

Democracy, human rights, and castes in Senegal.

Translated from the article by Penda MBOW

Reflection on democracy, human rights and castes in Senegal doesn't necessarily belong in the agenda of this issue on contemporary forms of slavery, as caste-cleavage isn't founded on the principle of servility. But the necessity of building a democratic society where respect for human rights isn't simply a matter of rhetoric sufficiently justifies inserting this article in the debate opened by the *Journal des Africanistes*. A new citizenship demands scrutinizing African societies and eliminating barriers that hinder both individual and citizen fulfilment. The new definitions of human rights imply directly facing the fundamental issue of order and caste cleavages. Of course, for some Senegalese intellectuals, the problem of castes seems to be outdated, to be part of a backward struggle, especially when the continent is faced with all sorts of difficulties. According to them, there is no need to contribute to afro-pessimism, as if one could forget it is the duty of Africans themselves to look critically on their own societies. Daniel Etounga Manguelle, in a book with an evocative title (*Does Africa need cultural adjustment?*) mentions, among other impeding factors: excessive conviviality, rejection of any kind of open conflict and placement of the individual in the shadow of the community. In short, all characteristics of pre-industrial and pre-modern societies. And yet, analysing the situation in our countries by considering solely their material foundations and the evolution of their political classes would be singularly reducing the capacity of transformation of our societies.

With the development of "*L'École des Annales*", the "*Nouvelle Histoire*" and structural anthropology, African researchers have access to conceptual tools enabling them to distinguish with greater precision the current mutations in continent societies. Today it is possible to practise what Roger Bastide calls "clinical anthropology", which consists of applying an analysis to special cases, the condition of a social group or of a community undergoing a crisis, with a view to determine in each case the suitable socio-therapeutic treatment. The debate on castes in Senegal must define one of the aspects of the serious crisis of values this society is undergoing, as well as defining its current mutations. Indeed, the feeling both groups and individuals experience regarding their respective positions and the conditions that result in this feeling, are not immediately determined by the reality of their economic conditions, but by the image they have of it; an image, which is never reliable but always manipulated by a set of complex mental perceptions.

Analysis of the caste-system enables understanding the long and complex process through which any change of society is achieved: studying mentalities is then of fundamental importance. This prospect requires every African or Africanist researcher to consider African societies in the long-term, while favouring the notion of structure, as it is defined by Fernand Braudel and applied by observers of the social phenomenon. What does one mean by structure? It primarily means an organization, a coherence of somewhat fixed relations between realities and social masses. This is precisely what historians speak about when they use terms such as "assembling" or "architecture" to characterise a reality that has disintegrated with

time but which firmly continues. Certain long-standing structures become unwavering constituents for countless generations: they obstruct history, thus calling for its collapse. Others will crumble more quickly. But they are both supports and obstacles. Mentalities are thus also prisoners of time (Braudel 1969). Like Guy Bois (1989 : 17-18), we believe old societies die slowly. Even when dying, they hold out a long time, and their widely spread roots prevent new shoots from emerging. Today the social condition of caste people has changed but the caste-system has survived. Its survivors have a real impact on the collective conscience imposed by the Wolof, Balpula and Bambara systems and they are a hindrance to the arrival of real democracy, especially in regard to – particularly in the beginning – the individual's own self-awareness.

Can a comprehensive study of the caste-system aid in understanding how deep transformations in Senegalese society have been? Impeding factors will no doubt be identified in the area of hierarchy reproduction mechanisms, a major phenomenon in social history. From precise examples we will evaluate the impact of the caste-system on beliefs and the strength of the ideological discourse underlying it. We will then attempt to clarify the concept of the caste-system with the aid of different works and studies. But let's look at first at the attitude of Senegalese society faced with this problem.

Senegalese civil society in face of the caste-system.

The emergence of civil society in Senegal is connected to the reinforcement of the democratic system, the complete multiparty system, and the triumph of cultural adjustment policies. But the main interest of the phenomenon lies primarily in the strong will of the Senegalese to be seen as citizens. In Senegal, the characteristics of civil society are both its dynamism and variety. This reflection on castes, therefore, can constitute a starting-point to looking at the relationship between civil society and intellectuals, who form a subgroup of it. The complexity of this relationship goes much further than our area of focus calls for. Nevertheless, the difficulty of debating this question in Senegal can be grasped from Madeleine Mukamabano's reaction: "when I wanted to make this programme, certain people said to me " but there is no point, it is not really a problem, it is something psychological that will be resolved, it has no impact whatsoever on people's lives. So today I don't even know if I was right to bring up the problem."(cf note 2). Such a reaction reveals the nature of civil society in our country and the lack of determination of Senegalese intellectuals to face their own society.

