

IDENTITY STRATEGIES, CULTURAL PRACTICES AND CITIZENSHIP RECOVERY: MAURITANIAN REFUGEES IN THE SENEGAL VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

In 1989 a conflict arose on the Senegal-Mauritania border, resulting in violence by populations on either side against those suspected of “foreign” origins. This situation entailed mass slaughters of people of Senegalese descent in Mauritania and expulsion for the luckier ones. Their assimilation in the Senegalese part of the borderland has been made partly easier by the language they share with the host communities, which enabled them, on arrival, to undertake activities that would also ensure their integration. Mauritanian refugees now have the possibility to move freely between their former sites and their new environment. Yet this process of losing and regaining their status is paralleled by a more complex process of identity seeking or recovery. This paper examines these identity issues by focusing on the experience of the Djolly Senegal refugee community, and also on the cultural bridging strategies that they have developed, with a particular interest in representations and discourse.

Introduction

This paper examines the cultural adaptation and integration strategies developed by a refugee community in the Senegal Valley after 22 years of exile on the Senegalese side.¹⁷ The refugees' discourse, which is itself part of their identity and cultural adaptation strategies, throws light on other strategies pertaining to socioeconomic and cultural practices.

The issue of refugee identity strategies and culture in the context of border processes in the Senegal Valley has been abundantly addressed, yet more by French than English speaking scholars. Moreover, these French scholars have focused on essential aspects of culture and identity construction. Santoir (1990a, 1990b, 1998) provides a comprehensive body of work on these refugee communities – but with limited emphasis on such cultural practices as discourse. Marty (2003) does so, but with an interest focused rather on the FLAM (Front de Libération des Africains de Mauritanie) nationalist movement (see also Fresia's (2008) insightful analysis). Even though the discourse of the latter is sometimes appropriated by Mauritanian refugees in their claim to citizenship, it does not take account of the refugee experience and the resulting perceptions and discursive strategies it shapes.

On the institutional level of humanitarian organizations, Polzer (2008: 6) deals with “discursive specialisations and blueprints” that convey “the assumption that a discourse of refugee rights, as defined

¹⁷ This began as a conference paper presented in a panel organized by Jordi Tomas Guilera and Alexandra Dias at the fifth annual conference of the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE) in Lisbon, Portugal in September 2011. I'm particularly indebted to the network and the participants for the fruitful exchanges, and to Dr. Cristina Rodrigues for suggestions for the final version. I acknowledge with gratitude Aboubakr Tandia's constant support.

by international Conventions, will in all cases be beneficial to the refugees concerned and therefore is desired by them". Such an assertion implies that the refugees' expression of their wants is not given due attention. The representation of their situation, drawn from the refugee's imagination and the cultural reserve of their linguistic community, is thus structured by their cultural heritage. The question is then also that of how the refugees address their integration with various cultural strategies, and how these are disclosed by discourse and implemented through discursive strategies.

