THE OCCUPATION OF PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL EVENTS: HOW SENEGALESE MIGRANTS BECAME A PART OF HARLEM, NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

During the last twenty years, Senegalese migration has shifted from West African cities to France, from France to its European neighbour countries and finally towards the United States of America. Whereas the secular French state discourages religious display, especially within public space, the more community-oriented USA is far from opposed to religious expression in the public sphere. In this article, I analyze how Senegalese migrants who have grown up in secular states (Senegal and/or France) use American public space to demonstrate their political and religious identity through the organization of special events. Even though the migrants, notably the political and religious activists, take into consideration the cultural and political differences between their different places of residence, they follow continuous strategies across their translocal spaces. Special events like the Murid Parade in July or the Senegalese presidential election campaign in spring 2000 provide rich empirical data for the analysis of the complex interaction between Senegalese inside and outside their country, their translocal networks and their connections to the local situation in New York City. The latter includes the different inhabitants of Harlem and the local geographical setting, the representatives of the state and the politics of migration, as well as the Mayor and his political program. The recently opened House of Islam, founded by members of the Murid Sufi order in Harlem, shows how deeply the Senegalese in the US are already rooted. However, the annual religious event organized by the Murids is only one demonstration of identity politics. In order to illustrate the diversity of the community, I show how the events organized during the Senegalese presidential election campaign in 2000 in New York City take into consideration the complexity of the religious, political and economic identities of the American Senegalese.

Studies of Senegalese migration have focused mainly on Murid trade networks. The increasing migration of Senegalese peasants to the urban areas, and the international migration to Europe (France, Italy, Spain and Germany) and, currently, to the United States (especially New York), has reinforced the creation of translocal social spaces. Pries (1996), while studying migration between Mexico and the United
States, identified the transmigrant, a working migrant who is situated in pluri-local social spaces. Transmigrants interact in highly complex transnational networks that provide information about employment, facilitate the transfer of money to family in the home village, and offer a means of identification with the home country by network members sharing everyday practices like preparing food and organizing social gatherings according to well-established rites. The networks are structured by mutual obligations and are the result of a complex system of loyalty. The positions and identities created in this way are hybrid because they take into consideration elements of the original and host countries. These transnational social spaces are the result of new forms of delimitation and are different from geographic or national boundaries, transcending a simple coexistence of the two systems of reference (Pries 1996: 456).

Translocal social spaces: The importance of the local living conditions

Following L. Pries’s concept of transnational social spaces and N. Glick Schiller and E. Fouron’s book (2001) on long-distance transnationalists, I suggest emphasizing the importance of the specific local living conditions by adopting the notion of translocal social spaces. Even though Pries included the importance of elements of the new environment within the transnational social space, the reference to the home country seems to be the most important part of the reference system. During fieldwork amongst Senegalese migrants in Europe and the United States of America, we observed that the local economic, social and cultural reference systems became more and more important within the transmigrants’ identification process, which was only partly determined by reference to their original nation, village or family, but more and more to their new local and national environment.

Hence I suggest a definition of translocal social spaces as the result of new forms of delimitation that partly consist in, but also reach beyond, geographic or national boundaries. These translocal spaces are leading to new sources of identification and action based on specific local and global reference systems.

From participant observation that took place from 1994 to 2002 in Senegal, the United States, France, Germany, and, to a lesser extent, in other European countries, we deduce that political issues are becoming more and more important, especially within the Senegalese communities abroad. The translocal social spaces are not necessarily exclusively based on religious practices or on belonging to a dahira (religious community,
Communities have cross-cutting ties and individuals belong to several networks and interest groups simultaneously. The Murid economic networks are certainly some of the best organized groups with an undoubted financial influence. Nevertheless, we have observed that individual and collective migrants’ activities in migration, particularly in and around Paris, were largely focused on the desire for political change. This element in the migrants’ discourse can be considered as a long-distance nationalist reference. The large political coalition that aimed at breaking the domination of President Abdou Diouf was united above religious or ideological orientations. During the electoral meetings in Paris, for example, three women controlled financial affairs: one Murid and one Catholic woman who belong to the main opposition party PDS, and one Tijâniyy woman who is a member of the old Marxist party, And-Jef/PADS. Religious issues were not openly discussed during the meetings in and around Paris—on the contrary, the secular character of the constitution was underlined several times by political speakers. Nevertheless, most of the practising Murids were conscious of the fact that Abdoulaye Wade, a Murid talibe (Wolof/Arabic: pupil) was leading the main opposition party. In the past, marabouts (religious leaders) have been criticized for supporting the government, whose policies have been increasingly contested. The dissatisfaction with the ruling government and the difficult economic situation since the devaluation of the Franc CFA in 1994 increased the desire for political change, particularly within the youth, whose participation rate at elections was very low until 2000. Hence, it became a growing risk for marabouts openly to support the ruling government by the expression of ndigals (which means a general order, in this case a clear recommendation for a vote). In France, a member of the Senate, the second chamber in Senegal, proudly said during a meeting of the opposition: ‘I have convinced my marabout not to give any ndigal, although he usually supports the Socialist Party.’ The applauding public in Paris shared the opinion of the marabout, believing in the real chance of political change. We can assume that historical structures of religious authority were largely contested on an individual level. People’s desire to take political decisions independently of the marabouts’ advice was obvious. This evolution was fruitful ground for Abdoulaye Wade’s strategy to count on translocal networks. Wade himself organized his political campaign from his residence in Versailles, near Paris. His local contacts, especially with the French liberal political leader Alain Madelin, were crucial for the organization of the election campaign. Several deputies of Madelin’s party supported the members of Wade’s party
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by lending them their infrastructure (offices etc.). The second important city where the election campaign took place was New York. Political claims of the migrants constituted the central part of his political program: a favourable customs policy, governmental aid for investments in Senegal, bilateral social insurance agreements, improved living conditions for migrants in France, etc. Wade addressed himself systematically to the migrants during electoral meetings that were organized in the collective workers' homes in and around Paris. He presented himself as the only candidate who was close to the migrants and who best knew their problems. In New York, he regularly met members of the West African community based in Harlem. His discourse was not only focused on the problems for migrants coming home to Senegal (like trouble with customs), but also on the local situation of New York.

