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SARAX AND *SUTURA*: ALMS AND THE VALUE OF DISCRETION IN DAKAR, SENEGAL

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DEDICATION

For Madame Ndiaye née Rokyaha Diop and Michael Silverstein: I can never repay to either of you what I owe. So instead I will try to live up to what you have taught me, in some small measure, and to be in some small way to others what each of you has been to me. I think this is what you would both prefer, in any case.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnography of domestic economies and the management of information and material goods within and between households in Dakar, Senegal. It begins by introducing two seemingly unrelated sets of practices and concerns: forms of everyday Islamic almsgiving grouped under the term *sarax* (arabic: *sadaqa*), and practices and discourses surrounding concerns about discretion and concealment, *sutura*. At first, it seems that very little draws the two practices together: alms are often given in the street, to strangers; discretion is a concern of managing (circulation of knowledge about) the most intimate aspects of the domestic sphere. The first is emblemized by ragged male children in torn clothing who beg in the street, the second by lovely veiled women in the space of their own homes. Over the course of the dissertation, I argue that the two concerns are bound to each other as two sides of the same coin. Or better put, working together they create an outside and an inside to people, homes, and linked relationships. To do this, each relies upon and enacts careful means of controlling the flow of information about interactions. I locate these practices in the unremarkable activities of women's everyday lives as they manage themselves, their households, and the reputations of both. Tracing the movement of food given as alms, and contrasting it with the circulation of food within households and in kin networks, I locate *sarax* and *sutura* as built within, integral to, and reflections upon local institutions of Islamic piety, kinship and allied modes of relatedness, gender and feminine power, citizenship and neighborliness, and commodity markets and flows.

Put in more sharply analytical terms: though apparently quite distant, the practices which constitute both *sarax* and *sutura* have much in common. I argue that the multiple practices and discourses that make up each of these modes of action create what we might term "boundaries,"

moments and places of disjuncture between social contexts and entities, through the careful management the epistemic qualities of the exchange of goods and other sign media. Both *sarax* and *sutura* craft objects and situations to create aporia of information about histories of circulation, setting participants at a step of remove from actions and object. Both, then, create ignorance, or better, non-knowledge (in Simmel's sense): spaces purged of knowable information. Far from the violent silences about which other anthropologists have written in other contexts, here blank spaces and epistemic aporia are protective and nurturing, the very condition of possibility of any form of agentive action. Further, these practices of active not-knowing and carefully constructed non-knowability are framed as virtues, and models for other ways in which people manage the circulation of objects and information in the city. As such, *sarax* and *sutura* model a generally applicable (though still irreducibly feminine) semiotic ideology at play in the city (and perhaps the larger region). As such, *sutura* informs communication and transactions well beyond the space of the household, in Senegalese domestic and foreign policy contexts from intellectual property and privacy online to modes of engaging with international diplomacy.

Keywords: semiotics and materiality, circulation, exchange, islamic almsgiving (*sadaqa*), information management, kinship, femininity, anonymity, food, commodities, fungibility, Senegal

Introduction

Seeing and being (un)seen

From a taxi passing the entrance to Universite Cheikh Anta Diop, my companion (a highly educated professional woman in her fifties) and I watch the pedestrian traffic. She sucks her teeth at the sight of a woman walking with an infant tied to her back, face visible and body covered by a large terry-cloth towel wrapped beneath the mother's arms and fastened at the front with a secure tuck. "You see what they are doing now? It's horrible for the children. Lord knows what will happen to them, exposed to the world like this." Most women, she says, will at least cover their babies in the *musoor* (a large rectangle of fabric usually used to intricately wrap the head) that matches their clothing, covering the infant's face and effectively camouflaging the outlines of the child's body in the wrappings of densely printed fabric. "In my day," she says, "we really protected our babies from being seen, we covered them with *ser u rabbal* (a complexly patterned handwoven cloth), and no one could see their shapes. That's why we all grew up well, our children grew up well." She says nothing about the young child beggars, whose dusty bodies are clothed in torn cut off pants and ripped, baggy t-shirts, who jostle around and beside these women.

I have spent the years since this conversation trying to figure out what kind of danger these towel-wrapped babies might be in, a danger to which babies wrapped in *musoor* matching their mothers' clothing, or *seru rabbal* which cover them in dense pattern, are not also exposed. It was much later, that is, more recently, that it became clear to me that the dangers of exposure and concealment faced by infants carried by their mothers are intimately tied up in the exposures of child beggars, and the protection afforded to women by their veils, and families by the management of information about

Chapter One

Sarax: Dakar's economy of forgotten alms

Sarax as the sign of a limit

This dissertation centers on a complex of practices called *sarax*, a set of forms of giving to the poor that are embedded in the everyday life of people in Dakar. *Sarax* can be glossed as “alms,” or “almsgiving,” and includes practices from giving a coin to a beggar on the corner, to dispersing kola nuts at a funeral, even good advice gently offered can be *sarax*. More than a set of kinds of giving, however, *sarax* is a model for morality in social interaction. As I argue over the course of this dissertation, *sarax* is a model for social interaction, as played out in the circulation of material goods, as space in which the *control of the circulation of information* is foregrounded. In this drama, the act of *saraxe*, doing *sarax*, enacts a limit of various kinds. In the practices of *sarax*, the possibilities of the limits of social interaction, of human goodness, of divine intervention, and of human potential to act in the world are dramatized as functions of the control of information.

We might say with Rasmussen, as she describes *takote*, a similar Tuareg practice, “The meanings and uses” of the practice “reside not in a unitary form of exchange, transaction, or libation, but, like Nuer cattle exchange, a metaphorical process which takes on a life of its own.” (2000, 35). Though the term *sarax* derives from the Arabic *sadaqa*, “spontaneous alms” (as distinct from the charitable payments required of the believer), the actual forms of practice in Dakar which fall under the heading “sarax” are often far from any religious context, and too numerous and diverse to enumerate here. To take a bank note out of your pocket and put it in the hand of a beggar on the street is *sarax*, of course, but so walking away from a small amount of money one has argued over with a taxi

driver, giving up a claim to something, putting food out for an unknown stranger to collect, buying and releasing a bird. What unites these practices as *sarax* is the kind of relationship that they create between parties to the interaction: a radical separation between people, an absence of — or even an end to — relationships in which reciprocity is expected or imagined, a wall enclosing intimates from the rest of the world, a punctuation to the otherwise ongoing play of prestation and counter-prestation, action and reaction of social life. In Senegalese social life, as I discuss in more detail in chapter four, gifts and return gifts between women who head households form an ongoing space of action and strategy that builds up and plays out over adult lifetimes, and indeed generations. In this space, individual people, lineages, and their relationships are mapped and renegotiated, building conflict and tension over time.¹ It is a game of high stakes and high drama. To do *sarax* is to create an out from the game, to make a move that reaches outside of the spaces of shared knowledge and obligation which constitute people, houses, and groups in Dakar, as entities in relationship to each other. Indeed, to do *sarax*, in Wolof, one says that they “*gene sarax*,” they “put out” the *sarax*. Wherever it goes, it is now out. Out of the house and out of circulation. Out like the household garbage that one will also “*gene*.” *Sarax* is one of the only things in Dakar, if not the only one, that truly goes “away.”

While many practices fall under the title *sarax*, the prototypical action, the most unmarked meaning, is the spontaneous giving of small amounts of money, commodity foodstuffs (rice, sugar), or in specific contexts, cooked food, to the unknown poor, as embodied in any one of the city’s beggars. These beggars are in many ways inseparable from the alms on which they make their living. Their

¹One is reminded of Bourdieu’s comment that “The temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, is what makes possible the coexistence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift.” (1977:5)

bodies, bedraggled yet nondescript, assume the role in this “metaphorical process,” as Evans-Pritchard might have it, of the object and action of *sarax* itself. By accepting objects and then disappearing back into the masses of which they are only an example, beggars allow the transaction of *sarax* to be a transaction across a nearly hermetically sealed edge. Objects thus given as *sarax* disappear from the donor’s social world, marking an edge of the intimate relationships of gift and counter-gift — and the forms of power and influence that they entail — which form the otherwise inescapable web of social ties that animate the city from within the walls of houses, behind the darkened windows of cars.

In Wolof, one does not “give” (maye, jox) alms. One “puts it out” just as in English one does not “give” but “takes out” the trash. Indeed, the Wolof phrase is literally “to take out alms,” the same verb used for any kind of taking out (e.g. taking out the trash *gene mbalit*²). To do *sarax*, is therefore, to create an ‘outside’ or an ‘away’ for things to go *outside of*, to go *away from*.

Sarax can be more or less habitual or elaborate. Some kinds of sarax are taken out daily, as an acquaintance of mine was in the habit of wordlessly handing a coin to a beggar each morning as he entered the main road on his way to work. Others are briefly considered, as the protagonist of Sembene’s film *Mandabi* prays briefly that his misfortunes will follow the money he has just given a beggar. Still others are more elaborately considered and executed, sometimes requiring a series of consultations with a ritual specialist to resolve a problem. The problems range from arthritis to the envy of others; they often refer, however obliquely, to something one has done that has attracted attention, or one’s own misdeeds, especially sins of improper gain or accrual. Once diagnosed, these problems are repaired through the purchase of elaborately anonymized mass-commodity objects,

² fn. gen to go out, -e instrumental

which are then secretly “cast off” to beggars. I argue that each individual act of making *sarax* is a form of epistemological labor, by means of which qualities of the person or household are moved into physical objects, and then dispersed. The aim of this chapter is to describe *sarax* as a specific set of ritual and economic practices, and to outline the work of *sarax* as a form of semiotic labor that works across scales in the city, connecting individual virtue and vice to images of collectivity and community, while simultaneously maintaining the privacy of individuals and households.

Here to see the secret: first thoughts on an ethnography of the effaced

Early one Friday morning in 2005, on my very first trip to Dakar, I took a taxi downtown to the exclusive high-rise building “Immeuble Kebe.” Named after the independence-era industrialist who built it, the high rise is a landmark on the city’s skyline: Dakar’s Trump Tower. As I approached the building it was dark. A few talibe slept on sheets of cardboard pressed into hollows near the doorways of the ice cream parlor built into the ground floor of the building. A few talibe sat on the broad steps outside the building. I entered the lobby and greeted the doorman and security staff. We’d been introduced by one of the residents of the penthouse, a prominent sociologist at CODESRIA. “Go grab a coffee,” he told me. “It’s too early. They’ll come down later. After dawn.” I stepped into the patisserie next door, bought a coffee and a croissant, and set myself up to wait for something I expected to be a spectacular moment: the Friday breakfast provided to the city’s *talibe* by the elite households in the building. This would be, I was certain, a crucial piece of data for my dissertation project. I had seen the empty bowls left after householders in the middle class SICAP neighborhoods of Dakar set out bowls of *laax* (millet and yogurt porridge) for their Friday morning *sarax*, and watched American Evangelical missionaries prepare huge vats of porridge to feed wandering talibe on Friday mornings as

encouragement for the talibe to come for medical exams at the mission. Surely this would be the best example of this weekly ritual that unites the actions of the city's households. I planned to administer my oral IRB consent script, pass out my business cards, then record this ritual sacrifice in detail. I was ready to photograph each part of the process, to interview both the adult donors and the children receiving these alms, and to create a detailed description of the whole. I planned to interview donors and assign them codes in my notes, I would use the photographs to estimate the amounts of porridge put out as *sarax*, and from that calculate each household's ritual expense. Then I would repeat the process, of course, at the same location and at others representing a diverse socio-economic sample of the city. None of this was possible, and the reasons for the impossibility were my first lesson in the fact that *sarax* is not only a model of good giving, it is a model of good epistemological crafting. Doing *sarax* requires careful attention to the information created and dispersed in that doing, akin to what network security professionals now call "information hygiene."³

Of course, somehow, I missed the *sarax* when it was put out and consumed that morning. I rushed to add sugar to my coffee and dashed back outside, the sun had barely risen. I re-entered the building's vast lobby. The security guard laughed a bit when he saw me. "The sarax is out!" he said, "the bowls are empty." He gestured towards a tower of 24 inch diameter steel bowls and their covers, easily six feet high. I asked if I could take a picture of the bowls, and he said of course. No harm in that. The doorman was so kind and hospitable that it was only years later that I came to suspect he had sent me out for a coffee at that moment precisely so that I would *not* witness the alms-givers' descent or the

³ The term seems to be used more in practice among hackers and network security professionals than it is in academic writing on systems security, but see MacLennan 2014 for examples of discussion.

boys' feast. Looking back now, I am almost certain that is what happened. Now I understand that the doorman of one of the most exclusive residential buildings in Dakar could not have done anything else. To do his job he had to withhold that moment from me, with hospitality and complete discretion. He assured that I was welcomed, just as he assured that the *talibe* were welcome to eat, while veiling from view the movements of the building's inhabitants.

In my subsequent years in Dakar, I tried many times to capture the movement of bowls of porridge from the closely guarded and well-hidden homes of Dakar's super-elites. As much and as earnestly as I tried to capture the detail of these moments, my knowledge of the entire scene was always partially obstructed, secondhand, and somewhat abstract: the guards told me about watching the ladies in the building emerge from the elevator, beautifully dressed, veiled and smelling of fine perfume, to deposit the bowls in their hands for dispersal. The guards even used their own lean bodies to pantomime the gait of different unnamed ladies for me, exaggerating the dragging steps and perfectly swaying posteriors of ample ladies as if they were performers in a *theatre*. One Saturday the sociologist's housekeeper showed me the half empty glass bowl of yogurt in the refrigerator. She makes it each Thursday, she told me, so that Friday's porridge will have the freshest yogurt when she puts it out. I was left to work out for myself that the empty space in the bowl represented (some part) of that week's *sarax*.

Calculations were made impossible, as exactly those transactions I meant to record were carefully veiled and effaced. I saw traces of the movements of prepared food into and out of the building: maids carrying neatly tied packages wrapped in veils. I saw evidence of grocery shopping: building staff draping sheets across stacks of canned goods behind the lobby desk, girls carrying covered

cardboard boxes in. I struggled to understand the veiling of food, as retailers and vendors moved about the city with their goods openly, strapped to carts or the backs of porters. The careful veiling of any food in transit from one house to another — yet not between retailers — appeared in other contexts as well. I was even admonished ‘for God’s sake, put something over that!’ because I had left an unopened bag of rice in the foyer of my apartment.

I spent many other Friday mornings walking by villas in the most prestigious residential neighborhoods in the city. Once, I met the sociologist’s wife for a coffee, and standing next to her car, I saw a neatly tied tower of bowls in the footwell of the passenger seat. “Don’t include this in your dissertation!” she said, laughing. A moment later she told me I could write about seeing her bowls in the car, she knew I would, she said, because she would do the same: “I’m an ethnographer too! But no pictures.” While I continued to see countless empty bowls stacked by doorways, I always failed to capture any moment of transaction. I grew frustrated with myself that I could never see the transaction I had come to investigate, convinced that the ‘real stuff’ of this city-wide ritual occurred in a moment I never failed to miss. I was sure I was completely failing at my job.

Though I never managed to see the ladies of Immeuble Kebe put out their *sarax*, I became a fixture inside other households, in which I learned to put food alms out myself. While developing my skills in the kitchen, my sense of humor in conversational Wolof, and real friendships, I began to understand why I’d never seen what I was looking for at the thresholds of elite homes. The information contained in the moments I never caught is, indeed, important for an understanding of the city. It is so valuable, so intimate, it seems, as to be purposefully effaced, publicly invisible.

Even the sociologist's wife, herself an anthropologist trained in Europe who had conducted her own fieldwork in the United States, withheld the bowl from me at the same moment that she showed it to me. After admitting that she would surely include a parallel moment in her own ethnography, she held her bowl's existence in a separate frame by suggesting different ways that she imagined I would narrate that moment in writing. She moved the real bowl into a hypothetical, a comic, frame. Rather than discuss the real bowl in her car's passenger side footwell, she speculated (with quite sharp self-conscious humor) on how exactly I would characterize her, how I would describe her body posture, her clothing. She went so far as to, hilariously, suggest that I should make a bowl of *laax* and then call the *talibe* to eat and have someone take a good, clear photo of me giving it to them. I could use the photo on a scholarly bio page, she suggested, perhaps put it on the door of my office. With a wry chuckle, she suggested some corners of the city where I could find very dramatically shabby *talibe* so as to stage a photo that would seem truly *authentic* to the viewer. Her tone made it clear that she had witnessed something this before, that she was remembering someone else's actions with scorn. It was only much later that I realized that my earnest attempts to capture, photograph, record, and measure the movement of bowls in the transaction of alms with all parties present were doomed to failure (perhaps even comically misguided). I would never be a bystander to the accomplishment of this ritual, because the effacement of the action — or the reframing of it into a sort of *irrealis* mode — was an essential element of the ritual itself. The food had to disappear from the donor's social network, the sleight of hand that accomplished this was, itself, the ritual.

As I came to understand, the movement of all bowls outside of the homes in which they are packed and consumed is necessarily veiled. To be *sarax*, the actions I hoped to record around some of

these moving bowls must be accomplished ‘lepp ci biir u sutura,’ all in *sutura*. That is, every part of *sarax* must, by definition, be done with discretion, even as the bowls move on public streets.

Overhearing: taxi and traffic⁴

The interpretations of Dakar’s beggars I had heard in 2005 recurred in formal interviews during 2006 and through the markedly different tone that people’s relationship to food took during the economic difficulties of 2007-2008. During the latter period, however, greater familiarity gave me access to other forms of talk. The topic of the population of beggars was picked up and dropped during women’s day-long visiting sessions, whispered as people walked down the street, mentioned between patrons at the corner shop, and the topic of debate in taxis. The tone of these conversations was always astonishment: an observation on the street led to a moment of shock and then reconsideration. The action of one anonymous beggar could suddenly attract a person’s attention, and in discussing his or her surprise the observer would seem suddenly to glimpse a new view of the city as a whole, as if diagnosing it from carefully considering its shadow.

In these contexts of spontaneous commentary people consistently talked about the (purportedly) growing number of beggars, their growing audacity, and their (supposed) increase in wealth as signs of pathology of a different order. (Note, of course, that in every account I have found the number of beggars is always imagined to be increasing, the beggars imagined to be wealthier than before.) A curious explanation was often given: the changes in the beggar population reflected the growing number and amount of sacrificial alms that support them. This, many concluded, was a sign of the growing number of reasons to make sacrifices, the increase in size of individual alms, a sign of

⁴ Parts of this section draw heavily on material previously published as Pfeil 2012.

escalating stakes of sacrificial practice. Just as an increase of the number of fish in the pond indicates some increase in nourishment for all the fish in the pond, the growing population of beggars was taken to signal something about the ecology of the city. In this case, the diagnosis was not that the city was richer than usual, quite the opposite. It was that people's increased struggles and uncertainty led them to devote more of their resources to alms, in an attempt to stabilize their own situations: to gain or improve employment, to shore up their relationships with in-laws, to atone for ill-gotten gains.

Though people responded to my questions about their own practice of *sarax* with blank stares or platitudes, I overheard countless conversations about the results of unknown givers' alms. Like most overhearings, these were partial and thus difficult to capture (as well as not really meant for me, so a bit questionable to record). In one instance, though, I was able to observe an entire conversation, which perfectly encapsulated the many aspects of the genre I had come to recognize. It took place in late 2008 during a weeklong garbage worker strike, in response to government's failure to disburse their salary.⁵ The following narrative is adapted from field notes I made immediately afterwards:

I am in a taxi with an older woman I know quite well, we are going to the dentist because I need a root canal. She is going with me because I am scared of the dentist, and this makes a good excuse to take the afternoon off from her busy office. Before we got in the taxi she had a quick and sharp talk with him about how much we'd pay to go from Ouakam downtown to *Place de l'Indépendance*: 2,000 francs CFA (~\$4). While she is settling into the back seat the conversation continues. When she talks with taxi drivers, I always listen. This driver is a

⁵Rosalind Fredericks provides a lovely nuanced ethnographic account of the moral, political, and practical stakes of the 2008 garbage strike in her 2018 book *Garbage Citizenship*.

man who could be much older than her. He has worked in the city for over thirty years; she has worked in a major national office in Dakar for the same length of time. My friend does not always talk with the driver, but she almost always engages older drivers who seem to know the city well, and so the two of them begin a heated discussion of the changes the city has undergone. As we proceed down *route de Ouakam*, they point to various things in the landscape as signs of change, as signs of the problems of Wade's regime.

We pass the (then) new overpass, just before the Poste Fann and the driver tells us that he saw a woman and her child hit here the other day — beggars of course. My companion leans in, "oh! there are so many of them! We used to see prostitutes here [she gestures towards an infamous bar on the corner before the Poste] but now it's all beggars!" They nod in agreement. Talk turns to a beggar both knew, but who no longer works this corner (he's built his house back in his home village, apparently, and has retired). (*Ndeeysan!* The lady says.) Though both know him, they do not call him by name. Rather, they describe him as "the old man in the wheelchair, from Kolda."

The two of them are enjoying the conversation immensely. This talk is fresh and off the cuff, covering the subject of new construction and its new consequences, yet the themes are standard. The image of the beggar killed in traffic in front of this hospital was already a commonplace when Aminata Sow Fall composed *La Grève des Battù* (1979). The house that alms built is also a common theme of talk about beggars, and a similar house is the setting of half of the action in Sow Fall's novel.

Then the driver points to parking lot near a large grocery store (frequented by the cream of Dakar society). He begins to tell a story:

"You know, I was stopped there, a few weeks ago, praying, and someone told me to go over to a private car, a black Escalade. So I went, out of curiosity, you know, people were telling me to go. There was someone inside the car, behind its tinted windows."

The woman interrupts:

"Oh you have to KNOW someone to have those on a private car..."

They nod and cluck in agreement. He continues:

"This hand is passing envelopes out of the skinny little space at the top of the window. So I take mine, turn back towards my taxi, rip it open, I see white fabric. I put it in the trunk and forget it. It's only when I get home that I remember it, thinking I could maybe make some clothing for the kids out of it, if it was enough, I open the package. Well [a sigh] I unfold the fabric and I see red paper [the highest denomination of banknotes, each worth about \$20]. It was a sum of [about \$200 USD]."

From here the conversation takes a turn that surprises me. The two work together to read an agent or source back from this envelope of money, a relationship they treat as one of simple part-whole metonymy. First they follow this line of speculation through quantity: it was determined that more than \$4,000 must have been given away. They calculate this sum based on an estimate of the number of packets handed out, and the assumption — grounded in their own broader experience of alms-giving practice — that each envelope of money contained an equal portion of some larger amount. They are calculating back from sarax as I had intended to do, but for a slightly different purpose.

Having arrived at this size of the total cash portion of the *sarax*, they begin to discuss what a sacrifice of this scale could tell about its donor. They reason that no one gives away \$4,000 that he himself has earned, no matter what he wants or what he is trying to escape. Therefore, this money could only mean one thing: the \$4,000 (remember, this is the estimated ‘total’ of alms that they believe were given out) was possibly itself only a smaller portion of a much larger sum, embezzled or stolen, and the envelopes given out represented a sort of spiritual money laundering, meant to shield the giver from the rapid divine judgements due a thief. Alternately, they suggest, this sum of money had been called for as alms, and the person thus directed was then compelled to procure the money to meet this request: “In which case he must surely have a serious problem!” the taxi driver says. “Yes, and think of the problems that he’ll have to fix now that he’s done this!” (Here he meant that this sum of money, if called for, must almost certainly then be stolen, leaving the almsgiver in the position of the already imagined thief.) The lady agrees; a sad look briefly crosses her face.

Then, they turn to the physical qualities of the notes, which they read as a further source of information about the situation that led this money to appear on the street: crisp sequential 10,000 francs CFA notes must, they reason, come from a brick of notes at the bank. Banknotes do not stay crisp long. Therefore, this money could not possibly be the result of an accumulation of money hoarded over time. Nor could this be a large sum collected through an aggregation of money from smaller transactions (in neither case would the bills be sequential, nor would they be uncreased). Finally, and for similar reasons, the bills could not come from a payout from a *tontine* or rotating credit union (for classic descriptions see Ardener 1964; Geertz 1962). This particular group of notes — the taxi driver and the lady decided — must be the result of a division of a larger set of bills drawn new

from the bank. The bills are therefore understood, as are the tinted windows of the black SUV from which they emerged, as signs that this event of almsgiving is closely linked to high-level government or financial agents.

They pause for a minute and pick up a new conversational thread: the current garbage workers strike. I write a few notes down on a piece of paper. Then, just as we are preparing to get out of the taxi, the talk takes a final turn:

“The thing is, I pity [the man in charge of payroll for government sanitation workers].” The taxi driver continues, visibly saddened, “I sympathize with all of them [*yerem naa leen, ñoom ñepp*]. I know that there is nothing you can do in that situation, you want to do the right thing and then you have some kind of other need...”

“Or someone comes into your office and tells you he has another need...” the lady says, “And what can you do? You have no choice at all. These people higher up in the government can make things so complicated.” She turns her eyes to me, “Pay the driver.”

We’ve pulled over as far as possible from one of the giant, stinking piles of trash. And while she is pulling herself out of the seat, I quickly hand him the money.

Ideally, almsgiving of the sort described in this conversation is completely anonymous: both donors and the objects they give are general and are intended to efface all knowledge about the history of the transaction. They are interpretable precisely because of the attempt to remove or obscure marks that would identify their history. The ritual is effective — and the objects meaningful — in proportion to the complete anonymity of the objects it produces. The most generic token of a particular commodity

makes the best sacrificial “victim” in this case. But this anonymity — the ignorance surrounding the object — is also the key to its productivity and meaningfulness.

Silences around *Sarax*

What I had discovered by trying to carefully measure and map *sarax* is that it is emphatically not to be measured, a well guarded blank spot on the map. I eventually turned my attention away from attempts to sketch the reality of almsgiving, and instead focused on tracing the contours of the blank social space created around almsgiving. I moved from attempting to observe the practices that made *sarax*, to recording the ways in which *sarax*, as a practice, was consistently and carefully erased. This shift has consequences for the possibilities of ethnographic description. Both my methods and my findings, I think, shed some new light on an old subject of anthropology: taboo.

Of course, I am not the first ethnographer to stumble onto an intentional ellipsis in people’s shared talk, to realize I had found a taboo by being repeatedly corrected. As Aimee Placas discovered of talk about prices in Greece in 2000 (Placas 2016), the taboos on conversational topics and moves one stumbles into in attempting ethnographic fieldwork are often more than frustrating.⁶ Specific gaps in what can be said, or asked — or how it can be said and asked — that first appear as methodological challenges, reveal much more than anything that might have been directly said.

During my fieldwork, I found that *sarax* was not to be discussed, or only to be discussed as a hypothetical or fictional possibility, or only to be discussed in passing as an explanation of an aggregate

⁶ See also Basso (1970) on the cultural meanings of silence as a site of ethnographic inquiry; Debenport (2015) for discussion of the role of silences and refusals to e.g. directly gloss lexical items during language revitalization work; and Mahmud 2014 for consideration of silence in relationship to the formation and circulation of ritual meanings in contemporary ‘secret societies.’

phenomenon. These taboos on talk about almsgiving are much more meaningful than I at first understood. They carve out a space around these practices that traces some of the shapes of the practices themselves. As I later found, *sarax* involves interactions with objects and people carefully managed to frame the event outside of the real of everyday life. The ritual actions of making *sarax* to blur the specific identities of interactants and objects, rendering them tokens of social types, and to pass objects and people through processes of aggregation and dispersal, anonymizing each and further distancing it from the specificities of its interactional history.

By maintaining my ignorance of *sarax* — or attempting to — my interlocutors maintained the key conditions of *sarax*'s efficacy, its opacity. After almost two years in the city, the same friend who would not discuss their almsgiving with me began involving me in the practice. I began to be invited to visit people's *seriñ* — their diviner or spiritual consultant — and to consult them. Rather than practical advice on how to navigate a social situation, or rather alongside that advice, my friends began to offer to take me to see someone who could do more.

The following discussion of the practices of *sarax* is drawn almost entirely from my own experience as an almsgiver, and as someone accompanying close friends in personal crisis. I discussed the process of almsgiving with people who referred me to their *seriñ*. I frame my description in the vaguest of third person reference, and in relationship to scenes from Aminata Sow Fall's popular novel, out of respect for the parties involved in my research, and out of respect for the ways that they taught me to respect taboos on talking about *sarax*. This discussion reflects over a dozen instances I attended personally, the details of which I recorded in coded notes.

In what follows, I examine sacrificial almsgiving in Dakar as two distinct practices: the production of objects made anonymous in the practice of giving, and speculative practices of inference which read states of affairs back from aggregates of such objects. On the one hand, I describe practices of “casting out” objects that makes them effectively disappear into the shadow city populated by the beggars Sow Fall’s protagonist terms “shadows of men.”⁷ On the other, I describe practices in which these shadows are read as signs of the status of individuals, of households, of the city as a whole. The first set of practices, the creation of specific kinds of ignorance, are the condition of the latter, the creation of an otherwise impossible form of knowledge. I further argue that these practices highlight the importance of the management of ignorance to sociality in Dakar, more generally.

Putting out Sarax

— *C’est vrai, c’est vrai Serigne...Ce n’est meme pas a discuter.*

It’s true, it’s true *seriñ* it’s not even to be mentioned

— *Si tu feras l’aumône comme indiqué, avec trois fois sept mètres de tissu blanc non soyeux, ainsi que sept cents noix de cola dont trois cents rouges et quatre cents blanches...*

If you perform the alms indicated (prescribed), with three sets of seven-meter lengths of white, non-silky fabric, as well as seven hundred cola nuts, of which sum three hundred are red and four hundred are white...

(Aminata Sow Fall 1979, 79)

A person, suffering from some very private affliction or, alternately, hoping for a particular outcome in a complex situation of chance, goes to see a specialist, widely termed a *marabout* in the

⁷ A turn of phrase I return to in chapter five.

French literature: a *seriñ* (a local title of a Muslim cleric) or a *seetkat* (a seer who uses techniques not considered specifically Islamic). News of this visit is not shared with others, and the person going tells any number of cover stories to explain the trip without revealing its purpose. If the person seeking a consultation does refer to the specific person to be consulted, he is “an old man” or she is “the lady” and only rarely identified by name, more likely by location, e.g. “Paa bi nekk xar yalla” (the old man located in the ‘xaryalla’ [lit. waiting for God] quarter). This person is a cleric or diviner who has earned a reputation for determining — through one or more means of divination — what needs to be “put out” as a sacrifice to remedy the problem.

The forms of divination employed are diverse, but share one important quality, all involve some relationship, most often contiguity, with the physical body of the person seeking help. Further, in each case no explicit question is posed to the diviner. Some diviners I witnessed carried out a complex numerological sorting of verses from the Quran after they have been touched by the seeker. Others read cowries that have been tossed after the seeker had held them. Yet others famously read just the photograph of the seeker, and had no need to meet him or her in person.

It is not always necessary for the client to name the particular problem in question, in fact in some forms of divination this is not allowed. One can even consult someone to find out *if one has a problem* and then to cure that problem (without ever knowing exactly what the problem was). If sacrifices are indicated, the specific problem has been located and given a name (somewhat tautologically, “the need to make these sacrifices”). From the moment a remedy is sought, the practice of giving *sarax* is framed in transaction with the physical body, in contiguity, and importantly, as a movement of goods. The pathology is conceptualized as a need to cast something out of the physical

body of the afflicted and away, through a mediating object, through the hands of the shadowy beggar, and into the even more obscure society of the *djinn*.

Though superficially similar to forms of divination and the consultation of oracles, the *seet* consultation that precedes *sarax* is in many ways the opposite of these practices. Explicit questions are rarely allowed in sessions of consultation with the *seetkat*. This is quite different from most familiar oracular traditions, which involve a question explicitly asked of the oracle, and a response that can only be interpreted in response to that question. Indeed, one of the most famous oracles of the past, the Shang dynasty “oracle bones,” are valued as historical artifacts because they preserve detailed questions: each bone was inscribed with fairly detailed questions about possible tactics to be pursued, and even court gossip (Kwang-chih 1980). The oracle’s response was read from the way that the inscribed bone reacted when cast into a fire. Similarly, the Zande poison oracle, as described by Evans-Pritchard, involves the careful creation of the text as a clear and well-crafted question, first in a multi-party discussion of “how the question will be framed,” and then an elaboration addressed to the poison itself in which “the questioner does not cease his address to the oracle, but puts the questions again and again in different forms.” (1976, 135) The question text is then closed by an instruction for the poison to simply affirm or deny the truth of the question text: “‘If such is the case, poison oracle kill the fowl,’ or ‘if such is the case, poison oracle spare the fowl.’” (Ibid.)

Classic examples of oracles and practices of divination in other social contexts follow this general structure. A specific question is asked, and the “response” of the oracle is read back from a binary set of circumstances. That is, the oracle is asked a question that structures a clear response, either by providing clear meanings for signs read as “yes” or “no,” or within a structured regime of

interpretation. The presence of the oracle as party to the interaction and respondent is imputed from one of a set of states of affairs that must occur. The bone will crack, or it will not crack, the fowl will die, or it will not die. The oracular “frame” establishes either of the outcomes as the meaningful intervention of a disembodied agent. The denotational and interactional text (Silverstein 1996) of the consultation, then, recruit the oracle itself to the status of participant.

Rather than structure the meanings of a response by regimenting the question, most Senegalese forms of divination leave the question radically underspecified. If divination is usually understood as practices of finding some information or state of affairs about the current or future world, the practices of consultation that precede some forms of *sarax* are not divination at all. *Seet*, the forms of consultation that precipitate *sarax*, differ from many others described in the literature because it involves no finding of fact, no denotational text that can be taken to *mean* anything about the client. A *seetkat*'s client says very little, and the *seetkat* responds with a detailed list of specific goods to be “put out.” If the client's question were to be recorded, as are those of the clients of the Shang oracle bones, they would be of no historical or social scientific value, if they were even meaningful at all.

The afflicted person listens and makes a list of the objects demanded: one might be told, as was the protagonist of Sow Fall's novel in the passage that begins this chapter, to give three seven-meter lengths of white, matte-finish cloth; and seven hundred kola nuts, 300 red and 400 white. Once purchased these objects become indexical signs of both this moment of consultation and of the “problem” that led to the consultation. The value and quantity of the objects requested are understood to reflect the scale of the problem, or the stakes of the situation.

The *seriñ* specifies, too, how these items will be “taken out.” Perhaps one of the pieces of fabric will go to an old woman with a child; another to a mother of twins; the kola nuts, in three packages to three different blind men. The person making the sacrifice might buy them himself, but it is more likely that he or she will send a trusted intermediary. The gathered objects are hidden in the house overnight. They are divided into their prescribed portions and closed up in opaque bags, envelopes, or wrapped in brown paper. The next morning, ideally just before dawn, someone — not necessarily the afflicted person — will take the bags and parcels along on the way to work. Whether they travel by foot, bus, taxi, or private car, people are always carrying neatly wrapped parcels with them when they go out in the morning. The packages might contain work clothes, lunch, a gift for a friend, clothing that needs to go to the cleaner, something to take to the tailor. Parcels of sacrificial goods — and the problems of which they are signs — disappear into the melee of commuting and rushing.

Then, as the taxis and buses pass a major crossroads — near a major post office, for example — the problems become visible for a moment, because of the traffic disruptions they cause. Bags are thrown from the windows of stopped buses into the hands of beggars who press close around every vehicle. A taxi suddenly crosses lanes of traffic to stop momentarily in front of a cluster of shabby children with begging bowls. The tinted window is lowered and a veiled woman in sunglasses is momentarily visible as she hands small black bag after small black bag out the window. The moment is finished, but beggars continue to demand, and she dismisses them with the phrase “the sacrifice is out” as the taxi speeds away.

Objects given as *sarax* lose all meaning but this: they point to someone’s personal problem or secret, and they suggest, by their size, something about the scale of the problem. Not necessarily

because big problems mean big sacrifices, but because only big problems would motivate someone to actually follow through with making such a big sacrifice. The problem is only rarely explicitly formulated by the client; a visit to the *seetkat* is not an opportunity to reflect on a personal issue. The task of this meeting is thus not divination as it is usually understood. No information is created in a client's interaction with the *seetkat*. Aspects of the social or psychological world of the client, things most carefully protected by *sutura* — a form of discretion I examine in the following chapter — are given a physical form in which they cannot divulge any recoverable information about themselves, and then they are expelled from the household, put out and lost, epistemologically divorced from the client.

Because no report of fact — no denotational text — is ever produced in reference to the client, *seet* does not even qualify as divination within most discussions of the term. Du Bois provides a suitably subtle definition, “divination is not so much a means of obtaining information as a means of establishing social facts, facts which command a consensus and can form the basis for legitimate, recognized social action.” (1993, 54) Here Du Bois is particularly concerned with the ways in which divination establishes individual culpability by producing an incontrovertible text that shows the intentions of the party it names, and is constructed as a semiotic object so as to appear to say nothing about the intention of the diviner, the speaker. Indeed, *seet* and *sarax* appear to do precisely the opposite, they detach or efface social facts, they conceal the internal states of the client from the public (the “consensus”). Where divination establishes facts about persons by imputing a disembodied agent to a denotational text, *seet* effaces facts by moving them through bodies. If *sarax* is a form of action derived in these cases from a consultation with a ritual specialist, it is everything but “legitimate,

recognized social action,” it is a separation, an erasure, a coverup (as one is commanded: *sutural sa bopp!* “Cover/conceal yourself!”), a kind of effacement work.

Almost as soon as the commodities to be sacrificed as *sarax* acquire this identity, they disappear. The objects — including rice and sugar — are quickly fenced in the market and become ordinary commodities once again. The resultant money mixes with other cash received and is sent to families in rural areas, or banked in secret banks, only to become visible much later as something else. At each stage in the process a new kind of uncertainty is introduced: each portion is a sign of the whole, of which it is a part, but division masks the total size of the whole. The kind of each item hints at the kind of the problem, yet it cannot tell the whole story. Further, the person who hands it out — glanced only fleetingly — might be the person in whose name the sacrifice is made, but it is just as likely to be a messenger.

It appears troubling to argue that almsgiving produces palpably unknowable — and radically alienated — objects, as if the objects of *sarax* are more commodities than gifts.⁸ The bag of sugar and envelope of cash given as *sarax* appear, if only momentarily, autonomous and separate from the history of individual human interactions that have produced them. This is, however, precisely the result of the practice of alms in Dakar. *Sarax* transforms the givers’ highly personal and private problems into an aggregate and depersonalized stuff, emblematic of a total social situation: the city. The entire process, like the “grazing” practices of Jain renouncers (Laidlaw 2000, 623), transforms prepared foods served

⁸ Indeed, the objects given as *sarax* are *almost always commodities*, in the specialized sense adopted by the Chicago Board of Trade, among others: not only are they produced specifically for the market, they are fungible bulk commodity products, meaningful more for their quantity than for their (highly standardized) qualities. I discuss the importance of these qualities in detail in chapter six.

by householders from a “personal substance, closely identified with the donors,” into “an anonymous and undifferentiated substance.” Laidlaw’s argument is different, though, inasmuch as he argues that by causing the object to disappear at the precise moment of transaction, the renouncers’ means of consumption creates a free gift: “Here, the gift as object is made to disappear once it has been given, so there is no longer the same ‘it’ of which to speak.” (2000, 623) Alms in Dakar achieve a slightly different magic.

In Dakar, it is widely known that *‘lu nekk ak boromam,’* “everything has an owner,” just as *‘ku nekk ak kilifam’* “everyone has a patron.” Making the unique origins of each object disappear by creating a tightly worked veil of ignorance around it, almsgiving in Dakar creates a hidden channel within the city’s social networks within which ‘problems’ can move away from the afflicted, and the blessings of virtue can enter his or her private life. By putting out *sarax*, people in Dakar create otherwise impossible objects, objects with no *‘borom’* — no owner — objects that index the possibility of personal action beyond the bounds of an individual’s relationship with her *kilifa*, of a means of rendering social facts into vapor, a way of creating an epistemic wall around an individual. *Sarax* enacts and reinforces *sutura* — the discretion that gives individuals their own minds.

Chapter Two

Sutura: the value and protection of enclosure

I get into the taxi and close the door and the driver turns the radio on, “yall naa yalla sutural ko, yall naa yalla dimbili ko...” the voice on the radio booms, continuing a set of benedictions before beginning his completely mundane advice to the caller. This is a formulaic opening to prayer “I pray that God gives him sutura, I pray that God aids him”¹

— Fieldnote, June 2007

“One man’s hypocrisy is another person’s discretion”

— Chas Freeman, former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia.¹

Kooku Amul Sutura: vice and talking about others, lessons from a ‘bad girl’

It was said to me—off the record, at night, over glasses of tea — of a much-beloved woman in the neighborhood, divorced and remarried many times, “kooku amul sutura ci boppam,” she has no discretion about herself. In that context I was meant to understand that she tells all; she keeps her own secrets poorly and talks widely (and, as I would learn later, uses her imagination to create quite self-interested reports of others’ doings). Everyone loves her, she runs a thriving business, but make no mistake, she is a “bad girl.” The evening that I heard her characterized in this way, I wasn’t surprised. I had begun to write explicitly about the virtue of *sutura*, and indeed, she seemed a perfect case study of its deficit. To make it easier to discuss this woman in the remainder of this chapter, let’s call her Ndeye.

If Ndeye had a deficit of *sutura* she had other feminine virtues in abundance: she was *jonge*, she had *teranga*, she was blessed with tremendous *yermande*. *Jonge*: she was full of a gracious mature female sexuality that drew men to her. *Teranga*: she delighted in offering hospitality to guests, in

¹ On the dilemmas presented by the Wikileaks’ publication of US diplomatic cables. 7 Dec 2010, “Talk of the Nation,” NPR.

dotting on visitors and spoiling her sisters-in-law; she gave generous gifts. *Yermande*: she treated others, and particularly the weak, with compassion; she never failed to produce some food for the hungry or to back the underdog in a squabble. As in my English translation, the first of these qualities is expressed as a grammatical adjective in Wolof; the latter two as the direct object of *am*. Like *teranga* and *yermande*, *sutura* is something one can possess, in greater or lesser degree. Or not possess at all. Indeed, these qualities or attributes are among a catalog of virtues that are less ‘feminine’² *per se* than they are ‘noble;’ like ‘*faida*,’ ‘*jom*,’ and ‘*kerse*’ they are the standard epithets attached to individuals in a griot’s praise song or genealogy, equally applicable to men or to women. The attributes are *less properties* of a given person *than an almost material substance* conditionally possessed by that person, requiring moment-to-moment maintenance through the production of appropriate behavior and material signs, and subject to destruction in practice or in song.

In the paid praise song of griots at family events, in the sung praise of female in-laws,³ and in private conversation, Ndeye was often credited with each of these three vital qualities. Indeed, her instantiation of each of them made her notably feminine, and quite influential. Each brings people to her, each is a means of drawing the social world in and under her power. As I discovered later, the virtue she lacks is crucial to balance the others, however. If *teranga* (hospitality), *yermande* (compassion), and *jonge* (feminine sexuality in its mature, domestic, persuasive incarnation) draw society together, *sutura* does the equally crucial work of keeping people apart. In this she was, sadly, lacking.

² *Jonge*, however differs in that it is a grammatical adjective, not a noun as are the others, and that it is markedly, if not definitionally, feminine.

³ For more discussion of which, see chapter four.

Ndeye used to have me come to lunch. The very first time, I brought a bottle of juice. When I arrived she grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed both cheeks, she cooed “ma chérie, bisous!” She sat me down immediately on an overturned bucket, talking ebulliently about everyone (by name and without regard to whether I knew who she was talking about) and in rich detail as she cooked our lunch: *ceebujen*.⁴

Ndeye lived with her son and her (current, I believe third?) husband in an apartment I found extremely charming. The first time I came here it was to attend her granddaughter's *nguente*, the baby's naming ceremony. The ceremony took place during Ramadan, and was therefore a rather demure affair. I had just arrived in Dakar for what would be my third and longest stint of fieldwork. I knew next to no Wolof at the time, and even less of how to dress and comport myself. I wore, I thought, a nice dress, but only managed to look shabby and wilted in the heat.

I am certain that it was my pathos that drew this woman to me, to adopt me and promote me, to give me her name and my first set of *yeere Wolof* ('African' style locally tailored clothing). Or, as others in Dakar framed it, it was her own possession of noble attributes that attracted her to me, and her remarkable possession of feminine attributes that guided her training of me. Her *yermante*, her compassion, lead her to take me on as a sort of apprentice in womanhood. She drew on her remarkable compassion to see me as a lost child with some potential, to pity me, in my feeble attempts to dress myself and interact in society. She decided that, given my body shape and remarkable coloring, I had the makings of someone *jonge*, and she was going to see to it to transform me from a sad and rumpled

⁴ Spelled in the French styled “thieboudienne.” In this dissertation I use the standard Wolof orthography for most terms, but use the French styled orthographic conventions when discussing words as written, if this is how they commonly appear.

mess into an elegant and attractive woman. Rather than enjoying the oft-mocked spectacle of a slatternly, or worse, mannish Caucasian woman, she took me on as if she were some cross between scandalous society lady and Henry Higgins. In any case, I became a frequent guest at her apartment.

