

Remembering MOMAR-COUMBA DIOP: A Tribute to a Brilliant Scholar and a Generous Friend

Momar-Coumba Diop passed away on 9 July 2024, aged 73. He was a professor of sociology and political science at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar and one of the most respected scholars in that institution. He was based at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) where he would share space with researchers working in multiple disciplines. In fact, one of his traits that impressed me most after I started reading his work was how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary he was, so much so that it was hard to define his precise discipline. To use Hirschman's expression, Momar was adept at 'trespassing' across disciplinary boundaries with ease, always able to engage scholars as a real connoisseur of each of their different disciplines. This ability inspired me to move beyond the disciplinary boundaries of my development economics training and read more widely than I was accustomed to.

I had the privilege and honour of knowing him personally and professionally for almost three decades. Two great scholars of Senegal studies strongly recommended that I meet Momar and discuss my research with him: Ferrán Iniesta (University of Barcelona) and Donal Cruise O'Brien (SOAS), both longstanding friends of Momar. They told me in no uncertain terms that he would be a major source of guidance and inspira-

Carlos Oya

SOAS
University of London
United Kingdom

tion. When I first met him, in 1997, when I was embarking on my PhD fieldwork and had read some of his work, I expected to find a distant and busy academic who was probably tired of receiving so many PhD students with scant familiarity with Senegal. From the start I saw how genuine his interest in my research was, how much time he was ready to offer me for advice, how much depth he shared in every sentence, and how important he would become in my learning process.

Since that first encounter at his IFAN office, Momar was always one of my first 'stops' in my many trips to Dakar. I was privileged to contribute to one of his major works, *Sénégal (2000–2012)*, which was one of the key milestones in the long journey to study the trajectories of the Senegalese state and its relations with society, economy and polity. It continues an outstanding scholarly tradition and has become a crucial reference not only for the study of Senegal but more broadly for debates on African political economy and social change.

Momar was a visiting scholar at several prestigious academic institutions, which included the School of Oriental and African Studies

(SOAS) in London and the London School of Economics (LSE), where he had a very productive stay in 2014. While there, Momar made use of the British Library and the National Archives, examining the colonial archives. His excitement about these resources was infectious, and the way he was able to go through an incredible volume of colonial documentation with such enthusiasm reflected the intellectual stature of this remarkable Senegalese scholar. Beyond his archival work, his talent for exploring and dissecting large volumes of secondary sources was impressive.

For anyone who has an interest in Senegalese society, politics and the economy, Momar's body of work has to be central. Indeed, some of the best-known edited collections and monographs in this field have his name on them indicating his prominent role in their creation. Momar was undoubtedly an intellectual giant in Senegalese scholarship, someone who was widely respected, if not revered, by many social scientists and beyond. His oeuvre is truly impressive, as was his editorship of prominent collections. For example, as a doctoral student, I was first acquainted with his classic *Sénégal: Trajectoires d'un État (1960–1990)*, translated into English as *Senegal: Essays in Statecraft*, which provided the necessary background for me to embark on my study of the political economy of state interventions and policy reforms in Senegalese agri-

culture. His early work as a ‘*mouridologue*’, as Jean Copans would say, gave me critical insights into Mouride social organisation and the differences between its urban and rural manifestations, which prepared me for my fieldwork in some of the areas where the Mourides dominated large-scale farming.

Momar-Coumba Diop was not only a brilliant scholar but also a very generous, kind and loyal friend. This is perhaps the most important legacy in his life—how he welcomed friends and new scholars, how he nurtured them to understand and study the political economy of Senegal, its society and culture. He was a vivid exemplification of intellectual mentorship. African and non-African scholars enjoyed his academic hospitality, mentorship, guidance and persistent encouragement. He persuaded and guided

countless scholars, young and old, to contribute to many of his wonderful edited collections that became cornerstones for the study of Senegal’s society, economy and politics. He accomplished all this with a degree of humility that belied his achievements. The conscientious approach he demonstrated in any individual or collective project he was involved in manifested an outstanding degree of integrity. He was very demanding of the peer-review process he adopted for every edited collection and would never hesitate to request further revisions and changes that would improve the contributions.

Momar was an indefatigable scholar, always looking for new sources of inspiration, new perspectives and never afraid of engaging with contested debates. There was no pause in his academic trajectory. Every time

an intellectual project was close to conclusion he was already conceiving or starting a new one.

The last message I received from him, back in January 2024, was an example of his relentless passion for scholarship and intellectual engagement. He told me how, after some health troubles, he was looking forward to continuing his journey by updating the 1994 edition of the book *Le Sénégal et ses voisins*, and especially his ‘*grande synthèse*’, a very challenging project, in his own words, which focused on the political, cultural and social evolutions of Senegal since 1960. Not a small feat. He anticipated a ‘fat’ volume, based on the huge amount of evidence he had gathered and synthesised over several decades. That was Momar until his very last days.

