

Senegalese Family Values and *SOS Village d' Enfants*

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“...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (International Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989).”

Dedication

Do you know that you are my inspiration
that I still look at your picture
that you are still in my heart

Do you know that I am doing this for you
because I will never forget you
because in my heart you are my child

Do you know I still can't believe I left you
that you changed my life forever
that you guide my every step

Or do you still feel unloved and alone
do you look up at the endless sky
and wonder why I left you
just like everyone else has

Please know that I haven't forgotten you
that this and every step of my life
is a testament to you

And that one day I will come back

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I. Abstract

My research studies the concept of family in Senegalese culture by examining family values and their place within families in an orphanage setting. I studied two orphanages in Senegal both run by the international organization *SOS Village d'Enfants*, one in Dakar and one in Kaolack. I spent a week in each orphanage doing participant observation and conducting interviews with the mothers of the homes in the orphanage. I also conducted other interviews to find out how the orphanage is run and to better understand the concept of family in Senegal from a religious perspective. I found out the importance of family in Senegalese culture and how the values of *teranga*, *mbokk*, and *njaboot* are the basis of the construction of the Senegalese concept of family.

II. Introduction

Senegal: le Pays de la Taranga

You look up at the sky and you see the same thing: blue and clear and endless. Then you hear the distant but distinct sound of a tama playing on the radio, and the sound of small brooms sweeping sand off of the floor. You smell fish being cooked on the fire, burning trash and the freshness of the sea. You begin to hear animated chatter in wolof accompanied by joyous laughter. You look around and see colorful, beautiful fabrics, smiles, dancing, and community. Senegal, *le pays de taranga*, where you are greeted by strangers wherever you go and offered to stop by and drink some tea. Senegal, where no one goes hungry and everyone is family. Senegal, where strangers are treated like kings

and given everything they could want and more. A country hovering between tradition and development, caught in the legacy of French colonization and inspired by the history of a colorful, vibrant culture, full of values.

Senegalese family values

In Senegal family is everything: support, companionship, and the definition of who you are. The idea of family is constructed out of a series of traditional values buried deep into Senegalese culture. The basis of these values comes from Islam and the traditional culture and way of life in Senegalese villages. There are specific words in wolof, the official language spoken by the majority of the population, that define the values that are present in Senegalese life and construct the core of Senegalese families. These family values have been important in the history of Senegalese care for orphaned children and shine through in the means for which Senegalese people take care of orphans.

An important part of Senegalese culture is the value of *teranga*, or hospitality. For Senegalese people, *taranga* means that no one ever goes hungry and everyone helps each other out. It comes from a history of poverty requiring people to look to those around them for help, and is rooted in Islamic beliefs and the importance they place in family relationships. *Teranga* is manifested in the way Senegalese people are extremely welcoming, always offering food and gifts to family, cousins, neighbors, and strangers. One aspect of *teranga*'s manifestation within the family that can be seen in taking care of orphans is that when a member of the family dies or cannot take care of their child, normally another member of the family takes the child in as their own. This flexibility

and hospitality in family relations is represented in a study that was done in West Africa. The study examines the commonality of the fostering of children that occurs when children leave their birth families to live with other relatives or friends in order to attend higher education schools that exist only in big cities and not in villages (Pilon 2003). This system of family foster care has begun to change, however, as families are less willing to take in other children because they are more concerned about making money. Structural adjustment and the economic crises have called into question the traditional African primacy of family ties over the individual (Pilon 2003, 23). As urbanization has developed further it seems that the traditional Senegalese values such as *taranga* that functioned in small villages are adapting and changing.

The word for family in wolof, *mbokk*, and its use also provides insight into the values that construct Senegalese families. *Bokk* literally means to share or to have in common. It is used not only to refer to people that live in the same house and the entire extension of blood relatives, but it is also often used to refer to all the members of a village or of the same ethnicity (lecture SIT 2/07). This presents an idea of the concept of family in Senegal as a concept that is extremely extensive and possibly stems from the close quarters of living conditions in a village as well as the importance they place on a person's family history. The extensiveness of *mbokk* is manifested in how in a village children can roam free because everyone in the village looks out for them and takes care of each other's children. It is also manifested in how Senegalese people often refer to their cousins as sisters, or their friends as cousins, even though they are not blood relations. Often children will also refer to their aunts as their mothers and their uncles as their dads. *Mbokk* can be seen in how it is not uncommon to find children living in homes

where the parents of the home are not the biological parents of the children, yet the children are treated as if they were blood relations. In these instances the children keep their original last names but exist as a true member of the family. In Senegal it seems that everyone is accepted into the home and treated like family.

Another wolof word that is pertinent in defining family values is the word *njaboot*, which means literally to carry on your back. It means that everyone that sleeps, wakes up, and eats with the family has their own job and responsibility to take care of the family (lecture SIT 2/07). This gives an idea of the context in which a child is raised within a Senegalese family and the responsibilities required of the child as well as the relationships the child has with the other members of the family. It is manifested in the relationships between family members and how they place their family first in everything they do. It can be seen in the chores and housework that each member of the family shares and does for each other, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry. It can also be seen in how older members of the family provide for the rest of the family. For instance, siblings work to give money to their parents and to help pay for the endeavors and education of their younger siblings. An extreme example of *njaboot* that relates to the fostering of children is that when a couple cannot have children because of disease or infertility, another member of the family, usually an aunt or uncle, will give one of their own children to the couple because it is their responsibility as part of the family to help out the couple. This child is then brought up within the new family as if it was the real child of the parents.

Senegalese family structure and relationships

The relationships between a mother and her child and between other members of the family also show the Senegalese values that underline the existence of the family. There is a wolof proverb that says: *ligeey nday muy aňu doom* (the work of the mother is the lunch of the child). According to Madame Doucouré, an expert in female economic enterprises in Senegal who also has children of her own, in a Senegalese family the mother sacrifices everything for her children, in the spirit of *njaboot*. Doucouré says the role of the mother is to be life giving and her life is centered on her children. It is expected for families to have children. If a mother doesn't have children then it's like she doesn't exist. If you are old and unmarried you are considered to not have had chance in life. Families always come first in the life of women in Senegal, and families always have children unless there is some medical reason that hinders them (Doucouré 2007).