Ndeye's apartment at the time was on the third floor of a crumbling building in Taglou, an older neighborhood in Ouakam. The stairs to her flat were narrow and uneven poured concrete, a series of switchbacks interrupted by landings. Her place was on the top floor, and a wide landing spread from the stairs to her front door. A large 1970s-era print of a German hunting cabin woodland scene hung framed on the outside wall, to the right of the door. She cooked out here, as if it were a courtyard between rooms in the compound of a named lineage in one of the old neighborhoods in Medina, rather than the landing of a crumbling colonial-era equivalent of counsel flats, inhabited by people related to each other only by their claims to apartments in the building, inherited one way or another from local employees of the French military in the 1950s.

As I came up the stairs she was bringing out a small wooden stool to sit on, the *gënn* (mortar and pestle), and the gas can and *bek* (burner nozzle). She talked me through every step from the moment of first frying the fish (*saf*) — “...and here's what happened to the woman downstairs, so I've brought her daughter in, to work for me (is she still at the shop?), she's useless!” — through winding a narrow strip of fabric in the space between rice steamer and cooking pot to seal the edge as the rice steamed (*tey*) — “...and that's why Goora hasn't built on his land yet!” Finally, she upended the steamed rice into the broth (*söör*) — “...and though she's pregnant, she's come home, and thank goodness! Her husband's a monster and she's so beautiful! He's ruining her! I'm sure the baby's a son!” — and setting the lid on top. A neighbor comes up the stairs to chat. He is an older man,

laughing as he comes up the stairs: “Listen to everything she says about cooking, and be deaf to the rest! She’ll ruin you and you seem so proper!” He pivoted gently to smell the cooking meal and began to describe my hostess in flirtatious terms, telling me everything about her that — he insisted — I should not emulate. I am embarrassed by all this and concentrate on looking at his feet as he walks away. He is wearing plastic thongs, his trousers are neatly cuffed around his calves, his feet gleam freshly washed and free of dust. He must live in the building, I realize as I read over my notes later, and have just come from praying.

As the afternoon wore on it became obvious that the visitor was right, and Ndeye was more of a threat to my propriety than I had suspected. After a delicious lunch eaten in front of a giant television playing Saudi satellite rebroadcasts of some censored movie (an appropriately blue screen appeared when something untoward occurred) she took me into her room to lie on her bed and chat — standard same-sex sociality after lunch in Dakar — while she smoked cigarettes. Cigarettes! And then she told me all about her husband’s skill in bed, as compared to those who had come before. Oh dear. At first I believed it was her private sins and ‘peches mignons,’ that marked Ndeye’s spotted reputation. However, I soon learned that I had misunderstood: her habits had, of course, their own consequences for her, but I was told that they reflected her nature, however flawed. She was, I was told, the kind of woman who had a lot of husbands, “and what’s the problem with that?” Some women, I learned, are that way. In some ways, it’s really a sign of many of their good qualities. They attract so many men, maybe that’s why they lose interest in them so quickly. Later I learned that plenty of other women her age smoke, in the privacy of their rooms, knocking the ash of their Pall Malls into the ever increasing pile of ash in their incense burners. The behaviors I had found worrisome were not only not

the problem, they were rather common for even women of good reputation: smoking, sitting topless in her room while chatting with me, her long string of husbands. Her penchant for publicity was closer to the root of the problem. Her questionable judgment of what to reveal, when, and to whom, lay closer to the trouble. Ndeye’s lack of *sutura* is perhaps, then, not instantiated in any one action, but in a her unreliable management of information, about both herself and others.

My translation of the phrase “Kooku amul sutura si boppam,” as ‘she has no discretion about herself,’ is clumsy. Though literally fairly accurate, it comes close to misrepresenting the interaction. This utterance could be glossed as follows:

kooku	am-ul	sutura ci	bopp-am
the aforementioned- singular human)	has-neg.	Sutura prep	head-3rdSgPoss

Two aspects of this comment disappear in my translation. First, the use of “kooku” is notable for more than its grammatical peculiarity as a specifically co-textual referential index, plucking out the human topic of prior discourse for continued reference and predication (Ngom 2003, Robert 2006, Tamba et al 2012). “Kooku” bears another valence of indexical meaning as the mark of negatively evaluated women’s speech (c.f. Inoue 2002). It belongs to a set of completely grammatically predictable forms that have been used in completely pragmatically predictable ways as euphemism. They have become not only pronouns but also items of an avoidance vocabulary, though still in use as pronouns, they have become tarnished. (Examples, ‘leff’ generic substance-singular item: ‘thing’ is now an extremely vulgar term for female genitalia) What ‘kooku’ shares with these other forms is its status

as an emblem of performed (in)discretion. It is the mark of talking as properly as one can about an absent third party, a form of talk that is, by definition improper, even quite sinful.

‘Kooku’ is emblematic of the practice of ‘prettying up’ (*rafetal*) a dirty conversational situation, in conversational context it is the proper way to do something improper, namely third person reference and predication. Using *kooku*, I had been told, is thus an example of ‘solal sa wax tubey’ ‘to dress your speech in pants/underwear’ Of course, one is only implored to put pants on speech that exposes something inappropriate, and pants themselves come to mark what they cover from proper view. The pretty word is contaminated with the dirty uses to which it is put, the improper moment in which it appears, the indiscretions it both covers and signals. On the other hand, *kooku* is about as pretty as gossip can be made.

By beginning with ‘kooku,’ this comment not only refers indexically to the topic of our conversation, making her available in discourse for predication, it also indexes the genre ‘gossip’ via stereotypes of women’s speech here indexed in marks of feminine politeness. By doing the latter, the phrase takes a gentle poke at both the referential content of this interjection and the speech interaction in which it is now embedded: she gossips indiscriminately, *we ourselves* are gossiping *right now*. A second problem arises in my translation of ‘ci boppam,’ as ‘about herself.’ ‘Ci’ is the only (syntactic) preposition in Wolof. It is therefore in extremely wide distribution in speech, and the relationship it codes here is unclear. ‘Ci boppam’ is even more difficult to gloss. In one context it can be quite literally ‘on his head.’ In others, it can be quite the semantically bleached: ‘to itself’/‘of its own.’ Boppam, alone, is commonly used as a reflexive pronoun when the reflexive form of the verb is unavailable for this purpose, for example when a piece of reported speech is used as a verb in the style of free indirect

discourse. In short, every part of this sentence is so useful and so common in speech that the sentence itself is nearly meaningless.

Semantically weak as it is, the sentence “kooku amul sutura ci boppam,” does little to clarify the relationship between the quality ‘sutura’ and the referent of the indexical pronoun ‘kooku.’ In fact, in the conversation that followed the interjection, it became clear that the other participants in the conversation had no better segmental gloss on this than I did, and that the utterance really did not bear this kind of reflection. As soon as it was uttered, the speaker was ashamed. However, there was unanimous agreement that his claim was true, as much as we were ashamed to discuss it. What, however, that truth entailed was unclear; after stopping himself sort in the narration of numerous examples, the speaker said, well, “c’est que...xamul lu muy def, rekk. Xolam rafet na. Lu mu yoor rekk, di ko maaye.” (“It’s that...she doesn’t know what she’s doing. She has a beautiful heart, in any case. Whatever she has, she gives it away.) And then the subject dropped. I would hear this statement of another’s generosity more times than I could count, as the closure of any criticism of the behavior of one’s own kin, or, more often, one’s affines.

Am Sutura: containing intimacies

When Ndeye moved from the neighborhood to stay with some family downtown in the Medina, I began to pay my lunch visits at the house of the wife of a successful cabinetmaker, let’s call this woman Sokhna. Many of the same people who cautioned me about Ndeye, suggesting what to imitate and what to ignore, were delighted that Sokhna had brought me under her wing. “She’s good. Uncomplicated,” I was told. “Oh Sokhna? Yes, *sunna ak farata rekk.*” No one has anything specific to

say about her, characterizing her actions as only *sunna* and *farata*, Wolof words derived from the Arabic *sunnah*, the (meritorious, exemplary) deeds of the Prophet, and *fardh*, religious obligation.⁵

Sokhna's house was attached to her husband's prosperous and bustling workshop at the entrance of the Ouakam market. I'd enter the little courtyard that opened on the workshop, carrying a black plastic bag full of fruit from the vendor across the street as I passed the palms potted in poured concrete urns. I'd then turn to the left and knock on a heavy wooden door. A long pause. A teenage girl would answer, wearing a loose t-shirt and a tie-dyed wrap skirt, a short broom in one hand. She'd nod, gesture me in, then turn to walk the long hallway to a small atrium where she deposited the broom in a corner and drew the dustpan to cover it completely. Sokhna would then appear from behind one of the curtained doors. She wore a long housedress, and threw a worn prayer shawl over her ample body, as if haphazardly. She smiled a long slow smile revealing the gap between her teeth, a rare mark of beauty she shared with every TV news anchor in Senegal, and gestured me past another crocheted lace curtain into the *sal* (salon), to sit on a long sofa. She'd greet me effusively, drop a little more incense (*coorai*) on the coals in a terra cotta burner full of ashes, and spread out her rug to pray. Somehow, my arrival always coincided with the early afternoon call to prayer. The television was turned to channel two, the less somber of the national broadcast channels. The girl brought me a cup and a partially frozen two liter bottle of water. I poured myself a drink, and waited for Sokhna to begin our conversation: a gentle discussion of her crochet work, the news on the television, my clothing.

Sokhna also tried to teach me to cook. She invited me several times into the little atrium where the girl had arranged the broom, and offered me a short wooden stool (*bang*). Here she showed me

⁵ I discuss this phrase and its use to describe married women's activities in greater detail in chapter four.

how to remove the vegetables and fish from the broth in which they had been cooking (*sippi*) and to place them in a covered bowl before stirring the pot three times and pushing the rice out of the steamer where it had rested above the broth, and into the pot (*soor*). She liked to talk to me about modifications she made to her recipes because she wanted to ‘moitu tension,’ (avoid high blood pressure), and I appreciated this about her cooking: it tasted more of parsley and chili pepper and less of MSG. The atrium was at the end of the long front hall. In the hallway hung a photograph of the Nineteenth century cleric Serigne Mansoor Sy, and a velvet painting of the Kaaba. When it was time for lunch I spread a cloth on the floor under the pictures while Sokhna sat on a bench in the kitchen arranging the food (*yekk*) in a large enamel bowl and platter. The girl carried the bowl out to the workshop, and when she returned we ate with the other women in the house around the platter.

Both Ndeye and Sokhna are excellent hostesses, skilled cooks, and gentle teachers. The contents of my visits with both women were similar; indeed the practical lessons on womanhood they felt compelled to share with me were almost identical. Both taught me nearly identical culinary technique (though Ndeye is thoroughly unconcerned with cholesterol and sodium). Both taught me similar techniques for tying a *ser* (wrap skirt) so that it falls perfectly to break at the arch of the left foot. Each accompanied me, at one point or another, to buy cooking pots in the market. Ndeye and Sokhna are of roughly the same generation, raised in the same neighborhood, married (for Ndeye this was several husbands ago, however!) into the same family, have children who share the same surname, and are almost always in attendance at the same ceremonial events. Both waxed nostalgic about going to dance clubs in Dakar in the late seventies. Here, however, the similarity fades. Ndeye is always seen, always implicates herself in family and neighborhood affairs, always seems to be coming and going: during my

time in Dakar she moved house no less than five times. I could always count on seeing her—or worse, her seeing me and telling a greatly embroidered version of events to any member of the listening public—yet I never knew where to look for her. Sokhna, on the other hand, was always home to receive visitors. The few times she left her comfortable home she went to market early in the morning, or stepped out the door and into a taxi to visit an ailing relative. In each case, she left wrapped in a soft knee-length veil, her face obscured, carrying an opaque plastic bag.

One day I came to visit Sokhna and found her usually jovial husband in the *sal*, somber. He was rarely in the house during the day; he barely paused to take his meals and to pray out in the workshop with his sons and apprentices. He gestured me from the *sal* into her bedroom, and I saw her lying on the bed on her side, her veil pulled up and pressed against her face with one hand. She was sick. Our conversation was hushed, punctuated by her soft sighs. The girl came in and gave her a black plastic bag and Sokha showed me its contents, single-serving packages of Bideew brand biscuits and Baralait powdered milk. She held the bag close to her face for a second as she recited a *sotto voce* prayer, then tied the top of the sack and handed it back to the girl with instructions as to how to divide the contents, among a certain number of *talibe* at the crossroads.

Something occupied Sokhna's mind, and we lay there on the bed in near silence for a few minutes, me fanning her. Soon the maid returned from distributing the alms; the mood lightened and Sokhna seemed, again, completely self-possessed. She told the maid to bring in the fruit I'd brought, and swung her legs to one side of the bed and drew aside the tablecloth on her bedside table to show me a collection of glass jars, each filled with strings of beads. She laughed and told me she figured it was time that I learned about 'the things' you know, 'how to keep a marriage fresh for fifty years!!' It is

crucial, she told me, that the strings of beads a woman wears at her waist under her clothing be stored in a jar of perfume. “It’s a big surprise!!” she said, and began to laugh. As she pulled out one strand of beads after another, explaining the importance of each to me—like a woman taking her young adult niece to a lingerie shop for the first time—she shook each strand in the air and we both began to giggle. At the end of the visit, she rose to sit on the bed, and began her parting routine: offering her greetings to all our common acquaintances, and then, cupping her palms before her face, a little formulaic prayer of protection to close our visit. This time, rather than the standards asking God for health or *barke*, she said ‘yaal na yalla sangal ñu sutura,’ ‘may God wrap us in discretion.’

In my visits with Ndeye and Sokhna I learned that *sutura* is a form of crafting a virtuous self, not through managing what is true about oneself—the contents and particulars of one’s life—but managing how that information is separated out or held aside from other information. As Sokhna’s prayer suggests, *sutura* is like a garment or a curtain meant to be drawn around a situation, a person, or a group, constituting that body as a set of restricted knowledge. As such, it is a virtue instantiated through the restriction of some forms of circulation of knowledge about facts of a person’s life; it is not a virtue that is concerned with the specifics of those facts themselves. The propriety of *sutura*, just as the sense of “the secret” as Beidelman argues, “does not always involve a lack of knowledge [or, information] but can comprise a commonly agreed-upon set of restrictions and silences about the proper time and place of discourse.” (Beidelman 1993:5)

Both Ndeye and Sokhna took it upon themselves to teach me salacious secrets about female sexuality, for example, but the manner in which these interactions transpired were quite different. Ndeye provided specific information about herself and others to me right away with a jubilant

openness, while seated on her landing; Sokhna, offered me generic statements of instruction—and a very quick glimpse into the intimate world of her illness and the sacrificial alms she had been prescribed to offer in search of a cure—framed by both the inner rooms of her home and a series of progressive encounters in which I became, over a period of years, her confidant.

If each of the classic “Wolof” virtues is as it appears grammatically, something like a material possession of its noble owner, not quite inalienable, *sutura* might then be a framing virtue: a metaphorical curtain that can be drawn around the social person. Indeed, *sutura* is discussed at times as a garment. It can be wrapped around oneself or another (most often a dependent) as Sokhna prayed, it also can be torn or abraded. This metaphor, however, performs a sleight of hand, disguising the fact that *sutura* is not a quality or a piece of information or a set of actions or facts; it is a state resulting from the proper management of circulation about any and all of those entities.

We might, then, think of *sutura* as a virtue of implicit metapragmatics writ large: a judgement as to whether someone is ‘am *sutura*’ or ‘amul *sutura*’ is a judgment about a social fact constituted in the poetics of that person’s communicative actions over time: the extent to which a person makes information about him or herself known, and the artfulness with which a person can manage access to that information.

Where *sutura* appears in literature about the region, it is often linked to tensions surrounding female (or feminized) sexual propriety, in light of Islamic family law. In an overview of Muslim kinship and household structure Sow (1985) notes “one marries, out of respect (*sutura*), a woman who is carrying his child.” (566). Sow’s mention of *sutura* translated here as “respect” is fascinating; it appears within a larger discussion of the consequences of the application of Islamic inheritance law in the

context of (“Wolof”) bilateral descent. Because property follows the agnatic line under Islamic law, Sow argues, children born out of wedlock create serious social problems. Indeed, she argues, the only resolution to the problem is a marriage. Though Sow’s argument is a bit circular, it points to the relationship between *sutura* and the question of social reproduction. Here, *sutura* makes social persons possible, however indirectly. Through a study of popular video melodramas produced in Senegal, Mills (2011) follows a different understanding of *sutura* to a similar conclusion. For Mills *sutura* is not the condition of social life, but its absence can cause social death.

Mills contends that though *teranga* and *sutura* were at some point in the past emblematic of the distinction of noble lineages, recently “*sutura* has come to produce gender difference itself, making a break with feminized *sutura* a break with legible womanhood.”(3). For Mills, contemporary *sutura* is best defined as “feminine submission to masculine authority, and wifely submission to the husband in particular”:

This modality of *sutura* is most powerfully exemplified by the injunction to guard the husband’s *sutura* by eschewing the disclosure of his flaws, misdeeds, or anything else that would diminish his honor in the eyes of society. The wife’s knowledge of these flaws is deemed protected, domestic, private information, and to narrate them publicly or expose them to the public eye by other means would be to tear the veil that protects that private sphere.

In her extended reading of popular Wolof language video dramas (*theatre*), Mills argues that within the “regime of *sutura*” women’s experience is contained within a domestic sphere rendered ‘unspeakable.’ Because disclosure of domestic experience strips a woman of her *sutura*, for Mills the the Senegalese female subject, of any social standing, is always already subaltern. To speak domestic experience is, on Mills’ reading, to commit social suicide. This formulation, while both politically

compelling and perhaps representative of some contemporary Senegalese feminism (e.g. Diaw 2004, Mbow 2000), elides the specific complex forms of semiotic practice that constitute ‘*am sutura*’ as a quality of an individual, practices that go far beyond the avoidance of disclosure of abuse. While this analysis reveals that to lose *sutura* may mean to face a form of death by exposure, it neglects the ongoing practices that make the (re)production of social persons possible. While a lack of *sutura* can lead to scandal, and in the popular fiction Mills discusses: disinheritance, loss of protection from the family, and death.

I argue, *pace* Mills, that the presence of *sutura* nurtures and sustains. Maintaining *sutura* is itself a means of self-protection. Further, both men and women create *sutura* in their own persons and households without stoic submission and secrecy, and *sutura* may be judged absent or weak even when no shocking or even shameful ‘flaw’ is ‘disclosed.’ Mediation and discretion are, here, ends in themselves.

The body is as important an instrument of *sutura* as is speech. Francesca Castaldi, writing on women’s dance in Senegal links “the ‘Wolof’ virtues of *sutura* to *kersa*,” the latter translated for me by Senegalese colleagues as ‘perdeur’ (fr. *modesty*) or ‘honte’ (fr. *shame*), to describe what she names a particular gendered Senegalese *habitus*:

The ‘Wolof’ virtues of *sutura* and *kersa*...establish a relationship between kinetic containment and propriety...Both qualities depend on a bounded and subdued self and are especially appreciated in women, but also in members of the upper classes. These concepts suggest that the kinetics of the female subject constitute also her kinaesthetic.
(Castaldi 2006:86)

Though Castaldi draws the reader’s attention to a pair of bodily dispositions “especially appreciated” in the properly gendered female body, she notes that this quality is also valuable in elite men. Castaldi

later links *sutura* and *kersa* to ‘boundedness’ and to comportments of gaze—lowered, unfixed—and posture—restrained, drawn in—she labels “submissive.” This reading of the bodily attitudes of *sutura* as submissive, however, seems at odds with her mention of the nobles and aristocratic castes. Indeed, Castaldi draws her definition of *sutura* from Roberts & Roberts (2003:157), who, though they define *sutura* as a specifically feminine quality of containing information—particularly by non-disclosure of problems to strangers—do so within the space of a larger work devoted to images of the Murid founding saint Bamba, who himself is always depicted almost fully veiled and is commonly regarded as an exemplar of pious *sutura*.

Castaldi’s use of the term “kinaesthetic” highlights the status of *sutura* and *kersa* as qualities—in a technical sense, *qualia* (Chumley and Harkness 2013, Lemon 2013, Munn 1986)—of certain kinds of embodied personhood in Senegal. Though this quality concerns the ‘private,’ as instantiated in bodily habitus, and women are often presented as its exemplars, I argue that it is neither ‘feminine’ *per se*, nor reducible to any current analytic concept of a ‘private sphere’ (even a sophisticated semiotic interpretation of such, as in Gal 2002). However, that *sutura*—and more broadly, non-arbitrary withholding of certain information from circulation—is not reducible to feminine submission. Neither is it necessarily linked to non-transparency, nor to a traditionalist (patriarchal, even gerontocratic) status quo. Indeed, the larger task of this dissertation is to untangle the relationship between what I will argue is the local standard or archetype of virtuous being, *sutura*, and the local standard or archetype of virtuous doing *sarax* (almsgiving). I argue that the two concepts articulate a relatively perduring yet controversial local model of *that which is properly withheld from view*. *Sutura* is about power, certainly, but the routes of that power are not, I will argue, necessarily

parallel to any straightforward logic of feminine submission, nor is that power exercised strictly so as to contain a disorderly private sphere.

On a return trip to Dakar in 2013, I sat talking with one of my closest companions and collaborators during my fieldwork in 2005-2009. I was revisiting the material for this this chapter at the time, and asked her quite casually, “what is the link between women and *sutura*?” She responded, “In the villages, when the men wanted to know something about a woman—was she liked? was she acceptable?—they would ask the women for their collective opinion. You know, in the village, the men have their activities, the women their activities. That is to say, the women know the women. So when the women’s representative gave a response for the women she didn’t have to say much, just ‘yes, the women approve,’ or ‘no, something is lacking for approval.’ In this way they could handle the situation, all within *sutura*.” (The last sentence in the original Wolof: Kon, ñu gere affair bi lepp, si biiru sutura.) “So,” I responded, “*sutura* has some utility to women, politically?” “Yes,” she laughed, “yes, that’s the way to say it.” In other words, the constraints of *sutura* can create a space for an authoritative judgment with no explanation that might reveal any specific act or quality.

The relationship between managing access to and knowledge of the forms of information *sutura* has traditionally protected—primarily specific knowledge about the inner workings of households (see chapter 4)—became a central theme in political rhetoric in the long run-up to the 2012 elections in which Abdoulaye Wade was deposed. Schaffer provides an illuminating glimpse at the concept of *sutura* as it arose in the previous round of Presidential elections; “One farmer, a member” of the long ruling socialist party, “explained that ‘we need voting booths to ensure discretion [sutura]. To vote in front of everyone and be afraid of what you are doing is not normal....’” (Schaffer

2000:103). In the political discourse Schaeffer presents, *sutura* emerges as an ethic emblematic of Senegalese Sufi confessional identities, opposed to a “moral code based on the values of public display embodied by the noble castes.” (Ibid.)

Sutura appears resistant to the analytical categories that seem most appropriate: is it a posture of the body, or a restriction on the expression of information? Is it masculine or feminine? Is it emblematic of the powerful and high status, or a constraint that defines the subaltern? Of confessional identity or religious practice? However, as I was reminded time and again in discussion with my fiends in Dakar, *sutura* is a coherent quality. It is not readily analytically decomposable, even for my most talkative interviewees, into any stable set of constituent parts. Indeed, if one piece of the concept coheres across the literature and my material, it is that *sutura* is best discussed as a physical object that is possessed by an individual, a household, or a lineage segment. It is described in terms that render it with qualities both both protective and delicate: a garment that might be torn, a voting booth that might fail to appear, a membrane or skin that can be injured.

The protective physicality of *sutura*, and the constant risk of its destruction recalls the Homeric Greek phrase “tearing away the veil” (*kredemnon luesthai*), a metaphor used to name both the sexual violation of a woman and the entailed dishonor of the male head of household/lineage charged with her protection, and the sacking of conquered Troy (Beidelman 1993:5, LlwellynJones 2007). Similarly, Simmel clearly links practices of secrecy with protection of both individual and corporate group (Simmel 1950: 345), specifically a means of sheltering a group of individuals within a larger society from intrusion.

Just recently a misfortune that will publicly sully Sokhna's name befell her through no fault of her own. When I heard this, I responded that I was just writing about her, as an example of 'am sutura.' My interlocutor agreed that she is a perfect example, because "she could teach you about all kinds of really risqué stuff, while still maintaining her propriety," then sighed, eyes down, visibly saddened, 'de tout façon, hotti-nañu suturam' (in any case (fr.), they've torn her sutura (w.)). Later I learned that a series of misfortunes followed the fateful event that had pierced Sokhna's discretion, and her household had split and "fallen" (*danu*).⁶ Whatever *sutura* indexes and implicates analytically—communicative practice, bodily habitus, gender, mystical Islam—it is clearly a social fact made of uncut cloth, a quality of the person that cannot be separated out into distinct analytic meanings, only wrapped around the social person, or, conversely, shredded and torn away from her.

Local Meanings of Mediation

Obscurity, distance, and mediation in communication are central themes in the ethnography of West Africa. This is perhaps because the role of 'porte parole' or 'spokesman' of persons of noble lineage is the exclusive vocation of certain lineages or 'castes' in many ethnic groups in the region. As Judith Irvine (1974) has shown for rural Senegal, the public status of the Wolof nobility depends in large part on their ability to maintain 'closed' and 'heavy' demeanor (Goffman 1956). They do so by reducing the utterances emanating from their bodies, employing emblematically 'noble' forms of speech that are not only semantically, but also morphologically, phonologically, and even prosodically, minimal. The restrained quality of noble speech and behavior stands in stark contrast to 'griot' speech,

⁶ I have been asked by several readers of drafts what, exactly, led to the family's downfall. Out of respect, I choose not to further damage the worn fibers of the household's *sutura*, and refrain from any greater detail.

which is referentially detailed, morphologically rich, and performed in an almost florid style. A set of opposed qualities then map, Irvine argues, to the noble/griot pair: rock/bird, quiet/loud, simple/ornate, restrained/unrestrained, and in some contexts male/female (Irvine and Gal 2000, Irvine 1974). In the Wolof village in which Irvine studied this phenomenon of casted verbal labor, the two categories of people and these two types of qualities appear sufficient to give each other meaning by opposition. The value of ‘noble’ qualities appears itself grounded in a casted hierarchy in which free ‘géer’ landowning nobility command the labors of casted, landless peoples, including those whose work is to sing the genealogies that found an individual noble’s claims to power. In this division of labor, the author of speech and the source of all illocutionary force is distanced from the medium who in fact produces the sound that carries it to the ears of the audience. The fact of mediation itself then becomes an icon of the social distance between the nobility and those that they compel to act.

In contemporary Dakar, the stakes of nobility and the meanings and value of silence versus speech are set in very different—contested and evolving—political and economic conditions. In this setting, discretion and apparent mediation of actions remain important markers of both value and of agency. Acting through another person signals agency itself. While *griots* maintain an important role in social interaction, the meaning of restricted communication is not as closely moored to the noble/griot dyad as one might initially suspect. Instead, as I argue below, the value of discretion and the stakes of mediated communication are more closely tied to logics of veiling of the body and the architecture of domestic space that have arisen under the particular conditions of life in urban Dakar.

The veil and the serigne

In his retelling of the folktale “The Pretext,” Ouakamois and noted Negritude intellectual Birago Diop plays with the tensions inherent in the idea of *sutura*, without using the term. In this story, a well-known and respected householder is visited by a traveling cleric of exceptionally good reputation, Serigne Fall. Though the Serigne is well-known for his skill in divination and prayer, the narrator warns the reader from the outset that the cleric’s character diverges from his reputation. “The species is always the same,” the narrator warns as he introduces the story, “full of false and insinuating unction, the typical parasite, inconstant and vagabond” (Diop 1958, translation from Blair 1976: 41). The Serigne takes up residence in the house, providing spiritual advice to those who come to visit him there, and enjoying the householder’s protection and hospitality (*teranga*). The Serigne, however, subsequently reveals himself to each member of the household to be a charlatan. The householder himself is last to accept that his guest is a sinner, not a saint. He continues to make excuses and to cover for him, until he can no longer; both the sins of the guest and the folly of his host are revealed.

In a short piece on the limits of tolerance, Senegalese philosopher Soulayemane Diagne reads this *conte* as a meditation not on false piety or deceit, but on a host’s vexed moral obligations. Specifically, Diagne argues, the host is compelled to protect the guest in his care, and therefore to tolerate the guest’s actions, even those that would expose the host to social censure. Indeed, the host is compelled by religious duty to limit the circulation of information about all members of his household, to provide them shelter from the eyes of others. Tragically, Diagne notes, the good host risks “wrapping his veil so far around the other that his own buttocks are exposed to all.” (Diagne 1996).

For Diagne, Diop’s “The Pretext” is the setting for an argument about the nature of a specifically Islamic mode of tolerance, an imperative to provide hospitality in the form of cover and care of the other—particularly when he is “*Other*”—even at risk of injury to the self. Tolerance here is a refusal to acknowledge the abhorrent, to, as I was told quite often in Dakar, “work on oneself” by attending to one’s own faults rather than examining the behavior of others, and to attempt to fulfill one’s duties without regard to others’ successes at fulfilling their own. Diagne then turns the question of liberal religious tolerance against itself to ask (of the French government and public) at what point the obligation to provide cover for a weak outsider might be justly outweighed by moral outrage.

Diagne’s reading of the story, and quite possibly the traditional story itself, draw on the Hadith (Bukhari) from which the divine name and attribute, “al-Sattar,” (“the concealer of sin, the protector”) is derived. “When you are afflicted with a sin, hide that sin.”⁷ That is, the pious subject is to contain flaws in his or her own behavior. To advertise one’s sins is itself a second and distinct violation. Both “sattar” and “sutura” derive from the same trilateral root in classical Arabic, s/t/r: “to cover, veil, conceal, be shielded, that by which something is protected, sheltered, to be modest, chaste.”⁸

Many exegeses of the Hadith from which al-Sattar is derived focus on the injunction to conceal one’s own sins from public view, so long as these sins do not harm another person (e.g. consuming alcohol, failing to pray or to fast).⁹ Under this interpretation, concealment of sin prevents the distinct and separate sin of inciting bad behavior in others. Further, if knowledge of vice is concealed from all

⁷ Looking for citation for this.

⁸ This too.

⁹ Diagne personal communication, 2016.

but God, the sin is contained and may be forgiven. Beyond this, one is urged to conceal or to ignore similar sins committed by another Muslim: to grant the same concealment or protection to the other.

Within Senegalese popular Islam, the protective power of *sutura* seems still greater; concealment confers not only the possibility of redemption of vice, but also divine protection of positive attributes and good fortune. To wrap something in *sutura*, then, is to protect it not only from censure, but perhaps more commonly, from the envious gaze of others. For this reason, *sutura* — as containment, protection and covering — therefore appears as a foundational virtue in the moral universe of Dakar’s popular Islam, the precondition of ongoing value. Discretion is a good in and of itself, and it is also a second order quality: a virtue of manner, not of content.

Closedness and interiority as mind

I propose that we gloss the second order virtue *sutura* as the quality of “closedness,” by means of which a person produces him or herself as possessing an exteriority which becomes a sign of a separate, veiled interior depth. Though my discussion has focused primarily upon *sutura* as a named quality of action, it is important to note (with Castaldi 2000) how closely allied it is with *kerse*. *Kerse* seems, analytically, to be a subset of *sutura*. To have *sutura* requires having *kerse*, but not vice versa. The domain of *kerse* is the individual self; *kerse* is performed exclusively in bodily manner and habitus (including vocal qualities, but not referential content of speech). While both *kerse* and *sutura* highlight the positive valence of “closedness,” the allied qualities of character of *jom* (honor) and *fayde* (decisiveness, sangfroid), also require forms of self restraint, stoicism, and denial that depend on an interiorized, “closed” individual subject.

In a 2010 study of the new phenomenon of female (Tijani, Niassen)¹⁰ religious authorities in Dakar, Hill provides an apt discussion of the complexly gendered performance of *kersa*:

Kersa demands a degree of interiority of both men and women, requiring them not to put themselves ‘out there’, for example, through speaking too loudly and openly or dressing immodestly. The bar of kersa for women is relatively higher than for men: ways of acting, dressing, or speaking that are acceptable for a man may show a lack of kersa for a woman in a similar situation. In religious contexts, however, the more pious and mystical a man is the more his behavior tends to approach the level of interiority exemplified by a decent woman. Many of the most charismatic Taalibe Baay *muqaddams* veil in public, at least to the same degree that pious women are taught to cover themselves (albeit not in the same way), make elaborate shows of submission to other leaders (albeit not to their wives), sit close to the ground and speak quietly through animators (*jottalikat*, someone of lower status who broadcasts to an audience the speech of someone of higher status¹¹), all of which enhances their aura of piety and mysticism.

¹⁰ The word “Niassen” means, literally, of the house of (surname) Niasse, the final *-en* is a productive suffix that can attach to any surname as a means of naming a household (see chapter 4). The Niassen Tijanis, literally ‘Tijanis of the house of Niasse,’ form a sub-group of Tijaniyya, which is a branch of the Sufi path founded by Mawlana Ahmed ibn Mohammed Tijani al-Hassani (popularly called Cheikh Ahmed Tidiane in Senegalese literature), the Sufi scholar and saint (1735-1815) born in Algeria and buried in Fez, Morocco. Within Senegal Tijaniyya has two branches. The largest of these is seated at the city of Tivavoune, Senegal, and was founded by the Peul Islamic scholar and Sufi saint Al-Hall Malik Sy (1855-1922). The Tivaoune branch is referred to simply as “Tidiane.” The second, branch was founded by the Wolof Shaykh al-Islam Ibrahim Niasse (1900-1975), is much smaller within Senegal, though widely followed in Gambia, and counts numerous American devotees. This family and order is based in Kaolack, Senegal. (This information appears in chapter 2 in expanded form.)

¹¹*Jottilikat* names the profession or role of serving as a speaker for another. In this sense it is a name for the work often accomplished by *griots*, yet it does not specify a caste. Indeed, younger members of Ndeye Aida’s sibling set are members of her same lineage and caste, but are, both male and female, subordinate to her through the logic of birth-order.

Hill's discussion of men's performance of closedness and mediation within religious context demonstrates that these practices of individual comportment—veiling, speaking through an animator—emblemize not only distance between the speaker and addressee, but also a model of (mystical) knowledge in which the truth is hidden within form. In this context, pursuit of religious knowledge is framed as a project requiring the ongoing development of discernment. The seeming paradoxes of status evoked in multiply mediated performances, then, themselves convey metapragmatic (Silverstein 1976) meaning about the nature of knowledge and of mind themselves.

Within the community of Baye Niassé's subsegment of the Tijani order, female clerics (*muqaddamas*) have recently gained increasing status and followers, yet they insist on marked public performances of feminine submission. Hill notes that these well respected religious authorities perform extreme traditional feminine submissiveness to their husbands in addition to practicing complete veiling, e.g. prostrating themselves fully when delivering a glass of water to their husbands.¹²

Some of the *muqaddamas* Hill interviewed explicitly describe these acts as ritual performances demonstrating obedience to God's prescriptions, that is, as emblematic of their status as exemplary Muslims. "In discussing their observation of gendered restraint and submission, they highlight the opposition between the performance's apparent (*z'āhir*) meaning and the hidden (*bāt'in*) truth behind it. This 'performance' is "neither a disingenuous charade nor a naïve reproduction of social roles," rather it is, Hill argues, a sort of conscious performance of a riddle, an act intended to have multiple conflicting interpretations (386). One of the sources of these interpretations clearly lies in the history

¹² Prostration is a marked and extreme variation on the simple curtsy of an inch or so that marks good breeding and traditional morals.

of veiling and seclusion in elite (particularly clerical and/or *sayidi*) families in Islamic communities in the region and beyond (Papanek 1971; Tucker 1993; Cooper 1994, 1997). In a particularly telling example, Hill recounts a conference organized by Ibrahima Niassé's daughter, Ndeye Aida in Kaolack in 2010. Going beyond the use of a *jottilikat* to rearticulate and amplify her speech, Ndeye Aida remained seated and motionless while her younger brother read off the written statement she had prepared. Though it is possible to read her completely placid demeanor as a mark of female propriety through submission to her brother, Hill's article suggests that we read her performance as did the press and the broader community of Niassé's devotees: as a powerful statement of Ndeye Aida's position of authority with regard to her younger siblings, the cohort of Niassé's direct descendants, and more broadly the community of Niassen in general: the more and less restricted senses of the 'house of Niassé.'

Indeed, when I told this story to a series of interlocutors in Dakar — male and female, younger and older — Dakar their response was always a variation on 'kii am na feyda de!' ('wow, she has sangfroid!'). That is, they all agreed that Ndeye Aida's performance was a demonstration of her high position and power in the Niassé organization. By not opening her mouth, she displayed a tremendous amount of power, demonstrating that she was the real force to be reckoned with in this generation of the family. Ndeye Aida's *complete disavowal* of public action, of the communicative role Goffman (1981) termed "animator," unambiguously asserted her agency and power over the younger members

of her sibling set. By refusing to animate, Ndeye Aida communicated very clearly that she had the power to compel others to act.¹³

Here closedness, when obscuring and completely enclosing, becomes a visible sign of the existence of something beyond the seen: a presentation of the idea that the object or person one sees—the embodiment of sign form—is animated by something within, hidden from sight. *Sutura* as a quality of the person therefore depends on similarly complexly layered iconicities of the meanings of covering, the interior versus the exterior, and the potential of individual persons and groups to be closed to each other. It is, I'd like to suggest, a religiously structured model of the political and moral nature of the autonomy of other minds.

I can best illustrate the presupposed opacity of other's minds in Dakar by explaining an ongoing nuisance I had in my house in Dakar. To explain this, I present a quick architectural sketch. During my time in Dakar I lived in a house I rented in a state of half completion. Like other recently constructed houses in Ouakam, and in Dakar more generally, the house filled the entire lot on which it sat, met at the property line by the wall of the house next door. A tall wall on the property line at what might later become a paved street was pierced only by the door to a small enclosed garage and a wrought iron gate (quickly modified by a friend who sewed a large plastic mat over the inside of the grate, rendering it an opaque door) that opened on a small tiled yard, a front porch, the windows to my salon, and the front door. The rooms inside the two story house were arranged around two atria, onto which their windows opened.

¹³I discuss this ideology in which actors are distant from apparent action in greater detail in chapter four.

When guests visited me, we sat on the carpet in the *sal*, often leaning against the wall that my house shared with my neighbors. Every day after lunch, a horrible noise emanated from the wall. It was a truly awful sound, like the death of a tuba or a hard drive or a refrigerator; my guests often told me to run to check the refrigerator, in fact. This noise always seemed to punctuate our discussions, just after the lunch plate was cleared away and we had settled into some sliced fruit: the noise. My guests never mentioned it. Indeed, they hardly seemed to notice it. I was always troubled, however, and asked each of them what the noise might be. No one offered a hypothesis.

Finally, one day I snuck a peek down into my neighbor's lot from my roof, only to see a peacock in their rather large atrium. At following meals, I waited for the sound and triumphantly announced "it's a peacock! Why do you think they keep such a very loud peacock in their home?" To a person each guest replied, slowly and with clear approbation, "hana, loolu lañu bëgg," ("well, perhaps that's what they like"). When asked to elaborate the only clarification given was "ku nekk ak bëgg-bëggam," ("each person with his/her own preferences"). The conversation ends here. I could only hope my obvious conversational transgression would be forgotten.

This carefully built up opacity of others' interiors, both domestic and mental, recalls the well known Melanesian (and more broadly Pacific) hesitance to speculate about the intentional states of others, an epistemological stance Robbins refers to as "the doctrine of the opacity of other minds." (Robbins 2008: 407) Much as my collaborators cited "their own desires" as the final reason my neighbors chose to keep a loud ornamental fowl in their atrium, in another article in the same volume, Stasch's Korowai interlocutors met non-normative behavior with the statement "his own thoughts"

not as a negative assertion, or even as a rebuke of the question, but as a statement about the freedom of others. (Stasch 2008: 446).

Just as the voting booth is a crucial prop in the operation of democratic politics for Schaffer's Senegalese farmer discussed above, the supposition of the opacity of the minds of others appears, in Stasch's analysis of the Korowai, to be a form of practical enclosure that makes possible a certain kind of political subject. Assertions of opacity of thought are claims about the autonomy of others. Statements about the necessity of voting booths for reasons of "sutura" are thus claims about individual autonomy as foundational of a virtuous social order. Similarly, Ndeye Aida's stone faced silence while her brother read her speech is an assertion not only of her power, but of her autonomy. By refusing to speculate on my neighbors' motivations for keeping a peacock, my guests traced the other face of the contours of enclosure as autonomy.

The forms of epistemic enclosure that make up *sutura* as a category delineate specific kinds of autonomous actors: individual embodied persons, domestic units, lineages. The walls of the house, the curtains of the voting booth, and the garments of the individual each make material the segmentation of social actors as a segmentation of information.

In the following chapters, I argue that the disciplines of semiotic practice that constitute *sutura* are implicated in, and draw value from, the logics of two domains often understood as analytically distinct: kinship and semiotic ideology (see chapters three and four). Further, the habits of behavior that lead people in Dakar to count as 'am sutura' (having sutura) form a set of logically interdependent and mutually constitutive practices of circulation that together form an 'onstage' and 'offstage' of social life in Dakar. This separation is analytically distinct from that between the 'public'

and ‘private’ spheres (as discussed in Gal 2002, among others), and creates lasting economic and semiotic institutions — infrastructure perhaps — the analysis of which (see chapters four and six) complicates current discussions of network and infrastructure in linguistic and semiotic anthropology (e.g. Elyachar 2010, Kockelman 2010) by demonstrating the epistemological complexity of the social networks fostered in ongoing meaningful contact between parties. Creating and navigating communicative channels involves labors of both knowing and of obscuring.

Working through the logical entailments of an ethnography of *sutura*, I show that women’s economic practice articulates these apparently separate forms of value in contemporary urban Senegal. Foremost among these practices is *sarax*, like the biscuits and powdered milk Sokhna sent out to the *talibe* the day she felt such unspeakable pain, which, I will argue, opens spaces of productive and protective ignorance in society (c.f. Nozawa 2011, Pfeil 2011). Alms is a form of semiotic labor, a means of operating on *sutura*; it serves to maintain individuals and households as bounded bodies, and discrete sets of knowledge.

Chapter Three

Bowls: “le secret du bonheur”

The attraction of bowls

Near the end of my fieldwork, when I was beginning a teaching appointment at a foreign university in Dakar, I celebrated my thirtieth birthday with a dinner party at the apartment I had rented in Ouakam. An older woman who is a dear friend of mine, someone who I call ‘Merebi’ (“the mother”) in this chapter, came to the party and gave me the most delightful gift: a pair of what would be marketed in the United States as low-end cooking pots, one ten inches in diameter, the other six. The two cylindrical vessels were enameled, white on the inside, dark blue with a floral pattern on the outside. Each had its own glass lid. As I knew by this time, they were not cooking pots, but a set of bowls to be used for food service, and for sending food gifts to others; the larger bowl was destined to contain rice, the smaller bowl to contain sauce.

It was time, my friend announced to the assembled, that I should have some proper bowls. In many ways, her insistence that I have ‘my own proper bowls’ was read by the other guests as her blessing of my household as an entity, of myself as, in some ways a potential new peer, even though I was at that point still childless. As I was told later, the gift of bowls announced my new role. In fact, my friend’s move to change my status was acknowledged when both Merebi and one of our senior male colleagues offered prayers and *tēfli* (“Qu’ranic saliva,” see Perrino 2002) to me and the other guests at the end of the party. Both asked God for blessings ‘on this woman, on her work as a teacher and a writer.’” Finally they closed with the rather formulaic blessing on an adult woman, mistress of a house:

each asking God to bless me with *barke* (baraka), to give me children blessed with *barke*, and to protect my home by enveloping it in *sutura* (discretion).