In fact, the organisations in Senegal which work on promoting human rights never carry out investigations to evaluate the impact of hierarchies of order and caste on the lives of individuals and their social relations, on their married lives and, subsequently, on their personal fulfilment. What is the meaning of the system of statutory hierarchy? The human rights organizations are not very motivated as far as this important question is concerned as, most of the time, their own concerns are defined according to those of Northern NGOs, who themselves don't always have

good knowledge of African social realities. Regarding the problem of slavery in Mauritania, it was only after the Senegalo-Mauritanian crisis in 1989, with its train of human tragedies, that the debate was at last raised on an international level. Of course, the caste problem is not on the same level, but there is crucial education work that needs to be begun, notably to accelerate the process of the individual's emergence.

Instead, a good proportion of civil society deliberately maintains total vagueness in regard to the disappearance of order and caste hierarchies. Is it, as some think, a real logic of exclusion to keep whole areas of society out of all decisions ? Has the system established taboos so firmly fixed in the collective unconscious, that many people don't want to transgress them, because of the immanent unhappiness they are supposed to cause here and there ?

The issue of castes reveals one of the weaknesses of Senegalese democracy, which is still far too formal. For a long time, men said caste people hardly ever tried to found or lead a political party, because the social origin of individuals always determines their relationship to power. Even in marxist-feminist parties, in which the large number of activists of caste origin has always been noted, these activists have almost never been leaders, in spite of their intellectual qualities. It was not until 1992 that the former Minister of National Education, I.D.T. created the first party lead by a descendant of blacksmiths. Today there are many either at the head of a political party or aspiring to take over from the present leaders. O.N. is at the head of the "*Parti pour la Libération du Peuple*"(PLS), while I.S. is in a good position to take over from M. Wade at the "*Parti Démocratique Sénégalais*"(PDS). Among the most important activists in so-called leftist parties, .P.G., M.T. and the "*Guissé de la Ligue Démocratique*" can also be mentioned.

In the 1990s, one notes a small presence of caste people soliciting elective mandates due to universal suffrage forty years after independence! If until now caste people have often held very important positions, including the position of Prime Minister- a nominal function- they are rarely to be found in elective functions. Thus, in Parliament, the elected caste people are usually elected on the national list and hardly ever on the "department" list, where the election is carried out locally. At this level, the candidates' individual qualities, political talent or social origin remain determinant. Obviously the paradox lies here, since social origin always overrides other criteria. According to Landing Savané, the leader of And-Jéf PADS, (a leftist party), his party was faced with the reality of castes being involved. One of his most committed activists who wished to be a candidate in the Fouta region told him that, as a "*griot*", he met strong opposition including within his own party from electors who considered he wasn't going to stand as a candidate. According to an enquiry in "*Le Nouvel Horizon*" the risk for a caste person of not being elected is still high In the "Fouta" or Wolof countries, it is not rare to see activists of some political party not allowed to speak at meetings, because, traditionally they were not entitled to speak in public gatherings. The PS (Socialist Party), which has been in power since independence, has contributed in perpetuating such political ostracism by leaning on traditionally important families.

Now, with the "Refoundation" they are endeavouring to change this situation, to the extent that the man who leads the reforms, O.T.D, is said to be a caste person. But the man is so controversial within the area of public opinion, that one wonders if negative reactions surrounding him are really linked to his being a caste person or to more objective criteria: lack of political experience, or his privileged position in taking over from President Diouf, who passed on his prerogatives to him, not only in political matters but also in the administrative field, which, of course, arouses jealousy.

Whatever it may be, the caste problem can in no way be underestimated. This is what M.N. understood, in 1981, when the succession to Senghor went to Abdou Diouf instead of him. Although he denies it, many thought his caste origins put him at a disadvantage. From then on, he became closer to the TALL Families of Fouta (Toorobe) by creating family bonds with every marabou family in the country. But for a long time, people referred to the blacksmith origins of the "Niassenes" - powerful Kaolack marabout - to which his father belongs. He seems to happily ignore this aspect and recalls with pleasure, that his wife is a "descendant" of Blaise Diagne; the first Senegalese deputy in the Bourbon Palace during the first world war. (1914-1918).