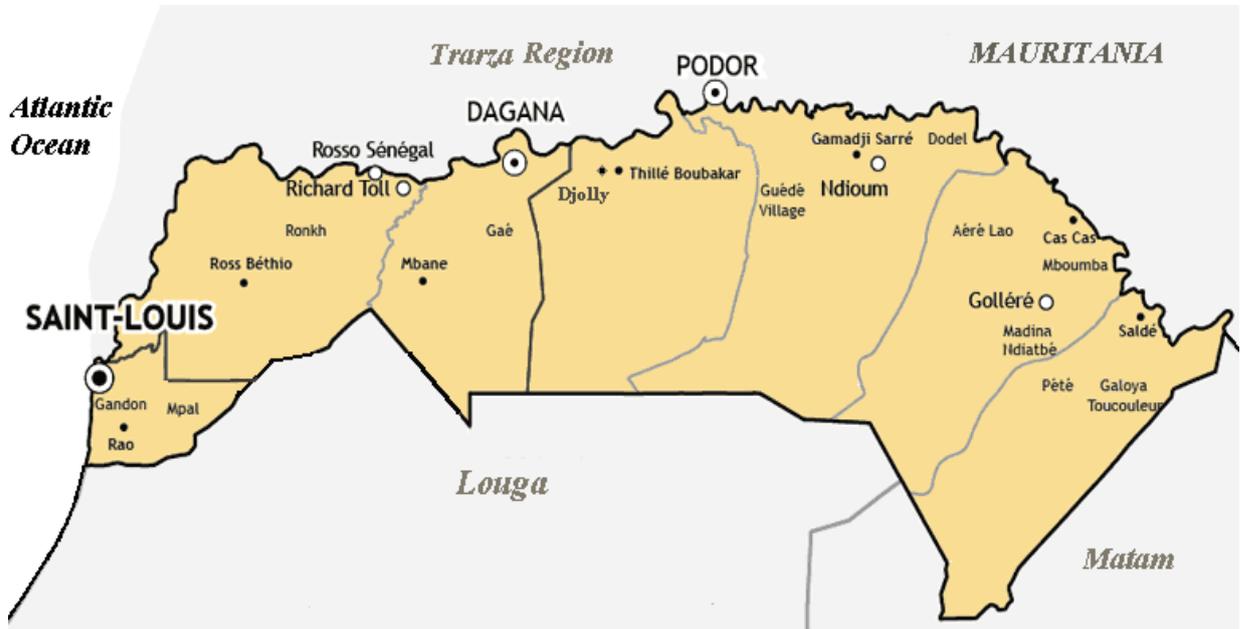
This article will first address the deportation experience in its psychological and social/material aspects. The second part looks at the local integration and adaptation strategies, with a focus on the part played by refugees in their integration through representations and discursive strategies and socioeconomic and cultural practices.

The manpower-and-ghost community

In 1989 a clash between Mauritanian cattle raisers and Senegalese farmers led to a diplomatic crisis, due to the intervention of the Mauritanian National Guard. This situation entailed intercommunity violence on both sides of the border and also turned out to be the last straw in the ongoing socio-political tension in Mauritania since 1978 (Marty, 2003: 499). In Mauritania, whose Arab-oriented policies have been more and more marked, this crisis between the two countries was coupled with an escalation in tension between white populations (called *Beydanes*) and black Mauritians. In addition to the resulting killings, the mass deportation of black populations from Mauritania to the other side of the border was the most remarkable aspect of this crisis.

It is in this context that the inhabitants of Djolly, a Mauritanian village in Trarza – a southern region on the banks of the Senegal River –, were deported to the Senegalese side of the border early in 1989. Like other refugees landed in sites of Ndioum, Dodel, etc. along the border, they were taken in by the district of Thillé Boubacar, in the same borderland area called the middle Senegal valley (Figure 1). It corresponds to the pre-colonial province of Fuuta Tooro.

Figure 1: Map of the St-Louis region illustrating the location of the Trarza region (Mauritania) and the Thillé Boubakar district (Senegal) in the middle valley borderlands.



Source: <http://www.au-senegal.com/carte-administrative-de-la-region-de-saint-louis,038.html> (modified by author).

The psychological dimension

The psychological dimension of the refugee experience covers 22 years of exile, with a deep trauma at the beginning, due to the experience of violence, dispossession and uprootedness. Jean Schmitz argues that the implication of the Mauritanian State in these events makes it possible to compare it with what was going on at the time in the south-west Sudan province of Darfur, with the same idea of an ethnic or racial state vendetta leading to the same uncontrollable outcomes (Jean Schmitz, 1990: 503). Former possessions on the Mauritanian side and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of state-supported abuse have not been cleared from consciences by concerns and expectations. Nourou, 29, evokes this aspect as the main reason why the possibility of going back to Mauritania is not welcome to him:

I was 6 or 7 at the time our families were leaving. So people of my age cannot remember all the details about how good it was to live down there, but we have been told about the way we used to live there; it was a life of abundance. Then we spent 22 years here... it has not always been easy. Yet I know that in Senegal, whenever you undergo an identity control, chances are there's something wrong with you. Otherwise, nobody disturbs you. In Mauritania, someone can find you in your house, slap you and ask you what you are doing there. Everybody hasn't the required self-control to tolerate this, and if you react, you can be imprisoned for it, or even more. Personally, this is one of the reasons why I don't like Mauritania at all.

