

# Senegalese Immigrant Entrepreneurial Entanglements and Religious-Cultural Continuities

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## Abstract

Senegalese entrepreneurship in South Africa is a typical example of how entrepreneurial entanglements are beginning to pose huge challenges to the theorization and understanding of modern African forms of business. This group of immigrant entrepreneurs finds it difficult to separate the use of charms and magic in the day-to-day running of their businesses. The invocation of magical means to promote a modern form of business among the Senegalese immigrant entrepreneurs of South Africa directly undermines purely economic and scientific explanations to business success. Modernity suggests a breaching and disenchantment of the world, which is premised on a break of tradition and magical means to a more progressive, technologically infused approach to the world. The ideology of entrepreneurial success viewed from purely a modernity perspective appears to be misleading. Our argument is that the practice of enchantment is embedded in the ethos of modern business with a significant interplay between the two. This religio-economic behaviour in South Africa is beginning to create its own enchantment with its unique origin which has been (until now) covertly embedded in the making of modern prosperity among Senegalese entrepreneurs. In this article we discuss such enchantment and it is hoped that this will change the way immigrant entrepreneurial success is viewed.

Since the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa, new forms of social, economic, and cultural interactions have emerged. Among the observable interaction is entrepreneurship. The different migrant groups in South Africa's entrepreneurial space seem to exhibit unique approaches to business yet one can also observe commonalities. People in transnational environments are often united by the migratory experience but very often utilise what their different religious beliefs and cultures have to offer in this new environment to their advantage, which differentiates them from other groups of immigrants. Throughout their transnational experience, a cultural exchange is taking place. Some develop hybrid methods of entrepreneurship (see Ojong 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009; Ojong & Moodley 2005) while others simply use counter-current modes of business (such is the case with Senegalese entrepreneurs, as will be discussed in this article).

The kind of culture to which a people are predisposed determines what choices they will make in life (Ojong 2007). The cultural milieu in which individuals are nurtured is crucial in explaining their involvement and success in entrepreneurship. The Senegalese have a mentality and disposition that favors commercial success. While this explains why Senegalese migrants go into entrepreneurial activities while in diaspora, it does not explain why they should have this kind of predisposition in the first place. Cultural norms and practices are highly influential as the Senegalese immigrant chooses an entrepreneurial means of livelihood. In order to demonstrate this function of culture in this context we will present some of the specific cultural elements of the Senegalese people which have fostered a mentality for business.

## **Background of Senegalese Entrepreneurship**

Senegalese people in transnational spaces have been noted for their business acumen (Tidiani 2007). In Senegal, outward migration was the preserve of traders. Buggenhagen (2001) noted that young Senegalese men turn to transnational trade networks in search of prosperity and in the interest of embarking on a spiritual journey; the call of the shaykh speaks to their sense of alienation and their desire to acquire the means to achieve adult masculinity. Senegalese businessmen traveled abroad to import goods and those who intended to stay longer abroad most often went to France (Adepoju 1995: 98). Several factors propelled the increased outward migration of Senegalese people after 1994. The country started experiencing the effects of the structural adjustment plan imposed by the IMF and the currency (CFA) was devalued. The impact was felt by both those employed by the government as well as the self-employed. Senegalese men started emigrating as a means of extricating themselves from the socio-economic pressures caused by the above mentioned.

For many years Senegalese have been involved in international business in other African countries, Europe, North America and Asia (Tidiani 2007). Their involvement however was limited to repeated trips to purchase items to be sold in Senegal. Other visible activities include the practice of street vending in foreign countries (Adepoju 1995). In recent times Senegalese businessmen are no longer limiting their international activities to importing goods, but are increasingly seeing migration as an option that may enrich and fulfill their lives and the lives of their families. An increasing number of Senegalese migrants are getting involved in local businesses of their respective host country. Ross (1995) reported that many Senegalese are establishing businesses in Italy, Ivory Coast, the United States and South Africa, while Adepoju (2004) remarked that a large proportion of Senegalese migrants in the world today are commercial migrants.

