

Barriers of Tradition, Social Stratification and Culture: The Oppression of Sereer Women in Sénégal

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Abstract

Strongly rooted in traditions and customs, the Sereer Siin society of Sénégal gives ground to a social stratification that has a discriminating face as they organize social gender relations in an absolute phallocratic mode. In this process, woman are considered to be a valuable item for a lineage and community use; defined in a languid and controlled destiny, and once married, she loses all decision-making powers to fundamentally obey the good wills of her husband and her in-laws, and considered as a cheap labor force in her virilocal home. This convoluted lineage system allows her to only abide by the dominating male power. Hence, in this personally observed study, the analysis presented outlines the social stratification of woman in Sereer Siin society and the intrinsic link between lineage and political, social and economic function in the Sereer Siin community to suggest that the divisions of kinship and lineage must be deconstructed in order to remove male domination that enslave women, and that the medieval pattern of patriarchal in Sereer Siin society in western Sénégal must be challenged.

Key-Words: Sereer, Lineage, Traditions, Enslavement, Woman, phallocratic

Introduction

“The culture is at the beginning and at the end of any development,” a statement from Leopold Sedar Senghor highlights the primacy of the role that culture plays in African societies. Indeed, African populations south of the Sahara who evolve in relatively identical traditions view the hierarchy as the backbone of their political and economic social organization, and with a phallocentric character, such an organization affects an incongruous part for women in the political and economic sphere as the principle of authority is left to men who are believed to have an experience of knowledge and therefore the power to direct decisions and give guidance.

Thus, men are considered to be at the center of all social interactions and incarnate the symbol of centralized power, so in ethnic communities like the Sereers in Sénégal an awkward tradition is born in which women are viewed as an 'object'.

The situation of Sereer women is defined with much ambiguity; they belong to their clan and lineage of origin as long as they remain unmarried. But once married, they are no longer members of the original clan. Therefore, given that they are admitted in a virilocal residence, to perpetuate the offspring of the lineage of their husbands, they become simple a 'object' or means of exchange and matrimonial alliances between two families. They are owned by everybody, but they have nothing within their own possession, except to deal with the menial tasks work and to take care of the family of her spouse. Thus, women define themselves in relationship to a form of alliance and exclusion in a double articulation of the status which creates problems in the social organization of the Sereer community in Sénégal. Hence, in this society, women exist as a female entity with practically non-existent powers, in their original clan they play second roles, and in their conjugal families they are isolated and have no possibility to aspire to any earthly law.

In this analysis, we will manage to define the structural position of women in the Sereer community to see how the natures of the lineage and clan system constitute obstacles to the release of women and their ability to change their status. And in this, we also note that that it is important to study how maternal lineage, which is different from the paternity lineage, constitutes an impediment for Sereer women to have access to land and general empowerment.

Phallocentrism Stiffens Men to Enslave Women

Without pretending to standardize the female identity among the Sereer communities, we strive to situate the place that Sereer Siin¹ society in Sénégal offers to women. Hence, among the Sereer Siin, the notion of female gender bears a particular subjective perception and the role assigned to women is very telling as their status and socio cultural identity as the stratification of women in this phallocratic society reserves women with ridiculous roles as she deals with "domestic and maternity tasks and the socialization of children from birth to the age of initiation²"; while men are concerned with tasks they believe to be more honorable, such as "war, hunting and farming³." In so doing, the distribution of male and female tasks involved and tangibly promotes the superiority of men over women in the Sereer Siine society, a social imbalance that encloses women with a second class citizen status and deprives them of any business opportunities as she appears as a yes-woman who makes do with second roles, being judged not capable to assume top-levels political and economic responsibilities. And in this, she also carries the heavy burden of a asymmetric society that in a way or another, draws the balance of social power in favor of men, rendering her fate as predictable and static, a point George Balandier articulates as:

The woman appears to be a widespread used instrument, the physical reproduction of the group: this is the most obvious function that determines the strict control that the latter is to ensure her maintenance and growth of the workforce⁴.