Senegalese migration, which has been circular and translocal rather than restricted to two locations in the last twenty years, has recently shifted towards the United States. Whereas the administrative conditions and the job opportunities for seasonal agriculture work and for petty trade were still convenient in the 1970s and 1980s for sub-Saharan Africans in Europe, the restrictive visa policy in the European Union in the 1990s has encouraged more and more Senegalese migrants to move to the United States. Better educated migrants in particular explain their decision to live in the United States not only for economic reasons, but also because they feel that Senegalese migrants in France were 'déclassé' (Gueye 2001: 130). The feeling of being downgraded is related to the living conditions that are becoming worse, the complicated bureaucracy, which discourages liberal entrepreneurs, and finally the impression of low esteem for African migrants in general, reflected by their lack of representation amongst political or economic decision-makers. Another reason for the downgrading of France as an important platform for migrants is the attitude of the Senegalese government towards the migrants who are French residents. None of them is represented amongst the Senegalese Ministers, although American Senegalese are better represented in the new government. This has been perceived by the migrants as a betrayal of the voters because the election campaigns in France in 2000 and 2001 (cf. Salzbrunn 2001) focused particularly on the representation of migrants on the list of the winning PDS (Senegalese Democratic Party). Abdoulaye Wade has addressed his election campaign to the migrants abroad as somebody who is part of the Senegalese abroad, knowing well their problems and living conditions. Wade himself has resided in Versailles for several years and used this argument in order to get the migrants' support during the presidential election.
in 2000. The fact that a Senegalese resident from France had a key position on the PDS list for the parliamentary elections in 2001 was also used as an argument in favour of the PDS in France.

Since the 1990s, the USA has been a new centre of Senegalese migration, which is mostly a result of the above factors. From New York City, New York State, Connecticut and New Jersey, migrants spread over the whole country, building several regional centres like that in Atlanta, Georgia. The local context of migration and the way that migrants organize themselves within the new translocal spaces is as important as the knowledge and customs from their original home. Therefore, we suggest including the notion of ‘translocal spaces’ in theoretical and empirical approaches to migration. Our recent empirical fieldwork amongst religious (Sufi) and political Senegalese networks in New York has shown how deeply these networks are rooted in the local social spaces. Getting connected to key persons in the religious communities in New York and getting in touch with the local administration in order to build up commercial, social, political and religious structures are important examples of local strategy for migrants that have to be taken into consideration by researchers (Salzbrunn 2004). The implementation of religious and political structures by migrants in New York requires profound local knowledge of law, customs, administration, etc. The existing social practices have influenced and modified the experiences of the Senegalese, and led to new hybrid practices, which take into consideration the very specific local situation in Harlem. Whereas France and Senegal are secular states, the presence of religious references in public space is much more visible in the United States. In Harlem, prayers are organized within public space, often via microphones on the street in front of churches or assembly halls. The flourishing Pentecostal or Neo-Protestant movements in particular put a strong emphasis on missionary street work. The Senegalese migrants, who have become familiar with the religious patchwork of Harlem, have adopted the use of loudspeakers to announce daily prayers in a mosque in the urban centre of West African migration, near the Malcolm Shabazz mosque. Iconographic symbols of religious affiliation are also omnipresent in the names and decors of Harlem boutiques, as well as in the cars of Senegalese cab drivers. Stickers and paintings reproducing the only existing image of the founder of the Murid brotherhood, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, and photos of the Murids’ Khalifes who were residing at Touba, are commonly exposed in Senegalese restaurants or video shops. The use of these iconographic documents is much more common than Arabic writings and calligraphy—which can be explained by the
limited knowledge of Arabic amongst the Senegalese Muslims, in comparison to other Muslim migrants residing in the United States.

The Regular Visits of Shaykh Mourtada Mbacke to New York

At the end of the 1990s, the annual visit of the Murid Shaykh Mourtada Mbacke has become an important event that lasts for more than two weeks. The Senegalese and American press, as well as radio stations, regularly report the news. Video producers film the whole event in order to distribute the tapes through retailers in the US, Europe and Senegal.

On his arrival at JFK Airport, a crowd of hundreds of talibes welcome Shaykh Mourtada Mbacke at each visit with khassaides (songs). Serigne Mbacke Ndiaye and Adja Aram Adj, president of the female dahira Sokhna Diarra, direct the organization of the visit. El Haj Mohammad Baloozi, the first African American convert, is the first person to salute Shaykh Mourtada on American soil. He follows the rules of 'soudjod', having one knee on the ground and kissing the Shaykh’s hand. Then he conducts the Shaykh towards a huge white limousine, where the Shaykh, accompanied by the talibes’ khassaides, leaves the airport with an escort of the Port Authority of New York Police. Participants see the engagement of the police who accompany the event as a sign of prestige rather than a threat. Whereas events organized by Muslim minorities in European countries are sometimes accompanied by large numbers of police to prevent conflict and subversive acts in the crowd, the role of the American police in this specific religious event is rather seen as a matter of honouring officially the arrival of a religious authority who needs protection and respect. Before the acquisition of the House of Islam in Harlem, the Shaykh stayed in prestigious luxury hotels. At his arrival at the Pennsylvania Hotel in 1999, a huge crowd, including many women and children, again saluted him. Banners, mostly in English but also in Arabic, proudly celebrate ‘blackness’ as an important quality, or cite ‘Allah the Creator of the Universe’. Children wear T-shirts especially printed for this event, some showing Senegalese and American flags. Several messages are appeals seeking for converts: ‘You young people. Make the achievement of peace and justice your ultimate goal while striving for knowledge and enlightenment.’ In 2001, the ambassador to Senegal and his son welcomed Shaykh Mourtada at the salon d’honneur at JFK Airport. This manifestation of official honour was reported in the bi-monthly francophone Mouride magazine distributed around the different migration platforms.
Acquiring Senegalese and American official proclamations or symbolic honours is part of the strategy of occupying public space, and is not seen as contradicting the secular constitution of Senegal.