Many Senegalese entrepreneurs have migrated to South Africa and are currently carrying out businesses in KwaZulu-Natal (where this research was conducted). Prior to 1990, the apartheid legislation reserved the cities of Durban, Empangeni and Richards Bay exclusively for white residents and the kind of shops that were to be found there catered for the needs and interests of white people alone. Some of these shops were Woolworths, Foschini and Miladys. After Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, blacks began to gain entrance into these cities. After the first democratic elections in 1994, these cities entered a new phase of development. Formerly white-owned shops began to close down because white people no longer felt safe with the increasing numbers of black people living, working and shopping legitimately. White-owned businesses began to move out to the suburbs. This relocation particularly affected clothing shops. Senegalese immigrants who were forced by apartheid laws to be located in black townships like Ulundi took the opportunity of the changing demographics to start their entrepreneurship in the cities. In Durban, Richards Bay, Empangeni, Ulundi and Stanger, Senegalese men have now established businesses with an observable increase over the past six years (many have established two or three small franchises, as will be shown later). For the purpose of this article, thirty Senegalese men were interviewed utilising the snowball or referral method. Twenty of the research participants were selected from Durban (most are clustered in the Durban city centre), four from Empangeni, two from Stanger, two from Richards Bay and two from Ulundi. Informal, unstructured and in-depth interviews constituted the method of data collection. Life histories from ten of the research participants enabled us to get detailed information which we used in exploring the cultural endowment theory and its applicability to Senegalese entrepreneurship in South Africa. Personal descriptions given by the participants provide an integrated picture of religion and Senegalese culture. All interviews were conducted at the participants'

shops since these were the only convenient places due to their busy schedule. Interviews were conducted in English, though because some of the research participants (especially the new-comers) could not express themselves properly in English, they were allowed to speak in French (both researchers are fluent in English and French languages).

All of these entrepreneurs lack formal Western education and can only eke out a living by getting involved in business (in the informal sector) in South Africa. This leaves them with no formal employable skills or know-how to secure jobs that will enable them to meet their responsibilities and aspirations. Thus entrepreneurship to them is an alternative that will fetch them the money they need. Because they did not acquire formal Western schooling, they were groomed into business at an early age.

Peberdy and Rogerson (2000) argue that economic recession has led to diminishing market opportunities for nationals and non-nationals. With this increasing unemployment, coupled with the need to survive in diasporic spaces, migrants tend to see informal sector entrepreneurial activity as a means to an end. Lack of formal Western education coupled with the conditions of the South African market leaves these entrepreneurs with no other options than to turn to business. The economic recession has led to high rates of unemployment and even the job opportunities that are available are not well-paid (for instance domestic workers, security guards and shop attendants). Given that these people are migrants it becomes very difficult for them to accept such menial jobs as they need to take care of themselves and still remit back home. Becoming self-employed is the only way through which these migrants can eke out a living in South Africa.

Adepoju (1995) shows that migrants get involved in entrepreneurial activities due to lack of jobs in the host countries. To him it is difficult for migrants to secure jobs at the initial stage of migration due to the fact that at this stage most migrants do not have the necessary or required documents to enable them to secure jobs. Peberdy and Rogerson (2000) have argued that migrants see entrepreneurship as a stopgap. Self-employment is an important earning option for migrants living in South Africa. Specific communities such as the Senegalese exhibit even higher rates of self-employment. Literature on immigrant entrepreneurship in South Africa positions African migrants as hawkers and/or street vendors. This article demonstrates the extent to which some Senegalese entrepreneurs have moved from selling shoes, handbags and clothes in flea markets and streets of Durban, Richards Bay, Empangeni, Stanger and Ulundi to owning shops at shopping malls in these areas. As more Senegalese expand their business opportunities by owning two to three chain shops, (for example: Top Classic, Ladies Corner, City Fashion, MC Exclusive) we expect to see a shift in literature and a repositioning of African migrant entrepreneurs in the centre of discourses.