In their capacities as farmers, the Serers Siin maintain secular relationships with the land, which plays an economic, political, cultural and religious roles in their community. Its exploitation is exclusively reserved for men who, with rudimentary means, work with extreme harshness in the fields. And for this reason, they impose their wives the 'sacred' duty to bear and give birth to as many children as possible to overcome the problem of labor-force in the exploitation of arable lands. This subordinate position of Sereer women prevents them from being productive actors in the economic domain and reinforces the rule of Sereer men as it pulls women down the social pyramid. Thus, in the Sereer society, women are under the control of agnatic lineage which places her as a "social position of inferiority and subjection."⁵ Hence, in her conjugal residence, women are condemned in a dependent standpoint of total submission to men which finds its grounding force in an organic and hierarchical consideration, thus, according to Hadiza Djibo:

Among the Wolof Sereer, houssa and traditional Songhay societies (...) social stratifications were not less present, based on biological factors (age and sex) (...) thereby establishing (...) dominance of elders (seniors) and women under that of men in a patrilineal clan⁶.

This ideology of hierarchy implied by the agnatic lineage makes women an eternal servant deprived of all basic rights. She cannot pretend to a hereditary advantage or aspire to be a depositary of any right to land or kind of property belonging to the agnatic family. She is said to be a wandering being, hence there is no less negatively charged saying: "*O Tew Guenée seene*" (the woman is not entitled to a house, she lives nowhere). Customary law in the Sereer Siin society does not give her any power over the substance of her agnatic family as the right to have access to "land, livestock, and children is based on kinship (...), on the birth (inbreeding)⁷", and she also can't claim a noble political status, because the succession of political power is a man's game as the saying "*O Tew née maadokha*" (the woman has no right to be a leader) becomes a mantra. Thus, the woman is said to be weak, irrational, instinctive, and vengeful, lacking, therefore, the physical, intellectual and psychological capacities to manage the political affairs of her community, however, she remains a line for power transmission via "property (land, slaves, cattle) ... passed through uterine in the regions of Kayoor at Baol and Walo⁸".

Status of Attribution

The social status of the Sereer woman represents the serious and repeated female duty violations expressed by men in the name of male dominance. She is a tongue-tied victim who suffers the martyrdom of moral outrage and abuse of customary power, as any idea that aims at questioning man's power is systematically repressed. And with a one-side oriented customary law, men have the latitude to divorce his wife without the risk of being punished by traditional law as Abdel Kader Boy reports, "the unilateral power of repudiation the husband exercises without considering the opinion of the family members is unfortunate, and there is no measures that can be directed against him for having exerted a wrongful repudiation⁹". And in so being, the husband keeps his masculine power he exerts willingly on his wife who is not less than an 'object 'of value, of which use is conditioned by the good will of her husband. She is dispossessed of all kind of possibilities, even related to children keeping after a divorce: "custody is never discussed or claimed by the mother and her family, as it is natural to return the child to his father after the divorce that appears as the only parent. Often, however, the position of women is dictated by economic reasons¹⁰". "

The woman, in the land of Sereer Siin are subjected to the duties of silence and obedience, and in case she breaches these obligations, moral and physical sanctions are provided by custom wherein she can be beaten by her husband or put in quarantine by her in-laws. And in fact, the woman, actually, remains a victim of discretion and arbitrariness of her companion who is protected by customary norms, in any respect, in his physical and moral interactions with his wife. This absolutist dimension of man's power over women among the Sereer Siin is highlighted in a song that is sung whenever it is about to welcome a bride in her marital house:

Mbaal samba, mbaal- lee munié
kuu gi-oona ngen fa gi-aan kaa mugniine
Mbaal Samba, Mbaal-lee Munié

[O mare Samba
Armed strongly yourself with patience in your new married life
For all things you will endure as tests, your female fellows have already
gone through them,
And they supported them because they were patient.
O mare Samba be really patient in your marital life.]

The Sereer woman are always invited to endorse the qualities of patience, docility and perseverance in silence as conjugal life is regarded as being synonymous with subjugation and a vassalage relationship, a process she must be prepared to bear as the "burden of the household¹¹". The above Sereer wedding song, rich in moral lessons, helps to welcome women in their marital house as it exhumes the main idea of the duties and obligations of the Sereer bride. Hence, Issa Laye Thiaw specifies that "these marriages singing is to show the need for the husband and his wife to abide by the strong line of morality that reflects with community's social norms¹²". "

In the saying "*Khum O Tew*" (tie a rope to the woman), marriage dispossesses the Sereer woman of her freedom and the right to break by herself, marital ties however hard and inhuman the abuse and mistreatment she undergoes are. Yet ironically, the woman can plead for mercy, and an exit from a marriage, as expressed:

Demba dibor
O buga ngeeram O tew
O wassam-mée

[Please, my husband don't cut a stick to hit me
Please, if ever it happens that you do not love me as a woman, you will be
of great help in releasing me from my marital obligations and duties.]

