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Alhamdoulillah: The Use of the Car Rapide as a Living Symbol of Senegal

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Alhamdoulillah: The Use of the Car Rapide as a Living Symbol of Senegal

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Art History

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Dedication

To all of my friends and family here in Senegal and on the other side of the ocean, I would not be here without your love and continuous support.

Thank you to my wonderful host family, for giving me a place to call home even when home felt so far away.

To the wonderful staff of SIT Senegal, thank you so much for all the time and energy you put into making our semester so incredible. It would not have been possible without your guidance, patience, and kindness.

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Abstract

The *car rapide* is an inescapable part of daily Senegalese life. With their brightly painted decorations and their sheer number lining the streets of Dakar, car rapides have become a symbol of Senegal. Images of these vehicles can be found on postcards, in graffiti murals on the street, in guidebooks, and in artwork. The car rapides provide a picturesque image of Senegal for tourists, but for most local Senegalese people, they are seen as a necessary evil. In this study, I investigated all aspects of car rapide culture in Dakar, specifically, how because of their physical aesthetic and image, the car rapide has become a symbol of Senegal. Because of the Senegalese oral culture and tradition, I decided that the best way to exhibit my findings would be by writing a creative fiction narrative where the car rapide itself is given the opportunity to speak.

Key Words: Transportation, Design and Decorative Arts, Cultural Anthropology

Introduction

Growing up in New York City, I have always been fascinated by public transportation. My daily commutes on the subway were oftentimes my favorite part of the day. While riding on the subway, one encounters all kinds of eccentric, colorful characters, however, the subway in itself is not aesthetically interesting or beautiful. In contrast, the colorful car rapides which roam the streets of Dakar are impossible to miss both because of their sheer number and their impressive color and décor. Senegal is a country that prides itself on its arts and culture whether that be through music, dance, literature, or visual arts. Art is everywhere in Senegal. It can be found in the markets, on the walls in the form of graffiti and other street art, in artists studios and museums, and of course, on car rapides. One can learn much by looking at the art of a particular culture. Arguably, one could learn even more by examining aspects of a culture that are central to the everyday lives of the people of the country, such as public transportation. Because of their striking appearance, the image of the car rapide has lent itself to become a symbol of Senegal and an integral part of the tourist experience when visiting Dakar.

The car rapides were one of the first things I took note of upon arrival in Senegal. I found them interesting and fun. I was intrigued yet also intimidated. It was not until about a month after my arrival in Senegal when I finally took my first car rapide ride. We were traveling from Point E to Sandaga.¹ I hopped on board and took a seat on a bench just behind the driver's seat, right next to a window. Once I was actually on a car rapide, I realized that I really had been intimidated for no reason. I expected that being a *toubab*² on a car rapide would no doubt attract lots of unwanted attention. However, I was

¹ Point E is a neighborhood in Dakar. Sandaga is a large market in downtown Senegal.

² "Toubab" is the Wolof word for "white person."

pleasantly surprised to find that we were left alone. Not only that, but people went out of their way to help us out. One woman who was also traveling to Sandaga took us under her wing and kept us updated about our whereabouts and guided us about which car to get on when we had to switch cars. Driving through Dakar, sticking my head out the window to feel the breeze, I felt like I was truly a part of the beautiful chaos that is Dakar. In the past month, I have held on for dear life as I hung precariously from the back of a car rapide, I have had the passenger next to me propose to me, I have sat down only to realize that there were ten sleeping chickens under the bench across from me. Any number of strange, yet wonderful situations can happen on the car rapide at any moment. The car rapide is a mini Senegalese society on wheels, and after my month with the car rapide, I feel as though I can truly say, “Man Senegalaise laa.”³

Background

Senegal has always been a country that placed great value on the cultural and artistic endeavors of its people. It is because of Senegal’s rich cultural history that I chose to come here in the first place. By electing Leopold Sédar Senghor, a renowned scholar and poet, as the first president after independence in 1961, Senegal established itself as a country that recognized the importance of preserving and encouraging its unique creative and cultural contributions and fostering the growth and minds of future generations.⁴

Senghor is oftentimes associated with the concept of *négritude*. In his speech, “The Spirit of Civilization, or the Laws of African Negro Culture,” Senghor discusses these ideas and

³ Wolof phrase meaning “Me, I am Senegalese.”

⁴ Léopold Senghor, “The Spirit of Civilization, or the Laws of African Negro Culture,” in *Western African History*, ed. Robert O. Collins (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1990), 131.

how important African arts and culture will be for the future of African social and political identities.

The ideas that Senghor discusses in his famous speech are reflected in many aspects of every day Senegalese life. It seems natural that in a country that prides itself on its advances in the arts that this interest in the arts would be seen in all aspects of life including public transportation. Such an aesthetically beautiful public transportation vehicle naturally lends itself to becoming a symbol for the nation. The car rapide is depicted on postcards, in visual arts, in films, and more. Miniature painted car rapides and souvenirs with the image of the car rapide are popular souvenirs for tourists. After noticing details like this during my first couple months in Dakar, I felt ready to explore more about the car rapide through the lens of Senegalese life and values.

Methodologies

After choosing the car rapide as my subject, I really struggled with the best way to present my information. Personally, I excel in projects that allow me to use my creative side and put my own personal touch on my work and I wanted to find a way to convey my information in a unique and creative way. Eventually, I decided to write a creative narrative where I could give voice to the car rapide. Senegal is an oral culture with a long history of storytelling and oral tradition. I thought that in light of this, a story would be the best way to present my findings with regards to local beliefs and ideas. Additionally, due to the vast amounts of outsider viewpoints and opinions about the car rapide, I thought it would be interesting to give the car rapide an opportunity to tell its own story.

