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Money Can Buy Friends: Wealth and Relationships in Senegalese TV Series

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Money Can Buy Friends: Wealth and Relationships in Senegalese TV Series

Traditionally, in the wolof culture of Senegal, relationships with and care for others, especially among family members, are highly valued. But perhaps something is changing, as insinuated by the popular tv series *Dinama Nekh*.

by Dieynaba Gabrielle Ndiaye

«The modern economy is propelled by a frenzy of greed and indulges in an orgy of envy, and these are not accidental features but the very causes of its expansionist success. The question is whether such causes can be effective for long or whether they carry within themselves the seeds of destruction.»

(Schumacher 1973, p. 18)

When E. F. Schumacher was expressing these words, he was concerned about the negative effects of the market economy on planetary resources and on individual well-being. For him, the market economy encouraged, for profit's sake, the plundering of irreplaceable natural resources. He has also accused the market economy of destroying «man's soul», that is, of creating the illusion that the accumulation of wealth was the only goal worth pursuing at the expense of others that are essential for well-being (*e.g.* internally rewarding work). In addition to its effects on the planet and on well-being, the market economy impacts how

people relate to one another. Consumerism, individualism and monetization have negative effects on people's willingness to care for others, even in communitarian African countries. These negative effects have been analyzed by academics, filmmakers and TV series producers alike. In this paper, I will first review relevant academic research, then I will examine, with qualitative research methodology, how these effects are portrayed in a Senegalese TV series.

Money, Well-Being and Relationships

Research in social psychology suggests, as Schumacher believed, that one's relationship with money has important impacts on well-being. Greater desire for financial success has been shown to correlate with worse mental health (Kasser *et al.* 2014). Spending money on oneself, on material goods or on large purchases brings less satisfaction than spending on others, on experiences or on small pleasures (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011).

Consumerism and monetization have also been shown to negatively impact the ways in which people relate to one another. First, money reduces the need for social connection by making people believe that they have what they need to take care of themselves, and therefore they do not need others (Vohs, Mead, and Goode 2006; Zhou, Vohs, and Baumeister 2009). Second, money fundamentally changes the mindset with which people approach relationships. In a communal mindset, the focus is on the other person's welfare. Acts of care (empathy, generosity, help, collaboration) are normal, there is no expectation of return. Money, however, introduces an exchange mindset where one's benefits from a relationship take precedence over others' welfare, even if it means sacrificing one's interpersonal values (see Zaleskiewicz and Gasiorowska 2016 for a review on money, communal and exchange relationships). Thus, compared to their higher class counterparts, lower class individuals have been found to be more generous, helpful, caring (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, and Keltner 2010). Lower class individuals have also been found to support unethically behavior (lying) for another's welfare, where high-

er-class individuals would only do so for their own benefit (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015). In addition to research on the effects of social class, there is research which shows that just priming people with money (e.g., by showing them images of dollar bills), regardless of their social class, is enough to change their mindset. Caruso, Vohs, Baxter, and Waytz (2013) found that money priming made people more accepting of social injustice and more likely to support the idea that wealthier people are more deserving of organ transplants.

As a worldwide phenomenon, the market economy has produced important changes in countries with strong communitarian cultures such as Senegal. Traditionally, ethics in the Senegalese culture focus on care and consideration for others. There is a strong expectation that one should offer hospitality, salutations and resources, protect others' dignity, regularly visit others, say kind words, share others' good and bad times, etc. (Ly 2016). Sylla (1978) recounts that the Senegalese were so caring towards the first European missionaries that the latter assumed that it would be very easy to convert them to Christianity. Since the 1970's however, reforms favorable to the market economy have contributed to an increase in poverty, a switch from communitarianism to individualism (Vuarin, Leimdorfer, Werner, Gérard, and Tiékoura 1997), and an exchange approach to relationships. Samassékou (2017) notes that there has been, in Africa, a switch from a «culture of being» characterized by «a permanent relationship of solidarity, free from calculation, a spontaneous impulse of welcoming the Other» to a «culture of having» (p. 38). Diop (2012) decried «the era of the homo-economicus, who puts his selfish material interests above his social relations, the latter being used to serve the former» (p. 143). This use of social relations for material benefits has extensively been documented by Fall (2007) who, for instance, found that many single women in urban areas resort to having several boyfriends as a strategy to obtain material advantages, in exchange for «a good time» (which may or may not include sex). This behavior is not seen as prostitution, but as a modern and necessary way of relating, given the economic context.