Doucouré also advocates that, in Senegal, the only reason a woman would not have a child would be if she had AIDS or another sickness that would harm the baby, or if she was infertile. In those cases the first solution would commonly be for the husband to seek a second wife, as it is usually the women that are considered to be sterile and never the men. The next solution before considering any form of adoption would be to go to the family for help. The family holds the responsibility for finding a child for a couple that cannot have children, and a family member will often give their own child to the couple as a solution. Children are considered to be the property of the entire family and not just of their parents. Therefore, the education of the child is a matter take on by all members of the family. Mothers tend to hold responsibility for the informal and social education of the child while the main charge of the father is to provide for the child,

especially in polygamous relationships where the father is often absent for long periods of time from the home. (Doucouré 2007).

Another important note to make about family structure in Senegal is the immense size of the family. The average number of kids that a Senegalese family has is six (Gaye 2007). Also, many members of the family all live together for long periods of time in the same household. For instance, offspring tend to live with their parents until they get married and sometimes even afterwards, and grandparents often live in the same household or within close proximity of their grandchildren.

Overview of Childcare

There are three different structures that relate to taking care of orphaned children: foster care, orphanages, and adoption. Adoption is normally considered the best option for children because they get to grow up in a permanent family environment and it has the least amount of negative psychological impact on a child. Foster care is the next best option because kids get to experience a typical family atmosphere. The problem with foster care however, is that it is unstable and impermanent and kids usually end up changing families multiple times. Orphanages are usually places for kids whose lives are suspended because their family exists and therefore they cannot be put in a permanent home situation. They also include kids whose parents have died and either they are alone, or they have another living relative that can't take care of them. Orphans are usually in orphanages because their parents can't afford to take care of them, they have been abused, or they have been involved in rebellious behavior and criminal activity such as drugs or gangs. Orphanage facilities vary greatly in their structure and functions. They

can have large, camp-like atmospheres, where all the kids sleep in the same room. Some orphanages are understaffed and under funded and provide seemingly inadequate care for the orphans living there. Some orphanages are broken up into group homes consisting of one or two parent led families; these are often called children's homes.

The UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989 declares that "...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding." Many studies have been done that advocate the importance of a child having a permanent family and the negative psychological effects of children living in institutionalized orphanages. According to neuroscientist Charles Nelson, "A child placed in foster or adoptive care before the age of 24 months is going to have a higher IQ, a stronger body, and an all-around better chance in life than a child who stays longer in an institution... (Nickerson 2006)." His study in Romania determined that orphans will suffer in institutions even if they provide good care. Another study was conducted on orphans from Russia and Romania that determined there was a difference in hormonal levels of hormones linked with emotional intimacy and sociability which were lower in neglected children in orphanages versus children in family situations (Rust 2005). Therefore, having a positive and constructive atmosphere to develop and grow up in is essential in the life of a child.

Overview of Childcare in Senegal

One form of fostering kids in Senegal is the system of *talibes*. *Talibe* is the name for someone that learns a discipline. In Senegal the word often refers to kids that leave

their homes to live with a *marabout*, an Islamic religious leader, in order to learn the Qur'an and the ways of Islam. As a part of their education the *marabout* teaches the *talibes* to be humble by having them beg for their food and for money on the streets. The children must be strong because they leave their parents at a very young age and have to learn to live without a family. The problem with the system is that some *marabout* require their *talibes* to bring back a certain amount of money every day and mistreat them if they fail to do so. This often does not give them any time to learn the Qur'an, which is the stated purpose for them being there. There is debate on whether the system of *talibes* serves as a way for families to get rid of kids that they can't afford to take care of, or if families send kids there genuinely for the purpose of getting a religious education (Mam Binta SIT 3/07). The system has become warped in its movement from villages into cities where it is harder for the children to find food and to be looked after by the community.

Institutionalized orphanages in Senegal tend to be owned by religious sources, mostly Catholic, or international organizations. One example is the *Pouponnière*, a Catholic run orphanage located in Medina, Dakar. This orphanage takes in babies whose mothers have died in childbirth and cares for them until they reach 8 or 9 months of age and another member of the family can take care of them. This is an example of an orphanage working with the Senegalese values of families taking care of each other. For example, the extension of the family *mbokk* is seen in how other family members will take care of kids that don't belong to them. Also the value *njaboot* is seen in how the other family members are carrying out the responsibility they have to care for the children that are part of the family.

Another group of institutionalized orphanages in Senegal, which is not run by a specific religion, is *SOS Village d'Enfants*. *SOS* is an international organization that has over 400 orphanages spread out in over 132 countries. Its services in Senegal include four villages for orphans, two preschools, one medical center, and three family strengthening programs (Gaye 2007). The premise of *SOS* is to create family like situations for the children that live within the confines of the *SOS* villages. The director explained that *SOS* does not do adoptions because it adopts the children itself and keeps them there until they are able to return to their original families. Out of the 460 children that live in the *SOS* Villages in Senegal only 2 are abandoned children, and 116 of them are not complete orphans but have fathers or mothers that can't take care of them (Gaye 2007). The ones that are true orphans would normally be taken care of by other members of the family under Senegalese family values and beliefs, but they end up in the orphanage because other family members either can't take care of them or don't want them. The reasons why the parents or family members can't take care of the kids include: being physically or mentally handicapped, lacking the means to provide for them, or drugs or alcoholism (Toure 2007).

The basic principle of *SOS* is that they do not do outside adoptions because they take total responsibility for the children themselves, but formal adoption is also something that is very uncommon in Senegalese culture. Although it seems unusually common for children to be living in families that don't consist of their biological parents, the children always keep their original last names. Parents may treat an outside child as their own but it is often not legally defined and the parent's inheritance will go to their biological children only.

Purpose and Objectives

The overall aim of my research was to examine Senegalese families in an orphanage setting to learn how the family functions, what values are portrayed and taught, and how the orphanage uses the cultural concept of the Senegalese family and its cultural values to take care of the children in the orphanage. I wanted to do this in order to better understand Senegalese culture and gain a perspective on their cultural definition of what family is. I also wanted to further explore the beauty in the Senegalese values that govern the lives of the people of Senegal, specifically the value of the importance of the family and everything that goes along with the values that define family that are intertwined throughout all of Senegalese life. I wanted to learn this so others can understand the beauty of the culture and its values and learn from them and perhaps come to apply them in their own lives and in their own families.

