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**FINAL PAPER**

“Transnational Islam, Migrancy and Cultural Congruence:  
The Case of West African Muslims in the United States”

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Discourses on Islam in the West tend to focus on the Middle Eastern and South Asian Immigrant experiences. African and especially West African Muslims’ presence and experience in the West are often overlooked. In today’s postcolonial West Africa, the classic patterns of migration, from the former colonies to the former *metropole* are currently being altered.

The prominence of North America in the international stage has, among other reasons, helped promote the region as a new destination of choice for immigrants from West Africa; especially after the former European *metropolises* have been struck by protracted crises of all kinds. The migratory experience of West African Muslims in North America, the United States in particular, takes on a different form when compared to the migratory experience in former colonial powers such as France, for example. Islam plays a major unifying role among West African immigrants in the United States.

**Keywords:** Islam; West Africa; Immigration; Postcolonial education; Transnational Islam; West African Muslims

On the evening of November 18, 2007, Amadou Cissé, a Senegalese graduate student in chemistry at the University of Chicago, was shot to death in a robbery attempt outside of his residence in the south side of Chicago. At least three young men were named as suspects in connection with Cissé’s murder<sup>1</sup>.

Although Cissé’s murder happened during a strikingly violent school year especially in the south side of Chicago<sup>2</sup>, what sets it apart is that university students have ordinarily not been the subject of such violent acts. Cissé’s case is both unusual and important in that it brings to the forefront the immigrant Muslim community from West Africa, an often overlooked community throughout the United States. Generally, as a social phenomenon in

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<sup>1</sup> The suspects named are Benjamin Williams, 21, Eric Walker, 16, Jamal Bracey, 17. Reported in different newspapers across the United States. See for example *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Chicago Sun Times*, thirty-six students from Chicago Public Schools died as a result of violence, from January to September 2008. See *Chicago Sun Times*, September 2, 2007, p. B6.

the US, Islam is more readily identified with Middle Easterners or Southeast Asians than sub-Saharan<sup>3</sup>.

Nearly three years after the murder of Amadou Cissé, a 30 year old Muslim American of Pakistani descent named Faisal Shahzad, was identified and arrested as the main perpetrator of a failed car bombing in New York City's Times Square. A less talked about aspect of this otherwise high profile car bombing attempt is that Alioune Niasse was reportedly the first to have spotted smoke coming from the car and alerted other vendors who eventually called 911. Niasse is a Muslim immigrant from West Africa who works as street vendor. On that evening of May 1, 2010, Alioune Niasse did not personally call the police when he saw the smoking car next to his cart because he felt that his "English is not very good". Although much media attention focused on the perpetrator of this failed bombing and to a lesser degree to Duane Jackson and Lance Orton, two other street vendors who each claimed to have called the police, little mention is made of Alioune Niasse.

Both Cissé's murder and Niasse's actions provide an opportunity to explore some facets of the world of West African Muslims and the culture they bring to the United States. Throughout this paper we will attempt to shed some light on the personality of the young francophone sub-Saharan Muslim and his/her migratory experience in the West and more specifically in the United States.

## **I - Education in Francophone West Africa: Between Islam and the Post-colonial Paradigm**

History and its vicissitudes have made francophone Europe the destination of choice for most young Africans from former French colonies in pursuit of higher education. After the years of independence in the 1960s, many formal educational systems in the former French colonies in Africa kept major aspects of their colonial heritage. France offers therefore a natural educational extension for many West African students, particularly in fields where opportunities offered in the home countries are limited, if not altogether non-existent. Interestingly enough, in post-colonial francophone Africa in countries where Islam is the dominant religion, the educational system tends to be of a binary form: on the one hand, a system bequeathed by the colonial administration (and now supported by the government), mimicking the educational system of the former *metropole* and on the other hand the traditional system of Islamic education which is generally maintained through private enterprises. Surprisingly, this duality is not commonly perceived in polarized terms but rather as an opportunity to pursue two complimentary systems: a formal system essentially embraced for the purpose of acquiring the necessary tools to function in a no less formal sector inherited from colonial times and perpetuated by the secular post-colonial state and a centuries old system structured around the study of the Qur'an and other Islamic disciplines, embraced for religious purposes.

