ‘I came to improve my knowledge. Italy is like a school. After, you have to show what you have learned. It is a mission we have to do here in Italy, but afterwards we will go back to Africa, it is us, the young people that have to work in Africa not the elderly people’. For Mourides, travel connected with hardship is an important rite of passage to acquire training and knowledge (Ebin 1996).

The Senegalese newcomer often finds that a system of selling is established and there are wholesalers who will supply him with products to sell and teach him the strategies necessary to street peddling (Campus et al. 1992; Schmidt di Friedberg 1994; Scidà 1994). Although for some Senegalese trade is a sign of identity, others prefer different forms of employment and have been integrated regularly and irregularly into small firms as welders or masons. However, I came across some critical perceptions of ‘exploitation’ in the work environment. This is one of the main reasons why many still prefer trading, where they can be their own bosses; ‘if they are to make miserable earnings with long hours and no insurance at another job, they might as well be self-employed, unsupervised peddlars’ (Zinn 1994: 60).

Studies of the Mourides’ trading diaspora in France and in the USA stress the power of the self-sustaining system of networks linking ties of belonging and trade. Although linked, the networks of belonging and the trading networks do not overlap mechanically (Salem 1981), but they help to develop each other. Mouride networks are not closed systems with rigid boundaries, sometimes followers of other brotherhoods as well as students and workers also rely on such trade networks to supplement their income. I noticed how some members of the Tijaniyya sometimes use Mouride networks and vice versa (see Perry 1997; Stoller 2002 for similar observations in New York). Indeed, the Senegalese in Italy are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious foreign community. Although the great majority are Wolof and Mourides there are also some Fulani (Peul), Serere, Toucouleur and some Diola from the Casamance. In terms of religion together with followers of Tijaniyya there are some Kadres and Layennes alongside some Catholic representatives.

However, Mouride networks play a very important organisational role in the migratory experience. According to Vertovec and Peach’s typology characterising Muslim associations in Europe (1997: 28–9), Mouride associations seem to fall between different categories which, as these authors stress, are not mutually exclusive: “grass-roots” organisations to serve perceived needs of a local community … specific to a certain … Muslim minority tradition (of) national or regional origins’, but which also act as an ‘extension of organisations in a country of origin’, ‘attached to a mystical fraternity’, and sometimes behave as ‘fund-raising outposts of movements elsewhere’.
Religious adherence and organisation seem to be very strong among Mouride migrants and ‘it is not a matter of words or thoughts but rather of beliefs and feelings’, as a Senegalese himself put it. When speaking about the meanings attached to their religious beliefs, some informants acquired a mystical tone: ‘If you look there (in Mouridism) you will find everything in it’. Often a strengthened religious involvement is an effective way to find equilibrium when in a state of crisis. For instance, Abdou’s disappointment during his first stage of migration pushed him into a rigorous, lonely and daily interpretation of Mouride discipline and morality. More often, the difficulty a migrant faces at the beginning in a foreign environment is balanced by the spiritual points of reference provided by religious doctrine.

The brotherhood helps in respecting the rules of the receiving context and prevents migrants from ‘doing bad things like drinking, getting involved with immoral or unlawful situations’. This is even noted by Italians who spend time with Senegalese migrants. In other words, this reading is confirmed also from an ‘outside in’ perspective (Grillo 1985). For instance, Luigi is a retired postman who likes to call himself a friend of Senegalese and thinks that:

Senegalese are the preferred migrants. Because they tend to remain apart they are not violent and they accept the rules. ... I would not say that they are integrated, indeed they take very little from here ... they avoid Italian influence but they are always friendly with Italian people. Furthermore, they do not go into bars, they do not smoke. Because there is very effective and constant control and any violation of principles can be reported to the family of origin or to the marabout in Senegal, and these play a very important judgmental role.

Mouride transnational connections facilitate the control over potentially deviant behaviour. Mouride transnational formations are kept alive by oral conversation, the selling of cassettes, where besides prayers and poems one finds information about ndiguel (orders, decrees) from the Khalifa or from the Touba establishment. Another channel is represented by transport. For example, when Abdou was fully into a mystic phase and was ‘working, praying and reading the Koran all day’, he wanted to go to Touba and he found out about how to obtain a ticket for a flight reserved for Mourides only. This is an example of the organisational capacity of Mourides to maintain transnational social formations.