The culminating point of the annual visit is the Murid parade, a march through the streets of Harlem that ends with several discourses held in Wolof, Arabic and English at a corner of Central Park. The videotape that documents the Murid parade 1999 shows interviews with several participants during the march. The common point of most of the discourses is the celebration of ‘African’ unity, the wish to bring together ‘Africans born in America and Africans born in Senegal’. One of the main messages is the invitation for a reinvention of Africanness addressed to the African American population. Clear allusions are made to the Black Muslim movement and Afrocentric philosophy: ‘We want to thank Shaykh Mourtada for coming here to spread Islam amongst the African American community.’ Several speakers assimilate African unity to conversion to Islam.

We would like to thank Shaykh Mourtada for his dedication, his hard work, his support for the last ten years to the Murid Islamic community here in America. Insh’Allah, next year, the Murid Islamic community will be continuing to propagate Islam, propagating and letting the world know that the Senegalese, that the African American community have come together to do something great. That something has been prophesied by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, one day we will come together and be one.

After the discourses, several Senegalese and African Americans demonstrate their unity by emphatic accolades. The women, who were mostly at the end of the parade, are also interviewed, expressing in Wolof or French their great satisfaction at participating in this event. A large place is always reserved for female participation in religious or political events in Senegal. During official meetings with religious or political authorities, women are systematically represented and participate in the debate. The participation of the female dahira Mame Diarra in the 2001 Murid parade and the community’s activities in general are reported in the magazine Mouri de as ‘immense oeuvre’. ‘Behind every great man, a great woman is hidden’, says the article as a summary of the situation in New York.

Participants understand the different messages issued during the Murid parade differently. As the Afrocentric allusions by several African American speakers need a high level of knowledge to be deciphered, one can consider that they are understood by a very small group of participants. The demonstrative discourse of brotherhood between African Americans and recently arrived African migrants hides profound conflicts.
that emerge in everyday life in Harlem. The prejudices that exist are very destructive. In 1994, the violence that characterized the relationships amongst different groups of traders reached a climax when access to public space was radically altered. Before that date, Nigerian and Senegalese petty traders occupied the public space in Harlem, attracting a growing number of clients and tourists around 125th Street. The shop owners, mostly African Americans and Asians, had the impression that the occupation of the sidewalk prevented their customers from entering the boutiques. Rudolf Giuliani then based his mayoral election campaign on the promise to disperse the informal traders, but, when they were compelled to leave this area, the shop owners realized that their customers had moved with them. The Masjid Malcolm Shabbaz proposed itself as an interface between the informal vendors, the Mayor and the 125th Street Vendors Association, promising to regulate the informal vendors in an area at 116th Street. This caused an important conflict between Nigerian traders, who were opposed to this plan, and Senegalese, who mostly agreed with this solution (Stoller 2002: 121-143). The Senegalese, being used to the local negotiation processes since their arrival in 1982, managed to negotiate with City Hall and the Masjid Malcolm Shabbaz, which disadvantaged a large number of the Nigerians. Paul Stoller’s analysis of the ‘Spatial Politics of African Traders in Harlem’ (ibid.) undermines the rosy image of brotherhood between black people presented during the Murid parade. However, in certain circumstances, the Senegalese join the African American population or they use the etiquette of blackness in order to reach political goals. This strategy is a result of the Murids’ excellent understanding of the way political negotiation processes work in the United States. Collective claims in the name of a group, particularly a minority group that is concerned by affirmative action programs, can be more successful for individual people than individual demands. There are individual people who have succeeded partly thanks to affirmative action programs or thanks to belonging to a certain group (e.g. Murids who negotiated the access to public space with the Mayor of New York, or African American students who have obtained a special research grant), but there are also indicators for a continuous discrimination based on race: the high percentage of African Americans who are incarcerated or the extremely low percentage of mixed couples in the USA (in comparison to France) show the real impact of a constructed and/or perceived racial difference. It may be too early to draw general conclusions on the relationship between African Americans and recent immigrated Africans, so that I limit my own analysis on the specific
case of Senegalese migrants in New York. As we have seen that the analysis of the specific local situation is extremely important for the comprehension of a translocal network, an extension of the analysis to the situation in Atlanta (where Martin Luther King’s non-violent movement has its roots, and where African American politicians have promoted racial identity as a ground for legitimacy) or in California would need further intensive fieldwork.

In France, the Senegalese migrants would not use the same strategy because the French Republic is based on universalism and rejects communitarian categories. This leads back to Abbé Grégoire’s political concept of allowing people human rights in the name of the individual who is part of the Republic, but not in the name of interest groups. However, in order to have representatives, the French government tries to encourage the creation of official Religious Federations (which have a structure similar to that of churches). The Jewish and Muslim Councils (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, CFCM) are negotiating the place of religion and religious symbols within public space. Their power is relatively limited, and, in practice, distinctions are made between the different religions for historical reasons. For example, the large majority of Catholic churches are maintained by the State because they were constructed before 1905, a fact that classifies them as being under the protection and responsibility of the State. In comparison, Muslims have to finance the maintenance of their mosques on their own, because they were constructed more recently. Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa suffer from a double disadvantage because they are underrepresented within the CFCM and do not necessarily share its position. On the one hand, this lack of consideration and institutional power can cause trouble; on the other hand, the non-association of Black Africans with Islam can prevent them from religiously motivated attacks in times where public opinion may confound Islam with Islamism or even with terrorism. During the latest debates about the interdiction of religious symbols in the public space, especially the wearing of a veil within public schools, several journalists associated the veil with oppression of women and Islamist ideology. This very emotional debate concerned mostly Muslims of North African origin. Young women of sub-Saharan origin are less likely to wear a veil. Their mothers’ coloured headscarves were less associated with religion than with folklore or customs. In the United States, clear distinctions are part of the conception of the American multicultural society, so that rights are attributed in the name of these differences. The Murids have well understood these mechanisms.