Once I had decided on what form my finished product would take, I used several different methods to obtain the maximum amount of information for my project. My main methodologies are recounted in the explanations below.

Secondary Research

I spent several afternoons at the West African Research Center looking for background and contextual information and research. It was hard to find research on the car rapides specifically since it is not a topic that has often been looked into, but I did find some valuable information which provided me with solid background information to set my topic within the Senegalese context. I also used online research databases that I have access to through my home university. At the advice of my advisor, I spent one afternoon at the library of the Ecole Nationale des Arts where I found a memoire written by a past student about the car rapide which proved to be very helpful.

Since I was interested in the use of the car rapide as a symbol of Senegal, I spent one afternoon at the cinema of the Ministry of Culture with my advisor. We watched the film *TGV*, directed by Moussa Touré, about a group of people traveling to Guinea in a car rapide and the difficulties they encounter along the way. While the film did not entirely pertain to my topic, it was interesting to see how the car rapide has been utilized in various forms of art and media.

Participant Observation

Because of the sheer number of car rapides in Dakar, simply walking down the street and observing the car rapides driving down the road, I was able to actively observe my subject in its natural environment. A few times, I sat outside the door of my

apartment in Mermoz and watched the car rapides go by, taking note of their frequency, decoration, and how many passengers appeared to be on board. I spent roughly twenty hours of participant observation on the car rapides themselves. I took it to and from school every morning and tried my best to take it to my interviews and research opportunities as well. My goal for ISP period was to take one car rapide or, at the very least, take one form of public transportation every day. I met this goal and I think it was a central aspect of my research. By taking the car rapide, I was integrated not only into the culture of the car rapide, but also the much larger world of general public transportation in Dakar.

Interviews

I conducted a total of seven formal interviews, in addition to several more informal interviews (See Figure 1). Through the interviews I conducted, I tried to cover many different aspects of the car rapide culture in Dakar. Overall, I would say that interviews were my main source of information and the people I spoke to were central to my research. I had a general set of interview questions which I asked every person I spoke to, but I also wrote personalized questions for each informant before each of my more formal interviews. In addition to my more formal interviews, I spent an afternoon at the Lat Dior terminal downtown conducting more informal interviews with the car rapide *apprentis*.⁵ The apprentices were very friendly and more than happy to talk to me and answer all of my questions. They invited me into their cars which fostered a more discussion-based environment where conversation flowed and my prepared questions

⁵ Young men who are responsible for collecting the money and communicating with the driver where and when to stop the vehicle

were not necessary. I also spent an afternoon talking to the car rapide painters in their workshop in Medina and some of the artisans at the Soumbédioune artisanal village where I discussed their use of the car rapide as a symbol in their work and about the popularity of the car rapide as a symbol for tourists. I tried as often as I could to strike up conversation with my fellow passengers, but for the most part I decided that it was better to let people go about their business without me disturbing their commute.

During each of my interviews I took notes and if the setting was appropriate I recorded the interviews. With my recorded interviews, I spent time transcribing and translating the interviews to reinforce important ideas. This was helpful because it allowed me to notice similarities between conversations and helped me identify central themes and make connections.

Advantages/Disadvantages

The car rapide is an integral part of daily Senegalese life. The streets of Dakar are lined with car rapides at all hours of the day. Because of this, it was easy to become integrated with the object of my research. By simply walking down the street or commuting to school in the morning, I was able to actively participate and take note of public transportation culture, specifically car rapide culture in Dakar. Another advantage I had was because of the prevalence of the car rapide in daily Senegalese life, almost everyone has an opinion or something to say about the car rapide, making it simple to collect data about popular opinion about my subject.

While it was very simple to conduct observational research, finding secondary research was much more difficult. Though I was able to find some sources, they were hard to locate and oftentimes either outdated or in French. I would say that the lack of

background research specifically on the car rapide was my biggest disadvantage with the project.

Limitations

As with any big research project, I faced several challenges that I had to overcome throughout the course of the ISP period. I would say that my biggest limitation was the language barrier. Many of the people who work with the car rapides, especially the apprentis and drivers, speak little to no French. This meant that, with my very limited knowledge of Wolof, I was reliant on a translator to conduct parts of my research. While going to such densely populated areas such as the Lat Dior garage with a Senegalese male translator did help me to gain the trust of those with whom I spoke, my lack of Wolof meant that I did not get the most out of my interviews because I could not understand the exact words and phrases of my interviews. A second downfall of being reliant on a translator was that I had to wait to conduct my research for times when both my translator and I were available. While this was not a huge problem, it did cause a problem a time or two during ISP period.

Another limitation that I faced was two weeks into ISP period, my computer was stolen and I lost all of my secondary research, two recorded and transcribed interviews, and all of my interview questions. Though I did try to redo the work and recover the information to the best of my abilities, this did somewhat set me back in the ISP process.

Time constraints were another big limitation for my research. While I was able to fit in most of the interviews that I wanted and planned to conduct, I would have loved to have more time to gather more information and speak to more people. Four weeks is not a lot of time especially considering the other previously mentioned limitations. Despite

the difficulties I encountered, I developed a real passion for my research and could have spent two months researching the car rapide if time had allowed it.