However, such social formations are shaped and strengthened mainly by the activities of the numerous dahiras, widespread in the receiving countries (Babou 2002; Diop 1985), and by the frequent visits of marabouts from Senegal. ‘The urban centres of religious activity that span a transnational world have become an integral part of the legitimacy and power of the contemporary order’ (Carter 1997: 70). Through the activities of the dahiras, the Mouride movement is also able to organise the interface with the institutions of the receiving context. In Ravenna, for sacred days, the members of the dahira rent a big room for collective prayers. Sometimes even the most discreet collective meeting of the Mourides benefits from and is itself an occasion for interaction with the receiving context. For instance, in June 1997 a reunion of the different dahiras was organised in Ravenna. The day–night long event involved prayers, chants, eating together and informing all the members of the different
contributions the movement had acquired. However, it remained mainly a spiritual meeting. The space (a gym in a small town just outside Ravenna) was found with the help of the director of a volunteer association who, through informal phone calls, convinced some politicians to make a room available for the event. Outside, peddlers were organising their products (T-shirts, jeans, shoes, but mainly pictures of M’backé family members, who are called M’backé Mbacké, especially the Khalifas, and cassettes with the sacred poetry).

A similar kind of picture can be seen when some important marabouts come to visit. These visits are very important to keep alive transnational Mouridism from an organisational as well as a spiritual point of view. Money is indeed collected by the marabout but he also provides followers with blessings and advice. These moments reaffirm the link and the identification between the sacred place (Touba), the Saint (Amadu Bamba as represented by other important members of the M’backé family) and the transnational community of Mourides (Ebin 1996).

In this context, I will briefly consider an important visit to Rimini. On 8 June 1996 Serin Murtada, the last son of Cheick Amadou Bamba and one of the most important itinerant marabouts, was visiting Italy and stopped in Riccione where he met many groups of Senegalese who had come from different parts of Italy. As he arrived in a bus, a group of followers waited impatiently. When the bus stopped, the doors opened and the marabout appeared dressed all in white exactly like Serin Touba in his most popular image. It is important to understand the interface with the receiving context and specifically how the Senegalese found the public space which became temporarily a sacred place. From my field-notes:

The meeting was located in a public place, which is the House of the Fontanelle district of Riccione, found with the help of some associations. In the hall were several sellers who arranged their material (mainly clothes) on the floor. Near the entrance of the big room most of the people (around 200) were praying. There were people selling and distributing different kinds of material—religious materials: cassettes, pictures of Cheick Amadu Bamba and his sons, books of poetry and sacred books for prayers, most of them in Arabic. Awaiting the marabout, everyone was praying individually, except for a group slightly to one side, who were chanting kasasids in a circle. I noticed the Baye Fall² because of their coloured clothes and their ceaseless activity in organising the others and in keeping the right order of things. Suddenly, two Baye Fall announced the arrival of the marabout. An impressive silence filled the hall, and everyone knelt down at the sides. The marabout was preceded by a group of Baye Fall plus a long queue of followers. Inside, the phases of greeting and blessing had begun. He blessed his followers and collected their offerings. The Baye Fall helped to organise each group coming from a specific town in Italy, forming a queue for the greeting of the marabout. He waited as the queue passed before him. Intermittently, there were moments of silent prayer at the end of which every believer lifted his hands to his face. These were the times when everyone was receiving baraka. This lasted a couple of hours, and, in the end, the marabout greeted and blessed a group, including two Italians who organised a training course. The two Italians sat with the rest of the group who prayed with the marabout. Finally, the marabout left in a way similar to his arrival.

These events are very important for the Senegalese abroad and, as we have seen, they imply also a sort of discreet interaction with the receiving context. Furthermore, they
testify to the Mourides’ ability to sacralise space through ritual. Werbner (1996) argues that the sacralising of space is centrally embedded in Sufism, which is a missionising, purificatory cult. As the event above indicates, a subtle ritual inscription in foreign (Western) space is at stake, through which Touba is recreated through ritual that temporarily sacrisfies space without the need to produce another new centre. As Metcalf suggests, ‘it is ritual and sanctioned practice that is prior and that creates “Muslim space”, which thus does not require any juridically claimed territory or formally consecrated or architecturally specific space’ (Metcalf 1996: 3).