Merebi: *yall naa yalla barke ke*

I ask of God to instill her with *barke*

All: amiin (amen)

Merebi: *yall naa yalla indi ke dommi barke*

I ask of God to bring her children of *barke*

All: amiin

Merebi: *yall na yalla sangal keram sutura*

I ask of God to wrap her household in *sutura*

All: amiin

I was touched by both the prayer and the bowls that accompanied it, and I felt this gift and the prayers offered on my birthday very deeply as signs of both respect and solidarity. After the party, though, I laughed with Merebi about her choice of gift. She had chosen her actions, among other reasons, she said, as an acknowledgement of my ‘bowl madness;’ my ethnographic fascination with bowls had risen to the status of a running joke among everyone who knew me, and Merebi — a 60-something intellectual with a biting wit — enjoyed both the gesture she made at the party and also the gentle ribbing that she felt it accomplished. That, and I kept failing to return the bowls that she often sent to me full of carefully presented meals.

My friend was right to laugh at my fascination with the covered bowls that I saw all over the city. What had started with a study of the begging bowls in which *sarax* is collected had expanded to a near obsession with all vessels that could locally be called ‘bol’: nearly hemispheric steel bowls with flat lids like plates, wide almost flat plastic dishes (that I originally thought of as platters), richly decorated enamel bowls with two handles and glass lids (that might appear to be cooking pots), tightly sealing thermal-isolating bowls, bowls stacked into a sort of cone, secured by one large piece of fabric tied at the top and balanced on the heads of women as they walked the city’s streets. I examined the bowls at which I sat for lunch in other people’s homes, and the bowls that people brought to my home for me out of pity when I was sick. I discreetly snooped in other women’s kitchens, trying to find where they stored their bowls (I rarely found them, and later had to ask). I was directed any number of times to give a ‘nice set of bowls’ to women my age and older, and I debated with my peers the merits of different bowls arranged outside shops selling ‘women’s things.’

My careful attention to bowls led me to notice them everywhere, not only in the hands of beggars and at the centers of meals, but on billboards and in magazines, carried by children as parts of costumes, and, as in the epigraph that opens this chapter, elegized in *tassu* verse to the accompaniment of drums at a *sabar* dance. In these modes of popular representation, bowls of delicious food are depicted with people gathered around them, drawn as if by some persuasive force. In these depictions people are drawn to bowls and to the women who own and serve food from them daily at *añ*, the afternoon meal, or at *ndogou* (iftar), the evening meal to break the Ramadan fast.

It is no surprise to an ethnographer that dishes of food carry a heavy symbolic load in Dakar. In nearly every social setting, ethnographies have shown the ways that food is a medium in which any

number of social meanings are expressed, any number of social dramas enacted. Indeed, ethnographic accounts of societies in Africa have given particular attention to the meanings of food sharing, as a mode of enacting lineage membership among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), as a site of political negotiation of Fulani ideologies of egalitarianism between lineages as enacted by senior men (Reisman 1977), and in mediating the “making and unmaking” of social imaginaries at the edge of global capital systems (Weiss 1996). These citations barely scratch the literature. Within each of these contexts, the vessels in which food is served are themselves loaded with symbolic meaning. Thus, in the pieces cited above, as in the ethnography of African societies more broadly, dishes holding food are argued to be both the stage of consequential interactions, and a character within them.

The wealth of studies of food sharing in African contexts reflects, perhaps, the heightened meaning of food sharing as a marker of African identities in the postcolonial and global contexts. In the introduction to his study of the “end” of shared-bowl feasting in Malawi (that is, the extinction of this traditional form of gathering), Mandala describes his discomfort with the separate and unshared lunches of his American academic colleagues in the United States, pointing to his own self-conscious participation in a set of norms about the inherent sociality of food consumption, for him quintessentially “African,” and importantly “peasant” (2005). Although the inhabitants of cosmopolitan Dakar do not identify with a peasant ethos (quite the opposite!) they take food sharing very seriously as a sign of varyingly “Wolof,” “Senegalese,” or “African” identity as opposed to “European” or “White” identity, as marking “Wolof” or “African” as opposed to “Toubab” or “European” ways of being, and particularly of being in relation to others.

The shared bowl, served on the floor or a low table, is opposed to individual plates (*assiettes*) served “European style” at a higher table, and many who eat at shared bowls were quick to tell me that “European style” plates and tables are *the* mark of an assimilated home. Similarly, as soon as an infant can hold a piece of food she is taught to offer it to others. The child who refuses is scolded and mockingly called “toubab bi” (the European). To eat from a shared bowl, and to participate in other food-sharing practices, therefore, is locally understood to parallel the choice made by bilinguals to use Wolof as opposed to French in the home, a means of asserting a place in a local (yet cosmopolitan) identity, contrasted with and often self-consciously critiquing, ‘European’ practice.

Among Dakar’s Wolofphone Muslim majority, such self-consciously “African” identities and modes of nostalgia resonate with local commitments to Islamic piety, both of which are called upon in the meanings of food sharing practices. Within these broader expectations of food sharing, individual meals emerge as forgettable sites of everyday enactments, more or less perfectly achieved, of ideal social relations. Meals thus simultaneously index the household’s self-situation with respect to ideals of belonging, generosity, and *sunna* choices and habits, and diagrammatically map the status of and relationships between individuals within the household.



Fig. 3.1 A billboard in Dakar advertising Maggi bouillon cubes (photo taken by the author, 2008)

In advertising, at least, both Islam and gender seem to be the most salient kinds of meaning tied to food in Dakar, and the most relevant frames in which to interpret specific aspects of food sharing practices. I photographed this billboard, which reads, in Wolof “An iftar that instills *barke*, with Maggi!” and below, in French, “Maggi and I, the secret of happiness!” a month after Ramadan had passed. It is one of many advertisements that link branded commodity foods (prepared seasoning, margarine, packaged vegetable oil, etc) with women, Islamic piety, and the bowl. In the center of the image, men sit around a traditionally styled bowl to eat a meal of *thieboudienne*, the national dish composed of fish and vegetables on a bed of rice cooked in a tomato and fish broth, all seasoned with the ubiquitous bouillon cubes.

In majority-Muslim Dakar, it is hardly surprising that ‘the secret of happiness’ might be exemplified in this *ndogou* (Wolof) or *iftar* (Arabic) meal of *thieboudienne*. A *thieboudienne* iftar neatly ties gender to piety. Questions about a woman’s ability to cook the dish well, perhaps like the ability to cook a cherry pie some time in the American memory, are taken locally as questions of a woman’s ability to please her husband. Throughout the Muslim world, fast-breaking meals exemplify the role that all meals are understood to ideally assume (Deeb 2006), particularly as an opportunity to enact ideal forms of generosity as a host (Kanafani-Zahar 1993, Meneley 1996). Within the broader context of Islamic imaginations of the possibilities of virtuous social worlds, the *iftar* meals are ritual sites of the perfectibility of social relations and all of the anxieties that the possibilities of perfection expose (c.f. Debenport 2015).

The potential for fast-breaking meals to create, restructure, or refine social relationships in both apparently ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres is exemplified in annual roadside *ndougou* offered by various political and groups to any passerby, and in women’s conversations about worries about having the money ready to buy just the right sausage (and croissants, etc) for the *ndougou* they will give to their in-laws. Indeed, the hopes and anxieties surrounding the possible social work that the *iftar* might accomplish are hilariously sent up on Radio Television Senegal (the older of two state-sponsored national television stations) every day of Ramadan at the moment of fast-breaking. The annual miniseries “Ndogou Sa Neex” (“Sa Neex’s iftar”) features the cast of the wildly popular *Soleil Levant* theater company, with comedian Mame Cheikhou Gueye in the title role of Sa Neex. This series of comic shorts runs on national television every day during Ramadan immediately after the announcement of the *rupture*, and the beginning of the feast. In each episode, the protagonist, a very

popular country-bumpkin character rendered in slapstick, attempts to enjoy his longed-for *ndougou* in various company, with unintended consequences each time.

During Ramadan, every fast-breaking meal is then a site of potential (near) ritual action, with the potential to restructure social relations and reassert the piety of the host. Throughout the year every formal midday meal (*añ*) presents similar potential to maintain or shift the social order of the household, enacting feminine virtue and asserting specifically maternal forms of power.

Whether or not Maggi's jingle is true, that a woman and the *Maggi*-seasoned contents of her bowl together compose the 'secret of happiness,' the claim resonates with the meaning of shared meals in the homes I studied in Dakar. While fast-breaking feasts are always memorable events, forgettable daily meals are one of the more important grounds on which everyday social relations are enacted and consequentially reshaped. Each successful meal in the households I studied in Dakar is both instrument and proof of a woman's virtue as she assures *jamm ci ker gi* (peace in the household), and a potential means by which the woman who owns the bowl might cement, consolidate, and expand the force and scope of her influence over her husband and dependents through the persuasive sensual power of food. The draw of a woman's bowl anchors the home as a social unit.

If during Ramadan, every fast-breaking meal is a site of ritual action, with the potential to restructure social relations and reassert the piety of the host, every midday meal offers similar potential for the maintenance and reform of the social order of the household. Here mothers may enact feminine virtue and assert specifically maternal forms of power over the relationships that constitute her household. By managing their bowls of food inside the house — in the plating, presentation, and service of pieces of food during the meal — the women in whose homes I ate inhabit their role as the

source of care and center of affective belonging within the household. As I will argue, it is within this role that they assert the corollary sole right to define relationships within the home, by claiming and redistributing the resources of its members. Similarly, in managing the bowl and participation in the meal, these women define the boundaries of belonging in the household, potentially drawing in even those outside the presumed scope of their power, by feeding them. As such, women's work in managing the space around the bowl constantly (re)makes people as her beloved dependents, offering the opportunity to align themselves and their resources under her roof. Eating at a place around the bowl situates individuals within the sphere of the *ker* (household), a potentially nurturing realm of veiled *sutura*, however long that alliance lasts.

At first I was troubled by the emphasis placed on women's domestic work, presiding over the kitchen and the service of food. This 'house and home' image of femininity appeared to me limiting and inaccurate. It seemed to me possibly even a colonial imposition, especially given Senegalese women's widely documented prominence in international trade (Buggenhagen 2012, Rosander 2005, Zoa Ngaoundoua 2003), religious organization and practice (Bop 2006, Hill 2010), government and politics (Diop 2010,), academia and journalism, and medicine (Patterson 2012), among other domains. In fact, many of my Dakarois interlocutors, the same women who placed so much of the weight of their identities on their work in the kitchen and took such pride in service of meals, identified as professionals (some quite senior) in the fields listed above.

I later understood that my confusion was founded on my own misunderstanding of the power of both home and food in everyday life in Dakar. I had failed, at first, to understand the specific form of local imaginations of the relationship between social order and shared consumption of food. It was

only much later — perhaps around the time that Merebi gave me that first set of bowls — that I came to understand more clearly that women’s relationship to food service, as iconized by their devotion to their bowls, is grounded in and serves to anchor a larger politics of dependence, ownership, and authority within which (successful) adult women dominate, from which they benefit materially, and by means of which they expand their personal power beyond the space of their own homes. It is this dynamic that I unpack ethnographically in the first half of this chapter through a discussion of the practical and symbolic world of everyday meals at the shared bowl in Dakar.

As I came to understand, though it had appeared to me a position of service, plating food and presiding over the bowl is, in Dakar, an exercise of power; managing the bowl involves overseeing the food it contains, and thereby exercising power over the relationships between those draw their sustenance from it . Here, to plate food and serve it (though not necessarily to cook it, as we will see), however demurely this service is done in practice, is to sit at the center anchoring, and in many ways determining, the inner workings of one of the city’s most powerful units of social life, the *ker* (household). The woman controlling the bowl is the beloved mother and source of life and life sustaining food, but she is also the all-powerful matriarch, on whom the happiness of all under her care depends. To recognize a woman as *borom bol bi*, the owner of a bowl, is to acknowledge her status as a head of household (although she most likely rejects that title, for reasons to be discussed below), capable of marshalling the labor, resources, and support of her dependents and others in her orbit.

In this second part of the chapter, I show that the power of women’s mastery of the bowl is refracted and reinforced by contemporary urban residence patterns. Just as I had misunderstood the affective and practical dynamics of feeding within the home, I had also failed to locate these practices in

larger models of relatedness, logics of kinship and coresidence that I describe in both contemporary and historical perspective in the second half of this chapter.

***Teranga* (“hospitality”): care and maternal power at the bowl**

Long before *merebi* gave me a set of bowls, marking me as a householder in my own right (however facetiously), I had arrived in the city like so many others, lacking a place in the social order of Dakar’s households. I was lucky to be drawn into the orbits of a few women in Ouakam early in my fieldwork, each of whom gave me a place at her bowl and the opportunity to participate in and be protected by the care and concealment of their households. In Chapter Three I described lunches with two of these women, Ndeye and Sokhna, contrasting descriptions of their manner at lunch as the basis of my discussion of *sutura*, the value of discretion that finds its moral center in protecting information about the household and all of its residents and attachées. At the beginning of this chapter, I describe my relationship with my close friend and protectress, a woman I here call by the franco-Wolof term ‘*mèrebi*’ (the mother), as I and her other satellites referred to her.¹ As at other houses I frequented, Sunday lunch at *Mèrebi*’s house was a soothing routine, a precisely executed ritual of kinship and belonging.

During what had become my predictable Sunday afternoon visit, I watch as *Mèrebi*, the lady of the house, prepares our plate of food for Sunday lunch. Having finished cooking, she lifts the white rice out of its pot and into a large aluminum bowl, arranging it gently inside. Then she slowly ladles the sauce into its serving dish, a matching bowl of a slightly smaller diameter. She asked me to go and spread her nice table cloth out on the floor, to carry the spoons to the floor, and then told me to tell the

¹ This term is also widely used by young people to refer affectionately to a peer’s mother when, for example, asking after each member of an interlocutor’s household during greetings.

others that she was “yekk añ,” plating the midday meal. I must not forget to call the driver, who is sleeping in his miraculously functional unlicensed *clando* taxicab, parked under the mango tree across the street.

When I return to the kitchen she stands over the serving bowl, carefully arranging steamed white rice in the dish, smoothing it in concentric circles with a large slotted spoon (*cuddu ciinwar*). She replaces the cover on the rice dish, and lifts the cover off of the dish of sauce. Gently, again with the slotted spoon, she arranges pieces of cooked vegetables in the center of the dish and extending outward slightly, then she places pieces of meat in the very center of the serving dish. A wide margin of white rice remains, forming a perfect circle around the vegetables and meat. Finally, with a large ladle, she spoons some of the sauce into a small bowl. With the covers replaced on the bowls of rice and sauce, and the counters wiped, she lifts the serving dish and walks slowly to the cloth spread on the floor and her gathered family and guests. She bends at the waist to place the dish smoothly on the floor, and then turns it slightly, as if aligning features of the bowl with the expected places of individual members of the family soon to be gathered around it. She calls back to me to bring the little bowl of sauce, then sits gracefully, her heels curved under her right buttock.

Though the exact desired arrangement on the plate varies slightly for each canonical dish, in each case, plating the meal is always a carefully considered moment. This time we are eating *domoda*, a stew of meat and vegetables in a tomato-based sauce thickened with flour, characterized by the addition of copious tamarind. It is served with the imported broken long-grain Vietnamese white rice which forms the basis of almost every *añ* (midday meal). It is crucial that each member of the household have both rice and sauce, but the locations morsels of fish or meat and vegetables — their

orientations in the very center of the dish like spokes marking the expected location of people around the bowl — mark greater status. However the dish is ideally served, the plating should always consider the preferences and place within the household of each person who will sit around it. The placement of meat and vegetables at the center of the bowl creates an icon of the orderly placement of each member of the household. The preferred items of persons enjoying status, or special favor aligned with their expected positions around the bowl.

In most households more or less self-consciously ‘socially conservative,’ at least two bowls are served at each mealtime. When the Mother’s husband is at home for lunch (on his three days with this, his second wife, before moving to spend three with his third wife), the large bowl I describe above has a smaller, but more ornate twin, *platou paabi*, ‘the plate for father.’²² The mother’s husband normally eats first and alone, or with any of his peers who may be visiting (this is the bowl depicted in the Maggi billboard), while the mother and her children and other dependents circle another, larger bowl. In other households with multiple couples (adult sons with in-married wives), a separate plate may be prepared for each couple, and the daughter-in-law brings this plate to serve to her husband, usually in their room, just as the home’s matriarch serves her own husband in the main room of the house as a whole. When Merebi serves her husband, she does so ceremoniously, spreading his little satiny tablecloth for him in his preferred spot (usually in front of the TV news), then bringing the beautifully arranged plate to him with a curtsy. The carafe of cold water and a glass follow, with another curtsy.

²² In current usage, frano-Wolof kinship terms *paabi* and *merebi* for ‘father’ and ‘mother’ are commonly used to refer to a mother and father not one’s own. These terms have replaced *baye* and *ndeye*, which are now most commonly used in insults such as ‘sa ndeye’ (your mom), etc. The Wolof word *yaay* is still used to address and refer to one’s own mother.

Today Papa is away, however, and we all eat at one big bowl, two to three inches deep, and easily twenty four inches in diameter, on the floor in the vestibule between the front door and the doors to the kitchen and formal salon. There are no guests here, we are all members of ‘wa ker gi,’ the people of this house; I am hardly a guest anymore, so consistent have my visits become. Two of Mérébi’s daughters are here, one a medical student, one a student in Economics at University Cheikh Anta Diop. Merebi’s driver and her maid are here, too. They, like me, are lost souls, of sorts, that she has adopted into her home. The maid is a young woman from the countryside, somehow distantly related to one of the women who works in Mérébi’s office. She takes many of her meals here, she doesn’t sleep at the house, has every other Sunday off, and is paid at the end of the month.

The driver is a young man from Guinea who speaks worse Wolof than I do, and drives a *clando* (illegal taxi) that only starts when pushed. Though he appears to be an employee, he’s more a kind of dependent. He writes down the fares that Mérébi technically owes him, and she gives him cash when he needs it, and subtracts the amount from her total. The math never works out, and the book — which he keeps in the car — seems purposefully illegible, pages torn and missing. Like the maid, he eats at least one meal with the family every time he appears at the house, and turns to Mérébi for clothes to wear for the holidays, and money for family emergencies or to pay for his medical expenses. All three of us come to her to resolve any bureaucratic problem we encounter. Later, after my bowls, I acquired someone like him at my house, “to guard” and “to run errands for me,” a young man in his twenties who helped himself to all of the better food in the house when I wasn’t there. When I told Merebi she shrugged, and said to tell my “doomu turiaan,” (delinquent son, a joke making merciless reference to

my acquisition of a dependent of dubious value) that if he ate all the breakfast cheese and all the butter it would “give him cholesterol.”

Each member of the household comes to take their place encircling the bowl, action called “wër bol bi.” Mèrèbi directs me to sit beside her place, to her immediate right. The seat of honor. It is Sunday afternoon and there is a sleepy quality to the air. Just as I had woken the driver, had summoned the mother’s children and various nieces and nephews from naps, books, or quiet contemplation in their rooms. Children place their left index fingers on the lip of the bowl, adults place their left hands on their left thighs, palm up. Eyes appraising the dish of food, Mother’s hands gently turning the bowl again so that each of the vegetables she had placed on the dish appeared before the person who loves it most: a nice piece of cabbage and one of mustard root are directly in front of me.

“Ayca, Bismillah” Mèrèbi murmurs, “ñu añ”: let’s go, Bismillah, let’s eat. As each person takes a small taste of plain rice from the space directly before her, Mother takes her own spoon to the little bowl of sauce I’d brought, dripping a spoonful of sauce onto each person’s place at the bowl, pulling bite-sized pieces of meat or carrots, potatoes, or cabbage from the center with her hand, breaking off pieces and tossing these morsels directly in front of each person, guests first. Her preferences among us were clear. I was the day’s favorite, my place constantly refilled with large pieces of meat, and the very center of the wedge of cabbage: the tiny curled in leaves at the heart of the head, my favorite.

The driver, who Mèrèbi was currently finding to be ‘an incurable bandit,’ had to pick his own meat, judiciously, from the center of the plate. What meat he took, he took sheepishly, preferring to add the smallest amounts of sauce to rice in the margin directly in front of him, barely reaching more

than an inch or two away from the edge of the bowl. More than twice, though, Merebi tossed little bits of meat on to his place, sucking her teeth and looking away.

While Merebi used her hand to feed us, and to serve herself, the rest of us held spoons. We ate in near silence, each of us building each spoonful carefully: rice, a little sauce, a bit of something. Perhaps we'd grab the 'kaani tyson' (a variety of capiscum, similar to Scott's Bonnet, the name of which compares it to the strength of Mike Tyson, the American boxer) with our spoons and press it onto the rice at our place, perhaps we'd raise our eyes slightly in the direction of the sauce bowl or the wedge of lemon that rested by the napkins, and silently Mérébi would respond; a spoon more of sauce drizzled over our place, a squeeze of lemon juice into our upturned spoons. One by one, each person finishes, rests the spoon on the cloth, drinks from the glass of cold water, and stands to wash hands and face. After the oldest daughter who had eaten quickly and in complete silence, in a hurry to return to reviewing for her exams, the driver was the second to rise, immediately followed by the young maid.

Mérébi sits, eating, slowly. She is always the last to rise, 'keeping company' (*wéetali*) each person as they eat, continuing to put food in their place, scraping untouched rice to their place, adding sauce, calling the maid to bring a little more rice from the kitchen to add. She invents topics of conversation to keep her guest at the bowl. Just as I am about to stand, she offers me the stewed tamarind pods she has hidden away to the side. 'Dencelnaale lii,' I've saved this for you. I press the now soft pods between my tongue and the roof of my mouth, pausing to spit seeds into my hand and place them under the rim of the bowl. When she finally relents, and I get up from the bowl, I hear a familiar small voice from the street calling "sarax, ngir yalla," "alms because of God." Simultaneously and

without any acknowledgement of the voice from outside, Mérébi calls the maid “ayca, pare ne, demal nga jox li xale yu coin bi,” “come on, (it’s/she’s) finished, go and give this to the neighborhood kids.” The maid comes to first cover the bowl, then fold up the cloth from the floor. Carrying both, she exits the door to the front courtyard, closing it behind her. I hear her open the gate from the courtyard and shout “ayca Bismillah!” I hear the scraping of rice into other mouths and into tin cans, and the sound of the maid shaking the cloth free of the last remnants of our lunch.

Later, when I try to describe the experience of receiving *teranga*, Senegalese hospitality, I recount this moment of enforced consumption. I say that it is like being a child held in a firm embrace, or like being a baby bird being fed in the nest. Lunch at Mérébi’s house is always the same, a welcome moment of calm in which the chaos of fieldwork in the cacophony of Dakar fades, and I feel sated and lulled into a happy afternoon nap.

Jamm ci Ker gi: the happiness of the unremarkable

A routine meal, and the sense of peace and happiness it instills, may be an odd center for a chapter in this dissertation that begins and ends with the image of child beggars adrift on the streets of an African metropolis. And yet, “happiness” is precisely what is at stake in the practices surrounding *sarax* and *sutura*, the sacrificial alms that support the city’s beggars, and the valorized discretion that motivates those alms. The happiness of the *añ* depends not only on the mother’s service, not only on the bowl itself, but on the manner in which the routine, taken together, places people in determined roles: Papa’s place outside and above the main bowl of the household, predictably alternating presence with absence, to the ranked positions of siblings and servants encircling the larger bowl, to the necessary and necessarily anonymous role of the *talibe* whose fingers scrape the last from the bowl and

mark the edge of the household's scope. As forgettable as the naturalized order of the everyday appears in these meals, the experience of well-tended predictability it is perhaps the best definition of *jamm*, usually glossed as "peace." *Jamm* is a result of quiet work, the unremarkable accomplishment of correct social relations. In everyday greetings, the standard response to every question is "alhamdulillah," thank God, or "jamm rekk," only peace. To respond "jamm rekk" is to assert the happiness of not having any remarkable event, not having any mark on the outward face of the household's metaphorical garment of *sutura*.

From 2006-2009 the laundry detergent brand "Diam" was widely advertised in Dakar. In television spots that aired in 2007, a beautifully dressed woman (who is not, but could be, the model in the Maggi billboard) laments a spot on her husband's fine garment (the traditional pale blue heavily embroidered *grand boubou*). With an air of resolve, she attempts to wash out the spot with an unnamed bar laundry soap, with no success. Finally, she purchases a sachet of "Diam" detergent powder at the corner *butik*, begins to wash, and finds that the stain immediately disappears. With a flourish of her fleshy bejeweled fingers and a roll of her eyes the woman triumphantly declares, 'ak Diam, jamm rekk ci ker gi,' ("with Diam, only peace in the home"). The wife's statement, the marketing slogan for this brand of detergent, is pronounced "ak jamm, jamm rekk ci ker gi," a pun; French *diam* (short for 'diamond,' line art of which appears on the container) and Wolof *jamm* ('peace') are homophones, and the marketing slogan also means "in peace, only peace in the home," itself a pairing of phrases 'akk jamm' and 'jamm rekk ci ker gi' both used in standard greetings and leave taking blessings to invoke of domestic bliss. All told, the detergent slogans play on the phrases 'akk jamm' (usually occurring as 'jamm akk jamm,' or 'peace and peace,' a formal response to a greeter's

well wishes), ‘jamm ci ger ki’ (peace in the home). ‘Jamm rekk’ (only peace) equivalent to I am/we are/it is ‘well, thank you,’ is the standard response in the most formal of greetings. Indeed, that one will say ‘jamm rekk’ to outsiders is itself a part of the expectations of proper social behavior, of behavior that preserves a spotless public face.

Jamm, so often asked of and referred to in greetings, is the state of undisturbed peace or being ‘well,’ is the ideal state of both bodies and households. Just as a person affirms her own health by answering *jamm rekk* to her conversational partner’s greetings, the claim of *jamm rekk (ci ker gi)* affirms that all is in order within the household.³ It is this ‘order’ or ‘wellness’ on which ‘happiness’ rests, and which, in the commercial, the stain on the patriarch’s garment threatens. Though I have not heard this argument elsewhere, I suggest that the *jamm* promised in the detergent advertisement, and the *bonheur* illustrated in the Maggi billboard are two faces of the same thing: orderly unremarkableness present in well-crafted social relations in the home. Or, perhaps put better if a bit more obscurely at this point, the quality of being an undisturbed and unmarked cohesive whole, a body in which no organ calls attention to itself, a household in which each member fulfills the obligations of his or her role unremarkably. As I will discuss at greater length below, these are qualities of both the disposition of bodies and states of relationships, and qualities of the management of information about both of these. To be well and to be happy are two sides of the goal to which the *mere de famille* aims, the care and containment established in the *ker* enacted in the daily meal around the *bol*.

³ The greeting ritual is itself a moment in which to enact order and rank between interlocutors, see Irvine 1974, among others.

Like my concern with happiness, my attention to the everyday meals of a fairly well off family may at first seem out of place in a regional literature that has historically preferred to focus on crisis and exception (to the extent of — quite usefully — theorizing “permanent exception” and violence as the condition of contemporary governance both on and off the continent, see e.g. Mbembe 2003, Van der Walle 2001, and refutation of this argument, e.g. Neocleous 2006). And yet, the ‘crisis’ literature elides the ways in which crisis is always understood in relationship to the everyday, the unremarkable. Leaving the ethnographically specific conditions of the possibility of the unremarkable, perhaps, insufficiently examined.

Maybe these reasons have contributed to the fact that the routine meals at home have escaped the attention of many ethnographers working in urban settings, and most conspicuously, in the ethnography of African cities. Indeed, the daily meal may have escaped the attention of many contemporary ethnographers of Africa because it is the ground on which the figure of crisis or exceptionality — popular topics of recent study — appear. This contrast initially drew Mandala from discussion of crisis to describe the unremarkable. “The daily meal,” he writes, is “a nonevent” in contrast to the famines that had drawn his attention to the conditions of communal eating in Malawi. He describes daily meals as characterized by their repetitive quality, “one meal is hardly different from another; today’s meal more or less replicates yesterday’s in its content and organization [...] So orderly is the meal that it assumes the appearance of a natural order.” (203-204). For Mandala, though the order enacted at the bowl appears “natural,” the well choreographed scene around the bowl, “despite its apparent cohesiveness,” contains “its own dynamics for change”: as perfectly smoothly as the event unfolds, that very choreographed smoothness presents any number of possible moments for

meaningful disruption. (204) Within seemingly ephemeral daily meal is great political potential, “every meal strengthens the position of those with interest in the *status quo* while encouraging the underprivileged to question and challenge that order” (204). Junior and female members of the society formed around the bowl in Malawi, Mandala argues, have the potential to subvert the taken-for-granted patriarchal, gerontocratic order in which senior men consume the majority of both sauce and meat, leaving women and young people to a separate bowl of the staple starch with scant sauce in times of plenty, only salt in times of want.

In Dakar, daily meals around the bowl present a similar potential to enact, or to disrupt, the normative social order within the household: to uphold the ‘happiness’ of a peaceful household by enacting the status quo, or to create disturbance in a failure to realize the predictable order of household dynamics at the bowl. While in Mandala’s material the greatest possibility for disturbance in the social order comes from below, in the potentially disruptive actions of juniors and women, here different dynamics are in play. In Dakar, the mealtime location of married adults⁴ are the most consequential. Even one absence by an expected adult member of the household signals a significant departure from the norm, with the potential to disrupt the peace of the home, or to build or nurture new social ties, quite possibly to the detriment of the *ker* in which they are expected to eat. Thus, adults’ presence or absence at the bowl is read as an important, potentially ‘creative’ (Silverstein 2003), index whenever it fails to confirm the presupposed order of household arrangements.

By contrast, low status people — particularly children and unmarried sons — are only slightly constrained by household membership, so they are free to eat where they want with little consequence

⁴ And, for slightly different reasons, of female children over the age of 12.

for one time or infrequent actions. Insofar as a child's wanderings do not establish a pattern of eating at one particular home outside the bounds of both uterine kin and the patriline, they are rarely consequential. When a pattern emerges in a young person's preferred bowl for *an*, these eating patterns might become, at most, evidence that a child favors a specific aunt or set of cousins. Put otherwise, as long as a child eats within the matriline or patriline, as it were, a meal eaten away from the mother says nothing about what's happening in the child's own home, though it can come to mean something about his or her relationships outside the natal household.

In this context, the least consequential parties to any dish of food are the the *talibe* child beggars who are called to the doorway of a house to finish the remains of the meal. It is important that the *talibe* come to eat the leftovers, and they always do. *Talibe* know the timing of meals within each house as well as its inhabitants do; each band of *talibe* times its rounds to coincide with the habitual meal-times of the preferred houses in the territories that they have claimed (and in some neighborhoods, different bands — or even different individuals — have claims on different specific houses). As intimately as the *talibe* know the people that feed them, for members of the household it only matters that the beggars come, that there is something for them to eat when they come, and the food is not discarded. I return to the meanings and specific preparation of this surplus at a later point. The beggars' consumption of the last shreds of the meal marks the edge of the household and the web neatly hierarchical dependency and care of which that household is composed.

In Dakar, the wretchedness of beggars, the meagerness of their meals consumed on the street, is always understood in relationship to the everyday meals of all but Dakar's very poorest. Indeed, the beggar — particularly the child *talibe* — is meaningful precisely because he does not live in his

mother's house, because he does not have a steady place at any bowl, because he lives on the street outside the protection of the *ker*.⁵ One might go so far as to argue that, like the ritual begging of Jain renunciatives Laidlaw (1995) describes, the *talibe*'s consumption of leftovers is key not only to his own religious discipline and the merit of those who feed him, but also to the meaning of the household and the householder within an urban space understood in religious and moral terms. His meal marks the edge of household membership, just as the maid's shaking of debris and residual grains of rice from the *nappe* outside the door marks the edge of property on which Merebi's house sits, and the beginning of the street. The *talibe* mark the edge of the circle of the mother's power, the limits of her moral authority, and the hem of the veil of her protection.

Households at the intersection of two models of descent

Over the course of this chapter, I argue that the bowl is an emblem of the *ker* (household), and that by managing, beautifying, and serving the cooked food that the bowl holds, women exert power over both their husbands and dependants. In serving food, women assert the existence of a place for each member of the household, and they put each member of that household in their place. As such, the bowl is an indexical icon of the household as a whole, a ritual site in which the potential and stakes of social life in the city are worked out in quotidian practice. To make sense of the power and pull of the bowl as a means of ordering relatedness in contemporary Dakar, therefore, one must situate it within the context of contemporary residential practices and contested ideologies of kinship and group membership in the city. The boundaries of what counts as a 'ker' in the city, that is, where the edge of both information and power relations fall in relationship to groupings of people and architectural

⁵ I expand on the *talibe*'s consequential "motherlessness" in chapter five.

forms, currently both resonates with and controversially refigures other models and regimes of relatedness and residence.

While individual residential groups work through internal politics and some semblance of peaceful coherence around the bowl, tensions within and across groups articulate not only interpersonal dramas but also the interplay of Dakar's larger political and economic dynamics. Both the arrangement of the structures in which people in Dakar live and the ways that they imagine being related are shaped by the articulation of the pressures of increased urbanization and rising housing costs on the one hand, and long-standing local models of descent, alliance, and relations of patronage and dependency within the household. As the rate of urbanization increases, patterns of residence that become more or less possible, more or less desirable under these conditions. Contemporary forms reference and potentially refigure presupposed models of relatedness, descent, and transmission of real property and personal properties. Of particular salience are the transmission of surnames 'sant,' and breastmilk-mediated matrilineage, 'meen.'

Interestingly, in contemporary Dakar membership in both patriline and matriline, though each governed by distinct logics, are figured in logics of feeding and eating. Like other shared schema of social structures, these models are perhaps best first introduced as abstract rules, and so, because the 'Wolof kinship system' is not adequately described in this way in English elsewhere, I begin my discussion in exactly such a gnomic frame, drawing from the explanations given to me, from rationalizations given as answers when I asked about people's behaviors and group membership, and at points, with discussion of work published previously in the francophone ethnographic literature.

People in Dakar discuss kinship in relationship to two potential vectors of relatedness, the patriline (*sant*) and the matriline (*meen*). Unlike descent in the Euro-American model, descent as mediated through the father's line is understood to be qualitatively different than descent mediated through the mother's line. Relationships based on descent from patriline or matriline have distinct rights, responsibilities, and affective tenor, and are named with distinct kinship terms.

The patriline — the group of people who share *sant* — is maintained legally and economically, in the public accomplishment of sacrificial feasts as granting the right to claim ownership of a child, and in the ongoing work of providing the resources to feed dependent persons, both descendents and clients. Assignment of *sant* always requires a public act of acknowledgement, in the form of elaborately staged ceremonies in which the baby becomes the father's dependent. The current standard and idealized narrative of becoming a social person, though never certain for any one child, is as follows: babies born in Dakar are nameless and invisible to all but members of their mother's household (and obstetric clinic staff) for the first seven days after their birth. On the eighth day, the baby's father, in company of his kin and imam, arrive to claim the child. The father's paternal sister (the child's *baggen*) shaves the baby's head, and father's paternal uncle confers the child's personal name and lineage surname. This portion of the eighth day ceremonies is called *tudd* (to call by a name). The father, and his kin, sacrifice a sheep, which will be prepared by their dependents to be consumed by the assembled guests. As the naming ceremony is concluded with Qur'anic recitation, a second ceremony, the *nguenta*, begins as the mother's household makes symbolic payments of cash to the *baggen*, and of *laax* (milky millet couscous porridge) to the assembled senior men. At this griots and guests assemble to publicly commemorate the father's lineage, to whom the mother's kin and guests pay homage.

It is possible for a child not to be claimed into a patriline, or to be claimed into the patriline of someone who is not his genitor (e.g. if the genitor fails to *nangu* (accept) the child, it may be claimed by the mother's patron or a member of her uterine kin, who perform the ceremony and whose surname then attaches to the child). Similarly, although a child may be abandoned by its genetrix, it will belong to the *meen* of the woman who has provided the stuff of the child's physical body, at the breast (or from the bottle), and with that body, the child's character as defined by its bodily dispositions.

Within standard Euro-American views of kinship, the difference between maternal and paternal relationships with a child is often understood as a difference between a 'natural' bond and legal or 'cultural' bond. Although paternity in Dakar is framed as a legal relationship, as embodied in the assignment of a name, and maternity as a corporeal relationship as embodied in breastmilk from which the body is formed, the difference between the two is not one of 'culture' vs 'nature.' Both forms of relatedness are achieved, albeit each with its own processural qualities, its own temporality.

The two distinct kinds of descent are both figured as social, and framed in culinary terms, as two different kinds of relationships of feeding, represented in the eighth day ceremonies in the feasts on sacrificial lamb provided by the man who claims paternity (as a representative of the patriline to which the child will then belong) at the solemnization of the naming contract, and in the milky millet porridge provided by the mother's family as a means of nourishing and appeasing the imam and patriline. As Feldman-Savelsberg observes of the role of cooking in figuring relatedness in one group in Cameroon, "culinary imagery, while not unique to double descent systems," helps to understand and resolve the ways that kinship is understood from multiple perspectives within a single group, notably

the ways that femininity is figured within a kinship system in which matriline and patriline function with quite different logics (1995).

Rather than sets of claims about the ‘natural’ vs the ‘cultural,’ or about ‘blood’ vs ‘love’ (Schneider 1980), that is relationships by birth vs. “in-laws,” so prevalent in American discussion of families, the models of kinship by which people in Dakar account for their relationships to each other appear both as metaphors grounded in ideas of feeding. Each mode of being related distinguished by not only gender, but temporality: one linked to punctual action, centered in the mosque or public forum, the other and ongoing process, concealed within the enclosed space of the *ker*.

The claims of the patriline are modelled in ritual sacrifice, and the feasts that follow. Perhaps it is no coincidence that these sacrifices are explicitly Abrahamic, enacting patriline membership within a larger frame of religious law (c.f. Silverstein 2004). Nor is it surprising that the slaughter and food preparation that sacrificial feast entail take place in open public places, and the cooking may even be done by men. In this frame, women, both as they prepare food and as they prepare bodies (in gestation) recede into the background.

In contemporary “Wolof” kinship, matrilineality, on the other hand, takes its shape in ongoing and largely uncommented upon feeding in the domestic space. in the intimacy of bodies made literally of the mother’s, as in the movement of breastmilk, and in shared consumption around the bowl. Within this logic of feeding and being fed, married women who head their own houses now seem to draw husbands (and dependents to whom they did not give birth) into the domain of matriarchal power. It is not that women make dependent children of their husbands, but that the power they exert

over their husbands develops and function in the same register. By feeding people inside, habitually, women achieving durable domestic ties.

In *La Famille Wolof* (“the Wolof Family”), Senegalese anthropologist Abdoulaye Bara Diop (1985) describes Wolof dual descent as a direct continuation of practices dating from the precolonial kingdoms, in which *sant* marked not purely biological descent, but membership in and dependence on the household of a particular lord (e.g. the *damel*), as mediated through the line of the genitor. In the system as he describes it, though the surname/lineage was shared by all within the lord’s court/household, rank and position within that lineage were determined by a person’s maternity. At the highest level, Diop argues, rank among the *damel*’s heirs was determined by ordinal position of the mother among the lord’s wives (first wife’s children ranking above second wife’s children, etc). This ordinal logic extended, fractally as it were, to the descendents of these sons in each generation, creating a vast number of people of noble birth while maintaining a concentration of power at specific places within a few small strands of the patriline. Within the unit formed by elaboration of this patriline, membership in West Africa’s famous endogamous occupational groups, otherwise known as “casted persons” (Wolof *nyenyo*) was understood to depend on maternity alone: one was a woodworker (*laobe*) or griot (*gewel*) or slave (*jam*) if one’s mother was.

Though all men who can purchase (or somehow appropriate) a sheep can now pass their own *sant* to their progeny, matrilineal descent in contemporary Dakar appears largely identical to that Diop describes in the period of the kingdoms. Now, as under the *damels*, caste status and numerous other invisible qualities of the person are understood to be inherited from the mother as part of the substance of the flesh, in a line of descent referred to as the ‘meen.’ (Diop 1985) *Meen* is a literal, if

archaic, Wolof word for breastmilk, and the group it picks out may also be referred to as those whose mothers, or mother's mother's 'sucked at the same breast': ego, ego's mother, ego's maternal siblings, ego's maternal grandmother, ego's maternal great-grandmother (if living), and all direct descendants of the women in this line (extending, for example, to great-grandmother's daughter's daughter's son). The maternal uncle (*nijaay*) is included, but his children are not. Analytically, one might then call the *meen* the "uterine line."

However, the local model has no interest in the womb as the locus of transmission of membership in the *meen*. Rather than gestation, children of the same mother are linked by a principle of shared consumption (and via women, transmission) of co-substantial breastmilk, (c.f. Turner 1967 28-30). As Diop writes, the very substance of breast milk is understood to transmit and compose the physical substance of the person, as well as qualities of the character understood to reside in the person's physical being: "the blood (*derat*), the flesh (*soox*) but also the character (*jiko*) and the intelligence, *xel*, and also *ndemm* the gift of sorcery." (Diop:1985:19, translation mine) None of these aspects of the person is present at birth, but must be 'fed in' to the person. Every perduring quality of the person beyond the name is conferred over time, at the breast. Children of the same mother (as well as all other members of the mother's matriline) are thus imagined to be 'of one flesh,' as it were, composed of the same stuff and therefore having the same temperament and dispositions. Within this frame, it makes perfect sense that caste status, and all physically-imagined qualities that attend it (e.g. 'heaviness' vs. 'lightness,' as in Irvine 1989) are locally understood to, on the final analysis, pass exclusively through the mother's line. Because women are expected to establish their households' in their husband's (patriline's place), or at the very least, not in their mothers' homes, the matriline exists as a dispersed

group of persons sharing the same substance and of the same ‘type.’ A set of households linked to the physical persons of mothers, of which men are only terminal nodes. The hidden connections between members of the same *meen* are not severed by patrilocality, however, and have important social consequences, as I discuss further in chapter four (see also Pfeil 2012).

Even now, among highly educated urban people who both understand and fully embrace the chromosomal model of heredity, matrilineal and patrilineal descent are experienced differently. In conversations with people in Dakar I learned that it is not only true, but universally obvious that sets of people who have consumed the same breastmilk are more (closely, consequentially) related to each other than children who share a father. Before I read Diop’s account I was already quite clearly instructed (and had watched events unfold that demonstrated) that children of the same father are less similar than they are consequentially different. *Doomubaay* (paternal kin) are the same in name only¹, and as I learned much later when I finally read Diop’s work, “the uterine line is the basis of a closer kinship than that of the agnatic line” (1985:20). In large part the close connection felt between children of the same mother may reflect the ongoing principals of coresidence of uterine siblings and separation of sets of half Polygyny and serial divorce and remarriage of both men and women support the proliferation of rival set of half-siblings, who, in ways that may parallel the battles of succession between noble sons in the time of the *damel*, now find themselves at odds over inheritance of land and money on the father’s death. A tension moderated within larger domestic units, by shared consumption of food.

In tension with the bonds shared by children of the same mother, within old patrilocal compounds, shared consumption of rice, and by extension of the other necessities of life provided by

the head of one's household, acts to unite people in a form of relatedness or siblingship that transcends matriline and patriline. Here again, a culinary metaphor defines belonging of yet another type: 'bokk' (sharing) defines who are related to each other as 'mbokk yi' (literally 'sharers'). This term is locally translated into French as '*parents*' simply, 'relatives.' It would, perhaps, be better translated as 'co-wards,' because the term includes all persons who are both materially and morally dependent on the same 'kilifa' or head of household, a relationship between people traceable through cohabitants across multiple generations and open to extension to, for example, followers of the same religious order, or to the *umma* as a whole (mbokkyi jullit yi). And while *mbokk* as a term transcends lineage membership, the shared consumption of rice that defines it has come into ever greater alignment with relations of sameness mediated by breast milk. Put otherwise, the economic unit of the household, one that once traced the outlines of the court of the *damel* and thus operated by a largely (but not exclusively) patrilineal logic, is becoming coterminous with relations traced by uterine descent.

Eating at the bowl as ritually enacting the household

Eating together at the bowl is thus a daily ritual tracing the lines of dependence, responsibility, and care that found the 'household' as a unified group of people. Within this daily articulation of belonging, both membership in subgroups and rank is enacted in space: each bowl modeling a conjugal couple and their children and other dependents, place at the bowl marking status within a group of dependents—by birth order or by temporary favor. Similarly, relationships of status are articulated in time in the course of the meal. The patriarch presides over the first bowl served, sons

eating with their wives are served in birth order rank. When tea is served after the meal, again a strict rank order is maintained in the order of service.

Each meal service, then, ritually enacts the structure of dependence and relatedness within the home, placing the mother of the house at the center and in control of the quantity, quality, even the mere fact, of each portion. At the same time, within the home, both the spatial and temporal considerations of plating and food service mirror and reinforce local ideas of kinship and coresidence; both stratification by rank, and mutual belonging are reinforced. The same logic is applied, metaphorically, in the *añ* (midday meal) served during the *yendóo* (afternoon-passing) portion of a *xéw*. Much as table seatings at a North American bourgeois wedding might replicate the couple's 'social circles' (bride's paternal cousins at one table, groom's fraternity brothers at another), women arrange themselves in groups that mimic sibling sets around the beautiful bowl of *thibouyapp* (a rice dish with meat, garnished extensively with marinated vegetables and boiled eggs): the celebrant's officemates, women married into the sibling set of celebrant's husband, etc.