Female Bondage

In a phallogocentric system the power of man stands on respect and on the total submission of women. The man, a chief with an almost divine right, only obeys the principles of his totalitarian power on all his family members, hence, he is the "*yale mbiine*" (the only owner and chief of the house) that imposes his will on a woman who is simply reduced "to a servant, and domestic"¹³.

In regards to the simple object of pleasure, woman, in the Sereer Siin community has the obligation to satisfy male pleasure as her body is a space that fills the pattern of rest for the husband, whose "power is expressed through the attributes of sexuality"¹⁴. His authority bears the hints of a phallic symbol that affects the power of fertilization wherein man is like a god father as he embodies the force of creation. Therefore, the woman is conceived as a state subject that undergoes the manly desires of his "*Koruum*" (the husband of her own), because he is her man, her chief, her husband. Indeed, it is this sexual arbitrariness which gives men the right *de seigneur* that strengthens the social injustice in Sereer Siin society. In fact, the social norms are organized in a way that men are able to use his male powers on the body "of the one enslaved by birth"¹⁵. This is based on the idea that women are believed to be less intelligent and less strong: "*néé néeukétééne a yornorkhna nééne yiif léé tééne a yornokhtuu*" (as her breasts are falling, as her spirit remains obtuse), hence, she is emotionally stigmatized by such a design, and as such, the male Sereer exerts an absolute power over the women in a medieval and feudal relationship in the presence of men as male domination over his female "subjects" remains fundamentally despotic and totalitarian.

Despite this open-air prison which evolves women, they are compelled in the name of a culturally standardized social-self to display happy features, however derisive they can appear to be. Therefore, the Sereer society maintains a construction of an identity of a differentiating movement¹⁶. And women integrates social standards in her daily mission that consists of defining herself not in relation to her ideal-self, but in relation to the Other, her husband, hence, she has no possibility to develop an intimate and singular identity dusted of stereotypes, social prejudices that can allow her to take advantage of professional activities without being stigmatized.

Thus, women in the Sereer Siin community are actually condemned in a position of "the Other that is not me"¹⁷ and socialized so that she thinks and acts from the perspectives of an "I" that considers a "You" as being her 'master'. Her relationship with men is distanced, and she incarnates the features of the female "*Kersa*" (decency) in an enchanted posture, and her status assigned is directly linked to her so-called weaker sex, a role intimately associated with the identity of "*Yalo Naafée*" (The one who wraps herself with a loincloth). And her duties are defined through sensual and emotional functions, contrarily to the man who fulfills "instrumental functions to support the household and embodies the power of authority"¹⁸.

Sereer woman can be observed in an enslaving passivity, a position opposite of her existence, which necessarily presupposes her dependence on a patriarchal system, a system which determines her personality and a dependence that gives ground to her powerlessness. And notwithstanding, the work she is confronted with that include: pounding millet, preparing breakfast, lunch, dinner, draw water, wash clothes regularly for all her husband's relatives, take care of children and elderly people, sweep all huts in the house and court yard every morning, make the bed of her father and mother in-law each morning, serve men and then eat after them, etc., highlights her total and endless submissiveness to the male authority. This activity also absorbs her energy, alienates her conscience and prevents her from liberating herself from a degrading state of mental slavery as her ideas are set within the limits specified by the male body. And even in case of death at a young age, the husband of a deceased woman is allowed by traditions to take without conditions, the sister of his deceased wife as a substitute wife, a reality Issa Laye Thiaw confirmed in an interview with Joog Sène (an old Sereer man) in June 1983 in the village of Baabaak wherein he said: "Yes, (...), we gave to a man whose wife died a few time after the wedding the late wife's sister as a substitute wife to inherit her wedding hut"¹⁹. And furthermore, should a woman delay in having children, she is viewed as a curse person among the Sereer Siin as the following satirical song illustrates:

A tew o timmer sakée ngaak
Té diarée guékèle no mbiine
A rimeel rmээр o kiine
Diaré sipaa ngaak no maakh

[A woman who cannot impregnate does not deserve to be kept at home.
 She has been begotten, but she cannot beget. This woman does not
 deserve to be kept in a matrimonial home.]