Furthermore, the message of Serin Murtada joins the strengthening of the transnational community with the need to behave according to the specific rules of the migration context. As Diop, a committed talibe, explains:

He is here to allow Muslims to know better their religion and to let it be known better by Europeans. He wants his disciples to organise themselves better and at the same time to open themselves to the host society ... they must respect its rules and have an exemplary conduct as ambassadors of Islam. Mouridism is an ascetic way to act in the world even if it is imperfect. It is in the world that the faithful must justify his existence, working and praying.

The ideology of work, the identification with a perceived Islamic morality to be practiced in everyday life, and the respect of the rules and institutions of the foreign environment represent the strength of the Mouride model of migration. This discrete and pragmatic stance allowed Mourides to be known to Italian society more than many other religious minorities (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

Besides the visits of important (‘big’) marabouts, there are also the temporary visits of less important (‘small’) marabouts (Riccio 2001). The following is the account of a young marabout belonging to the M’backé family, which gives us a sense of the working of Mouride connections and of the transnational extension of the talibe–serin relationship:

The economic difficulties do not spare anyone. I had the socio-economic problems of my family to confront. ... I have no income except from the talibe, who are in Italy. I went there to help them with their problems but also to ask for help (hadiya). ... When I arrived in Italy I was welcomed by some Senegalese (my talibe), this is why I was not lost. ... However, I also appreciated that there were also problems, the African sellers could have their products confiscated by the police and could even be expelled by them. The talibe asked me several times to pray for ways to avoid these problems; I think we should do something about it, they ask only to be free to work to help their families in Senegal.

This quotation shows the solidarity characteristic of Mouride social formations abroad. However, a superficial approach to Mouridism by some Italians has helped to promote a stereotypical image that does not correspond to reality. The Mouride brotherhood is often seen as a mysterious organisation wielding the power to decide the life of many people, a movement involved in the organisation of trade and migration (Riccio 1999). But Mouridism should not be so reified. Although it helps in networking and having points of reference abroad, this is not the whole story. The religious organisation is very important in maintaining transnational identity,
providing migrants with spiritual and ideological points of reference, and aiding the development of other social networks such as trade and professional ones.

Yet, in order to relate to the receiving contexts, Senegalese have developed a different form of organisation: the numerous non-religious Senegalese Associations of Italy which have emerged from the Italian associational structure and declared themselves independent from religious associations, as well as from political parties. The associations of foreign communities are often shaped by the migrants who are better educated and who represent the foreign community only to a certain degree (see Vertovec 1996; Werbner and Anwar 1991). Often the heads of the associations, who advocated a more open strategy and an entry into the public sphere, encounter the resistance of a system that is felt to work better when in isolation. Religious representatives are often connected to wholesalers who do not like many potential buyers (street peddlers) finding other kinds of employment. In fact, migrants who are in regular employment tend to be more involved with the associations and the trade unions (Mottura and Pinto 1996), whereas trade is often set up following communitarian and sometimes religious networks which provide newcomers with accommodation and work. People are strongly identified with these ties. This is why gaining the trust of religious leaders seems key to the development of an effectively representative Senegalese association. In this light one can better understand the motivation of some leaders of the association who have acted as mediators and translators between visiting marabouts and Italian institutions. Thus, although the two forms of organisation, religious and non-religious, are distinct, it seems that they intermittently need to hold dialogues to keep the former connected with the rank-and-file and to better link the latter with the receiving society.

I would like to draw attention to the latent tension within the Mouride community in Italy, which recalls the distinction already noticed by Cruise O’Brien in his analysis of Mouride urbanisation (1988). On one side is the migratory generation from the urban milieu, who are able to interact easily with the receiving context and generally advocate more outward movement. On the other are the modou modou (Ndiaye 1998), those from the countryside, who are involved in trade at various levels and tend to remain within the group with its own codes, interacting with the outside world only for business purposes and for minimum unavoidable bureaucratic obligations. More generally, among street peddlers or workers from a rural background, there is a widespread mistrust of the ‘intellectuals’. This translates in part into a potential conflict between different organisational strategies. However, to empower themselves with the institutions of the receiving localities, this tension is overcome in favour of a mixed solution between closure and outward attitude. Furthermore, the above-mentioned distinction is challenged by some exceptions. For instance, among street sellers one may come across young migrants who hold MAs, quote Jung or Marx as well as Cheick Amadou Bamba, and engage in speculative but passionate conversations with any talkative Italian customer. On the other hand the director of a self-managed building, although a leader of an association spending time in various Italian institutions and interacting often with personnel, comes from a rural background and does not speak Italian in a very articulate way.
That said, I should point out that the majority of modou modou perform that ‘third way of integration’ which, according to Schmidt di Friedberg (1994), stands between the excesses of two extremes: assimilation and pluralist segregation. However, ‘integration’ is more the fruit of the interaction with the different policies of receiving contexts rather than the mere outcome from the characteristics of the foreign community. I now turn to the spheres of perception in order to take into account Mourides’ views of the receiving context.