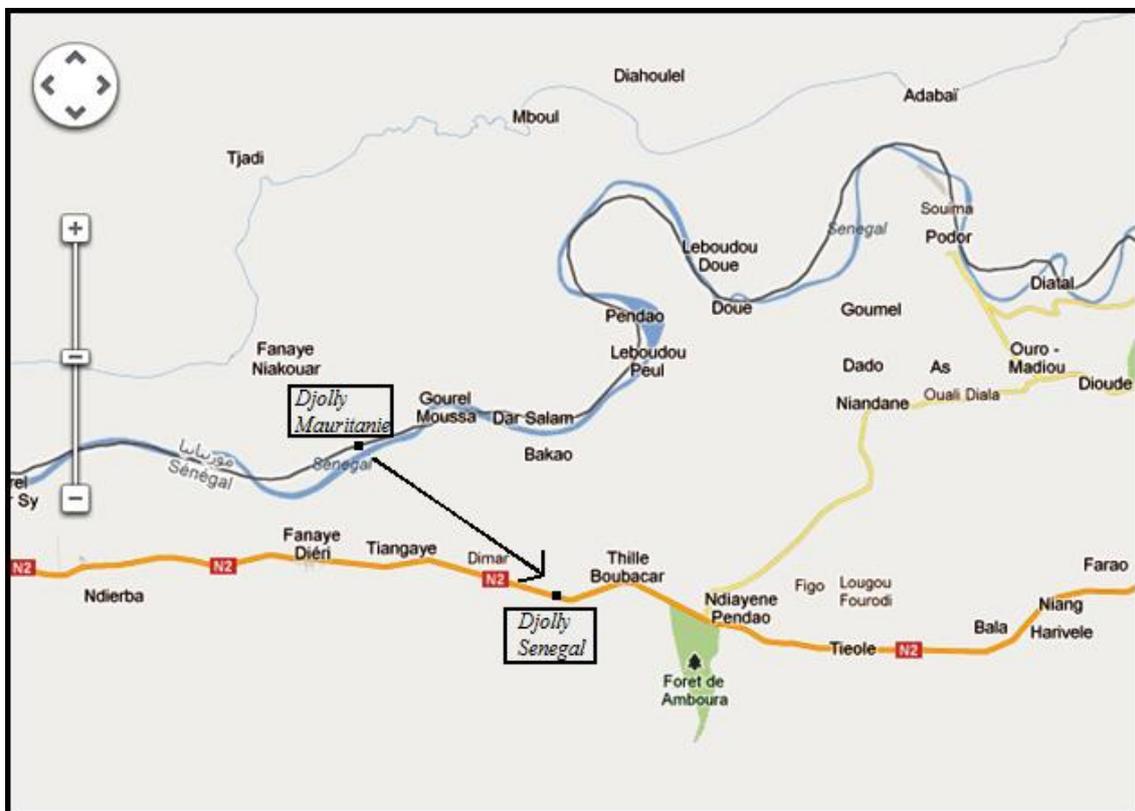
There is an acute awareness among the refugees as regards their condition that is still linked to the circumstances of their forced migration. Apparently not at ease with the term *refugee*, one of them

declares that they are the “deported”, “which is different from the label 'refugees' that is generally put on us. We have been forced out of our home places into exile as a result of a political decision; we didn't flee from war consequences, etc., as refugees do.”