I also aimed to understand a specific orphanage in Senegal and how it functioned in order to gain a perspective on the possibilities of orphanages and how they work. By examining how Senegalese values are applied in SOS families, I could begin to discover the Senegalese perspective of what children need in terms of family care, and eventually apply it to a universal quest to find the best solution possible for taking care of orphans and children in need.

III. Methodology

SOS Village d'Enfants Dakar

Dakar is the capital of Senegal and it is a large, metropolitan, quickly industrializing city. The headquarters for all SOS activities in Senegal is located in Dakar, as well as the first SOS Village that I studied. The Village was inaugurated in 1979 and it was the first in Senegal. There is a preschool located on the premises that is open to the community for a reduced price and also serves the children of SOS. The school accepts children aged 3-5 and has four classes, one each for ages three and four and two for the five year olds. The average class size I observed varied from 30 students all the way up to 50 in one class. Each class had one main teacher and there were several assistants that helped out with cleaning up and looking after the children. There were a total of 29 children at the preschool from SOS and the rest (about 100-140) came from outside the school. The parents from the outside that send their children there chose it based on location and knowledge of its quality. According to the director of the school their goals are to initiate the children into the French language and to prepare them for their elementary studies (Semb 2007).

The orphanage itself consists of 15 houses, and each house has one mother and ten children. The director of the orphanage acts as the father of all of the 150 children that live there. He lives within the confines of the Village with his own wife and family of four children (Toure 2007). According to the director of the activities of SOS in Senegal, the goal of *SOS Village d'Enfants* is to give a family or the notion of a family to children that have lost the profit of having one, and to make sure that all children live in a family

with brothers and sisters so that they develop well (Gaye 2007). The orphanage welcomes children from ages 0-16 years old. The children live within their SOS family as if it is their own natural family until the age of 16 when they have to leave and return to their old families. They are being prepared to leave from the minute they enter SOS. If they have a mentally ill parent or a situation in which they can't return to their families SOS prepares for them to live with another member of the family, such as an uncle. If there is no one in their own families that can take them they live with the family of their SOS mother. In preparation to leave the children spend vacations with their outside families. After they leave the orphanage SOS continues to pay subsidies to their families for their food and education (Toure 2007).

SOS Village d'Enfants Kaolack

Kaolack is another large city in Senegal, located three hours east of Dakar, but it is significantly smaller than Dakar and is more closely connected to traditional village life. SOS operations in Dakar include the *SOS Village d'Enfants*, with the same type of preschool as in Dakar, and also a medical center that is next to the orphanage and open to the public. The preschool has the same set-up as the one in Dakar, with four classes and a small percentage of SOS children that attend the school. The Village in Kaolack consists of ten houses with a mother and ten children each. It follows exactly same structure and concepts as the orphanage in Dakar.

Reasons for Choosing Sites

I chose the research site of *SOS Village d'Enfants* in Dakar because the structure of the orphanage, the fact that it is split into different families, was a convenient way to explore two things that interested me: family values and interactions, and the care of orphans. I thought it would be valuable in finding information about what family values are in Senegal and how the orphanage is trying to recreate the structure of family and the existence of those values in an imposed setting. SOS is also a well reputed, and well organized international organization that is very open and accessible. I decided to also observe the *SOS Village d'Enfants* in Kaolack in order to be able to compare the perspectives of an orphanage in a large city and one in a smaller city. I thought Kaolack might be a better example of the tradition of family coming from people that are within closer proximity to small villages instead of coming from a big, more westernized city. I also wanted to have a perspective from more than one orphanage so that the information would be less subjective and it would be more applicable to Senegal as a whole.

Methodologies

The first methods I used were for the purpose of gathering background information that would help me develop my ideas towards my main method of study and provide a good basis of information to guide my interviews and observations. I conducted an unstructured interview with Madame Doucouré (aforementioned specialist in female economic enterprises in Senegal). This was for the purpose of getting a general overall idea of family structure in Senegal. I then conducted a semi-structured interview with Madame Gaye, the director of all SOS operations in Senegal. The purpose of this

interview was to get an idea of how SOS functioned and the logistics of the organization, as well as her opinions on family values in Senegal from the perspective of the head of an organization working with children and families. I then conducted a semi-structure interview with Abdoulaye Aziz Kebé, a professor at the university Cheik Anta Diop in Dakar who specializes in Islamic civilization, rights, and development. This interview would give me an idea of the influence of Islam on Senegalese values, which is important considering at least 94 percent of Senegalese people are Muslims.

I then moved on to gathering the bulk of the data and information for my research. I spent a week conducting observations at *SOS Village d'Enfants* in Dakar. In the mornings I observed at the preschool and I rotated classes so that I got to see what went on in each class. I also did participant observation and played with the children and participated in helping to teach them. I did this because primary education is an important part of a young child's life and I wanted to see what the school was teaching the children and what Senegalese values could be found within the preschool. After visiting the school I spent the rest of the day visiting the homes within the orphanages, rotating homes each day. I conducted participant observation in the homes by constantly observing family interactions and expectations. I ate lunch in the homes and participated in the children's daily activities. At the end of the week I conducted a short interview with the director to get his perspective on how the orphanage is run. I also conducted structured interviews with three of the mothers that work in the orphanage to get their first hand perspective of their responsibilities towards their children and what values they are trying to teach them.

I then conducted observations at the *SOS Village d'Enfants* in Kaolack. I repeated exactly the same types of observations and interviews that I conducted in Dakar in order to have a direct comparison between the two.

Advantages and Disadvantages

My presence within the organization often caused somewhat of a disadvantage in observations because of my existence as an outsider, not only as someone coming in that didn't belong, but also the position of being a white foreigner. This was especially true in Kaolack because foreigners are not a very common sight in the city. For instance, the first day I visited the preschool a group of children refused to talk during their lesson because of my presence. As the children became used to seeing me, however, my presence was no longer a hindrance to their normal activities. I developed relationships with the children and the mothers with their expectations of me continuing the relationships after I left. While this is a disadvantage as it could make my information bias, it also helped me to be accepted into the families and gain more insight into their lives and values.

