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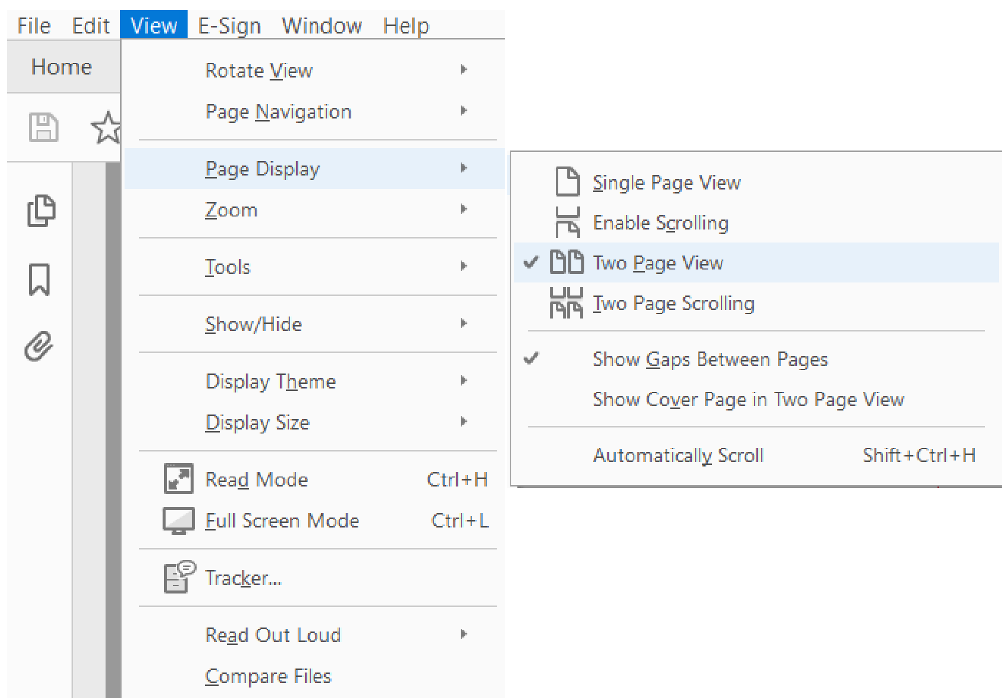

Family Home Exterior 1, Parcelles-Assainies, 2018.

Non fi daffa métti

DICK POWIS

ABSTRACT

In Dakar, Senegal, skilled tradesmen must navigate boom-and-bust cycles of the economy—tempos disproportionately influenced by the Islamic calendar, foreign investment, and an individual's access to social capital. Anticipating these cycles, drawing on community networks for support, and learning to weather the bad times can mean the difference between providing for your family and having your masculinity questioned. Both Dakar and its builders are always under construction, ever in progress.

KEYWORDS

masculinities, labor, economy, social class

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The first time I visited Dakar in 2012, I was confronted by a landscape in disrepair: buildings crumbling, missing their facades; old sheets in windows rather than glass; piles of rubble pushed up against walls; and miles of exposed rebar. Many of the buildings I saw lacked electricity and running water. Some appeared to be bombed out. Just their shells remained.

I learned very quickly that my perspective was all wrong, likely colored by stereotypes about Africa and development: Dakar is not in disrepair, but in progress (see also Melly 2010). The buildings were not falling apart from years of neglect; they were perpetual *chantiers* (construction sites) being built up *petit à petit* (little by little). In Dakar, construction moves in fits and starts, at the whim of economic booms-and-busts, the Islamic calendar, and charity of expatriated friends and relatives. Sometimes it can move quickly, as long as the finances, workforce, and materials line up, *insh'Allah* (God willing). Often things are paced from month to month: buy new tiles this month, hire a mason to tile the floor the next month, and so on.

In these circumstances, the tallest buildings are likely to remain unfinished for the longest periods of time. When a developer works with contractors to plan a building and budget the expenses, expected costs are set at that moment. During construction, financing can be inconsistent. While work stops, starts, and delays, the market price of building materials like cement and rebar continues to increase. The taller the building, the more expensive it becomes to complete. The walls on the tenth floor are more expensive to build than those on the ground level, not because they are more technically difficult, but rather because higher levels are built after the lower levels. If developers do not move quickly to complete a building, the rising costs of materials can rapidly outstrip their original budgets. There are dozens of unfinished office and apartment complexes in Dakar's suburbs—too valuable to sell, too expensive to finish.

This is the world where I met Diouf.

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MAME

Family Home Interior 1, Mbour, 2017.

Diouf is exhausted. As often as not, he is *au chômage* (out of work), but that does not mean he is standing still. As a contractor, work comes and goes. In the dry times, he wakes up for morning prayer and breakfast, makes calls to prospective patrons, and takes a taxi to their homes. He sits with them, drinks tea, appraises the work they want to be done, and gives them a ballpark estimate. Then they negotiate. This is a key part of social and business relationships in Senegal. Diouf draws on a calculus that deducts how well he knows the patron from his desired pay. By noon, he has seen one patron and still has two more to go. There is no guarantee that he will land a contract or be paid in a timely manner even if he does. *It is painful here*, he tells me at the end of every day. *Non fi daffa métti*.