## Why Senegalese Turn to Business

Most of the Senegalese businessmen nurture the idea that in order for a person to be successful and become rich, that individual must engage in business. A commonly held perception exists that they cannot get the money they need to enable them to eradicate poverty from their families and from the country in general by working for someone else. This is evident in the case of one respondent Abdulaye. Abdulaye grew up in a business environment and it was his father who told him that in order for him to become rich he must be involved in business. Because of the mindset that one can become rich without necessarily becoming formally educated, Abdulaye believes that going to school is a waste of time and resources. He came to South Africa in 2002 because firstly, as a young man, he had the ambition of becoming one of the most successful businessmen in Senegal and, secondly, because he had heard from many who had immigrated and become involved in businesses abroad how they quickly earned a lot of money within a short period of time. When he failed to acquire a visa to Europe, he decided to come to South Africa which was relatively easier. He is married and has two children. He comes from a family of eight (five girls and three boys). His two brothers are currently living in Spain while his sisters are all married in Senegal. His intention is to accumulate a lot of money and go back home to become a renowned businessman; this is the reason why he left his wife and children back in Senegal. While in South Africa he realized that although he is involved in the same line of business he was involved in back in Senegal, the economies and mentality of the clients are different. He reckons that back in Senegal, people bought clothes, shoes and handbags only during festive seasons like “fete du mutton,” national day, weddings, “Tabasku,” and New Year’s day. These were the only times when business was booming. But in South Africa people buy on a daily basis and the market never gets saturated. Before he came to South Africa he sold his shop and together with his savings he was able to have some start-up capital.

He opened his first shop at the Workshop, a flea market in Durban next to a Virgin Active Health facility. After only two months he was able to accumulate enough money to open another shop in West Street. He opened his first shop without any problem, but when he tried to open his second shop in West Street, a more regularized section of the city, he needed the proper documentation to proceed. To solve this problem he married a South African woman in order to securing a permanent residence permit, though he does not live with the woman. He is currently applying for citizenship so that he can properly infiltrate the business sector of the economy. He is currently the owner of three MC Exclusive shops in Durban.

Declining economy and extreme poverty has led Senegalese young people to increasingly becoming entrepreneurial individuals who buy and sell in the

urban/global informal and formal economies. Because the informal economy is intensely competitive for both buyers and sellers, they rely on social networks, various forms of reciprocity and trust in order to perform work (Scheld 2007). Culture forms an integral part of human existence. Each and every grown individual is nurtured in a particular culture and this contributes tremendously towards his/her level of socialisation and the choices s/he makes in life. The Senegalese have a culture of business; they are nurtured in an environment devoted to commerce.

Cultural predisposition is thus one of the reasons behind migrant entrepreneurship but it is not enough to explain the successes experienced by Senegalese entrepreneurs abroad, as this requires resources and skills of a particular nature. Most Senegalese people learn and become entrepreneurs at home in Senegal, which as a nation has long been devoted to commerce. When Senegalese emigrate from their homeland they take with them any skills or successful methodologies they may have obtained. Most of the Senegalese entrepreneurs were businessmen at home and think it is only wise for them to continue in the same light, since, according to them, they are already business experts and thus will excel even outside of their country.

