UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
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The Madness of Migration

An Ethnographic Account of Senegalese Migrants' Mobility and Lives in Buenos Aires

PhD thesis · 2018 · **Ida Marie Savio Vammen**

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PhD Thesis by Ida Marie Savio Vammen

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This thesis is dedicated to my dear parents Hans and Tinne Vammen.

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Prologue

> *France would be better for me but that door is closed, so is Italy. Now all my family is concentrating on getting me to Brazil or Argentina. Apparently, these are the only places you can go and live peacefully. There is not a lot of control and if you don't have a document nothing happens. In Italy or France – all over Europe – my family and others tell me how the police are constantly behind you, wanting to see your papers. My brothers in Argentina and Brazil have told me that there is no control. I will go where my brothers are.*

These words were uttered by Amadou, an aspiring migrant, on a late afternoon in spring 2014 on the fringes of a small town in the region of Thiés, Senegal. Amadou had left his job as a motor mechanic early to come and pick up Bernadette, my research assistant, and me at the local bus station. Although we had never met before I immediately recognized him. With his friendly facial expression and small wrinkles round his eyes, he resembled his younger brother, Omar, who I had come to know well during my previous fieldwork among street hawkers in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Omar had invited me to visit his family in Senegal and had helped to set up the meeting.

Amadou guided us on the short walk to his family's home along the main tarmac road and into a residential area that stretched out beyond it. As we walked through the area listening to Amadou and following his gestures, it became clear that migration had not only put its mark on the local landscape but also fuelled longings for mobility in him. Most family compounds in the area were one-storey buildings; however, in front of Amadou's home a large two-storey building was under construction. It clearly stood apart by rising high above the rest of the buildings on the street. It was owned by a Senegalese migrant living in Italy. He had just been back and put down enough money to finish it after several years of ongoing construction. A bit further down the road was yet another of these urban testimonies of achievement that were inscribed in and had reconfigured not only this town but many other urban areas in Senegal – testimonies that, with all their monumental spectacle, seem strangely detached from the hard work, sacrifice and money put into generating them. Pointing towards one of the other houses a bit further down the road, Amadou told us with longing

in his voice that the three sons who owned it had migrated to Latin America some years ago, just like his brothers. He himself was on the verge of following in their footsteps *pour chercher la fortune* – to make his fortune – by leaving his country for Argentina or Brazil. He hoped he would be able to do what other migrants had done for their families, but he also knew it would be difficult.

Through a low doorway in the brick wall that demarcated the public street from the yard, we entered into the family compound, where Amadou lived in a large L-shaped brick building with several rooms next to each other. At the far end, a group of smaller children were playing and a younger woman washed some plates at the water tap in front of the kitchen space. In the shade of the veranda, an old man sat calmly and watched the children while listening to rhythmic religious prayers on a small radio. Like many other households in Senegal, Amadou and Omar came from a polygamous extended household. Three generations were living under the same roof and the old man turned out to be the head of the household. Omar and Amadou's father had passed away more than ten years ago. Their mother had remarried this man and become his second wife and the family had moved in. We greeted the old man and Amadou's mother and withdrew to her small bedroom, away from the noise of the yard.

Sitting on his mother's marital bed, Amadou told me about his aspirations to leave for Latin America. He was eager to follow his two younger brothers, Omar and his new step-brother, who had already migrated to Argentina and Brazil, although he made it clear that he would prefer to stay and work in the local factory. However, Amadou explained that ']t]hey only hire their own family or people they know' and so, after three years of unsuccessful searching for a more secure and profitable job in Senegal, he was ready to go abroad. Yet Amadou had been delayed; he should already have left Senegal for Argentina, but his luck had failed him. A travel facilitator had gone off to Turkey with Amadou's passport and the money which he and a group of other men from the local area had paid in advance. Amadou was now waiting to receive a new passport so he could finally embark on his journey to Latin America, this time facilitated by a man with whom Omar, from Argentina, had put him in contact.

Like most of the other Senegalese migrants I had talked to in Argentina, embarking on the journey across the Atlantic to Latin America was not Amadou's first choice, despite the fact that his brothers were there. Amadou and his family had first tried to explore the option of going to Europe by mobilizing their social connections of kin and friends. He had a good friend in France who was, at first, willing to help him but it turned out to be too difficult to fulfil the requirements for legal entry to the country. This made Amadou and his family wonder whether Italy was another worthwhile option. Some of their family had already been living there for years but, yet again, restrictive migration legislation prevented him from joining them. Like most of the other migrants already in Argentina, Amadou considered the potentially lethal journey to Europe across the desert and the Mediterranean Sea, smuggled along as illegal migrants, to be too dangerous.