Portrayals in African Films and TV Series

Academics are not the only ones to have taken issue with these cultural changes. In his 1968 film *Le mandat*, Senegalese director Sembène portrayed the life of a poor family that was expecting a financial donation from a nephew living abroad. Sembène showed how the money changed the family's life before it was even received. In particular, the money changed relationships among family members, and the family's relationships with neighbors, friends, key community figures. In the film *Hyènes* (Diop Mambèty 1992), the main character, Linguère Ramatou, offers 100 million to the town of Colobane in exchange for a death penalty condemnation for one of its most respected residents, Draman Dramé. Initially, the people of Colobane refuse and are shocked by the offer, but little by little, they are seduced by material goods (fans, TVs, fridges, expensive paintings, imported cigars, alcohol, shoes), and end up sacrificing Dramé.

Nonetheless, Sembène and Diop Mambèty's works are particular. These kinds of films typically appeal to Senegalese intellectuals and to international audiences rather than to the average Senegalese. *Le mandat* won a prize at the 1968 Venice Film

Il denaro può comprare gli amici: ricchezza e relazioni nelle serie TV senegalesi

Nel patrimonio di valori tradizionali del Senegal, le relazioni (specialmente tra familiari) e più in generale la cura per gli altri hanno un ruolo centrale: ci si aspetta che le persone rispettino il prossimo, facciano sacrifici e offrano le loro migliori risorse per un beneficio non individuale ma collettivo. Eppure, nello stato attuale di globalizzazione, capitalismo e consumismo, il sistema di valori e le pratiche relative alla cura degli altri stanno evolvendo, in Senegal come altrove.

La solidarietà diminuisce in una società che incoraggia l'accumulo di ricchezza e l'acquisto di beni più per godimento personale che per aiutare gli altri. Vari studiosi rilevano come la ricchezza e l'aspirazione a raggiungere uno *status symbol* rendano le persone meno empatiche e inclini alla solidarietà. Tali cambiamenti di valori si riflettono, inevitabilmente, anche in prodotti culturali come film e serie tv. Già nel film senegalese *Le mandat* (1968), il regista Ousmane Sembène metteva in scena una famiglia povera la cui vita cambia con l'arrivo di una grossa somma di denaro da un nipote che vive all'estero. Il denaro, ancora prima di materializzarsi, cambia le relazioni con vicini e amici e tra i membri stessi della famiglia.

Tra le serie televisive, l'articolo opera un'analisi di tipo qualitativo sul caso di *Dinama Nekh*: serie molto popolare, girata in wolof e prodotta da Metzjo Djatah, regista e musicista senegalese. Le protagoniste sono due giovani donne che vivono insieme a Dakar, conducendo una vita costosa e materialista, pur non avendo i mezzi per sostenerla. Gli episodi ruotano intorno ai loro tentativi di «cavarsela», che comprendono anche relazioni con uomini spesso da esse sfruttati per interessi economici. I temi del consumismo e del materialismo sono dunque cruciali: le protagoniste hanno continuamente problemi economici, non legati a reali necessità di sussistenza ma allo stile di vita superiore alle loro possibilità, tra vestiti alla moda, prodotti per la cura del corpo, regali per le amiche, accessori costosi. Il denaro corrompe anche uomini che dovrebbero essere immuni – figure pubbliche, istituzionali e religiose – e intacca legami considerati sacri come la famiglia e l'amicizia, su cui prevalgono edonismo e individualismo.