Ethical Considerations

Since the car rapide is such a central part of everyday Senegalese life, I had some trepidations about myself as a Westerner conducting research. I wanted to integrate myself as thoroughly as possible into the world of the car rapide, yet also I did not want to disturb those who were simply trying to go about their everyday lives. Because of this fear, I tried to blend in as much as possible, sometimes to the detriment of my research. Ideally, I would have loved to speak to other passengers on the car rapide or to the drivers and apprentices of the cars I took, or even to just take photos of the cars. However, I was often too afraid to offend or anger the employees of the car rapide or my fellow passengers.

As I became more immersed in the world of the car rapide, I learned that the vast majority of Senegalese people do not see the car rapide as this wonderful amazing thing like I did. It is an ordinary and even unpleasant aspect of daily life, a necessary evil. This left me feeling ethically torn. Oftentimes when I would try to talk to local Senegalese people about their opinions of the car rapide, I was met with unfavorable reactions. Oftentimes, people were simply confused as to why I would choose this topic. These reactions really made me examine certain privileges that I had as a foreigner and a researcher. As a foreigner and a student I had the luxury to study the car rapides for a research project. It was a choice I made to study this topic which so many native Senegalese people have no option but to tolerate.

Discoveries/Analysis

I started off my research wanting to focus solely on how the physical aesthetic of the car rapide is reflective of Senegalese cultural values and how because the car rapide is so visually appealing it has lent itself to becoming a symbol of Senegal. In starting with this research question, I realized that it is impossible to study just one aspect of the car rapide without having to learn about the entire community that is the world of the car rapide. All of my informational findings are presented in my creative narrative. Therefore, I will use this space to analyze my findings and reflect on the overall research process.

By the end of ISP period, I would always joke that every interview I had made me less and less inclined to want to take the car rapide. I felt as though every person I spoke to alerted me to a new unsafe aspect about the peril of travel on the car rapide. More than half of the car rapides are more than sixteen years old and many of them are even older than that.⁶ Regardless of this fact, I still found myself thoroughly enjoying my daily rides on the car rapide. They are an integral part of Senegalese culture and my experience in Senegal would not have been the same without them. Coming from New York City, I am more than comfortable with public transportation. I came into this project thinking that the Senegalese opinions about the car rapide would be similar to the opinions of New Yorkers about the subway. Many New Yorkers have a love-hate relationship with the subway. Sometimes bizarre, uncomfortable things happen during your morning or

⁶ P.E. Faye, H. Azuma, and I. Yoshida, "Only-Bus System for Intercity Mass Transit to Reduce Several Numerous Road Traffic Accidents," in *Urban Transport XVIII: Urban Transport and the Environment in the 21st Century*, ed. James W. S. Longhurst and C. A. Brebbia (WIT Press, 2012), 565.

evening commute, but it is from those strange happenings that one gets the best stories and memories. New York prides itself on having a reliable public transportation system.

I took advantage of every possible opportunity to talk to local Senegalese people about their opinions about the car rapide. I quickly became frustrated and saddened with the lack of pride the Senegalese feel for a vehicle that is not only used by a majority of the population, but has also become a totem for their country. Whenever I mentioned my interest with the car rapide, I was often met with very negative reactions. Many people warned me against the car rapides for safety reasons, others told me that since I had the money for a taxi I should not take the car rapide. By generally polling other car rapide users, I realized that the car rapide was convenient for its price and little else. After realizing this, I was left asking myself the question: if the car rapides are so unpopular by the vast majority of Senegalese people, how can it be used as a symbol for the country? During many of my interviews, I asked this question. Most people responded by saying that it is a good thing for tourists, but if it came down to it most Senegalese people truly feel no attachment to the car rapide which has become an icon for their country and city.

The Senegalese government along with outside organization such as the World Bank and the Conseil Executif des Travaux Urbains de Dakar also known as CETUD have been trying to find ways to replace the car rapides with more standardized methods of transport, such as the Tata buses or the implementation of a Bus Rapid Transit system.⁷

⁷ World Bank. *Senegal—Transport and Urban Mobility Project*, (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2009), 6.

With plans in place to replace the car rapide, one must wonder, if the car rapides really do disappear from the streets of Dakar, what will the legacy of the car rapide be? As a developing country, it is important for Senegal to have a public transportation system that can support its growing population without endangering their safety. However, development means nothing if an important cultural symbol is lost in the search for progress. Dakar should absolutely move forward to continue to make strides to become a modern city and eventually that will lead to the death of the car rapide. That being said, even if the car rapides no longer rule the streets of Dakar, they must be protected as an important artifact from Senegalese history. The car rapide is a piece of art and to just discard them would be a true loss.

Conclusion

Throughout the past month, I have come to love the car rapide. So, naturally, it saddens me to know that there is a possibility that if and when I return to Senegal, the car rapides may no longer be there. During my interview with cinematographer Thierno Seydou Mourou he discussed why he chose the car rapide as a subject for his documentary. According to Seydou, in Senegal and in Africa in general, the population is oftentimes not educated about important elements of their history and culture. It is his belief that the general public must learn about things such as the car rapide because they are an important part of Senegalese daily life. Though the car rapide is not as beloved by the Senegalese people as I originally believed, it is still Senegal's most resilient form of public transportation. The car rapide is a living symbol of Senegal, a museum on wheels, and a testament to Senegalese tradition and values. Even if one day the car rapides are removed from operation in favor of more streamlined methods of transportation, it would

be impossible to erase the impact that the car rapide has had on Senegalese history and culture.