On their arrival most of the villagers of Djolly were scattered in the neighbouring villages where they were accommodated temporarily by the local inhabitants, mainly in Dimat – a village 2 km to the west of Thillé Boubacar – because of kinship ties (see Santoir, 1990b: 580-581 for other places in the valley). Soon after, they were allotted a plot of land to set up their camp (Figure 2). This moment at least temporarily marked a turning point in their relations with the local population and the perception of their condition. In the course of settling into the camp, they were faced with new spatial intrusions and collisions. M. O. Sy, a local worthy and one of the elders of this community, retraces this new sense of alienation:

It was the local authority of Thillé Boubacar who allotted us this area on which we've set up the camp. But unexpectedly, we've seen people who weren't refugees trying to take advantage of this opportunity by taking over building lots within this territory. We were not in a position to say anything, being newcomers. There was this feeling that we hadn't enough legitimacy to raise an objection, and it was all the more delicate as these people often turned out to be relatives...

Figure 2: Map of the Senegal-Mauritania borderland in the middle valley illustrating the displacement of the Djolly community, and their former and post-1989 locations.



Source: Google Maps - ©2011 Google.

This episode was a sort of re-enactment of their experience in the country from which they have been expelled. Both are connected to spatial dispossession and seem to produce a persistent sense of uprootedness that is reflected in their discourse.

It is a noticeable fact that the possibility of repatriation has not put an end to the deportation experience. Repatriation, considered on political and judicial levels as the end of exile, does not put an end to it in the minds of the refugees in this specific case, given that it is not viable. "I have always been a refugee in Senegal, a displaced person", says A. B. S. "And strange enough, even when I've returned in my country, my status has turned out to be problematic; it was 'incomplete' because they said I'm a 'Revenant'. Then I asked: 'Where did we go? We belong here!' which means that it would be much more pleasant if he had called us 'citizens'".

Seemingly the implied meaning of "Revenant" here is "someone who has decided to come back", yet the actual meaning of "revenant" in French is "ghost", that implies also, "someone who no longer belongs to this world". This might be the reason why the word has raised so much controversy. The use of such a word illustrates the invisibility of repatriates and testifies to the failure of repatriation.

The evocation of patience is also a recurring motif in conversations, and is indicative of the ongoing experience of exile.

Social/material aspects

A considerable heritage consisting of vast expanses of land suitable for agriculture and cattle-raising means that the community of Djolly has a long tradition of these activities, in addition to fishing and Koranic studies. So the first aspect they resented was the lack of these means of subsistence. On arrival, they were left with no other option than to make arrangements with the local population as to land exploitation, but they were aware of the scarcity of such a resource, in comparison to the possibilities that Mauritania offered. The Senegalese government's efforts in this sense are not acknowledged by the refugees. They appreciate that Senegal welcomed them and treated them humanly, but this treatment does not include putting such resources at their disposal:

On this side, when we came back, we pursued these activities, namely agriculture and cattle-raising. But if you have no land and no cattle, that turns out to be problematic. Then OFADEC arranged some contracts with the landowners and provided funding for the development of the land, so that we could share the latter's lots and exploit half the land. After the crops, which end the contract, we would take our water pump and move away for another contract with another landowner whose land has not been prepared for cultivation, generally because of the lack of means. None of us had land here on this side, so it was the system which permitted us to survive.

The idea that they are somewhat exploited by the local populations is widespread among the refugees, and their views diverge as regards the possibility that the local population has to provide them with land for farming. They repeat with a certain bitterness a saying regarding their role in the development

of land that the local hosts did not have the means to farm before the type of contract mentioned above: "People say in the surrounding villages that if you cannot prepare your land, give it to a refugee", says Habib with a certain sadness.

The refugee women of Djolly had a kitchen garden back in Mauritania, which they used for food, while part of the products was sold to provide them with some financial resources. Yet they admit that the trade culture they discovered in Senegal after their deportation has been quite traumatic. There were some products that they never imagined could be sold and which turned out to be expensive in Senegal. They experienced a clash of two extreme cultures: theirs, a culture of reasonable commercial spirit that has not yet wiped out deep rooted habits of gifts and mutual support, and that of the Senegalese communities, extremely mercantile.