He feels therefore strong enough, regarding his origins, to confront president Diouf in the February 2000 presidential election. Yet, genealogical questions, which many Senegalese hold important are often manipulated. For a long time a rumour circulated that M.N. wanted to build himself a new genealogy. "*L'autre Afrique*" takes this up by asserting that "M.N is distributing a letter in political circles sent from Kaolack, his native town, by an old woman who retraces his genealogy: if it is to be believed, M.N is a apparently a descendant of a family rich in prestigious ancestors." Aside from this statement, the debate brought up around the issue illustrates the considerable importance given to the social origins of individuals. In fact, everyone knows perfectly well that Keur Madiabel, the natal village of M.N., was founded and peopled by caste people, who had their own graveyard. If M.N. feels the need to close the chapter on his origins, it is simply because neither Senegalese civil society nor the so-called caste intellectuals, have done their work in awareness and education.

As far as we know, the first important public debate regarding the caste phenomenon, was organized in April 1992 by a group called ACTANCE, made up of intellectuals and artists and lead by Issa Sam (Joe Ouakam). All Dakar's intellectuals, artists and diplomatic representatives (from western countries) attended the debate. The only intellectuals of caste origin who dared to face the subject were the mathematics professor Sakhir Thiam and ourselves, being those that introduced the discussion. All the other supposedly caste intellectuals, many of who were present, carefully avoided saying anything, even to refute such and such idea with which they did not agree. One fact that was extremely revealing was that every time a participant spoke, they began by stating who they were: they did not want any ambiguity about themselves. For the first time in our lives, we were faced with the dilemma. : "Did we have the right to raise this debate?" as we were fiercely

reprimanded by certain caste people: they reproached us for breaking a pact "for speaking publicly of ourselves when our strength had always been to be feared."

How to understand the attitude of the elite, as a whole, in the face of this phenomenon ? Landing Savané probably best accounts for it : "Actually we started from the principle this phenomenon had to be totally ignored. We never mentioned it, but in reality, some of us fully supported it. (cf "L'autre Afrique"). And yet Landing Savané belongs to the May-68 generation, known for its revolutionary and generous ideas, nevertheless like their elders they carry on elucidating the debate. This is what accounts for the surprising reaction of one of the first lawyers of the Senegal-Bar, Maître Ogo Kane Diallo, also in l'Autre Afrique, where he declares : "Senghor had surrounded himself with caste-people because all the intellectuals loathed him as a French creature and nobody wanted to join him". This vision is not rare in Senegal. For some, Presidents Senghor and Diouf surrounded themselves with caste-people so as to have people indebted to them for their social rise. What place for competence, talent, rigour, honesty ? As a young counsellor near the Ministry of Culture in the 1980, we had had to record Senghor's opinion regarding the problem (shortly before he left power): " I nominate caste-people to positions of responsibility because they are more intelligent than the average and I marry my nieces to well educated caste-people.

Finally, as regards social stratification, civil society remains idealistic and generous. One of the symbols of this rising civil society at the end of the second millenium allows us to measure how far we still have to go: one's caste origins are still brandished to exclude, humiliate or hurt. What does "being casted" mean ? The question is justified.

Before turning to other aspects, let's close this chapter about the place of castes in administration. Sociologist Abdoulaye Bara Diop doesn't think the phenomenon can play a part in the sphere of modernity. To back up his theory, he leans on an enquiry which shows that blacksmiths are proportionally more numerous in the Senegal-administration than in other categories of the population. Even if it is true that the individual's social status intervenes neither in recruitment nor in nominations, there is no denying it is present in the relationships between colleagues. At the time of independence, the Foreign Office, then led by a caste-person, Mr Doudou Thiam, had chosen to be called 'the jewel-shop", a name that seemed stigmatising. Besides, many cases are found in administration of subordinates refusing to obey their boss, under the pretext that he is in no position to give them orders, being himself a jeweller or a cobbler or a wood-worker. DM admits to once losing the head of a service in the River Area : he chose to be sent somewhere else, as he could no longer stand the contemptuous reactions of the people around him.

And yet because civil society is being reinforced, because public-spiritedness needs to be rooted into the Senegalese people, interesting phenomena are appearing. El Hadj Mansour Mbaye, known until then to be the President of the Republic's griot and special counsellor, announces to general surprise : "I want to be either a member of Parliament or a Senator, like other socialists, to take part in

the development of Senegal. The time has now come when it is necessary to think about this." As the authorities now use the talent of griots to mobilize and instrumentalize the values they incarnate for its legitimisation, one now sees a shift in the labelling: they are no longer referred to as griots but as "traditional communicators". The phrase is both less connoted and more flattering. The authorities, by manipulating them differently, gives them the impression they are indispensable, which probably accounts for their sudden ambition. Moreover some values of those called caste-people prove precious in the modern world. Communication, a world whose control is practically in the hands of griots, is the strongest example of this. They excel at the press, above all the spoken press, but the written press too, and one of their best representatives is still Bara Diouf, former General Manager of the national daily (Dakar-Matin and Soleil) who boasts about being a griot. About this acquired awareness, a new phenomenon, let's remark that the "Association des Boisseliers" (the Laobés do all the work that has to do with wood) have given themselves the aim to reforest the whole of Senegal. In spite of this will to go forward, what explains the persistence of castes and perpetuates the phenomenon ?