Recommendations for Further Study

By choosing to study the car rapide, I was forced to immerse myself into a central aspect of Senegalese culture: the world of public transportation. I joked with friends that every time I had an interview, I became less and less inclined to take the car rapides because during each interview I would no doubt learn another thing about just how unsafe the car rapides really are. Despite my jokes, I honestly loved taking the car rapide. I felt that by taking the car rapide I was integrating myself into a part of Senegalese culture that I had never truly experienced before. The car rapide is a living talisman of Senegalese culture and history, and in my opinion, Senegal would not be Senegal without the car rapide. Whether or not future students choose to write their ISPs on the car rapide, I would encourage every student to spend some time learning about the cars. Even if it is just for one short car ride from Sacre Coeur or Mermoz to Point E, riding the car rapide provides a unique type of cultural exchange that is impossible to get any other way.

Alhamdulillah: A Conversation with the Car Rapide

Scene 1

(It is a cool November evening in Dakar, Senegal. Olivia, a toubab from New York City, is walking with her Senegalese sister, Mariama, to the bus stop on the corner in front of Good Food in Point E to catch the car rapide home to Ouakam after a long day of researching on her Independent Study Project.)

Olivia: No, you don't understand. This is not cold. In New York right now, there is ice falling from the sky.

Mariama: Oh, Olivia, c'est pas possible ça!⁸

O: Mariam! I'm serious.

M: Oh, Olivia. You always know how to make me laugh.

(At that moment, a vividly painted yellow, blue, and white car rapide screeches to a halt.)

Apprenti: OUKAM! OUKAM! OUKAM!⁹

(Olivia and Mariama hand the apprenti a two hundred CFA coin and hop on board. The two girls walk towards the front of the car and find two seats right next to the window, directly behind the divider between the driver and the passengers.)

O: I give up! In other news, my ISP is a total disaster. I just feel like I have no direction. Why do I even have to write an ISP? What is the point of all of this? I'm having an existential crisis on a *car rapide*...Am I Senegalese yet?

M: Oh, Olivia! You are just too much. You have to write an ISP because school is important. What exactly is the problem? I'm sure together we can come up with a solution.

O: I don't even know where to begin. When I started this project, I was so excited and optimistic. I thought that my project was going to be amazing because the car rapide is this unique, wonderful thing that can only be found in Senegal and that is so often used as one of the great, defining symbols of this wonderful country. But then, I started doing research and talking to people and I realized that most Senegalese people hate the car rapide. Whenever I talk about my project, most people's first reaction is a face of genuine horror. What is the point of me doing research on a topic that is by and large disliked by a

⁸ "That is not possible!"

⁹ Ouakam is a neighborhood in Dakar.

majority of the local population? I just need a sign or a divine intervention, anything really to get me motivated again.

Psssst...Over here!

M: Did you hear that?

O: That was strange. I mean I know these cars are old but I didn't realize they could be so old that the squeaking could make noises that sound like actual voices.

Yerim: Ladies, relax! You heard me correctly. I know I'm not invisible since every single one of my seats is occupied at the moment and you fine ladies are occupying two of them. I'm Yerim, the most reliable, and if I do say so myself, most handsome car rapide in all of Dakar.

O: I'm sorry... I'm just a little confused... How exactly are we having this conversation right now...?

Y: Yes, most passengers react this way at first. That is why I don't reveal my abilities to just anyone who gets on board. I've found that the best thing to do in these types of situations is to just let you have your moment and I'll just wait for you to finish before we move forward.

M: You're a car rapide? And you can talk? How is this happening?

O: Wait, what? I'm sorry. I don't think we need a minute, just an explanation because personally, I'm just wondering if I am suffering from dehydration or if I'm just going crazy...

Y: You're not going crazy. Well, actually, maybe you are, but I'm not a doctor so I can't tell you for certain. I'm a car rapide and I can talk. In fact, I speak almost five languages fluently, Wolof, Serer, French, English, Arabic, and I'm working on Spanish and German. Dakar is an international city and as the cheapest and most accessible form of public transportation in the area, I see and hear all kinds of different people. I listen and try to practice the languages whenever I can.

O: Not to be the stupid *toubab* or anything, but can all *car rapides* speak? Did I just come across Dakar's best-kept secret?

Y: We can all speak. We just choose not to for the most part.

O: Then why talk to us? I don't understand.

Y: Because, Olivia, you said you needed a sign. Well, here I am. All of those things that you were just saying about how you feel frustrated in your research because the Senegalese people don't appreciate the *car rapide* the way that you thought they would.

Well, trust me, as a car rapide I feel your pain. I want people to know my story and I think that you and I can make something happen. What better way to learn about the car rapide than to talk to a car rapide? I can help you with your project and in return you can show the Senegalese people how I am an important part of their history and culture. How does that sound to you?

O: That sounds wonderful! When do we start?

Y: Meet me tomorrow afternoon at the Lat Dior; it's the car rapide terminal near the downtown area and Sandaga market. We'll go from there. Does that sound good to you?

O: Yes, I know the Lat Dior. I'll be there! Well, this is our stop, but I'll see you tomorrow, Yerim!

Y: *Ba suba!*¹⁰

O: *Ba suba, inshallah!*¹¹

Scene 2

(The following day, Olivia and Mariama arrive at the Lat Dior terminal in search of their new friend Yerim.)

M: How are we supposed to know which one is Yerim? They all look the same!

Y: While you're right in saying that we all look very similar, we do not all look exactly the same.

