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PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY IN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

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From Kita to Ziguinchor: Occupational Reconstruction of a Malian Migrant Journey*

Commonly known as *tapa-tapa* in Senegal, the *fani boussila* of Mali are migrants who work in the production of batik, and are found today in many of Senegal's regional capitals. My focus here is on this migratory phenomenon, beginning with a reconstruction of the migration route (from their villages in Mali to Ziguinchor [Senegal]) and then exploring the economic aspect of this migration, which has worked to the migrants' benefit thanks to their understanding of the socioeconomic environment. In addition to observing their activities as *fani boussila*, my aim will be to decipher the mechanisms by which the migrants create more or less successful economic units of production and tailor them to local demand. These results were obtained through individual interviews as well as a focus group interview in a small production unit based in Ziguinchor.

1. The esteemed sphere of the *baxa*

To better understand the context and scope of batik activity in Senegal, it is useful to recall the world of fashion, understood as a

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temporary trend in collective references or behaviour specific to a given period and linked to a phenomenon of imitation. Except that in the specific case of batik that interests us here, the fad has stood the test of time thanks to the ingenuity of the dyers.

Batik has always been associated with festive events in Senegal: baptisms, weddings, religious events, etc..., and has emerged under different names such as thioub or baxa. In its wake the ancillary activities of dyers, fabricators and fani boussila have emerged. Some well-known Senegalese, important moral and political authorities, have contributed to the promotion of boubou baxa through their fidelity to this mode of dress. It persists in Senegal, Mali and Guinea Conakry despite the repeated assaults of conventional suits and ties.

2. The business of batiking

Batiking involves the complementary skills of dyers, tailors and garment-makers, and finally of the fani boussila or tapa tapa.

Dyeing is the first step in the process of manufacturing a batik robe. The quality of this work depends on the nature of the cloth, and fabrics called bazin¹, of German and Austrian origin, are very popular. They are dyed in various colours and customized with shrewd and adroit colour combinations. True alchemists, dyers employ subtle measures of various compounds to obtain vivid colours. Then designers and garment makers tailor-cut and sew the fabric. Finally, the activity of the tapa tapa is the last link in the production chain.

Originally, batik production in Ziguinchor (the location of the field survey) was carried out by immigrant families from Mali and Guinea that had established themselves in the region. Surveys of the Boucotte district identify these as the Dianhanké and Soninke,

¹ To our knowledge, there is no manufacture of Bazin in Mali and Senegal. And yet, the raw material of this fabric is cotton and is Mali not the largest producer of cotton in Africa.

two ethnic groups of the great Mande family of languages present when batik production was introduced in the town of Ziguinchor. During the fieldwork, we were given the opportunity to meet two families known in Ziguinchor for their activity in connection with batik. These were the Diakhaby and Gassama families.

Na Fanta is a member of the Diakhaby family. Today, she is no longer engaged in batik making, certainly because of her advanced age. She was born around 1946 and was 62 years old at the time of the survey (January 2008). The business is carried on by her daughters, her beautiful daughters and son, who alternate this activity with the sale of tiguadégué (peanut butter). Their batik business evidently provides enough to satisfy the modest demands of everyday life in the Diakhaby family. Siatta, one of his daughters says:

I have always divided my time between housekeeping activities (cooking, laundry, ironing, etc.) and batik. I cannot say that I learned batik – I think it just came to me in a way, because my mother did it, and so did my aunt (my co-wife's mother), and my sisters...

Although she attends a science high school, Siatta's daughter Aïssatou excels in dyeing. When she has time, she provides individual training in dyeing to certain groups of women in the city of Ziguinchor and surrounding villages. This training provides her with a regular income.

Na Fanta explains that batik is neither a caste business nor the prerogative of an ethnic group. In fact, she says, batik is also marginally practiced among the Wolof of Ndar (St Louis, Senegal). She said that initially the process made use of a plant called Ngalla in Soninke, Galla in Bambara and Ngandia in Wolof, to extract colours such as white, black or la couleur pale male. Although socially sanctioned for men as well, this activity was predominantly female. The income generated was marginal, however, compared what other activities provided. We may thus assume that it is these limited revenues that explain the long absence of men from the batik industry.

In any case, as a result the leaders in the Ziguinchor batik business have been women. The parallel development² of batiking not only in the clothing sector but also in interior design has led NGOs to consider it an important activity. A network called AGOA, integrating the Senegalese producers and meeting international requirements has been established. Meanwhile, financing is available to groups for the development of income-generating activities (IGA) and the consequently promising future has induced some men to get into the business as well.