A few considerations about the caste system

The Geography of castes in western Africa

In a thesis about the whole group of endogamic artisans and musicians –called castes- of western Africa (Sahelo-Sudanese area, border areas with Sahara and forest Africa), Tal Tamari comes back on to the spatial delimitation of castes. These groups, the most famous of which are associated with the work of iron, wood or leather, or else with music, are to be found in about ten ethnicities, in particular the Mandingues, Soninkés, Wolofs, Peuls, Toucouleurs, Songhay, Senoufos, Dogons, Touaregs, Moors. The repartition zones of the castes includes Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the north of Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, the East of Ghana, part of Algerian Sahara, a few spots in the North of Cameroon, Liberia and Sierra Leone (Tal Tamari 1988; 1997) . What can this stratification in castes be linked with ?

Hypotheses about the origin of castes

The work of Georges Dumézil (1956, 1958) about Indo-European societies has highlighted the situation of the caste-system : the shock of cultures seems to be one determining element of it all. In the example of India, one is facing the transformation of a society of order into a society of castes. Indeed by the end of the Vedic period the society of orders was divided into 3 "colours" (Varna) : Brahma - poet and priest- , Kishashtra –warrior and chief- Vis – of common birth- . A fourth colour, inferior, composed of defeated Black people –Dasa, Sudra- meant to serve the Aryas (other orders) then came and made the situation more complicated. From this time the Brahmin-order offers every characteristic of a caste : a functional group occupying a precise place in a hierarchy, shut in on itself by heredity, endogamy and a very strict code of interdicts.

Before India, the same process had been noted in "casted" Egypt. According to Dumézil (1958 : 17) "Greeks, in the 5th century, thought they were discovering there the prototype, the origin of the oldest Athenian functional classes [...]. Actually this structure only took form on the Nile after contact with Indo-Europeans, who, suddenly appearing in Asia minor and Syria in the middle of the second millennium before our era, also revealed to Egyptians horses and all their uses. It's only then that, to survive, the Pharaohs' old empire gave itself a new organisation, and notably, a permanent army, a military class.

CheikAnta Diop, in "L'Afrique noire précoloniale" questions Dumézil's thesis about the origin of castes in India. Relying on a text by Strabon (who, himself relies on a more ancient author, Megasthènes) Cheik Anta Diop thinks that castes in India fit with a division of work, excluding any ethnic difference, and indeed a Dravidian can be a Brahmin. The criteria allowing to tell one from the other are either moral or material, not ethnical. In black Africa, particularly in western Sudan, it is possible to attest to an Egyptian origin of castes, a very old phenomenon. One can agree with Cheik Anta Diop when he says that work specialisation, which has brought hereditary transmission of jobs in the caste system, on either family or individual scale, started with clan-organisation. At the time of the great empires, and Ghana, the most ancient, probably dates back at least to the 2nd century before Christ, detribalisation was already effective over the whole territory of the great empires.

In western Sudan, the origin of castes can be apprehended from the hypothesis developed by Yoro Dyao about the Noole caste, "the buffoons", biologically constituted, and which might have been born during the Jaa-Ogo emigration from Egypt. Researchers unanimously acknowledge that Jaa-Ogo master iron-metallurgy (Bocoum 1990). Captain Steff, in his "Histoire du Fouta Toro" puts forward a very interesting idea : "The Jaa-Ogo were very poor, owned little cattle and cultivated only the minimum to feed themselves. Their chief was Coumba Waly whose family had the prerogative of melting and selling iron. They went far away up the mountain to find the ore, which they melted in furnaces "

According to Cheik Moussa Camara : "The Jaa-Ogo not only sell the iron but they also govern Fouta" One can, then, question the origin of the debasement of the blacksmith's social position. How could he fall from the top of hierarchy to the position of an inferior caste-man ? Why such decline ? How has this loss of power, which perpetuates through history, been possible ?

Military defeat seems to be the most plausible explanation: the Jaa-Ogo were defeated by the Soninkés of Ghana as Sumanguru Kanté, the last blacksmith king of Sosso, was beaten by Soundjata Kaïta in the famous battle of Kirina (1220-1235). The hypothesis of Abdoulaye Bathily (1989: 221) to explain the social decline of blacksmiths in upper Senegal is very stimulating: "the fall of the regime of Sumanguru was perhaps followed by a dispersal of blacksmiths in all countries. The massive circulation of iron in West Sudan, as much through the intensification of regional trade as through the access of an increasing number of peoples and groups

of individuals to the techniques of metallurgy, lead to gradually break the traditional monopoly of a minority.”