It is worth noting that despite the often overwhelming presence of Islam in the majority of these former French West African colonies, the post-colonial state in these relatively young countries has in theory, consistently claimed their secular nature. This secularity has always been understood in the tradition of the French concept of *laïcité*

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<sup>3</sup> See Leonardo Villalon in "Commonwealth & Comparative Politics" March 1, 2000, p. 126-127

although, in practice, there have been some fundamental differences.<sup>4</sup> In 1905, France proclaimed the total separation between church and state, particularly in matters of public education.<sup>5</sup> This came after a long period of strong Catholic presence in the school system. The 1905 law was enacted while the nascent French colonial school system in West Africa was almost exclusively under the control of such religious orders as *Les Frères de Ploërmel* and *Les Soeurs de Saint Joseph de Cluny*<sup>6</sup>. These Catholic missionary orders provided the bulk of the public education in the West African school system under French colonial rule. Meanwhile, the 1905 law which was more of an anticlerical piece of legislation signaled a shift from a Catholic missionary dominated school system to a non-religious school system under the helm of an expanding colonial administration. As early as November 24, 1903 a federal educational service for the French empire in West Africa was already in place.

## 1 - Islamic Education in West Africa

### a - A Non-Regalian Domain

In West Africa, Islamic education has consistently been managed through private initiatives. Historically regarded as a pious enterprise, a relatively autonomous and self-sufficient educational system has been put in place whereby every graduated student with appropriate credentials could start a school of their own. This cycle, almost as old as the penetration of Islam in the region, has almost never been broken<sup>7</sup>. It has traditionally consisted of free boarding schools mostly relying on the students' readiness to provide free labor to the teacher in exchange for instruction<sup>8</sup>. This system has evolved beyond the control of any political authority.

Until recently, this type of education resided mainly in rural areas where teachers could cultivate the land during the relatively short rainy season using the student body as the labor force, especially in the Sahel region. This seasonal agricultural activity served as the main form of livelihood for the teacher and his students and was usually supplemented by sending the students to the community to ask for food during limited hours of the school day<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the concept of *laïcité*, see Véronique Dimier, "French Secularism in Debate: Old Wine in New Bottles" in *French Politics, Culture & Society*; Spring 2008, Vol. 26 Issue 1, p. 92-110. On the main differences between secularism in the American, French and Senegalese (West African) contexts see Alfred Stepan, "Rituals of Respect: Sufis and Secularists in Senegal", in Thomas Banchoff and Robert Wurthnow, eds., *Religion and the Global Politics of Human Rights*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Joan L. Coffey, "Of Catechisms and sermons: Church-state relations in France, 1890-1905" in *Church History*, March 1997, Vol. 66 Issue 1, p. 54 . 13p.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society*, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 168

<sup>7</sup> During the French colonial rule, there were some attempts to recuperate this type of education through the creation of official *medersas*, especially in some urban centers such as Saint-Louis in Northern Senegal. But that experience was discontinued and the already created *medersas* were integrated in public school system.

<sup>8</sup> See Rudolph T. Ware III, "NJANGAAN: The Daily Regime of Qur'anic Students in Twentieth-Century Senegal" in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37, 3 (2004) p. 515-538

<sup>9</sup> Especially in the Sahel region where the yearly rainy season lasts approximately three months.

However, a decade long drought that hit the West African Sahel region in the 1970s altered the dynamics of this educational system in that it triggered a vast migratory movement toward the urban centers. Some Qur'anic boarding schools moved to main urban centers where there was not enough land available for agricultural activities. This new situation forced the teachers who, for religious reasons, could not demand any monetary payment for their services, to send the students out into the community to beg during most hours of the school day. In many ways begging has always been regarded as a way to inculcate in the students some sense of humility and self-sufficiency in traditional Qur'anic schools. These values once considered part of the Islamic personality are now invoked to justify the begging activities the students have been subjected to in their new urban environments.