Volery (2007), quoting Waldinger et al. (1990), suggests that the development of migrant entrepreneurship cannot be traced back to one single characteristic that is responsible for the entrepreneurial success of migrant entrepreneurs. Volery argues that the success of migrant entrepreneurs depends on a complex interaction between opportunity structures and group resources. He calls this the interactive model. One therefore asks the question that, if migrants who are predisposed to and have a mentality for business are put together in the same economic milieu, why will all of them not go in for the same kind of business? Boissevain et al. (1990) try to explain this variation by arguing that opportunity structures should be analysed both on a national and local level. These authors further argue that the variation is also due to the fact that some migrant entrepreneurs do not have the intention of living in a particular area of settlement on a permanent basis but for only an extended period, while others just want to make money and go back home as soon as possible, and still others have no intention to return to their homeland. These issues often have a direct effect on entrepreneurial activities. For example, migrant entrepreneurs who do not intend to live in the area of settlement for a long time set up businesses that are easily portable and allow them to return to their homelands. They accomplish this by acquiring skills or assets that can be readily transferred across geographical regions. These factors have influenced scholars, such as Volery (2007), who argue that migrant entrepreneurship is usually characterized by low innovativeness. Although the literature goes some length to explain the variation in migrant entrepreneurship, it is not quite clear. The Senegalese entrepreneurs

do not follow Boissevain et al.'s (1990) argument since the kinds of businesses they start are not determined strictly by the length of time they plan to stay in a particular area. It is also influenced by the path of business in which they were previously involved.

The Senegalese men are dependent on buying and selling goods because it is a path they know. "I eat my peas with honey. I have done it all my life. It makes 'em taste quite funny, but it keeps them on the knife—an old Bostonian jump roping rhyme" (Page 2006). Using "Path Dependence" as an analytical leverage to explain why all the Senegalese businessmen are in the fashion or clothing businesses would mean that current and future involvement of Senegalese in the South African entrepreneurial environment would depend on the paths of previous actions and decisions of those in business. Path dependency theory stipulates that a small initial advantage along the way could alter the course of history (David 1985). According to Page (2006), making a choice or taking an action puts in place a set of forces or complementary institutions that solidify that choice, making it the preferred course of action. Path dependency may help us partly understand why Senegalese entrepreneurs are found in the same kinds of businesses but is insufficient because of their entanglement with religious/magical practices.

### **Senegalese Entrepreneurship and Religion/Magic**

The direct relationship between entrepreneurship and religion is not clear. A study done among professional Ghanaian hairdressers demonstrated that religious beliefs lie at the shadow of successful immigrant businesses (Ojong 2008). In their effort to survive in a foreign land, Senegalese entrepreneurs have drawn from their religious beliefs to create and successfully manage their businesses. This section of the paper intends to demonstrate how religious ideologies substantially affect economic behaviour. This research shows that religious beliefs and practices are currently affecting and influencing entrepreneurship in the South African business environment. In anthropological literature, it is difficult discussing any form of magic without relating it to witchcraft (see Luhrmann 1989).<sup>1</sup> Yet any attempt to discuss Senegalese entrepreneurship from a framework of witchcraft would be grossly erroneous.

The boundaries that divide the realm of magic with that of modernity appear to have been widened by literature, yet observation proves that these boundaries are blurred in modern forms of business. The practice of entrepreneurship has been plotted as a singular process; it is either "traditional" or "modern." In the same light, people and their activities are seen as either civilized or savage (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Coronil 1997; Ferguson 1999; and Geschiere 1997). This appears to have been a product of scientific imagination. This

angle of reasoning stipulates that when a society is exposed to modernity, it will abandon its magical means of viewing reality. In reality, these dichotomies have never existed in the African continent. This academic practice of placing process and practice in terms of stages made it difficult to properly understand African systems of business, though many developments have helped to correct this. Meyer (2003: 163) alluded to the use of magical means for enhancing prosperity in her ethnography on how many traders use “juju” in order to attract customers. Debrunner (1961: 71), cited in Meyer (2003: 164), reported that traders were regarded as people who made money through magical means and were therefore able to wield power over less rich and less influential people. Current literature on African migrant entrepreneurship in South Africa fails to capture the embedded nature of both economic and magical rationalities. As the ethnography will show, Senegalese entrepreneurs apply both rational and magical means to stay in business.