One can assert that even if the “social enlargement of the metallurgist profession had contributed to the decline of the blacksmith’s social influence,” the problem remains intact. Why, despite the increase in economic resources, has a caste consciousness involving fundamental changes not developed? African societies, up until recently, did not give major importance to material accumulation and disassociated the control of weapons from the access to power.

The centralising monarchy, created with Ghana, went further in the political domination of inferior castes. According to Abdoulaye Bara Diop (1981), it developed caste relations not in the sense of a socio-economic interdependence based on the division of labour, but in the sense of a dependence of inferior castes on superior ones. We will return to this fundamental idea, even if it contradicts the racial theory of caste formation developed by Abdoulaye Bara Diop, which is an attempt to root culture in biology: the so-called caste hierarchy is not based on the wealth of their members, not on their role in the mode of production, but on to their degree of purity or impurity.

It is impossible, within the outline of this reflection, to go over the entirety of problems connected to the evolution of castes in our societies (all the historians have amply tried to do so). Let’s remember¹⁶, however, that its structure had already taken shape in the XIXth century at the time of the colonial penetration and that two significant cleavages divided society. They were, on the one hand, the criterion of freedom and, on the other, hereditary professional specialisation (castes). The criterion of freedom opposes free men or *geer* (sing.gor) to slaves, *jaam*. Castes oppose the *ñeeño* – those who practise crafts, music, singing, praises – to all those who are not tied down by this kind of limitation, the *geer*, from which results the idea of social bipartition. When they analyse the caste system, researchers generally include among the *ñeeño* the *griots*, who have an ideological function, as well as a singing and praising role (*sab-lekk*, “those who live by the word”, cf. A.B.Diop). This classification lends itself to confusion. The term *ñeeño* actually connotes a more restricted sense; it is applied predominantly to craftspeople castes, who are often excluded from political power, whereas the *griot* is an indispensable element of the centralising monarchy. It remains that, generally, people within castes are “characterised” by endogamy and impurity.

Let’s again refer to several of Tal Tamari’s important conclusions regarding the relation between caste-people and slaves and the reproduction of caste-people. In certain regions, people within castes have increased in number through the integration of people who did not originally have caste status¹⁷. The most common process, at least, the most frequently admitted by those concerned, concerned

¹⁶ It is my own reading of Boulègue (1987: 53): “It is more difficult to know if these structures were already, in their essence, identical to what they would be in XIXth century.”

¹⁷ In our time, one observes rather the inverse phenomenon. Even those that originate from egalitarian societies such as the Diolas, established and fully-integrated foreigners (Cap-Verdians, generally citizens of other African countries) are all *geer*.

children of a man within a caste status and his concubine of servile origin: the children accessed the father's status. Descendants of captives held by a caste family could, in certain cases, become eventually integrated into the master's family, conforming to the model that prevailed in the relations between noble families and their slaves. This case occurred regularly with blacksmiths. In other circumstances, nobles passed themselves off as people of castes in order to escape slavery. We know that people of castes could never be reduced to slavery (Tamari 1997). Moreover, in Senegal, it is easier to hide a servile origin than a caste origin.

Concerning the notion of impurity, one can assert that it is a theorised phenomenon, to say the least: the *geer* are superior by birth, they are of pure blood, of wolof, halpulaar origin, as far as one goes back in time; the *ñeeño* are biologically inferior, of a foreign origin. According to Yoro Dyao (*Cahiers*): "If it is said that the sweat of a blacksmith is ill-fated, it is because he remains between two bodies: iron and fire. One is hard, the other is hot. His work is tiresome and the sweat that results from it creates pain and unhappiness to he/she who touches it." In reality, the place occupied by ideology in the caste system is fundamental since such a system is not only a mechanism but also the mental representation that individuals within groups have of what the behaviour of other groups should be in regard to them. However, a question remains: through what processes did the internalisation and formation of values by the castes themselves occur for as long a time? We will come back to this by analysing the experience of castes from a matrimonial perspective, but let's first look at the explanation Cheick Anta Diop and Abdoulaye Bara Diop give.