In the urban centers however, the sight of begging children has created reactions ranging from outrage to empathy. Some modern day Qur'anic teachers have often been accused of being abusive and using begging for their material gain instead of inculcating humility in the students. For students living in this new environment change came in additional ways in that not only do they have to provide for themselves but they also have to support their teachers and contribute to the survival of the school. In fact, stories abound in the city-based media of Qur'anic school students being submitted to corporal punishment for failing to bring "home" at least the daily minimum amount of money required by the teacher.<sup>10</sup>

## **b - The Curriculum in Traditional West African Islamic Schools**

In the United States there has been a great deal of speculation about the 'madrasa' or Islamic school. Along with this speculation comes suspicion as to what is the actual curriculum. In West African traditional Qur'anic schools, the curriculum usually revolves around mastery of the Qur'anic text. It involves first and foremost the memorization of the Qur'an in Arabic. Other subjects include *Fiqh* (Law), *Tafsir* (Qur'anic Exegesis), *Tawhid* (Theology), *Nahw* (Grammar), *Balagha* (Rhetoric), *Mantiq* (Logics), *Usul al-Fiqh* (Juridical Methodology) and *Tafsir* (Exegesis)<sup>11</sup>.

Children as young as three are sent to distant Qur'anic schools where they memorize the Qur'an. The amount of time that the students spend memorizing the entire Qur'an varies. The students are first introduced to the Arabic letters (*Lifantu*) before being familiarized with the Arabic vowels (*Ijj*). They are then trained to sound out the words (*Boole*), and only after this step, are they engaged in memorizing the Qur'anic text proper, starting with the shortest and last chapters (*Suras*). This step called *Mokekal*, is usually done with students using wooden tablets (*Labn*) to have their daily portion of the Qur'an (*Bind*). This process is reinforced with a weekly review (*Nafar*) until the entire Qur'anic text is memorized (*Waacc*). Memorization proceeds in descending order, from the first and longest *Suras* to the last and shortest ones. This step known as *Najj* involves the recitation of long portions of the Qur'an. In cases where students have difficulty memorizing some segments of the Qur'an, an extra step of reinforcement is added (*Gendel*) to assure a smooth memorization of the entire text. This memorization process is usually completed by the *Beqqi* process through which the student is trained in the proper spelling of the Qur'anic text.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, the Senegalese daily *L'observateur*, Juin 21, 2008 issue.

<sup>11</sup> See Mamadou Ndiaye, *L'enseignement arabo-islamique au Senegal*, Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture, Istanbul 1985, p. 38-67.

The rote memorization of the Qur'an has presented many challenges for the West Africans whose mother tongues do not usually include Arabic. Proper pronunciation and spelling of Arabic letters that do not have equivalents in West African languages have prompted the creation of techniques such as *Waññ* in Wolof for example, devised to keep track of similar sounding Qur'anic terms for grammatical and orthographic purposes<sup>12</sup>. The memorization of the Qur'an, as stated before, usually takes up the young student's first few years of study and is in certain cases, followed by the pursuit of other aspects of Islamic studies. *Fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence is preferably the first discipline studied to equip the young Muslim with the necessary tools for a normative practice of his or her faith. Most of the textbooks used are from North African authors and the orthodox Maliki school of jurisprudence remains predominant. Traditionally the regimen of Islamic studies is crowned, by studies in *Tasawwuf* (Sufism).

As early as the 1960s when most Arab States (Such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria) had already gained independence from European colonial domination, there began a movement of former West African Qur'anic schools graduates migrating to them to further their education. Upon returning to their home countries, these students were commonly recruited as Arabic language teachers in the public schools of the newly independent West African countries where Arabic has been added to the number of available foreign languages.

## **2 - The Francophone Post-colonial Educational System in West Africa**

The French influence in major parts of West Africa has been profound throughout the century-long colonial presence that France has in that region. One domain where that influence is most felt is, as mentioned previously, in the educational system. The legacy of colonialism looms large on the school system.