Another part of their strategy to become well rooted in the public
space in Harlem is the translation of their values into a language understood by Americans in order to promote their activities. The most important issues amongst these values are economic and moral practices. The ideology of very hard work and the ideal of a certain form of piety are welcomed by a section of American society. In the context of an open battle by state officials against drugs and alcohol, the promotion of an ascetic lifestyle by the Murids is considered as a helpful initiative. American researchers who are specialists on Muridism also express their fascination with these values. In their own discourse, Murids declare they have reconstructed large parts of Harlem, fought crime and stopped the disintegration of the area. Prejudices against African Americans include their supposed negative attitude towards work and loss of moral values. I have also collected several testimonies of African Americans critical of Africans. These include the feeling that their new employers in recently opened shops and restaurants exploit African Americans, or that the Africans show no solidarity but a hostile attitude towards the former inhabitants of Harlem. Almost every person I interviewed from both groups gave a concrete example of negative experiences with the other group. The apparent unity, which is declared during the Murid parade, seems to be in contrast with everyday social relations. Considering the attraction for African Americans of Muridism, the economic dynamics of the Senegalese traders are cited as one of the personal reasons. In general, conversion is the result of a search for spirituality and authenticity. This authenticity can appear in different forms, as Stoller has shown by documenting how Korean traders produce so-called Kente clothing in Manhattan, which is sold by Nigerian traders to African Americans during third-world music festivals as ‘authentic African’ clothing.

Even though the average African American Muslim might not have the historical intellectual roots of the various Black Muslim movements in mind—and the knowledge gap between leaders and followers of a social or religious movement is a general phenomenon—it is important to underline that the leaders of the major African American nationalistic Muslim movements have managed to connect Afrocentric and Muslim ideologies: Pauline Guedj (2003) points out that the Ahmadyyah Movement, the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam have drawn inspiration from the theory of an Afro-Asian Islam and an Afro-Asian origin of the black race. Karen Isaksen Leonard (2004) points out the inherent paradoxes of these ideologies. In the early twentieth century, the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam both asserted “Asiatic” racial identities, explicitly rejecting slave, Negro, and/or African...
identities in many ways’. The emerging category of ‘Asiatic Black’ can be interpreted as a response to the racialization of identity politics in general in the United States. Nevertheless, the complexity and variety of the contemporary identity discourse of the Murids shows us how dynamic these discourses and references are. The reference to ‘African personality and culture’ in the Mayor of New York’s proclamation of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Day connects African roots and Sufism, which makes it possible for African American Muslims who currently research their African roots to identify themselves with this spiritual leader. But I want to underline how fragile these intellectual identification processes are, because those of the everyday struggles that are based on religion, ethnicity, origins, etc., have an important impact on community life and individual practices in the United States. The discourses of social or religious movements are not representative of the relationships between individuals and/or groups.

The Murid community establishing roots in New York

In 1986, a couple of hundred Senegalese Murid migrants set up their first dahira in New York under the auspices of Serigne Moustapha Mbacke Gainde Fatma. His father, Shaykh Mbacke Gainde Fatma, is the eldest grandson of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba. During this period, the Murids met regularly in Brooklyn, at a house named Keur Serigne Touba. Brooklyn was one of the first residential quarters of the Murids in New York, mostly frequented by Haalpulaar or Fulbe. Because the high concentration of Fulbe originated from the Futa Toro around the river Senegal, Brooklyn’s Fulton Street was also named ‘Futa Street’. Serigne Moustapha Gainde Fatma took the initiative of contacting his grand-uncle Serigne Mourtalla Mbacke to encourage him to visit the New York dahira. Serigne Mourtalla Mbacke was asked to pay for his own journey. In their publications and reports of annual events, the Murids normally underlined that the first part of the funding of a visit or of the construction of a mosque came from the Shaykh’s initiative. His acts are described as an example that encourages the Murid followers to do the same acts of charity. Originally, of course, a part of the aid offered by the Shaykh came from his followers’ donations. One of the most important African American converted talibes in the United States is Shaykh Balozy from New Jersey. He financed an important part of the first visit of Shaykh Mourtalla in 1988. The largest part of the costs was allocated to pay for the hotel, so that the idea of achieving a place of permanent residence grew two years later. When the annual
event attracted so many disciples that the Brooklyn space became too confined, the location shifted to Manhattan.