My presence also worked to my advantage because the way that I was treated and welcomed by the families gave insight into some of the values that they live by. For instance, their insistence that I eat a lot and stay for dinner and their willingness to serve me gave me insight into the value of *teranga* and how it works within the family and with outsiders. My interactions with the mothers and the children and how quickly they accepted me also gave me insight into the values that they live by.

To conduct interviews with the mothers I decided to conduct them in wolof and to bring my professor Mam Binta with me to transcribe their responses and later translate

them into French for me. This worked really well because the mothers could all speak freely in wolof as they speak it more commonly than French and I also got the benefit of knowing when they used the wolof words that give so much insight into the values they uphold in their families. The only difficulty was that I did not understand their responses at the time so I couldn't respond by asking pointed questions to learn more. Overall the interviews are the strongest part of my research because they give direct insight into the beliefs of the moms that are the head of the households in SOS.

One disadvantage of basing most of my gathering of information on participant observation was that I could only view surface interactions. It was hard to discern the intentions and values behind the actions that occur in daily life in families through just simple observation. With the help of the other interviews and research, however, I could pull together different sets of information to help me come to concrete conclusions.

IV. Results

Islam and the Family: Interview with Abdoulaye Aziz Kebé (Kebé 2007)

According to Abdoulaye Kebé in Islam the family is the nucleus of society. He described to me the meaning of the word for nucleus or pit in French as the thing inside a shell that when you put it into the ground makes it grow. The nuclear family consists of a mother, a father, and their children. In Islam the family's purpose is to multiply the number of Muslims and conserve their values. Kebé made it a point to say that the main idea in enlarging the Muslim community was quality and not quantity.

In Islam the relationship between parents and their children is one that consists of education, trust, respect, and responsibility. In the family it is important for children to learn to respect their parents in order to eventually respect other authority later in their lives. Kebé and Madame Doucouré both have told me that in Senegal they say that children have rights because they are young and are not able to fend for themselves. They also say that instead parents have *devoirs*, “shoulds” or responsibilities, towards their children. The responsibilities of the parents are to assure them, and to give them a house, security, inheritance, and a good education. Specifically the responsibility of the father is to provide money for health, education, food, and shelter. The responsibility of the mother is to educate her children in the values in life at home. The main responsibility of the children is to respect the affections of their parents.

The mother is the central figure in the family in relation to the children. She is responsible for giving them their character. “*Le comportement de l’enfant c’est le resultat de la mere* (Kebé 2007).” According to Kebé and his interpretation of Islam, parents must have good values in order to give them to their children. Children cannot be allowed to do whatever they want because life is not like that. He also thinks that although traditionally the mother holds the sole responsibility for the character of the child this is not really fair because the father, society, and the child themselves all have an influence in the character of the child.

There is a Hadith (the Hadith consists of stories of the life of the prophet that Muslims use to guide their lives) that breaks down who is responsible for children and what their role is according to the age of the child. From age 0-7 the mother holds all responsibility for the child. At this age the role of the parents is to *faire plaisir*, or to

please, their children. From ages 7-14 both the parents and school, traditionally the *koranic* school (Islamic religious school), are responsible for the character of the child. The role of these figures in the life of the child is to educate the child. Age 14 and on is a critical age for children in which they are in need of a mentor and guidance. If they do not find this guidance in a parent then someone else with a bad character could end up guiding them. At first Kebé said this was the responsibility of the father, but then he added that it could also be the responsibility of the mother for girls. The role of this mentor is to bring the children with them to learn about the world, to communicate with them, and to help them learn about life. He gave an example of how he taught his son by taking him with him out onto the streets and his son saw men sleeping in the street and began asking his father why God would allow that to happen. At the age of 21 children are considered to be free. Parents, school, and society have all taken a part in transmitting values to the child. In Senegal that doesn't necessarily mean that the child leaves the house. It means that they are mature and responsible for themselves. If they continue to live within their house then they continue to respect the rules of their parents.

Adoption is a touchy issue in Islam and there are many rules that define what is and what is not allowed. According to Kebé it is forbidden in Islam to give a child your last name if the child is not biologically yours. It is also forbidden to give your inheritance to a child that is not biologically your own. It is allowed, however, to take in a child and bring it up as your own, which happens often in Senegal, as long as you don't change their last name or leave them part of your inheritance. Kebé gave the example that he had a child living in his house that was not his biological child but that he treats as his own child. This child, however, still retains his natural last name and will not be able to

receive his inheritance, even though it is as if the child is his own. He said that Islam specifically says this and therefore even though it is not a state law people follow it because they don't want to go against the laws of God, especially in regard to something dealing with their death.

According to Kebé in Islam there are four main purposes to the family. The first is to protect the honor of people. In Islam you are not allowed to have sex outside of marriage so therefore people get married in order to diminish the risk of sexual immorality. The second purpose of the family is to be able to share the plan of your life with someone. The third is to have children, as you must be married in order to have children. Finally, the fourth purpose of the family is to enlarge the Muslim community, although once again quality and not quantity is important.

Kebé stressed that from the perspective of Islam it is very serious to have a child. A child is a project and can end up being a “leader or a dealer.” It's the responsibility of the parent and society to influence the child to become one or the other. He said that it is unacceptable to have a child just to have one, that there must be two parents and that the education of the child begins even before the parents get married, based on who you chose to marry and have a child with. “*C'est un projet (Kebé 2007)!*” According to him their spiritual leader, Muhammad, said if a child is seven years old then they are too old to be adopted. He also said if they are two years old they are still too old, because their education begins before marriage. This gives insight into why adoption is questionable in Islamic culture.

Kebé described to me a Hadith in which there was a 40 year old man who was good because his parents had taught him to be good and therefore he thanks God and

desires to teach his children to be good or even better than him. There was another 40 year old man that when he was a child his parents just let him be and now he is bad. In Islam they believe that all children are born good and it's up to the parents to make them into what they will become. If they are good parents their children will be good and will teach their own children to be good.