Most of the activities women used to carry out in Mauritania were severely limited by the new environment, especially immediately after deportation. They used to have a wider range of activities than men in Mauritania, but most of them were not profitable in the end when they gave them a try in Senegal. Apart from farming, they would get together in mutual profit associations too and undertake various activities. They were faced with the same problem as the men to find land for farming. In terms of support, there was a good start on arrival, but it did not last long. The distribution of food supplies helped them in the daily management of family resources, but was cut off long ago. "We also had a centre built for us so that we could undertake such activities as dry-cleaning, dress-making, etc." – says Aïssata Sy – "We've been involved in these activities for a long time, and others too, initiated by various organizations".

The relationship with the women of the host communities has also not made things easier. Refugee women have rarely been invited to join women's profit associations, but the experience would always take a wrong turn given that the expected outcome vanished at the moment of sharing profits. "We decided that it was perhaps better to stay out of these associations" – says Aïssata Sy – "We often had the feeling that we were cheated. That's why we decided to be more cautious about this sort of association with the local women".

Relations are far from being conflictual yet and on the contrary ties with the host population have even been reinforced. The refugees seem to compensate for the negative aspects of deportation with evocation and claims of their Mauritanian belonging and citizenship.

Local integration and adaptation strategies

Making sense of integration

Ways of life and forms of meaning are constituent of culture. Border is essentially a matter of perception. Brunet-Jailly (2005: 635) illustrates the fact with Anderson's description of "how meaning varied according to place, noting, for instance that 'frontier' in the American and French traditions does not

appeal to the same imagery". Whereas people live and work at borders "because of the very existence of borders", they also have a shaping power on them. Borders, beyond their rigid physical presence, are what people make of them through their practices, and these result from a particular perception of these markers. "This, then, is the core theory of border studies: the implicit recognition that agency and structure are mutually influential and interrelated in the shaping of emerging and integrated borderlands" (Brunet-Jailly, 2005: 644).

This mutual influence between agency and structure occurs through complex processes in which ethnic, social, political and economic identities of various actors (refugees, host communities, state control agents at the border) cooperate, interact and clash according to a logic that opposes states' global policies and communities' and individuals' local strategies, or sometimes reconciles them. Flows of people and goods across borders are at the heart of these exchanges. The refugees' perception of the border, which appears through their discourse, varies depending on the reference to their Mauritanian identity as citizens or their relationships and ties with the borderland communities. Marty observes the same phenomenon in the FLAM's rhetoric (Marty, 2003: 508).

Local integration, as it appears with the Djolly refugees, is a negotiated shift from the conditions of the temporary to those of the indefinite, or its possibility. This indefiniteness (Polzer, 2008: 3) encompasses a variety of limits (temporal, spatial...) that were previously set in the host territory and are eventually blurred through 'a process of negotiating access to local legitimacy and entitlement on the basis of a variety of value systems determined by local power holders in dialogue with refugees' (Polzer, 2008: 3). Polzer provides this definition as including elements of Jacobsen's *de facto integration* and Crisp's notion of integration as the eventuality of permanent stay in the host country in a way that satisfies them.

The refugees' role in Djolly community integration

The refugees' approach to integration encompasses a wide range of elements that can be classified in three categories: perceptions and discourse, socioeconomic practices and cultural strategies.

"Kaya mbeeya!" (either float or hover)

One interesting question regarding the Mauritanian refugees in Senegal is their idea of Mauritania, in that their representations of it reflect the complexity of their relationship with the home country, a complexity that is made worse by the bonds that have been created with the host country. "You cannot possibly give your head to someone, and then take back the tongue. That's what is going on in Mauritania presently", says M. Sy. "Mauritania, in my mind, cannot be separated from what has been in construction since 1966, meaning racism", adds A. B. S. The association with racism and unfair practices of Mauritanian governments is a leitmotiv and is deeply linked to the question of land. Justice, for the refugees, means reclaiming the land that fed them.

