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978-0-521-10109-7 - Saints and Politicians: Essays in the Organisation of a Senegalese Peasant Society

Donal B. Cruise O'Brien

Excerpt

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## Introduction

As these lines are written, people are dying of hunger and hunger's attendant diseases in the Wolof region of Senegal (as indeed they are dying, often in much greater numbers, throughout the West African Sahel). Wolof fatalities, as yet, are few in number – above all the old, the weak, and the very young. The great majority will at least survive this hungry season (1973) to reap the next harvest. Few however, in rural areas, can face the long-term ecological future with any degree of confidence.

The Wolof farm in the savannah region of north-western Senegal, the Senegal and Gambia rivers to north and south, the Atlantic ocean to the west and the Ferlo desert to the east. No part of this region could be described as agriculturally fertile, soils being (in varying degrees) poor in humus, dry and sandy. And as soil deteriorates with over-cultivation, so the desert still expands from the north and east. Agricultural techniques have improved only very slowly with French technical guidance, productivity per acre remaining low despite the limited use of chemical fertilisers and some light machinery.<sup>1</sup> Wolof response to the pressure of rising population, and of rising expectations for at least some imported 'luxuries', in these circumstances has been to extend the area under cultivation. This means a neglect of necessary fallow periods even on relatively good soils, and new agricultural settlement in ever poorer soils. In present conditions, it can only mean the further

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encroachment of the desert. This grim logic has long been apparent to the trained agronomist, but even to the layman it is strikingly enough illustrated towards the end of any dry season. The savannah then takes on the appearance of a semi-desert expanse, a few trees and hardy shrubs dotted through the dead grass, strong winds driving the sand across the landscape. In some areas true desert dunes are already in the process of formation.<sup>2</sup>

To report that the Wolof are living in the shadow of death, although certainly very necessary, is equally certainly quite inadequate to understand how they continue to live at all: even, disturbing as this too may seem, to live rather better than most of their neighbours. To gain any real understanding of their present predicament, one must first understand Wolof history – the processes (at least since French conquest) which have led to the present situation. The outlines of this situation, as reported by the journalist or representative of an international relief organisation, may seem simple enough – too many people trying to live on too little land. And put in these terms, the problem *is* indeed simple – although, alas, no ‘solution’ of equal simplicity is readily to hand. But there is obviously much more to the Wolof than the stark evidence of today’s rural starvation: the purpose of these essays then is both to present a historical analysis of changes brought about (in large part) by colonial rule and to suggest an interpretation of the present situation which does some justice to its real complexity.

Good ethnographic evidence, studies of at least some Wolof villages by trained social anthropologists, could be of great assistance in an enquiry of this kind. And it may seem surprising, given the simple fact that the Wolof account for one third of Senegal’s population, that no such study exists. English and American anthropologists have indeed worked among the Wolof of neighbouring Gambia,<sup>3</sup>

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but their findings although helpful cannot be assumed to hold for the Senegalese Wolof – if only because the latter have undergone a quite different colonial experience. Many monographs have on the other hand been written (though very few published) on Senegalese Wolof villages, of widely varying thoroughness but in any case not showing much evidence of basic ethnographic training on the part of any of their authors (some of them administrators, colonial or post-colonial, recently some geographers and some economists).<sup>4</sup> One Senegalese social anthropologist (Abdoulaye Diop) is presently engaged on a full-length study of Wolof social organisation, the results of which may go far to fill the gap, but for the present one must acknowledge the simple non-existence of much basic data, above all on the detail of kinship patterns at a local level.

These essays themselves are not designed to fill that gap, although some evidence for at least one segment of Wolof society is indicated (above all, in 'Land, cash, and charisma', below). This author's fieldwork among the rural Wolof, in 1966–7, provided only partial evidence on kinship structures, which here is completed so far as possible by a selective use of material (copious enough, at least) from other sources. Certain very broad generalisations can on this basis be made safely enough – in particular that the partially matrilineal character of pre-colonial Wolof society has almost wholly given way to the patrilineal forms dictated by Islam. It may also (perhaps less safely) be asserted that in the Wolof case social and political structure can be fully understood only by methods which go beyond the traditional approaches of social anthropology. In discussing the Wolof now, one is necessarily involved in an understanding both of a commercial market and a state structure which include the whole territory of Senegal. For historical reasons, the most important of which deserve some preliminary mention, the Wolof have long ceased to be (if indeed

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they ever were) a discrete tribal entity, a social group with clearly defined boundaries – whether cultural or other.

