

## MOMAR-COUMBA DIOP, My Colleague and Friend<sup>1</sup>

I first met Momar in the Spring of 2008, during my PhD research in the Dakar region. With intervening meetings in London and Dakar, we last met in Dakar in December 2023. I experienced Momar as part of a formidable community in Senegal. During my first visits, Momar—along with other intellectuals like Ndeye Sokhna Gueye, Abdou Salam Fall, Papa Demba Fall, Serigne Mansour Tall, Penda Mbow, Aminata Diaw, Cheikh Oumar Ba, Adebayo Olukoshi, Omobolaji Olarinmoye and Alioune Diagne—left me ever grateful for their insights and guidance as I researched the dynamics and politics of Senegalese migrations. They were notable not only for their contributions to the theoretical and empirical scope of my thesis but also for their generosity in introducing me to people in various institutions and associations. This was particularly humbling because of my very limited language skills and inexperience as an early scholar.

This immersion in the intellectual life of Senegal continued in 2023, after a decade away, as though I had never left. It shaped for me a richer perspective of politics and ‘knowledge production’ than would have been possible with solely the combination of ethnographic research and theoretical and empirical literature that normally would make up the formal basis for academic writing. It was a scholarly community that had direct connec-

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tions with the state, institutions and social movements while sustaining genuinely autonomous research. In my Western experience, it had seemed impossible to have any direct relationship with ‘governance’ without being drawn into neoliberal modes of thinking and a detachment from social realities. Yet from Dakar I have continued to see the most critical and uncompromising research from intellectuals who have direct experience of the workings of political power.

My experiences and impressions are borne out by Momar’s foreword to the edited CRES-Karthala volume, *Le Sénégal sous Abdoulaye Wade: Le Sopi à l’épreuve de pouvoir* (2013). Here he set out the aim to document the trajectories of the state and its relationship with society since Senegal’s independence. He explained that, after he and Mamadou Diouf were recruited to Université de Dakar in the early 1980s, the question that preoccupied them was how to construct and defend their autonomy on an intellectual level. Their intellectual agenda had to be independent from that of foreign foundations, the Senegalese government and its so-called experts.

This autonomous agenda compels a careful analysis of state–society relations in their concrete historical circumstances without the dogmatic imposition of abstract ideology, certain Marxist and national forms of which Diop and Diouf were critical. An understanding of today’s inequalities, hierarchies and democratic deficiencies is enriched by Momar’s insights into the history of the Senegalese state. Among other literatures, this can be found in around a dozen edited works covering the presidencies of Abdou Diouf and Abdoulaye Wade, political power, regional relations, globalisation, structural adjustment, technologies and migrations. Any worthwhile study of the Senegalese state and politics demands engagement with Momar’s rich body of work. It was therefore an honour to contribute to his edited works on Senegal during the rule of Abdoulaye Wade.

These two volumes, published in 2013 by CRES and Éditions Karthala—*Sénégal (2000–2012): Les institutions et politiques publiques à l’épreuve d’une gouvernance libérale* and *Le Sénégal sous Abdoulaye Wade: Le Sopi à l’épreuve de pouvoir*, incorporated sixty-five contributors. Jean Copans, in his preface to the first volume, described the authors as part of a larger family of around two hundred, many of whom were at the start of their careers. This family did not constitute a school or a clan,

but represented the diversity of social sciences, themes, analytical perspectives, theories and methodologies. It became ‘a completely unique sociological and intellectual object’, studying the Senegalese state and nation and African studies more generally, catalysed by Momar and crucially rooted in Senegal, with the exception of some international collaborators.

In these two volumes, despite the diversity of their contributors, Jean Copans noted the prominence of a ‘return to the earth!’ theme—agriculture, land, the environment, climate change and local planning—at the same time as the theme of Senegal’s ‘pseudo-hypermodernisation’. My chapter in the second volume, although focused more on coastal livelihoods, fit the first theme. Examining the political economy of migration, largely to Europe, in the context of globalisation and borders, it focused on modes of accumulation and displacement in historic fishing communities. Rising sea levels were evident on a later return to Rufisque, while struggles over land, resources and the environment intensified nationally.

Earlier, Momar had articulated in his introduction to *Le Sénégal des migrations: Mobilités, identités et sociétés* (CREPOS-Karthala-ONU-Habitat, 2008) that the youth had a knowledge of *la débrouille*: trying to find a place in the informal sector, to do anything possible to survive, or leaving at all costs for wealthier places, despite the danger to their lives. This phenomenon reflected the three-decade

‘failure of development ambitions of the postcolonial state’, and the political and moral failings of ‘elders’. Such conceptualisations, also developed by Abdou Salam Fall, helped to explain the realities of young people ‘managing’ in a setting where factories had closed down, fishing agreements and overfishing had destroyed artisanal trade, and the cost of oil and food was rocketing. People could survive but little more than that, held back from any further ambitions, and with families often dependent on unstable remittances.

The understanding of migration that developed in Senegal acknowledged the distinctions between households and communities, the marked differences between the migration dynamics in villages only kilometres apart, and the varied channels of mobility that had developed and changed around the country. Yet migration had to be understood within ‘the global’ to see the role that international connections, imposed food prices, trade agreements and deindustrialisation played in it.

Momar observed in *Le Sénégal des migrations* the hardening of immigration politics and the growth of surveillance technologies in Europe, which now increasingly constitute a kind of global apartheid, with historical migratory exchanges disrupted and disrespected, and looming (or existing) fascism in many receiving countries. During my last visit, the severe sociopolitical consequences of encroachment by the European migration regime were striking.

The times I spent in Dakar have undoubtedly helped me to develop both an understanding of what constitutes meaningful research and collaboration and a will to ‘pay forward’ all the help and support I received as a PhD student and since, though I am not sure this is achievable. The last time we met, along with his friend Pascal Bianchini, Momar was a force of energy and kindness. It was heartwarming to read Momar’s introduction of me, in a message to Aly Tandian, as his ‘collègue et amie’. How deeply saddening it is to think that the next time I return to Senegal it will no longer be *Le Sénégal sous Momar-Coumba Diop*, as Jean Copans put it in a recent dedication.<sup>2</sup> While to my mind, he could not easily be isolated from the family and community that he belonged to and cherished, he was the only person I contacted every visit, and he responded as though I had never been away.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this tribute appeared in: Cross, H. 2023. ‘Tribute to Momar-Coumba Diop’, in Diallo, I., Thioub, I., Ndiaye, A.I. and Benga, N. (eds.) *Comprendre le Sénégal et l’Afrique d’aujourd’hui. Mélanges offerts à Momar-Coumba Diop*, Paris and Dakar: Karthala, pp. 127–130.
2. Diallo, I., Thioub, I., Ndiaye, A.I. and Benga, N. (eds.) *Comprendre le Sénégal et l’Afrique d’aujourd’hui. Mélanges offerts à Momar-Coumba Diop*, Paris and Dakar: Karthala, pp. 51–64.