Justice is a fair settlement of arguments between citizens and their equal treatment (...) There is no justice. When they imprisoned us for claiming our land, the public prosecutor said that I shouldn't be taken to him if land claim was the issue. Now the question is: where should I be taken for a settlement? And as a condition to my release, he demanded that I wouldn't return there, unless I get permission to do so from the governor. If there is justice, then we don't know what it is.

The point is that farming is a central, nearly sacred element in the cultural range of the Djolly refugee community. Besides being the main source of subsistence, it is a value they have inherited and that has shaped their way of life in Mauritania for decades. To a great extent, land determines their options as regards repatriation, and is evoked in their discourse by strong images. "The nights you spend in the south are the nights you can't spend in the north,¹⁸ because in the north your land is the bed", says a woman.

Evoking the difficulty of choosing between a home country where you can return and get any favour, providing that claims to land property are not mentioned, and a host country where land access is also quite impossible, the dilemma they are facing is expressed in various ways. When asked what was to be done, Mamadou gave a quite uncommon answer: "kaya mbeeya".¹⁹

The discourse pointing to dilemma, "kaya mbeeya" expressing bitter irony and cynicism, shatters that of such public actors as states and the IGOs. "Kaya mbeeya" sums up a disorientation that is reflected in a discourse and is also translated in various practices as a result of identity re-composition strategies. It is an attitude that shows the discourse of states and the UNCHR as simplistic and hardly serious with regard to the identity issue, but also it questions and even annihilates the actions of relocation that they undertake, given that it is not merely physical.

Besides, this discourse reflects a specific notion of the border space as a continuum and connotes a certain relationship with the border in that it determines the floating situation that the discourse describes, with its bridging effect.

This relationship illustrates the dialectical relationship between the notions of *space* and *place* within the anthropological perspectives and interest in "accounting for cultural disjuncture, displacement and distress" (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 9). Space is defined by Donnan and Wilson as "the general idea people have of where things should be", that is, "the conceptualization of the imagined physical relationships which give meaning to society". As to place, it is "the distinct place where people live; it encompasses both the idea and actuality of where things are" (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 9).

¹⁸ In the Fulani language (also called *pulaar* in Senegal and Mauritania), the terms "Mauritania" and "Senegal" do not exist. They are respectively referred to as "the North" (Rewo) and "the South" (Worgo) of Fuuta Tooro, the land of the Haalpulaaren. See Fresia (2008).

¹⁹ "Kaya mbeeya" means literally in *pulaar* "either you float or you hover". It connotes the lack of certainty, but also the lack of options with regard to a particular situation.

***“Dem-Dikk”*: socioeconomic practices**

The mercantile culture of the local host communities has left an imprint on the refugees. Most of them acknowledge that they were perhaps too naïve, less realistic than the host communities, and that this difference must be due to the proximity of the Senegalese villages to local markets, which was not their case in Mauritania. For most of them, the utopian relation to resources of the old days pertains now to the category of buried habits, even though it is still magnified as a great human quality.

Faced with the new reality of what one is tempted to call the possibility of impossible repatriation, the refugees have adopted a strategy of ambiguity with regard to their options. In Djolly, which looks more like a refugee village (Santoir 1998: 109 uses the term “site” and discards that of “camp”) than a refugee camp (see Photo 1), both those who have decided to return to Mauritania and those who have decided to stay can be found at home. They have sent one or two members of the family to Mauritania to occupy the new sites they have been allotted, (paradoxically near their former places, which are still occupied by Beydanes) so that they can take delivery of any supplies from the UNCHR or any other form of support, and watch over the place at the same time. M. Sy says:

There is no other possibility. We haven't enough choice because it is not practicable as a destination. You go there for a moment, if you find conceivable conditions that allow you to stay there a while, and if you don't find them you go back to where they permit you to sleep and take some rest, given that you've spent three or four sleepless nights.