Diouf is an *enduiseur* (plasterer). His trade is plastering and painting, but he also has years of experience and training in France to lead teams of laborers as a contractor. While he calls on masons, pipefitters, electricians, roofers, and more to join him on jobs, he can do a little of everything if needed.

In some cases, his patrons are referrals from past patrons. Their homes are his portfolios. In Senegal, where *teranga* (hospitality) is a significant point of social and national pride, affluent hosts proudly show their new renovations and interior design to guests who inevitably ask, *Who's your guy?* In other cases, referrals lead to expatriated developers, rich Senegalese businesspeople speculating on the land shortage of Dakar. Their massive apartment complex holdings require someone to paint and plaster dozens of units. It is a big job for big money—if they actually pay.

In the good times, when Diouf has steady work and good patrons, he invests significant sums of revenue and social capital into his business. He connects with colleagues in France, a country to which he vows he will never return, to buy second hand tools, equipment, and machinery. If he can get them to invest, even better. He gets ideas for what kind of specialized equipment he needs from watching home improvement videos on Facebook and YouTube. In some cases, he can make the tools himself from scrap metal and the help of a welder-friend. Many of the videos are not in French or Wolof, but that does not seem to matter: renovation is a universal language.

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Achieving the Senegalese national dream is impossible without foreign travel. For the working class, this means migrating mostly to European countries overland across the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean by boat, through the

Atlantic Ocean by *pirogue* (fishing canoe), or by commercial plane. Once (if) they arrive, they face discriminatory barriers to employment, education, and health care. There is a xenophobic misconception that African migrants in Europe intend to plant roots and stay indefinitely, but for the Senegalese, that would mean the possibility of losing community or never seeing family again.

Even though my research never focused on migration, it was an unavoidable topic of conversation among Senegalese men. The broad brushstrokes of the national dream go like this: travel to a foreign country, find work, earn an income, and send whatever is not spent on living expenses back home where the cost of living is much lower and the money can stretch further. Ultimately and ideally, a migrant should send consistent and sizable remittances such that his family can begin overseeing the construction of his new home to which he will return. This process, I am told, takes about ten years, barring illness, unintended pregnancies, unemployment, deportation, and other financial obstacles or surprises.

Diouf spent five years in France before he was deported, despite maintaining a clean criminal record, consistently paying his taxes, and starting a successful business. *Fuck France and fuck Sarkozy*, he likes to say since he has changed his mind about migration. *Why go away to send money back? If you love your country, you stay here and develop it from the inside*. Diouf's experience living in France and sending money home gives him some perspective on how he runs his business too. Migrants, who are more than likely navigating their own hardships and hustles abroad, send remittances home inconsistently and for smaller projects. Unless migrants are kin or kith for whom he is doing a favor, Diouf prefers to take work from expatriated or repatriated middle- and upper-class patrons who have demonstrated financial stability.

The best work comes from property developers, many of whom are expatriated Senegalese who speculate on Dakar's worsening land tenure crisis. Their projects include multistory apartment complexes and massive fortress-like concrete mansions on the outskirts of town. They promise a lot of work to be done, a long contract period, and a more consistent and reliable income. Developers are not immune from running out of money before a project is complete, but if a contract with a big developer works out, Diouf can earn an income that will allow him to build his business, buy new equipment, take on smaller projects for a while, and support his family with relatively little anxiety. And that is a risk he is willing to take.

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Young men in Dakar, like Diouf, are expected to marry, have children, and become educators, disciplinary figures, and spiritual leaders to their families. Where a living wage can be hard to secure and trade unions are effectively toothless, the continuous pressure to *sersé larzañ* (find money) and support a family can sometimes mean working grueling 12- to 14-hour days in unbearable temperatures amidst dangerous working conditions with neither consistent income nor health insurance.
Things get even more complicated during Ramadan. In most cases, work does not stop just because workers are fasting, though it might slow down. Workers make more mistakes when they are hungry. They are also quicker to anger and frustration, which is *haram* (forbidden) during Ramadan. And they cannot even take the edge off with a cigarette. Accidents happen all the time. Diabetic crises are a major risk during Ramadan too. Even if young construction workers are relatively healthy, their older relatives' health threatens their already-precarious financial situation.

To make matters worse, it is not uncommon for patrons to stop payment weeks prior to major holidays like *Korité* (Eid al-Fitr), *Tabaski* (Eid al-Adha), and *Gammou* (Mawlid), or more personal events like *takk* (weddings) and *ngente* (naming ceremonies). The organization of grand festivals and the maintenance of valuable social capital demands that patrons reprioritize their finances away from building and renovation projects. Meanwhile, the skilled tradesmen they hire are left in the lurch. Working hand-to-mouth makes it infeasible to save (*épargner* in French, also *denc* in Wolof) for these dry times. When the money stops coming, it is always a shock, but never shocking.