O: Well, I guess we found him! Salaa maalekum, Yerim!¹²

Y: Maalekum Salaam, ladies. Nangeen def?¹³

O: Nungi fi.¹⁴

Y: Your Wolof is quite impressive for a *toubab*. How is your Serer?

O: Non-existent...I have to master Wolof before I can even think about trying to learn Serer.

Y: Fair enough. Should we get started?

¹⁰ "See you tomorrow!"

¹¹ "See you tomorrow, god willing!"

¹² Traditional greeting in Senegal meaning "Peace be with you."

¹³ Response to the traditional greeting followed by "How are you?"

¹⁴ "We are here."

O: Yes, please!

Y: Great! Hop on board. Currently, Lamine, the apprenti, is having his afternoon break. I believe he is in one of the other cars enjoying some *attaya*¹⁵ with some of the other boys, so we have some time before we start moving. Before we begin, I want to start off by asking Mariam a question. That is, if she doesn't mind of course.

M: *Pas de probleme!*¹⁶ What is your question?

Y: What do you know about the car rapide?

M: Well, that does not seem like too difficult of a question. The car rapides are Senegal's cheapest form of public transportation. One can get almost anywhere in Dakar for between fifty and one hundred and fifty CFA. The car rapides run from very early in the morning to late at night. Although their low cost and frequency make them the best option for the majority of Senegalese people, they are very dangerous. I am a frequent car rapide user, but honestly if I had the choice I would much rather prefer to take a taxi...No offense.

Y: None taken. I have had to get used to statements like that in my line of work. I appreciate your honesty, Mariam. I hope after our discussion that maybe you will come out with a better understanding of my side of the story. I am going to try and teach you as much as I can during our time together. I am going to start with a brief history lesson. Are you ladies ready?

O and M: We are listening!

Y: The first car rapides arrived in Senegal in 1947, just after World War II.¹⁷ They were imported from France by a man named Furnard Dumat.¹⁸ The first car rapides, a Renault model van called the SG2, looked very different from the way the car rapides look nowadays. They were painted a singular solid color and were undecorated. Additionally, they were not originally intended to be used as passenger vehicles. The cars were imported to be used to transport goods, but by simply adding benches and creating windows, the vans were remodeled to fill the need for public transportation in Dakar.¹⁹ The SG2 stopped being manufactured in the seventies, but some of those vehicles are still part of the car rapide fleet today. Even on some of the newer models of the car rapides, most of them are run using the parts and engines of Mercedes and German and Polish vehicles, not Renault engines.²⁰

¹⁵ Senegalese tea

¹⁶ "Not a problem!"

¹⁷ Ibou Diouf, "Comme Car Rapide ou Les Tentatives d'Intégration du Transport Artisanal," in *Les Transports et La Ville en Afrique au Sud du Sahara: Le Temps de la Débrouille et du Désordre Inventif*, ed. Xavier Goddard (Karthala Editions, 2002), 45.

¹⁸ Thierno Seydou Mourou, interview by author, Dakar, November 19, 2014.

¹⁹ Diouf, "Come Car Rapide," 45.

²⁰ Daour Wade, interview by author, Dakar, December 1, 2014.

O: Why is that?

Y: Well to be honest, some of these cars are so old that the correct parts are no longer manufactured. Oftentimes it is a question of availability and cost of repairs. Repairing a car rapide can be expensive. It could cost up to two million CFA to repair a car rapide. Repairing the benches alone is 100,000 CFA and repairing the motor is around 800,000 CFA.²¹ The apprentices are usually responsible for smaller repairs and vehicle maintenance, but oftentimes the cars are in terrible shape. Despite an attempt to ban vehicles that are more than five years old from entering the country, more than half of the car rapide fleet are more than sixteen years old with some even being up to thirty to forty years old.²²

M: You are not doing a very good job of instilling confidence in your abilities.

Y: At the end of the day, there is no denying that the car rapide is not the safest mode of transportation. I am not going to lie to you. That is not my intention. We are called “flying coffins” for a reason. Car rapides are responsible for many traffic accidents and a lot of the air pollution which has been a rising problem in Dakar.

M: Then, what exactly is your goal in talking to us today?

Y: I am getting to that. I still have a lot more I want to tell you about.

O: And I have a lot more I want to know. Yerim, I would love if you could walk me through a typical day and please do not spare any details!

Y: Your wish is my command. My day starts at around five or six in the morning and ends anywhere between eleven at night and two in the morning, depending on the day and the driver.²³ At the peak time of day, there are hundreds of car rapides on the streets of Dakar which transport thousands of people per day. However, because there are so many car rapides, there is oftentimes a lot of competition between the apprentices for customers. Car rapide owners expect between fifteen and twenty thousand CFA per day.²⁴ In order to reach this goal, the drivers and apprentices try to make as many *mbiijis* or roundtrips as possible in a certain day.²⁵ The more *mbiijis* made, the more money they make.

O: What happens if the daily goal is not met?

²¹ Kosso Sow, interview by author, Dakar, November 21, 2014.

²² P.E. Faye, H. Azuma, and I. Yoshida, “Only-Bus System for Intercity Mass Transit to Reduce Several Numerous Road Traffic Accidents,” in *Urban Transport XVIII: Urban Transport and the Environment in the 21st Century*, ed. James W. S. Longhurst and C. A. Brebbia (WIT Press, 2012), 565.

²³ Kosso Sow.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Daour Wade.