Cheick Anta Diop (1987: 11) estimates that for "each caste: inconveniences and advantages, alienations and compensations balance each other out" and he adds: "the stability of the caste system is secured by the hereditary transmission of social functions that corresponds, to a certain extent, to a monopoly, disguised in religious interdiction, in order to eliminate competition" (*Ibid*: 17). What Cheick Anta Diop is saying is mostly relevant for a pre-capitalist society and it must be also acknowledged that the fact of being removed from areas of decision is not easily compensated for. As for Abdoulaye Bara Diop (1981: 73-90), he explains the situation by the domination of an agricultural economy, resulting in the dependence of artisans on peasants in a trade system controlled by the latter. One can not help holding several reservations. Peasants did not control trade at all, especially in a long-term perspective. Trans-Saharan trade had generated a class of merchants closer to Muslim scholars, while the peasants would be Islamised later: XVIIIth, XIXth century?

Moreover, the *ñeeño* were not forbidden to work in agriculture. They played not only the same role as the *geer badolo* (peasants) in an economy of subsistence, but they also had control over the tools of production. Why, then, did the *ñeeño* not follow the same evolution as the European bourgeoisie, which was in practically the same situation at the end of the middle ages?¹⁸ Perhaps because the communal

¹⁸ Regarding this subject, we had a most interesting discussion with the sociologist A.B. Diop, who I thank here for his advice and suggestions. Our viewpoints diverge a little on this subject as, rightly, he estimates that the caste system was created within the framework of an economy of subsistence. Yet, the divergence of our opinions resides

movement initiated by the European bourgeoisie within corporations would be the spearhead of social and economic mutations in Europe between the XVIth and the XVIIIth century. In its beginnings, the communal movement's sole objective was for the bourgeois to be recognised by a three-party society made up of those that pray, those that fight and those that work the land. The *ñeeño* had no need whatsoever for this kind of recognition as they were born through detribalisation. Recognition has often been the objective of emancipation movements.

Lastly, in the clientilistic relations maintained by caste people and *geer*, the gift function must not be over-estimated. Only the *griot* was truly economically dependent, and as much on the *gor* as on the craftsperson. One can also presume that contempt, which is often emphasised, was reinforced by the monetisation of exchanges.

Daily life, matrimonial status and castes

Societies in crisis, such as current African societies, live in a paradoxical situation: money has become the sole real value, but the need to avert the crisis develops identity reflexes in the individual and the group. The exaltation of values specific to our traditions and to our culture often determines inter-individual relations. The reality of the caste phenomenon can therefore be grasped also through examples that reflect the everyday reality, primarily at the level of the lower social classes.

Everyday life and caste

To respond to an offence received by his daughter, an old jeweller from Dakar preferred to recognise his grandson rather than the father who is *geer*. On the contrary, someone else pressured his daughter into choosing celibacy, forbidding her to marry the man of her life because he was a *griot*. These sorts of incidents are not only limited to matrimonial aspects. Some ordinarily explain their misfortunes from having had such and such contact with a so-called caste person. A woman acknowledges having never had her hair plaited by a woman of blacksmith origin out of fear that it would lead her hair to fall out. If she touches the hand of a person of blacksmith origin, her own hand would be immediately covered with bumps. For S.L., a driver, it is enough for him to sit on the bed of a blacksmith for the same effects to occur.

There are numerous such examples. Obviously impossible to prove, they rise from the worlds of fantasy and the imaginary. The existential reality of caste people deserves therefore more attention, even if one can observe a certain evolution in the everyday attitudes towards them. Each time that an individual is faced with difficulties he/she tends to accuse the other - the neighbour, the friend - and the caste people generally represent an easy target as ideological justification is deeply rooted in the collective memory. It is thus that the caste person is regularly

primarily in the fact that the caste person constituted an integrating part of society, despite its stratification, whereas the bourgeois was excluded from the three-party society and felt more need for recognition; however, the attitude of a caste person today corresponds more to that of the bourgeois of the beginning of the XVth century.

accused of having the ability to change the fortune of another: they bring bad luck. The caste people may reach the height of success but they will always be reminded of their origins. What Sartre says in *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1954: 108, 113) is relevant to caste people in our societies: "They (the Jew) may accumulate legal protections, wealth, honour but they are only more vulnerable and they know it (...) but at the same moment that they reach the height of legal society, another amorphous, diffused and omnipresent society is revealed to them in flashes that refuses them. They feel, in a very particular way, the vanity of honour and wealth, since the greatest success will never gain them access to this society that claims to be the real one: minister, they will always be a Jewish minister, both an excellency and an untouchable. However, they will not meet any particular resistance: but a sort of escape, an impalpable emptiness will hollow around them, creating in particular an invisible chemistry that devalues all that they touch." To various degrees, the caste people experience the same reality. Whatever their success may be, they will always be reminded of their caste origin; this origin is the cause for their false steps and they will be forgiven no failure. In lower class neighbourhoods where the caste people are often accused of witchcraft, it is believed that one must beware of their *thiat* (their evil-purveyor words). One witnesses here an abusive and completely warped generalisation of the belief in the mystical powers of the blacksmith. The control of fire required magic faculties, the blacksmith was responsible for circumcision, he possessed healing abilities and practised incantations (*jat*) to tame iron. This fear of the caste people's words sets up relations between friends that are not founded on confidence; reasons to mistrust sleep in the unconscious of the individual and the weight of culture and education is omnipresent.