The House of Islam in Harlem

Becoming aware of the growing number of Senegalese and African American talibes, Shaykh Mourtalla took the initiative of setting up a non-profit organization whose aim was to create a permanent centre for the Murids. The Murid Islamic Community of America INC. (MICA) was founded as a 501 (c) 3 type, which allows donors to deduct tax from the amount of their contribution. Shaykh Balozi, known as ‘the first American talibe’, is the President of MICA. In 1991, three years after his first visit to New York, Shaykh Mourtalla asked MICA to buy a house in New York in order to create a House of Islam. Murid publications like the bi-monthly bulletin Mouride in French and the MICA Internet site (in English) underline that Shaykh Mourtalla has given US$55,000 to support the project. The talibes have collected another $61,000, which led to the acquisition of a house in Harlem. According to an initial estimate, the renovation of the four-story building would need an additional $250,000. Finally, after several errors and delays, the cost reached $350,000. In eight years, the Murids managed to raise $500,000 through gatherings and assemblies. At the first floor, a mosque and a school ‘for the teaching of Muslim religion’ were the first installations. On the second floor, the Shaykh’s residence was installed in order to avoid paying hotel costs. According to official sources, the rest of the space is reserved for welcoming other Murid dignitaries who visit the city. Our informants reproduce the discourse of Murid hospitality, declaring that ‘anybody who arrives and who is looking for an apartment can go to the House of Islam and reside a couple of days there’. In the talibes’ discourse, the House of Islam is a symbol of Murids’ hospitality and openness. Cheikh Bassirou Lô, who lived in New York from 1992 to 1995, has been head of the Murid community in New York since 2001. He confirms’ that hospitality is offered to guests for two days, which gives them time to find a place to stay. One of the four rooms in the house is reserved for that purpose. Cheikh Bassirou Lô estimates that the Murid community in New York has 1,000 to 2,000 members. An important part of the Senegalese Embassy staff in Washington comes to the main religious celebrations: Eid, Magal and the prayers at the end of Ramadan. The Senegalese Consul of New York regularly attends Friday prayers. The House of Islam is not restricted to Murids. According to Shaykh Bassirou Lô, members of
the Tijaniyya brotherhood also attend prayers. He wants the House of Islam to be an open space for anybody who is interested in Islam. After 9/11, he felt a growing interest in Islam amongst the American population and noted the number of registrations for weekly classes at the House of Islam. As Cheikh Anta Babou points out (2002), education, through the mediation of dahiras, constitutes an important source of social capital among Murid migrants. The consciousness of belonging to this religious community has grown after 9/11 among the Murids, but the general interest of the American population in the diversity of Islam has also increased. Sales of translations of the Qur’an were growing, as well as the demand for Arabic lessons. It is true that this attention to Islam was not exclusively positive, but also arose from fear and mistrust—literature on religiously based terrorism also benefited. But still, in this context, Murids who felt threatened tried to show how their religious practice as Sufis differed from other Islamic groups or ideologies rooted in the Near East. In this context, religious expression, and especially expression of Islamic practice, were certainly not easier than before 9/11. But given the important number of Muslims residing the United States, the clear expression of a tolerant, non-violent religious practice was welcome.

Other Black Muslim organizations called for a deeper connection to the American Muslim roots—which does not mean the Arab migrants who came at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the descendants of the Muslim slaves. In his ‘Reflections on Black History Month’, Imam Zaid Shakir (2004) points out that in identifying with African Muslims,

we must not allow ourselves to forget that they were part of a greater community, a community which has evolved to almost fifty million African Americans. The struggle of that community, its pain, perseverance, triumphs, and defeats, cannot be separated from the struggle of its Muslim members. If we as Muslims are moved by the suffering of our coreligionists who were exposed to the dehumanizing cruelties of a vicious system, we would similarly be moved by the plight of their non-Muslim African brothers and sisters who suffered the same injustices.

Imam Zaid Shakir quotes the references to the history of slavery from Sylviane A. Diouf’s book, Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas. Diouf points out that 20 per cent of the Africans enslaved in the Americas were Muslims. In some areas like the coast of the Carolinas, Georgia, and parts of Virginia, the percentage may have approached 40 percent. During Black History Month, facts about institutional racism are discussed with references to the history of slavery. These connections lead to a discursive construction of a we-group (Elwert) of African
American Muslims and African Muslims, considering all African Americans as being brothers and sisters, too. The counterpart of a growing interest in Islam was a growing hostility towards Islam in general and Arab Muslims in particular. For that reason, Black and recently immigrated African Muslims also tried to show a particularly peaceful, tolerant and moral image of Islam, underlining constructed African particularities.

The huge size of the House of Islam reflects the desire of the Senegalese migrants to develop strong roots in the urban space. The investment in the migrants’ new location is also a proof of their economic impact and the ambition to invest significant amounts of money in the translocal migration network rather than in the country of origin, even if both practices are still current. Finally, the Murid Islamic Community in America carries out missionary activities through the publication of a magazine in English, although French is still the most common language amongst the Senegalese migrants, besides Wolof and Fulbe. Under the title ‘Education. A Key Function in Muridism. A Message from Shaykh Mourtada Mbacké ibn Khadimou Rassoull’, the history of Muridism, especially the life of its founder Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, and the current activities of Murids in Touba and New York are presented and explained in detail. Citations of Qur’anic verses and of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s words are spread through the articles, as well as advertisements by members of the Senegalese community: services like attorneys-at-law, travel agents, car service, money transfer agents; shops like bookstores, grocers, clothing, video markets, wholesale and retail distribution centres for perfume, cosmetics and food, computer centres and import-export firms. The Murid radio stations have also included an advertisement for their radio and Internet broadcasting service. Finally, the magazine contains an application form for the ‘Children’s Quranic Saturday and Sunday school’, held at the Masjid Touba Islamic School for children, based at the House of Islam.

From the annual visit of Shaykh Mourtallá Mbacké towards the official Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba day

Although 1989 is cited as the year of the first official visit of Shaykh Mourtalla Mbacké in New York, the Murid community managed as early as 1988 to obtain the official proclamation of 28 July as Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké day in Harlem by David N. Dinkins, President of the Borough of Manhattan:

Office of the President of the Borough of Manhattan. City of New York. Proclamation. WHEREAS: Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké of Touba-Senegal-
West Africa was among the most charismatic and effective leader of this century; and WHEREAS: To honour his distinguished memory and his outstanding achievement for the benefit of African personality and culture; and WHEREAS: His venerable son Cheikh Mourtalla Mbacke of Touba Senegal has come in Harlem to visit his thousands of followers and admirers; and THEREFORE: The Senegalese Murid Community and the people of Harlem are proud to seize this opportunity to salute as a great leader Cheikh Mourtalla Mbacke and to proclaim this day July 28th, 1988 to be known as ‘CHEIKH AHMADOU BAMBA MBACKE’ in Harlem. IN WITNESS WHEREOF I HAVE HERETO SET MY HAND AND CAUSED THE OFFICIAL SEAL OF THE BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN TO BE AFFIXED THIS 28th DAY OF JULY 1988. David N. Dinkins

Charles B. Rangel, Member of the United States Congress, and representing the 16th Congressional District, New York, has signed a similar Proclamation on behalf of the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. The only detail that differs from Dinkins’s proclamation is the pronoun ‘We’ in the second paragraph. Rangel writes ‘We honor his distinguished memory and his outstanding achievement for the benefit of African personality and culture’. Choosing the personal instead of the impersonal form, he clearly includes himself in the people who honor Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s life and work. This identification with the Senegalese migrants can be remembered by potential voters during the next election campaign. During our stay in Harlem in autumn 2002, election workers canvassed in Senegalese boutiques. During the West Indian Parade in Brooklyn, candidates also participated in the march to boost their credibility.