As to the teaching of values to children, Kebé said that the same values are shared by all the members of the family and they all help and have the responsibility of imposing them upon their children. He even went as far to say that the same morals and values are shared with your neighbors and that they also have the responsibility of correcting your children. Although now as people's lives are becoming more individualistic, this aspect is being lost.

I asked Kebé if he thought the values of Senegalese culture, specifically the value of *teranga*, came from Islam or if it was just something innate to Senegalese cultural traditions. He said that *teranga* is a principle of Islam, in the Qur'an it says that if you believe in God you should honor your guests, but it is also a cultural value specific to Senegal and it would still exist outside of the religion. When Islam came to Senegal it found *teranga* that was already within the culture.

Dakar: First Mother Interview (First Mother 2007)

The first mother I interviewed from SOS in Dakar had been working there since 1985 and she is a widow and has her own daughter. The reason she was working in the Village was because she wants to help kids and to bring them the affection that they lack

since they don't know their father or their mother. The things that she does for the kids are: she helps them with their education, teaches them to cook and do laundry, etc, and she shows them what is good and what is bad. She thinks that their responsibilities are to later be good for their own kids and to be able to live in society. She thinks that in life they need aid to become men later on and that they are most in need of affection. She said that the SOS family is different from a normal Senegalese family because there is no father and the mothers must play the role of the father and manage everything. According to her the role of children is to listen to what they are taught and to not do what they are forbidden to do. She gives them a good life by giving them affection, giving them good advice later on in their lives, being at their sides when they are sick, and looking after them. Her role is also to play with them sometimes and to not be too severe or too stern. In her opinion, a mother should be open for her children to approach her and tell her their problems. She teaches her kids good things at home so they do not go outside of the home and develop bad habits. She thinks that it is necessary to prepare them for their integration later because they do not know what there is outside of the Village. She keeps in touch with her kids from SOS once they leave by visiting them during her vacation time and they also come visit her at SOS. According to her you have to have a good heart to do the job. Working there is a true sacrifice, your real family is outside and you stay there 25 out of 30 days to help the kids. Many mothers can't do the job and they abandon SOS. She says that they ask God to help them do everything because He knows that they do their best.

Dakar: Second Mother Interview (Second Mother 2007)

The second mother I interviewed had been working with SOS since 1997 and she was divorced with no children of her own. Her reason for working at SOS was to have work and to aid herself. She said that her responsibilities are to be their mother: to teach them to cook, to clean, and everything else, and to be a good mother and do what's best for the children to have satisfaction. She said that the kids are in need of growing up and having their needs met and that they are most in need of a good life, good health, and to succeed. In her opinion a family should be strong and sturdy. It should have values like *soutoura* (being able to keep secrets) and *teranga*. It should be in good health and it should be able to allow the child to succeed. The child should have their responsibilities. They should do their homework, keep up with their little siblings if they are old, or imitate their older siblings if they are younger. She thinks the mother gives affection to her kids by being approachable to them, loving them and aiding them to be calm and not worry. She should be there for them when they are sick and to help them live well. She thinks that a child should have peace, eat well and have a healthy and balanced diet. She teaches them values like *soutoura* and gives them religious education, as she is Muslim. She thinks that it is necessary to have a lot of indulgence with the children. She keeps in touch with the kids and they often come back to the Village to be looked after or just to visit. She thinks that the mothers in the Village are courageous. They have ten children and have to try and educate them. It's a noble job and she tries to do her best. She said that each mother tries to have a good family and lives like they are in their own true family. She said she has the impression of being in her true family and that there is not

any difference. She tries to have peace in life everyday and support her neighbors and have good relationships with them.

Dakar: Third Mother Interview (Third Mother 2007)

The third mother I interviewed had been working at SOS since 1997. She said that it was God that brought her to her position at SOS and that she is good within her family and gets on well with them. Her responsibilities are to educate the children, follow their studies, teach them housework and how to cook. On Sunday she teaches them to conduct themselves and eat at a table in case they end up having a foreign husband in the future. She teaches them to live well, to know how to talk well, and to avoid many things that could hurt them because they don't have the habit of training for life outside of the Village. She said that the children are in need of knowing life. They must learn to be enough for themselves and to not be envious. They must also know that they won't be always at the Village and that they don't know what they are going to encounter once they leave. She thinks the children are most in need of success in their studies, and that sometimes they say they want to be doctors, ministers of affairs, teachers, or SOS aunts and that it's necessary that they work hard to reach those goals. Her family consists of her and her children but the Senegalese family is different because it is larger and consists of a father, mother, grandmother, uncle, grandfather, etc. At SOS there are aunts and uncles but the father is missing. She said that in the family the elder children have their responsibilities. They should aid their little brothers and sisters and be a good example because the others are going to imitate them. She thinks it's also necessary that they are always responsible, confide in each other, respect and love each other, and learn to share.

When the children are 13 years old they are given pocket money and must learn to share and economize, just like normal brothers and sisters. In order to give affection to her children she thinks a mother should tell them the truth and she should also not love them too much to the point where they are not being educated. She thinks it is necessary to show them the right path, even though it may not be easy they will understand it later. Then, it is also necessary to educate them and give them good values. In order to give a good life to her children she gives them peace and tranquility as long as it is in the right path. She also thinks they need to eat well. She said that at SOS they aren't missing anything and they have everything they need for school. She teaches them to have a good character, to be sufficient, and to not be envious. She said that the children come back often after they leave SOS and continue to come back to pick up the grant that SOS gives them. She said they also have a good relationship with the families of the children and that they mom's of SOS continue to attend the children's ceremonies while the children come back to SOS to attend parties. She is satisfied with her work at SOS and doesn't regret anything. She said that the children she has educated come back often and are friends with her new SOS children and sometimes even come visit her real family. She said that God gives them the force to support everything and that she wishes that all the kids succeed. It is an honor for the mothers to work there and it is not easy but she calls on God to help them.