The religion of the Senegalese people exposes them to a well established culture of trade that favors entrepreneurship. Many Muslims are inspired to become businessmen through the example of the prophet Muhammad and his wife, Khadija, who were in business together. He and his wife participated petty trade that is; buying and retailing some items in the flea market. The Senegalese entrepreneurs’ we interviewed for the project believe that the prophet Muhammad was not involved in business purely for financial gain, but simply that he aimed to lead by example, demonstrating that business is a noble profession. The entrepreneurs also agree that through Muhammad’s example they learn that formal education is not necessary to succeed in business.

Religion plays a significant role in the choice and pursuit of entrepreneurship among Senegalese immigrants. As people migrate with ideas, the Senegalese people carry along their beliefs and attitudes to the country of abode. The thirty research participants for this project all participate in selling goods related to the fashion industry: clothes, shoes, handbags, leather belts and wristwatches. This niche formation is partly as a result of this religious belief system, and dependence on a path with which they are familiar, coupled with the fact that migrants usually rely on networks as they begin the process of entrepreneurship in a foreign country. These Senegalese migrants (all of whom lack formal Western education) believe they will receive divine favor in business, following in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad.

### **The Modus Operandi of Senegalese Entrepreneurship**

Senegalese businessmen experience and understand the concept of bounded solidarity (the sense of solidarity with a group of people because of shared common experience) and enforceable trust (the existence of social obligations that provide



group members with economic advantages and opportunities). Generally, these concepts are practiced in all African communities. In this case, however, their shared religious beliefs strengthen these concepts and increase the potential for the realization of these concepts. They claim that the Islamic religion advocates for solidarity. One of our informants indicated that if a Senegalese person travels from a village like Koki to Dakar for instance, the person does not need to worry about food or accommodation whilst there. All s/he needs to do is to look for the house of a Muslim, and once there all he has to say is “as-sallm lalaykum” (“peace be upon you”) and if they reply “wa lalaykum as-sallm” (and peace be upon you) the person will be asked to introduce himself/herself and he will be offered food, drinks and a place to sleep even though he is not an acquaintance. Senegalese immigrants have migrated with the spirit of solidarity, and this has enabled them to create niche markets. They assist each other spiritually, morally and financially. In South Africa, newcomers and those who are still struggling at the margin are loaned money without any interest by their fellow Muslim entrepreneurs to enable them to start up businesses and only repay when their businesses are stabilized. These entrepreneurs do hire South Africans to work in their shops but never allow them work at the pay point; they only entrust such responsibilities to their fellow Senegalese. Because they operate as a group in procurement of goods from Bangkok, whenever a shop owner travels abroad to buy goods, his fellow Senegalese will oversee his shop and work at the money counter until he returns. The Senegalese, however, do not have a monopoly on this market—they share it with other aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly Chinese immigrants. This has led to tense competition. The challenges of competing in the marketplace have led Senegalese entrepreneurs to use alternative methods, such as employing the use of charms from their home country to give them an advantage over their competitors in the market.

Abdulaye uses charms as a success strategy for his businesses. He believes that all Senegalese businessmen use charms to attract customers to their shops. As a result, if he realizes that many customers are not buying from him he uses charms to lure them. He said that if other businessmen attract his customers, he uses charms to lure them back and attract many more. Cisse, who came to South Africa in 2005 and owns a shop at the Workshop in Durban believes that if one has furnished a shop with the type of goods that people require for the season and people are not buying, then something mystical is happening. Under such circumstances, he will visit a Marabou (religious leader) and collect charms to bath with and some to apply in his shop. Mo also came to South Africa in 2005 and owns a shop at the workshop. The only way he copes with the competition at the Workshop (everyone here sells the same kind of goods) is to consult with the “chef religieux” (religious leaders) from Senegal. He believes that if he does not consult them and collect charms he will never prosper. Ibrahim came to

South Africa in 2000 and was later joined by his two brothers in 2003 and 2005, respectively. He owns three shops in the South Beach area in Durban and each of them manages a shop. Ibrahim uses charms in all of his shops because he believes that he has to protect himself and his businesses from the charms of other competitors. He says that if other Senegalese entrepreneurs stop using charms he will also stop using them.