Un'analisi, quella dell'autrice, che rivela quindi come una serie tv popolare possa essere spia di un cambiamento valoriale diffuso, e offrire al tempo stesso una piattaforma di dialogo su importanti temi sociali.

Festival and *Hyènes* was nominated at the 1992 Cannes Festival, but many Senegalese may not have seen or even heard of those films. Such films would, in Senegal, be played in theaters in the capital, which are attended by the elite. Or they may be played on national television which is perceived as pro-government, and as being too educational and not entertaining enough: according to a survey by the National Council for the Regulation of Audio-visual media, national television was the most watched for news programming only; people preferred private television channels for entertainment (Conseil National de Régulation de l'Audio-visuel 2015). Thus, although Sembène, Diop Mambèty and others have offered rich and critical analyses of the effects of the market economy in Senegal through film, their works are not well known to Senegalese audiences.

In this paper, I wish to analyze how a modern, popular TV series geared towards mainstream Senegalese audiences, played on a wide-audience private TV channel, may portray the effects monetization and consumerism on relationships. The TV series I will examine is *Dinama Nekh* (meaning «I will like that»). The main research questions are the following: how are people with wealth treated and treating others in this series? What does the series reveal about Senegalese society today?

Subject of the Analysis and Methodology

Dinama Nekh is a comedy series in wolof (the most widely spoken language in Senegal), produced by Metzo Djatah, a Senegalese musician and filmmaker who grew up in Senegal, lived in France to pursue university studies in sociology, then moved back to Senegal. The series is about two young, attractive, single, Senegalese women - Daro and Maïmouna - who live together in an apartment in Dakar. They enjoy a materialistic lifestyle (fashionable, expensive clothes and electronics, nice apartments, gourmet food, etc.) which they cannot afford. The series follows the women as they try to manage financial stresses, relationships with rich men whom they try to manipulate for material gains, relationships with poorer friends and family members who rely on them and sometimes manipulate them for material gain, their desire for a stable and authentic life and strict cultural norms around dating, money and proper behavior.

The series ran between 2013 and 2016 (more seasons are being made), first on the SenTV network (season 1) before moving, due to its popularity, to the Télé Futurs Médias (TFM) network (seasons 2 and 3). TFM has been the most watched private TV network in Senegal and *Dinama Nekh* has been one of its most popular series. There are about 50 episodes per season, each lasting between 15 and 20 minutes. The episodes have also been posted on YouTube, which means that Senegalese living abroad can watch them. Episodes posted on YouTube have around 350,000 views.

Two other series, *Un café avec* (2012 - 2018) and *Wiri Wiri* (2015 - 2017) ran concomitantly on the same network and were more popular than *Dinama Nekh*. For those series, many episodes have over 500,000 views on YouTube and season finales hav-

ing over 1 million views. However, *Dinama Nekh* has some interesting features that explain why I preferred it for this study. The other series focused on complex, evolving storylines reminiscent of Greek tragedies but unrelated to the purposes of this study.² Those other series somewhat brought up the issue of wealth and relationships in that they always included wealthy characters who relate to others in particular ways. Nonetheless those series treated wealth as an attribute of characters in relation to the storyline, while in *Dinama Nekh*, it is the central focus of the series. It is therefore easier to examine

the impact of wealth on relationships as understood and consciously portrayed by the series producer.

In order to conduct the analysis, I randomly sampled, with the R statistical software, 20 episodes per season that I re-watched³ on YouTube. If an episode number that was randomly sampled was not

available on YouTube, I took the next episode closest to the episode number sampled.

My analysis will focus on the following themes: materialism and consumerism, exchange mindset and insincerity, autonomy and safety nets.