Kaolack: Fourth Mother Interview (Fourth Mother 2007)

The first mother I interviewed in Kaolack had been working with SOS since 1988 and is divorced with no children of her own. She said she works at SOS because she has a

family and she should help them with the money that she makes. She occupies herself with the children under her care at SOS like they are her own children. Her *devoirs* are those of mom's concerning their kids. She loves them, she has a lot of *termande* (pity), and she shares everything with them. She thinks that children are in need of learning well and succeeding in life to be able to aid themselves and to be able to aid their parents. She thinks they are most in need of learning. When asked to define Senegalese family she said that the family is very large and that there are a lot of *mbokk* and *dekkando* (neighbors). She said that in the Senegalese family each mother should be open for all and that everyone should have their *njaboot*. She thinks that a child should listen and follow the advice of others. She said that the mothers should know that the children are without parents and that they should give them affection. She gave an example of how she has young twins and when she went on her vacation time she cried thinking about them because she didn't want to leave them. She said that on her vacations she brings them to her house so they can get to know her family. She said that she gives a good life to her children by being close to them and sharing everything with them. When asked what values she teaches them she said everything that is good, to be practicing in religion, to learn to share all with their environment, and to have *termande*. She said that she continues to see the children after they leave because they are her children and that they come often when they need her and she also goes to visit their natural families. She said that she thanks God and uses the money she makes to help her family. She also asks that God helps them aid the orphans. She thinks that one should always persevere in life (*le mun*). She also believes that it is necessary to aid the people that are in need and to

work well and try to share all. She said that life is about sharing and asked me not to forget about them.

Kaolack: Fifth Mother Interview (Fifth Mother 2007)

The next mother I interviewed had been working with SOS since 2001 and she is divorced with a 16 year old child. She said that she had discovered SOS late and that it had been a surprise for her but she wanted to be able to be there for the orphaned children. Her responsibilities as a mother are to educate them and to get them to know life. She does the maximum she can so that they integrate themselves and so that they do not miss out or fail in life. She said her *devoirs* are to put them in the right path, to follow their studies, and to give them something to eat for their hunger. She also makes sure they are always clean, teaches them what life is and how to do all the household chores, and she helps them according to their age. She thinks that children are in need of eating well and having their free time. She tries to integrate them into society so that they can defend themselves later when they leave SOS. She thinks that they are most in need of aid in their studies and that they also need to eat well but they must have success in their studies to have a good future. When asked to describe the Senegalese family she said it is large and consists of the mom, dad, grandparents, sisters, brothers, nieces, etc. She thinks that children should be submissive and should listen and try to follow advice above all. She gives them affection like they are her real children by not frustrating them, rocking them, playing with them, and sometimes dancing. She said that when she's on her vacation time its like a vacuum because she misses the children. She said she also shows affection for her children by involving them in family decisions and asking them what to do that is

best for the family. When asked what values she teaches the children she said she teaches them sincerity, how to receive a person, how to take charge and not be broken by men, and how to speak and regard an older person. She also teaches them what is good and what is bad. She still gets to see the children after they leave but she said it is hard for the moms when the children leave but that the director often gives them the means to do a round and visit all of the children. She said that she never regrets the decision to work there. It is a difficult job but she loves it. She said that she and the kids understand each other and that when she is gone she misses them. She also said that it is difficult for her to follow along with their studies because after all of her responsibilities of the day she is very tired. She wishes that the kids will succeed and not regret anything. She also wishes that the mothers will never regret making the choice to work there. She thinks that all the mothers should have the ability to have maids to make it easier for them to follow the studies of the kids because trying to do everything is difficult for them.

Kaolack: Sixth Mother Interview (Sixth Mother 2007)

The third mother I interviewed from the SOS Village in Kaolack had been working there since 1995 and is divorced with one child of her own. She gives the children love like they were her own children and she tries to take the place of their parents. Her responsibilities are to help them, to teach them domestic work according to their age, and to teach them to behave themselves well. She said that the oldest children manage and lead the work while the younger ones follow. She thinks that children are in need of a good education and good health. She thinks that they are most in need of love and that without a father it's important for them to have plenty of affection. She described

the Senegalese family as large and welcoming. She said that children should behave themselves well and respect their parents and brothers and sisters. She gives them affection and respect and tries to do everything so that she is approachable. She thinks that education is the foundation of a good life for the children and that they also need to have a good behavior. She gives them a good life by giving them a good education and showing them the difference between good and bad. She also teaches them to be well practicing in their religion. She continues her relationship with the children after they leave because they are her children. She said that the work there is very difficult and it is a big responsibility. She searches for the children to have a better future and wishes that they all have success in life but realizes that is up to the domain of God. She thinks that SOS is a good institution but that there are kids that should not be there because they having living parents that are not extremely poor and it is better for the kids to be educated by their real parents. She thinks that SOS should be the last choice for a child and that there are children from families where their parents are more impoverished that could take their place.

V. Observations and Analysis

Importance of the Family

One value that stood out in all of my research and observations was the great importance that Senegalese people place on family. From my interview with Kebé I learned that the family is the core of society and also that it is responsible for transmitting values. The family is what keeps Senegalese values alive as the parents pass their values

onto their children. The Islamic rule that a child cannot be adopted and change their last name to receive the inheritance of their new parents also stresses the importance of family.

I observed this phenomenon in action while I was visiting the preschool and the homes of SOS. When the children in the school introduced themselves they always used their full name, first and last. It surprised me that in the orphanage houses the children introduced themselves using their last names as well, which were different from the last name of the mother of the home. It was interesting to see the children proudly owning up to their real last names among their “brothers and sisters” that all had different names than them. The children also introduced themselves by telling me what ethnicity they were. One day towards the end of my week at the orphanage in Dakar a couple of the children asked to come to my home and meet the Senegalese family I was staying with. This really showed how important family connections are because I had met their family and now the children wanted to meet mine. They came to visit me later on in the week and it was interesting to listen to the conversation they had with my host “brother” because he isn’t biologically related to our family although he lives with us like he is a member of the family. When they introduced themselves to each other they all had different last names than the families they lived in, although my brother lives in a family while the others live at SOS.

Another example that I saw of the value of how important families are in Senegal was the structure of SOS itself. After talking to the director of the orphanage in Dakar I learned that there used to be a youth home for the children to go to when they left their homes at SOS Village. He said that now the youth center doesn’t exist because they

decided that it was more important for the children to be integrated into families. Everything in Senegal seems to revolve around the life of families and if you do not have a family then it is very hard to get by. My original question after experiencing the importance of families in Senegal was: how does SOS make sure the children get integrated into a family? It seemed that without a family the children would be lost. I then learned that pretty much all of the children return to a member of their original family. There is always an uncle or some relative that they can go to live with after they leave the orphanage. This shows how just how strong and important family ties are.