Y: That really depends on the owner. Sometimes he will fire the workers or sometimes the workers will have to repay the difference as a debt. That being said, there is a lot of corruption in our line of work. During the day, the apprentice will oftentimes give the day's earnings to the driver to hold on to. One hears all too many stories about drivers who will run off with the day's or the week's earnings. Then, of course, you have apprentice, who collect the money, sneaking little spare amounts into their pockets whenever they get the chance. The apprentice have a very bad reputation in Senegal, but I wish people would cut them some slack. Many of them are very young and the work is hard and oftentimes unrewarding.

O: How many people will work with one car rapide?

Y: There are usually two drivers and two apprentice, but there can be four drivers and four apprentice working on one car.²⁶ It depends on the size of the car and the owner. Oftentimes, there will be a younger apprentice called a *jondo* who is learning the tricks of the trade from the more experienced apprentice.²⁷ Most of the apprentice aspire to become drivers. Being a driver is a much more desirable position; one does not have to interact with customers, but also the apprentice stay overnight and sleep in the car whereas the drivers can sleep at their own homes after a long day at work.

O: They sleep in the cars? What happens during the rainy season?

Y: When it rains, the water leaks in through the roof of the cars. Then there is also the problem of mosquitoes. As I said, the job of an apprentice is not easy. Most of the boys come from the countryside or suburbs and get the job through a familial connection. Lamine, for example, is from a small village south of Dakar. He came to Dakar to earn money for his family. He hopes one day to be able to buy a house for his mother and father. He dreams that he will find another profession, but right now he has no choice but to work with the car rapide to support his family.

M: I had no idea how hard it must be to be an apprentice. I will keep that in mind next time I am taking a car rapide.

Y: Thank you, Mariam. I appreciate that.

O: Thank you so much for sharing, Yerim. I would love to change subjects now. I was hoping we could talk about the decoration of the car rapide now if possible.

Y: Yes, the decoration of the car rapide has evolved into an art form. In the 1970s, an artist named Moussa Tine, who was working as an apprentice at the time, started painting the car rapide that he was working on. Eventually, other car rapide owners started approaching him to do the same to their cars, to make them more beautiful and to attract more costumers and therefore earn more money.²⁸

²⁶ Kosso Sow.

²⁷ Daour Wade.

²⁸ Moussa Tine, interview by author, Dakar, November 20, 2014.

O: That is so interesting. What kinds of designs did he paint on the cars?

Y: Tine was inspired by Senegalese culture. He wanted to make designs that were beautiful and that caught people's attention, but they were never useless or vulgar. Before decorating each car, Moussa would have a discussion with the owner to find out more about him so that he could personalize the car to reflect the beliefs and practices of each individual owner. Oftentimes, this had to do with religion. Sometimes, the designs were reflective of familial heritage. For example, Tine was once hired by an owner whose ancestors were crocodile hunters. Moussa decided to paint a crocodile on this client's car to pay tribute to his family and his origins.

O: I don't know if I have ever seen a crocodile on a car rapide before. Can we talk about what kinds of decoration and designs are most often found on the cars today?

Y: Though we all tend to look relatively similar because of our similar colors and popular decorative motifs, but we are all unique in our own way. As I said before, the decoration of the car rapide is not just beautiful, but functional as well in the sense that the designs and motifs are reflective of Senegalese culture and values. Three of the most popular designs that can be found on almost every car rapide are: the eagle, the horse, and the eyes.

The eagle (See Figure 2) is usually found on the lower corner towards the back of the car. Moussa Tine was inspired by a popular song by a well-known artist called Pape Seck. He first painted this design in an attempt to create something unique for a special client, but now this is by far one of the most popular motifs and has stood the test of time. The eagle represents strength and power and is sometimes shown holding a soccer ball to show the widespread influence and popularity of the game here in Senegal.

The horse (See Figure 3) can usually be found towards the front of the vehicle, normally by the door to the driver's side. The horse is reminiscent of how in the past the horse was the main mode of transport in Senegal. It serves as a reminder of our past and a way of connecting the past and the present. Personally, I think the horse is my favorite symbol on the cars.

Now, the eyes (See Figure 4) can be a bit hard to explain.

O and M: We will try our best to follow along.

Y: Many people believe that the eyes are representative of the eyes of Bamba or the eyes of God. Moussa Tine originally painted the eyes as a talisman to ward off bad spirits. The Senegalese are very spiritual people. Oftentimes, you will see people wearing protection amulets around their waists or their necks. Though this is a Muslim country, Animist beliefs are still believed and practiced by a majority of the population in addition to Islam. In Senegalese culture, eye contact is somewhat of a taboo.

O: Yes, I know that. I have struggled a lot with that because in my culture it is rude to not look someone in the eye, but here it is rude to look someone in the eye.

Y: Well, in Senegal, we believe that eye contact can bring bad luck. We also discourage people from calling our children cute because the cuteness can disappear. For situations like this, we say “*car-car*” to alleviate the badness and right the wrong. The eyes symbolize *car-car* and they protect the car and act as a talisman.²⁹

O: I have been wondering about what the story behind the eyes is. Tell me more about the other designs and decorations!