The new mobility, “dem-dikk”,²⁰ as one of them called it, is justified by the fact that “a drowning man would clutch at a sword blade without hesitation”. After 22 years in Senegal with the problem of refugees' land access still unsettled, the very evocation of the possibility of having this problem solved in their home countries creates a rush.

²⁰ This is an allusion to the name (in Wolof) of a Senegalese public transport company, which means “come and go in a round trip”.

Photo 1 : The Refugee “village” of Djolly



Source: by author.

Besides there is the need to secure possessions acquired in Senegal, which are worth 10 other years of hardships and effort that cannot be sacrificed to the hope of going home. So, to them, the question has taken on a socioeconomic dimension, in addition to other aspects.

Dresses and cards: cultural strategies

Among the identity and cultural adaptation strategies, there is the adoption of a cross-border nomadic way of life that characterizes the new figure of the deported. They see and define themselves as citizens of the other side who are still compelled to come back now and then to the land of exile in the quest of identity and cultural roots. A. says:

In Mauritania our culture has been confiscated. Whenever people gather to express or celebrate or enjoy cultural practices we inherited from our forefathers, they are faced with the reluctance and resistance of authorities who consider any gathering as a threat to stability and set out to discourage it or even forbid it. We are not given freedom when it comes to living our culture in community.

As it seems, the refugee as a cultural figure is denied existence in Mauritania, and it is this fragmented identity that the nomadic strategy of re-composition of the self-addresses. Describing, about French policy, what he calls *le paradoxe flagrant* (explicit paradox), Etienne Balibar explains this type of situation:

the struggle against more or less real communitarianisms that are perceived as a threat turns into the construction of an exclusive identity which is given an "abstract" and "political" definition (...), but is used very concretely to draw lines of ethnical demarcation (given that there is the people of the republic, with their history, their symbols and traditions...and there are the others). (Balibar, 2001, cited in Neveu, 2004: 4).

This somewhat clarifies why the refugees interpret the Mauritanian government's efforts to discourage their cultural gatherings as a rejection of their citizenship. Thus, in a context of deprivation, they resort to cultural identity to compensate for a citizenship they are not allowed to live fully. This situation creates a link between those who have returned and their fellow refugees who have chosen to stay in Senegal, and even with the Senegalese host communities, in a reflex of bridging activism.

The existence of a linguistic community, a culture spanning the border, creates the opportunity for those in the Djolly community who have returned to expand their spatial scope by crossing back to Senegal whenever they are denied their cultural practices. So the demands of local culture and its expression entail a temporary denial of the border in the imagination of the repatriates. In their minds, it is a line they cross when they temporarily discard transcendence to reinstate their political status as Mauritanian citizens for a specific purpose (socioeconomic reasons).

A noteworthy aspect of the cultural practices of the Djolly community after their deportation is the immediate adjustment of their appearance to their new relationship with the Beydane culture. Among the visual features of their Mauritanian culture, some garments were adopted from the Beydanes. These were discarded from the refugees' habits as soon as they arrived in Senegal. One of these outfits, called *darra* – traditional short trousers that do not reach the calves and are very common among the Beydanes – is particularly interesting in that it is unfamiliar to Senegalese culture:

These belong to Mauritanian culture and have not "crossed" to this side. They are unknown to even someone of Mauritanian descent who has been living in Senegal and is not acquainted with the other side (...) whenever you put on one of these elements, even a child will identify you as a Mauritanian with the utmost certainty. What has changed is that we are no longer putting on the *darras* which are typically an element of the Beydane culture. It would give us the appearance of Beydanes. And since we strongly resented our bitter experience with them, we've just given up this way of dressing. It was adopted in a context of a peaceful cohabitation and quest for harmony, which implies an effort to show the other that we have things in common. We have eliminated this point, I mean dressing up like them, out of anger and disappointment.

In the light of Parker's (2006) model, this move in boundary dynamics corresponds to a shift of the cultural boundary from the characteristics of the fluid frontier to those of the static, linear border. The rejection of Beydane material culture entails a displacement of the cultural boundary and its juxtaposition with the political border.