The status of women as (at least the centers of the *ker* if not the) 'head of household' emerges in the practical working out of the demands of both of these influences. Over the last few generations, the pressures of urban life in Dakar have contributed to a transformation of residential patterns, all the qualities and powers of 'ker' as a political and economic unit have come to be superimposed on what were formerly subunits of the *ker* compound, the *neeg*, a unit of residence and social organization that has long been under women's control. Changes in architectural styles and constraints on the site of new construction in the last two generations have shifted residences from a norm of patriarchally

headed patrifocal compounds of separate structures housing a mother and the sibling set of her children to one of detached ‘European’ style structures (or apartment block units), separated spatially from those of both natal kin and affines. As before, each individual free standing unit maps onto a group composed of a matriarch and her children. However, these female-headed units are no longer subsumed in male-headed compounds set within larger lineage based neighborhoods. Scattered throughout the city by the chaotic forces of real estate and rental markets, women’s *neeg* are no longer part of a male-headed *ker* compound. Instead, they are free standing, economically and spatially distinct households, with mother at the center.

In Ouakam, the transformations have been particularly pronounced. The ‘old village’ of Ouakam is traditionally held to have been consolidated by Mame Mbeye Diop (a Tijanni cleric from Tivavoune), who built the village’s first mosque in the 19th century. Here, to this day, one finds the houses of various ‘founding families,’ representing many of the Wolof and (partially assimilated) Peul noble (*gээр*) lineages established in Tivavoune.⁶ As one might expect, the center of this part of Ouakam

⁶ In metropolitan Dakar, particularly, the contemporary social order appears to articulate tensions inherent to both traditional “Wolof” dual descent and also religiously founded taboos on MIXED-sex sociality, widely attested in the region. Contemporary restrictions on building, women’s expanding wealth, a resurgence of elite male polygamy, and elite junior male out-migration together create a spatial logic of individual female-headed households in the urban center. This logic is not a break from a previous patrilineal/patriarchal order, but an articulation of the ongoing tensions of “Wolof” dual descent kinship system, in dynamic tension with a continuing politics of aristocratic patrons, their houses, and their dependents.

As Abdoulaye Bara Diop, the preeminent ethnographer of the Wolof, describes it, kinship in the former Wolof kingdoms is bilinear within the noble lineages, and for dependent persons and members of court, reckoned in relationship to the patron families. (Diop 1985). Put in more technical terms, ego’s descent was reckoned through both mother’s and father’s lines, in reference to noble lineages and focal persons of noble descent who have achieved political eminence. Ego’s relationship to these noble lineages may be traced by descent, cases in which ego was born to and hold the surname of a noble lineage, but also through alliance and dependance (Diop 1985: 16). In the past, dependent persons often assumed the *sant* (surname) of a noble lineage with which they were affiliated. In this way,

was originally built up around the household of Mame Mbeye Diop. His original compound was a cluster of single-room structures, one for each of his wives. As his sons married (those who did not return to Tivavoune), each built a detached one-room structure for his wife, facing his mother's and leaving an open air kitchen to be shared by the wives. Thus, residences within this settlement grew like rhizomes, clustered around the original courtyard that stood at the center of the Mame Mbeye Diop's original compound. In this way, the cluster of dense structures that now form 'Diopene' ('Diop-one') in the Sinthie district of Ouakam has grown in and closed up, creating a sort of rabbit warren of rooms belonging to members of the Diop patriline and their in-married wives.

Within this set of older structures, the larger overall spatial logic marks historical relationships between patrilineal groups. So doing, the build environment of "old Ouakam" partially maintains them to this day: descendents of an apical Ndiaye ancestor are clustered together forming "Ndiayene," descendents of a 19th century Wane patriarch similarly inhabit a cluster of structures known as "Wanene."⁷ The placement of each of these settlements with respect to Diopene reflect the historical relationship between the three lineages. The most tightly clustered areas of each settlement all border each other, facing a large clearing in which Mame Mbeye Diop hosted large scale devotional activities, including recitations by clerics visiting from Tivavoune, and an open air girls' Quranic school, over

patron/client relationships found formal kinship. Following Diop, to the extent that noble lineage was carried in a name, the name traced not biological descent in the lineage, but relations of dependence, household membership, and political allegiance. It may be most accurate to view contemporary patterns of residence and small scale economic action not as the weakening of a pre-colonial patriarchal logic, but an expansion of the matrilineal/matriarchal logic that has maintained a dynamic tension within the political system since (at least) the time of the precolonial kingdoms.

⁷ For a wonderfully detailed account of the history of settlement and construction in Ouakam, and its present instantiations, I recommend Babacar Niasse's 2002 Master's thesis in Geography, "Le village dans la ville: dynamique spatiale et mutations sociales à Ouakam."

which his descendents continue to preside. What had been the courtyard of the cleric's household settlement is now a sort of public square, with the households of his of the descendents of his children arrayed around it.

Within this logic of patrilineal descent, however, residences are grouped by uterine sets: the structures belonging to male members of the patriline beside and facing those of their mothers and uterine siblings, adjacent to, but turned away from, those of their paternal half-siblings, and therefore, from those of their paternal cousins. The pattern is therefore based on a fractal logic, which fills in spaces within named compounds.

After only a few generations, construction of *neeg* for each woman and her children has filled in most of the open space in the old settlement. Repairs and renovations to women's *neeg*, funded by the earnings of their sons and grandsons as World War II and UN Peacekeepers soldiers, employees at the nearby airport, civil servants, and as émigrés in Europe, the U.S., and the middle east have transformed one-room wooden structures into multi-story cement brick. As the space has filled in construction within Diopene and the neighboring lineage settlements has been limited to renovation of existing structures, and the sons of these lineages have either brought their wives to live in rooms in their mother's houses or the wives have moved not into their husband's compounds at all, but into their own 'modern' multi-story cement houses outside of the old village, in new neighborhoods growing quickly in what had, less than twenty five years ago, been agricultural fields, animal pasture, or open bush.

Population pressures and the inflow of money have therefore lead to transformations in homes in the old city which still maintain aspects of the older spatial order. For example, during the period of

my fieldwork, the neighboring wooden structures belonging to Hajja, a wife of Mame Mbeye Diop's grandson, and her co-wife were renovated into two two-story cement brick homes, sharing one wall, but with separate entrances with distinct front steps, and no common indoor space. The renovation was managed by both women's children, but I have been told that perhaps it was only one of Hajja's daughters who funded the construction of both parts of the structure: at least, it was she who collected money from all those 'participating' and paid the builders who assembled the first floor of both of the older women's homes.⁸ On both sides of the new structure, smaller buildings that had housed each wife's children were demolished to allow the new structure to sit in the footprint of all of the women's dependants' previous residences, as well as the open air kitchen, courtyard, and enclosed shower and toilet each woman shared with her sons' rooms. The new structure contains a *salon* (sitting room), the mother's bedroom, two smaller bedrooms, an interior kitchen, and european-style bathroom on each side. Bedrooms for each of the married children occupy the second floor, joined with the mother's spaces by an interior stairwell, yet completely separated from their half siblings'. The second floors were not completed simultaneously, and Hajja's children had no hand in the construction of the second floor of the co-wife's part of the structure.

Both the arrangement of compounds and individual structures around the clearing and the architecture of Hajja's new house demonstrate the ethnographically specific qualities of the possible distinction between the analytic categories 'household' 'lineage' and 'family.' Anthropologists' concern about the household and the family as units — that they do not appear to neatly 'fit' units of production or consumption, that other logics e.g. 'lineage' are actually operative, etc — parallel in

⁸ I return to discuss a visit with Hajja, and to describe her social power, in chapter four.

some ways people in Dakar's own concerns about the role of the household in relationship to other modes of belonging. These concerns are reflected in discourses surrounding polygyny and divorce, both widely practiced in Dakar, but they are not reducible to them.

One afternoon, after an *añ* in Diopbene, I listened to three adult sisters talking about recent events in the neighborhood. The older two of the sisters are here visiting, as they have moved away to live with husbands outside Dakar, the third, Oumy, lives in Diopbene with her mother. Today Oumy, the youngest sister, is bringing her sisters up to date on an ongoing drama unfolding nearby. "In the end, finally, they just cut the house in two," Oumy said, of the neighbor's house. "After the old man died, there was no way to keep the peace, no one could agree on repairs and expenses. They had to add a second electrical connection and be done with it." And though Oumy and her sisters expressed concern, even surprise at this turn of events, I was not surprised in the least. I had seen the same thing, more or less, occur many times throughout my time in Dakar: those prosperous polygamous men, of the generation that began having children in the early 1950s, who had chosen to house their wives together in duplex-style houses on their ancestral land in the now extremely populous quarters of the old Dakar settlement in Ouakam left a complex legacy to their descendants, literally. Those old men who had lived long enough to see the money for rebuilding in cement had built single attached structures with separate wings for each wife, or duplexes with one side or floor for each wife. Because of the vagaries of utility service in Dakar, however, most maintained a single electrical hookup, and one metered water connection.

On the husband's death, the children of the wives began to fight in earnest. These conflicts were never a war of each man for himself, or of improvised alliances, rather the conflict was always

between one set of uterine siblings and another. Battles erupted of unpaid electric bills and intentional waste of resources, of property damage. No longer bound by their father's administration of material resources, his management of utility bills and distribution to each wife of rice and 'dispense' money for expenses, the household fell neatly into two units, each group acting together as if of one flesh. Because the departed patriarch was no longer there to administer resources between the two wives, to manage the shared expenses of his household, what had been his compound, his 'ker,' split into two parts defined by uterine siblingship and the bowls of food that each wife commanded. One *ker* containing two rival *neeg* became two enemy *ker*, albeit sharing a wall, distinct economic units each headed by its matriarch.

The three women's surprise over the final separation of the group they were discussing, was followed by a series of laments of these times, the loss of tradition, nostalgia for a bygone era in which a man's co-wives were like "*ay doom-i yaay*," (that is, children of the same mother) united in a loving care for each other. This lament, as familiar to me as the wars — at times cold, at other times quite hot, fought by uterine sibling sets, *doom-u yaay*, against their half siblings, *doom-u baay* (father's children) — belies the fact that most everyone acknowledges the extreme tensions inherent in these forms of relatedness. Indeed, despite their nostalgia, none of these women would willingly live beside their husbands' uterine kin, let alone in a shared structure with a co-wife. The two older sisters lived in detached houses with their children (and husbands, depending on the husband's schedule, etc). Oumy, the youngest, stayed at her mother's side even after marriage, occasionally going to stay for a week or so at her mother in law's house.

There were two reasons each of these women gave me, almost always in private, that they would never accept the ‘traditional’ residential arrangements about which they had been so nostalgic: danger to themselves from co-wives, and to their own children from half-siblings. As has been widely observed in the Africanist literature on the politics of descent and lineage, father’s children, and those of paternal uncles’ are ‘natural rivals’: potential incumbents of heads of households. In these conditions the friction that troubles cohabitation after the patriarch’s death is not surprising.

Dealings with co-wives, however, are widely recognized to be the most treacherous. Of those women that I knew in polygamous marriages, almost all avoided any contact with their husband’s other wives, if at all possible. This avoidance was so complete as to lead many women to avoid referring to the other wife by name, preferring the distal demonstrative pronouns ‘kele’ (sing.human.dist) and ‘fele’ (location.dist) if it was ever necessary to refer to them at all.⁹ As these forms of avoidance suggest, in contemporary urban Senegal, the relations two women married to the same man are hardly ‘co-‘ anything, least of all ‘co-wives.’ They are quite literally rivals: the correct term for this relationship is ‘wujj’, rivals (and the verb ‘wujjunte’ ‘wujj-mutual’ means to compare oneself competitively with another, to be involved in a rivalry, in any context). Their status, in relationship to each other, and to their husband’s brother’s wives, is always ordinally ranked: senior and junior wives, of senior and junior brothers.

Whether situated in the old village, or in the newer neighborhoods, new buildings refract the ‘one wife, one *neeg*’ model of the original settlement into a new logic in which each adult woman

⁹ One extremely clever woman I know (a second wife), however, named her youngest daughter after her husband’s third wife. This calculated move ended the truly vicious attacks the third wife had waged against both the second wife and her children.

strives to command her own separate ‘modern’ style house. Land is so valuable and in such short supply that brothers rarely live near each other, let alone grow up living in larger clusters their ‘doomu baay’ (members of their patriline, of all generations, literally ‘father’s children’). Here, the wives’ *neeg* are separated from the husband’s patrilineal kin, now full cement structures. The same land shortages and pressures to build costly cement brick structures that fueled the dispersal of individual women’s homes in their mother’s generation keep young men in their thirties and forties in their rooms within their mothers’ homes, re-instantiating the logic of uterine sibling clusters from the old village, now embedded not in a network of half-sibling rivals and cousins, but in a neighborhood of strangers.

Contemporary patterns of polygamy and frequent divorce and remarriage — among both women and men — further support the dispersal of patriline members. Because many women construct, renovate, or expand their houses using their own resources, once established, women rarely leave their houses in divorce. In the families that I studied, though young wives (with no children, or only a young child), who had not moved from their husband’s room in their mother-in-law’s house returned to their mothers on divorce, older women who were established outside their mother-in-law’s homes remained in place.

In contemporary Dakar, then, the ‘neeg’ and the ‘ker’ appear superimposed. As women assume even greater control over finances, and the challenges of obtaining land break down and disperse old patterns of settlement organized around patriline membership. Households appear to be headed by women because changes in spatial logics of the city fueled by the real estate market and women’s growing investment in urban housing together contribute to a situation in which it is nearly impossible for a man to create his own compound beside that of his father, and women who have

achieved houses of their own rarely move, even on divorce. In many homes that I studied, a wide variety of economic, semiotic, and, for lack of a better term, occult practices were employed to maintain a sharp distinction between groups of children of the same mother. In fact, separation—often quite strict— was the rule and there were few ties at all between the households of one man’s different wives, and little assumed familiarity between their children. In the most common situation of these polygamous urban households, in fact, patrilineal inheritance had been cleverly rendered almost moot for the current generation. Husbands established a separate house for each wife, which became in effect her property, to be inhabited by herself and her children and any of her son’s in-married wives.

With this architectural and spatial reordering of gendered power, women appear not only as (functional) heads of household, but also as the masters of both the labor and the secrets of those who live within them. The wife’s bedchamber (the old sense of the *neeg* — in which the (secrets of the) conjugal couple is contained — and the *ker* or ‘house’ — in which the household is contained and its secrets are wrapped — are now coextensive, and the woman at the center of both of these orders of information are the only ones who might protect happiness or *diamm ci ker gi*, the joy and peace to be found within the protective enclosure of both the physical house and the carefully orchestrated unremarkableness which affords its residents shelter from the inquisitive eyes and intrusive comments of outsiders.

In the previous chapter I discussed *sutura*, glossed roughly as ‘discretion,’ as a moral virtue pertaining to a relationship to the circulation of information, yet also enacted and embodied in less clearly communicative practices (body posture, household arrangements, etc). As I described it, *sutura*

is a kind of quality. It may be one of the qualia which comes to be embodied in entities as an effect of semiotic practice (Munn 1977, see also Chumley and Harkness 2013, Lemon 2013, Nozawa 2013).

In my discussion of Diagne’s interpretation of Birago Diop’s folktale, “le pretexte,” in chapter two, I suggested that *sutura* is not only a quality of people, but also of households as discrete entities. By entering the household a guest (in the case of “le pretexte,” a charlatan) passes inside the ‘veil’ of *sutura* which the householder maintains about the doings of those under his or her roof. Like the person, then, the household may be said to be virtuous, and ‘am *sutura*’ (possessed of *sutura*), insofar as information about the inner workings of the household do not travel, insofar as the metaphorical veil of *sutura* is held around the members of the house, and their doings in ‘private.’ Just as the mind and power of the individual agent in Dakar draws power from its opacity to others, in the enclosure of the voting booth or in less material means by which closed interiority is enacted, so too does the control of information and restriction of circulation that defines the household constitute the *ker* as a sort of agent or actor. The veil of *sutura* of the household serving the function of the fabric drape that allow many people to become, at a Chinese New Years celebration, one dragon; by containing information, *sutura* not only protects those within it, it allows them to act as a single entity, masking the complexities of relations between the persons who might otherwise be said to compose the household. The *ker* — and the bowl which serves as its emblem — is an entity that exists, draws power from, and is able to act by virtue of its informational closure, the solid semiotic exterior edge created by *sutura*.

The Secret of Happiness: ‘teranga’ and the power of the bowl

Later, I will learn from one of Mérébi's children that a mutual friend has been joking, 'I don't know what you put in what you feed that American,' playfully implying that I'd been pulled into this woman's sphere of influence by something I consumed at her bowl. The comment obliquely suggests that I might have consumed some kind of occult preparation along with my rice and sauce. I'd heard the line before — half joking, half serious — about others, single people from the country pulled into affiliation with a home and a 'mother' in the city. Questions about 'what she's put in their food' are light but ambiguous; is it good cooking that draws and holds a person under a matriarch's power, or has the patroness employed some other, occult, means of gaining the support of a new dependent? Asking about "what she's feeding them" is a way of asking if the power of the bowl, at this moment, is licit or illicit?

The ambiguity of the nature of 'influence' — epicurean or occult? — to result from what is found inside a woman's bowl marks the power of the midday meal as the ritual center and indexical icon of belonging. The form of 'belonging' enacted around the bowl is one of *membership* in a closed group, the home, but also of belonging to someone as a person at least partially possessed — a child, a vassal, a client. At the same time, it points to an important local model of *specifically feminine* power. By managing the bowl, a woman controls a means of persuasion mediated by the consumption of prepared foods, a specifically directional power that the bowl's owner employs to pull people *into* the space that she controls, and to provide them a place to rest and to belong.

The complexity of the power of the bowl is often discussed as *teranga*, a local value often translated as 'hospitality.' Like *sutura*, *teranga* is both a general virtue and also often specifically

feminine, an obligation and a source of strength. As Hudita Mustafa, an ethnographer of femininity and beauty in Dakar, defines it, *teranga* is “the Wolof ethic of hospitality and reciprocity which undergirds Senegambian culture, and prescribes a range of duties in everyday life, from public etiquette, to mutual financial aid, to attention to one’s tired husband at the end of the day.” (2006:23) Indeed, *teranga* is the other face of ‘belonging’ as I describe it above; it is both an obligation to care for another and a site for the production of personal power and agency in relationship to those cared for. It is this set of obligations that constitute female mastery of the household, of dependents and of guests: creating the conditions of groupness, recruiting individuals to the places in which they belong. Indeed “*teranga*,” I was told when I first took the photo, is the subject of the *Maggi* billboard. *Teranga* is that thing constituted by ‘Maggi et moi,’ it is ‘the secret of happiness.’

Mustafa’s definition of *teranga*, above, moves seamlessly from the public to the private: from ‘public etiquette’ to the physical care a wife provides her husband’s tired body. By highlighting the role of *teranga* in both the public space and the privacy of the conjugal home, Mustafa ties *teranga* to both marriage and a larger feminine erotics of the social in Dakar, grounded in the “corporeal, sensory and visual spectacle of mature femininity” (2006:25). The social world posited by *teranga* is one in which “mature femininity” is characterized by plentitude, specifically that embodied by the *dirriankbe*.

The *dirriyankbe* is one archetypal object of male desire in Senegal, and an image of feminine power. She is understood to control considerable wealth and powers of sexualized persuasion, which she embodies in a carefully curated physicality, possibly accentuated by the occult or even chemical powers of the costly creams and perfumes with which she cares for her body. The prototypical

dirriankbe has a heavy voluptuous body perfumed by exposure to Arabian incense, (artificially) pale skin, and ornamented in (visible) heavy gold jewelry and (unseen, but audible) beads and charms wrapped under the large quantities of high-value textiles in which she is dressed. A woman enacts the persona of a *dirriankbe* with a quiet vocal style (almost whispered), that requires people to approach to hear her, and a slow dragging gate that causes her ample body, and the beads she wears inside her clothing, to shake and roll slowly, creating a similar effect of sound emanating from a hidden source. The scent of her perfume radiates outward from her body, hanging in, yet only partially obscured by the barrier of, her clothing. Sound and scent both create an attractive power of mystery: something is marked to be behind the veil of the clothing, alluring in its obfuscation. Finally, the *dirriankbe* is exemplified in the public spectacles of lavish giving and expenditure that characterize women's participation in baptisms and weddings, as she produces banknotes from her elegant clutch. Here too, she radiates outwards from a concealed source, this time in a seemingly endless flow of banknotes, issuing from a concealed and presumably large personal wealth, the size of which cannot be verified precisely because it is only witnessed in its effects, in pieces of a presupposed larger whole.

Each of the qualities of a *dirriankbe*, if properly executed, give the woman a presupposed power of persuasion, especially over men. The prototypical *dirriankbe* earns her money as a merchant, importing goods from the Middle East, Asia, and the United States (Akyeampong 2010, Buggenhagen 2009). It is by *being a dirriankbe* that these women are able to draw wealth to themselves (by persuading a customs official to release her shipment of cosmetics, say), and it is her ability to accumulate and hold wealth that gives her the qualities of a *dirriankbe*. Thus, the image of the *dirriankbe* frames adult female power in qualities of weight, plentitude, and directionality. She pulls

wealth towards herself by charming those under her power, and she maintains her power over clients and dependents through her expenditure.

Like the plenty and luxuriance of physical pleasures to which the *dirrianke*'s physicality alludes, the beautiful bowl of seemingly endless food at the center of Mérébi's Sunday lunch pulls people to itself and persuades them by the careful combination of elements selected for their beauty. A perfect okra and an artful pour of sauce parallel a well chosen earring and cloud of just the right incense. Indeed, the same terms are used to describe liquid *Arôme Maggi* and a popular body lotion: two forms of *saf-safal* (W. seasoning agents) that both belong to the *petites astuces de l'arsenal féminin* (Fr. 'little gambits of the feminine weaponry'). Like perfumes, incense, and jewels, seasoning agents and sauces — even imported vinegars and American ranch dressing! — are the property of a married woman, kept under lock and key in her *armoire*.

Teranga is best expressed in the labor of creating moments of happiness around the bowl, its power, like the *dirrianke*'s, lies in the persuasions of deliciousness and the pull of the bowl. Questions about what Mérébi fed me — which items in her arsenal had she employed? — were questions about how I had come into her sphere of influence, or under her power. In other words, to ask what she fed me was also to ask both why I brought her a bag of rice and a box of vegetables every time I came back from Marche Tilene — the notoriously tiring food market. The questions at the same time, though, were a means to frame our close affective bond, a means of expressing some wonder at the way that I had come under her protection and care.

That questions about how I had come to belong to Mérébi's *ker*, to be one of her 'wa *ker*' (W. household members) were united in one question, 'what are the mysterious contents of Mérébi's bowl?' signals not only the complicated relationship between hospitality and power, as discussed above, but also the close relationship between these forms of power and ideologies of epistemic status and semiotic practice active in Dakar (as in Pfeil 2011). Only an outsider who has no idea what happens inside the home, what food is inside the bowl, would wonder how someone came to belong to a household. If one knows what is in the bowl, as I do, one is also by definition, someone with 'a place at the table' and a member of *wa ker gi*, therefore under the sway of the bowl's owner. To put it otherwise, it is only to those who stand outside the *sutura* of the household that the matriarch's powers over her household might appear to be troublingly occult, rather than simply charming.

It is important, then, that the bowl and its powerful *teranga* are the property of married (or once married) women, a relationship I discuss in much more detail in chapter four. Marriage, and its most important sequitur, motherhood, create the domains — *neeg* and *ker* — in which the strongest forms of *teranga* operate. First, a newly married woman exercises power over the *neeg* (bedchamber), even if in her husband's natal house, by employing all of the persuasions of *teranga* to strengthen her *sey*: the affective, practical, and sexual union that unites the wife to her husband, and to his mother's *wa ker*. I discuss this, and other appropriate means of acting across household boundaries, in depth in chapter four.

Within the household, and before that in the room, the private spaces of the conjugal couple, the bowl and all of the other commodities classes as women's things — spices, bouillon, even powdered

detergent — are the means by which she accomplishes her task (‘ak diam, jamm rekk ci ker gi,’ ‘Maggi et moi, le secret de bonheur). They are the stuff by which she manages the order of her household, and maintains her power and control. The link between highly flavored sauces (or highly perfumed lessives) and female sexuality is certainly clear to the Dakarois audience, and forms the basis of such *nearly* innocent lines as “takk me, me seyal le...def si tutti ñeex,” “Marry me, I’ll take care of you... I’ll add a little sauce,” from the pop singer Ami Colle Dieng’s 2006 hit, “Takkeme” (Marry Me).

Put otherwise, the bowl’s charms — not unlike the sexuality for which it can be a metaphor — is not only legitimate, but valorised within the scope of a married woman’s legitimate sphere of control. As seen from the street, the house is closed, the windows covered by drawn drapes, and even the grating of the front gate is rendered opaque by plastic matting stitched on from inside. Within the house, incense fills every corner, scented cushions cover the deep sofa, and a tray of food sits waiting. Inside the bowl, a delightful and imaginative plating, a harmonious pairing of scents and textures. The outside of the lidded bowl is smooth, opaque, and highly polished. Within the folds of her spotless starched voluminous boubou, a body ringed in gently sounding beads and bells, surrounded by a cloud of incense.

What might be an inappropriate form of persuasion outside the household is not only allowed, but necessary, pleasant, even pious within the *ker*. By employing the powers of feminine persuasion, of which the bowl is emblematic, she works to contain and nurture the happiness and luck of her household by making it delightful within and orderly and unremarkable when viewed from without. Thus, “happiness” around the bowl depends on a spatial order, the location of key household

members in their prescribed places around the bowl. The “happy” and unremarkable household, seen primarily in the tight alliance of mother and her children, is nurturing, and perhaps more importantly, protective. Consequential deviations threaten the safety of the household by potentially exposing information to outsiders.

Maintaining (the appearance of) order around the bowl

In the stalls at the famous fabric market Marche HLM one form of incense is marketed under the name ‘bul dem’ (don’t go) another ‘bañe gene’ (refuse to go out). That a woman’s body care product has the power to limit her husband’s movement is such a commonplace assumption that a colleague joked with me about a hand cream that I’d brought from the US to sell, “certainly if I buy this for my wife, she’ll be able to lock me in the house without [herself] getting up from the couch!” Rest assured that my colleague was not troubled, but rather enticed by what he took to be a very real threat posed to his personal autonomy. He promptly bought the hand lotion from me, adding a few small bottles of perfume.

It is significant that many of the items of the wife’s arsenal — incense, perfume, seasonings — are described by vendors as potent tools to manage a husband’s location and movement. Indeed, maintaining control over the husband’s movements is of utmost importance. No woman I met believed an incense could accomplish this task. However, many either prided themselves on their choice in scents that they felt aided them in keeping their husbands’ attention, or hoped to finally find one that might hold some sway.

More than any argument, a husband’s absence at a meal he should attend had the potential to create larger problems. In the homes of wives of polygamous men, a properly achieved meal also

requires the husband's presence at the right time, demanding that he is present for meals at the home of the wife to whom the day 'belongs,' in the sequential logic of *aye* (rotation, turn-taking). Within this logic, the husband's presence or absence is potentially the most consequential aspect of any meal. Not only must the husband eat in the prescribed place, he must do so on the right day (the standard 'aye' or turn with each wife is three days). To fail to appear at a wife's house for a meal on her day — or, just as bad, to appear when unexpected! — has the potential to upset the delicate order both at that wife's home, and between the co-wives and their children, creating feeding tension between sets of half-siblings. Similarly, a monogamous husband — if unaccounted for at mealtime — may be assumed to be considering a change of marital status.

A husband's failure to predictably uphold the *aye* threatens one wife's status within a clearly defined hierarchy and order of turn-taking, and invites the attention of co-wives on each other's households. Anything that draws attention threatens the smooth epistemic exterior of the household, it suggests a break in the fabric of *sutura*. To be remarkable is to be uncontained, exposed, under threat.

The biggest problem with disorder, I am told, is that it leads to talk, and to doubt. Best put, a disruption to the expected order within the home leads people to focus their attention on affairs that are not theirs to examine. They will try to know the inner workings of households and bodies that are not theirs to know, leading almost certainly, I am told, to *inyane*, dangerous jealousy. Disorder within the *ker* brings outside entities who are scrupulously avoided as topics of conversation — referred to exclusively with deictically distal pronouns — into prominence. A disruption in the *aye* will lead a wife to look outside her own home, to examine the status of entities she normally refers to only as 'felé' (over there, in this context taken to mean the other wife's *ker*), to consider 'kilé' (the person over there,

that is, a co-wife or other romantic rival), or ‘kooku’ (the aforementioned person, that is, one that is only present in discussion and gossip, see chapter two for a more detailed discussion of the second order indexical linkages between pronominal forms and gossip-like genres), and her management of ‘wa ker ge’ (the people of house, distant). In short, the disruption of the predictable at mealtime invites eyes into the home, or leads them out into another home; disorder in the household both ruptures its *sutura* from within, and threatens the *sutura* of other households from without.

The *sutura* of an orderly household protects individuals within from the *yakk derr* (lit. ‘skin destruction’) of gossip, and also protects the shared interests of the matriline as embodied in the matriarch and her descendents, a set of uterine siblings. The care and mutual support within the household, enacted around the bowl and in the matriarch’s control over and (re)apportioning of the income and resources of *wa ker gi*, are threatened by interference from outside. If the order of the *ker* is disturbed, husbands and dependants — especially children the lady of the house shares with her husband! — might be stolen away by the persuasions of another woman. In moments of disruption, outside their proper domain within and upholding the order of her own household, the charms of a woman’s (a *dirriankhe*’s?) bowl and body appear as illicit, even occult, powers. Even the charms of a co-wife — a woman who has, after all, a ratified place in the movements and time of the husband, the mother of her children’s half siblings — can appear sinister when they appear out of place, drawing a man or a child out of the *ker* in which they should ideally be placed at any given time.

Framed slightly differently, the boundaries of the *ker*, and the uterine kin group it holds, are also the bounds of legitimate, even valorized, use of women’s means of persuasion. The *dirriankhe*

may use her powers to charm those outside her household — in business, for example — as a means of benefitting herself and her dependents, and be lauded for it. However, impositions *into* the order of the household from the outside — to steal a husband, to bring misfortune, or to steal away a child — are always problematic. It is in these moments that the powers of female persuasion are transmuted into dangerous *ligueey* (literally ‘work,’ here ill-intentioned occult practice).

The greatest potential danger from *ligueey* — occult interference — originates in co-wives, or more broadly, in women not of one’s own matriline. People tell me that the co-wife (*wujj*, literally ‘rival’) is threatening because the relationship between co-wives is fundamentally one of *wujjente* (‘rivalry,’ broadly applicable). The threat of potential occult attack from the co-wife extends to others, members of her close (always matrilineal) kin, who might commission *ligueey* on her behalf. It is not surprising that any upset in the portioning of a husband’s time and resources will lead to *inyane*, jealousy, which is the motivation for evil deeds and the cause of *ligueey*. The appearance of unequal distribution of the husband’s resources and attention is also the root of rivalries between *doomu baay*, half-siblings sharing a father, and by extension, all members of patriline. Of course, perfect equity in the distribution of wealth, like the perfectly smooth functioning of any household, is certainly impossible. Perfect order can never be maintained within the household, but the appearance of order will protect it from interference. Here too, *sutura* protects.

On further consideration, however, the line between licit *teranga* and illicit *ligueey* seems hard to hold. While a woman is encouraged to *gate* (spoil) her husband and his kin, to *teral* (offer *teranga*) them, what appears to be appropriate care and charm when viewed from within the *ker* can quickly

shade into *ligueey* in the eyes of her co-wife (or perhaps most chillingly, her co-wife's relatives). In keeping her husband at home and maintaining the good will and praise of her in-laws, a woman might always be seen to be the source of discord between her husband and another woman, or between the in-laws and another wife.

Women regularly commission 'mystical' help from their *seriñ* or *marabout* as a means of caring for their *wa ker*. Indeed, this is one of a mother's most important duties. As discussed in chapter one, it is the mother's responsibility to seek a consultation to determine what *sarax* her children should make, often even once they were grown. She and her uterine kin also take charge of even more apparently occult interventions in the lives of her children. From infancy, amulets enclosing Quranic verses and various substances are attached to children's wrists, ankles, and waists by their mothers' maternal kin. Whether to 'keep hold of' children threatened by illness, or to control the will of a child as a means of breaking a bad habit, amulets, 'baths' prepared from soaking Quranic calligraphy and other ingredients, and various preparations added to food are among the standard tools of a good mother. Within the proper space of the home, a multitude of forms of persuasion, from delicious food and intoxicating incense to various occult preparations, are not only licit, but celebrated. They are the stuff of maternal care. Or, from another perspective, the power of the mother within her sphere is absolute.

The relationship between positive *teranga* and improper *ligueey* is further complicated by the fact that tools of *ligueey* are nearly identical to those on which *teranga* and the maintenance of the household rest. Indeed, a successful wife is said to 'bewitch' her husband, persuading him to continue his allegiance with her and her household. As described above, women employ incense and perfume,

marketed as semi-occult intoxicants, with names like ‘door locker,’ ‘stay here,’ and ‘forget everything.’ Men I interviewed suggested that these scents could, potentially, be used to overtake their will. *Teranga* in this, its essential form, appears as a means of occult power over the will of another. Female sexual potency sits very closely to the possibility of *ligneeey* (sorcery). At the heart of the secret of happiness, then, lies something very much like the secret of misfortune. The distinction between the most valuable and most dreadful of female powers rests on the discreteness of the sphere in which it occurs (her carefully enclosed room), the discretion with which it applied. Perhaps recalling Derrida’s *Pharmakon*, the secret of happiness — the sensory repertoire of feminine persuasion — also contains the secret of misfortune in the form of witchcraft.

Chapter Four

Veiled bowls: the happiness of secrets

*Leket dafa baax;
Am sutura, am teranga.*

The (gourd) bowl is virtuous;
Having discretion (*sutura*), having hospitality (*teranga*).
— Stanza from a ‘tassu’² overheard in Dakar, 2008

For something to be disclosed (properly speaking)...requires a mode of enclosure that permits it to move along certain paths, and be opened by certain addressees; and, simultaneously, a mode of enclosure that prohibits it from moving along other paths, or being opened by other addressees. In short, the task of a channel is to protect secrets....

— Kockelman (2017, 71)

Am sutura, am teranga: simultaneous containment and connection

As the short piece of poetry that opens this chapter suggests, bowls are virtuous objects because they embody two apparently conflicting virtues: the ‘closedness’ of *sutura* and the ‘openness’ of *teranga*. The bowl is a near paradox. Yet being this paradox is its entire function. As the poem says, the bowl “am sutura, am teranga,” it has both *sutura* and *teranga*, discretion and hospitality. On the one hand, the bowl is a container, an enclosure. As such, it contains both food and information. It is both emblem and functional material manifestation of *sutura*. And on the other, the bowl is the dish from which people eat together: the center around which social bonds are formed and reaffirmed every day. As I argue in chapter three, the contents of the bowl are the secret ingredient of ‘happiness’: the affective stance of *teranga*, embodied in food. The bowl from which a midday meal is eaten is literally and metaphorically the means of grounding a household as a distinct entity. When covered, wrapped in a veil, and sent out of the house, a bowl is also means of (and model for) moving the tastes and smells of the afternoon meal, that is, the intimate details of a household and the qualities of the woman at its

center, safely through space. Considered as a channel, the bowl contains happiness, and its task “is to protect secrets.” (Kockelman 2017, 71)

If, as I argued in chapter three, the bowl inside the house is a center around which a social formation is built and maintained, the veiled bowl is a means of building and maintaining a network between houses. As such the veiled bowl is a means (and model) of the expansion of feminine power in a such a way as to maintain all of the protective powers of *sutura*, and all of the autonomy that such protection affords. As both means and model of virtuous communicative action, the veiled bowl makes possible a vision of a social network that manages the tension between individual (information, property, etc) and group (e.g. obligations, claims to solidarity, etc) by keeping all knowledge about the network partial to both participants and outsiders. Indeed, it is these epistemological qualities of the system that make it a useful means of building feminine power and efficacy that, when exercised publicly appears to exceed a woman’s apparent ability. The epistemological qualities of this network therefore afford skilled participants a very literally occult form of power — at least in the word’s sense as a verb meaning “to shut off from view or exposure.”

As I argued in the previous chapter, women in Dakar work on bowls in their homes to work on their households. Bowls of prepared food are irreducibly sensual signs of the women who prepare them, and the problems of enclosure and circulation that bowls solve also solve the problems of virtuous female sexuality and power. Within her home, a woman arranges food in the bowl as a means of arranging the relationships between people who sit around it, and their own hold over those who find themselves in her orbit and under her authority. The wonderful sensual qualities of the foods that a woman serves function as means of her care and tools of her persuasion, the flavor of a mother’s (or

wife's) cooking as laden with intimacy and affect as the scent of her perfume or the softness of her bosom in an embrace. All of these charms, as I discussed in chapter three, are the heart of *teranga*, “the secret of happiness,” as a Maggi slogan might have it. The bowl is good not because it can be discreet or hospitable depending on context or use. It is good, and good to think with, because it has both *sutura* and *teranga* at the same time, and therefore models a solution to a series of problems related to exteriors and interiors, and to dependence and autonomy, solidarity and freedom. One of the tasks of this chapter is to show how these problems in Dakar are inseparable from both semiotic ideologies broadly applicable in the city, and embedded in and structured in relationship to practices of household management and virtuous femininity and female sexuality. Bowls and their uses inside and between homes model a morally-coded semiotic ideology inseparable from (pious) gender and sexuality. The problems and solutions of bowls are the problems and solutions of maintaining a household and power within and over it, are the problems and solutions of women's sexual and reproductive ability. At base, I argue, these are all questions of enclosure and circulation: issues of the practice and ethics of communication, in which women are both participants to exchange and themselves objects of exchange. In each case, problems of balancing intimacy and autonomy, knowledge and freedom.

The last chapter began a discussion of the semiotic properties of bowls of food by focusing on how they model enclosure as protection that makes possible the pleasures of a well-arranged household. This chapter continues the discussion of the semiotics of bowls in Dakar by describing how they model virtuous circulation, the ability to move all of the information, intimacy, and pleasure of the bowl's contents outside of the household — even through the street — while maintaining the

protective affordances of the bowl's enclosure. Put in terms that may cast the analytical stakes in starker relief, this chapter is about how information and valuables are circulated in such a way as to maintain specific knowledge states — or states of non-knowledge — in some participants to interaction. It is therefore an ethnography of a set of everyday economic and communicative practices which create social relationships as networks of secure channels, in Shannon's (1948) sense. And it is about the kinds of power that engagement in this sort of social network affords its most skillful participants.

My argument about the complex semiotic potentials of bowls — and about the moral stance of the semiotic ideology they model — grows from my ongoing concern with bowls as a local means of thinking about femininity and feminine virtue in Dakar. As I studied bowls of food within the home, I saw them come and go, sent out and returned. These movements of bowls of food were always accompanied by talk that made it clear that far more was at stake in these transactions than mere meals. This talk also made clear that, as with the almsgiving practices which I describe elsewhere in this dissertation, practices of exchanging veiled bowls are not to be discussed publicly. Not only the practice, but also talk about the practice, is accomplished within the veil of *sutura*.

As with *sarax*, the strongly epistemological stakes of veiled bowls and their movements make this widespread and large scale practice fall into the background. Perhaps this is why this chapter may be the first ethnographic account of Dakarois women's widespread everyday practices of food sharing, which link households across the city (and much farther afield). These gifts of carefully prepared meals in many ways define a number of kinds of relationships between adult women in the city. Women send food in this way to (potential and actual) patrons and to clients, to their own sisters, and especially to

their *goro*, members of their husband's natal household¹ (husband's mother, but also to his maternal sisters, who are likely now themselves married and thus dispersed). As do the women who taught me to cook, present, and send out food, my approach treats these veiled bowls of food as simultaneously meals and messages to be read and commented upon. Enclosed in bowl and lid, and veiled in fabric that serves to both obscure them from strangers and indicate their origins to the recipient, bowls are a means of communication between households. Each bowl is thus something like a missive or an utterance, containing both information and force.

The argument of this chapter moves through four major steps. First I argue that the bowl resolves paradoxes linked to the role of women in Dakarais norms of kinship and residence (as introduced in the previous chapter). Putting food in covered bowls and wrapping those bowls in veils are material practices of enclosure which echo practices of dressing and wrapping the female body: means of managing the perils and delights of the circulation of sensual information about the most intimate aspects of life. Discussing closing up bowls and wrapping them in fabric is useful as a way of conceptualizing practices of managing information states around objects, what can and can't be known (and by whom) in any given moment of circulation. Second, I discuss the literature on food sharing and political power in Dakar, which has almost exclusively focused on radically publicized events of feeding and giving at baby-naming ceremonies (*nguente*). In contrast to this, I argue that it is more useful to understand social networks and women's power through a very different form of ritual

¹ Goro itself simply means "affine," that is, the set of people that either a male or female person is related to through marriage. In use, the scope can be quite inclusive: members of the husband's natal household, his extended family, his neighbors, people who share the same surname, even people from the same location. For example, when I was introduced as "from Chicago" to a woman from Dakar, she said "Yow sama gono nga! Sama rakk jekkeram Chicago la dëkk." "You're my goro! My younger (sister)'s husband lives in Chicago."

and exchange, the *seysi*, when a bride is brought, veiled and accompanied by large bundles of housewares and food, to her husband's mother's home (sometimes weeks or years) after the marriage ceremony. Third, I argue that economy and network of exchanges which these bowls trace phatically serve to mediate and resolve local tensions between display of wealth and social connection, concealment of intention and the status of one's social relations (as described in chapter two, "Sutura."). Ironically, these are the tensions which animate public gift exchange at other ceremonies. Finally, engaging this network from the perspective of one node, an accomplished participant in the food sharing economy, I show how the epistemic qualities of the network so constructed afford tremendous social power. Women who have developed strong places within this network appear to have almost supernatural powers. They can act from great (social distance) as if pulling invisible strings, and they can produce and publicize improbably large quantities of wealth without apparent source, as if having pulled them through invisible channels, or from thin air.

I suggest two metaphors of network to explain the peculiar qualities of communication operative in this economy. To explain the function and consequences of this economy as a network and from a systems perspective, I suggest the image of the fungal fairy ring and its tangled underground mycelium. To describe this situation from the perspective of the participant, I use the metaphor of a spider and her web. The ethnographic description of this economy of food sharing, and the importance of crafting possible knowledge states of participants and observes across the system, itself presents and resolves a series of problems of less concern in the daily lives of women in Dakar than they are to semiotic and linguistic anthropologists.² I argue that the bowl in Dakar, both object

² And, for reasons that may become apparent, for information security professionals and their adversaries as well.

and emblem of its larger economy and network, models a resolution of a paradox central to all forms of communication, that circulation requires enclosure or packaging of information and/or sign forms. As Kockelman observes, reframing Shannon's model of communication in more clearly Jakobsonian terms, "the task of a channel is to protect secrets." People in Dakar are starkly aware of this aspect of communicative practice, and it strongly influences moral judgements about talk, gift exchange, and other forms of semiotic practice.

By tracing veiled bowls, their movements, and their meanings as signs of their senders and of the state of the network in which they move, I treat bowls as messages. I also argue (implicitly first, and then explicitly) that veiled bowls of food are not only themselves meaningful communication, they are also useful as a model for thinking about the possibilities and moral stakes of semiotic practice. This approach, though it might seem unorthodox to some, comes directly from how I was taught to cook, package, and send, and also to receive, bowls of food by the women in whose Dakar homes I became a fixture.

***Dieg ne*: Dressing and undressing bowls**

During my fieldwork I spent hours each day in kitchens, chatting, watching, and ostensibly learning to cook. In this time, I observed shopping and storage, planning and preparation of every kind of food: elaborate Sunday lunches of *thieboudienne*, and simple family suppers of *sombi* (a sweet rice pudding/gruel). While learning how to prepare food to be consumed within the home, for household members and guests, I also learned that prepared food is not always consumed where it is produced, and some portion is often sent between houses. In some houses I witnessed several bowls of prepared food arrive in a single day, each sent by a different member of the matriarch's social world: sons' wives,

husbands' coworkers, their own sisters. While I noticed these incoming bowls of food, I also watched women painstakingly plan for the gifts of prepared food that they themselves would send out to kin and patrons. The sending and receiving of bowls was of a piece with the preparation of meals for the house, and the careful arrangement of platings similar to those I discuss in the previous chapter. Much as multiple platings at a single meal time might iconically mark out smaller units within a single house (a conjugal couple, for example) while indexing the woman who prepared them and her relationship with those who would eat, bowls of food that were prepared to be sent out similarly represented relations between the woman who sent them and the matriarch of the house that would receive them.