Y: As I said before, many of the *car rapides* are decorated with similar designs and motifs. The design of each particular car is decided by the owner. The cars are painted by specialized painters. Oftentimes, the owners simply tell the artists to make the car look beautiful because it is believed that more beautiful cars will attract more customers.³⁰ That is why sometimes you see *car rapides* with streamers and lights. Personally, I find that kind of over the top decoration tacky, but maybe I’m just jealous. Some of the designs on the cars are there simply to add more color or to make the cars more beautiful such as the apples or birds or color block designs found on the area on the side surrounding “Transport en Commun.” The designs tend to be symmetrical just for aesthetic purposes.³¹ There is usually a floral plant design which is supposed to be reminiscent of the African bush.³² One design that I find particularly interesting was actually imported from your homeland, Olivia. Oftentimes, you will see the Nike swoosh logo, sometimes paired with the phrase, “Air Jordan.” This is meant to represent the strong influence of the Western world here in Senegal.³³

O: Very interesting! It appears that American influence is everywhere. How about the colors of the cars? Is there any significance behind the popular yellow, white, and blue color scheme?

Y: Those three colors were the colors chosen and mandated by the Senegalese government for public transportation.³⁴ However, sometimes one will come across a *car rapide* that is orange or green and white and blue. Once I even saw a *car rapide* painted red, white, and blue.

O: That is all fascinating! Personally, I still want to know more about the phrases and words that can be found on the *car rapides*. Since I’ve been here for some time now, I have been able to identify that oftentimes these phrases come from a religious context.

²⁹ Moussa Tine.

³⁰ Kalidou Diallo, interview by author, Dakar, November 26, 2014.

³¹ David G. Nicholls, “African Americana in Dakar’s Liminal Spaces,” in *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (LIT Verlag Münster, 2004), 146.

³² Kalidou Diallo.

³³ Nicholls, “African Americana,” 146.

³⁴ Moussa Tine.

After all, Senegal is a ninety-five percent Muslim country, so it is not at all surprising that religion would be influential in the design of the car rapides.

Y: You're absolutely right in saying that these phrases are usually related to the religion. Islam plays a very important role in Senegalese culture. Here in Senegal there are two main brotherhoods, the Mourides and the Tidjaines.³⁵ The phrasing on the very top of the cars usually indicates which brotherhood the car rapide owner belongs to. For example, when "Touba" is written on the top, it means that the owner is a Mouride.³⁶ Touba is the holy city of Cheikh Amadou Bamba. Do you know who he is?

M: I love Bamba! Bamba merci, Bamba feep, Bamba partout!³⁷

O: It is impossible to live in Senegal and not know who Cheikh Amadou Bamba is! His name and picture are all over the country. Bamba was the founder of the Mouride brotherhood and he is a local celebrity.

Y: Exactly! "Touba" or "Lamp Fall" indicates that the owner of the car is a Mouride, whereas "Talibe Cheikh" or "Dahakh" means that the owner is a member of the Tidjaine brotherhood.³⁸ As I said before, the Senegalese are a very spiritual people. Many of the words on the cars are put there to show religious devotion to please God so that He will protect the cars from danger. On the front of nearly every car rapide, the word "Alhamdoulillah" is written which means "Thank you God." One will also oftentimes find phrases like "Yalla Yana" or "Sope Naby," both of which are Wolof phrases praising the greatness and goodness of God.³⁹ Usually, there will be a design of two pineapples on each side of the word "Alhamdoulillah." The pineapples are representative of two regions in and near Senegal, the Casamance and Guinea, where they grow a lot of pineapples.⁴⁰

O: I've noticed that on the door of almost every single car rapide is written "RTYE" (See Figure 5), what does that stand for?

Y: RTYE is the Regroupement des Transporteurs de Yoff l'Environnement. The RTYE was the name of an association of car rapide owners and if the placement of this on the car indicates the owner's membership.⁴¹

O: I've also noticed that it is not only the exterior that gets decorated but the interior as well.

Y: Yes, you are correct. The interior decorations are often more personalized to the tastes of the driver. One will find photos of important imams and religious figures. The iconic

³⁵ Daour Wade.

³⁶ Kalidou Diallo.

³⁷ "Thank you, Bamba. Bamba forever. Bamba everywhere."

³⁸ Daour Wade.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kalidou Diallo.

photo of Bamba is, once again, very popular. It is believed that the photos enforce piety and serve as a reminder of religious devotion because of the living presence of the icons.⁴² Perhaps you have noticed that there is often a single child sized shoe hanging from the roof of the car?

O: Yes! I have been wondering about that. What does that mean?

Y: It is once again a form of protection or an amulet to protect the car from accidents. It is believed that the innocence of children protects the cars from harm.⁴³

O: Fascinating!

Y: Another interesting thing to note is that the interior of the car rapide is set up like a mini living room. Unlike the other forms of public transportation available like the Tatas or the Ndiaga Ndiaye where passengers are seated in rows, in the car rapide passengers are seated facing one another in very close quarters which fosters dialogue and conversation.⁴⁴ Speaking of other forms of public transportation, Olivia, where are you from?

O: I am from New York City.

Y: New York! My grandfather lives there! You may even know him. He is the car rapide that lives uptown in the neighborhood called Little Senegal. He doesn't drive anymore because he was pretty old. He was one of the original SG2 models from the seventies, so he decided to retire and when they called auditions for the role of New York City car rapide, my grandfather was first in line. He loves it there! He tells me that you have an interesting form of public transportation there. I would love to hear more about it from a local.

O: New York City has a very thorough and very reliable public transportation system. There are buses and ferries, but the most popular mode of transportation is the subway, which is an underground network of trains that connects all five boroughs of New York City.

Y: An underground train? That sounds really interesting, but also very expensive. What are the local opinions about the subway?