Concerning the Gassama family, based in Ziguinchor, a family EIG (economic interest group) was created in 1999 including both men and women. The main activity of the EIG, apart from the art of batik is to provide training for women's movements or associations receiving NGO financing. According to Bambo, one of the few male members of the family EIG, his own involvement was essential for the management of contracts with NGOs and Senegalese Government Institutions (Ziguinchor Chamber of Trade, National Organization for Vocational Training, etc...). During our fieldwork in Ziguinchor, EIG type production units for dyeing were booming and the membership was mixed, although there was an overrepresentation of females.

3. The long search for a "business" for oneself

The production unit that concerns us here came into existence in 2004 in Ziguinchor. Two years later, a branch was opened in Kolda, a Senegalese town located 204 km from Ziguinchor. The pillars of this economic edifice are Abdourahmane, nicknamed Drahman, and Modibo. Both were born in 1966.

Drahman is from a village called Segou Dongni while Modibo is a Fulani from Koulikoro. They met in 2000 in Bamako at the

² Also, USAID promotes the batik industry locally and internationally through SAGIC, its Support Programme for Economic Growth in Senegal, at the same time advocating skills transfer and capacity building for Senegalese producers and the use of quality inputs (original colors, new fibers, etc.).

home of “the boss”, a certain Bako Traore, head entrepreneur of the fani boussila established in the Minianbougou district. This man is from Kita, a district near Bamako. Since they met in this fani boussila workshop, the migratory paths of Modibo and Drahman have been intimately linked. Modibo entered the workshop in 1999 and was joined by Drahman in 2000. While Drahman studied briefly in the past and manages to speak French, Modibo has only followed the teaching of the Madrasah (Islamic school) and consequently speaks only Fulani. As is often the case in migrations to cities, their arrival in Bamako is explained by economics as much for one as the other.

It was the failure to find an occupation that provided a regular income that led Modibo and Drahman to take up an activity in which they had no previous experience. Although manual dexterity and concentration are the primary qualities required for this work, their success at fitting into the workshop was without doubt due to their substantial physical strength. They never expected to do this work for long. But ten years later, although they had a professional break from 2000 to 2005, they still continue to “hit the fabric” as Drahman put it.

Their boss, a true businessman, was involved in the entire batik production process, revolving around a network of dyers with whom he maintained a business relationship. Once the work was completed, Senegalese or Malian women bought the fabrics for resale, often in Senegal, Guinea and Gambia. It sometimes happened that the “boss” himself made trips to Dakar or Conakry to supervise the sale of the fabrics. This man had lived in France and according to respondents, was very critical of French policies, notably regarding expulsions and the regulation of immigrants. He did not hesitate to comment on the racism and exploitation experienced by immigrant workers in France. Drahman reported this:

He always told us to work here. Africa has everything. Once he was very upset because a young man had gone to France³.

³ In fact, this young man was stuck in Senegal. His name is Abdul. We will find him later in the reconstruction of migration routes.

Sometimes, we even thought that it was just spite on his part because he had already been there and he did not want the others to try too.

Yet, according to Drahman, the very thing the boss complained about, namely the exploitation of immigrant workers in France, he practiced in his studio with his own workers.

We were not well paid. There were 10 wooden blocks (shea tree trunks that serve as supports for beating the fabric) in the workshop. So there were 20 people working and in the evening around 4 or 5 o'clock, we even had to stop working because of the heat. You could earn between 1,000 and 1,500 CFA per day.

This went on until 2003 when Drahman, dissatisfied with his working conditions and above all his meagre daily wages, decided to try his luck in Conakry. The migration to Conakry is not dangerous. A client of "the boss" had previously discussed it with Modibo. This woman said that *fani boussila* there were few and not very skilled. In addition, she told them that through her relations in Conakry, they would be able to leave Africa and go to Brussels. About this woman, Modibo explained:

This is a Susu woman – she practiced international trade everywhere: in Dakar, Abidjan, Bamako and even Lomé and Ghana. She always goes to a hotel when she is in Bamako. Also, she always pays the boss in cash and she gives an advance on the next order.