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One of the most important jobs a Senegalese man has is to find money and provide for his family. Getting married and having children are, of course, a matter of (social) life and death, and men learn about supporting families as soon as they begin developing relationships with their own fathers. An inability to finance the operation of a family is, therefore, not only a failure of one's own masculinity, but it opens one's parents up to questioning too: *Who raised him?* Religious and family holidays add exponential pressure to an always already dicey situation.

Just because the jobs dry up does not mean the hustle ever ends. Men will pick up odd jobs and one-offs for any amount

of extra scratch. During a good season of construction, their monthly income can range US$200–400. If they are lucky, they have a wife who earns some money in a marketplace, but it can be a delicate situation to ask her for a contribution. In some cases, men have expatriated relatives who can send something, twenty bucks here, thirty bucks there. They are always patching together whatever they can for a celebration while trying to minimize the ongoing expenses of family life. *Tabaski*, for example, begins with the ritual sacrifice of a ram, which costs US$150–1,000. If Diouf cannot get the money together to buy the ram, people will notice. The neighbors. His friends. His wife and kids. The in-laws!

Every year, it feels like a race watching him pull the money together at the last moment. Hopefully, there is a healthy, presentable ram still around that is not price-gouged, but that does not always work out. *It's better to have a scrawny sheep than no sheep at all*, he tells me.

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Like the city's landscape dotted with endless *chantiers* (construction sites), the city's men are perpetually under construction. Global circuits of the human and material capital tether the performance of masculinities to the affordances of professional and social networking (see also Buggenhagen 2012 for detailed analyses of women's perspectives). The paradox of the religious holiday, which simultaneously shuts down the national economy for weeks while demanding the most explicit demonstrations of masculine labor and provision, is a microcosm of this precarious relationship. The dynamic between men and buildings is linked directly to overdependence on patron–client relationships such that (religious holidays aside) when the patrons' lives are affected by stops, starts, and delays, so, too, are all those who depend on them.

There are a variety of ways to express difficulty in Dakar.[1] In French, Senegalese men often use the phrase *C'est chaud* (It's hot, or in Wolof *Daffa tàng*) or *C'est dur* (It's hard) to express the difficulty of their social and financial situations. In Wolof, construction workers often use the phrase *Daffa métti* (It is painful). In one sense, it is the work that is painful. Working for long hours on your feet under the sun is not for the weak. Heavy machinery is expensive, so work that requires heavy lifting involves complicated scaffolding, pulley systems, draft animals, and bucket brigades. But it is the broader structural interplay between patrons and clients and national borders and fishing canoes that undergirds what

men really mean when they use this phrase. It can be a frustratingly vicious and violent cycle that whiplashes between anxiety about lost futures, finances, and reputations on one hand, and hope for stability, community, and family on the other. The only thing that is consistent during this otherwise emotional roller coaster is the ceaseless cycle of religious holidays. Yet, instead of any advantage or preparation, the regularity of these events and pressure to perform them promise to knock them back down and stall whatever hope has been mustered in the interceding months.

One of the most revealing phrases to express difficulty is *Ma ngi goor-goorlu* (glossed as "I am managing [or getting by or making an effort or trying]"). The noun *goor* (man in Wolof) is reduplicated and verbed to mean literally, "I am playing [or being] a man" (Ndione 2013, 270).[2] Able-bodied

Family Home Interior 2, Parcelles-Assainies, 2018.

men, insofar as they are satisfying a social performance of masculinity, should not sit idly drinking *ataaya* (tea), a popular pastime that evokes paradoxical masculine laziness (see also Ralph 2008). Men *au chômage* (without work), like Diouf, must constantly beat the bushes for work, even when they already have it. Without employment—that which enables men to fulfill their roles as providers and educators—men can still claim manhood ("playing a man") by hustling, tapping networks, and calling relatives. It is a particularly gendered response to the socioeconomic challenges of navigating a simultaneously urban and transnational life in Dakar (cf. Foley and Drame 2013). Like building a house, "playing a man" is an aspiration scaffolded by hope and put together piecemeal, *petit à petit*.

Rental Property Exterior 1, Ngor, 2017.

Rental Property Exterior 2, Ngor, 2017.

Rental Property Exterior 3, Médina, 2013.

Family Home Exterior 2, Ouakam, 2017.

Family Home Exterior 3, Parcelles-Assainies, 2018.

Family Home Interior 3, Parcelles-Assainies, 2018.

Rental Property Exterior 4, Médina, 2018.

Notes

1. Diouf named this article.
2. Compare this to the pregnant women and mothers during my dissertation research who joked that we should say *Ma ngi jiggeen-jiggenlu* during labor and delivery. *Jigeen* is Wolof for woman.

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