O: Personally, I love the subway. You always see the most interesting and oftentimes bizarre things on the subway. In that sense, it is quite similar to the car rapide. However, I think in general, New Yorkers are much more proud of the subway than the Senegalese are of the car rapide.

⁴² Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, "Visual Tactics of Contemporary Senegal," in *African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/sites of Creativity and Conflict, Numéros 1 à 2*, ed. Tobias Döring (Rodopi, 2002), 201.

⁴³ Daour Wade.

⁴⁴ Thierno Seydou Wade.

Y: Yes, and that is why I wanted to talk to you girls. As I said earlier, I am under no illusions. It is true; the car rapide is not the safest mode of public transportation. But, I just wish the people of Senegal would acknowledge that I was and still am an integral part of their culture. I am one of the things that makes Senegal so special and unique. Senegal prides itself on being a proud supporter of the arts and Dakar is such a wonderful artistic and cultural hub and the car rapide is an integral part of all of this. I just want people to see and understand this before it is too late.

O: This is the perfect opportunity to transition over to my next topic of discussion. There are a lot of people and a lot of plans in motion to replace the car rapides with a more streamlined and normalized mode of public transportation. How does this make you feel?

Y: Yes, the government as well as organizations such as the World Bank and the Conseil Executif des Travaux Urbains de Dakar also known as CETUD have been trying for years to replace me because of safety and environmental concerns. The truth is that I am tired. I am an old man and I would love nothing more than to retire and take the kind of vacation that my grandfather did. But before I go, I need to make sure that we, the car rapides, that work tirelessly for the people of Senegal, won't be forgotten. It is essential to our history as a people and a nation that we preserve this part of our culture. We are living symbols of Senegal, museums on wheels. Our mark on Senegal cannot and must not be erased.

M: Yerim, I want to thank you for this. You have made me see that just as we value our artists and writers and musicians for their contributions to Senegalese history, we must honor and value the car rapide which has been part of our lives for so long. Though I must admit, I do hope for a safer public transportation system, I will work to make sure that if and when the time does come for the car rapides to retire that they will be put somewhere where they can be honored and cherished. Perhaps you will get your retirement in relaxation after all. Maybe, just as there is a museum in San Francisco devoted to your cousins, the cable cars, a similar museum could be created to preserve and celebrate the unique role of the car rapide in Senegal. Maybe you could enjoy your retirement there and could spend your days telling all who come to visit about the your place in Senegalese transportation, arts and culture.

Y: A museum would simply be a dream come true. Thank you, Mariam. I truly appreciate that. And Olivia, do we have any other questions to ask me before I have to head out for the afternoon?

O: No, Yerim, but I learned so much this afternoon. I do not even know how I could possibly thank you.

Y: Simply telling my story will be thanks enough. It looks like Lamine is just about set to head out for the afternoon. Would you ladies like a ride home to Ouakam?

O and M: Yes, please!

(Yerim carried Olivia and Mariam along with twenty other passengers back to their destinations. On the way, the two girls looked out the window, marveling at the beauty of Dakar and were so grateful that they had had the opportunity to view this marvelous city through the eyes of one of the things that makes Dakar so special.)

O: This is our stop. Yerim, it was such a pleasure to meet you. I hope to see you again someday!

Y: Goodbye, my friends! *Ba beneen yoon!*⁴⁵

O and M: *Ba ci kanam!*⁴⁶

Scene 3

(One week later, Olivia is walking home from school, grinning from ear to ear when suddenly she hears a voice calling her name.)

Y: Olivia! Hello, my friend!

O: Yerim! I am so happy I saw you. Guess what I have right here!

Y: What is it?

O: This is my ISP. I told your story and I could not be happier with the way it turned out. I truly could not have done it without your help.

Y: The pleasure was all mine. I am so grateful to have met someone who cared enough to listen to and tell my story. When do you return home?

O: I leave tonight. I hope to return to Senegal one day, but I am worried that you will not be around anymore.

Y: Do not worry, Olivia. This is Senegal and I am the car rapide. No matter how hard they try, I will be around causing trouble for a while longer. I am sure that this is not goodbye! We will see each other again soon.

O: That's what I like to hear! *A la prochaine, mon amie!*⁴⁷

Y: *A la prochaine!*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ "See you next time!"

⁴⁶ "See you later!"

⁴⁷ "Until next time, my friend!"

⁴⁸ "Until next time!"

(Yerim continued down the road with plumes of smoke following him. As she continued home, Olivia could hear the sound of Lamine's voice yelling, "Ouakam, Ouakam, Ouakam," getting fainter and fainter. She smiled to herself and continued home.)

The End

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Appendix

Figure 1: Interviews

Name	Occupation	Date
Seynabou and Alassane Deme	Manager and Director of AgenDakar	11/18/2014
Thierno Seydou Mourou	Cinematographer	11/19/2014
Moussa Tine	Artist	11/20/2014, 11/27/2014
Apprentis (Kosso Sow, Lamine Sarr)	Apprentis	11/21/2014
Papis Bassene	SIT staff, frequent car rapide user	11/21/2014
Kalidou Diallo	Car Rapide Painter	11/26/2014
Daour Wade	Storyteller	12/1/2014
Jedidiah Fix	World Bank	12/2/2014

Figure 2: Eagle motif



Figure 3: Horse motif



Figure 4: Front of the car rapide with “Alhamdoulilahi” flanked by symmetrical pineapples and the eye motif



Figure 5: RTYE (Regroupement des Transporteurs de Yoff l'Environnement)