Women talked about recipients and the importance of sending successful and elegant bowls of food to other houses while selecting the best goods in the market, carefully taking down and wiping out covered bowl sets, and deliberately arranging food in each of the bowls: white rice, millet couscous, or vermicelli in the largest bowl, spooned in and smoothed to an attractive, slightly domed shape; sauce in a slightly smaller bowl, pieces of meat or fish carefully arranged, vegetables neatly placed around them; an accompanying sauce or garnish or sweet in a smaller bowl. Each of the bowls carefully covered with a flat lid, then a large square of fabric—almost always a piece cut from one of the sender's retired prayer shawls or head wraps—is laid on the ground and the bowls stacked in its center, largest to smallest. The corners of the fabric are drawn up, opposite corners tightly tied, to create a roughly conical bundle. The attention to each mirrored their careful management of bowls meant to be consumed at home, but the preparation differed in one key way. While bowls of food to be eaten at home were immediately served, travelling open to their place before those who would eat them, these bowls were always carefully wrapped as if veiled. Not only covered but completely concealed. The

shape of the package of food echoing the shape of an adult woman dressed for a formal event, conical and bottom heavy, enveloped in one seemingly seamless garment, tied decoratively on the top, the corners of the scarf pointed artistically up into the air explicitly recalling the careful stylings of a *musoor* head wrap finishing the reference to a woman dressed for a formal event. The physical resemblance between the powerful woman sender and her bowl is often even more pronounced, as the wrapping of the bowl is very often the actual fabric of the *musoor* or *ser* (wrap skirt) belonging to an outfit the sender wore on an occasion memorable to the recipient. It is almost as if the bowl is a doll, dressed in clothing made of the garment the sender wore to the recipient's wedding: an indexical icon of a particular woman, a particular visit, recalling a particular moment in the relationship between sender and receiver.



Fig. 4.1 (left) a set of filled bowls and the pink *ser* it will be wrapped in. (Ousseynou Dia, 2019)

Fig. 4.2 (right) wrapping the bowls. (Ousseynou Dia, 2019)



Fig. 4.3 (left) tying the bowls. Fig. 4.4 (right) the bowls are dressed. (Ousseynou Dia, 2019)

As I observed and helped in these preparations I also witnessed a series of admonitions, to me and to others helping in the kitchen, about the importance of making each meal *rafet* (beautiful) and *jekkk* (elegant, sumptuous), comments—and even arguments!—about the relative beauty of different morsels of meat in the sauce, commands to add more carrot (‘her husband prefers the carrot!’), and finally, to select just the right piece of fabric to tie up the bundle, one the recipient would recognize, one that would make her remember a particular visit or life cycle event on which it had been worn. Preparation of the bowl is thus a careful attempt to manage a message *to* the recipient and a message *about* the sender, and thus, to embody in some literal sense the sender’s relationship to the woman she is feeding. A bowl of food thus communicates the giver’s taste and generosity, her own social status and the resources she commands, and her esteem for the recipient. Like plating food to be consumed within the home, the preparation and packing of food to be sent out enact a small drama of manners, a ritual of recognitions of relationship. When a bowl of food is truly *jekkk*, the self-consciously artful

management of form produces a beautiful message that far exceeds the material value or even the deliciousness of the food given. Thus ‘dressed,’ the bowls of food can be sent to the intended recipient, most often in the hands of a domestic servant or a young child.

The bearer of this culinary message carries out this bundle on her head to the recipient’s house, maybe walking, maybe by bus. She will ring the bell at the gate and deliver the package to the maid or child who answers the door, announcing its source. The package will be carried into the kitchen to await the lady of the house. The reception of the bowls of food is not a simple matter. Just as every aspect of the food and its presentation was carefully crafted before the bowl was closed, and the wrapping carefully chosen to, so too will every aspect of the bowl, its contents and packaging, be interpreted.

The recipient of this bundle—the woman addressed by the package of food—will at some point begin her appraisal as she unwraps it. Just as preparation entails a constant stream of verbal direction, this unwrapping requires a similar verbal performance before an audience of dependents and inferiors. First the fabric will be discussed: “Oh, I know this fabric, this is from the wedding two years ago...” or, possibly “chut! A stain!” Then the bowls themselves inspected and commented upon. Finally the sniffing will begin near the sauce bowls as they are opened, the name of the dish announced, perhaps “cioudewteer,” (stew seasoned with palm oil) “my favorite!” or, “doesn’t she know I don’t eat that!” or “not in this weather!” Then an examination of the physical qualities of each bowl itself. Finally, a decision: Who will eat it? Often enough, no one, really. After it has been sampled by a younger daughter, it is sent outside to the children, or scraped into the bowl of a *talibe* who passes by

later. Yet even if no one in the household eats the food, the bowl is often judged by the recipients elegant, a complete success. *Jekk ne de!*, she might say (it/she is elegant indeed!), *reussir ne* (she/it succeeded).

Full of meaning and potentially felicitous (illocutionary?) force, the veiled bowl is not only received as a culinary object, the sensual qualities of the food contained therein judged as signs of its sender's prowess in the kitchen, it is also — wrapping, container, and all — a rich text encoding the state of the relationship between sender and recipient. This relationship, the path between the households that the bowl traces, may be called on at other times for other things. A woman like *Merebi* might turn to a partner in bowl exchange who is about to travel to the United States or France to act as a courier of her *yobante*, a sort of care package of items to be taken to her children or other intimates in that country. Similarly, she might hear a request from one partner for the loan of gold jewelry to be worn at a daughter's wedding, and not having any of her own appropriate to lend, *merebi* might turn to a second exchange partner to borrow something appropriate. *Merebi* will base her decisions about which of her contacts to ask (and to whom she will respond), in part, on the qualities of her exchanges of foods with each partner: the type and quality of the food, the timing of the gifts, their relative frequency. Bowls of food sent and received maintain an open channel, and they suggest and shape the possibilities of future traffic on that channel. Just as food within the home persuades and pulls people and resources in to *merebi*, the woman at the center of her house, food moving between houses can pull information and resources between households. If the women are the nodes of a network, the

bowls of food that pass between them are more than meals. The veiled bowl is a means of diagnosing the state of a channel, a means of acting on that channel, and a means of acting through it.

As with the bowls of food served in the place where they are prepared — the focus of the last chapter — bowls of food sent between households rely on local understandings of the affordances of prepared food as a medium of social relationship. Well prepared and presented food communicates care and persuades. As described in the last chapter, this persuasion is grounded in the relationship between a woman's food and her body. To eat at her bowl is to join an inner circle, to gain a place within the *ker*, however momentarily. Even the guest can thus come to find himself inside the *sutura* of the *ker*, his most intimate secrets (even if unknown) now the secrets of the household, and thus protected by the lady of the house (see Diagne 1996, and my discussion of this piece in Chapter 2). To sit at and eat from the bowl in the house is a sensual experience and it is an intimate experience. To call again upon the Maggi advertising phrase which helps to title the previous chapter, the lady of the house is inseparable from the flavors of her bowl of food; together they compose *le secret du bonheur*. When bowls of food are sent out from the household, their sensual and affective qualities travel with them, as does their indexical relationship to the woman who has prepared them (or in whose name they are sent). Sending food thus allows women to break off a piece of this rich text of an intimate social relationship, this *bonheur*, put it into a sealed envelope, and send it in secret. And like many other forms of persuasive communication, this text and its packaging will be judged by its recipient to be more or less successful, of greater or lesser elegance, more or less *diék*. The food, like body of the

woman who sends it and which it indexes, moves through the city protected and contained by the fabric which encloses it.

Dieg and jekkk in motion: elegant and proper circulation

I describe fabric wrapped bowls of food as “veiled” to draw attention to the many resonances between bowls of food and women’s bodies, and the paradox of adult women’s power to persuade. The parallel is strengthened, I think, by the fact that elegant women and truly successful gifts of veiled bowls are described with the same term: *jekkk*. In Dakar, as I described in chapter three, a woman’s body and the food that she cooks are always extensions of each other. The body and food are powerful media through which women provide care and pleasure, and by means of which simultaneously persuade and rule, yet the intimacy of the relationships and social formations they engender is vulnerable. The safety of a woman and those within her *ker* is threatened when specific knowledge of the contours of daily life inside the household is exposed to outsiders. *Sutura*, the management and enclosure of this kind of information, is thus crucial in the protection of domestic spaces and activities, and also the bodily and intellectual integrity and autonomy of individual people. As discussed in chapter two, *sutura* is described as a fabric wrapping, a veil, that wraps around and protects. The American imagination links Islamic veiling with restricted movements, and women “trapped” in the home. Yet in this context, the enclosure of the veil does not constrain. Rather it makes circulation possible, and safe. A veil, whether it surrounds and encloses the specific sensory qualities of food or a body, allows the freedom of physical movement while partially withholding or obscuring information about the entity that moves. A covered woman and her covered bowl, together or separately, move through the city with their qualities obscured.

Hidden too, are the reasons and details of her itinerary, cloaked as they are in the idea that proper pious women are always moving through the city to accomplish their obligations and to achieve virtuous ends. I often heard proper married women reply when asked about their movements around the city, “sunna ak farata, rekk.” Her movements were only, she would state baldly, to achieve merit by acting in imitation of the Prophet (sunna), and to meet the requirements of their obligations as muslimes (farata, from Arabic fardh).

Just as local advertising of bullion cubes as the ‘secret of happiness’ within the home seizes on and amplifies visual idioms which tie plates of prepared food to mature women’s sexualized powers of persuasion within the home (see chapter three), so too other local brands’ advertising play on the familiar image of women moving their bowls through public space. A *dieg* [jeeg ji], is a woman of childbearing age who is or has been married, in contrast to a sexually mature but never-yet married woman [janq].³ Though any woman who fits this description is technically a *dieg*, the term implies a specific physicality. To call a woman a *dieg*, rather than any of the many other polite terms for an adult woman, is to describe her as a representative of a particular traditional femininity, ripe with a specific sexuality in a pleasingly ample body. As Munro and Gaye (1991, 56) so coyly define the term, “jeeg: relatively young woman with some experience (perhaps divorced, or in her 30s — she is likely to wear traditional-style clothing, not rush around, and perhaps to be a little plump.”

Perhaps one of the most familiar images in everyday Dakar is the logo printed on the ubiquitous tomato paste named ‘Dieg Bou Diar’, roughly ‘Lovely Lady Passing by’ ([jeeg bu jaar]).

³ See, however, the entry for *jeeg* in Dial’s 2011 *Basic Dictionary: Wolof-English / English Wolof*, in which the contrast with *jank* is highlighted but the marital history of the woman is not: “jeeg ji: n. Woman. Duma takk janq, jeeg laa bëgg. *I will not marry a young girl, but a woman.*

Like the Maggi bouillon cubes discussed in chapter three, Dieg Bou Diar tomato paste is an iconic element in the national cuisine. Indeed, bouillon cubes and tomato paste are closely linked. The super-concentrated tomato paste the can contains is the signature ingredient of *thiebou hoque*, the emblematic Senegalese dish of red rice depicted in the Maggi billboard that opens the last chapter. The scene depicted on the can of Dieg Bou Diar is just as familiar as its contents; a woman in traditional dress moves through the city with a bowl of food. The image of the “lovely lady” on the can of tomato paste repeats nostalgic imagery of Senegalese women going about their daily tasks, and though it depicts a woman moving through public space, for Dakarais clearly echoes a still-powerful ideology that imagines proper elite householders of both genders in pious seclusion within their homes. However, even Dakar’s most active women in politics, media, and business are often judged to be models of pious action, even though they circulate constantly through the city, moving influence and money. To note the extent of a married woman’s movements is to suggest that she is improper.

The image of the ‘dieg’ resolves the problem of propriety in movement much the same way the veil does, it provides cover for what one wishes to accomplish without disclosure. The veiled woman, protected by both the clothing that envelopes her, and the expectation that her movements are required by duty, is visible to non-intimates only in passing, a veiled figure in motion between predetermined interiors. The public figure of the pious adult man is similarly imagined in motion on his way to the mosque, prayer rug tucked under one arm. Like her husband, the lovely lady moves outside of her domain (her home, her professional office) only to accomplish “*sunna ak farata*” (a wolofization of the arabic ‘*sunna[h]*,’ imitation of the Prophet’s deeds, and ‘*fardh*’ acts of religious obligation).⁴ The traditionally pious adult woman is well dressed and accompanied by her bowl: as she

does her early morning marketing, and en route to the homes of her natal kin, her husband's relatives, or her own patroness, bringing with her a neatly wrapped dish of prepared food. Her movement is, in this sense, 'restricted,' but it is also constituted as a set of paths, linkages, and ties. Rather than demonstrate a 'private' held apart, or back from, the 'public,' the *dieg* models a kind of closure in circulation that is both contained and constitutively linking, creating and maintaining protected connections between enclosed spaces of affect and the creation and transformation of forms of economic and symbolic value.

Diek, Diam, Ndiarene: the female world of bowls and ziaar

The *dieg* — ideally, as a fantasy — moves around the city accomplishing her “*sunna ak farata*” conceived as wifely duties, accompanied by her covered bowl. She is seen going to market to purchase the perfect fish or most beautifully ripe taro root for the afternoon meal, and carrying her purchases in a gourd bowl balanced on her head. She is seen beautifully dressed and wrapped in a translucent veil carrying bowls of food or a plastic sack of fruit with her as she goes to visit members of her husband's family in a formal visit called *ziaar*. In short, the *dieg* (as an ideal figure of nostalgia, and as an identity a woman might want to inhabit, however temporarily), is imagined busy at work on her relationship to her own household (shopping for food), and her relationship to other households (visiting in-laws). A woman is most a *dieg* as she is seen passing by as she works on kin ties, kin ties only a married (or divorced, or widowed) woman can have.

Bowls of food and visits are not just properly feminine ways to move through the city, they are the tactics of what most of the women I spoke with in Dakar frame as life-long strategies of developing their own interests: projects of self making. One might say of individual power and efficacy in Dakar

that it is understood much as Bourdieu understands groups “instead of ‘real’ entities, clearly demarcated in reality and in ethnographic description, or genealogical sets defined *on paper* ... as social constructions, more-or-less artificial artefacts, maintained by sustained exchanges and by a whole material and symbolic labour of ‘group making’ often delegated to women.” (2003, 290). For men, as much as for women, one’s self and one’s abilities are built and sustained through ties built by women: mothers, wives, sisters, and if one is a woman, oneself.

The Dakarois women with whom I have worked would likely accept all of Bourdieu’s description of kinship and groups as practice as an accurate portrayal of the nature of houses, families, and individuals. That is, they would accept all of this but the phrase “delegated to women.” In Dakar this work — the very making and unmaking of social and individual possibility! — is the sole domain of women, it is only available to women, and it is inseparable from women’s unique sexual and reproductive abilities. Women, in the Dakarois imagination, and in reality, are both what and who make social networks. The woman’s body is its physical stuff, both in actuality and by metonym through her breast milk and the food she prepares and serves, is the medium through which alliances are made. And it is women, as agents, who choose when and how to build these ties, when to sever them, and when to call upon them. In this web of influence, men exist through their mothers and sisters. They are sources of wealth and means of material access (e.g. through government posts, jobs at the port, etc) to their mothers, beneficiaries of her actions, and means of recruitment (as husbands) of other women into relations of exchange. With apologies to gayle Rubin, here women build relationships with other women through men.

If groups are made, in Bourdieu's words, in the "material and symbolic labor" of women, this labor of kinship is both communicative and network building in nature, semiotic and focused on the phatic. We might think immediately of Elyachar's discussion of "phatic labor," (2011) which highlights the ways that channel maintenance work is, indeed, work. It is even, perhaps, useful to think of it as a kind of infrastructure work, as she suggests. However, infrastructure in its everyday sense, is "public works." The product of work on the groups under discussion here is not public, but of another specific kin. It is work on kinship, as di Leonardo (1987) notes, the specificity of "kin work," where it has been discussed, can be easily lost.

Kin work, as di Leonardo defines it, is the labor involved in "the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings." (442) Kin work is not only the physical work of "caring" as these actions might be understood, it is also a strategic sort of executive work on "the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations," through individual women's own "decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties." (443) Insofar as it involves the strategic "creation and communication of altering images of family and kin vis-a-vis the images of others," kin work shares much with 'public relations' or 'media relations' work. However, the relations managed, and the media through which they are managed, are not broadcast media, but more selective and intimate. In the Italian-American community di Lorenzo describes in Northern California in the 1980s, the media of kin work are greeting cards and holiday gatherings. In Dakar, during the time of my fieldwork (and one suspects long before it, and well into the future), the media of kin work is bowls of food and *zhaar* visits.

While I was in Dakar, all of my female contacts were engaged in kin work, and for the most part, it was the most pleasurable of their activities. Young married women devoted much of their leisure time to planning visits and gifts, talking about how to best achieve them, and consuming popular media guides to how to prepare the best, most fashionable food for one's husband and in-laws, for example. While many of the women I knew who had adult children both received *ziaar* visits and made them, my peers were focused on learning to make visits that would allow them to develop as many (and as powerful) patronesses as possible. One woman who was particularly adept at this was a friend of mine, Nabou.

Nabou is a woman of roughly my own generation who I have known for more than ten years, a period spanning our late twenties to early forties. For most of the time that I have known her she lived outside Dakar, in her mother's house in the *banlieue* of Pikine. At times she managed an import business, with a shop in the HLM fashion district selling beauty supplies, at others she worked in the offices of a regional telecom company. I know her from Hajja's household, however, where she frequently appeared as a Sunday afternoon visitor. I describe Hajja in more detail towards the end of this chapter, but for now let it suffice that Hajja is a very powerful person, known for her virtue, generosity, and uncanny ability to get things done, all qualities linked to both her noble birth (to particularly notable strands of each line) and her ties to longstanding clerical lines. A few years after I met Nabou on one of her visits to Hajja, she was married to Hajja's grandson, her longtime sweetheart living in the United States, whom she saw no more than once every four years.

Each of Nabou's visits were consequential and carefully crafted, though rarely announced. One afternoon, not long after she became a daughter-in-law, I was spending a Sunday afternoon at

Hajja's house as I often did, when Nabou arrived. At that time, as before, she lived with her mother and sister in a different part of the city, and visited only on special occasions. As she had before her marriage, Nabou arrived with a stack of bowls full of food, neatly tied, sent by her mother. Indeed, before she was married, the bowls were cited as reason for her visit. Before she was married, Nabou's entire visit was always framed as the execution of a social call between older women — Nabou's mother calling on Hajja as her distant aunt. Nabou's presence was only coincidental, she was an accessory to the bowls she brought. Certainly, or so the pretense went, she was not there trying to pay court to the people who would decide if their child would marry her. She was a message, linked as her visits were to her mother's bowls, but she was not the author of that message, at least ostensibly. She was simply doing her mother's bidding, a dutiful daughter, *sunna ak farata, rekk*.

Today, however, Nabou came as their wife, author of the bowls she carried. Oumy, Hajja's youngest daughter, met Nabou at the door, took the stack of bowls from her and sent her back to Hajja's bedroom, in the back of the house. Oumy, like every member of the household, including Hajja herself, was dressed in everyday clothing, lovely but a bit worn. The women's hair was not done, their heads were tied in everyday scarves that didn't match their clothing, they wore no makeup. They were at home, regular clothes on a regular Sunday. Nabou, on the other hand, wore an ensemble in crisp black cotton eyelet, in a pattern that had certainly just come out on the market. She wore long, loose, waves of natural hair extensions, expertly done, smelled of expensive perfume, and carried a little beaded 'pouchette' (zippered wristlet purse) well stocked with neatly folded CFA Franc bills. She also carried a black plastic bag, from which she retrieved a bottle of body lotion for each female member of Hajja's household. Though Hajja and the women of her household were dressed for a day of cooking

and napping, Nabou came as a woman about to attend an important family ceremony. Perfectly attired and equipped for consequential social interaction, expensively dressed and ready with gifts and money to demonstrate her generosity and taste.

Nabou came to *ziaar*, to visit her in-laws and treat them as her patrons. Each time she came, she wore an outfit that they had never seen, preferably in fabric so new that it had yet to be washed. The paper label announcing the brand and origins of the fabric was still attached in places, having been left on by the tailor. She came to present all of the delights of her beauty — perfumed and well dressed — for her female in-laws to enjoy privately, along with her generosity and her excellent cooking. Within the space of Hajja’s bedroom, Nabou appeared prepared to attend a major public ceremony. Certainly, the expense — between preparations of appearance and gifts — was similar. Yet no one but Hajja’s intimates would ever know what had transpired. She came, in short, like her bowls to offer them enclosed *teranga*, a taste of her household and its delights, all of the secrets of the happiness she contains.

After distributing the lotion, she opened her little pochette and produced a tightly folded FCFA bill for each woman (including me!), and cast her eyes down as one of the older women, the head of a dependent family living in Hajja’s home, exclaimed “sunu jabbar!” “our wife!” Nabou drew the fabric of her headwrap, which had rested folded on her left shoulder, across her face, the classic posture of *ruus* (shy, bashful), as the same woman began to chant “jieg, jamm, jiareen” literally “lovely (married) lady, peace, utility.” This phrase often follows “our wife,” an epithet of praise for an in-married woman. The refrain was picked up immediately by several of the women as they began to dance, lotion in one hand, money in the other. *Reussir ne*. Success. *Jekk ne*. An elegant visit. Or so

Nabou told me afterwards, as we rested in the adjoining room after lunch, sipping soda from glass bottles.

Traffic, Women, Bowls

When women visit their husband's mother's house, or maternal grandmother's house as Nabou did, they take great care to prepare themselves and their appearance, and to bring gifts and money, along with the bowls of food that they will often name as the occasion for the visit. Women prepare for formal visits (*ziaar*) to their husband's mother's place and people as if preparing for a major ceremony. Most women begin making these visits in their own name when they are married, and many continue long after their relationship with the husband is no longer, and even if remarried: often for years or even decades after his death or their divorce. These visits, like visits between women and their uterine kin discussed above, are crucial moments in the maintenance of ties on which women will draw later, and through which their own resources will be drawn. In this way, the visits are much as others describe public ceremonies, moments in which women may negotiate their place among households. However, these visits to affines are achieved in private. As with often informal visits to uterine kin, more formal *ziaar* to affines form the basis of the ongoing invisible channels of goods and influence that underwrite the spectacles of exchange at public ceremonies.

The exchanges of *ziaar* in these visits are accomplished within the confines of the house, within *sutura*. What happens within the space of the hostess's home is never directly available to anyone but her household and her guest. Neighbors may know that Nabou comes to Hajja's house beautifully dressed, that she carries bowls and plastic bags. They cannot know the contents of the bowls or bags, nor can they know what transpires (and indeed, in whose name) when she enters Hajja's

home. Similarly, when one of Hajja's daughters goes to visit one of her sons, no one can know what has happened in their conversation. More than that, the visit will be even less remarkable than Nabou's visit, as the visiting sister is usually dressed well but not for a ceremony. *Ziaar* is therefore both like and unlike public ceremonies, like and unlike visits to spatially dispersed uterine kin. *Ziaar* is, however, very similar to one special kind of event, both like a ceremony and conducted in *sutura*, between two groups of coresident intimates: the *seysi*, in which the bride is delivered to her husband's mother's home.

The *seysi* is an interesting ceremony because, though a portion of it takes place in public view in the street, it is not conducted *for* public view. This is unlike weddings or naming ceremonies, which are staged at midday in the street in front of the home of one of the celebrants. In these ceremonies, the female members of the bride or mother's side of the family interact with and give gifts to each other, as do the female members of the groom or father's side. Then the two groups interact with each other with gifts. All of this is performed for an assembled audience including not only the participants, but also the neighbors, and anyone within earshot. These ceremonies even address absent future participants, who will see video of the event or hear stories of what was given.⁴ If one of these ceremonies occurs nearby, physically or socially, it is nearly impossible not to witness and participate in the event, know who is celebrating (and have your photograph taken with them), eat some of the food served, and have a general sense of how much money and valuables the relevant women at the ceremony are transacting. The *seysi*, though it passes through the street, leaves no trace in public. It does not address anyone but the household of the bride's mother-in-law. It is very difficult to witness a

⁴ As discussed at some length in Irvine 1996.

seysi, or even know that one has happened or will happen. A *seysi* involves intimates, is about intimacy, and it maintains intimacy. This is only one of the ways that it is like a *ziaar* or the movement of a veiled bowl of food.

A bride, accompanied by a trousseau of housewares is prepared and packaged — that is, bathed, dressed, and literally enveloped in fabric — by her father’s sister and given to her mother in law. The bride is then moved from her mother’s house to her mother in law’s in an elaborate ceremony, usually in the dead of night. I have never participated in one, but have watched twice. Once I watched illicitly from the 12th floor balcony of a prestigious residential building in downtown Dakar, looking down onto the courtyard of a large and well established family home in the Medina (while my host, a Senegalese anthropologist, carefully explained the process, with thinly veiled delight in having an excuse to watch the neighbors’ private lives). The second time, I watched as the bride and her entourage passed me while I stood on a street corner with some friends.

Once, a little after midnight I was standing, chatting with friends in front of a *butik*. The shop faces a major road, but a passageway leads back into tightly packed houses of Sinthie, Hajja’s neighborhood. The entrance to Hajja’s compound is about five yards down the alleyway, and one of my friends, Hajja’s grandson, has gone back into her house to check on something with Oumy. While our friend is away, a taxi arrives, and an older man and woman emerge from both the front and back on the passenger side. Then two young women step out of the taxi, their bodies and faces nearly completely obscured by heavy handwoven fabric wraps. My friends and I watch from the corners of our eyes, and though pretending to continue our conversation, my friends whisper to me to explain who each of these characters must be, what they must be doing.

The two young women hold the fabric up around their heads, partially shielding their faces and follow the older couple, single file. Each woman's gaze is fixed just in front of her feet; she does not speak, but pulls herself inward, visibly, performatively 'ruus' (shy, embarrassed). Slowly, they enter the alley, and just as they pass out of view, another taxi arrives, packed with women — the bride's aunts, cousins, friends — who begin to unpack the baggage tied to the top of the taxi. They laugh and yell as they take down two large plastic wash basins filled with bowls, plates, pitchers and glasses, sheets. As the women struggle to lift the giant basins full of housewares, they laugh and tell bawdy jokes; at points breaking away to cheer and dance lewdly. One woman rushes to the front of the procession carrying a *leket* filled with spoons and napkins. And soon enough, they are gone down the same passage, their voices echoing after them.

Once the women have gone and the taxis have left, my friends put away their postures of quietly ignoring what had just happened. One, always the charismatic joker, tries to remember the last time he has seen a bride led to her mother-in-law's house. A young woman tells me how lucky I am to have witnessed their passing. She lives in a rowdier neighborhood, she tells me, still she almost never sees a bride going to 'seysi.' Hajja's grandson returns and we tell him what we have witnessed. Like us, he has no idea which house has 'married a wife,' where she was going, who she was. As visible as the movement of the bride and her bowls was in the street, her identity was withheld by her fabric wrap, her destination potentially disguised. Though we saw the bride move, we had no idea where she came from or where she went, let alone who she was. That knowledge belonged only to the household who sent her and the household who received her as she moved through the street protected by her wrapping, like a bowl, in *sutura*.

Spectacular Teranga: bowls as/in public

While the literal everyday management of food and its many qualities serves as a key moment of articulation of women's power within the home, the qualities of food are also a crucial medium in which women exert influence and effect broader social action. This happens in two ways. One of these, the expansion of the model of the household to larger and more 'public' political domains, is highly visible in Senegal and both widely documented in literature on Senegalese politics, and widely criticized within Senegal as potentially suspect. More interesting, and I think more consequential, is a second, constitutively concealed, way in which food and the bowl serve as medium and metaphor for power through persuasion. This second way, the focus of the chapter, involves not the dilation of the household model to projection on larger social units, but the linking of separate and discretely contained households within a network of care mediated by the movement of veiled containers of food.

The possibility of treating the political public as one household to be both served and controlled by a central figure is well represented in the literature on Senegalese models of democracy (Schaeffer 1998), women's involvement in politics (e.g. Creevey 1996, Riley 2016, 2019), and perhaps most famously, the role of clerical lineages (that is, houses in the classical sense and the sense described in chapter three) in influencing election outcomes (see Cruise O'Brien 1971, Coulon 1988). Unsurprisingly, older work by male scholars of political science locates this mode of power not in concepts of household, and certainly not in women's political action, but in the peculiarities of "African Islam" and/or "African politics." However, newer ethnographic work sees the relationship between household and gender more clearly. Neither captures the role of feminine action in visions of household and political sphere as well as one might hope. Indeed, I have yet to find an academic

discussion of the ways that Senegalese visions of the potential homology between political and domestic modes of power — which Riley names “the *teranga* ethos,” (but I would love to term it “maternalist politics”) — at times extends beyond the walls of the home to take larger and more ‘public’ domains as its scope and arises with some regularity. Certainly there has been little academic discussion of the ways that the metaphor of state as shared bowl is understood to be problematic at best, and has become quite often as the subject of local moral critique.

As Riley has recently argued (2019), the charms of *teranga* and female modes of social action are often explicitly mobilized in the bids of female political candidates. Similarly, as Schaeffer demonstrates, Senegalese ideas of *demokraasi* — a term transparently borrowed from the English “democracy” — explicitly frame political participation as sharing of resources modelled on *yemale* or *seddale*, the process of even handed (though rarely quantitatively equivalent) redistribution in the form of shares of a common pool of wealth, the economic role traditionally assumed by the mother at the center of a household. This model of political participation is not undisputed in Senegal, however, as a series of political cartoons and newspaper opinion pieces in 2008 (and more recently) demonstrated, depicting, among other things, the nation itself as a bowl of food served by then president Abdoulaye Wade, dressed in women’s traditional attire. At the bowl were seated the ministers of government, and at their feet, the ministers’ families.

Traffic, networks, channels, dyads

Practices of food preparation and sharing also labeled *teranga* are a site of political power in the much more widespread and much less controversial practices described in the beginning of the chapter. However, the existence, systematicity, and political import of these practices and the social

relationships they constitute in Dakar (and likely in the broader region) have not been clearly described in ethnographic literature on the region.

In contrast to public ceremonies or spectacles of hosting which summon something like a political public around a bowl, these practices are based on dyadic ties between individual households, managed discreetly, within *sutura*. If public ceremonies are something like a broadcast medium, the practices on which I focus here are more like a peer-to-peer network: decentralized and web-like.

The traffic in bowls is highly visible in the fabric swathed stacks of bowls carried through the city's streets, though the sources and contents of the bowls are concealed from all but sender and receiver. In these private transactions that move through public space as visible signs of concealment, each bowl a known unknown, women move food and other resources between households to form ongoing structures of sharing, concern and obligation mediated by and modelled in the movement of bowls of lovingly prepared and artfully packaged food. As I mentioned above, one might see in these movements as the work of building a sort of "phatic infrastructure" (Elyachar 2011). Indeed, much like the cases I describe here, the woman at the center of Elyachar's description of phatic infrastructure in Cairo builds connections through visits, and then calls upon them to secure various favors.

However, while I believe that there are merits to using "infrastructure" as a model for thinking about the social forms built and maintained in these practices, the application of infrastructure as an analytic hides consequential aspects of these forms from view. Specifically, it elides the restrictions of relationship and information circulation without which, at least in Dakar, these networks would lose their efficacy.

The movement of bowls is a performance demonstrating ongoing social channels, as such focused on the phatic aspect of communication. The ties enacted and built in these exchanges solidify routes for other exchanges, for the passage of information, and the movement of influence: something necessary to the functioning of the city is built in this phatic project. It is not clear to me, however, if the network of relationships built in the traffic of bowls over time is “infrastructure.” The movement of bowls evidences a set of channels that connects households, over space and through time. However, this network is composed of intimate dyads communicating over closed channels. And though it is possible to read the density of connections of any one household in this network, each thread joining a node is invisible, the objects and information that pass through these threads concealed in opaque packages. Only the bowl’s sender and recipient, themselves intimates, can know of the existence of this channel, let alone know the status of the channel (that is the relationship) at any given time.

The operative model of the social in this economy is not one of discrete citizens as members of a uniform political public, albeit seated around the bowl of the state. Instead, it is a model of the social world as a network of distributed operations, in which households (not individuals) appear as nodes in a hidden web of influence through which women may act with both efficacy and, at a distance of only a few nodes, more than plausible deniability.

This network of distributed actions is structured around the movements and linkages that constitute kinship via dual descent and a system of alliance that is functionally matrilineal and virilocal. As Paulme (1960) notes in discussion of kinship in an adjacent West African society, “It can readily be imagined that a system which combines matrilineal descent with patrilocal residence, with their conflicting pulls, may give rise to some tricky problems...” (4) As discussed in chapter three, though

surnames and lineage membership in Dakar pass through the patriline, the stuff of a person, their literal substance and character, move through milk, and houses themselves belong to the mother at their center. In this situation it is impossible to move to the “husband’s father’s people’s” place. When a bride decides to move after marriage she moves not from her father’s home to her husband’s (or husband’s father’s) but from her mother’s home to that of her husband’s mother. Finally, if she is to have a chance at building her own power and legacy, she will move to her own home in which she will raise her own daughters and sons, and to which she will eventually pull daughters in law, through marriage to her sons. In short, women build up their own positions of power through “kin work” as di Leonardo defines it, discussed above, “weaving” to borrow from Gillian, the webs through which they also exert their influence.

Both the Italian-American women di Leonardo discusses and women in Dakar achieve this work through visits and the circulation of objects used as physical tokens to trace the routes of connection otherwise marked in those visits. While the women di Leonardo discusses send and receive greeting cards as tokens of the ongoing existence of these open channels of relatedness, women in Dakar work to similar ends through the medium of prepared food. Dakarois women’s exchange of carefully curated bowls is a form of kin work, then, in the local idioms of relatedness discussed in chapter three, in which matrilineal descent and intimacy are understood as relationships of sharing of both resources and literal bodily substance. By exchanging bowls between households, women in Dakar work at building and maintaining relationships of ‘sharing’⁵ and the consubstantiality that

⁵ Quite literally, because they are developing a network of *mbokk*, a noun derived from the verb *bokk* “to share.” *Sama mbokk yi* is often translated as “my family,” but implies a large network of active social ties, where *sama wa kerr* (people of my house) is used to name not only the literal inhabitants of one’s house, but other close relatives as well.

constitutes the solidarity of ties within the household, through the literal, albeit dispersed, sharing of single preparations.

From this perspective, households themselves are both discrete, contained, entities, and simultaneously made of the literal material stuff of the networks in which they appear. Households are in some sense carefully contained pools of milk/food/body, and moments in which streams of the same substance intersect and deepen. The distinctness of each household is then, if one permits the metaphor, contained within a semi-permeable informational membrane made possible by practices that instantiate the virtue of discretion, *sutura*.

Within the social infrastructure afforded by these practices, individual women develop their own social potency (*dole*), and means of effectiveness (*pexe*), as they move goods and influence through channels opaque to those not directly involved. On the one hand, women act at a distance horizontally, through cooperative ventures and their uterine siblings. Mother's children, though often spatially dispersed in adulthood, are nonetheless understood to share a bond of consubstantiality and natural joint interest elaborated in the food sharing practices of mother-headed households as discussed in chapter three. Though they assume forms from rotating benefit responsibility (not unlike that of a tontine), to pooling and redistribution under the direction of the mother or *jiiit* (the 'head of the family, wolof lit. "first," often but not always the eldest sibling), all means of amassing strength through these channels are structured by the guiding ideals structuring the co-resident household: shared wealth, aligned interest and sympathy, and complete opacity to outsiders. These qualities of relationship allow adult siblings, whose households and professions disperse them throughout the city (or even across regions or national borders), to act in concert even though appearing, to everyone else,

to act as individuals. The strength of network appears momentarily only in the actions of a single individual, and becomes her (or his) *dole*.

On the other hand, women act through a different set of ties to effect their will beyond their own reach. Using the persuasive charms of *teranga* women seek to sway the decisions of others outside their household and largely opaque to them. The prototype of this form of action is women's work to appease and delight their *goro* — members of their husband's natal households, particularly his mother and maternal sisters — through apparently asymmetrical exchange. And, at later points in life women rise to positions of patronage from which they are beseeched to act on behalf of others, persuaded and also fueled in these actions by the offerings of *teranga* and tribute they receive from their own brothers' wives and sons' daughters.

Spectacle and Silence: Announced and effaced exchange between *ker*

In Dakar, the *ker*, or home, is a physical location that people in Dakar work to build and rebuild, but more importantly, it is an arrangement of social relationships, of obligations and rights, of feeding and laying claim to resources. The previous chapter focused on the means by which women build and rebuild the relationships between people which define their households, and which ideally make them the center of moral and economic gravity of their *ker*. But the *ker* does not exist only in the carefully curated relationships between its members and hangers-on, a *ker* is also a node in a network of relationships between households and lineages, linked by ties of kinship, hospitality, and patronage. As Buggenhagen writes of the homes of Murid traders in Senegal's interior city of Touba:

As an ideal place, the home is a form of value because of the relations it houses. A home is made and kinship ties are produced through hospitality, feasting and gift-giving during family ceremonies such as marriages, baptisms and funerals, all of which take place in the home.

Through these events, junior women aspire to establish themselves as *grandes dames* within their networks of kin and community. (Bugenhagen 2001: 2)

That is, women form themselves as actors by establishing their *houses* as both literal places and as metaphors of the household as a unit of action within a social network. The house is a domain in which women order the relations of their most intimate others: husband, children, other dependents and employees. It is also the position from which, and occasionally the stage upon which, women will locate themselves within broader social networks.

Women build themselves and their legacy of *dole* by building up their own houses, and displaying their own strength in lavish expenditures at the family ceremonies Bugenhagen lists above. At the same time, women pay careful attention to the informational opacity that delimits them (as I argue in chapter three). By restricting information about the internal goings-on of their houses women not only protect themselves and their dependents from the dangers of various kinds of interference in the organization of their homes (such as the influence of other women on their husbands or children, as discussed in chapter three), they also obscure the sources of the wealth and power which allow them to act in such spectacular fashion at staged public events like family ceremonies and political rallies. Maintaining the appearance of enclosure of their own houses, successful *meres de familles* simultaneously, and perhaps apparently paradoxically, strengthen themselves by moving tremendous amounts of wealth and information in the paths between those houses. Feminine power thus depends on radical display and careful occlusion, containment and circulation, at the same time.

To build up the *dole* of their houses within their networks, Senegalese women construct and negotiate their own, and perhaps just as importantly, their children's, status through lavish expenditure

on family ceremonies. Studies of feminine power in Senegal have focused on these practices of display of hospitality and generosity life-cycle ceremonies (naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals) in which women perform their own wealth and power through both giving and display on their bodies (e.g. Buggenhagen 2011, Heath 1988, Mustafa 2001). It would be surprising if they did not, as these displays are inescapable in any city in Senegal. Though these ceremonies are ostensibly private invitation-only events, they almost always occur outside the space of the *ker*, in temporary pavilions set in the street. The exchanges that happen here are broadcast by *griot* and loudspeaker, sharing information about the scale of transactions not only with the assembled guests, but also the neighborhood, and even the press. While most ethnographic accounts are trained to the significant expenditures required of hosts to enact *teranga* in these settings, some have noted the ways that guests, too, enact *teranga* and are obliged to make equally publicized gifts of money, fabric, and other valuables.

The expenses of ceremonies, on their own clothing and grooming (Buggenhagen 2011, Heath 1988, Mustafa 2001) as well as on gifts to be given publically and money to be paid to various casted persons for performance and food preparation, are incurred not only by hosts (celebrants), but also every guest who attends the ceremony. Each ceremony is an opportunity for women to establish new relationships of debt and patronage, or, through effective repayment of multiples of goods previously received, to change their status in relationship to an exchange partner, e.g. from client to patron. Most ethnographic accounts of these ceremonies focus on the ways relationships are enacted publicly in competitive giving, and consider the politics of these gifts as primary. However, to the women I worked with in Dakar, ceremonies are less sites of political action by and meaningful exchange between the

women visibly giving and receiving than they were a sort of theater displaying the extent and value of other, prior moments of exchange and influence. A mountain of fabric or banknotes, for example, given on the occasion of a wedding is not only a move in a series of exchanges between the two women involved, it is also a legible sign of a series of hidden shadow exchanges and relationships which underwrite the gift. A woman who can give big at a ceremony is not only able to earn respect for her ability to maintain a high stakes public exchange relationship, she is also demonstrating that she has the ability to amass this wealth by pulling it to her from a shadow network of unnamed supporters and allies. Just as the verse performed by griots wedding festivities is always read as a sign of “shadow conversations” (Irvine 1996) in which it was composed by others, masking the precise identity of the authors while simultaneously asserting their power, money and other forms of wealth transacted in women’s ceremonies, I argue, are always understood as signs of shadow transactions, exchanges in hidden social networks through which the wealth was acquired and amassed.

An exhaustive ethnographic account of women’s ceremonies in Dakar and the strategies and modes of generosity, debt, and fame elaborated in these radically public (or perhaps better put, publicized) events to negotiate and reframe relationships between households falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Beyond this, there is little need. The displays of wealth and power I witnessed and recorded at weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals in Ouakam and elsewhere in Dakar were remarkably similar to those described by Buggenhagen and Heath in Touba and Kaolack, respectively, and even to those Masquelier (2004) describes in rural Niger. Each of these pieces describe women’s often herculean efforts to amass the resources to produce lavish gifts of goods, banknotes, and food at their children’s and peers’ children’s major life cycle ceremonies. Each ethnographer notes that these

expenses are far larger than anything that the women involved “can afford,” as one might say of lavish weddings popular among lower financial strata in the United States.

To secure a future for their children in West Africa, these accounts suggest, women must meet impossible demands from (potential) affines. Each of these moments, then appears as a crisis of reproduction. Interestingly, however, few of these accounts of the difficulty of staging a ceremony discuss the influx of money, fabric, and other valuables that women expect at these ceremonies. It is as if one has enumerated the costs of hall rental and caterer at an American wedding without accounting for the envelopes that will pass into the hands of the bride by the end of the night, the proceeds of the dollar dances, the various gift registries, or the unstated expectation that you “pay your plate.”⁶ Notwithstanding the potential for substantial returns on the expenses of the ceremony, it is not easy to amass the resources necessary to produce the event. For the women and men I spoke with in Dakar, however, the drama of public transactions was not the *source* or *cause* of women’s power even though it might be the locus of their fame. Instead, each of these public gifts was read as indexical proof of a power that would exist even if she did not display it in these ceremonies. Every FCFA note or six meter *piis* of fabric she silently handed over as a griot announced the sums transacted was really only a small sliver of the real situation, people told me, a private situation not of a bank account or a salary, but of a woman’s ability to pull valuables to herself in private, to make claims on others in her hidden networks.

For people I knew in Dakar, it was a certainty that the resources on display evidenced much more extensive exchanges behind the scenes. Much as ‘everyone knows’, Irvine notes, that the insult

⁶ However, in Dakar, it is the bride’s mother and not the bride who stands to experience an inflow of money on the day of the event.

poems performed by a *griot* at a wedding reference “shadow conversations” prior conversations between now silent members of the groom’s household and family, so too are the public exchanges of *griot* words, here accompanied by physical valuables, also understood to be a sort of theatrical performance dependant upon other transactions *shadow exchanges*, if you will. The moments recorded and shared in photo albums and video that will circulate afterwards are self consciously performances. It is not that these public transactions are, as Riley argues, the site of “continual renewal of obligation” (2019, 111), but the medium by which it is broadcast and the moments in which the *existence* and *strength* of still other webs of obligation are made “public and can create a lasting record in the public imaginary.” (ibid)

Much as the sting of *xarxar* insult poetry Irvine described derives from the uncertainty of their precise authorship, the force of women’s displays of wealth at ceremonies is augmented when the provenance of money and goods transacted is unclear. Each display of wealth is thus a display of correspondingly powerful underlying relationships. These underlying relationships derive their power, in great part, from the fact that they are not said or recorded directly, but are known to be distinct from — sometimes even potentially orthogonal to — the relationships on display. This reading is a direct consequence of the role that *sutura* plays in local semiotic ideologies. In this regime of interpretation, every relationship of value or consequence should be protected by *sutura*, and hidden from view, and the default stance is to carefully enclose and obscure all personal information.

