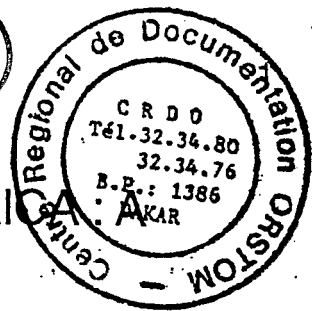


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SENEGALESE WOMEN MIGRANTS IN AMERICA
NEW AUTONOMY ?

*Sc Sc. Pop - Migration
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roles of women. Few women can afford not to work and the money they earn is essential to the family income. The crisis has made women "more active, more creative and certainly more visible" (1991:2). This characterization applies equally well to Senegalese migrant women as to those who have remained behind. The wives of migrants are now out on the streets selling with the men.

In this paper I shall explore how Senegalese women in America have recently created their own specialized niche and are acquiring an economic independence. To better understand the context in which these new directions have developed, I will now turn to a brief summary of the history of Senegalese migration to the US.

The Senegalese migrants whom I met during the initial period of my research in New York (1986-87), were mostly Wolof and belonged to the Mouride brotherhood. The situation, however, has now changed and there is a more representative range of ethnic groups and religious affiliations.

My research explored how membership in this Sufi brotherhood facilitated the complex operations necessary to carrying out their long-distance trading activities. As Cohen (1971:267) has pointed out for the Islamic trading empires of West Africa, important

Successful Mouride traders have now expanded into international trade. As they have become more competitive, they have specialized in buying electronic goods in large cities in Asia and the US, which they re-sell in Senegal. While the successful traders travel abroad constantly in search of new goods to re-sell in Senegal, other Mourides work as street-vendors in cities throughout Western Europe and increasingly in North America. These migrants have established communities in major commercial centers which provide anchor points for traders back in Dakar who rely on New York and European markets to supply their stores.

Senegalese migration to the US is relatively recent. Until the mid 1980's, Senegalese migration to America was chiefly composed of a small number of students and diplomats, with a few high-powered businessmen who already saw the profits to be made in New York's wholesale districts. As a former francophone colony, France had been the principal site of migration for Senegalese seeking work but with growing unemployment, accompanied by a strong anti-immigrant sentiment, African migrants sought out new sites.

Around 1986 large numbers of Senegalese vendors, generally Mouride, appeared on the streets of New York, seemingly overnight, selling merchandise which they bought in wholesale markets in Senegal. They initially lived in

developing between American Muslims and the Mourides, there is a growing trend to send American children to Koranic schools in Senegal, where they remain for several years.

In 1987 two Senegalese women, Mariam and Nabou, began to regularly attend the da'ira. They were both married to Mourides and had recently arrived in New York and, at that time, they did not work. I have followed their itineraries over the years and a summary of their lives in the US illustrates the increasingly independent roles taken by migrant women. It also points the way for future directions in my research.

Mariam and Nabou had come together to New York in order to join husbands who had migrated to the US. The couples had been close friends since Dakar. Mariam's husband was a cab driver and Nabou's was a wholesaler who sold watches to other Senegalese vendors. Each woman had left her children in Dakar in the care of family members. They did not work because their husbands did not want them to and they spent most of their time in the apartment which the two couples shared in a building which was inhabited by several Mouride households. Their next-door neighbors were young boys who worked as street-pedlars and the head of the household, Mamadou, was a close friend of the couples from Dakar. After a short time in the US, the women decided they had to find work to send money home to their families. Their first economic venture was to prepare food in a room in a hotel near Times Square where many Senegalese lived. The restaurant soon attracted other Senegalese street-pedlars who worked in the neighborhood and became profitable.

Their husbands went along with this initial venture but attempted to stop the women from broadening their economic activities and becoming street vendors. Though women are involved in trade in Senegal - foodstuffs, artisanal products and imported goods such as shoes - the men claimed that street peddling in New York was too risky for women. It was all right for women to be "commerçantes" in Senegal and stick to women's specialities but the men pointed out that in New York the police were too aggressive. What if the women were arrested and, like the men, sent to jail for a few days?

Mariam and Nabou insisted that they needed to send money home for their children. As Fatou Sow has pointed out (1991:26) economic crisis brings a new liberty for women since men are obliged to