Materialism and Consumerism

The idea that materialism and consumerism are ubiquitous and problematic is central to *Dinama Nekh*. The main characters, Daro and Maïmouna, constantly have financial problems. Yet their problems are not related to necessities but to their materialistic lifestyle. Despite not having stable employment, the women are always perfectly dressed and made up. They wear fancy outfits made of expensive fabrics, nice jewelry, expensive hair extensions. They regularly visit hair salons and famous tailor shops. They own high-end smartphones and other electronics. They live in a nice apartment clearly above their means. Maïmouna has a personal griotte, a woman of another social cast who visits her regularly to sing her praises and those of her ancestors in exchange for financial favors.

The producer, Djatah, further addresses the ability of consumerism and materialism to transform luxuries into needs by making self-esteem and social value dependent on them. If the women get into financial problems, it is mainly because they feel that their value depends on their ability to maintain a certain image for themselves and in society. They dress up and offer up large sums of money at traditional ceremonies (weddings, baptisms), because they want to be respected and seen as high-class women who can afford such expenses.

Djatah also believes that materialism is generalized. It is not simply that Daro and Maïmouna are materialistic. Rather, he suggests that most of the Senegalese society has switched to basing social value on wealth. On the one hand, the women often treat others differently based on their social class. The women are seen, time and time again, being nice towards a date believed to be wealthy, being mean towards one believed to be poor, or even changing their attitude suddenly after having obtained more information about a date's wealth. On

* ————— *

The producer, Djatah, further addresses the ability of consumerism and materialism to transform luxuries into needs by making self-esteem and social value dependent on them.

* ————— *



Behind the scenes and promo pictures for *Dinama Nekh*. © Dinama Nekh

the other hand, the dates would flaunt and sometimes even lie about their wealth to impress the women. For instance, one date, after being complimented on the beauty of his fancy watch, commented that he used to own two of such watches but gave one to the president of Senegal as a gift. By doing so, the guest not only flaunted that he was able to afford several of such watches, but also that he is a friend of the president.

Exchange and Insincerity

Djatah is clearly concerned about the exchange mindset. Most episodes describe relationships in which money and pleasure are the ends, and people and insincerity are the means. In order to solve their financial problems, Daro and Maïmouna usually rely on men. Some of the men are regulars: they often visit the women who sometimes treat them well and sometimes reject them, depending on their moods, their other relationships and their financial needs. Others are one-time dates. In exchange for the money, the women offer pleasure. It is never implied that the women offer sex as this would be controversial in Senegal. Rather, they offer «a good time». They often describe their apartment as being heaven on earth, a place where people are happy, are not stressed and forget their problems. They always make sure to be elegant and agreeable, to smile, to offer food and drinks that are well-liked in Senegalese culture (e.g. sweet yogurt, fruit juices) and to have fine manners. They praise their guests (for their wealth, their good taste in clothes or cars, etc.) and call them by affectionate nicknames. Sometimes they invite Maïmouna's griotte who sings the guests' praises. The men very much appreciate this and express their satisfaction by increasing the amount of money they give the women.

For Djatah, as money and pleasure become ends, people become more tolerant of unethical means. Already in the theme song for the series, the women are heard mocking sincere love as something outdated. The women are often seen acting hypocritically: they may act nicely towards a guest, then backbite about the same guest after he leaves their apartment. They may lie about emergency situations (pretend to be sick, lie about family members' health, etc.) to get money. Although there are several episodes in which the women meet men who are sincere, they also meet men who are just as likely to lie, steal and cheat. For instance, one date who was well liked by the women because he «owned a car big enough to fill their street» turned out to be a poor mechanic who had borrowed a car he was supposed to repair.

Djatah believes materialism and the exchange mindset to have a corrupting effect even on those who should have been shielded by their social roles. The women are love interests to a reputable religious figure, a policeman, a congressman and even a university professor. These men are portrayed as using wealth unethically for a pleasurable moment with the women. The religious figure used money from devout disciples; the policeman, money from corruption; the congressman, money stolen from citizens; the professor, his income which was supposed to cover for his wife and children's needs.