Under the guiding ideology of *sutura* it is not only acknowledged, but expected, that visible exchange is intentionally publicized. Under this regime of interpretation, all exchange that is available for interpretation must be interpreted not only as public exchange, but as *publicized exchange*, and

therefore as a staged performance drawing materials as props from a larger, hidden economy. It is crucial, I suggest, that for Senegalese women, every act of “performing munificence” (Riley 2019, 111) be understood not as a moment in which power is earned, but as a demonstration of a woman’s *existing* power. Each moment of public largess is thus framed as an effect of some other and more important exchanges, a sign that she has cultivated relationships with many powerful secret patrons, silent partners, and backers.

When ethnographic accounts of Senegalese women’s public prestige exchanges focus on specific moments of interpersonal friction that arise as women attempt to raise the valuables necessary to succeed in their ceremonies, they, I would argue, miss the point. Though they may have captured a moment in which an offstage relationship does not work as it should, and thus becomes visible, by focusing on this moment of trouble, they miss the many other transactions that went seamlessly, without acknowledgement or much talk.

Permanent gold from nowhere: the power of non-knowledge about objects

Drawing on wealth from their hidden networks allows women to produce themselves spectacularly at public ceremonies: to put themselves on display in surrounded by fine objects and wealth that they could never afford to purchase. It is an open secret, Heath (1994) notes, that women’s performances of generous giving at public ceremonies are almost always made possible by undisclosed sponsors. When Sokhna’s daughter was about to marry, Sokhna might expect private visits from some of her partners in bowl exchange. Knowing that she was preparing a ceremony, they would each be sure to put money into her hand as she prepared to leave. When one of these same women prepared for the naming ceremony for her daughter, Sokhna would be certain to visit her in advance to give her money,

she might even be sure to give her money privately on the day of the ceremony, knowing that as the grandmother she would make a large number of very public gifts to family of the baby's father. Each of these private exchanges of money, made through channels maintained by bowls of food, underwrite public exchanges. Sokhna gives her friend money in private as a means of effacing herself from the later public transactions and displays of wealth in which the friend will create herself as a powerful, autonomous actor.

By displaying valuable objects at the right moments, women can not only demonstrate their own value and influence, but also enhance the reputation of their exchange partners. Not only do women borrow secretly to give publicly, they borrow secretly to display on themselves. By displaying borrowed wealth, women can appear publicly to have received from someone who (though not the actual source) is expected to have given and to whom the gift will be attributed. Therefore, properly staged, wealth drawn from hidden sources can appear to be the result of public exchanges, and thus attributed to visible parties of exchange.

To explain this, consider the example of a Dakarais bride's jewelry. A bride's jewelry at her wedding is traditionally an engagement gift from the husband's family or purchased with money that she was given as her bride price. It is therefore read as an index of his (and his mother's) spending power. Much as a high karat engagement ring in the United States indexes the wealth of the man who gives it, and (to some) the regard he wishes to show his fiancée, the monetary value of the bride's wedding jewelry is read as an index of the scale of bride price her husband's family gave. However, gold jewelry does not come with any mark of its actual provenance, and the bride will not wear it every day like an engagement ring. The jewels she wears, and in which she is photographed for the bridal

portraits she will hang in her home, could just as easily be on loan from a friend. Just when visible display of wealth and power draws from visible exchanges and when from hidden ones is, in practice, far from clear. This can lead to very productive ambiguities, as in the case of Jeynaba and the gold necklace.

I heard the story of Jeynaba's jewelry from a friend. Jeynaba was a colleague of hers, a young divorcée, preparing for the wedding ceremony for her second marriage. My friend grew up in Dakar, and most of her extended family lives in the city or surrounding area. She and Jeynaba knew worked together at a prestigious though not terribly well-paid job. Unlike my friend, Jeynaba grew up far from the city, and had moved to Dakar when she entered university. Her family all lived in one of the rural *regions*. Jeynaba had adopted my friend as a sort of older sister and confidante, and her mother as a patron. She often visited my friend's mother, giving her little gifts: produce when she came back from the countryside, bowls of meals she cooked. When my friend's cousin married, Jeynaba accompanied my friend and her mother to the wedding. Jeynaba was about to marry a young man with a very slightly less prestigious job, and a very small salary. She came one afternoon, my friend told me, to my friend's mother's house to ask a favor. She wanted, more than anything, she said, to wear at her wedding the set of gold jewelry — a massive and heavy necklace, earring, bracelet and ring ensemble — that she had seen my friend's cousin wear at her wedding, and in which her bridal portraits were taken. My friend's mother had nodded, replying that this would be elegant indeed, and two weeks later my friend brought the set of jewelry to Jeynaba's wedding reception, discreetly packaged, and helped her to put it on as she changed into her second outfit, was photographed for her portrait, and circled the room greeting each of her guests. The jewelry that she wore, immortalized in formal portraits and the

memories and retellings of her guests, demonstrated that Jeynaba was a woman of power and prestige, and it also became a source of power for her because of what it announced and displayed about people who could be expected to have been the source of the gold.

To all but the most intimate of the couple's friends and kin, the jewelry Jeynaba wore was an index of her husband's wealth and power. It demonstrated that Jeynaba's new husband was professionally successful, that his family was well connected, and that his was potentially a very important acquaintance to cultivate. This would not only bolster his reputation, but also (and especially) that of his mother. The (perceived) value of the jewelry was also read as a sign of the high esteem with which Jeynaba's husband (and his close kin) regarded her, and therefore of her virtue and her own generosity towards them, making her also appear to be an excellent potential patron.

To intimates, the meaning and indeed, the force, of this display was quite different. Jeynaba's husband's mother (and sisters) knew the actual amount of the bride price (which was, in fact, quite small), and so they knew that all of the gold Jeynaba wore must have come from another source. They could choose to see that the jewelry Jeynaba wore was a gift to them. By procuring and wearing such valuable jewelry at her own wedding, Jeynaba enhanced the reputation of both her husband and her *goro*. This enhanced prestige could help them to strengthen their own positions in their private networks by persuading those who witnessed it to pursue them as patrons, with visits and gifts. Jeynaba's mother, too, would benefit from this display, as the husband's mother would likely attribute Jeynaba's actions to the density of her mother's private connections, and the power of each of her exchange partners. Knowing that she had not played a role procuring the jewelry, however, Jeynaba's mother would look at her daughter with new eyes, knowing that her daughter was not to be trifled

with, but had developed powerful connections of her own. My friend and her own mother, the actual vector through which the jewelry had entered the scene, left as they had arrived: two guests among many, but with a closed package containing thousands of dollars worth of gold jewelry. My friend's mother would now return the package to her husband's sister, whose daughter had worn it at her wedding.⁷ And though they appeared to the other guests and the public as marginal members of Jeynaba's social circle, beneath the surface — or rather inside of *sutura* — their ties to her were now among the strongest of anyone's.

The story of Jeynaba's gold wedding jewelry is one instance of many similar episodes that I knew about or participated in during my time in Dakar. I chose it to tell because it is less complicated than some, yet still illustrates the aporia of knowledge about objects and relationships that result from private exchange and allow for the careful and multiply misleading interpretation of objects as signs of public exchanges. As the story of the jewelry demonstrates, the objects of public exchange and display in women's ceremonies often have complex histories, but these histories are effaced so that participants in the public ceremony can act without knowledge (or with plausible deniability) of that history. Public exchanges depend materially on private exchanges: without the money secretly given by her friend, Sokhna would not be able to make large public gifts at her daughter's wedding. The success of public exchanges also relies on *the occlusion of* those private exchanges: it must appear that Sokhna is the origin of the money given, not simply a conduit passing money on. Even though everyone knows that sources and sponsors behind the scenes underwrite public display and exchange, the fact that

⁷ The jewelry would almost certainly continue to travel between women until it was finally returned to its legal owner. The woman my friend's mother had borrowed it from was unlikely to be its owner at all, and was just as likely to herself return it to someone just as likely to have borrowed but not to own the gold.

those relationships cannot be seen by the public means that what *is seen* is the qualities of the woman who appears in public. She is a node in a network from which she draws her strength, but that network is only publicly known through the power of her actions, which translate her private dyadic relationships of exchange into an aggregate expressed as personal qualities. She is powerful, she is well connected. She is a force to be reckoned with.

Mycelium

Though the relevant ethnographic literature seems concerned with the potential of women's public competitive giving to bankrupt households, it is an open secret in Dakar that gifts given and the publicized alliances and rivalries dramatized at these events call upon another layer of exchange relationships. Traffic in this network of exchange relationships is not publicly announced by griots or recorded by event photographers, rather it occurs in transactions that are unspoken and contained, within and between pairs of households. Discreet as the transactions are, they compose a network that invisibly links apparently quite separate and distant nodes: the homes of government ministers to those of clinic nurses, between fabric merchants and school teachers, between the city and the country, and even beyond the borders of the nation. This carefully constructed social web is built of many dyadic relationships between and through adult women, and thus, by extension, between their *ker*: between a mother and her daughter, between two children of the same mother, between women and their mothers-in-law.

While the strength of any woman's position, and the power of her network as a whole, becomes visible in publicized and memorialized moments of high-value exchange at family ceremonies, these moments of high-stakes transaction are not where the network IS, and not where it is interpreted

to be. Senegalese women read public displays of power (literally, *dole*, “strength”) as indices of women’s ability to command valuables to themselves outside of public view; a woman who is able to give hundreds of dollars of high value textiles and banknotes at a ceremony is understood to have this ability because she has drawn privately on the resources of her hidden network. Just as Jeynaba’s jewelry provided evidence (misleadingly) that her new in-laws were powerful women, able to give thousands of dollars of gold jewelry to help their son marry, large public displays of wealth suggest a (potentially remote) cause that the giver or wearer has tapped into.

Perhaps ironically, in this system the source of women’s strength is the very fact that women leave and return, owing simultaneous allegiances to multiple places. Women are able to construct themselves and their houses as nodes of dense traffic in these networks because they move and are moved, like bowls, women’s value and power emerge in simultaneous enclosure and circulation. While women begin their adult lives like travelling bowls, wrapped and passed between their mother’s place and their husband’s mother’s, they can work to establish themselves as the centers between which that traffic moves, becoming the mothers around which not only homes, but entire private worlds of influence are centered.

Fungal infrastructure

Public gifts function in relationship to private exchange in a way that relies on two different aspects of information management built into the system. The first of these is the effacement of private giving, allowing public gifts to appear as if from nowhere. The second is the dyadic structure of private exchanges themselves. While public exchanges always take place before an audience, spreading knowledge of what is given or worn and how much across potentially infinite numbers of people

widely dispersed in time and space, private exchanges are always dyadic and contain information about what is given within two households.

To describe the relationship between the economy of veiled bowls and that of public gifts, it is useful to picture a kind of fungal growth sometimes called a “fairy ring.” Some kinds of fungus popularly known as mushrooms or toadstools appear to grow in a large circle, as if they individually decided to form a circle, or marked the path of fairies who had once danced there. However, the appearance of separate toadstool entities arranged in a ring belies the actual state of affairs. What appears above ground is only the fruiting bodies of a mass of fungal threads beneath the surface, of which the toadstools define the outer edge.

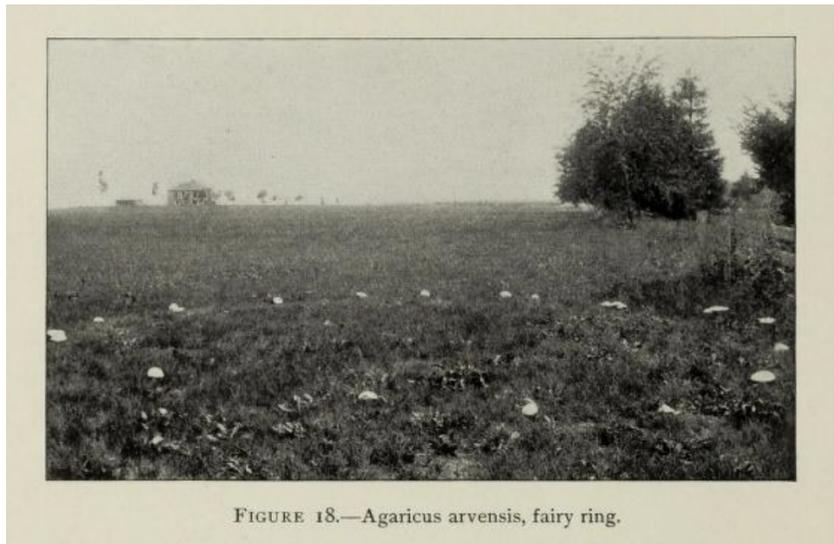


Fig. 4.5 The fungal “fairy ring” as seen from above (Atkinson, 1901, p. 20)

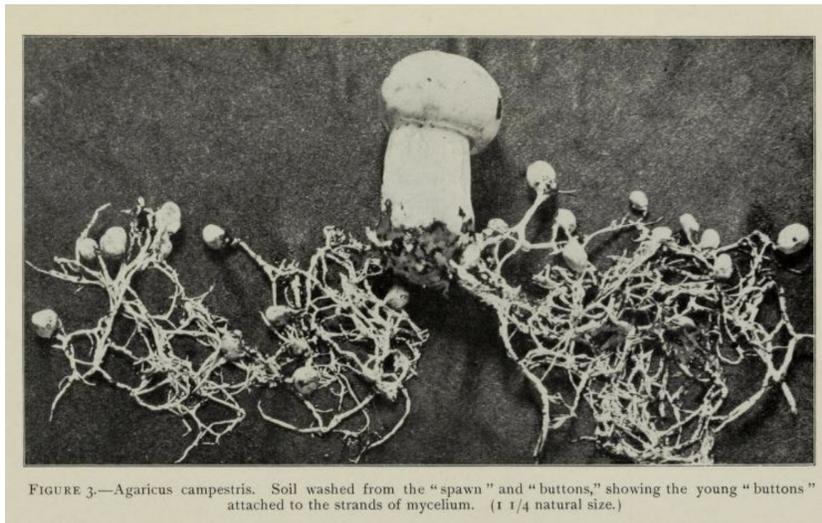


Fig 4.6 The real relationship of networked connections in the fairy ring revealed. (Atkinson, 1901, p. 4)

On closer inspection, with the soil washed from the fungal structure, the “fairy ring” is demonstrated to be not a set of mushrooms “arranged” with relationship to each other, but rather the apparent “mushrooms” are the above-ground efflorescences of the actual body of a single fungal organism, which grows, weblike beneath the surface. As such, the connections (and thus the ring like arrangement) precede the mushrooms. The mushrooms are only a momentary making-visible of the extent, maturity, and health of the organism, which exists at all times as a system beneath ground: capturing, metabolizing, and circulating nutrients.

Pressing this metaphor a bit, I suggest that ethnographic accounts of exchange at women’s ceremonies see a bright toadstool in one woman’s display at a ceremony, and perhaps a ring of toadstools in the set of exchanges in which it is involved. They locate the drama of social action in the relative positioning of toadstools. However, while women I spoke with in Dakar enjoyed discussing the pageantry of public exchanges, they see them as a sort of staged event. A woman’s gifts at public events,

I was told, demonstrate power in relationship to her public partners and rivals in exchange, but that power does not really come from public move and countermove, but from the ability to assemble her resources before hand. Working together apparently against each other in competitive display, women actually demonstrate the strength of their shared private resources. To call on the toadstool metaphor, for most of the women I spoke with in Dakar, any set of toadstools is evidence of the mycelium, the tremendous mass of fungus underground of which the visible toadstools composing a “fairy ring” are only the individual above ground efflorescences. I mean that the spectacular transfers of wealth between exchange partners rest on other exchanges that are publicly visible only through inference from patterns of separate events, the real meat of the operation exists in networks just out of view.

As a form of semiotic practice, bowl exchange (and the social relationships it engenders) defies some of the current common sense models that one might use to describe it. On the one hand, gift exchange of food between pairs of partners appears to be less a means of communication than a form of economic relationship, and a familiar one at that. However, the value of the network built up in these transactions exceeds the simple possibility of swapping one food for another. Like the “phatic labor” Elyachar (2010) describes in Cairo, the exchange of bowls cements relationships upon which people may later draw for material resources, and for influence. Yet because it builds relationships on an explicitly intimate and domestic model, the work of bowls may be more like that of greeting cards, as described by di Lorenzo. That is, bowls of food, like greeting cards, are kind of message sending activity that not only acts overtly on the relationship between sender and recipient (as “phatic labor”) but means of doing “kin work” to make and manage relationships that are if not private, certainly not public. (fn: Nozawa touches on the possibilities of using the phatic as a means of thinking kinship in

practice). As such, it is not clear that the perduring set of pathways and ties resulting from this labor is “infrastructure” as Elyachar (and perhaps Simone (2004)) would suggest. While in many ways these practices may seem analogous, Dakarais women’s bowl exchange differs in one key way: the kinds of epistemic states it engenders and enforces. Because bowl exchange involves both containment and veiling, it creates not only a channel but a coded channel. Because each exchange is veiled in this way and *always dyadic*, it creates a network as a series of separate channels through which information and other valuables may pass with only one degree of known provenance, yet with the expectation of having come through other homologous pairings. Because the network built in bowl exchange is epistemically structured so as to create partial ignorance about the source of goods, information, and influence that pass through it, it makes it possible for individual women to both draw on vast networks of exchange relationships and to appear to act alone. Indeed, one can only judge the extent of an individual woman’s involvement in this hidden economy by the strength of her public actions. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the quantity and quality of gifts a woman gives in public are most often interpreted as signs of her own character, her own generosity (Pfeil 2012). Her effaced private ties thus make possible her public persona, and make that persona appear to act autonomously.

Not only are these bowls explicitly understood as semiotic media by the women who send them, they are read as sign forms with a particularly phatic function: exchange of bowls of food between households indexes (creatively or presupposingly), the existence of a particular channel between the women who sit at the center of those households. Like the bowls that move through them, this channel is closed. Like an encrypted frequency used by only two parties (could go into more detail here), the space of communication that the bowls mark out creates the possibility of exchange of

information and valuables in secret. To borrow again the image of the structure of a fairy ring: below ground, the structure of the mycelium draws resources from a distance, invisible to the surface and channeled in such a way as to not be absorbed into the soil. The message, that is all of the information about the relationship between sender and receiver of bowls that I discuss above, is contained and hidden: knowable only to the two parties to that transaction.

Sitting in the center of a web: a dieg at the end of a successful career

Women's place...has been that of nurturer, caretaker, helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies.

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (1982:17)

"I excel at pulling strings!" said Arachne. "I'm a spider!"

Rick Riordan, *The Mark of Athena*

For the Dakarois, the secret of happiness lies, I suggest in the previous chapter, in the proper ordering of relations within a household. Women, I argue, manage these relations in the medium of food (among others), to create their households with themselves at the center, both the source of warmth, care, and authority, and the rightful owner of all material resources in the home. The relations that compose an individual household are most clearly displayed around the bowl of a Sunday midday meal. Indeed, within the household, a mother's power rests in the charms of mealtime, hidden from the world outside. With age and skillful management, however, her power can extend outward, far past the walls of her *ker*.

Power is built over time, and a woman develops her own power after marriage by working on her social network over decades. Because social relationships are built over time, and extend with each generation, true power belongs to very senior women. Therefore the work of first strengthening a

home and then locate that home in a larger set of relationships between women, households, and bowls is most legible in the social lives of undisputed *grandes dames* of the *troisieme age*, extremely socially powerful women whose grandchildren are entering the years of marriage and childbearing.

Perhaps like a spider on its web, the *grande dame* pulls at threads that move wealth and other desirable states toward her and her dependents, that mobilize others' wealth to her advantage and that of her children, that shape careers and affect policy decisions. With the patience of the spider, she maintains consequential relationships between kin, affines, patrons and clients. The threads of this web of influence, more numerous and perhaps longer, but otherwise like those created and maintained by other *meres de famille* I know in Dakar, are maintained less by talk than they are by the movement of goods; and like the spider's web, their functionality depends on their ability to bridge vast distances nearly invisibly. The primary medium by which this web of relations is built and maintained is clearly communicative. It serves to mark a set of linkages of information sharing between closed units: bodies and the stuff of bodies cloaked from view as they pass between sites in which they are dressed, undressed, appreciated and revealed. Visiting women's bodies and bowls of prepared food move nearly invisibly linking the private interior spaces of homes.

Not all senior women ascend to positions of power within their social networks, of course. The possibility of such ascent depends on conditions of birth and marriage, themselves based on generations of social labor. Within these positions, success is not guaranteed, however, as a woman's power is built up over decades and exists only in individual social ties, themselves depending on the successful placement of each of one's children and grandchildren, requiring decades of careful attention to relationships of alliance. These women, having succeeded as masters of 'kin work' often

rarely leave their homes, sending out in their place and receiving from others not the greeting cards di Lorenzo describes in circulation in the Italian American community she studied, but countless bowls of food. I therefore begin my discussion of the very visible movement of bowls between households in Dakar with a moment in which a woman is at rest and her set of bowls is static, indeed about to disappear from view, having returned from a voyage outside of her home. On this July evening in 2012, I am a returning *protégée*, visitor to an old friend, coming back to her house after a long absence

I arrive at her her house at six in the evening to find Hajja stretched on the sofa in her salon. Apparently too tired to continue fanning herself, she rests her fan across her bosom. She is now almost 90 years old, having far outlived her husband, a prosperous merchant and representative of a powerful Tijani clerical lineage. Her house is at the center of the “Old Ouakam” settlement I discussed in the last chapter, in fact, it opens on one of the settlement’s important public spaces, a clearing in which is the venue for ceremonies like weddings and baptisms, and home to a *daara* (Qur’anic school), in which girls are taught to recite the Qur’an. Her husband’s patriline’s settlement in this part of Ouakam, close to the sea, dates from the 19th century, when their ancestor, member of a powerful clerical family, travelled to the coast and constructed the area’s first mosque. He is buried beneath it and the anniversary of his death is memorialized each year in a nationally televised event. In other words, this spot is an important space in social networks and routes extending across the nation and broader region, built up and maintained over more than a century.

After I remove my shoes at the door, I shift the curtain in the doorway to enter her well-furnished *salon* with a cheerful “Salaam alaikum,” and we greet each other for a bit as I settle into the upholstered chair. Hajja’s home, which sits on the space formerly occupied by the 19th century

ancestor's immediate household, is much different than I had last seen it. When I first met Hajja, this house was a single story wooden structure with little internal division, but major renovations have been undertaken in the time that I have known her. As I enter the home I see that the second story is nearing completion, and the ground floor is completely tiled and painted (finished in time for the party to celebrate her return from Mecca). I have been told by many members of her family how pleased she is by the state of her new home. Her happiness about the house has increased her already limitless prayers for all of the dependents of her household who support her and contributed financially to the renovations, that is, the people that she fed and over whom she ruled as mother and grandmother, many of whom now live overseas. While it is clear that Hajja succeeds at drawing financial resources towards herself, the scale of these resources is only ever visible as an aggregate, a partial one at that. The qualities of the physical structure of the house demonstrate her strength as a function of what her dependents can do, yet how much has been contributed — and by which dependent exactly — is hidden from view, obscured by the physical unity of the house and the fact that only her name attaches to it. The house is thus a testimony to the scale and power of her connections, a sign of her own qualities.

It's been several years since the last time I visited Hajja. I've been in the United States, and we have a lot to catch up on. Although she recently returned from Mecca where she had made the *hajj*, her first trip by airplane, Hajja's movements have grown limited. This is in part because she has grown weaker with age. That said, some women of her generation now live in one of their children's homes, no longer the absolute ruler of their houses but permanent visitors in the houses of others. Hajja, however, remains at the center and in complete control over her own house. She calls on her many

social ties without leaving home or even dialing her cellphone, sending her dependents out with packages and messages, or, more often, receiving the visits of her various clients. When we first met, I came to know her as a true *grande dame* of the social worlds of old Ouakam and nearby Guediawaye, her natal home (where many of her mother's children live) and another old coastal settlement near Rufisque. Back then, Hajja was always an important presence at any marriage or funeral, and she had taken me with her to many events, introducing me to all of the most notable people, and explaining to me what occurred (with what I only later realized was a Dorothy Parker wit). She is older now, I can see, and as we talk I learn that while she still attends some such ceremonies, her social calls have become much less frequent.

As I sit in the armchair, Hajja lies on her side on the divan, her feet stacked one on the other, ankle bones touching. Her head rests on her hand. We are talking when — still in the repeated refrains of greetings asking-after, and her nearly constant drone of 'alhamdulillah' (thank God), in response to my questions about her family, and to my responses of 'jamm rekk' (just peace) when she asked after mine — her youngest daughter Oumy (born in the same year that I was) walks down the hallway behind the curtains. Hajja says quickly, "Did he bring the bowls?"

"Should be here," the daughter replies, "but I don't see them by the refrigerator."

I point through curtains and a wall to a space near the front door with my lips and nod, and Hajja tells her daughter to bring the bowls from the place I indicated. Oumy pulls aside the curtain and enters, the first two fingers of her right hand hooked under a knot at the top of a bundle wrapped up in green fabric. I recognize the wrapping as the headwrap that goes with a *grand boubou* I've seen Hajja wear around the house in the afternoons. It's a nice fabric, a tioup (hand dye) on a light damask fabric.

To me, the fabric looks new, but because she wears it at home, I know that the clothing is now retired from public life.

Oumy puts this package on the floor in front of her mother, and Hajja pulls herself up on an elbow and begins to untie the top of the bundle, spreading the corners of the rectangle of fabric, smoothing the fabric out flat on the floor. She then inspects each of the empty bowls that were contained in this bundle. She runs a finger over the inside of each bowl. She turns it in the shaft of light from the curtained window, examining both inside and outside of the bowl. She checks that each lid is there. The bowls are slightly dented, they have been in circulation as long as I have known her, since at least 2005. Hajja holds each bowl close to examine it with her failing eyes, weighs each in her hands. Hajja calls her daughter to put the bowls away.

Hajja's bedroom is near the back of the house, just before the kitchen. Her room has an adjoining private bathroom, and a grand set of bedroom furniture. Her bed is a 'trois-place' the largest standard size, covered with a satin spread and layered with decorative pillows along the headboard and the wall. At any given time, half of the surface of the bed is covered in folded clothing, neatly stacked. The door and facing windows are concealed behind floor-length organza curtains, a matched set with the bedspread.

Hajja's 'huit-bunt' (eight door) armoire stands parallel to her bed. Each door of the armoire conceals a separate compartment, not accessible through the other doors. Each compartment locks with a key, and Hajja keeps the keys with her. The shelves of the armoire are stacked with neatly folded clothing and fabric. Hidden in the folds are her photographs, incense, jewels, money. On top of the armoire stand stacks of large bowls and cook pots—20 or so, each roughly a meter in diameter — used

only for preparation of meals for big gatherings ('xew' or 'ceremonie'). The bowls and pots shine brightly of white metal, Hajja's name is inscribed on the rim of each. Like her fabrics, perfume, jewels, and family photos, the bowls are Hajja's tools and emblems of rank as the matriarch of an important family. Most women of my generation that I know have two door armoires. Established women of my mother's generation and older generally have four door armoires. As senior and influential as Hajja is, her belongings require an armoire at least twice the size of the local standard for an established adult woman. Indeed, her influence extends so far that people who do not live inside her house sit around her bowls at a great distance. The bowls that have just returned have made a long round trip. Though she herself travelled with her bowls over the years it took to build this network, that is no longer necessary. The charm and delight with which she rules over her own home extends out in the bowls that she sends to affines and allies throughout the city, only to have them return for her consideration and inspection before they are put back away.

The moment of return is itself a triumph and a mark of success. Hajja has invested in building on the social status and network she married into, making great efforts to send *teranga* over the years, then to make alliances for her children, sending daughters out across the city, and sons and grandsons to Europe and the United States. Now, in her old age, all kinds of good things flow back to her along the threads she painstakingly wove, among them the money that rebuilt her house.

The return of bowls is never certain, and is itself a meaningful communication, an assent to the ongoing existence of this relationship. The presence of bowls in a woman's armoire testify to the fact that she sends and receives. Ruptures in relationships lead to stoppages in the flow of bowls.

Buggenhagen describes the ways that when a marriage failed because the bride ran off after her *seysi*, the consequences were felt in the failure of bowls to return to her mother.

Rama's family said that they were angry with Bintu because they had sent so many bowls out, sharing the wedding feast with neighbors down the street and important associates. Because Bintu had run away, none of these bowls had come back in the return direction. Thus, often Rama's mother would often look for bowls in her armoire and curse Bintu because she had so few left.

The presence or absence of one's own empty bowls in the home, like the contents of the bowls received, are thus signs in which the status of social relationships can be read. Even at rest and in their absence, bowls can serve as signs of a general phatic state of affairs. Like the house, Hajja's bedroom furnishings, and even the qualities of her clothing and grooming, empty bowls can be signs of Hajja's overall status, an aggregate of each of the threadlike channels through which she is connected to others; they are signs of the integrity, size, and strength of the web in whose center she sits, like a spider. They are signs of her potential, in the moment, to pull at any of those strings, and be answered.

Because I know her well, and I have painstakingly traced out the locations and alliances of her siblings, her children, and their children, I see her as a node of heavy traffic in a dense social network. Because I know her and she knows me as an ethnographer, I can name the ties of influence that form what others see only as the aura of power and quietude emanating from her. From her bedroom, her armoire, her reclining pose on sofa in the salon, Hajja's influence extends through a social network that covers large portions of the Cap Vert peninsula on which Dakar sits, and extends to the homes of clerical elites in Tivavoune, of officers in international organizations, even to the residences of

Senegalese diplomats in Geneva and New York. Several years after the visit I have just described, in my own apartment in Manhattan, I ate a bowl of *thiere* that Hajja (that is, her coresident daughters and daughters-in-law, and her house staff) had made in the bowls I described just now, this very house in Ouakam. After the *thiere* was made (in great quantity), some portion of it was frozen and sent via diplomatic pouch to New York, where another powerful woman — a close ally of one of Hajja's daughters, but not kin — oversaw the production of some sauce to accompany it. The sauce and *thiere* were then wrapped up in a fine (but not new!) resist-dyed fabric and delivered to my shabby Harlem apartment by a black car with diplomatic plates. The force by which Hajja moved to reach me, to feed me, drew me to call her the day the food was delivered, and obliged me to a series of favors I was only too happy to accomplish.

Chapter Five

Talibe: “any body” and a city of non-relations

“I remember being a *talibe*. The best part was the leftovers at *añ*. Some *thieb* from one house, some curry from another, everything together. You think it’s disgusting, but I loved tasting the city.”

— An academic administrator in his fifties, to me, over a shared lunch in 2007.

Dakar’s beggars: shadow infrastructure

Ce matin encore le journal en a parlé: ces mendiants, ces talibés, ces lépreux, ces diminués physiques, ces loques, constituent des encombrants humains. Il faut débarrasser la Ville de ces hommes — ombres d’hommes plutôt — déchets humains, qui vous assaillent et vous agressent partout et n’importe quand. Aux carrefours, c’est à souhaiter que les feux ne soient jamais rouges!

The newspaper mentioned it again today: the beggars, the *talibe*, the lepers, the handicapped people, these collapsed men, forming human roadblocks. The City must be rid of these people — rather, shadows of people — human castoffs, who assault you and mug you anywhere, anytime. At intersections you just hope that the light is never red!

Senegalese novelist Aminata Sow Fall opens her landmark 1979 novel, *The Beggar’s Strike*, with the fascinating depiction, excerpted above, of beggars as inseparable from Dakar’s built environment. Fall confronts her reader with a Dakar in which the beggars come to control every aspect of life in the capital city: the choices made in the halls of power and the talk between husband and wife long after dark. The protagonist, an aging civil servant, is charged with the task of enforcing a new ban on begging. He finds his attempts complicated by the fact that the *marabout* to whom he has turned for help in gaining the affection of a young woman prescribes ever greater and more costly gestures of sacrificial alms (*sarax*). Though he insists that ‘nothing links’ him to the beggars, and that it will be very easy to erase their presence from the streets to ‘modernize’ the city and welcome foreign investment, the city grinds to a halt when the beggars decide to strike rather than leave the streets.

Unable to find beggars to accept the sacrificial alms he is compelled to offer to bolster his chances with the object of his affections, the protagonist feels himself personally impotent. He is not the only resident whose plans and projects depend on the beggars who would accept their sacrifices.

Though a work of fiction, it is to this novel that I was directed over and over when I began asking people in Dakar to help me understand the city's ever-present child beggars. The novel captures a truth about the social fabric of Dakar; in some sense the beggar controls everything that happens, every movement of information from the most political to the most personal. As improbable as this seems, the city's many failed attempts to remove beggars from the streets through new legislation and renewed enforcement (most recently, 2006, 2011, 2016) echo the fictionalized world Fall presents, in which the need to give alms fuels a material and spiritual economy that drives the city itself. Though they appear to live outside society — a shadow of society composed of the “shadows of men” — the beggars are entangled in every aspect of life in Dakar, individual and collective.

While an accurate census of the city's beggars may never be achieved, one widely cited local report (as noted in Wells 2010 and Human Rights Watch 2016, among others) claims that in the 2010s the city was home to 30,000 *talibe*, mendicant male children affiliated with the city's informal quranic schools, called. The *talibe* are only one of the many types of beggars to populate the city's streets today as they do in Fall's novel: mothers of infant twins, albinos, blind men led by young women, the physically handicapped in various modes of transportation. If beggars have resisted legislation and policing to block the flow of traffic in Senegal's capital city for at least forty years, surely their persistence points to an enduring aspect of the city as a social form. Neither of the city, nor removable from it, beggars are an enduring means of picturing Dakar. The beggars themselves, Fall's “shadows of

people” form a crucial kind of infrastructure in the city, a network of “human cast-offs” that set Dakar’s society up against its foil, a shadow society, Dakar’s economy against a shadow economy, producing and transforming real economic value in transactions between named people and nameless beggars. The economic value of these strange shadow people derives from their interchangeability with each other and the fact that they are, to use a Wolof phrase *doomi jambur*, “someone else’s children.” Residents of the city, yet related to no one, the anonymous child beggars exert a strange force. The boys are attributed a series of mystical powers: the ability to absolve sin, to draw luck, and to turn up strange caches of wealth from nowhere. In fact, they do all of these things.

In contrast to the veiled bowls of food described in the last chapter, which circulate within their own enclosures, maintaining sutura inside them, food given to beggars as alms takes what was enclosed within the house and makes it disappear through diffusion. Alms, thus ‘goes out’ of domestic space without seeming to go anywhere; alms just *go away*. The byproduct and (carefully created) surplus of cooking and eating at the shared bowl, alms moves away from the home and the enclosed domestic networks of *berndel* and *teranga* in which they are embedded, into shadow worlds outside the protective enclosure of households — the societies of beggars and jinn — densely populated by beings we could call “any body” and “no body” respectively. Beggars, embodied but without individual identity or apparent agency; jinn, highly individuated and willful agents with no (apparent) body. These two shadow societies exist and share space in Dakar with the city’s human society, and though they are distinct and largely opaque to humans, these shadow societies and the human society of households and networks of kin and patronage interact consequentially on a daily basis.

In *sarax*, jinn and beggars come into relationship through a sort of sleight of hand. *Sarax* is most often given as a means of managing problems created (or at least manipulated) by jinn, it is given to appease jinn or to entice them to act in one way or another in their invisible world. However, *sarax* are not given to or consumed by *jinn*. It is the all too visible beggar who collects, and possibly consumes, *sarax*, thereby somehow passing it into the invisible world. Their relationship, cast into relief in the economies surrounding *sarax*, articulate a social world embedded in and yet opposed to the order of relatedness and care constituted in women's "underground" or "veiled" networks described in chapter 4. This is a city of consequential actions committed by unknowable others, neighbors opaque to our reason, webs of social causation that while close at hand and through which one may attempt to act, are fundamentally unknowable. If women build a society of consubstantiates and shared interests by exchanging carefully veiled bowls of food (metonyms for their own bodies), the giving practices which constitute *sarax* reveal a simultaneous society of autonomous and opaque others. The movements of objects and the actions of agents in the *sarax* economy trace a society outside the *sutura* households build, perhaps this a society as seen from the one in the street, without a veil or a fixed destination, outside the carefully constructed *sutura* of others' homes.

In the previous chapters I have argued that the ways that women in Dakar manage their household economies — food prepared and shared, purchased in small quantities in the market, and passed between households — reveal a social world in which the boundaries of belonging and power of allegiances are built, negotiated, and broken in the movement of bowls of food. Movements within and across the social field constituted in these food exchanges are organized in relationship to *sutura*, the ethic and aesthetic of enclosure. Each exchange builds ties of shared substance, while at the same time

defining the structure of an ‘inside’ of social life, a carefully curated world of intimate relationships of material dependency and affect. Against this web of artfully curated contained circulation, almsgiving is a site in which social ties are further managed by ‘casting out’ gifts by giving to beggars who stand in as the limits of society.

By giving alms to beggars, women mark out a social world outside of, and opposed to, their spheres of intimate influence and control: asserting the existence of another social order in the city, one populated by strangers. This is a vision of Dakar not as a city of interior spaces connected by women’s movements and governed by generosity and obligation, but of streets bustling with unknown and nameless bodies, a city of other people’s children (literally, w. “doomi jambur”). Almsgiving helps to define the city as a space of stranger sociability fueled by unseen and unknowable intentions and actions of others.

As described in chapter three, Dakar’s beggars are the practical edge of the city’s logics of food sharing, sustaining themselves by consuming the leftover meals from the city’s households. They do this in two distinct ways. First, by consuming the last bits of food that remain in a bowl after every member of the household has eaten, they define the limit of the set of dependents that they household (and therefore, its matriarch) sustains. Beggars also consume entire bowls of prepared food sent out from the household, parallel to food gifts exchanged against favors with in-laws and sisters. Yet these bowls of food are expected to create no lasting relationship. They neither nurture nor anticipate any return from their recipients. By consuming food in these ways, the beggar marks the end of the bowl of food that defines the household, and the limit of a social network built in the exchange of meals.

Through their modes of consumption and movement in the street, the city's beggars, like the city's sanitation workers, are implicated in what Fredericks terms "material processes of abjection through which certain bodies become constituted as waste" (2017:193). Like the Dakar garbage workers Fredericks describes, beggars and the networks they form create a human form of infrastructure (see Simone 2004), vital to the function of the city imagined as a whole: they assume the necessary role of removing and transforming the discarded, and in so doing protecting the health of the city (see Fredericks 2018). As Fredericks argues, garbage workers, frame their labor within "the conviction that the labor of cleaning the city is an act of piety." (126) While the garbage workers' efforts maintain the city's health quite literally, and derive a spiritual value from so doing, the beggars' task in Dakar begins as a labor of producing spiritual value, and ends by producing a necessary social service.

The Outsiders: the figure of the *talibe* in Senegalese media

When I first came to Dakar, a now retired librarian/archivist showed me a file of newspaper clippings he had collected over the years: over ten years of stories from the national papers about *talibe* and the various forms of trouble they got into. I was delighted to have access to these materials, though they proved difficult to source and cite properly, each piece having been cut cleanly out of one of six or so newspapers the library receives each day (many of which use the same typefaces!), with no margin or notation, and placed carefully into a large manilla folio over the span of no less than ten years. In spite of their dubious bibliographic status — or perhaps because of it! — the clippings were particularly precious to me. As I sat with various members of the library staff over photocopies of the most interesting stories, attempting to work out which paper had published each when, people began to talk about their own experiences of the city's *talibe* with me for the first time. These stories had not been

easy to elicit without the newspaper clippings, much as it had been very difficult to engage anyone in Dakar in structured interviews about *sarax*, a methodological issue I discuss in greater depth in chapter two. Later, having completely failed to work out the exact provenance of the articles that I discuss in greater depth below, I took photocopies of the clippings with me on afternoon visits to various notables, and some of my closer consultants and friends that appear in this dissertation under various names. Drinking *attaya* in the salons of dozens of Dakar homes I had conversations not unlike those I had with the library staff: no one could precisely identify the clippings (though they were obviously from Dakar newspapers, printed in the period 1994-2005), but everyone had a story of their own about the *talibe*. People's own stories were very similar in genre and plot to the stories in the clippings, and inform my discussion of the figure of the *talibe* in what follows here

The stories the librarian showed me first in this set were similar to what little I had heard about the *talibe* in the international English-language press, and missionary and NGO reports: cases of violent physical abuse and shocking neglect discovered in the *daaras* of so-called "*faux marabouts*." These stories are shocking, abuses which warrant the attention they have drawn not only in the Senegalese national press and the international sources in which I first encountered them, but in recent academic work as well (e.g. Thiam 2014). I soon identified a second set of articles in the collection, however. Interspersed with the stories in which *talibe* were victims, I found others in which these boys were near protagonists, perhaps even semi-fantastic creatures. Indeed, these were the stories that most captured the imagination in my later conversations with librarians and others (though perhaps this is because they were my favorites, for reasons which will soon become clear). Here the *talibe* appear from

outside the scene, to act on the social world inhabited by newspaper readers, and then disappearing again into the background of the city.

Sometimes the *talibe* appear as heroic saviors, a sort of living *deus ex machina*. In one type of story, new variations of which I would see repeated in the press over my years in Dakar, a very young lone *talibe* (younger than eight, certainly, sometimes younger than six), or a band of *talibe* of the same age, would be credited with stopping what could have been a fatal mugging attack in the middle of the night in some disreputable area of the city. A stranger to all parties involved, the *talibe* would be described to have appeared as if out of nowhere, from the shadows of a house under construction, from underneath a shed. I found more than five such stories in the librarian's collection, and many more in the local papers during the subsequent years I was in Dakar.

In this genre of story, a *talibe* would be reported to have been found with a large amount of contraband that had appeared in his hands as if from nowhere, and of which he purportedly knew nothing, least of all its value. In these stories, *talibe* appear to be a sign of some economic order otherwise completely hidden, as a moment indexing the presence of flows and networks which escape and evade the city's visible logics. The first story of this type that I found appeared in a newspaper and reported a scene in *marche sandaga*, the city's largest open-air market, in which, it is rumored, everything on earth is available for sale. A trail of high value euro bills had appeared in the market one day, the story read. Stall owners, and then police, followed this suspicious trail of foreign currency to its source, a five year old *talibe* who reportedly spoke no Wolof. Though no one could say, for sure, how many bills he had distributed around the market, he was found with over a hundred thousand euros on his person, in fifty- and hundred-euro notes. The boy, the paper reported, said he 'found them,' but

maybe they had been given to him as *sarax* and, it speculated, not knowing their value, he had simply allowed some of them to scatter.

In 2006, I saw a nearly identical story reported on the television news, on RTS, the national station. A *talibe* was said to have been discovered to be the locus of distribution of tens, if not hundreds, of counterfeit US hundred dollar bills. A few friends, watching the news with me at the time, found the story credible. More than that, they spent the remainder of the evening telling me their own stories about *talibe* wealth. Once when they were teens, for example, they had been walking along and thrown a big rock into a deteriorating cement brick wall. The impact somehow dislodged something, and they found a wad of FCFA notes in what had been a hidden void in the cement brick. They assured me that the hundred or so francs they had found (roughly two hundred US dollars) must have been stashed away by a *talibe*. They, of course, appropriated the funds for some other use. In the summer of 2013, the city's newspapers and multiple television outlets carried a news story described a large quantity of cocaine, seized from an apparently unsuspecting *talibe*, under similar circumstances.

In each of these narratives, the central figure in this encounter with a vast quantity of foreign valuables was a young boy — always under ten, usually under six years of age — of unknown parentage, in tattered clothing of unknown origin, a poor speaker of Wolof if a speaker of Wolof at all. His lack of Wolof fluency marked him as a newcomer. Like most of the city's *talibe* (and the city's labor force more generally) born outside Dakar, and often, outside of Senegal. A child who, though he is known to live off of the alms of the city, lives completely outside of its order.

Beggars as visible bodies, masses

Though Dakarais may be reticent to talk about *talibe*, it is impossible to move through the city without encountering them. Indeed, every person that I spoke with interacted with *talibe* at least once, if not several times a day. One woman who shared my commute always had a two hundred franc (roughly forty cents US) coin to hand to a *talibe* every morning before stepping on to the *kaar rapide*. A close friend told me that she made a point of pouring out water on her doorstep when leaving the house in the morning (for the jinn) and handing a coin to a *talibe* immediately, before speaking to anyone else. But along with these intentional interactions with *talibe* which form part of the normally unspoken daily routines of *sarax*, moving around Dakar involves tens of other unplanned encounters, in which the *talibe* seem almost to be yet one more factor of the city's built environment with which one might contend. *Talibe* crowd around you at every cross roads. *Talibe* cross streets at unorthodox junctures, sending taxi drivers swerving. *Talibe* can be easily summoned to help move something heavy, requiring only a few coins to go around. *Talibe* improvise a soccer match in a patch of beside the road, kicking the empty soda bottle playing the role of 'ball' right into your freshly ironed and expensive *ser travaille*.¹ In short, they are an unavoidable and recalcitrant set of obstacles and potential allies for anyone attempting to accomplish anything in the city.