The above declaration reproduces the official discourse of the Murid community which considers Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba as a charismatic leader and as an incarnation of African character. His African identity is emphasized for two reasons. First, the internal historiography of the Muridiyya seeks to distinguish this brotherhood from Arabic Sufi brotherhoods like Tijaniyya, Layène and Qadiriyya which are also popular in Senegal, by underlining the fact that the Muridiyya was the first brotherhood founded by a Cheikh from sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, especially in the context of the United States, the highlighted Africanness of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba and the Muridiyya is intended to attract African American Muslims and potential converts in search of African roots and authenticity. We will see later how the discourse of Africanness and of African American brotherhood is systematically used by participants in the Murid parade in Harlem during Shaykh Mourtalla Mbacke’s annual visit. Since 1989, the local Murid community has organized annual meetings around the visit of Shaykh Mourtalla Mbacke in New York. These visits are videotaped and documented on cassettes for sale in Senegalese shops all over the world. The arrival of Shaykh Mourtalla
Mbacke at JFK Airport as well as the annual Murid parade, a march through Harlem towards Central Park, are documented in detail. During the march, reporters ask Senegalese and African American followers to comment on the event. The African American participants in particular underline the importance of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba as an icon for unity between African migrants and African Americans in the United States. We have seen above how the relationships between these two groups work in everyday life and the struggle for resources.

In Atlanta, Georgia, where another important regional centre of West African migration has been established, the Mayor has also signed a Proclamation concerning the Murid brotherhood:

City of Atlanta. Office of the Mayor. Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe Day. Whereas, The City of Atlanta is honoured to welcome Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe, the Second in leadership line of the Mourtide Sufi Order of Touba-Senegal, West Africa to our great city on August 11, 1997; and Whereas, Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe is the son Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba M’Backe, founder of the Mourtide Sufi Movement, the non-violent movement which was a major influence in the liberation of Senegal; and Whereas, Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe carries on his father’s work to liberate his people through religion, education and economic prosperity and used his personal funds to establish over 400 hundred schools with more than 4,500 teachers in Senegal, Gambia, Garbon, parts of Europe and the United States; and Whereas, We honor Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe for his lifelong devotion to improving the educational, religious, economic and social welfare of people around the world and commend him for his outstanding academic excellence, superior professional accomplishments, and leadership abilities: Now, therefore, I, Bill Campbell, Mayor of Atlanta, on behalf of the citizens of Atlanta, hereby proclaim August 11, 1997, as Cheikh Mourtalla M’Backe in our City and urge all citizens to be cognizant of the events arranged during his visit. Bill Campbell, Mayor.

In this text, we find an interesting hybridization of American and Murid references, which reflect the creation of the migrants’ identity discourse. Furthermore, the proclamation shows how an event can be created and emphasized by the language of officials. In the first paragraph, the Murids are named ‘Sufi Order’, which corresponds to their theological description. From the second paragraph, the Murids are cited as a ‘Sufi Movement’ and a ‘non-violent movement’. These terms fit the American reference system, in which movements have been saluted for their struggle for collective rights. The heritage of Martin Luther King makes Atlanta a particularly important place for the importance of non-violent movements—which does not mean that there were no violent struggles based on race or ethnicity. But the history of Atlanta facilitates the inclusion of this reference in the general discourse. The individual liberation or the victory against oneself, which is a central part of Sufi theology, is absent from the semantic level of the text. Collective
values, like the liberation of Senegal from the French colonialists, and economic prosperity, are emphasized, though education is also mentioned. The mention of non-violence is an allusion to Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s attitude towards the French colonial government. The latter sent the spiritual leader into exile in Ghana, and later in Mauritania, because his spiritual attraction was considered subversive. However, other important members of Sufi brotherhood were either violent in their struggle against the French government, or were collaborating with local officials. Several marabouts served as interfaces between the French governors and the local population in order to maintain the colonial order. Liberation in the name of religious convictions is only one aspect of the attitude of Murids towards political power. We will mention below how this ambiguous behaviour towards political decision-makers continues today. Economics is mentioned in almost Weberian terms, reflecting the successful marriage of Murid work ethics and American economic liberalism: Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s recommendations of hard work and contribution to prosperity are common knowledge amongst Murids and frequently cited as a virtue. The lobbying for official support by elected decision-makers is part of the strategy to occupy the public space in order to spread religious and political messages. The latter are not necessarily declared as such; several Murid intellectuals would even deny any contemporary link between the Sufi brotherhood and politics. We conclude that this is rather a question of definition of what can be considered as politics. In the analysis of several declarations relating to the Murid march, we have seen how global and local politics are reflected during this event.