Further, the endogamous or exogamous polygamy remains to be one of the most widespread cultural practices among the Sereer Siin community which tradition grants a man a right to have at least three wives, and thus, the first wife is chosen by the man's father or his maternal uncle as the woman is designated under the noun "*O Tew O kayenaak*"(the shepherd's wife or the girl given to the shepherd as a wife for his breeding activities done in the name of his family members' well-being); she is selected and given to a man as a thank-giving present in regard to the services the man has done in the name of the well-being of all members of the paternal and maternal lineage. This wife will during her life will fulfill the mission of "*O Tew o yook noff*" (a wife for male comfort) wherein she must blossom sexually for her husband and provide services to his family in a very satisfactory way.

The second wife is known as "*O Tew O Tebb*" (the younger wife) and can also be the wife "inherited" by a younger brother from a deceased elder wherein she is supposed to play the role of a henchwoman to dote her husband and must always seek to satisfy the whims of her male bed partner. And last, the third wife officiates as a mistress as she is identified through the noun "*O Tew wa koob*" (the woman in the bush). She is often older and must be married to a man of the same age. She generally lives in a village that is miles away from the one of her husband as she provides mainly libidinal function for an advanced-aged man. Thus, women in this patriarchal society regardless of her age must satisfy the desires of her "owner", a reality the following wedding song illustrates:

*O tew O tolokhu djéguée khaa kides.
Réff o ndéb takhé riniaa maak waa*

[Married women, do you know that a woman whatever can be her age,
can satisfy her husband.
It is unworthy for a younger married woman to bride away the older one.]

Woman! "Silence is Golden"

"Considered to be one of the sacred institutions of society, a source of comfort and protection of its members²⁰", the traditional African family in general, and the Sereer family in particular is a space based on functional components that give men a dominating power and confines women in an enslaving momentum. Hence, the silence of the married woman is as valuable as gold as she is compelled to keep silence as long as she lives in her marital house regardless of the vicissitudes she has to endure. Thus, "a woman may horrify an eye to black butter, because it will be a visible trace of her state of a beaten woman²¹" as articulated by Lydie Chantal Ella Meye.

In the name of custom, the abuse of power of men over women is normalized and naturalized at a point of becoming a customary law of which women dare not to complain, a right she does not have, and to protest against her status would mean to question the established social order. Thus, she must resign and retreat herself into a nodding silence: "if the law of silence requires from a battered woman not to 'shout louder, while being beaten by her husband, for fear of being head by neighbors, it also forbids to spread over public places his wife suffering abused²²," according to Lydie Chantal Ella Meye. And thus, her dignity, her image of "*O Tew No kiine*" (someone's property) is measured by her capacity to subjugate herself to the dominating power of male "*yaale mbine*" (her master-owner) without indignation, and thus, "the design of dignity implies, in our societies, a woman's ability to stoically endure the excesses mistreatments that are exerted against her²³."

As outlined above, the family institution among the Sereer Siin is a coercive cell for women as women are beaten, insulted, tortured, without having an opportunity to rebel against the social order, and in the eyes of custom, the more she remains stoic and subject to domestic violence without flinching, the more she is said to have the chance to benefit from a blessed and protected offspring.

Hence, a popular saying among the Sereers is: " *Kou O tew aa mougna naa ndokaa tolakh aa guaiine no kha mpééme*" (the woman only has the children she deserves. The more she is submissive, the more her children are blessed, the less she is submissive, the less her children are blessed). Here, the customary bedrock of the family institution does not favor women's freedom to instead update the social levers that keep women in a state of vassalage, neither cantankerous nor critical as her knee yield to the desires of her husband, favored by customary law, and if he is a Muslim, even the *Holly Coran* works to justify his power over women, hence:

Virtuous women are devoutly obedient (to their husbands) and protect what needs to be protected with the protection of Allah and as far as those you fear disobedience are concerned, admonish them and move away from them in their bed and beat them²⁴.