That child beggars are one of the most striking features of Dakar's streetscape is unsurprising, given a recent government census finding that the city is home to at least 30,000 *talibe*, a number decreased by only 1620 by the mass government anti-begging actions of 2016 (a number I find suspiciously specific and unmotivated, but reported by Senegalese online news service ActSen.com, June 13, 2017). However, the meaning of the spectacle of this vast number of children begging in the

¹ Floor-length wrap skirt made of pieced fabric, ideally composed entirely of European-import lace and eyelet.

streets of the city is less clear. The meaning of the city's masses of beggars shifts when viewed through international and local lenses.

Because a large number of beggars are *talibe* — child Qur'anic disciples — drawn from across the region, discussions of begging in Dakar is shaped by international discourses on child labor, trafficking, and abuse (Sangupta 2004). Of recent note, in 2010 Human Rights Watch released a one hundred and fourteen page report titled *Off the Backs of the Children, Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal*, containing thirteen full color photos of *talibe* in Dakar, depicting exploitation and abuse. Lahti (2018) argues that the report successfully “shamed” the Senegalese government, leading to the passage of the 2011 legislation once again outlawing public begging. However, the law was understood locally as an example of the government caving to international pressure, a local reading recalling again Aminata Sow Fall's fictional city.

In fact as in fiction, foreign calls to remove *talibe* from the streets of Dakar have a strangely repetitive, even ritualistic, quality to them, issued every few years as if for the first time. On the eve of the most recent national election, Human Rights Watch again charged Senegal's leaders with remedying the status of the *talibe* immediately (HRW 2019), making no mention of HRW's past commentary and calls to action. Indeed, in each mention of the *talibe* in the international press, the same pattern repeats, presented as if discovered for the very first time: a scene of incredible physical suffering, a description of the vast quantity of children in this state, and a series of claims that the government cannot, indeed, will not act. Depictions of individualized pain, located in individual bodies, shift to become evidence of the state of a nation. Reading the role of the figure of the child beggar in the international press semiotically, we see that he produces economic value for others — in monetary

donations that sustain NGOs and missionary groups — precisely in the moments that his individual suffering is transmuted into a sign of larger social form, in the moments that he, as an individual, disappears into the masses of beggars, and the beggars disappear into the crowd.

In international press and NGO accounts the physicality of the *talibe* body is visually foregrounded. We are shown an injured child, a beaten child, a child as most importantly a suffering body. We are simultaneously presented with the idea that they are many, an indifferentiable mass of human suffering. The *talibe* body and the body of *talibe* in the city fuse in these reports, forming an icon of the extent and scope of social pathology in the medium of nameless bodies. Injury and suffering focus on the idea of an individual body, even a lonely body, but at the same time, a non differentiable group.

If the outsider gaze usually reads the large number of beggars as a transparent sign of the city's — or even the nation's — pathologies, others in the press conclude that the streets are crowded with beggars because people give. In this case they remain a mass of undifferentiated bodies, only the meaning of that mass has changed. On this view their number, and the fact that they are fed and maintained, however poorly, by the generosity of strangers thus becomes a sign of the city's benevolence, not its moral turpitude (Dickenson 2006). Both of these interpretations have their merits, yet neither corresponds with the local meanings of the image of mendicant bodies in Senegal's capital.

Though they are consistently figured as the ultimate outsiders, cut off from the social orders of belonging in the city, beggars, especially child beggars, are one of the most salient aspects of the experience of passing through Dakar. More often than not, foreign press discussion of Dakar opens with a street scene in which *talibe* figure prominently. This is not the result of sensationalist foreign

reporting, the streets of Dakar are in fact, full of beggars. Indeed, *visibility* itself is central to the international understanding of Dakar's beggars. International attention — and a number of unsuccessful interventions by NGOs, humanitarian agencies, and foreign missionary groups — has fixed particularly on the city's population of *talibe*. Images of Dakar's child beggars thus not only frame Dakar in international reporting, but are mobilized to elicit feelings of pity and shame in international audiences, feelings that are monetized by any number of organizations within Senegal and internationally.

At several points during my fieldwork, affiliations with American, Canadian, and international institutions afforded me a privileged opportunity to study the creation and circulation of images of the *talibe* intended for 'first world' and international donor audiences. Early in my work, I sited some of my study of the *talibe* economy of begging in American Evangelical Missionary projects in Dakar. It was through publicity of their work that I had originally encountered the *talibe*, and this led me from undergraduate and master's level research on American Evangelical Christianities to Dakar's domestic and charitable economies, which became the major focus of my extended fieldwork. Later, still in Dakar, but beginning to write up, I was employed by various international education organizations to supervise undergraduate and masters level study abroad work by American and Canadian students in Dakar, and to give orientations and guest lectures on the begging economy specifically (which many undergraduates found both compelling and troubling, as one might expect). In these roles I had ample opportunity to observe, and at times participate in, North American practices of image creation and circulation. And while I quickly stopped photographing the *talibe* myself, and never took selfies with them, I did see patterns emerging in the behavior of others.

Images of *talibe* were at the center of most of the interactions I witnessed and participated in with Americans experiencing the city. American missionaries kept and circulated detailed photographic logs of their gifts to the *talibe* and sent copious photos of injuries and signs of illness to donors in the States. One missionary family began a project that they imagined as “like baseball cards” to create a sort of medical and social record for each child who entered mission property to eat millet porridge that the mission provided each morning, play soccer on their broad cleared field, or to seek medical attention (most often for minor injuries). I spent a good deal of time with this family, who were the most integrated Americans I met in Dakar, speaking near fluent Wolof and well known and respected in the community as “simple people” who “just came here to give *sarax*” (the ironies of this have yet to become lost on me). Their refrigerator was covered in photo cards, most “prayer cards” produced by their own and other missionary organizations as devotional objects sent to (potential) financial supporters to be used during prayer. Some cards depicted other missionary families, posed in classic American “family portrait” style, often in matching t-shirts. Others, also produced by missionary organizations based in the US featured photographs of local people meant to be the targets/beneficiaries of missionary activity. This family showed me their collection of prayer cards that the organization had created for their supporters over the years, a series of annual family portraits stretching back 15 years, and 15 photographs of “the talibe boys” in various states of injury. These prayer cards recall the photo postcards produced in the region for international circulation during the colonial period (see, for example Prochaska 1991), but in form and function they more closely resemble the photo cards used by various groups in programs encouraging donors to “adopt” or “sponsor” a ‘third world child’ (e.g. Save the Children) or endangered animal (e.g. Wild Futures, etc).

American college students on study abroad in Dakar are always certain to have themselves photographed with *talibe*. The image of “the *talibe*” — that is, the image of visible suffering in the body of a nameless, unaccompanied child — is thus central to American perceptions of the city, tied up in complex structures of affective response, ideas of “Africa” and what it means to be present there, and chains of transmission of the experience of “having been to Africa,” all widely distributed, without the subjects’ permission (or attribution of their names), through channels from personal blogs of college students, to aid agency literature and web presences, to articles in major American newspapers. Photographs by outsiders, professional journalists and tourists alike, thus present Dakar’s beggars as a sort of physical feature of the city, like the “door of no return” at Goree Island, rather than as members of its population, a framing that resonates strangely well with the opening scene of Fall’s novel, which opens by identifying beggars as “human roadblocks.”

Given that images of child beggars in Dakar serve as instruments of social pressure and tools for fundraising for international organizations, what does the sight of beggars mean to people who live alongside them in Dakar? I began my work on begging and almsgiving in Dakar by attempting to understand local meanings of both the *talibe* and the giving economy in which they serve as beggars. During my preliminary fieldwork in Dakar in 2005, I spoke with people living in the city who acknowledged and at times agreed with outsider interpretations, but often framed the situation in very different terms.

In my formal interviews with social scientists and policy makers about the meaning of beggars on the street, Dakarais suggested that the hypervisibility of beggars was indeed a symptom of pathology, on two scales. First, the growing presence of beggars was ascribed to desertification and

deepening poverty in the rural areas, as labor-intensive farming methods no longer yielded sufficient millet and peanut crops (see also Perry 2004). Second, the growing beggar population was said to reflect the deepening of longstanding political and economic problems in Senegambia and the surrounding area (Antoine et al. 1995, Zoumanigui 2016). Many suggested that instabilities in Guinea (DOL 2014), Burkina Faso, Mali, and other countries in the region had sent a flood of migrants to Dakar. This movement reflected both contemporary distribution of resources and the residues of colonial administration; Dakar is relatively rich in both commerce and infrastructure, and is the former capital of Afrique Occidentale Française (French West Africa). That is, people in Dakar told me that — if framed in terms of international relations and diplomatic ties — the correct interpretation of number of child beggars in the street in Senegal in was not that they were a sign of Senegal’s lawlessness or governmental weakness. Rather, they argued, the growing number of child beggars represented Senegal’s role as a relatively stable democracy in the region, and thus the country’s relative economic strength and stability. As such, for many local observers, child beggars figure as counts of any other refugee population might: a measure of current geopolitical conditions, and the relative stability of the host country as compared to the sending countries.

In the course of my fieldwork, the picture grew more complex, however, as I moved beyond policy pronouncements and discussion of the meaning of population numbers, and came to focus on local representations of interactions with individual *talibe* in people’s everyday lives. Alone or in small groups wandering any specific neighborhood, *talibe* represented the tensions not of regional politics, but concerns of neighborhoods and households. Here, *talibe* bodies and movements make it possible to gauge private life inaccessible to others who live outside the walls of an individual home. The

individual *talibe* serves as the only publicly accessible sign of the aspects of local households usually concealed by local practices of discretion and information control that fall under the rubric of the named value *sutura*.

Local meanings of the *talibe* share one feature with those in international press and NGO reports: the generative value of the *talibe*'s shifting position as a radically individual body, and simultaneously one of many members of a mass. The ability to both hold a strongly physical and physiological uniqueness and affect, a moment of painful marks, and to then disappear into something larger is a particular quality of the *talibe* in Dakar. This, from whatever position it is seen, is his unique semiotic affordance, the value-generating labor he provides to the city. This role is a carefully crafted one, shaped by the local history of Islamic education and ritual giving practices. The *talibe* is a human being who is also a special kind of semiotic process and sign: a means of creating moments in which objects and affects disappear, and reappear transformed.

The talibe as an economic relationship

- *Qu'est-ce qui te pousse vers les mendiants ?*
- What draws you to the beggars?

— *Ce qui me pousse vers les mendiants ! Tu te trompes, Sagar, tu ne vois jamais rien ! Tu ne discernes jamais rien ! Ne sais-tu pas que tout m'éloigne d'eux !*

- What draws me to the beggars! You're mistaken, Sagar, you never see anything! You never understand anything! Don't you know that everything distances me from them!

Aminata Sow Fall (1979), *La Grève des Battù: ou les déchets humains*.

“Everything” pushes Dakar’s inhabitants away from the city’s beggars, yet, as the novel so skillfully argues, the fate of every publicly knowable individual in Dakar is inextricably linked to the city’s masses of anonymous beggars. It is precisely because they are tied to no one that the beggars

become signs of others. The economic relationships in which beggars — and the *talibe* in particular — are embedded make them a crucial medium of social action in the city, a role that depends on the fact that the *talibe* do not appear as individuals, but as members of an unindividuated mass. Begging and almsgiving have a specific resonance in urban Senegal: instead of icons of their own material need, as they might be viewed elsewhere, beggars are understood locally as signs of the problems of others, and of the city as a whole. Beggars are taken to be signs of the city because of the role they play in local almsgiving practices. As consumers of sacrificial goods, the city's beggars come to literally embody some portion of the sacrificial alms given in the city as an aggregate. Each beggar's body is an anonymized sign of the aggregate virtue and vice of Dakar. The goal of this dissertation is to make sense of this interpretation by both describing the practices of *sarax* themselves, and situating them within local models of the person, relatedness, and proper semiotic practice.

As I have argued in the last few chapters, the meaning of persons in Dakar is perhaps best understood in relationship to a logic of patronage, support, and care, in which each person is located at the conjunction of social ties mediated by objects both shared and exchanged. The *talibe* is both implicated in existing models of relationship and patronage, and importantly set apart from them.

Dakar's begging economy is simultaneously both vast and hidden; because of the nature of the transactions involved one can only speculate about its true scale, though a conservative estimate suggests that at least US\$16 million per year passes through the hands of the city's 30,000 child beggars alone. Some readers may find it a little jarring to imagine child beggars as economic actors, and potentially as part of a much larger system of transactions, not the least in light of the February 2016 recommendation by the the United Nation Committee on the Rights of the Child which noted the

role of human trafficking in Senegal's begging economies. Indeed, the economic aspect of child begging — particularly the ability of so-called “faux marabouts” to extract substantial cash income from the money received by *talibe* — is often foregrounded in discussions of various abuses the children suffer. I set aside these very real concerns in my discussion here.

The term “*talibe*” itself identifies a relationship, and means simply “disciple.” Though here I use the term to apply specifically to mendicant child disciples, seen in the street, this is not the full sense of the word, or even its most common usage. Indeed, used without modifier, “*talibe*” refers to members of the population of child beggars, though it can be used expansively without becoming a sort of figurative or metaphorical use. When someone calls themselves *talibe cheikh*, they mean that they are dedicated to a religious leader or path. Calling oneself ‘a *talibe*’ can also be used to draw attention to one’s acceptance of spartan conditions, one’s stoicism, one’s disdain for luxury or display, all without recalling the child beggar. For example, when explaining why she refused a soda and requested tap water to drink, a female colleague of mine responded “*man talibe laa*” - I’m a *talibe*- the same response one might use when sitting down on the floor to make space for one’s elders on more comfortable chairs at an afternoon gathering.

Like the relationship between a *mere de famille* and the dependents of her household, the relationship between a *talibe* and his marabout — a disciple and his spiritual master — is always fundamentally an economic relationship. As the literature on the Mouride (also spelled Murid) trade diaspora (e.g. Babou 2002, Buggenhagen 2004, Riccio 2006), and on local market practices in Dakar (Faye 2003, Gueye 2003) have observed, ties of discipleship serve as the reason and basis of informal practices of economic activity and centralization of wealth in the Mouride city of Touba, Senegal.

Like the mother described in chapters three and four, who lays claim to the earnings and labor of those in the house, only to redistribute them to sustain all members of the household, the spiritual master receives some portion of the earnings and/or work of the disciple. In both cases the logic is ideally one of aggregation and redistribution — of lumping and splitting — in which dependents (children, disciples) bring quantities of goods or money to the *kilifa* (Wolof, meaning the authority to which one is directly responsible, transparently derived from Arabic “caliph”), which are then reapportioned to all of the members of a group. The movement of valuables in to the center, as discussed in chapter four, can be called “berndal” or *ziar*. Having moved to the center, valuables, money, food etc are not destined for consumption by the *kilifa* alone, but for complementary processes of reapportionment and redistribution (*seddo* or *seddale*) between people who are entitled to a share, that is *mbokk yi*. Within this model, mother and marabout are parallel figures, each at the center of a house and therefore the apex of collection of valuables. Both mother and marabout collect from dependents and disciples, and each each the centralized source of their material support, as well as guidance, approval, and moral authority.

Within this logic of aggregation and reapportionment, the economic activities of the begging child called *talibe* are rather paradoxical. Though he has no moral authority, he spends his days aggregating and apportioning valuables, especially uncooked rice, the commodity most emblematic of the moral authority that comes with heading a household. And, while his role in the circulation of rice parallels that of both mother and marabout, he is everything they are not. Or, better put, he is nothing that they are. He is nameless, he is small, he is ragged, he commands no circle of dependents. It is in this anonymity that he plays the central role in a shadow economy that provides a secret subsidy of rice to

the poor. In the moments of this subsidy, when the *talibe* does not accept, but gives, he is all but invisible. Indeed, like a cut-out, he is a nonperson, he disappears.

Unlike the ‘somebodies’ whose bodies are built in social ties that feed them and create carefully curated means of acting through persuasion, attraction, obligation, and reciprocity, the beggar interacts with his source of income by consuming the alms sacrificed to as a means of ridding their donors of problems. Beggars come to embody these problems by accepting and consuming the media of sacrificial alms, *sarax*. This relationship is in many ways parallel to the ways that children and mothers are related. In Dakar, a child indexes a mother — every person is understood to necessarily have a mother — and the mother often comes to be known respectfully through a teknonym: her child is her sign. Indeed, a mother’s children are understood to have a special relationship of consubstantiality with each other and with every member of their matriline: to be embodiments of the milk that fed them, and as women, potential channels of that substance. Unlike that of the mother at the center of her home, the husband at his wife’s bowl, the child at its mother’s breast, who each build their bodies of foods carefully crafted as signs of love, belonging, and maternal power, the *talibe* draws nourishment from objects made to embody troubles and pains.

This logic of relatedness and identity grounded in the transmission of substance-generating sustenance is not limited to the most obvious cases of biological kinship. As I have been told, ‘lepp ak boramam’ (everything has an owner), ‘ku nekk ak kilifeem’ (every person has a patron/master). As certain as the existence of a source of nourishment is, the connection between a source and its expression is often understood to be necessarily opaque. Thus, every display of wealth indexes a hidden patron, and the beggar indexes a source of its own sustenance. Thus the beggar is both a sign of the

most intimate problems of the city, and through his unique labor, the one from whom ‘everything distances me,’ to echo the words of Fall’s ill-fated almsgiver.

While the praise-singing *griot*’s patron will be announced, and a politician’s patron may be discovered, the beggar’s patron necessarily always remains anonymous. The anonymity of the beggar’s source of sustenance, the unknowability of the individual of which the beggar is a sign, is the result of two material aspects of the practice of *sarax* in the city. First, the ritual practice of giving sacrificial alms involves the careful preparation of anonymous objects to be transacted, in most cases unmarked mass commodities. Second, no one beggar can be a sign of an individual donor, because unlike griots and politicians, beggars have no loyalty to their donors, each beggar receives small amounts of goods from many sources. Taken together, these practices of almsgiving in the city assure that each beggar lives off items that have been not only carefully separated from their donors, but also further anonymized by virtue of processes of aggregation and dispersal: each beggar receives alms that are only a small part of the total sacrifice made by an individual giver, and each beggar receives many of these small dispersals, often from multiple sites in the city over the course of the week (cf. Kockelman 2010).

To frame the situation in a different set of analytical terms, Dakar’s beggars are the most visible, the most embodied, manifestation of this entire ideology of the person and relatedness. The beggar is a visible sign of an entire social phenomenon that constitutes the city as a network of *invisible* — and only ever partially knowable — *infrastructure*. The city, I argue, can be viewed as a structure of hidden relationships, secret social passages that move money, food, care, even sexual connection, between apparently autonomous households, animating the actions of apparently autonomous individuals. Individual people — housewives and politicians alike (though the two are often simultaneous and

mutually reinforcing roles in Senegal, see Riley 2019) — harness the power to act from the power of their positions within these networks.

Almsgiving is only one facet of this system, but it is crucial to it, because it relies upon and creates outsiders, the city's alternately powerless and all-powerful beggars. The beggar feeds upon, literally, the physical manifestation of pathologies in Dakar's social networks and worlds. *Sarax*, I argue, is the shadow and mirror of the city's function, and in the moments it becomes visible, it is also the faint smoke marking out the city's invisible networks of circulation.

From this perspective, *sarax* can be interpreted analytically as simultaneously tracing out and effacing the networks of circulation that constitute Dakar as a social form. As such, my study of *sarax* as a semiotic practice intersects and complicates recent discussions of the 'phatic function' of communication, broadly conceived (Elyachar 2010, Nozawa 2015). Indeed, the work of the beggar might be understood as a special form of Elyachar's "phatic labor," or perhaps the negation of phatic labor, a kind of labor of anti-channel, an idea that I explore further in the next chapter.

Most importantly, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is the fact that in Dakar *sarax* is understood to be extremely efficacious. Worries, bad health, complex issues of chance, bad luck, and lingering gossip are constantly being acted on through the medium of *sarax*. And *sarax* is understood to be necessary in each of these instances, and many others. It is a necessary expense.

Yet, the magic achieved by *sarax* is also known to be both real and illusory. Individual private problems are cast off, but they do not truly go away. Rather, anonymized sacrificial objects come to be an emblem of social problems and the state of the city as a whole. As a result of accepting the sacrificial objects cast out by society — and the problems they are meant to cure — the city's beggars (as an

aggregate) become a medium in which the moral and practical status of the city (as a collectivity) are diagnosed by people who live there. Thus, the elaborate creation of ignorance in the management of *sarax* transactions actually makes possible certain forms of local knowledge about the city, imagined as a unified moral agent.

No One: any body

Because of the historically derived meaning of beggars in Senegalese Islam, and Islam as it is practiced in Dakar specifically, the beggar creates a unique medium in which to view and to understand the city. Because proper Islamic almsgiving, as discussed at length in chapter two, requires that the giver make as ‘pure’ a gift as possible (Mauss 1954, Laidlaw 1995, 2000), the recipient must never be known to the giver. Indeed, the giver should encounter the beggar as nothing more than any beggar, an example of humanity and need, nothing more. The nameless example of the type “beggar,” they are no one, all body, and no face or name, a real representative of the abstract “masses.”

I suggest we think of the *talibe* as an imagination of the social subject we could call “any body” a special kind of corporeal sign of the social order. Really just *any* body that makes up the masses. As an anonymous example of the type “beggar,” the *talibe* they are, in some sense, the homologue and inverse of the “nobody” so crucial to the European idea of the public. As Manning puts it, describing the Georgian writer Bavreli, “‘nobody-in-particular,’ a nobody in an almost literal sense of being a disembodied voice of a member of the ‘public.’” (2019: 27, see also Nozawa 2011 on Japan’s “real particular nobodies). This “nobody” which Manning describes is an anonymous point of perspective from within the public of an emerging nation (see also Silverstein 2000). The *talibe* shares some

features with “nobody,” but crucially his function within the city depends on that fact that he is a member of the masses, but *is not* a possible perspective on the city.

Unlike the “nobody” of Euro-American public formation, however, the *talibe* is not a “disembodied voice” of the masses. He is a voiceless, nameless example of the physical stuff of the masses, all body, though any body, and no one at all. We might, half seriously, consider this “any body” as the homologue of the national public’s ‘anybody,’ or ‘nobody.’ any body would then be the generic individual member of a social world viewed not as “a (political) public, but through the lens of models of society in which “biopower” entails “biopolitics” (Foucault *Volonte du Savoir*, 1976, as well as the ensuing literature lucidly framed in Rabinow and Rose 2006). This mode of understanding of the subject within a political order has most often, in the African context at least, been linked to violence, to the extent that, for Mbembe, the post-colony models not a *bio-politics*, but a “necropolitics” (2003). With apologies to Mbembe, a politics not of the living, but of corpses.

Yet the utility of imagining “any body” as a semiotic process and form also emerges in questions surrounding the power to give and to sustain life. Following from political action mobilized around exclusion from participating as a donor in the national blood supply, Strong argues that “publics today are more and more tightly linked to the circulation not only of semiotic media (Warner 2002), but also to the circulation of bodily substance,” a mode of civic organization and self-conception Strong terms “vital publics.” (172). One wonders, however, if the distinction between “semiotic media” and “bodily substance” truly holds. What do we make of the ways that the material stuff of life and the individual body — indeed, the stuff of life of any body — serves simultaneously as a medium of building a

network of interdependence between physical bodies and as a medium for thinking about and understanding the nature of social relations?

At first it may seem troubling to read Dakar's mendicant children as a sort of semiotic medium in which the city might be read. Worse still, it seems, to present the child beggar's most important quality as his fungibility, his (ideologically constructed) untraceable interchangeability with any other example of his type. Yet there is no necessary difference, between the human body and its substances and other potential media of signification, as important as the distinction may at first appear.

Consider the relationship between a democratically elected representative and his constituency, a relationship in which human bodies serve as sign forms in multiple ways. In his original definition of the sign, Peirce enumerates the diverse entities, material and less so, that might serve as semiotic media, including "pictures, symptoms, words, sentences; books, libraries, signals, orders of command," and "legislative representatives." (MS 634:17—18). The last of these, "legislative representatives," at first gives pause. However, a representative in the legislature is such only as a sign of something else, that is, as a sign of their own election and thus the "will of the people." In their role as representatives within a democratic system (ideally), individual human actors serve as signs of the will of exactly those 'real particular nobodies' (Nozawa 2012) on which the idea of democracy depends. In the process of the vote taken to warrant the ability of one representative to 'stand for' a given constituency, specific individual citizens must be transformed from quality to quantity, a magic rendered by the process in which votes are cast on identical ballots, aggregated, and transformed into pure quantities. A group of bodies can be made to work in this way so as to imagine the social as a sort of measurable and homogenous liquid: a constituency, the masses. So too can bodily substances.

In some ways, the *sarax* economy is like a blood bank: both participate in an economy in which anonymous gifts from any kind of donor are collected, building an aggregate of a life-sustaining medium, food or blood. In this way, rather than figuring the relationship of any body to the nation through ideas of a political or intellectual public, a closer parallel to the status of the aggregate bodies of Dakar's beggars might be found in publics and nations modelled in the stuff of the body, in blood and tissue carefully constructed so as to belong to nobody in particular, freed of the privileges and obligations of kinship. This is precisely the history of the modern blood bank.

Much as *sarax* enters the beggars economy as radically anonymized packages of commodities (most often food) specified by kind (rice, granulated sugar, etc), in modern blood banking, individual blood donations enter the bank as anonymous items separated only by type, to be used by those in need. "Anyone," might have given this blood, and that donor can only understand the intended recipient as another "anyone."² To draw the connection to *talibe* a little more closely, blood might come from and enter into *any* (one) *body*. Similarly, in fractionated blood products — like plasma and platelets, the material stuff of individual bodies — are split and reaggregated in ways that cause individual donors to be lost in the mass of a "blood supply." These features, added to blood banks's status as public institutions, the qualities of the blood supply suggest it as a potent medium in which to play out ideas of the nation. Similarly, the city's (and nation's) population of *talibe* comes to figure the city (nation), a mass of corporeal shadows of which the individual *talibe* is but one token.

In India, as Jacob Copeman has found, the national blood supply serves as a means of not only imagining the nation via bodily substance, but as a medium in which Nehruvian logics of the nation

² See Titmuss 1971, *The Gift Relationship: from human blood to social policy*

can be dramatized: ethnic and regional boundaries are blurred by the pointed framing of blood donation as an act of moral virtue, both religious and civic, practiced by Hindu and Muslim alike. Thus the blood bank is framed as a juncture in which otherwise separate parts of society are joined and mixed, in the process of receiving blood from “anyone” and issuing blood to “anyone.” Thus Indian blood donors see themselves as

required to give as an act of high-minded citizenship, their recipient being an anonymous ‘any’ rather than a specified known individual. Voluntary donors are thus being asked to imagine their blood travelling in the way that the technology of blood component therapy operates on the blood they donate.... Anonymously donated blood mirrors the technological procedure, travelling as it does in an external or outward direction away from the donor to unnamed recipients whose identities cannot be specified or known.... the voluntary system in which donors think of themselves as giving both to an unnamed ‘any.’ (Copeman 2009:78)

Blood donation in India thereby models the state as a circulatory system which draws from all to pass through and vitalize all citizens. Blood donation in India thus allows “the generation of microcosmic integrative images at a variety of scales” (73), The national blood supply itself, then, forms an indexical icon of the nation as a Nehruvian ideal in which ethnic and regional difference vanish into a unified body created from shared civic duty. It figures the possibility of an “any body” as source of blood, and by extension, an “any body” as one example and member of the nation as a corporate, *indeed corporeal*, form.

Yet, as Copeman notes, despite the imagery and rhetoric, not just “any” citizen really *is* a source of the blood that circulates in the nation, any body is a particular form. In India, Copeman notes, though blood donation is a process framed as involving “any,” in fact, donation involves *de facto* exclusion of large portions of the population, “As the honorary director of a Delhi blood bank, a retired policeman, put it me: ‘We go out in the van to middle-class areas and shopping malls so as to get

safe, healthy donors. No slum dweller's or poor person's blood is allowed.' " (77). Though the populations excluded from donation in India may not be aware of their exclusion, other blood systems have become the site of political action through calls to the end of *de jure* exclusion of certain populations from participation in the national blood supply. As Strong (2009) writes, the exclusion of men who have (ever!) had sex with men from blood donation in the United States and Ireland (among other countries), has come to figure the exclusion of part of the population from the national body. In these senses the idea of "any" or "no-particular" body in these cases excludes those who are deemed to fall outside of a certain mark, beyond the limits of this form of relatedness. "Anybody" is not really anybody, as much as he may be a stranger. He is always a moral judgement about the limits of the acceptable human form.

Unlike the blood donor and recipient, the *talibe* is not a member of society conceived as a "public" in which one aims to participate. He is both nameless and from elsewhere. Not just 'any' he is a body that, in its lack of specificity, is separate from the donor's social world, undifferentiated from other beggars, but maximally differentiated from the donor and the world that she inhabits. In the Senegalese case the any-body-ness, that is the conjuncture of their corporeality and radical biographical non-specificity, is precisely what places them beyond the limits of relatedness. With no name, just 'someone's child,' from an unknown place, not even a speaker of Wolof, the *talibe* is excluded from Dakar's public. He is not a perspective, as he is not locatable within the map of social ties Dakar's women so carefully construct in the privacy of homes and covered bowls. He is part of the city, a body who composes the city's masses, purely physical and stripped of any identifying mark. He is a sort of

fungible person, capable of serving as a counter or token of abstract humanity, whatever might be the name for a single grain of “the masses.”

As a *talibe*, the child beggar is nearly a stranger in Simmel’s sense, in that “as a group member...he is both near and far *at the same time*, as is characteristic of relations founded only on generally human commonness.” (1950: 407) As such, the *talibe*’s role in society “involves both being outside it and confronting it.” (1950: 402). He is someone’s child, but he is nameless. Unable to be located around a bowl or within a lineage, the *talibe* is not unlike a child that no father has claimed by sacrificing a sheep at the child’s naming ceremony (ngunte) (see Ch 4). The *talibe*’s body is a sign, but it is not a sign of his attachment to any particular house within the city. In his movements through the streets the *talibe*, to again quote Simmel, “comes in contact with, at one time or another, with every individual, but is not organically connected, through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation, with any single one.” (ibid) As such, the *talibe*’s body remains a sign of a sort of generic humanity “outside” of kinship and a social order adult women build between households in ties of patronage, marriage, and descent. His body is and remains an example of the “masses,” a token of the type “someone else’s child,” a generic body, the most basic member of society. He is within the social world of the city imagined as a space and economy (perhaps best encapsulated in the wolof word “askan wi,” a sort of overall social milieu), and outside the social world of the city understood as set of ties between households through which affect, goods, and powerful persuasion flow (here we might contrast a different wolof term, “mbokk yi,” which is also translated as society, yet means literally “sharers,” those who have a place in the division of goods). He is, to reframe the conflicting words of Aminata Sow Fall’s unlucky protagonist and his marabout which open this chapter) the entity to

whom toward whom one is pushed, and at the same moment, from whom everything distances one (1979: 60-61).

The *talibe*, and the beggar more generally, in this role as “any body” and “outsider,” creates the possibility of a boundary of social ties. Not quite inhuman, he is still not a named person, living outside the order of the household. If everyone has a *kilife*, the *talibe* stands alone outside this order, drawing sustenance and *ndiggel* (direction, mandate) from both everyone and no one. In this sense, his status as *outcast*, “dechet humain” (human discard), makes it possible to *cast out* aspects of social life, to create a hem on one’s network of social ties. As such, the objects given are cast out of their social context, becoming, after great effort, simply objects, problems embedded in the ties that they had represented, vanishing into the crowd. Indeed, it is only by passing from the visible world in which they embody problems, that these objects come to do their real work as solutions, as *means*.

Chapter Six

Rice: granularity, anonymity, secret subsidy

If you disclose your charitable expenditures, they are good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is better for you, and He will remove from you some of your misdeeds [thereby]. And Allah, with what you do, is [fully] Acquainted.

— Quran Surah Al-Baqarah 2:271 (Sahih International English interpretation)

De-individualization is the sociological character which, in the individual member, corresponds to this centralistic subordination. Where the immediate concern of the society is not the interests of its elements; where the society rather transcends itself (as it were) by using its members as means for purposes and actions extraneous to them the secret society shows, once more, a heightened measure of leveling of the individuality, of "de-selfing" [Entselbstung], Some measure of this is characteristic of everything social, generally.

— Simmel, Features of the Secret Society, 378

Intro: disappearing and reappearing rice

Standing at the intersection in front of the Fann post office during morning rush hour, I watch traffic swell with each red light, and like a tide, beggars sweep into the street from the sidewalks, surrounding each car and bus, to retrieve the tied off opaque plastic bags that emerge from windows when the lights turn red. The *talibe* are the most numerous and the quickest, sweeping in groups around the vehicles, their empty tomato paste cans cum begging bowls outstretched to receive coins and closed off bags. As the light changes, they run back to the sidewalk, darting around. When the light turns red again, the same boys return, their begging bowls once again empty. What they have received seemingly vanished completely.

As I discussed in the last chapter, from the perspective of the donor, alms given to beggars seem to 'disappear' once they are given; from this perspective, giving to beggars allows objects given as alms, and therefore the personal troubles that are understood to be placed into them, to be 'put out.' Alms

lets people make something go, quite literally, “away.” This is a certain kind of magic, or at least a sleight of hand. But there is more to this disappearance, as the bowls of beggars are empty when they descend on each red light. The same *talibe* return to beg, as shabby and skinny as before, never having grown fat off the uncooked rice that fills and refills their seemingly bottomless beggars’ bowls. The rice does not just go “away” from the almsgiver, it seems to vanish into thin air. Rather than bemoan the fact that individual daily giving is never enough to stop the begging, people in Dakar keep doing *sarax*, putting out their troubles by putting out generic commodity goods to strangers every morning.

Though rice disappears from the *talibe*’s bowls at the city’s busy crossroads in the morning, rice appears in the afternoon in the cooking pots of those who cannot afford it. Through a series of transactions completely opaque to all but the *talibe* themselves, rice given as alms is sold at a deep discount to the poorest families in the city. This series of transactions moves from informal giving from commuters at busy intersections, through the scales of corner shops, and through the door to door collection of leftover food, to produce a relatively stable system in which sacrifice is transformed into subsidy.

In this chapter, I present an ethnographic account of the disappearance and reappearance of a uniform commodity: uncooked Thai Hom Mali broken rice, the staple carbohydrate of Dakar’s cuisine.¹ To do so, I trace the movement of this substance through several regimes in which it acquires and loses meaning in practices of aggregation and measurement, lumping and splitting. Chapter five focuses on the role of the *talibe* as ‘any body’ plays in *sarax*’s ability to move objects and affects *out of*

¹ Imported rice is the staple food in coastal and urban Senegal, in the paella-like national dish *thieboudienne*, which I discuss in some detail in earlier chapters. It is also served as the base for a variety of sauces. In Dakar, the main meal of the day, served at midday, is nearly always rice based. In the interior, other starches predominate, particularly the indigenous and locally grown millet *dugub*, often in the form of a couscous made from its flour, *ceere*.

social networks, arguing that the boys' status as generic bodies without social connection makes them ideal recipients of what is essentially a Maussian sacrifice. In this chapter I argue that the particular qualities of the medium of exchange in practices of *sarax* — that is, the objects that can be given as alms in this context — serve not only to make sacrificial giving possible, but to turn it into a surprising institution of social welfare. *Sarax* works as more than just a symbolic means of purification from misfortune, it creates the everyday experience of miracles. As a medium, uncooked rice (and to a lesser but still considerable extent, other media transacted in *sarax*) affords a series of transformations of states of knowledge about itself as an object. As parts of the history of the substance's movement are occluded, value (both economic and spiritual) is produced. The circuits emergent in rice as *sarax* constitute, literally, an "occult economy," in which "magical means serve material ends." (pace Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Yet here abstraction is not a site of 'violence,' but in fact creates the very possibility of a nearly pure generosity in the form of a subsidy without the possibility of stigma.

Much as I argued of the transaction of veiled bowls in chapter four, the function of the rice economy of subsidy via *sarax* in Dakar depends upon the creation of specific aporia of information about the medium of transaction. In both cases, the physical properties of the medium — fabric wrapped bowls of prepared food, plastic sacks of uncooked rice — afford particular configurations of knowledge and ignorance about the situation to participants in different positions in relation to the goods over the course of their movement. In the case of *sarax*, I argue, the production of these (non)knowledge states depends on the fact that in Dakar both *talibe* and the rice they are given lend themselves to 'deindividualization' in Simmel's sense. Or, to use a term that is both more current and more suggestive, *sarax* works in Dakar because both rice and *talibe* are fungible. To account for the function of *sarax*, and account in part for the longevity and productivity of the city's system of

almsgiving and begging, requires a careful accounting of fungibility as an epistemological and semiotic problem.

In their role as *sarax*, alms are objects that symbolically or ritually remove qualities or states of being from the interiors of persons, households and intimate social networks, by literally removing objects from the circuits of transaction and consumption that materially constitute individual people (as argued in chapter two, households (as argued in chapter three), and intimate ties (as argued in chapter four). *Sarax* moves ‘out’ because it passes — or is pushed! — outside the protective barriers of *sutura* that mark the edges of normal channels of exchange between people and households. To truly disappear, thereby taking the problems they hold with them, objects must be permanently moved outside the circuits of social life, beyond possible return. As I argued in chapter five, this is made possible by the carefully crafted status of Dakar’s beggars as nameless persons, especially the *talibe*. It is only as ‘any body,’ that is, anonymous members of the public to which one is “linked by nothing” (to repeat the words of the angry almsgiving protagonist in Fall’s *The beggars’ strike*), that the beggar can receive and thus dispose of alms and everything they contain.

The disappearance of objects given as *sarax* in Dakar depends on more than the anonymity of their recipients. Some kinds of objects are better at disappearing than others. As I discussed in chapter one, when a person in Dakar decides to give *sarax*, they are given a prescription for a specific set of objects to give, always chosen from a restricted set of kinds of objects: banknotes, gold, fabric (solid white or solid red, always specified), kola nuts (again, white or red), chickens, sugar, rice. With the exception of chickens, these objects all share two (related) key features: they are mass produced commodities, and they have served in the region, at one time or another, as money objects. The special

qualities of these objects are crucial to a second function of *sarax* in Dakar, which is to cause the basic necessities of life (or sometimes, wealth!) to appear miraculously in the city, as if from nowhere at all.

What rice affords: commodity fungibility as material process

Because *sarax* is a practice that works by creating asocial exchanges, gifts from an anonymous giver to ‘anybody,’ it is perhaps unsurprising that these exchanges are accomplished through the medium of mass produced bulk commodities and through currency objects. Perhaps commodities are necessary to the magic of *sarax* because of the magic of commodities themselves. The transubstantiation of *sarax* might depend on, as Marx so beautifully put it the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” of the commodity form. After all, the commodity appears as an abstraction of social relations, delinking the product from the systems of divided labor in which it is produced while simultaneously uniting that social history in its very form. Similarly, money itself is an abstraction from social relations, building on the distance and objectification embodied by the commodity form. All of these things may in fact be true and important to the function of commodity objects as the medium of *sarax*. However, far more interesting, as I argue here, are the concrete and sensible properties of bulk commodities as objects in global distribution chains. In Dakar, the transactions of rice that unite and combine sacrificial grain in the city’s alms and subsidy economy demonstrate that the magic of bulk commodities might lie not in the labor that produced them, but in their fungibility, itself the product of not agricultural labor, but of the epistemological labor which renders them not only commodities in Marx’s sense, but radically deindividualized bulk goods, commodities in the sense intended by, for example, the Chicago Board of Trade. To understand how *sarax* works to produce not only sacrifice but also subsidy, one must consider uncooked rice as a carefully constructed and epistemologically

crafted medium. To do so, it is crucial to unpack the qualities of the fungible bulk commodity as the product of historically specific semiotic labor.

The bulk commodity is a strange object, and has taken center stage relatively rarely in ethnographic accounts. Characterizing the work included in his landmark 1986 edited volume *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai notes that though most chapters focus on commodities, “the list of commodities not discussed would be quite long, and there is a tilt toward specialized or luxury goods rather than “primary” or “bulk” commodities.” (6). It is rather surprising that bulk commodities had not become central foci of anthropological inquiry after the 1985 publication of Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power*, which, by tracking the development of sugar consumption and supply chains, reframed histories of the Atlantic world. Now, as in the intervening decades, “‘primary’ or ‘bulk’” commodities remain under discussed. Notable exceptions are Guyer’s (1996) and Appel’s (2012, 2018) separate discussions of raw and processed petroleum in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea respectively, Blanchette’s (2015) fascinating discussion of pork production and the management of human sociality as a means of restricting the flows of potential pollutants to the overall environment of pork production, and Besky’s (2016, 2017) discussion of tea plantations in India. Even in these cases, however, the fungibility of the bulk commodity rarely comes into focus in the ways it does in contemporary anthropological discussions of money, for example. (Cattelino 2009, Goldfinger 2002, Hart 2015, among others.)

Anthropological investigation of fungibility thus requires a tour through the anthropology of money. Fungibility and abstraction are often collapsed analytically in discussions of money. It is useful, however, to separate the two concepts. Though bulk commodities (like grain) behave like money in many ways, there are some crucial differences between the two. Thinking through these differences can

help to distinguish fungibility from abstraction as processes. Most bulk commodities serve their primary purpose, and therefore ‘have use value’ in Marx’s sense, whether fungible or not. To be cooked and eaten, rice does not need to be standardized and interchangeable. It is actually difficult to imagine what role fungibility would play in the preparation of a bowl of rice.² In bulk commodities, fungibility arises in relationship to the exigencies of distribution and circulation, and particularly in the financialization of global trade in that commodity. At points in the history of the global trade of wheat, it has been fungible. At others, it has not been so. Money, on the other hand, cannot work as money if it is not fungible. The minute one dollar bill is not interchangeable for another dollar bill, it stops working as money and becomes something else. A second important difference between the two is that, in their use, bulk commodities are often consumed or radically transformed into another category of object: rice is eaten, oil is refined and/or burnt, steel is cast.

Cattelino (2009) notes, following most of social theory, that “fungibility is a function of money’s abstraction.” To understand money, and to thereby better understand both fungibility and abstraction, in Dakar and Atlantic Africa more broadly, it may be useful to decompose and uncouple the relationship between fungibility and abstraction. As Guyer has demonstrated, money and monetary transaction function differently in Atlantic Africa than they do in the centers of global monetary regimes. These differences are often quite instructive. Monetary exchanges in the region she argues, “were never continuously governed by any of the principles that were institutionally established in capitalist Europe and treated as systemic and invariant in economic theory.” (2004, 16) Indeed, her discussion of monetary transaction in Atlantic Africa shows that across the region forms of money

² Though, it is possible that the standardization and fungibility of rice may play some role in measurement of rice in correct ratio to water for preparation.

transaction and discussions about those transactions often play on, pick apart, and even “dramatize” factors of money’s qualities that appear to be inseparable aspects of money in the centers of finance and financial regulation (e.g. the US economy). As Guyer argues, both the practices and the semiotic ideologies that compose monetary exchange in Atlantic Africa and in Europe differ enough that while the same money objects may move through both contexts, “in thought and practice, there was one theory of money and commodity exchange in the metropole and another at the interface.” (2004, 13)

As examination of monetary exchange in Atlantic Africa unravels qualities of money and of commodities that are not ‘natural’, but held together in ideologies and pragmatics of money practice reflected in and reinforced by these theories. Perhaps the relationship between abstraction, fungibility, and the mystical qualities of the commodity form is one of these strands in which each is, in fact, a separate thread.

To think about rice in Dakar, and indeed other bulk commodities that are or have been used as forms of payment in West Africa, it is therefore useful to consider the possibility that abstraction is just one of fungibility’s many functions. The standard concept of money conflates two levels of semiotic practice. The first of these levels is that on which money serves, as Marx says in *Capital*, to “supply commodities with the material for the expression of their values.” In this regard, money represents some ‘value’ therefore shared by and equivalent in the objects for which it can be exchanged. The, value, price, or “money-form” of commodities is as Marx notes, “a form quite distinct from their palpable bodily form; it is, therefore, a purely ideal or mental form.” From another perspective, the assessment of value is a form of abstraction across different objects much like measurement, which, as Kula writes, “demands that we abstract from a great many qualitatively different objects a single property common to them all, such as length or weight, and compare them with one another in that

respect.” (1986, 43). Yet the assessment of “value” differs from the assessment of weight etc determined in measurement. While weight is a sensible quality of objects themselves, value is not. From this perspective, in processes in which money is related to objects as a measure of value or a means of payment, it represents an abstract shared quality attributed to sensibly qualitatively different objects.