Matrimonial relations and castes

The caste system is particularly rigid in matrimonial relations. As Proust remarked at the time of the Dreyfus affaire: "When it comes to the Jewish question, the driver like the aristocrat have the same attitude" (Sartre 1954: 36). The majority of intellectuals, men and women who hold an important position in the state apparatus share with the local housewife nearly all the same reflexes on marriage: caste barriers are crossed with difficulty. Matrimonial investigation is a preliminary that all marriage suitors must comply to: one must avoid, above all, mixing one's blood. The consequences of this situation are numerous but the most common remain premature divorce and a split from the family. In our societies the notion of a couple is uncommon: marriage is primarily a matter of families and not of individuals. Other consequences are abortions –problems of caste are not always the cause for this, but they can be the basis –, most of the cases of suicide and suicide attempts, infanticides and life traumas connected to unhappy love affairs¹⁹. Is the matrimonial question an individual affair then? Most of the time – no.

¹⁹ A recent survey carried out in a study on *Muslim women and development* provides pathetic life records. F.D. confirms having attempted suicide because her family refused to let her marry her friend with who she has two children. Her father turned her out of the family home; only the love she held for her mother enabled her to resist. Among the numerous causes of infanticide cases reported by the daily press where the mother is an accomplice, inter-caste relationships are involved. The case of marriages of people we know that end badly, by divorce, by *maraboutage*, by spells designed to separate two individuals that love each other are manifold. In the survey of

There is certainly no individual revolution, and yet it is the amount of individual awareness that will be the basis of a revolution in mentalities. Because caste people are the only ones on who endogamy is strictly imposed, they have the highest rate of polygamy and arranged marriages between close relatives, resulting sometimes in harmful consequences on the child's health. It is true, however, that caste people share these characteristics with the marabouts. Are Islam, school and urbanisation factors of transformation?

The presence of Islam in West Africa is very deep-rooted as it goes back at least as far as the VIIIth century; but it was not until the slave-trade period and particularly that of the colonial invasion that Islam penetrated the lower classes. However, its presence did not fundamentally modify the caste system. On the contrary, the Islamic religion adapted itself perfectly to this system, replacing aristocratic officials with religious ones; in many aspects, the marabout house reminds one of the royal court. Of course, certain small cities of Senegal such as Bambey, Mekhé and even once Tivaouane had caste people as great imams, but this is altogether exceptional in a big city like Dakar. The results of a study carried out by Abdoulaye Bara Diop (1981: 94-95) are still relevant today: "In religious society, they (*sab-lekk*, the *griots*) fulfil certain secondary functions related to their hereditary specialisation as "people of the word". Muezzins in mosques specialise in religious songs in evenings organised by the believers.

The adaptation of Islam to the caste system contradicts its egalitarian principles (*cf.* Surat 49, *Al-Hujarat*, "Private apartments", verse 10). The first revolution in the history of Islam – that of the Abbasids (750) – precisely wanted to put an end to clientelistic relations between Arabs and non-Arabs (*mawalis*). Abdoulaye Bara Diop was certainly right to think that Islam, however important it may be, was not, through sole ideological force, able to radically change or curtail the caste system. However, the great marabouts with the great majority of them being of a superior caste, did not initiate any action to assert the egalitarian principle.

Moreover, the supposed superiority of marabout origins remains to be clarified. In regards to this, traditions are completely contradictory even if research can determine the very modest origins of those that lead the marabout revolutions at the turn of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, Islam being the only alternative to aristocratic oppression. The problem arises, above all, from culture and, generally speaking, African culture is stilted. It is only able to grasp exterior contributions and adapt them. African cultures change little through contact with other civilisations, and there are objective reasons for this. For instance, the changes provided by school are not considerable. Attendance to a western school does not greatly disrupt mentalities. The same phenomenon is found all the way through to professional training. Let's take a large caste family where nine people were able to access tertiary education. Their specialisation is as following: three people in chemistry-physics, two in natural science, one in economics, one in pharmaceuticals,