Some Senegalese entrepreneurs travel to Senegal once every year (especially the ones located in Empangeni, Stanger, Richards Bay) to collect charms from Marabouts to ensure that they prosper in business. A common belief is that Marabouts should not travel abroad, and if one is seeking spiritual advice then s/he must journey to meet the Marabouts. Others, however, pool money together so that they can invite the Marabou to come and provide charms for them and give spiritual guidance. Some of these entrepreneurs had been consulting Marabouts while in Senegal. They believe that Marabouts get their powers from the Quran. Four entrepreneurs in Durban initially had the idea of inviting a Marabou from home and when they mentioned it to others, five more were interested. Nine of them grouped together and paid the airfare for Musa (the chef religieux) to visit South Africa, which generated interest from many Senegalese entrepreneurs. They all paid Musa at their discretion as a token of appreciation for what he did for them.

We met Musa in 2009 in Durban as we were completing the study. He explained that he goes to Spain, Italy, Germany and other countries where Senegalese entrepreneurs are found and helps them with charms to succeed in their businesses. He insisted that he only goes upon invitation. Schwartz (1980) asserts that the internationalization of magic seems to have occurred since colonial times because the influence of sorcerers extends beyond national borders. Like Musa for example lives in Senegal with his two wives and nine children and travels from one country to another re-enforcing the charms of his clients and creating transnational ties with his home country. He lives in each of these countries for one month and then returns to Senegal. Musa adorns himself with talisman on his hands to assure his clients that he is a Muslim Marabou. He supplies his clients with concoctions made from herbs and the roots of plants from Senegal. Usually the concoctions are given with instructions to bathe with it and/or sprinkle it in the four corners of their shop. After supplying the concoctions, he prays for them so that Allah will bless them. He told us that his powers are strictly from the Quran, which he acquires by reading and keeping to the rules and regulations (*sharia*). Musa claims that the Quran permits the use of concoctions to grow one's business as long as it is for the good of the people and no one gets hurt in the process. He believes that even Muhammed and Khadijah used charms for their businesses to prosper. All the Senegalese entrepreneurs interviewed believe that selling bags, clothes and shoes is good

for them because both Muhammed and his wife were involved in business. They were great business people and serve as role models for Muslims. For them, their business is the business of Allah.

The use of magic in the market place is not a new phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa (Meyer 2003). In Senegalese entrepreneurship in South Africa, magic and economics are covertly intertwined and lie at the centre of their entrepreneurial endeavour. They perceive the use of charms as the economic secrets of their country. This perceived economic secret is highly protected and used only among Senegalese entrepreneurs. Musa told us “*ca c’est donne les secrets economiqué de mon pays a quelqu’un d’autre* (I am revealing the economic secrets of my country to others).”

## Conclusion

Our research demonstrates the intermingling of entrepreneurship and religious beliefs/practices. We argue that Senegalese immigrant entrepreneurs use magical means to promote their modern forms of business. They have infiltrated the modern shopping malls in South Africa and embedded magic with marketing strategies to become critical components of the business sector of the economy. Magical means of livelihood has been broadly seen as a traditional or uncivilized affair, completely separated from the domain of the modern and in some quarters largely seen as fiction or a lie. Our intention is not to trivialize and overlook critical dimensions of prior understanding but to state clearly that this presupposition constitutes the very basis on which Senegalese entrepreneurship is operated. They have incorporated magic into their businesses and it now lies at the core of their practice.

## Notes

1. This is ritual which is motivated by a desire to obtain a specific effect, magic being seen as the attempt to manipulate supernatural or spiritual forces or agencies. According to Malinowski (1948), magic is resorted to when technology does not permit people to ensure the outcome of their actions. According to Evans-Pritchard (1937), witchcraft is the inherent power to harm other persons by supernatural means.

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