The second level of abstraction is specific to money’s role as a means of account and store of wealth. In processes of accounting and storing wealth money does not relate to other objects, it is manipulated as individual (mutually interchangeable and equivalent) currency objects or other tokens of money (marks in a ledger, etc) representing value. These material signs of value are (semiotically) regimented so as to be commensurate, mutually interchangeable, and for all purposes relevant to their manipulation, interchangeable.³ To function in this way, the currency objects which serve as they tokens must be themselves regimented in some way so that they are understood to be interchangeable and equivalent. This involves the semiotic work of hiding or disattending to the fact that they are, in fact, different objects as are any two tokens of the same type, two instances of the ‘same word’ for example. This requires the work of semiotic ideologies, which, like all of the most forceful aspects of semiotic ideology, is likely regimented by a metapragmatic discourse (or set of practices) that sits outside the awareness of practitioners (Silverstein 1981).

Money tokens are not the only objects that are made fungible. Indeed, outside the world of social theory, and in the world of finance, “commodities” are a specific subset of products that are manufactured for the purpose of being exchanged. In the ‘commodities markets’ at the Chicago Board

³That the tokens which represent monetary value are themselves fungible — indistinguishable from each other — might serve to reinforce the abstraction of value represented by the use of money to mediate commodity exchange. Some bulk commodities have served as money objects while also maintaining a separate use value. It is not, however, the same.

of Trade, for example, “commodities” are always, by definition, fungible. This is a much different concept than Marx’s, in which a bespoke suit, for example, is a commodity. To disambiguate I will refer to the kinds of commodities exchanged at the Chicago Board of Trade, among other places, as “bulk commodities.”

Bulk commodities have a set of unique properties as media of circulation, some, but not all of which money shares. The history of how bulk commodities became fungible in the first place provides an important means of thinking about the possibilities and consequences of fungibility without the conceptual abstraction attributed to the money form. These qualities of grain, specifically were built, in large part, in the late 19th century, as a result of the development of an interrelated set of technologies, practices, and institutions. As Friedberg (2017) argues, the development of fungibility in grain depended on technology, but its most important creation was epistemological. By making grain fungible, these processes created the ability to trade and distribute grain while transmitting little, if any, information about the supply chain through which the grain has passed, that is, as a largely untraceable substance.⁴ Made fungible, grain can do many kinds of work that appear abstract, while maintaining the concrete qualities of grain: able to be aggregated, measured out, split apart, and later, consumed.

The affordances of rice as uniform, untraceable, physical stuff make Dakar’s rice subsidy possible. It is also these affordances of rice as stuff that make it a medium in which to think other

⁴ The possibilities and stakes of the “epistemological rather than material crafting” (Pfeil 2012) of grain as a global commodity are ongoing and debated. As Friedberg writes, “the history of knowledge and non-knowledge in commodity trading - that is, the history of what needs to be known by whom, what should be kept secret or must be disclosed and at what cost - is an ongoing one.” (2017, 514) Among the many aspects of the current debate are the benefits of different modes of balancing flexibility in the market with the imperative that products be “fully traceable...in compliance with the food safety and social responsibility standards set by industry organizations” (508), for the management of issues related to e.g. food contamination.

entities, to frame, for example, knowledge about the city. To see how this works it is crucial to unpack fungibility as a quality built not of abstraction, per se, but in concrete material semiotic processes that create anonymity in objects, thus (epistemologically) reframing e.g. individual grains as identical members of a seamless, untraceable mass. Given these qualities, they “cease to act like solid objects and begin to behave more like liquids, golden streams” now given the ability to flow (Cronon 1991, 113).

The treatment of grain as a mass, to be sold in measured units, predates its anonymity and present fungibility. Measurement, as I noted above, is one of the processes of abstraction that lies behind the abstractions made possible by the money form. The historical transformation from grain as the produce of a specific plot of land into “grainy liquid” (in Europe at least) involved several stages of regimes of measurement. As Kula explains, in Poland grain was measured first by fairly idiosyncratic volumes, then by more standardized volumes, and finally, as it is today, by weight. (1986, 43-70) Measurement by volume is tricky, not only do containers warp and differ ever so slightly from one place to another, but for solids there is the question of “heaping” or “striking” (making level) the measure. Further the height from which grain is poured into the measure substantially affects the density at which the grain comes to rest, and therefore the space that the same sack of grain will take up. Because of these procedural problems, a bushel of grain sold in one place might not be the same size as a bushel of grain sold in another place. Problems ensue in the marketplace because the measures are not commensurate. The shift to weight as the means of measurement remedied many of these problems in Poland, as I will assume for the sake of simplicity it did across Europe, but did not in itself render grain fungible. That happened in the grain elevators of Chicago in the 19th century.

The fungibility of grain began, it seems, as a solution to a series of problems of circulation and transportation. It continues, even against current trends valorizing the specificity, locality, and

traceability of food products, because of what fungible grain can do in a global marketplace. As Cronon (1991) tells it, grain became fungible as a consequence of the logistical challenges of moving the immense amounts of grain moving into Chicago from the newly settled and farmed prairies. (109) The pressures of moving a vast quantity of grain combined with the possible speed of shipping by railroad challenged the previous system of grain marketing, in which grain was measured into sacks, and sold to shippers who assumed the risks of transportation by boat. Until the grain trade was transformed in Chicago in the mid 19th century, though grain was sold by standard measure, it was not a truly fungible commodity. Individual sacks of grain were clearly labeled with the name of their owner, and transportation was arranged so as “not to break up individual shipments or mix them with others.” (109). Each sack was clearly labeled with its origin and the name of its owner.⁵

However, the exigencies of railroad transportation led to the introduction of a mediating figure, the grain elevator, and with that a transformation of grain as an object of knowledge, requiring any given quantity of grain to shed the marks that had given it what had been “implicitly a geographic as well as legal identity” and had “attached grain to specific places and people.” (Friedberg 2017, 505) The steam powered grain elevator, invented in Buffalo NY in 1842, became the defining technology of a new system of grain distribution that would come to establish the standards of knowledge creation and maintenance in a soon-to-be global market system. In the mid 19th century, Chicago — and within it, its grain elevators — became the centers of a new global infrastructure, that is, a built

⁵ Interestingly, as Friedberg (2017) points out, this is exactly the kind of information that contemporary food consumers are beginning to demand. However, the removal of this information is built in to the logistics of modern grain distribution. It is also built into the structure of multinational agricultural corporations. Recent calls for transparency and recoverability of information about the food supply chain, for food safety reasons among others, have led to discussion of the possible implementation of blockchain technologies in agriculture (Tse, Bermeo-Almeida et al. 2018 for a thorough review of the state of the field).

assemblage which serves to “facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin 2013) Grain elevators now purchased the grain by weight, identified not by the name of the owner, but by grades and standards established by the Chicago Board of Trade. The introduction of the grading system “redefined what needed to be known about grain marketed in Chicago.” (Friedberg 2017, 505)

Rather than identifying grain legally, the new system created a situation in which the buyer of a quantity of grain “required information only about how it had been classified, not whose farm it had come from.” (ibid) With the facilitation of the flow of grain came a transformation of the knowledge states surrounding the grain itself. As Friedberg deftly argues, the core step in the creation of modern ‘bulk’ commodities was the production of “ignorance intrinsic to the modern understanding of the commodity crop.” (500) What changed was not how grain was valued, per se, but how it was *evaluated*. Within the same cultural context, a transformation of the infrastructure of circulation induced new regimes of evaluation. Quality had been turned into a matter not of individual farms or even regions, but into a flattened participation in a “grade.” Other information stripped away, grain became a substance whose most important quality was its quantity.⁶ Grain had become, by the magic of these specific processes “food from nowhere” (Campbell 2009; McMichael 2002). In becoming not only a commodity, but a ‘bulk commodity,’ grain became mystified while remaining irreducibly concrete. Made fungible — one unit interchangeable for another within the grade — grains were

⁶ As both Gregory (1996) and Guyer (2004) have convincingly argued, the play between *quantity* and *quality* is particularly accented in commodity exchange in Atlantic Africa, at least in the 19th century. The same could be said, I think, of the social context surrounding the transformation of grain in Chicago into untraceable commodity: “Quantity was *a form* of quality,” which is to say “number and kind were both scales, among others; none was anchored in a foundational invariant; all were at play” (Guyer 2004)

mixed and interchanged. Lumped, stirred, dispersed, the premise of fungibility created a situation of very practical untraceability. This relative untraceability is one of the unique affordances of bulk commodities on the global market, and of grain specifically, that make it in many ways more liquid than money as it exists in modern currency.⁷

Senegal's rice markets, and the role of rice in alms payments

Rice comes to Senegal through the global grain market that was created, in part, in the grain elevators of Chicago. However, the story of grading and transportation Cronon tells is perhaps better used as a model to think about the status of rice in Dakar than as an historical account of the precursors of the city's rice economy. Rice in Senegal shares many of the qualities of both fungibility and near-currency status that wheat and corn came to have in the United States after the introduction of the grain elevator and receipt system Cronon describes. This is not surprising, because Senegal imports rice from Vietnam (and at times Pakistan), participating in the global market.⁸ Owing to these features, derived from and embedding global supply chains, rice in Senegal (and granulated sugar, to a lesser extent) shares many of the qualities of other global 'bulk' commodities, specifically its resistance to being 'traced.'

The qualities of rice as a medium of exchange and store of value in Senegal are further shaped by national regulation of wholesale and retail sale of rice, and by the routes in space and time that rice typically takes as it moves from a 25 kilo sack to a cookpot. From independence to the early 1990s, the

⁷ The relative difficulty of embargoing grain, as witnessed in the failed US grain embargos on the USSR in 1980, demonstrate the profound liquidity and fungibility of grain (Ghoshal 1983). These qualities of grain as mediated by the global market afford it an anonymity no longer available to monetary transactions (with the exception of informal financial systems like hawala, see McCusker 2005)

⁸ There have been several recent pushes to produce rice in Senegal for the domestic market. None has succeeded in gaining significant market share.

Senegalese government held a monopoly on the legal import and national distribution of rice, though Senghor granted limited quotas for the importation of rice to a small number of businessmen.

(Thioubo, Diop, and Boone 1998, 67) The price of rice was set by the Senegalese government via the Caisse de Péréquation et de Stabilisation des Prix (CPSP), and the rice was taxed. However, as one might suspect, rice entered the country illegally, and mixed with legally imported rice throughout this period. After structural adjustment's overnight 50% devaluation of the CFA franc against the French franc⁹ in January 1994, the CPSP was dismantled and the pricing of rice, flour, and wheat liberalized. (ibid. 72) However, the price of the standard grade of rice remained consistent across wholesale and retail markets during the time of my fieldwork (2006-2009), through a network of 'reference stores,' that is, stores selling the standard commodity products at the price set by the government.¹⁰ In Senegal rice maintains the qualities of a fungible commodity even in the retail markets, in which a kilo of rice sold loose has a fixed value in relationship to the FCFA.

Households in Dakar generally come by their rice in one of two main ways, and the distinction between these two is a mark of the household's relationship to the city's formal economy. Some buy a 25 kilo sack of rice (or a half sack) at the beginning of every month from a vendor in one of the city's large open air markets. Some buy rice *en detaille* from the corner store (*butik*) by weight, most purchasing only the amount they plan to cook for that meal immediately before cooking it. Though

⁹ To which the value of the FCFA was fixed. It is now fixed to the Euro.

¹⁰ In the wake of the price shocks the country experienced during the 2008 financial crisis, the government of Senegal has developed a national food self sufficiency program. A key aspect of this plan was the goal of complete self-sufficiency in rice production by 2015. This goal has not been met, as locally produced rice is quite different in quality than the preferred Vietnamese rice limiting demand for local rice, and also because local production and distribution chains for rice were developed to move imported rice. (See Demont and Rizzotto 2012 for discussion of the goals and the state of the market and distribution chains in Senegal in 2008-2012)

the price is still standard, rice costs more per kilo when purchased a kilo at a time than it does when purchased in bulk. However, buying in detail presents a series of advantages. Most obviously, buying a sack of rice requires a substantial outlay of money at one time: in 2007 a sack of standard grade rice cost 16,000 fcfa, over \$30 US. This is a manageable sum for those on a government salary. However, in the same period, female domestic workers were paid 20,000 to 35,000 FCFA (roughly US \$40-\$70) a month. In other parts of the informal economy, people (mostly men) work as day laborers at 1500 to 2000 FCFA (US \$3-4) a day, or doing piecework (e.g. laundresses, who could make 5000-10000 FCFA for a day handwashing and coal-iron pressing clothing).

Less obvious to an outsider is the fact that those who buy rice by the sack stand to lose a portion of that rice to anyone who knows that they have it, and feels they have a claim on that person's resources. Family members and neighbors are not shy about coming to visit and asking for rice on their way out, a scene depicted to great comic effect in Sembene's *Mandabi*. Further, it is common practice for husbands to leave a sum for *dipense bi*, that is 'the day's expenses', most usually the preparation of the afternoon and evening meals. On the one hand, if the husband purchases the sack of rice, he may use this as a reason to give less cash to his wife. On the other hand, if she purchases the sack out of her own earnings, the amount of cash he contributes will similarly decrease. Perhaps less dramatic, buying *en detaille* is a hedge against the constant danger of loss of rice (and other uncooked food) to spoilage, pests, and the seasonal threats of water damage from sudden flooding.

Another, even less obvious set of advantages of buying rice *en detaille* arise from the institution in which *en detaille* purchases are made: the *butik*. Rice, like other goods at the *butik*, can be purchased with cash or, for ongoing customers, on *bind* (writing). *Butiks* sell on *bind* by keeping a *cabier* behind the counter with a page for each customer who is allowed to purchase on credit, usually by household

rather than individual. When a customer who has a page in the notebook makes a purchase, they offer cash or tell the person working at the counter to write it down. The shopkeeper then adds the amount to the running tally in the book.¹¹ It is common for people to ‘write’ even small purchases, especially when the shop is low on change. It is also common for people to ask the shopkeeper to ‘write’ small sums of money. They ‘write’ for example, 150 FCFA and give the coin to a customer for them to pay their fare for their commute on a shared *kaar rapid*.

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Customers who can purchase by *bind* may pay the total due on the first of the month, or make payments when the shopkeeper decides they have reached the limit for credit. Alternately, some customers use the *bind* system and the *butik* itself as a sort of bank, paying money to the *butik* as soon as they receive it and then drawing against that deposit, either in goods or in cash.

¹¹ The books are kept in Arabic script, in what I assume is shorthand derived from the form of Arabic spoken by the shopkeepers, who are almost exclusively (ethnically) Mauritanian.

The *butik* is not only useful as a source of credit, inserting liquidity into a very tight retail economy, the *butik* is also useful because it provides cover for information about individual and household finances, and material protection for individual assets. ‘Writing’ purchases is widespread, and one’s ledger tally is information shared only between the head of household and the owner of the *butik*. Customers who can purchase by *bind* may pay the total due on the first of the month, or make payments when the shopkeeper decides they have reached the limit for credit. Alternatively, some customers use the *bind* system and the *butik* itself as a sort of bank, paying money to the *butik* as soon as they receive it and then drawing against that deposit, either in goods or in cash. By keeping their money in the *butik*, to be drawn against, customers can avoid the dangers of carrying money on their persons. Keeping a month’s salary worth of cash on one’s person (or worse, in the house), presents risks not unlike those of buying rice by the sack. If people find out that you have it, they may come to you for help meeting their own needs, they may refuse to help you with your needs if you ask, they might simply take some of it for themselves, or it might be lost.

But there are those who do not purchase sacks of rice by the month from the store, or kilos of rice by the day from the corner shop. These people depend on asking for rice from those who have sacks, playing on their ties to them, or they gather small amounts of money in much the same way, and use that money to purchase rice at a steep (fixed) discount from the *talibe*. It is not easy to tell who comes by their rice without purchasing it from a regular vendor. This is due in part to the fact that rice is standardized, but also to the fact that (for the reasons listed above, among others) people who have more than a day’s supply of rice in their home do not advertise that fact among people who live in their own homes, let alone even the most intimate of visitors. Though it is not possible to know the exact

numbers, my anecdotal evidence suggests that perhaps a quarter of the number of people who regularly buy their rice *en detaille* purchase their rice from *talibe*.

Every day, then, a substantial portion of the city eats their afternoon meal from a bowl of rice that did not begin its day in a sack in the kitchen or *butik*. Rather, the rice that fills the bowl at the center of the meal began as strangers to each other, grouped together from grains collected at one crossroads or another in the city (and therefore, from donors coming in to work from anywhere in the city or suburbs). Each of these bowls of rice came together from a mixture of individual gifts of *sarax*.

The paths the individual and sporadic gifts of rice take once donated are nearly imperceptible in the movements of goods in Dakar's busy streets. Just as the moment of giving alms is usually carefully effaced, as I discussed in Chapter One, the paths in which alms circulate once given are also skillfully scrubbed. Here too, then, the nature of *sarax* as social process creates a series of challenges for ethnographic study and description. Just as I spent a long time trying, and failing, to see the moment when bowls of *laax* were consumed by the *talibe* at Immeuble Kebe, I tried for years to connect the moments in which I saw *talibe* collecting alms on the street to stories I was told about the *talibes'* secret wealth and caches of money. Two experiences gave me a fleeting glance at the outlines of this system of circulation: first, idly watching *talibe* collecting rice as I waited for clothes to be finished at the tailor's on Korite (Eid al Fitr); second, a passing reference to the fact that a peripheral member of a colleague's kin group buys rice from the *talibe*. In this chapter I will sketch out this economy, then, with research stemming from these two vantage points. I begin here where rice enters this economy in great quantity, Korite.

Korite: The Visible City of Rice

One edge — the very smallest part — of Dakar’s shadow rice economy becomes visible for a moment on one day each year, Korite (Eid al Fitr) when nearly everyone gives alms to beggars at the same time, in payment of zakat, and on which talibe collect their single largest influx of rice. Otherwise, rice moves into the alms economy every day in countless nearly invisible transactions all over the city as small amounts untraceably, individual scoops or half-kilos closed up in plastic bags and given quickly to talibe. On Korite, however, If you stand in just the right place, just as men arrive to pray the holiday prayer, you can see a shadow city in the movement of rice.

I was only able to see this crucial moment in the rice economy because of my status in Dakar as something of a no-one. On a day on which everyone is occupied, extremely busy with meeting religious and social obligations, I had no assigned tasks and was of little use to anybody. Men and boys made elaborate preparations for the group prayer that marks the day. Women rose early to prepare an elaborate feast which marks the end of Ramadan. Because I was not much help in the kitchen, and couldn’t even be trusted to cut onions properly, I was sent to pick up the last few items of holiday clothing from the tailor.

Indeed, Korite is a busy day for adult women, who spend the morning not only preparing food and tracking down last pieces of holiday outfits, but also coordinating the allocation of *zakat al-fitr*¹² that will then be given to a beggar.¹³ In some other Islamic countries this payment (roughly 2-3

¹² This annual act of charity, though distinct from the calculated *zakat al-mar*, is still still *fardh* one of the five pillars of Islam. It is distinguished in theological texts from other, spontaneous gifts of alms, termed *sadaka* in Arabic.

¹³ Zakat al-fitr is not the same as *zakat al-mar*, the main charitable tax and second pillar of Islam. Rather, it is a smaller, flat payment, of a fixed amount of grain (roughly 2-3 kg, as determined by local legal tradition), made at the end of Ramadan. It is included in the obligations of observing Ramadan,

kilograms of the local staple carbohydrate or the equivalent in cash, for each member of the household) is paid by the head of household to a state agency, which then distributes it.¹⁴ Though most Dakarais I spoke with made their payments in rice, it is also possible to make the payment in cash, an amount announced by religious leaders, corresponding to the cash price of two kilos of rice. In Dakar, these payments are organized by the female heads of household (see chapter four), and generally taken by the men and boys as they go out to pray the holiday prayer and given to apparently disorganized street beggars.¹⁵ This differs from practice in many other majority Muslim countries, in which payment of *zakat* usually involves clear participation in a structured institution of support for the poor. In Senegal, rather than running through networks of social support formalized in, say NGOs, the charitable tax flows through the channels built by the city's child beggars who draw their year-round subsistence by collecting charitable money and rice and in diverting flows of alms to feed the city's poorest households. In this sense, the *talibe* discussed in chapter five are not only a sort of collective mass of

and if the payment is not made, the fast is considered incomplete. (see Hasan 2010 for a straightforward general discussion of *zakat* in scripture, hadith, and practice)

¹⁴ In other Islamic countries, for example Malaysia, religiously mandated charitable giving centers on the payment of *zakat al-mar*, a cash payment made to the government or, in some cases, NGOs. (Nadzri et al 2012) As described in contemporary Islamic economics and finance, the amount to be given as *zakat* is calculated as a percentage of annual income or profits considered as surplus. The correct means of application of Islamic law in the calculation of *zakat* owed is the subject of ongoing international debate in the fields of Islamic finance, economics, and jurisprudence. For an overview of the state of discussion about these questions, see Mahmood and Shah Haneef 2008. For a discussion of the stakes of Islamic finance for an anthropology of money see Maurer 2005.

¹⁵ Although there have been attempts by some younger religious scholars to 'modernize' the *zakat*, creating a state institution to accept payments in cash to be used to provide housing, healthcare, and daily meals for the city's Quranic schools. (Abdoul Aziz Kebe, personal communication, 5 July 2005) Members of the Niassene Kaolack branch of Tijanniya, known for their socially progressive reformist readings of Islamic law, have made similar suggestions in speeches to their community of disciples. (Hawa Ba, personal communication 10 August 2006).

anonymous bodies, but also an institution and infrastructure by which the city dispenses food to the needy.

While some choose to make their *zakat* payment in cash, many of the people I knew most closely in Dakar chose to make it in rice: some purchasing their allocated measure of rice into a bag at the butik, or scooping it from sacks of rice at home. The rice is tied into a bag, and placed in the hand of the senior man of the house as he leaves for the holiday prayer with the other men and boys, each dressed in a brand new ensemble of ‘yeere wolof’ traditional clothes, each with a plastic mat rolled up under his arm, to be spread on the ground outside the mosque for prayer, as no local mosque is large enough to host the crowds that come to pray on Korite. The rice will have seemingly disappeared from his possession before he arrives to pray.

The man’s movements to the mosque to pray invoke two starkly contrasting orientations to the ritual he enacts: both display and concealed action. The man acts with the goal of being seen: wearing beautiful clothing, enacting traditional obligation. At the same time, he acts with the goal of not being seen: giving *zakat* without breaking stride, leaving the house with it but joining prayer without it. These opposed ideals of doing and being known to do suggest the ways that Korite is a heightened moment within two opposed social orders: the visiting and sharing networks described in chapter four, on the one hand, and the effaced networks of *sarax* described in chapters one and five.

Both women and men make and tend to their reputations on Korite, retouching relations with every tie, visible and hidden (see chapter four), with other households. Within the household, as described in chapter three, and within the women’s networks described in chapter four, both cash and uncooked rice have changed hands a thousand times in secret: cash collected from an aunt for a child’s holiday clothing has been, in turn, given to a sister so that she can pass it to her husband’s mother, rice

purchased by the 50 kilo sack at the market has been shared out to sisters, who have in turn given rice to poor neighbors, and on. At the end of the day, however, each matriarch is responsible for ‘*assurer fete bi*’ (ensuring [the proper observance of] the holiday), for her *ker* and those who fall within its domain. The clothing and food of *Korite* become a moment, like other moments described in the last chapter, in which women demonstrate the power of their own networks by creating a beautiful outward surface for their own households. Performing feats of spectacular *segnse* (dressing in traditionally tailored high value textiles, see also *Health*) and *toilette* not only on her own body, but also on those of every member of her household, women enact a rhetoric of their own strength and force, the consequences of which will be felt long after the holiday itself as portraits taken on the holiday are shared and discussed, and as talk about them circulates outward. Similarly, the *korite* meal is not just an opportunity to eat well, it is also an opportunity for a woman to demonstrate and expand her power by feeding the guests who will come to call, and by sending miniature bowls of the feast to her patrons and inlaws (*yekkal*). *Korite* is thus a day of simultaneous and synchronized *ziaar*:¹⁶ every woman moves her carefully curated body (and those of her household’s members) and bowl through the networks that she manages all year by sending individual, smaller, visits and gifts.

Just as *Korite* highlights the phatic infrastructure women build throughout the year, the movement of *zakat* highlights the infrastructure of hidden social support built by *talibe* throughout the year, and from which they derive their own livelihoods. For beggars (and tailors) *korite* is a day of income, not expenditure. Just as tax day means a year of income for private accountants, *korite* is both lucrative and busy for the largely invisible people who make two of the most important activities of the holiday possible: tailors rushing to complete clothing orders, and beggars gathered to accept the

¹⁶ See chapter four.

payment of zakat. Without their work, someone's holiday will be ruined, someone will fail to meet an obligation. The labor of the tailor turns the valuables transacted in the hidden exchanges between households into publicly visible beauty, bringing that wealth above ground to bear fruit. The labor of the *talibe* moves valuables transacted in hidden exchanges into two radically different and equally invisible things.

Watching the disappearance

I spent one korite observing the labor of both of these groups of laborers. The rain is heavy in the sky, not yet fallen. I stand in a stall in Ouakam market, across from a large open space called 'jullikay' (literally prayer location), a clearing that hosts the holiday prayers for this neighborhood. Everyone is tense: myself included. I stand over my tailor and his apprentices, entreating them to finish the remaining work on three sets of formal holiday clothes that I commissioned weeks ago for Korite. While an apprentice irons the tailor repeats his apologies, recounts the electricity problems that have plagued this Ramadan (2008, though every Ramadan seems to be, at the time, the very worst one in terms of power outages). Our conversation is punctuated by the entrances, complaints, and exits of women all on errands identical to mine: attempting to retrieve their holiday clothes. While power shortages have led the tailor to make excuses for incomplete work on some of the orders, money shortages have led some of the women to come with promises of payment rather than cash.

The electricity problem, the tailor says, that's the reason he hasn't yet finished all these clothes; he gestures towards walls stacked high with neat black bundles, clothing folded up and tied tightly inside plastic sacs. "Surely," another person will tell me when I recount the conversation later over cooking pots in the kitchen, "surely the outages played their role," "waaye, dekk bi dafa woo" (the town is dry) "kor gi nii moom, metti na" *this* ramadan has been difficult. Meaning: it's not only that

there has not been electricity, it is also that the cash deposits people put on clothes were likely consumed before all thread and other shop expenses were paid, and thus it's been necessary to wait for the final payments on some outfits to complete the others. These final payments are not terribly forthcoming either, I note that little money changes hands as women come to collect clothing, arguments erupt, promises are made. Tensions are high all around. Political problems are mounting for the Wade government, Thai and Vietnamese rice have been scarce in the market, electrical outages have become almost constant.

We continue to talk, and he continues to finish my clothing. Men begin to appear at *jullikay*, dressed in their new clothing. Though the rain threatens to wilt their perfectly starched new clothes, they brave the drops, some with umbrellas, to meet their obligations.

I have been watching two boys in the street while I wait and listen: taalibe. Unlike children I know from the households I frequent, the taalibe have no concerns about playing in the rain, and do not run for cover as it begins to fall. At first they played in the street, kicking a can back and forth, taunting each other, laughing. No one else seems to notice them, but I note that they are paying careful attention to the movement of people on the street. Now that the men appeared, the talibes' activity begins to take on a different character, more organized, their attention drawn to the men coming to pray. The boys separate, now several yards apart. Their play is over, they turn away from each other, do not acknowledge each other, as if each is alone in the world.

Each boy sits on the curb, head in hands. One casts his scabbed leg out into the street. A man passes by him, grand boubou fluttering gently as his right hand moves inside its folds, retrieves a clear plastic bag of rice, tied in a knot at the top, and almost imperceptibly deposits the bag on the curb at the child's side. The talibe doesn't look up; the man doesn't look down. He doesn't break his stride. He

continues, into *jullikay* and unrolls his prayer rug in one smooth motion in front of him on one of the large plastic mats spread in the clearing.

As soon as the rice is released at his side the boy plucks it up by the top of the bag and runs to cache it behind a piece of broken concrete almost directly in front of where I stand at the tailor's atelier. From my position, waiting rather impatiently for the clothes I ordered to be finished, I have a perfect view of their entire operation. These two who had played together are now working together, and working together to obscure their connection.

The boy returns to his place, apparently alone on the curb. The routine continues, building in tempo until the boys no longer have time to sit back on the curb. Finally they are too busy collecting packages of rice to return them to their hiding place one by one. They only go back to drop them off when they can no longer hold all of the packages.

In the shop, women become more frantic as they retrieve their packages. They are insistent. They demand that the tailor's apprentices iron their clothing now, stitch up a last seam now. I continue to wait, staring pointedly at the tailor. Men emerge from houses at an increasing clip. The boys become more and more occupied, now bringing armfuls of plastic bags to their cache. A tidy pile of packages of rice, each a different size, accumulates stacked against the back of the concrete slab, mirroring the now much shorter stacks of black plastic bags against the tailor's wall.

The growing tempo of retrievals of clothing and deposits of rice increases, then slows abruptly, then seems to end as the *nodd* (call to prayer), sounds over the portable speaker system set up today in *jullikay*. My clothing is finally finished, and I have no more excuse to stand in the tailor's market stall. My packages of clothing under my arm — thankfully only women's clothing! No man has waited for my return to get dressed — I return to the house to rejoin the seemingly endless women's holiday task

of dicing onions and slicing potatoes for *frites*. While I am cutting potatoes, I later learn, the talibe are deciding how much rice they can withhold from their masters without arousing their suspicion. They are finding hidden hollows in concrete walls to hide the rice they have held back.

While the many closely-timed and spatially condensed moments of rice giving and receiving make korite an ideal moment to see the *talibe's* relationship to rice, on other days the practice continues, at street corners around the city, over larger periods of time. I later recognized the same talibe I had watched at work outside the tailor's shop doing the same work every Friday outside the mosque, and at the main crossroads in Ouakam, where the kaar rapids stop, during the morning commute. Indeed, now that I have seen the talibe collecting rice on Korite, I try to spot which boys are working together, and to trace their movements to a shared cache of goods hidden along the road.. I spent several afternoons watching beggars perform the same routine at the crossroads in front of Poste Fann, the post office immortalized in Sembene's film *Le Mandat* and in Aminata Sow Fall's novel *La Greve de Battu*. In both iconic works of fiction, and in my own daily experience as I commuted from Ouakam to the CAORC research center up the street from the Post, that intersection serves as the workplace for a vast number of beggars. It is here that Sembene's protagonist, Ibrahima, first meets the beggar woman to whom he gives sarax, praying under his breath that his bureaucratic troubles will pass from him and follow the coin he gives to her.¹⁷ Though I only found their location, and never saw the contents of the beggars' caches at the Post, or by the mosque, I recognized the same pattern of action. I watched them for hours, like the undercover police officers on David Simon's television series "The Wire" divining the location of a cache of drugs or money from observation of seemingly disorderly

¹⁷ He later meets that same beggar again the same day on another side of the center city, where she demands alms from him, refusing to acknowledge that she is the same beggar to whom he had given alms not an hour before.

movements of individual members of the retail staff of a corner drug deal: “lookouts,” “corner boys,” “runners” and “hoppers.” (see also Bourgois 1996:29) Also like drug dealers on a corner in New York or Baltimore¹⁸, though apparently working individually, the *talibe* work in teams or pairs to collect individual small prestations from donors, and pool them. Though for different reasons, both alms transactions in Dakar and drug transactions in US cities involve the separation of small amounts of money and commodities from a larger store of the same, the first carried on the body of the apparent party to the transaction (dealer, beggar), the second located elsewhere, hidden from view as if behind a curtain on stage, association with which is plausibly deniable. For the drug dealer, a stash, a back-up stash, a stash house. For the *talibe*, the rice in his hands, the rice piling up out of view of donors, the rice given to the *marabout*, and the rice hidden from him. The drug dealer and his associates use this system of separated aggregations of drugs and money to make drugs appear untraceably, and to separate the transaction of money from the transaction of drugs. The *talibe* use their system of separated aggregations to make rice disappear twice. First, rice disappears from the view of the donor, affecting the payment of his debt. Second, some of that rice disappears from the *marabout*, who will never know it existed, and is siphoned off into the secret subsidy economy.

The everyday routines of beggars at the crossroads and the mosque were slightly different than those performed by the *talibe* on *korite*. Unlike the empty-handed *talibe* anticipating bagged rice or FCFA bills as *zakat* on *korite*, the beggars at the mosque and the Post carried beggars’ bowls (*battu*). Like the lovely lady of chapter four, some carried gourd bowl lekets. The *talibe*, perhaps more ironically, carried empty cans of Dieg Bou Diar tomato paste, emblazoned with the iconic image of that same lovely lady who begins chapter four, carrying a leket full of fresh tomatoes on her head.

¹⁸ As told by David Simon, at least.

Though the beggars at the Post collected alms every day, all day, the movements of sarax at the Post had a changing rhythm over the course of the day. In the early mornings, before the people who work in the offices and embassies housed in the villas of Fann Residence and Point E, the traffic at the intersection is steady but not congested. The talibe play soccer with an empty plastic soda bottle in the place of a ball, each holding his begging bowl in hand. Some donors come to them, depositing a coin or a sugar cube into the empty begging bowl, and continue on their way. Sometimes the boys crowd around a single apparently wealthy person, asking for money in unison. By nine, however, the intersection is tightly gridlocked, and the talibe and other beggars are focused on their tasks, coming to the windows of stopped taxis, private cars, and kaar rapids, and finding coins and small tied-off black plastic bags in outstretched hands. As their bowls grow full, I watch them run to the butik on this corner and return with bowls empty; coins have been changed at the butik for bank notes now hidden in waist pouch beneath their clothing. The rice, sugar, and candles — and sometimes other things, I once saw a talibe retrieve a live chicken, handed over by its bound feet, from the window of a taxi — have disappeared.

Wealthy donors express little interest in what becomes of this rice, at most expressing a vague thought that it might be prepared and eaten by its anonymous recipients at the *daara* where the talibe are assumed to live. The beggars have their own interests in the matter: most importantly the accumulation of currency. As such, they have no use for uncooked rice, so they repackage and resell it. Dakar's beggar's are uniquely suited to this commercial enterprise. After the morning rush to collect alms at the crossroads, the talibe disperse in residential areas for their afternoon meal. Each beggar moves from house to house within his territory collecting leftover food. He alone knows what each family has eaten, and which families have barely eaten at all. The talibe has access to the most guarded

of all household secrets, which families do not have the resources to buy and prepare rice for *añ*, the afternoon meal.

On *korite* rather than a medium for a ‘problem’ put out, and disappeared rice and money are transformed into marks of obligations completed to be kept in a heavenly ledger, equally distant from worldly relations.¹⁹ The grain does not actually disappear, though it leaves a mark on the spirit world, it is, instead, reevaluated, repackaged, and resold, transformed into an untraceable subsidy. It becomes “rice from nowhere.”

Aggregation and qualitylessness: the grain elevator and the *butik*

When the *talibe* have finished collecting for the day, they return to their cache of rice, and set aside some to take to the *marabout* and some to take to the *butik*. The *marabout* expects to receive all of the rice, and to keep it. The *talibe* rarely eat rice prepared by the *marabout*, instead getting their meals from the leftovers they beg for door to door (see chapter three). The *talibe* take the rice they have withheld to the *butik* to be transformed. Though the bags of rice given as *zakat* on *korite* should be of uniform weight, the rice collected in everyday alms rarely is. At the *butik*, the bags of rice are opened and poured into a large plastic basin, mixing together. From this basin of aggregate alms, the *borom butik* weighs out rice into individual plastic bags by the *kilo* and *liber*. By weighing and repackaging the rice, the shop owner turns the alms into packages of rice identical to those he sells *en detaille* to his

¹⁹ See Smid 2010 for a discussion of similar conceptions of the radical disjuncture between *aduna* and the heavenly ledger as described by women in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea.

retail customers. However, he does not add this rice to his supply, but gives it back to the *talibe*.²⁰ The *talibe* then take these packages of rice out of the *butik* in an opaque plastic bag.

The rice is now ready for resale to the very poor. Having transformed the rice from alms into standard units of retail rice by aggregating and remeasuring and packaging, the *talibe* set out for their rounds collecting the leftovers and bowl scrapings of the afternoon meals. Appearing to everyone as beggars and recipients of aid, the *talibe* are also now also in the secret business of distributing it. The *talibe* stop at each house, and are admitted to the enclosed front courtyard to accept food, either sitting to eat the leftovers (if there is a lot), or scraping the remains into the bowls that they carry, to be mixed with other leftovers and then consumed. In some houses there are very little leftovers, if any. Knowing their routes, the *talibe* therefore know which families eat well and which eat poorly, knowledge that is otherwise carefully contained by the *sutura* of each house. The *talibe* use their intimate knowledge of each house in the neighborhood to decide which of the houses are not donors of aid, but beneficiaries. When they enter these courtyards they do not come to take cooked rice. Instead, they offer to sell their uncooked rice, accepting what the family can pay. Accomplished within the closed courtyards of individual *ker*, the consumption of leftovers and the sale of uncooked rice both remain *ci biiru sutura*, inside the *sutura* of the home. Just as no outsider can know what the family cooked, or how much

²⁰ The few times I have discussed this process with *butik* owners, they have explained to me that they do not profit in any way from accepting and repackaging the *talibe*'s rice. Weighing and repackaging the rice for them, I was told, is a form of alms. This service is one of many that the *butik* performs for the *talibe*. Much as the *butik* serves as a hyperlocal institution of deposit and credit for retail customers, it is a safe place for *talibe* to keep (some of) their earnings. If the *butik* keeps small scale retail bank accounts and lines of credit for paying customers, it also keeps safety deposit boxes for the *talibe*. Instead of keeping account books noting the *talibe* deposits and withdrawals (though some shopkeepers may do this), the shopkeepers with whom I discussed this provides each *talibe* under their protection a place to hide a Nescafé tin or other repurposed food container in which the *talibe* keeps his savings. Like numbered safe deposit boxes, the boxes are marked to show who owns them, but the mark is essentially coded.

surplus remained, no one can know who has purchased rice from the talibe. Except for this moment of transaction, the standardized packages of rice are themselves untraceable, bearing no mark of their source or their cost to the purchaser.

In the *butik* the rice undergoes a miraculous transformation that makes this subsidy possible. When it enters the *butik*, the rice is *sarax* or *zakat*, specific payments from particular people. When it leaves, it is only standard rice in standard units. The process of aggregation and remeasurement has removed the history from the rice, laundering it. This transformation is a purely epistemological one, possible only because rice has been made fungible in exactly these terms in Dakar's position in the supply chain for Thai Hom Mali rice.

Rendering the rice untraceable through concrete practices of aggregation and measurement, the *butik* transforms alms into the stuff of miracles. This transformation allows rice to appear, as if from nowhere, within the homes of the poor. Enacting this radical transformation in the mundane manipulation of a granular substance, the shopkeeper is a bit like the grain elevator. As Cronon writes, the elevator performed a similarly complex metaphysical feat, helping to "turn grain into capital by obscuring and distancing its link with physical nature..." (Cronon 120) Through rather similar mechanical actions on grains, the shopkeeper turns alms back into rice, much like the elevator, "severing the link between ownership rights and physical grain." (Cronon 120) Cronon reports that one nineteenth century visitor to the Chicago's grain elevators remarked that "one man's property is by no means kept separate from another man's" (120), in the *butik*, one might say, that in this process of (re)aggregation, one man's properties — his sins, his faults, his virtues — are not kept separate from another man's. The result is the same, what had been individuated sacks marked in one way or another

with specific qualities — ties to owners and localities — becomes something quite different, a commodity that can appear as “grain from nowhere.” (Friedman 2017: 504)

Not knowing the city of rice

Where the amount of rice entering the economy might be guessed from the size of crowds at mosques, outside of Korite the scale of this traffic in rice is even more obscure. This daily movement of rice in the alms economy is impossible to quantify, and the individual small moves which compose it, nearly impossible to see. As I described in chapter one, the practices which compose *sarax* are carefully planned and enacted as to radically restrict all information about them, such that even the ritual specialist (the *marabout*) who advises someone who plans to give *sarax* often does not know the givers reasons for seeking help. It begins in the most private of places and moments, largely hidden from the ethnographer, people’s very specific and individual problems, the inner contours of their lives: their worries and thoughts, their misfortunes. Thus the practices of talk and action that surround *sarax* keep information about problems *in*, while the mechanics of the gift object are designed to move the problems themselves *out*. The private origins of *sarax*, taken with the methods by which *sarax* produces subsidized rice, make it nearly impossible to see, let alone quantify, the scale of the movement of rice in the shadow economy of *sarax* and subsidy.

The alms economy — conducted in money and uncooked grain, among other media — draws meaning from household exchange of cooked rice, even as it differs radically from it. In nearly every respect the alms economy stands in contrast to other forms of everyday exchange centered in the household. Women’s gifts to affines create durable forms of relatedness between people in networks of duty, care and belonging. Though the networks that sustain these relationships are importantly hidden, the relationships and even individual people (that is, babies) that they make materially possible

are publicly celebrated at ceremonial events. In this way, hidden networks are understood to underlie the publicly visible world of actions and relationships. While the model of the social world crafted in these inter-household networks creates individual fame, this fame is always underwritten by a series of relationships behind the scenes. Publicly visible forms of value — accomplishments, offspring, ritual events — are known to be held up by many relationships and instants of social action unknowable to all but the individual parties directly involved.

Gifts to beggars also create a series of unseen relationships, but, paradoxically, the infrastructure of social support created in the movement of goods given to beggars creates disjuncture. Unlike women's exchanges, alms does not tie groups together 'behind the scenes' (or rely upon and reinforce those ties), marking a distinction between what is seen in public and the intimacies of shared action in private worlds. Rather, it holds actors apart, separating each from the other through multiple processes of anonymization.

If Chicago's elevators turned grain into capital, Dakar's rice economy affects a similar mystification, and in a similar way. In both places, the fungibility of grain itself makes possible the effacement of the marks of ownership or provenance that would otherwise render it traceable, embedded in and telling the story of the routes of its circulation. It is not the breakdown of social ties that makes fungibility possible, but the socially constructed and highly naturalized fungibility of the medium that makes the erasure of circulatory history possible. Because grain is fungible, its history of movement can be effaced at will. The practices through which this effacement occurs are material, practical work (see Pfeil and Nozawa 2016). When the history of grain is effaced through aggregation and repackaging to standard weight packages, value is produced. The value that appears here is both monetary (because it is now resellable, gain is possible) and spiritual (because it will be sold at very low

cost, it provides evidence of divine intervention in the lives of the poor). Like that of the commodity on Marx's account, this value derives from the secret the object seems to contain. Because it derives from the careful rubbing out of the traces of its social history, the value produced might be something equally social yet quite different from the value that resides in commodities.

Indeed, the network created in the movements of alms creates both social and economic value *because* and *only because* it creates disjuncture. If the *talibe* takes on some of his social meaning as a negative image of the *mere de famille*, the networks he builds may also best be understood in opposition to the hidden but enduring relationships between households with women construct, as I described them in chapter four. Practices of giving to beggars mark a break between the veiled networks and agency of the house (or, perhaps better put, the web of influence extending from the mother through her spheres of influence) through which participants may act as if playing a stringed instrument, and something quite different, an anonymous, "disappeared" network and order of agency in which participants are alienated from each other, nodes held together by lines of connection which seem damped such that no vibration can pass between them (forgive the instrumental metaphor). And from this disjuncture of human relations, in the very real movements made possible by the material qualities of child beggars and uncooked Thai Hom Mali rice, things happen that must be attributed to invisible and disembodied actors: jinn, even God.

By repackaging and transporting grain (and other fungible commodities) the *talibe* creates breaks in the history of each item's movement, and thereby, spaces between people. In these spaces, apparently "outside" of society, real miracles occur, away from the knowable, namable social world. Women's networks produce women's pull and power visible in individual women/households that appear as the visible nodes of an invisible network. They bring individuals to the forefront. The

networks formed in the movements of gifts received by beggars also generate value and power.

However, this power is read as divine intervention: it produces moments of apparent “luck.” The circulation of goods mediated by beggars creates something from nothing, through a process of passing “cast out” commodities through the hands of “no one.”

While the lovely lady “weaves networks of care,” to use Gillian’s words, constructing a durable invisible “phatic infrastructure” (Elyachar 2010), through his role accepting and anonymizing alms, the talibe creates aporia in these networks. That is, though his actions actually build a durable structure of relations across the city as a whole, he does this by appearing to create distance between each of the nodes he links. This situation recalls the paradox Fall presents in which a marabout asks his client what draws him to the beggars, and the client replies that “everything” separates and distances him from them. The beggar, through the medium of uncooked rice, invisibly draws everyone together while creating the appearance of radical separation.

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