The importance of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s mother and the women’s dahiras and entrepreneurs in New York

As I have already shown concerning the presidential elections (Salzbrunn 2002), women are central actors in the organization of political and religious events. At all of the political or religious events I have observed, women had an important part in the organization and were always present during the ceremonies. In New York, the dahira Mame Diarra has approximately 100 members who pay $50 for each event that has to be organized, which includes essentially religious feasts like Gamou or Magal. During the annual visits of Serigne Mourtada Mbacke, they prepare food for visitors and talibes. In 2001, they have also served Senegalese dishes to their neighbours in Harlem, which represented an opportunity to present an image of generosity. In Senegal, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s mother Mam Diarra Bousso, who is buried
in Porokhane, is attracting growing interest amongst Murid pilgrims (Evers Rosander 2003). The emerging cult around this female religious icon contributes to the growing importance of women in the diffusion of Muridism. In 2002, the pilgrimage dedicated to another important female figure in Muridism, Sokhna Mai, the sister of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, was officially institutionalized as a Magal in the Murid calendar. The institutionalization of pilgrimage to places associated with female religious icons strengthens the participation of women in the promotion of Muridism. These pilgrimages are another example of the importance of events in the diffusion of a religious and, in this case, gender biased, message. As I have pointed out before, women also play key roles in important functions like finance and logistics. Several key persons act as interfaces with a broader population in order to forward important messages and to mobilize the population to attend religious or political events. Women are also clearly present in the representations that circulate about the events: Like male participants, they are always invited to express their opinion by reporters who prepare videotapes about the event. The important place that women occupy within the religious and political networks reflects their historical importance in decision-making processes in Senegal.

The Senegalese presidential election campaign 2000 as a translocal event

In earlier publications (Salzbrunn 2002; 2001), I have shown the impact of transnational migration networks on the victory of the opposition party in 2000. In fact, the new President Abdoulaye Wade directed the election campaign from his French residence in Versailles. Paris and New York were considered the most important ‘battles’ that had to be won because those circumscriptions were strong symbols of the wind of change. The main candidates Abdou Diouf, Abdoulaye Wade, Landing Savane and Djibo Kâ shared the ambition to win Paris and New York. All candidates, except Abdoulaye Bathily, went to New York to canvass the migrants. Although the absolute number of electors registered on the list of voters was relatively low, the candidates expected to start an avalanche that would retain its impact on further elections, in particular the parliamentary elections in 2001.

A central element of Abdoulaye Wade’s strategy was the instrumentalization and audio-visual reproduction of events during the campaign. Wade tested his ‘blue march’ in ‘Little Africa’ or ‘Little Senegal’, the main quarter of Senegalese migration in New York around 116th Street. In contrast to France, where students have the historical role of opinion leaders, and where workers’ homes constitute today the most
important resource for political parties, the vote multiplier role has shifted towards shop owners and rich entrepreneurs in New York. This is because the Senegalese immigrants to the United States are generally younger, richer and better educated.

Abdoulaye Wade’s ‘marche bleue’ through Harlem, New York, as a test for political strategy in Senegal

In New York’s Little Senegal, where recently immigrated taxi drivers circulate next to students in marketing and where the Consulate staff has lunch in Senegalese restaurants that are next to West African groceries and cell phone stores, resides the most important constituency. Most of the candidates in the presidential election in 2000 found a school assembly hall or similar location for their central meeting. Abdoulaye Wade, whose aim was to break with the reserved attitude that Abdou Diouf adopted towards the Senegalese population, decided to invent an original strategy for his campaign: the blue march. Instead of entering closed spaces and waiting for his (potential) supporters to join him, he decided to go out to his potential voters. Accompanied by an important delegation, he introduced himself to shop owners, restaurant guests, grocers’ clients and video filmers, by walking along 116th Street from the corner of Lenox Avenue. His presence quickly attracted a huge crowd of supporters, making of the ‘blue march’ one of the most memorable events of the whole campaign. Using a similar discourse to the one he pronounces in French workers’ residences, ‘I am the candidate who comes to you, who knows how you live, which difficulties you have in everyday life’, etc., he gave people the impression of being honestly interested in their personal occupations. In France, he established a distinction between the way migrants were treated in Europe, especially in France, and in the United States. He openly criticized the frequent identity controls in France as discrimination, and underlined the fact that a migrant’s life was more peaceful in the United States, once he managed to get inside the territory. When Wade addressed himself to the American migrants, particularly when he met entrepreneurs, he emphasized his liberal economic thinking. In France, his discourse was more centred on the difficult living conditions, the lack of consideration or the loss of dignity. In the US, he insisted on the migrants’ economic success, trying to convince the rich investors to place their money in Senegal, once the elections were won. Hardly any voter who was present during the meetings seemed to reproach Wade with residing at Versailles. Nevertheless, members of Wade’s coalition
outside the main party PDS, particularly the activists of the Marxist party And-Jef/PADS, underlined the fact that Wade did not really share the workers’ living conditions: Angeline Savane, a prominent member of And-Jef/PADS, said ‘I was sleeping on the floor in Senegalese villages while Wade was eating his steak at Versailles’. As the building of a large coalition was the only way to win against the Socialist Party, these differences were downplayed, so that voters could still vote for the coalition party without supporting Wade strongly, but rather because they were against Abdou Diouf and the PS. Finally, these strategies show the importance of the local migration platform and the capacity of the protagonists to adapt their discourse and the organization of political events to the local and national economic, social and political situation. During the election campaign in France, Abdoulaye Wade as well as Abdou Diouf used the services of the directors of communication of the most important French political parties. In the US, the decision-makers of the PDS had discreet contacts with representatives of the American government, thinking that this could eventually help during the election campaign. In France, Wade’s friendship with the leader of the (relatively small) French Liberal Party, Alain Madelin, was reported in the media, and Madelin spent the election days in Wade’s house in Dakar in order to show his support. The night the two political leaders spent waiting for the results, including the coverage by the media, was one of the important events in Wade’s electoral strategy. It is part of a long series, following Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin’s reflection on events (2003), which can be understood only if we take into consideration the local and global context of which these events are part.