The interviews with the mothers that work at the orphanage also provided insight into the value of the importance of the family. There were many moms that talked about the importance of integrating the children. In Senegal it is important to make sure that the orphans are integrated into a family outside of the orphanage before they leave because family is such a big part of life here.

Teranga

The Senegalese value of *teranga* has been predominant throughout everything I have seen in my research and observations. It was apparent in the preschool that children were learning to share their food because at snack time the majority of them would approach me and ask if I wanted some of their food. If they didn't initiate the sharing the teachers would tell them I was going to think they were mean because they didn't share their food with me.

Teranga was also extremely apparent in the homes in the orphanage. The first time I came to visit the orphanage in Dakar, before I had even started planning my

research project, the moms welcomed me into their homes to sit around and talk with them and meet their children. During my time in the orphanage the moms offered me many meals without accepting payment and while I was eating they insisted that I eat really well, proceeding to get angry with me every time I stopped eating and telling me that I hadn't eaten enough. The children also imitated their moms. Children would insist that I eat more and they would move food to my section of the large bowl we all ate out of. One girl in the preschool in Kaolack insisted that I eat part of her snack until I said yes, even after I had refused several times. The children and moms would also repeatedly ask me to stay for dinner and whenever I left anywhere I was always asked why I couldn't stay longer. The children also gave me gifts, such as a necklace and pictures of themselves. It was obvious that it was important to the mothers to teach *teranga* to their children.

I also discovered the importance of *teranga* through my interviews with the mothers of the homes in SOS Village. One mother specifically mentioned that one of the definite characteristics of a Senegalese family is *teranga*. Several mothers talked about the importance of teaching their children to share. One even went as far as to say that life is sharing and that one should try to work well and share all. In Kaolack every day at lunch *talibes* would come by the houses begging for food and the moms would give the leftover food to the *talibes*. Their belief in *teranga* and the way that it shows up in their actions is transmitted to their children, just as Kebé said that if the parents have good values it will be reflected in their children.

In Kaolack I experienced extreme forms of *teranga* outside of the orphanage. I met many people that invited me into their homes for dinner and for tea. I had many

people give me small gifts such as a necklace, free drinks, a tee-shirt, and I ate a lot of free meals in people's homes. I even had offers to stay in people's houses for free so I didn't have to pay for a hotel. *Teranga* is present within Senegalese families and pervades throughout the lives of Senegalese people.

Mbokk

Through my research I discovered how the word *mbokk* and the idea of family in Senegal are extended to create a value of an enlarged idea of family. Kebé described how values are shared by all members of the family and even by neighbors; therefore, everyone has the responsibility of teaching and correcting children, even if the children aren't biologically theirs.

One way in which I saw this value was in the preschool in Kaolack. In Kaolack the teachers had their students refer to them by *tata*, or aunt, followed by their name. When I arrived they introduced me to the children as *Tata Oumi* (Oumi is my Senegalese name). Hence I became their aunt in spoken language. One of the teachers explained to me that they do this because the children in SOS Villages do not have aunts, and that way the teachers can take the place of their aunts. In the houses of the Villages themselves there are "aunts" that take the place of the mothers of the home when the moms go on vacation. Therefore in Senegal it is not only the immediate parents that have an important role in the lives of children, but also extended relatives and members of the *mbokk*.

I saw multiple examples of the application of *mbokk* and the extension of words identifying family members in SOS Village. In Kaolack I spent time with the mothers of the homes while they were taking cooking lessons from a former child of SOS who had

attended culinary school. My clothes proceeded to get very dirty while I participated in the cooking and afterwards the moms were joking around and saying that they were going to have to wash my clothes. The mom that was the head of all the moms who had been the first to “adopt” me into her home my first day at SOS responded by saying that I was her child so I would do my own laundry just like the rest of her children. My presence in her home had given me the position of being called her child.

Another example of the extension of the concept of family in Senegal is how the SOS Village really was like a village atmosphere and all the mothers in the village made their families into a large community. In Dakar this was apparent in that when mothers would leave their homes to go to the market or to run an errand they would tell the mother in the house next to them so that she could take care of her children if there were any problems. This was even more apparent in Dakar as the homes were constructed in a circle with a pavilion in the center. Everyday that I was there all of the moms got together and discussed their families and children as well as danced and had fun together. They all seemed like one big family that looked after each other. I have seen this same type of connection in and between families in small villages in Senegal although it is harder to recreate in the big city of Dakar.

Another example of the extension of family that can be seen in the structure of the orphanage is how when the children leave they go to live with a member of their original family and it is often the family of an uncle or an aunt. As Madame Doucouré said the child is the property of and the responsibility of the entire *mbokk*.

Finally, whenever I came in contact with someone within the orphanage or within the preschool that shared the same last name as me (I had been given a Senegalese last

name) it was a big deal and it would be pointed out. The adults would often mention something about how we were from the same family and that I was his or her sister. Therefore the term family can be all encompassing in Senegal and the extension of family is an important value of Senegalese culture.

This concept can also be seen in the interviews of the mothers in how they said that they considered the children under their care to be their own children and they treated them like they were their own children. Even though the children held different last names and often went to visit their other families, it was possible for them to feel like they had a family in SOS because of the extension of the idea of family. This idea can also be seen outside of SOS in how common it is for children to be living in households even though they are not the children of the heads of the household. For instance, in my host family in Dakar there are three children that live in the house that are not the children of my host parents, two are the grandchildren of my host parents and their real parents do not live in the house, and one is unrelated.

Njaboot

The value of *njaboot* was also vastly present in all of my observations and research. Kebé described how in Islam the mother holds responsibility for the character of her children and she gets blamed if they have a bad character. He placed importance on the specific responsibilities of each parent towards their child to educate and provide for them and also the responsibility of the children to respect their parents. His thorough knowledge of a Hadith that outlines all the specific responsibilities of parent towards their children at specific ages shows how important the concept of *njaboot* is in the

family. He also outlines how important it is to have responsibility for a child even before a child is born, as each child is a project. In Islam, and in Senegalese culture, family is a serious unit and it is the responsibility of the parent to make sure that their child turns into a good person.