Culture contact, first, has had its effect both on internal Wolof organisation and (almost by definition) on the relations of the Wolof to their neighbours. Islam is the first notable cultural influence to mention, first both in overall importance and in simple chronological order. Wolof contacts with Muslims to the north and east date back at least to the eleventh century, and the long, slow, and fluctuating process of Islamisation can be traced from that time. Whatever the stresses and contradictions inherent in that process (for some of which, see ‘Warlord, saint, and knight’ below), it was certainly very firmly established by the mid nineteenth century and it is now apparently quite complete. Today, to be Wolof is necessarily to be Muslim. Pre-Islamic Wolof culture, insofar as it is ascertainable at all, is ascertainable only through the accounts of earlier European travellers and through a few vestigial beliefs and practices which still survive. Even these latter remnants are now overlaid with Sufi Islam, a culture ultimately dictated by Arabic texts although necessarily mediated by the learned among local holy men. A blurring of tribal boundaries is a logical outcome of Islamisation, as the Wolof’s immediate neighbours are also Muslims. This ‘blurring’ is also facilitated by a compatibility of social structures between the Wolof and each of their principal neighbours – stratification of society in very similar (almost indeed identical) hierarchies of class and caste. One may now much more readily intermarry at the same social rank, between tribes, than within the tribe but between ranks.

The second significant dimension of culture contact has been that implicit in Wolof relations with the French, established on the coast as traders from the seventeenth century, as an increasingly effective colonial government from the mid nineteenth century, as a hegemonic power in Senegal to

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this day. French cultural penetration has always applied principally if not exclusively to the towns, where French-language education has been concentrated, but it is an important hazard of colonial fate that Senegal's principal towns (Dakar, St Louis, Thiès, Kaolack) are all located either on Wolof territory proper or in areas readily accessible to Wolof migration and (in local terms) eventual dominance. The sub-elite of colonial intermediaries, and the Senegalese governing elite today (of whatever tribal origin) have written in French and spoken in Wolof. From this elite there has certainly been some process of cultural diffusion (most happily perhaps in gastronomic terms) from France even to the rural and illiterate Wolof majority.

Where France is concerned, nonetheless, it would of course be distortive to see 'influence' primarily as cultural. This particular culture contact was only part of a more important relation, the real language of which was that of power and money. Seen in these broader terms, the colonial impact on the Wolof has been enormous, uniquely so among Senegalese peoples. Other tribes may have yielded more to the French in cultural terms, notably the 'pagan' tribes chosen for intensive Catholic missionary activity (the Diola and Serer). But the Wolof, while immune to such proselytisation (as Muslims), also became almost inextricably involved in new institutional structures introduced and dominated by the French – those of the market economy and of the semi-bureaucratic colonial state.

The Wolof certainly have derived real material benefits, gains relative both to other Senegalese communities and even to their own pre-colonial situation, from the operation of these colonial structures. They have also been faced by new sorts of problems, some less obviously resolvable than others.

No simple cost-benefit arithmetic can be applied to the gains and losses occasioned by colonial rule, especially since

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the colonial mechanisms are still at work today with no final outcome in sight. But it may be worth remark that the colonial relation now seems to have been most damaging for Wolof society less in the frequently-condemned evils of economic exploitation and political subjugation than in colonial rule's apparently most unequivocal benefits. The suppression of internal war in the Senegal area, the containment of epidemic disease, improved infant care, relief food supplies for famine periods, all contributed to the rapid growth of Wolof (and other Senegalese) population. The expansion of a new cash crop economy made possible a short-term enrichment of this population, but over the past ten years or more it has become apparent that agricultural production can no longer meet the basic needs of ever-increasing numbers. And if production still stagnates, population still grows. Demographic statistics in Senegal are only approximations, but (even allowing a very wide margin of error) the trend is clear enough: some 460,000 Wolof at the time of the first world war, some 650,000 for the second world war (statistics in each case compiled with military recruitment in mind), and in 1960–1, 1,103,000 (the most reliable population estimate ever made in Senegal, based on a demographers' sample of 10% of the total population). Demographers now estimate continuing population growth at between 2.5% and 2.7% per year.<sup>5</sup> And it may be noted, with due reservation as to the reliability of these statistics, that there is no indication of more rapid increases among the Wolof than among other Senegalese peoples – consistently over time, the Wolof are held to account for some one third of Senegal's total population, by far the largest single tribe. The important conclusion from this evidence is that population growth does not appear to have been especially favoured by the Wolof's relatively high exposure to urbanisation and to commercial agriculture. The destructive impact of population growth, the often

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acute stresses on social solidarity where resources become ever scarcer in relation to numbers competing, cannot in particular be blamed on the peanut.

The peanut nonetheless in other terms has had enormous effects, both destructive and reconstructive, on Wolof society. This apparently innocuous plant seems to have been introduced to the Senegal area as far back as the sixteenth century, brought from South America by Portuguese slave-traders for local use as a food crop. The French in the early nineteenth century grew it experimentally as one among several possible future export crops: no firm conclusions were drawn from these trials (notably by Governor Roger, in 1824). But by 1847, having recognised the limited agricultural possibilities of most of Senegal's sandy soils, Governor Protêt (prophetically at least in his own terms) announced that 'peanuts will save the country'.<sup>6</sup> And 'save the country', or at least provide for a viable colonial economy, they went on to do: peanuts have for almost a century accounted for the great bulk (up to 90%) of Senegal's export value, with the Wolof growing the bulk (over 60%) of the crop. The increase of annual exports was very rapid in the early colonial period, as the following statistics for territorial export tonnages show: 1875, 13.9 tons; 1885, 45.1 tons; 1895, 51.6; 1905, 96.2; 1915, 303.1; 1925, 453.7; 1936, 487.3; 1948, 451.0; 1958, 808.0.<sup>7</sup> (After the second world war came a new spurt in output: detailed annual statistics for the period since independence in 'Bureaucrats and Co-operators', below.)