L'Autre Afrique (See above) someone said: "I don't care about being governed by a caste person as long as he doesn't marry my daughter!"

one in general mechanics and one in literature. Is it only a coincidence? In any case, one finds a predominance of caste people in scientific fields of study, particularly experimental sciences, and this phenomenon may be explained by the existence of a pre-scientific mind in caste professions²⁰. One also observes that youth unemployment affects less those that come from crafts castes: it is common to see these young people go to school the days there are lessons and, the other days, to find them in the workshop of the father, the uncle, etc. Another example is that of the *maîtrisards* of caste origin who formed an economic interest group to open a big modern jewellery shop. Or again, the case of a young person with a PhD in law (with a specialisation in international relations) who, unable to find a position corresponding to his diploma, lives off his trade as a jeweller. We think that a valorisation of craft castes after independence would have given a technological basis to Africa in the perspective of endogenous development.

The attitude and perspectives of the caste people

The attitude of the caste people can prove to be deceptive. There is firstly the caste people's self-consciousness, which manifests itself through certain excesses such as ostentation, the acceptance of gifts (contrary to a certain conception of human dignity). But there is also the solidarity of the caste social environment and the exaltation of sometimes very conservative values: sense of family, honour, etc. Max Weber's analysis on the relations between Protestantism and capitalism could be equally applied to caste people. By preventing energies from unravelling in all directions (the inferiority complex being a limiting factor), the system compels the caste people to dedicate themselves to work and, since the end of the Second World War, there has been a high number of caste people immigrating (Morice 1982) towards the majority of the African capitals. They bring their skills (jewellery, tapestry, shoe-making, etc.) but they are also found in trade. Does the decline of the craft-industry due to the invasion of the internal market by foreign products explain the immigration of caste people? This hypothesis actually remains empirical. We are convinced, however, that a more in-depth study would reveal conclusive results, especially if one considers the proportion of migrants in relation to the number of caste people within global society. The economic success of the caste people is a significant feature of modern Senegal. By definition, caste people have always been present in productive sectors. Many are those that, at the time of independence, transformed their workshop into a small family company: woodwork, jewellery, shoe making, clothes manufacturing... Others such as "the caste people of Baol entered successfully into trade". (*L'Autre Afrique*)

The caste people's second type of reaction is the acceptance of their "state", non-refusal, the proclamation of themselves such as they are. This attitude of the caste people can be criticised especially in a process of democracy construction. The fact of wilfully considering oneself as a caste person must only be a step in the course towards the abolishment of the system, a *sine qua non* condition to reach true democracy. Yet, one observes that certain caste people, primarily the *griots*,

²⁰ This example is only given as an illustration and is an intuition that needs to be refuted or confirmed through serious studies.

misuse their position in society. Under the pretext that they are considered inferior, they distort social relations, become involved in numerous intrigues, and spend their time begging, an occurrence that is becoming widespread. This situation contributes, among other factors, to the systemisation of begging and creates an ideal environment for corruption to set in: in a society where one is not repelled by begging, indulgence becomes commonplace and favours parasitism. In Senegal, many are those that live off the State and its citizens, thus reducing the number of active people while at the same time, annihilating their efforts. It is not solely the existence of caste people but the type of social relations created by the caste system that favours this situation.

The ultimate attitude is that of refusal. Certain caste people, taking advantage of a neutral name, simply refuse to take on their situation as caste people; others hope to escape their castes by entering into matrimonial relations outside of their own society. This may explain the high number of mixed marriages among the first intellectuals of caste origin. These marriages outside of caste are not always a bad thing, but they often put the children resulting from these unions in an awkward position: they are described as *geer benn tank* (having only one foot). One can gain a certain optimism following the example of the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Daigne²¹ who estimates that the matrimonial stronghold is in the process of falling. It is harder to follow him however when he asserts that "urbanisation made it possible for caste people to blend into the anonymousness of the city." The family name remains the caste people's identity card even if it is recognised that the emergence of a financial nobility in a society in crisis has demolished the foundations of ostracism.

Let's say, by way of conclusion, that fighting in favour of caste suppression is a primary principle for human rights, as individual liberation remains the very condition of development. How can our economic backwardness be fought without supporting new ideas to discredit certain dogmas, prejudices, fanaticism, arbitrariness, parasitism, in short, all archaisms of a society that has become, in a certain way, too intelligent for its own structures? Responding to this question firstly implies proposing the eradication of, among other archaisms, the caste system. Society will progress faster the day the Senegalese become aware that practicing a profession has absolutely no relation to social decline.

²¹ Cited by *L'Autre Africa*.