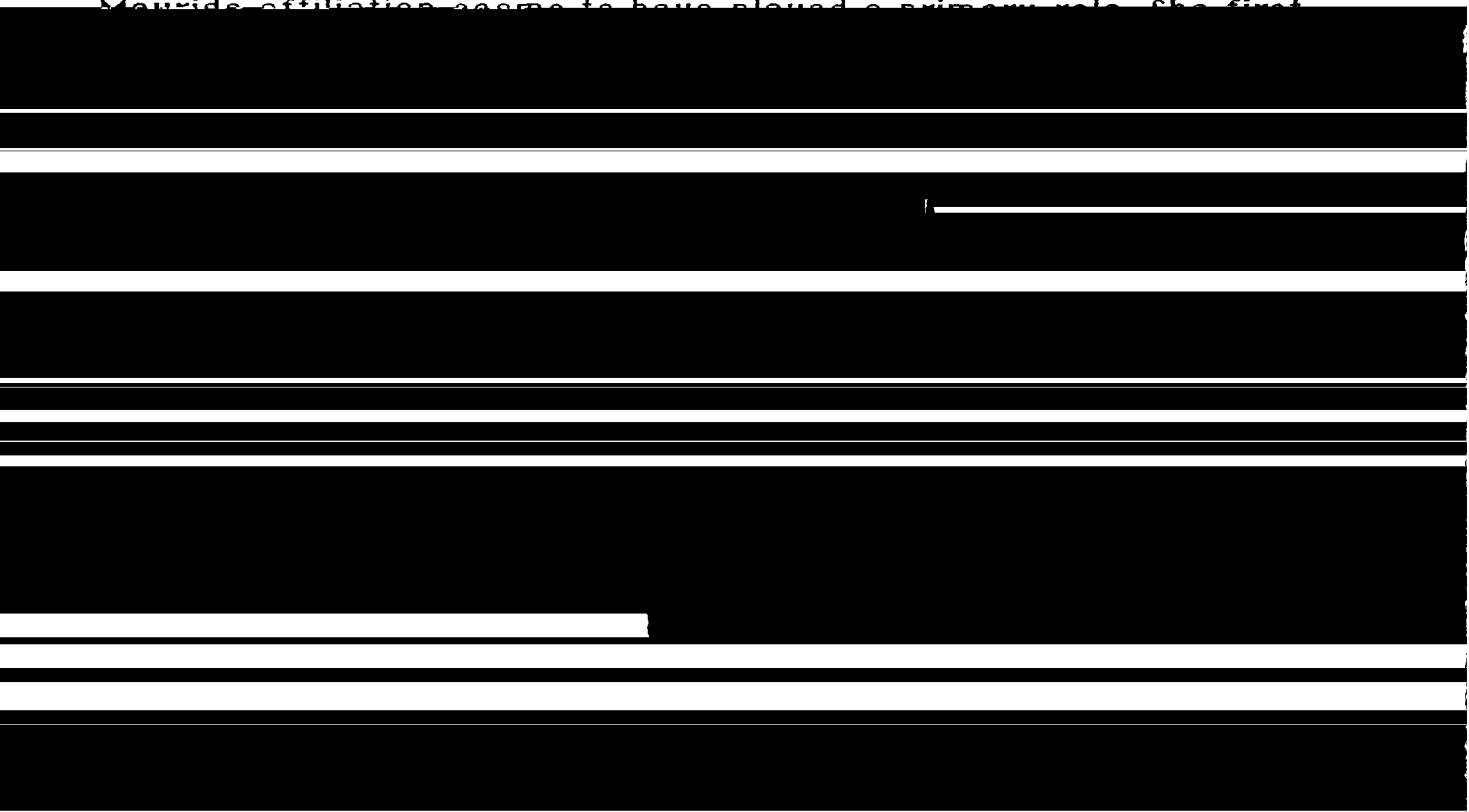
permit them to work when they can't meet their needs. The women started to sell on the streets ; they sold in the same locations and had far fewer problems with the law than the men because they became friends with the neighborhood police.

Like the men street pedlars, the women nearly always worked as a team on the streets. Such partnerships are useful because one person acts as a look-out for the police while the other concentrates on attracting clients. The women said too that they felt more confident in dealing with clients when the other was present.

When Mariam became pregnant, Nabou began to work with an older Senegalese woman, Adama, who had come to the US alone. Nabou became pregnant shortly afterwards and the women took turns looking after the babies, while the other two sold on the streets. There was a spirit of solidarity among these women. They tended to work together, pooling their money to buy wholesale goods together and everyday congregating on the same street corner to sell.

Shortly after the births of their babies, Nabou and Mariam began to look for salaried jobs. Mariam found work in a supermarket and Nabou eventually found a job in a hospital. After a time Mariam found her supermarket job too restrictive and explored the possibility of working full-time as a hair stylist. Like many African women in New York, she styled her friends' hair but had not thought of it as a possible full-time occupation.

In examining the steps which led to this new employment, Mariam's Mouride affiliation seems to have played a primary role. She first



for him in Sandaga market ; his wife works in the Fall family factory which manufactures hair extenders.

The Fall's networks extend far beyond Senegal and they are central in trading operations which stretch to Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia. They own stores selling imported goods, ranging from cosmetic products to electronic goods. Unlike other traders, the Falls have taken some of their capital out of the cycle of trade and invested it in a factory which makes hair extenders.

Key to their success is their extensive range of contacts with the migrant communities, especially in New York (Ebin 1992). Mariam's household was a sort of outpost for the Fall family in Dakar. They bought goods for them, they made contacts with useful wholesalers and helped them transport goods to Senegal.