### **a - Mimicking the Former *Metropole's* Educational System**

After winning independence in the 1960s, most if not all of the West African former French colonies inherited and continued to sustain school systems initially put in place by the colonial administration to serve the assimilation policy pursued by France. Even after many decades of independence, the school systems in these former French colonies have only been slightly changed if at all. French remains the language of instruction and continues to be the official language in all of the former French colonies in West Africa. The school systems are still designed to mirror the educational system in France. They follow the patterns of the former colonial power's system with a number of levels or cycles: the primary cycle (6 years), the *collège* or middle school cycle (4 years), the *lycée* or high school (3 years). Every cycle ends with an obligatory national exam to move to the next level. High school is divided into two kinds – general and special studies. All students want to qualify for special studies as this will be determinant for their future professions. In special studies however,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 48-56. To be considered a memorizer of the Qur'an (*Kaang* in Wolof), one should be able to recite it and write it without any error.

the costs of textbooks and tutors are prohibitive for most, creating an elite in which only a few students complete the entire body of exams.

### **b - Crisis of the Educational System: Designed for an *Elite* and Overtaken by the *Masses***

The school systems in many countries among the former West African French colonies have preserved the elitist nature and inherited many of its associated problems. Repeating a year is quite common among students, even though it has been proven to be detrimental to their academic future<sup>13</sup>. The rate of dropout remains quite high<sup>14</sup>. In Senegal for example in 2000, 28.8% of students at the primary cycle have repeated a year and 10.6% of students dropped out of school before the end of the primary cycle.<sup>15</sup>

This elitist system does not, however, deter parents from struggling to send their children to schools, because education, especially as defined by the state, remains the main form of social mobility. Unfortunately, the number of schools has not always kept pace with the increase in population. This often translates into overcrowded classrooms, especially at the lower cycles. It should be noted that preschool which has been almost non-existent until recently is currently booming but remains predominantly a preserve of the private sector whereas 87% of students at the primary level go to public schools<sup>16</sup>. As a result, well-to-do or well-connected families give their children a head start on the path to successful education.

In the former French colonies of West Africa, the formal educational system remains under the tight control of the state, unlike the traditional Islamic or Qur'anic schools. Notwithstanding the proliferation of private schools, the curriculum is always defined by the state, embodied by the Ministry of Education. Due to the asserted secular nature of the state, religious education in general and Islamic education in particular is not part of the official curriculum. To provide to their children an education that reflects their religious beliefs without compromising their chance of receiving an education as defined and recognized at the official level, parents, especially in urban areas, often hire private tutors or send their children to private Islamic "after schools". In addition to memorizing parts of the Qur'an in these Islamic "after schools", students are introduced to the Arabic language and to such fields of Islamic studies as, *Fiqh* or jurisprudence. These Islamic "after schools" are usually run by former students of the traditional Qur'anic schools.

Naturally, France and to some extent, other French-speaking countries in Europe have been the destination of choice for most students from the former French colonies of West Africa pursuing higher education. In fact, many generations of elite West Africans have been trained in France. That attachment of the elite to the French influence is in Senegal for example, illustrated by the fact that among the three presidents that Senegal has known since

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that a student cannot repeat more than once in any given cycle of study (primary, middle school or high school). This fact compounded with the very selective achievement tests that students are required to take at the end of each cycle, makes the rate of dropout quite high.

<sup>15</sup> "Indicateurs 2000" statistics from the Senegalese Ministry of Education accessed through the website [www.education.gouv.sn](http://www.education.gouv.sn)

<sup>16</sup> In Senegal for example, in 1978, there were a total of 3 preschools (maternelle) in the whole country. That number has considerably increased over the years. In 2000, for example, there were 93 public preschools and 263 private ones. See "Indicateurs 2000" 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, June 2000, from the Senegalese ministry of education website ([www.education.gouv.sn](http://www.education.gouv.sn)), accessed on July 9, 2008.

its independence in 1960, two are married to French citizens. The attraction of the French educational system on the West Africans will however be greatly impacted by the prolonged internal crises that shook the French system starting in the late 1960s. From that time onwards, the young French-speaking West African students started to look for alternatives first in Europe and then increasingly in North America.

## **II - North America: French-Speaking West Africa's New Frontier**

### **a. Opening New Doors through Cultural Diplomacy**

A few decades after the independence years in French West Africa (1960s) and especially in the heyday of the Cold War, nations from the former western bloc as well as the eastern bloc would supplement their diplomatic presence in that region with a strong cultural presence in the form of "Cultural centers". Funded and staffed by the embassy of the concerned country, these centers are often built around a library offering free access to the literature from the sponsoring country and in some cases a language center promoting the official language and culture of the represented country. Films, documentaries and daily news from the sponsoring country are broadcasted to breed familiarity. These cultural centers also function as a database of sorts, for educational opportunities offered in the country they represent.