An Afro-Muslim Critique of Italy

One of the recurrent criticisms by Senegalese who migrated in the 1980s and have had considerable experience in Italy is the lack of effective policies combined with an excess of politics in different domains. These critical representations are frequent:

Compared with other European countries Italy seems very bad, very ambiguous overall!
A lot of talk of solidarity and so few coherent and concrete things, it is unbelievable! In Spain seasonal peddlers are taxed, and there is not this war every year. In France at least people know about human rights.

Zinn also encountered such discursive strategies in Bari, and she argues that: ‘In terms of expectations, Europe seems to have taken on a generic quality, and Italy is supposed to conform to this European paradise’ (Zinn 1994: 64). Another repeated argument addresses Europe as a whole and the impossibility of stopping the migratory flows and the blindness of policies of closure, which are thought to fail.

Together with this critique of Italy within Fortress Europe which is common among various migrants, one finds a widespread shared discourse already partially rooted in Senegal. Indeed, Rita Cruise O’Brien’s study of the French in Senegal (1972) shows how, in the 1960s, Dakar was characterised by an implicit segregation and how Senegalese criticisms of the French concerned ‘the absence of family and community life, lack of hospitality, or, more generally, “a life impregnated with individualism”’ (Cruise O’Brien 1972: 260). It is in this light that we may more fruitfully understand the meaning of the word toubab. This is the term which Europeans and French people were and are called in Senegal. The term acquires a broader meaning though, when it is used as a typology. The word toubab becomes a synonym for acting and thinking as a Westerner without any god but money (xalis), lacking solidarity, tolerance, moderation, hospitality and dignity, the main Senegalese values (see Soares supra). It becomes the whole negative symbol of the faults condemned in popular culture (Riccio 2002b).

We can now appreciate how such a critical view can develop into a more complex socio-cultural critique of Italian society as a whole, which partially affects the unwillingness to ask for family reunions (still very low in comparison with other foreign communities) and the durability of a single male transnational model of migration. Modou, a Senegalese in Italy since the mid-1980s and married with two children, explained in these words his refusal of family reunion:
For me it was difficult. It encourages you to stay in this country for good, your children study and grow here, and you cannot stop their education. If you leave them here it is difficult for them to follow you in your religious logic and your normal life ... it is important that you make them understand the things you believe are right ... because this society has lost a lot of values.

When I asked him to tell me more about the loss of values in Italian society, he talked to me for half an hour without stopping:

I don’t like it. I’ll give you some examples from my experience here in Rimini. Many of the friends I met do not give importance to their parents. When these become old the children want to forget their responsibility and put them into an old persons’ home. This is the worst thing that can happen to a family. I find it very unjust that a person who cared for you when you were unable to do anything and you had nothing, giving his best for your success, once you become an adult, start working and become self-sufficient, you let him down in order to think about your future. This is the biggest egotism that exists. In Senegal it would never happen. ... Here, the children have lost their sense of the family. The two parents go to work and the mother is not there to care for the children anymore. Children spend their time in the kindergarten and get back home very late, they feel alone. ... Another thing is that here there is less faith. Faith helps people to think about life. Here people are too materialistic. We need to recognise that life and wealth are inside. We need to be clean inside.

The family is another pivotal Senegalese organisation in Senegal as well as for the Senegalese abroad, but which has also been changing in the last decades (Diop 1993). Along with the critique of the breakdown of the family and the lack of faith, Modou’s point about the materialism of Western life-styles is very common. Although one can distinguish a degree of ambivalence towards it, a kind of love–hate feeling, fear of the temptations provided by the materialistic world is a common refrain, as Badou explains:

Money pollutes the soul. ... Look at my colleagues at work who buy big cars and spend all their time caring for them, they waste a big amount of energy and time. We run the risk of becoming slaves of the material.