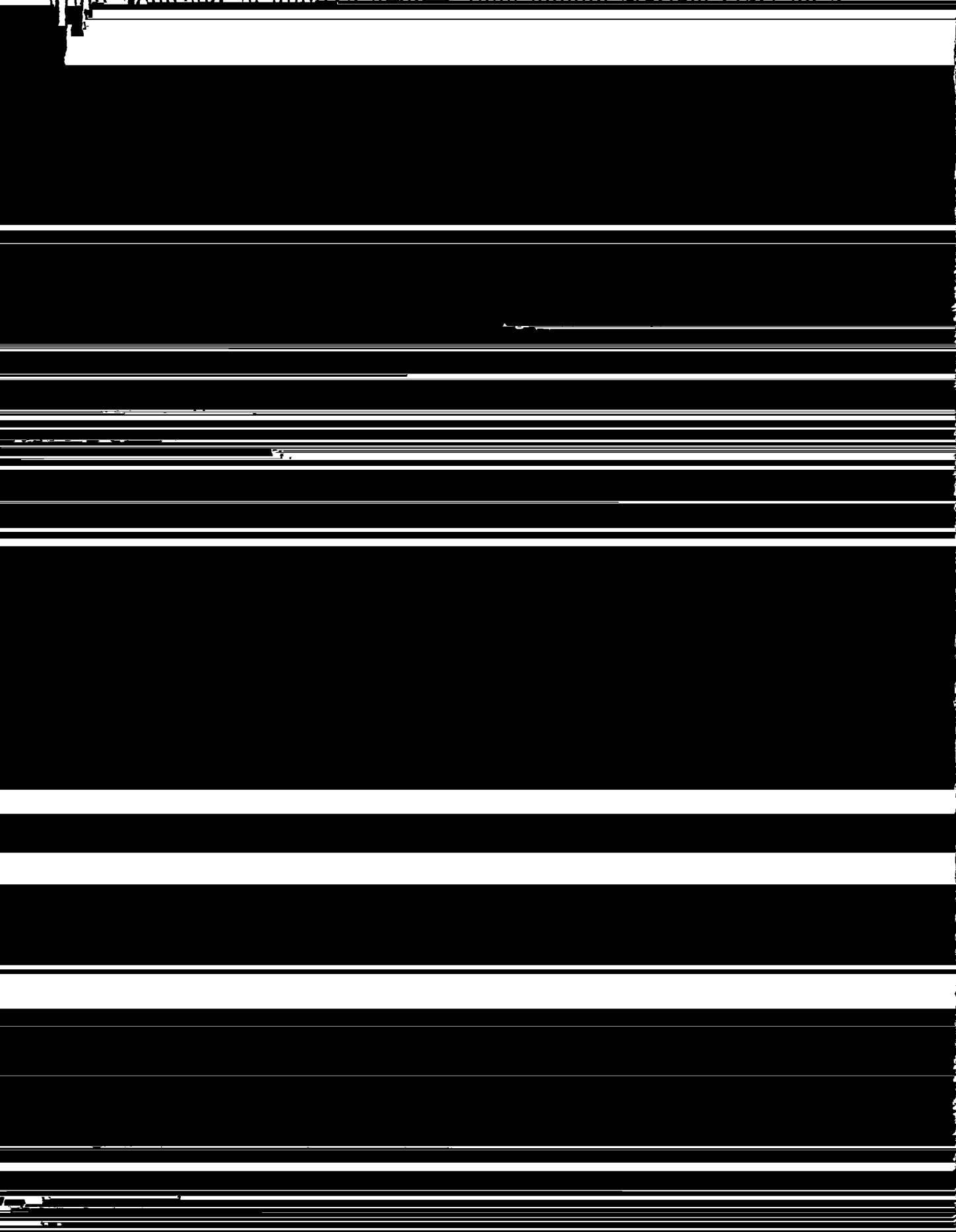
Cheikh Fall agreed to help Mariam in her project. He sent over a large supply of extenders and she began to look for clients. She had cards made up and while initially her clients were mostly other Senegalese women in New York, she soon had American clients from the Mouride da'ira in Brooklyn. They gave her name to friends and her list of clients has now expanded beyond the American Muslim community.

As she grew more successful, the Falls filled her increasingly large orders for hair extenders and she has now become an important distribution point for them in New York. To meet the growing demand for her services, Cheikh Fall has also sent over Senegalese women from Dakar to work with her. Mamadou's wife who had worked in the factory in Dakar came to New York to join her husband and also to teach Mariam the latest Senegalese hairstyles.

Each side has benefited from the partnership. For Mariam her Mouride contacts in Dakar helped launch her in the coiffure business ; Mouride contacts in New York widened her list of clients and she has developed a thriving business. She can now earn more than her husband and she recently brought over a family member to take care of her two children born in America.

These activities have also benefitted the Fall family. They have

other Maurides in diverse ways - they helped Meriam start up a



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