Omar Tanor Dieng, secretary of the ruling Socialist Party in 2000, had to face violent aggression by Senegalese migrants when he appeared in New York. Hence, it would have been impossible for him to walk across the streets of Harlem. At the hall he had rented for the official meeting of the Socialist Party, the public entrance had to be guarded, because the organizers were afraid of hostile elements who might want to interrupt Omar Tanor Dieng’s speech. The opposition parties regarded as a victory the fact that supporters of the PS were de facto excluded from occupying public space in New York because they became very unpopular and had to face hostile behaviour. Winning access to the streets of Harlem and occupying the largest place was a central point during the campaign. These events in migration were so important because of their effect on electors around the world who could access them via video and the internet.
Worldwide coverage via the diffusion of events on video

Long before Election Day, the opposition leaders invented the ‘bataille de Paris’, the battle of Paris, at the occasion of events preceding the campaign. When Abdou Diouf visited the French National Assembly for the last time before the Presidential elections, opposition leaders organized a meeting in front of the Parliament in Paris. In the following interviews, Abdoulaye Wade referred constantly to this event, insisting that he and his allies would win the battle of Paris, and that this manifestation was the first significant step in achieving his goal. Wade gave a huge number of interviews before, but also after his election, being aware of the impact of communication. Still keeping to his strategy of going out to the people, he travelled through several countries for symbolic purposes. In terms of percentage, the votes won in Paris or New York are not significant, but their symbolic value and impact was inestimable. As the Socialist Party quickly understood Wade’s strategy of winning symbolic cities, they entered the competition. The PS even used Concorde to demonstrate New York’s significance as an important place to win. This event was recast negatively as too costly by the PDS. Wade used the opportunity to stress the modesty and honesty of his election campaign, demonstrating accessibility by walking through the streets or by travelling in open cars. A central part of his strategy was to ensure worldwide coverage via the diffusion of events on video. Camera teams followed his ‘blue march’ in New York as well as in Dakar, producing videotapes. A production firm situated in New York and Paris was charged to edit the films, which were systematically shown during electoral meetings in other cities. During meetings in Paris, spectators could follow Wade’s triumphal return to Dakar, in New York, the local video producer sold the tape of Wade’s visit in Bordeaux, and so on. The diffusion of these original events fed the debate amongst migrants and contributed almost to the creation of a myth. At each place, the local notables were shown on the video or even interviewed in order to underline the respect that Wade had won in various places, and to promise his impact on the migrants’ situation in each translocal space. Once Wade had won the elections, the most prestigious places and conditions in every city were chosen to welcome him: the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York for the meeting with the Senegalese entrepreneurs and local delegation of the PDS, in Bordeaux the University with its president and professors, etc. The continuous use of this strategy shows how well the political leader and the activists know the local framework and how able they are to adapt to its functioning and rules.
Conclusion: Being a part of New York through the organization of events within the public space

As well as Pentecostalism, which ‘has become a transnational phenomenon that, in its modern form, is locally expressed through a highly accelerated circulation of goods, ideas and people’ (van Dijk 2002: 178), Muridism has spread around the multi-sited migration network and evolved. On the one hand, the local expression of Muridism changes according to the specific context and influences the religious network as a whole. On the other hand, the local expression of Muridism as an event contributes to the restructuring of a local territory including social, economic and political practices. We have shown how the Murids managed to use the local administrative rules (like the access to public space for religious communities) and the specific symbols of belonging to the American citizenship (through the Proclamation of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Day, etc.) in order to become a part of Harlem. Even if concrete everyday relations with African American citizens are a source of serious conflicts, the Murids used the common colour of skin to create a link and to lobby for particular rights and recognition. The demonstration of religious ethics like piety and hard work can easily be understood by American Protestant thinking and helped Murids to obtain recognition from public opinion and beyond. This strategy is directly connected to the specific local context and the result of hybridization of religious, political and social practices related to a multi-sited translocal space. On the one hand, the instrumentalization of this public expression of religion could be considered as not being ‘uncivic’. However, the specific local expressions of this translocal network are the result of a fine knowledge of this context. They do not erase the general uncivic structure of this translocal movement: e.g. the important financial flows go beyond national boundaries or controls of international public organization. Murids do not seek systematically for a visible place in public space, but in case of New York, this visibility and the construction of a peaceful, tolerant, ‘workaholic’ image of the Murids was helpful in the negotiation process with the Mayor. So the occupation of public space is not an aim in itself, it could also be considered as an instrument of the efficient local rooting of an uncivic translocal network.

Concerning political events, Abdoulaye Wade also adapted his strategy and discourse to the specific American situation. During his speeches, he mixed Wolof, Arabic, English and French in order to cover different interest groups. English, rather than French, was used during one of his meetings to unite the Senegalese residing in the United States, but also to obtain the attention and support of African American citizens.
The use of the local Senegalese language Wolof can be misinterpreted by Fulbe or other language groups as a rejection, so Wade used English or French in addition to Wolof and Arabic for the introduction. During his ‘blue march’ through Harlem, Wade occupied the public space by attracting a growing crowd of supporters that guaranteed attention by the whole population of the area. This way of getting in touch directly with the voters, instead of waiting for them to participate in electoral meetings somewhere inside, was used to reinforce Wade’s image as a man close to the people. It was also the result of a combination of different social practices.

Both events are part of a series of making the translocal social space. They exist more by the stories that tell them than by the moment in which they take place. The event is reflecting and producing the transformation of the social order within the translocal social space—in New York, Paris, Dakar, etc.—but the event is also structured by the translocal space in its very local expression.

REFERENCES


NOTES

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3. I use the term ‘translocal’ in order to underline the importance of the local rooting indispensable for the functioning of a multi-sited network. The different nation-states in which the migrants circulate are still important, particularly in terms of residence law and administration, but the very specific local environment changes from place to place within a national setting and needs to be known in detail in order to organize religious or political events.

4. The Prime Minister and the Ministers have been changed very often since 2001, so that the composition of the government could have changed between the writing of this article and its publication. Nevertheless, the point is that the impression of being forgotten remains amongst an important part of the Senegalese who reside in France.

5. Alternative spelling Mourtalla.


8. http://www.micasite.org/Visit%202004.htm. I cite the text of the three proclamations with the exact words, including orthographic and grammatical mistakes (Mourdite instead of Murid, etc.)