I saw many manifestations of the importance of this value in my observations at SOS and throughout my time in Senegal. Every day in the houses at the orphanages I saw the kids in every house carry out chores that were part of their existence in the family. It was the mother's responsibility to cook meals, as well as sometimes the responsibility of an older sister if there was one in the house. It was the responsibility of the rest of the children to clean the dishes and clean and mop the eating area and the kitchen. Every day I saw the children carry out the same chores automatically as part of their duties of living in the house. Children also had the responsibility of doing their laundry and ironing their clothes, although the mother also tended to help out with those chores. The interviews with the mothers also lay out these responsibilities that correspond throughout all the interviews.

Another example of *njaboot* that I saw in the families in the orphanages as well as in my host families was the expectation of children to do things for those in the house who are older than them. For instance, one time in my home stay we were sitting on couches around the tv and my sister demanded that her younger brother get the remote for her which was on the other side of the room and an equal distance away from both of them. It is a part of their upbringing for the children to follow these commands and serve their elders. I also viewed this many times in the orphanage families when the mothers would ask their children to bring them things, a drink of water for example.

The interviews with the mothers also provided insight into what they thought their responsibility to their family was as well as what their children's responsibilities were as members of the family. A couple of the mothers mentioned that they were working to be able to provide for their natural families. I was amazed that these women who gave up their lives to take care of orphaned children give in even more ways by sending their earnings home to their families. Family members in Senegal feel a responsibility to provide for the other members of their family. For instance, one of the mothers mentioned in her interview that she teaches her children to share their allowance with their siblings just like normal brothers and sisters. In Senegal everything in the family is shared, even children, as families will give their children to other family members that can't have children.

VI. Conclusion

My research, observations, and interviews introduced me to the beautiful world of Senegalese families and the values that make up their lives. I have been most impressed by their pride in who they are and where they come from and their strong faith in God that guides their lives. I have also been impressed by their unending dedication to their families and their openness and propensity to share everything.

The Senegalese family functions as a close working community in which each family member helps and looks out for each other. They are there to provide for each other, joke with each other, and help each other in times of need. The parents are there to educate their children in the values they need to know to live a good life and the children

are there to respect their parents and fulfill their responsibilities to the family. The family is extensive and includes extended family and sometimes even friends, neighbors, and people from the same ethnic group or area.

The purpose of a Senegalese family focuses on transmitting important values to the children in the family. Children are taught the value of *teranga*: to be open, welcoming, and hospitable, and share everything. They are also brought up understanding the concept of *mbokk*, that their family is extensive and anyone has the potential to be a part of the family. Finally they are shown the importance of *njaboot*, that everyone in the family has a responsibility to each other. These values are what make the Senegalese family so strong and important to the lives of people in Senegal.

SOS Village d'Enfants is a perfect example of these Senegalese values in action based on its structure and how the families within the Village function. The Village type atmosphere of SOS allows all the families to live in a community. The fact that the children can be accepted into families in the Village and still retain their original last names and keep their relationships with their original families is an example of how extensive the concept of family is in Senegal. Through my observations of the families in SOS I saw all of the main Senegalese values being taught to the children by their mothers, and I received affirmation of this from the interviews with the mothers.

The thing that left the biggest impression on me throughout my research was the strength, determination, and beauty of character of the mothers that work at SOS. The women had given up their lives to help orphaned children and they still continued to help provide for their original families. This shows a true sign of the strength of family values. They truly focused their lives on their children in the spirit of the responsibility of a

Senegalese mother to her family. They worked hard to do the best for their children and trusted in God to do the rest. I was continually impressed in how their values were reflected in their children and how they came out in how the women treated me and welcomed me into their families.

My research gives a perspective on how families function in Senegal and what values are important in the construction of Senegalese families. By observing how these values functioned in an orphanage setting I learned not only about Senegalese families in general but also about the ways in which people in Senegal strive to take care of orphaned children. My first day I was in the orphanage in Dakar one of the mothers explained to me that SOS wasn't an orphanage, it was more than an orphanage because the mothers adopted the children as their own. The original reason question I had coming into my research was why were there not very many orphanages in Senegal? Through all my observations I learned about the importance of families in Senegal and how they look after and take care of each other. It seems that every child is important and that truly no one is left behind.

Applications and Further Study

My research is valuable in helping others understand Senegalese culture and how families function in Senegal as well as what main values Senegalese families function on. This is important so that people can get an idea of how a culture works that is different from their own and perhaps they can pick things that they like from the culture and try to apply it to their own lives. The information that I learned regarding the orphanages in Senegal is also valuable because it provides one perspective on how an orphanage can

work successfully and interact with the local culture. This could be beneficial to compare to how other orphanages work worldwide to try to find the best solution and care for orphaned children. It also shows how important it is for an orphanage to adapt to the local culture, even if it is an international organization, and how this can be done successfully.

For further research I would suggest having further interviews with the mothers to ask them more pointed questions about what values they feel it is their role as mothers to impart to their children. I would examine more specifically the difference between what the role of the mother is in the family and what the role of the father is. I would also seek to observe more orphanages from many different organizations to get an idea of the different ways in which orphanages function and to be able to see the different ways in which orphanages work with the local culture. Finally I would suggest further research worldwide to be able to make comparisons between countries and the function of family and family values as well as how they are applied in orphanage settings. This would all be done with the ultimate aim of discovering the best way to care for orphans so that all the children of the world can feel loved and accepted by a family.

Glossary

Teranga (wolof): Senegalese hospitality

Mbokk (wolof): Extensive term for family

Njaboot (wolof): One's responsibility to one's family

Termande (wolof): Pity

Soutoura (wolof): Being able to keep secrets

Devoirs (French): Responsibilities, things that should be done (also means homework)

SOS: International organization that has orphanages and social programs in countries
around the world

SOS Village d'Enfants: Name of SOS orphanages in Senegal

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note: Gaye interview transcribed from tape by Mam Binta

All mother interviews transcribed and translated from wolof into french by Mam Binta

All interviews translated from french into english by author