In Senegal for example, in the early 1970s an institute for the teaching of the English language and culture entitled British Senegalese Institute was inaugurated by the Queen of England. In Dakar, Senegal, the United States Information Agency also inaugurated the American Cultural Center offering news, literature, movies and yearly forums about some aspects of American life and culture. The former Soviet Union, the former Federal Republic of Germany too, had also their cultural centers. The overwhelming foreign presence, if anything, opened up the world, especially for young educated urban West Africans, like Amadou Cisse. Their choices are no longer limited to the French language and to the former *metropole* as far as higher education is concerned.

Coupled with the fact that some foreign languages such as English, Arabic, Spanish, Russian and Portuguese are either mandatory or optional as early as middle school, these foreign language courses help young West Africans achieve proficiency in languages other than the usual French and therefore open up their chances to learn about cultures outside of the Francophone world.

Amadou Cisse, for example, arrived in the United States at the age of 16. He first landed at the United World College in Montezuma, New Mexico, a two-year high school, part of an organization of international schools. Cisse went on to Bates College in Maine where he spent four years pursuing a triple major in math, chemistry and physics and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He was accepted at the University of Chicago where he pursued his doctoral studies in chemistry and shortly before his death, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation. In his dissertation, Cisse studied how molecules diffuse and migrate through polymers. Certainly students like Amadou Cisse, who completed grade and middle schools in his native Senegal, had some knowledge about the educational opportunities that such non- Francophone countries as the United States offer. This relatively new trend in exploring the possibilities that developed nations other than the former colonial power offers, may also be triggered by the growing presence of American culture for example in the mainstream medias of these relatively young nations. The other part of this story lies in the

fact that unlike Amadou, his younger brother Alioune, took the usual trajectory for young students from the former West African French colonies and went on to France to pursue his studies in computer engineering in the southeastern city of Toulouse<sup>17</sup>.

### **b. The Overseas Campus: The African New Frontier**

The search for new areas of study, competent students and a greater presence abroad, have pushed many American universities to embark in the establishment of exchange programs with foreign based academic institutions and more recently in the opening of new campuses overseas. This growing trend among American institutions of higher education<sup>18</sup> is, slowly but certainly, gaining traction in West Africa. In the traditionally Francophone countries of West Africa, study-abroad sites, research partnerships with local institutions and faculty exchange from American based universities are increasingly gaining popularity.

In Senegal for example, the following American institutions have already established some study abroad programs: Suffolk University, the University of Minnesota, Temple University, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Wells College, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Beloit College, Michigan State University, Kalamazoo College and Goshen College. Such institutions not only allow their American based students and/or faculty to experience life in West Africa but in some cases, such as Boston-based Suffolk University which has a full fledged campus in place, give West Africans the opportunity to experience American education and culture. Most of these institutions, through these programs, offer young West Africans who have long been restricted to the Francophone world, the opportunity to travel and study in American universities. This trend, among other factors, fuels the popularity of the English language among young students in these former French colonies.

## **III- The Merchant Pioneers**

Long before North America became a new “academic destination” for young students from French-speaking West Africa, it was already established as a destination of choice for West African merchants seeking new markets. Unlike the migration for academic purposes, this type of migration had its causes in domestic strife, with the long years of drought that hit the region in the early 1970s. Migration first took the form of a rural exodus, from the desolated rural areas to the large West African urban centers. It then did not take long for the economic crisis to reach the cities which triggered another migratory movement from the internal cities to the former *metropole*. The latter was then ending thirty years of booming economy known as *Les Trente Glorieuses*<sup>19</sup> “The Glorious Thirty Years” of economic growth. In the midst of this unprecedented period of economic expansion, the former *metropole* attracted both skilled and unskilled labor especially from its former colonies. This demand for labor attracted mostly West African farmers gravely affected by long years of drought, unemployment and economic stagnation who after having migrated to the large

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<sup>17</sup> See *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 2007, pp.5, 22.