The condition of Women among the Sereers Siin community is concealed in a difficult fate as she is and remains to be an inferior creature that cannot but aspire to the happiness of her husband. Hence, via Nietzsche's standpoint through which this idea is defended: "Man must be lifted for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior. Everything else is folly²⁵."

Conclusion

Traditionally captured by the logic of domination, men in the Sereer Siin society refuse to be part of a social anthropological perspective to change the status of women. Thus, the absence of a prescription for a redefinition of the social roles prevent Sereer women from struggling to free themselves from the shackles of the family institution so they can contribute permanently and effectively to the building of their society and country.

Without a reshaping of social relations between men and women a dynamic production and entrepreneurial will hardly find a positive echo among Sereer Siin women, hence the women must be repositioned in the public and domestic space to free their productive and creative energies so they can contribute to the emergence of a new Africa. Therefore, the divisions of kinship and lineage must be deconstructed in a way it can remove the male powers of domination that continue to enslave women of their economic and political potentials. And moreover, the medieval pattern of patriarchal society must be challenged and defeated to bring forth "a feminine spring" in the land of Sereers Siin in western Sénégal.

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Notes

¹ It should be noted that there are several sereers communities in Sénégal. There is the *Sereer Siin* community, whose members mainly live in the central regions like the Fatick, Diourbel and Kaolack regions. We also have *Sereers Safènes* the *Sereers Ndout*, who live mainly in Thies region. In this article we will only talk about the *Sereers Siin*.

² Hadiza Djibo. *La Participation des femmes africaines à la vie politique. L'exemple du Sénégal et du Niger*. Paris: L'harmattan, 2001, p.32. (Translation is mine)

³ Ibid. (Translation is mine)

⁴ George Balandier. *Anthropo-logiques*. Paris: PUF, 1974, p.14. (Translation is mine)

⁵ Hadiza Djibo. *La Participation des femmes africaines à la vie politique. L'exemple du Sénégal et du Niger. Op.cit.*, p.34. (Translation is mine)

⁶ Ibid. (Translation is mine)

⁷ Ibid., p.36. (Translation is mine)

⁸ Hadiza Djibo. *La Participation des femmes africaines à la vie politique. L'exemple du Sénégal et du Niger. Op.cit.*, p.44. (Translation is mine)

⁹ Abdel Kader Boy. *Conditions juridiques et sociales de la femme dans quatre pays du Sahel*. Amsterdam, 1987, p.25. (Translation is mine)

¹⁰ Ibid., p.47. (Translation is mine)

¹¹ Issa Laye Thiaw. *La Femme Sereer*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005, p44. (Translation is mine)

¹² Ibid., pp144-145. (Translation is mine)

¹³ André Rauch. *Crise de l'Identité masculine*. Paris: Hachette, 2000, p.25. (Translation is mine)

¹⁴ Ibid., p.26. (Translation is mine)

¹⁵ Ibid., p.27. (Translation is mine)

¹⁶ Djaouida Séhili. *La Castration sociale*. Paris: La Collection « Le Présent à venir », 2003, p.117. (Translation is mine)

¹⁷ Djaouida Séhili. *La Castration sociale. Op.cit.*, p.117. (Translation is mine)

¹⁸ Ayes Iman *et al. Sexe et Société : engendrer les sciences sociales africaines*. Dakar: Codesria, 2004.p.44. (Translation is mine)

¹⁹ Words quoted from an interviewed made by Issa Laye Thiaw with Joog Sène, an old Sereer man, June 22, 1983 in the village of Baabaak. An interview cited in his book *La Femme Sereer*, p.261. (Translation is mine)

²⁰ Lydie Chantal Ella Meye. « L'économie domestique de la domination masculine » In *La biographie sociale du sexe*. Paris: Karthala, 2000, p.68. (Translation is mine)

²¹ Ibid. (Translation is mine)

²² Ibid. (Translation is mine)

²³ Ibid. p.68. (Translation is mine)

²⁴ *Le Saint Coran*. Sourate 4, verset 34. (Translation is mine)

²⁵ Frederick Nietzsche quoted by Lydie Chantal Ella Meye. In « L'économie domestique de la domination masculine » In *La biographie sociale du sexe. Op.cit.*, p.172. (Translation is mine)