The danger of such temptations in the Italian environment is also a concern for Abdou who recognises that ‘it is difficult to be a good Muslim in Italy’. Morality clashes with Western temptations are also illustrated in comments about Rimini’s transgressive discos: ‘one should close those places, which become a public temptation, an invitation to drugs’.

In contrast to the host communities’ conventional fears of being ‘polluted’ by incoming foreigners, a number of Mourides are themselves concerned not to be polluted in the corrupt environment of the country to which they have migrated. This is one reason why it is so important to go back to Senegal to see the family and for the marabout to visit and to give his blessings. A supportive ideology essentialising the toubab can be an identity safety-net in the experience of migration. For instance, one may find an unusual way of responding and giving sense to the racism Senegalese migrants have the misfortune to encounter (Riccio 1999). A Senegalese who was explaining to me that people from Rimini were afraid of black people said: ‘I do not want to live here. People do not respect us … Nobody sits next to you on the bus, they
think we are ill or something, that we are not human beings. Some Italians are ignorant. They do not know anything about Africa'. This description of Italian ignorance permits an empowering self-positioning and essentialised representation can be a means of resistance as well as of domination.

However, differences can be found in the way Senegalese see themselves in relation to the context of migration. Although the dominant attitude is the introverted strategy—not to mix too much with Italians—such mistrust is not shared by all Senegalese. For instance, Talla criticises the tendency towards isolation of many Senegalese abroad. He thinks that they should not be ashamed of their culture:

I often discuss with other Senegalese the need to let ourselves be known by the Italians for what we are, this is how relationships can grow. Good relationships with Italians can provide us with a lot of help.

Indeed, it is through the long-term work of migrants like Talla, who have lived in Italy for many years, that the institutional connections with the local receiving context were strengthened and the access to public space facilitated.

Therefore, a blend of moving and dwelling, of transnationalisation and partial sedentarisation with outward negotiation seems to be key to the peculiar success of transnational Mouridism. In this paper, I have shown how a specific historical trajectory has enabled the Mourides to display an ‘alternative’ and ‘vernacular’ form of cosmopolitanism (respectively: Diouf 2000; van der Veer 2002: 106). More precisely I wanted to provide a specific instance confirming van der Veer’s suggestion that:

Transnational movements that help migrants to cope with the condition of migration and labour flexibility ... do, to some extent, build religious enclaves or safe havens for the self. But at the same time they are creatively developing new religious understandings of their predicament, entailing an encounter with the multiplicity of Others and with global conditions on their own terms (2002:106).

Furthermore, there is also a methodological lesson to be found within the Mouride narratives I have discussed. There is a widespread and prosaic essentialism that should today become the object of ethnographic analysis rather than for simple condemnation (Werbner 1997). Indeed, as Grillo argued, ‘theoretically, cultural diversity cannot be reduced to incommensurable, homogeneous, entities ...; in practice it happens constantly’ (2003: 165). Moreover, one should remember that essentialism is not confined to racists (Grillo 2003). We need to combine the ever-necessary commitment to an analytic anti-essentialism—for instance by showing the multiple trajectories that characterise migrant communities (Riccio 2001)—with the need to contextualise through analysis, rather than demonising, the daily essentialisms practiced by those people involved in processes of intercultural negotiation we would like to understand.

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Notes

[1] In general, daara means a Koranic school or the house of a marabout, but among the Mourides was also used for an agricultural community of young men in the service of the marabout. The dahira means a local ‘cell’ (Villalon 1995), ‘circle’ (Carter 1997) or organisational unit of a Senegalese brotherhood (other orders followed the example of the Mourides, M.C. Diop 1981) or of the followers of a specific marabout.

[2] The Baye Fall is a sub-movement and sub-culture of Mouridism, very successful among the young people. It descends from and refers to Ibra Fall, the first follower of Amadou Bamba, who was more attentive to the organisational and political aspects of the brotherhood than to the spiritual ones. The Baye Fall are sometimes criticised for not always respecting Islamic practices. Instead, they stress more the characteristic service of the talibe toward the marabout and they take the work ethic to an extreme. Generally, in Senegal they cultivate the link with traditional animist culture, they hardly accumulate wealth (unlike many important marabouts), they work toward a social end or they beg in the street. In Touba they are responsible for control and organization; their guide is a direct descendant from Ibra Fall, the Khalifa of the Baye Fall.

References