<sup>18</sup> See Tamar Lewin, “U.S. Universities Rush to Set Up Outposts Abroad” in *The New York Times*, February 10, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> For more about *Les Trentes Glorieuses*, see Jacques De Bandt, ‘Economic Status of France : Past, Present and Future’ in *Atlantic Economic Journal*, September 1992, p. 18-22.



urban centers could not successfully integrate the already crisis-stricken urban economy of their home countries. This West African presence spurred the building of the now infamous ‘foyers’ which latter became ghettos of men.<sup>20</sup> That migratory movement towards the former *metropole*, would however, be short-lived because as early as the late 1960s the period of French economic expansion ended and a protracted economic crisis started to set in. The already numerous West African communities who just migrated to France, existing at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, were duly marginalized as France could barely offer enough opportunities to its citizens.

The French economic crisis drove the migratory movements from West Africa towards new destinations in Europe first and then North America. So countries such as Germany, Spain and especially Italy among other Europeans nations which were not traditionally lands of immigration for West Africans started to receive communities of West African retailers and seasonal workers. By the 1990s, Western Europe was in the midst of a heated conversation about political and economic integration accompanied by efforts at tightening its borders with restrictive immigration policies.

Reputed as a “land of immigrants”, North America in general and the United States in particular started to gain more and more popularity as a destination among West Africans. The first significant immigrant communities from the former French colonies of West Africa settled on the east coast of the United States in states like New York, New Jersey and parts of New England before expanding west and southwards. These immigrant communities were principally made of merchants. Retail has long been the default occupation for most of these new immigrants, whether they were formerly merchants or farmers however the profession of taxi driver is becoming more and more popular. Alioune Niasse, the street vendor in New York’s Times Square is representative of that experience. Through strong social and religious networks, these immigrants have managed to create niches in major cities. The most recognized and efficient form of network put in place is the *Da’ira* or Sufi circle. Built around a common membership to a Sufi order, the *Da’ira*, provides adherents the religious, social and necessary financial anchor. Centered around the main beliefs of Islam and additionally around the teachings of the historic founder of the Sufi order or *Tariqa* it is related to, the *Da’ira* represents the strongest if not the only social network for most West Africans. The regular gathering of the *Da’ira* at a member’s house and, in some cases, at the mosque or the designated place, allows the immigrant Muslim to reconnect with a wider and more familiar organization. During a typical *Da’ira* gathering, the main activities usually include special supplications (*Du’a*), recitations (*Qira’*) or invocations (*Dbiker*) and sometimes lectures (*Dars*). Members also pay their dues and sometimes help raise funds to solve emergency financial needs in the immediate translocal community or in the home country.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> During the “Trente Glorieuses” the French authorities put in place “foyers”, housing facilities, meant especially for the immigrant workers in the *Metropole*. They were designed as multiple single-person dwellings much like single men hotels in the United States. These foyers were developed specifically because the French were recruiting labor from their own former colonies for menial and hard labor for menial wages. This of course did not encourage men to bring their families. This particular fact led to social unrest later. The foyers, much like American housing projects, quickly became under maintained and overcrowded.

<sup>21</sup> See Monika Salzbrunn, “The Occupation of Public Space Through Religious and Political Events: How Senegalese Migrants Became a Part of Harlem, New York” in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34.4, Brill Leiden, 2004, p. 468-469

It is not unusual to see itinerant traders or taxi drivers eventually turn to other professions or engage in higher education for better professional opportunities. Generally speaking though, the West African tradition of immigrating to the US has been established by the itinerant merchants. This migratory movement intensified in the 1990s when the entire francophone West Africa was in the midst of a structural adjustment policies (mainly dictated by international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF), aggravated by the devaluation of the CFA which is the common currency of the region. This migratory movement which overwhelmingly concerned young males in general, started then to include women who opened small businesses, especially hair braiding shops.<sup>22</sup>

### III – Recreation of a Virtual Homeland

One noticeable difference between Amadou’s generation and Alioune’s is that the social networks that the former used include virtual communities often separated by great physical distances but sharing nonetheless the same identity as members of a diasporic elite. More and more young immigrant students and professionals join forum and discussion rooms on website centered around the society, politics and other issues of the home country. In this information age, almost every single country in West Africa boasts at least one website where communal, regional and international issues are followed closely and commented on. Links to news headlines are featured in these sites. On some of the sites, the nightly news from the home country national television stations is regularly streamed. Entertainment programs such as music videos and soap operas are posted on these sites. Some radio stations based in the home country also stream live to these sites, allowing the immigrant living in any part of the world with access to the internet the opportunity to follow news in the home country in real time.