Amadou's journey was financed by money he had been able to save from his job at the local mechanics workshop, but he also depended on his older brother, a local schoolteacher who was in charge of the family's finances, as well as on his two brothers in Argentina and Brazil and his friend in France. 'When people help it gives me more will to succeed so I can quickly pay them back', he told me. Amadou calculated that he would pay the migration broker in charge of the trip around three million CFA francs (approximately 4,600 Euros) for the journey. Apart from that, he figured that he would not need much money because one of his younger brothers would help him to get started and if, for some reason, they did not, he was confident that other Senegalese migrants would help him. 'It is in our culture', he told me. 'If you are a good *talibe* then you know the way,' he said, referring to how he, as a follower of a Sufi cheikh within the Murid Sufi order in Senegal, could count on a dual alliance with God on the one hand and the network of religious peers who already knew their way around on the other.

It was during a Skype conversation with Amadou's younger brother, Omar, that I had learned about Amadou's plans to follow him to Argentina. I had met Omar in the bustling commercial zone of Once in Buenos Aires a few weeks after he arrived there in May 2013 and we had kept in contact after I returned to Denmark. I was surprised by this news, because Omar was one of the migrants who had been very outspoken about how disillusioned he was with Argentina. The dreams and prospects he had initially connected to his migration to the country had abruptly come up against

the reality he encountered on the streets of Buenos Aires. He often cursed his own naïvety and felt cheated by people in Senegal who had made him hope for much more. His precarious wandering life as a street vendor without a fixed place from which to sell his inexpensive copies of designer sunglasses was a constant worry for him. As a former bus driver, Omar was used to a small but quite steady daily income in Senegal. In Argentina, unlike many of the other migrants, he desperately tried to find what he considered to be 'proper' work in the construction or transportation sector. However, as an only-Wolof-speaking migrant, he had not had much luck in a highly competitive labor market filled with other flexible Spanish-speaking migrants from Argentina's neighbouring countries (especially Bolivia and Paraguay) and Peru. Despite Omar's experiences and struggles, he was now, along with his family in Senegal, suggesting that his older brother Amadou should join him. When we met again in Buenos Aires, this time in spring 2015, Omar explained to me that, by helping Amadou to migrate, some of the burden of his family's expectations was lifted from his own shoulders. Amadou was, after all, his older brother, and the family therefore naturally expected him to shoulder more responsibility.

From the other side of the Atlantic, Omar's struggles were perceived differently: measuring up the pros and cons, Amadou emphasised the following:

> *Life here is hard. Sometimes I have work but sometimes there is no work. I am continually up against people who try to take over my business, saying that they can do the same work, but for a cheaper price – so you never know. I think I will be better off there. I like to go out and explore how people live and get to know new ways. I know that, wherever I am, God is with me. God is also here but there it should be more possibile for me to help my family, save money and get ahead … I do have work and food here and I can help my mother but, if I leave, I might not only help my family better but also save some money. I know some people die while migrating and many I personally know have come home with nothing. But you can't blame them: only God knows your path and sometimes you go off, only to realize that your path is here in Senegal. Then you have to start again from nothing and endure the shame, instead of just staying on and on, suffering without finding your way. I know these risks but I strongly believe in God. I am willing to try. The problem here in Senegal is that you spend a lot of money, especially in relation to the women. If you have some money saved, then there is always a name-giving party or a wedding. My mother*

or another relative will come to me, I will give them some money and they will take it and go, but that money is never returned to me. I need a way to save money, not only to spend it – it is not possible here but I know that, over there, it is. I have heard that there are opportunities for people with my skills in Argentina or Brazil. I hope I can work doing what I am good at but, if that is not possible, I will just do what the others do. I will be with my brothers. Omar tells me it is not easy and that you have to work very hard. He tells me about all his problems and how he sometimes suffers but, as I see it, he is okay. He is looking for life and he is getting it.

So even though you know about all the problems, you still want to go? I asked.

Yes I want to go – I suffer more here. Here I suffer and earn only a very little. There, I will also suffer, so the suffering will be the same, but I will have the opportunity to earn more and hopefully save money.

What Amadou had also seen was how, within a few years of Omar and his other step-brother leaving for Latin America, life in the household had changed for the better. The local community had also noticed the change. The older generation in the household had retired and were now depending on their children's remittances to secure the household finances. After the brothers' migration, Amadou's mother and his father's first wife had both experienced better access to health care and economic resources. However, the flow of capital had also created increased competition between the two co-wives, who each had a son abroad. Amadou told us that he did not like the way in which his mother was put in an inferior position in comparison to his father's first wife. Compared with Omar's struggles in Argentina, her son was doing much better for himself, having secured a steady job at a slaughter house in Brazil and being able to send a fixed sum of money home every month, unlike Omar's scarce transactions from Argentina. Amadou was afraid that people in the small town would soon start gossiping about the fact that it was only the children of the first wife who knew how to work and help their kin. The prospect of the shame that people in the local community would ascribe to his mother and his family further fuelled his desire to seek work outside Senegal, in a place where his income could close the ever-widening resource gap between the co-wives or, even better, would enable his own mother to take the lead.

Two months after I returned to Denmark from Senegal, Omar wrote on Facebook that Amadou had arrived safely in Brazil and was now seeking employment.