What these figures have meant to the Wolof is that they have become a people of peanut peasants. Low profit margins, and low economies of scale, effectively precluded white settlement in rural Senegal. There are still no major Wolof landowners, although there are some large land holdings – without legal title, and with an informal title which has to date always proved conditional and insecure.

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Family plots of no more than a few acres (10–20 in most cases) are at present the established norm. These peasant farms do retain a certain viability, independent of the market economy, in the cultivation of millet for subsistence. But they have also become dangerously dependent on the peanut, which is grown largely (though not exclusively) for sale. The ‘dangerous dependence’ on the peanut, which means that peasants may starve when the rains fail, also applies to the Senegalese state. The peanut was the quickest and simplest way to make the colony pay, and the same logic continues to apply in Senegal since national independence. Without the peanut harvest, no other local resources make it possible simply to pay for the state apparatus – which in turn, means above all to pay the salaries of state employees. So government policy, while frequently recognising a need for agricultural and other economic ‘diversification’, has in fact consistently been to encourage the monoculture which official speeches condemn. Wolof peasants, who know very well that the peanut until now has allowed them a (marginally) higher living standard than most of their neighbours, have been willing to take the risks involved – locally seen, and quite correctly so, as ‘a gamble’. Albeit a gamble in which the stakes are getting uncomfortably high.

The colonial state introduced the peanut as an export crop, and supervised the rapid extension of its cultivation, while the post-colonial version of the same state apparatus has brought the internal marketing of the crop ever more securely within its own control (while French oil manufacturers continue to control the marketing process beyond the boundaries of Senegal). For the Wolof, state dominance and state profits are necessarily seen in somewhat ambiguous terms: from one angle, ‘the state’ seems unambiguously to have economic interests in direct conflict with ‘the peasants’. But from another angle, if one considers

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that the interests of 'the state' represent little more than the aggregated interests of state employees (and by extension of their dependents), the matter becomes more complex. Wolof peasants largely provide for the state apparatus in economic terms, but Wolof officials also dominate the state in political terms. And if this suggests possibilities of some local variant of class conflict within Wolof society, it must be recalled that even the poorer rural Wolof feel a certain superiority over other Senegalese. The Wolof have not done so badly out of the colonial and post-colonial state, relative to Senegal's other tribes. They have a higher living standard, they get preferential treatment in the allocation of government finance (roads, rail, schools, the various forms of 'development' expenditure), and they have a certain shared pride both in these (often meagre) relative material privileges and in their communal political power (an argument developed in 'Clans, clienteles, and communities', below).

If these few remarks may have served to sketch a necessary background against which these essays may be understood, it remains to say a little more of the theme of the essays themselves. This theme is essentially a political one, that of the organisational response of the Wolof people to colonial rule – the response of particular individuals, of given categories of political actors, of segments within Wolof society and (to some extent) of the Wolof people as a whole. The argument running through the essays is that the French impact on Wolof society was effective enough in terms of the limited objectives of the colonial power, in dismantling most pre-colonial political institutions (states and chieftaincies) and in providing a rudimentary machinery for the maintenance of public order. But colonial authority, it is held, always lacked both the social legitimacy and the institutional solidity needed to have a firm control

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of political life among the Wolof. In this situation of governmental fragility, and in particular given the very rapid economic and social change produced by the generalisation of the market mechanism, there was always room for initiative among the subjects (see 'Chiefs, saints and bureaucrats', below). The same laws of institutional fragility, at least where the formal apparatus of state is concerned, continue to apply today. And this may be taken to imply what is the principal concern of these essays, the importance of the various intermediaries who stand between the nominally bureaucratic state (colonial or post-colonial) and the rural mass of Wolof subjects. Two very broad categories may be applied to these intermediaries, the categories indicated by the title of this collection. Let us then briefly outline a description of the heterogeneous reality indicated by each of the labels, 'saint' and 'politician'.

'Saint' is the single most appropriate English-language designation for leaders of the three Sufi Muslim orders (*tariqas*) which between them claim the spiritual allegiance of the entire rural Wolof population – the Tijaniyya (roughly 60% of the Wolof total), the Qadiriyya (10%) and the Mouride (30%).<sup>8</sup> Each of these orders has its own, Arabic, nomenclature for such holy men (*shaikh*, *muqaddam*, etc.), but the overall label saint applies to those who are considered to be the bearers of a (now quasi-hereditary) charisma – or in Sufi terminology, *baraka*. The term *baraka* implies a special spiritual grace, a special position with God which may include the power to redeem souls. But it also, in wordly life, has come to imply political as well as economic power, in other terms a special position with the authorities of the state. The power of the saint, spiritually sanctioned, is truly a legitimate authority. And the bureaucratic state, originally imposed by the French, has remained chronically deficient in moral sanctions of any kind. The state auth-