Confident and certain that the Guinean woman would keep her promises, they left for Conakry on the 17th of October 2003. The journey was not direct thanks to their limited financial reserves. Subsequently, they reached Boke, Kansara, and Kanaf, three locations in Guinea, before arriving at Conakry in February 2004. At each step along the way, they worked at odd jobs. In Conakry, the Guinean woman's promises were forgotten, and they worked for 4

months as guards in a market. It should be noted that at this point the two friends had a strong motivation to go to Europe with or without the aid of this woman. They then joined a network that promised to provide passage to Portugal from Bissau, but upon arrival in Bissau, they learned that the network no longer existed. They then met a Guinean named Yaya bound for Ziguinchor. In the end, they stayed one month and 13 days in Bissau where Drahman worked as a janitor and Modibo as a rickshaw carter. The harshness of their lives and their low incomes gave them little reason to stay longer. They joined Yaya in Ziguinchor one day in July. There they were helped by fellow Malian fishermen with whom they went to work.

At this level of migration pattern reconstruction, it is important to analyze certain facts. First, Modibo and Drahman's departure from Bamako stemmed from their feeling of being exploited by their bosses and the lure of the promise of the Guinean woman. Also, in the focus group interview they refused to accept the arguments of their former boss, who tried to dissuade them from leaving Bamako. As Drahman said: "He wants to be the only one to succeed ... It's as if someone served us the rest of the bowl to eat after he finished eating." Yet in both Mali and Senegal, the living conditions of immigrant workers in France are constantly raised in radio or television broadcasts.

The attitude of Drahman and Modibo – their unwillingness to listen to people who have already emigrated – is common in the case of Sahelian migration. Refusing to facilitate the departure of aspiring migrants, immigrants themselves are often held responsible for the non-migration of potential candidates for travel to Europe.

It is also worth noting that Drahman and Modibo's social and economic conditions have not undergone any great changes. From exploited *fani boussila* in Mali, they successively became guards and carters in Guinea, and then fishermen in Ziguinchor. However, both protagonists rule out a return to Mali, and each explains this in its own way. Modibo refers to the Qur'an, emphasising that God from time to time tests the believer to measure his degree of

faith. Accordingly, the hardships he and his friend have suffered are the result of divine will. The key is to persevere in righteousness here and everywhere. Drahman appeals to his social conscience by stating that a return to Mali would be an admission of failure and it would be difficult to bear the weight of the looks he would get.

4. Ziguinchor: return to the "tapa"

Needing gainful employment to meet the expenses of daily living (housing, food, etc...), and supported and encouraged by Yaya, the fellow Malian they had met in Guinea, Modibo and Drahman returned to their old profession: the *fani boussila*. The festive context of the moment, the feast of *tabaski* or *aïd el kibar*, gave them the opportunity to contribute to the preparations.

Yaya⁴ asked his landlady's permission to install his two friends in a corner of the courtyard of the cottage. She not only replied positively but even encouraged their project, putting them in touch with families of dyers, including that of Na Fanta. Thus they opened a little *fani boussila* shop on December 13, 2005.

The quality of their work generated a steady flow of customers. Meanwhile, Modibo and Drahman aimed at building customer loyalty by accepting all orders and especially by respecting delivery deadlines. With the pressure of growing demand, they were forced to increase their human resources by recruiting new *tapa tapa*. Rather than favouring the skills of the applicants the recruitment system relied on a moral bond provided by Drahman or Modibo.

The strategy of the two migrants consisted primarily of learning about the few *tapa tapa* centres already in place in the city. In this way they discovered these workshops' lack of commitment and rigour especially concerning the timeliness of delivery, on which the two friends from Mali are absolutely uncompromising. Accord-

⁴ At the time of the research, Yaya had gone to Tripoli (Libya).

ing to them, delays often make customers angry and customers talk. Drahman adds:

No woman ever attends events twice in the same dress.

At the time of the survey, workers currently working in the workshop were either members of the family of Modibo or Drahman or persons recommended by one or the other of them.

Abdul, a young Malian of 22 years was the first to be recruited in early 2006. His transport to Ziguinchor and accommodation were fully covered by the fledgling company. Having no kinship relation to his new employers, Abdul was chosen because of his availability and because he resided in Senegal. Indeed, following an attempted departure for France, Abdul was stranded in Dakar. Modibo and Drahman had met him once before at the home of "the boss" in Minianbougou. Three months later, Modibo's brother Abdoulaye joined the group of workers who then numbered four. Modibo said it was to protect his brother that he summoned him. Never having done *tapa tapa* work before, he was to be trained on the job.