Annual religious celebrations, especially Islamic events convened by such Islamic organizations as the Sufi orders are also featured in these websites.

The forums on these sites are for the most part in French, ensuring therefore that participants are of a certain educational level; meanwhile the use of other languages such as English and to a lesser extent other European or Asian languages are a testimony to the worldwide expansion of young West African elite immigrant’s experience. Topics in these forums range from national and international politics to social and economic issues. Religion also occupies center stage in the discussions. Professionals and students also discuss about topics related to their areas of specialty interwoven with conversation about yearning for home.

Besides serving as a platform for sharing ideas however, the forums are also used as a tool to reconnect with fellow immigrants from the same country living within the same city or region. It is not unusual to come across forum “threads” started by newly arrived immigrants seeking people from their particular region of origin living nearby. Many networks were started that way.

Visits of religious luminaries from the home country often coinciding with some religious gatherings or events organized by expatriates belonging to the same religious organization - often a Sufi order - are also announced in these websites.

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<sup>22</sup> See Beth Anne Buggenhagen, “Senegalese” in *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, online [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)

Businesses targeting the immigrant markets or owned by immigrants often use these websites to advertise their products or services. These websites also allow travel agencies and real estate agencies serving the West African immigrant niche market to reach potential customers.

These almost exclusively privately-run websites, in a nutshell, allow the young West African immigrant elites to stay connected with home and build networks with their fellow immigrant countrymen living in far away places.<sup>23</sup>

When word of Amadou Cisse's murder reached the website, many threads were opened mourning his untimely and "unjust" death and channeling condolences from people all over the world addressed to his family and especially to his brother, himself a user of this forum. It was an opportunity for people who grew up with Cisse or who knew him from the different schools he frequented, to come forward and express their testimony about his qualities as a young Muslim.

## Conclusion

Throughout its history, the West African region has long been shaped by human migratory movements. These movements intensified during the post-colonial era, when they started to increasingly play a major role in defining social and economic dynamics in the newly independent countries. The protracted economic crises marked by a tightening public sector and long years of drought that first affected the rural areas in that region and eventually the urban middle class, intensified these migratory movements. From an internal migration, the phenomenon expanded then to the former *metropole* and other European cities before eventually reaching North America. Driven first by the search for better economic opportunities, the movement is increasingly fueled by the search for better education. The attitude towards immigration and its attendant religious and cultural issues from one country or continent to the next, dictate in many ways the way West Africans have publicly displayed their religious and cultural traditions. France's concept of secularity or *laïcité* that discourages any public display of religion have inhibited any notable expression of religious affiliation in the public sphere among Muslim immigrants from West Africa, whereas in the United States where such religious display are if not encouraged at least tolerated in public West African Muslims have built thriving communities structured around the common religious values, despite a relatively recent presence.

The growing presence of American institutions of higher learning in the West African region through the study abroad and exchange programs as well as the "cultural" diplomacy pursued by U.S. embassies in the region have further contributed to open up North America as a destination of choice for young West African students yearning for better educational opportunities.

Overall the immigrant community of French-speaking West Africa in the United States and in the West in general is becoming more and more conscious of the important role it plays for the development of its region of origin. From an economic point of view, the yearly remittances from that community to their different countries of origin have now surpassed

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<sup>23</sup> Almost every country is served by one website at least, Maliweb.net for Mali, Abidjan.net for the Ivory Coast, Seneweb.com for Senegal, Lefaso.net for Burkina Faso

development aid in volume. In many countries of French-speaking West Africa, the states have created ministerial cabinets specifically devoted to the immigrant community. From a political point of view, not only the suffrages from the immigrant community are very much coveted by politicians running for office but their ability to influence the decisions of their relatives in the home country is also recognized.

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