Djatah goes as far as to argue that the exchange mindset can corrupt bonds considered sacred such as friendship and family. Daro and Maïmouna are best friends and relatives, yet, Daro often tries to cheat Maïmouna when she has a chance. For instance, she once requested reimbursement for expensive hair extensions that, it turned out, had been given to her as a gift for Maïmouna. At some point, the women almost became homeless because one of their friends had been keeping their rent money for himself for many months, instead of giving it to the landlord as promised.

Autonomy and Safety Nets

Although materialism, consumerism and hedonism are central themes in *Dinama Nekh*, Djatah also examines the greater social context which increases the main characters' vulnerability. The main characters live alone in an apartment. Typically, single women who have never married do not (at least not openly) live by themselves, they stay with family members until they get married. On the one hand, this kind of living arrangement can be constraining in that it puts pressure on women to follow family rules, or at least to worry about their parents' opinions of their lifestyle. As a result, they may not feel free to live the lives they want. On the other hand, this type of living arrangement affords some social protection to women, especially when women are unemployed or underemployed, as is the case for many young women in urban settings. The family takes care of basic needs (food, housing, utilities) and the women benefit from social valorization given that single women who stay with family members are seen as more respectable in Senegalese society. By having main characters who chose to rent an apartment instead of living with their families, Djatah wants to show the costs (economic vulnerability and social devalorization) and benefits (freedom in lifestyle) of choosing independence from immediate family and the shift from communitarianism to individualism in Senegalese society.

Conclusion

The switch, in Africa, from a culture of being to a culture of having (Samassékou 2017) is not only analyzed by academics or in films by experienced and internationally acclaimed directors. It is also analyzed in popular TV series watched by average Senegalese such as *Dinama Nekh*. Through his choice of characters and storyline, Djatah depicts the modern urban Senegalese life with its lot of materialism, consumerism, hedonism, individualism, and their negative effects on relationships. Such depictions show that TV series producers such as Djatah are well aware of and concerned about the evolution of Senegalese society; they want to share their concerns with their audiences; and TV series in Africa offer, without sacrificing entertainment, a platform for dialogue about critical social issues.

NOTES

1 - Since 2015, a version of *Dinama Nekh* in French is broadcasted on A+, an African subsidiary of the French television channel CANAL +.

2 - For instance, *Wiri wiri*, arguably the most popular TV series in Senegal to date, is about two enemy families that are connected in such a way that: the mother in family 1 is secretly the biological mother of the adopted son in family 2; the wife of the adopted son in family 2 is the ex-wife of the son in family 1; the son in family 1 still loves his ex-wife madly and wants to get her back, despite his mother's hatred of her; family 2 wants revenge against family 1 for mistreating this ex-wife.

3 - Prior to this research, I was already familiar with this series and had already watched most episodes.

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Right: Promo poster for *Tundu Wundu* series. © LeBasané

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BADARA

CHARLES EDUARDO CORREIA
DANS LE RÔLE DE
LYNX

SEYDI FATI MEKKE
DANS LE RÔLE DE
MR TOUMAMY

WIRRY MAGRE DIALLO
DANS LE RÔLE DE
MME DELGADO

NOUAFI KRE BA
DANS LE RÔLE DE
DIAMA

KIBRA MA GANI
DANS LE RÔLE DE
AGENT DIVINE

"PERSÉCUTÉ INJUSTEMENT POUR UN CRIME,
TRAQUÉ MORTELLEMENT POUR SA LIBERTÉ"

TUNDU WUNDU

SAISON 2

SCRIPTEUR ABDOULAHAD WONE SCÉNARISTE MOUSSA DIALLO PRODUCTEUR BUZZ STUDIOS

EN JUIN
SUR