Nfa was the next to arrive at the workshop. He was a friend Abdul had met in Dakar. He was Malian and spoke Wolof with a slight foreign accent. After his arrival in Senegal he worked at various jobs: rickshaw driver, dock worker at the port of Dakar, guard ... He then went to Diaobé, a town in the Kolda region famous for its local market, where traders meet from the two Guineas, Mali and Senegal. Another man called Nfa, cousin and childhood friend of Drahman (known as Nfatokhoba, which literally means 'eldest namesake' in the Bambara language) further increased the size of the workshop. Nfatokhoba's attempt to migrate to Spain by pirogue came to an end at Carabane, an island of the Casamance. He was joined at the workshop by his companion in misfortune, Badié. Both had already lost nearly 850,000 CFA in their unsuccessful attempts at migration, and there was a strong link between the two unfortunate companions. The insertion of Badié into the structure was approved after a lengthy discussion between Drahman,

Madibo and Nfatokhoba during which they considered all the risks involved if Badié should fail to live up to their expectations. He was finally hired on the strength of an intense need for labour in response to growing customer demand and on the recommendations of his friend Nfatokhoba.

We conclude this presentation of the workers in the shop with Iba, the only Senegalese in the story. Iba did not occupy a position as *fani boussila* but rather as a broker or *tout*. With his bike for transportation, he toured the villages near Ziguinchor in search of customers. He set the prices with villagers himself: a suit, for example, cost 2250 francs CFA, which provided him with a profit of 250 francs.

In January 2007 four young Malians arrived from Bamako, or more precisely, from Minianbougou. After a brief stay at Ziguinchor they settled at Kolda, 204 km away. Drahman and Modibo are uncommunicative when it comes to talking about the workshop at Kolda. Were these men former employees of “the boss”? What were the terms of their coming? Are they employees of Drahman and Modibo? In any case Drahman makes periodic trips to this locality.

Since leaving Minianbougou, the situation of Drahman and Modibo has clearly improved. Drahman bought a moped while Modibo left the village to marry. As for Abdul, their first employee, who initially worked in the *fani boussila* workshop of “the boss”, he acknowledged an improvement in working conditions and said he made a profit from the business in Ziguinchor. He declares:

Periodically, I send money to Nioro Sahel.

At the same time, however, the idea of continuing their migratory path to Europe persists for many workers in the shop. This comes out throughout the interviews, except in the case of Drahman and Modibo, who want to settle permanently in Ziguinchor. Modibo is also looking for a spacious room to accommodate his wife, whereas Badié and Nfatokhoba have not renounced their European dream. Abdul, the Dakar “castaway” is still reluctant to leave the Casamance capital.

As L. Missaoui⁵ writes, the act of moving, travelling, means not only navigating in space but also taking possession of territory (physical, social and symbolic), producing new things and improving them, participating in the production of wealth, getting around control mechanisms, as well as playing with the boundaries of identities and inventing new ones. The migrant must thus be seen as an actor, a carrier of initiatives, combining know-how and resourcefulness in his migratory business. The use of the term "business" is not trivial because, as illustrated by the example of the *fani bousilla*, business migration and economic enterprise are inseparable. Migration networks are very often integrated with economic networks, the former containing the latter. Economic networks allow migration networks to find other directions, generating new flows of goods and helping redesign the geography of economic flows.

Previous work on the migration of Sahelians to France revealed the existence of a unified system of support and sharing. Regarding the *fani boussila* observed in the present investigation, it appears that they manage their earnings freely. Outside the sphere of the workshop, Modibo and Drahman do not interfere with the actions of their workers and particularly with what they do with their salary. This absence of control is probably typical of contractual relationships between employers and employees. This contrasts with the known characteristics of Sahelian migration in that there is no indentured servitude here, in which individuals entrust one of their own (children, nephews, etc...) to a boss to learn a trade.

5. Conclusion

In this work I have observed a young and small business that offers services in the batik sector. Since 2006 it has included the opera-

⁵ MISSAOUI L., 2003.

tion of a workshop run by two Malian immigrants, who employ almost exclusively workers of the same origin as themselves.

The present analysis has shown that migrants are not just temporary passengers moving through a universe of norms, but that they can also participate in an original way in local life, playing with global signifiers so as to fit into local group dynamics. Through the business activities undertaken along their migration path they build bridges linking different individuals and rationales for action. They thus create a form of continuity within cultural and social discontinuities which now and again will inevitably result in the creation of entrepreneurs with local identities.