Integration also takes on a psychological dimension that we have mentioned in the experience of deportation. Discarding Mauritanian dressing habits that belong to the Beydanes is interesting first in that it

has been adopted both individually and by the group. And at both levels, this attitude has a therapeutic dimension: either spontaneous individual rejection or more complex mobilization of the group is a strategy of forgetting, which aims at curbing the traumatic effects of the deportation experience.

These choices are symbolical of transition, with elements of a failed national integration process that are discarded in an effort to start another national/communitarian integration enterprise in the host country. Part of this enterprise is the acquisition of Senegalese nationality,²¹ which allows them to go safely and even spend time in Mauritania to reconstitute their assets under the cover of Senegalese citizenship. Back in Senegal, refugee status is brandished and makes them eligible when migration opportunities negotiated by the UNCHR arise.

Furthermore, expunging Beydane traits from their cultural capital emphasizes similarities with the host communities given that what remains is common ethnic patterns.

Outcomes of integration: villagers, wrestlers and travellers

Several aspects and elements of the above testify to integration of the Djolly refugees into the host communities of the district of Thillé Boubacar. One of them is the discovery of self and other that is revealed by the refugees' new self-perceptions through the differences with their Senegalese fellow citizens in the borderlands. Daïbou, a young man, confirms:

Young people are integrated here to the point that some of them would like to stay. In the beginning differences would break out, there were misunderstandings, but it was because we didn't know each other very well even if we are relatives. We had different ways of life, different characters and styles. There is a frontier between the temperament of the Senegalese and that of the Mauritanian, in the same way as there is one between the two countries. (...) You can easily identify a Mauritanian, I cannot explain why. We feel at home now in Senegal, but we'll go back as soon as we have the guarantee to recover our possessions, in spite of the 20 years. The land we had there was our own, not one exploited by contract.

Integration, as we can see above, is accompanied by preservation of the Mauritanian identity. Integrating does not mean being naturalized.

Another positive outcome of integration has been the rise of a citizen consciousness among some of the refugees, like A., urging them to take action on claims to recover their rights and raising the awareness of fellow refugees:

I was "young", unaware of my rights, and they could make their bed on it. Now I won't let anybody sleep in this bed. They know I'm totally devoted to my reinstatement in my rights for now. It's no longer a matter of eating, drinking and sleeping, of comfort; now there's more to it.

²¹ Citizenship is obtained essentially thanks to the civil status documents (marital status...) that are issued by the local authorities such as the mayor or the head of the Rural Community. This makes it possible for the refugees to acquire an identity card.

Yet there are residual aspects that still affect this integration, such as a persisting vulnerability that is partly due to the lack of refugee cards (which they ought to have received 22 years ago), which refugees interpret – not wrongly – as an unwillingness by the Senegalese government to grant them clear refugee status. The land-access difficulties also are blamed on the state (see Santoir, 1990b: 588; 1998: 115-116 for the attitude of the Senegalese government).

In addition, there is the lack of reciprocity on behalf of the local population that is still resented by the refugees, on the issue of land-sharing, and because of the obvious tendency to exploit refugee labour: “For twenty years we have been the wrestlers, preparing their fields for them”, says Kadiata Diack, hardly hiding her bitterness, “But we cannot blame them for it; we must blame this situation on our country. It’s true that we have strong kinship ties, and that if they wanted to help us, there is enough land for all of us in Senegal...”.

This reinforces the transient subjectivity of the refugee: “You are a stranger wherever you don’t possess land, and you’ll always be a stranger there. That’s why we are travellers; we’ve been on a journey for 20 years!” The state of being away from home – out of their *space* – has thus survived the twenty two years spent in the home country – their *place*. The dialectical relation between the two notions is intact, thus accounting for residual “cultural disjuncture, displacement and distress” (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 9).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how local integration is approached by refugees through strategies stemming from a particular experience, and how their imagination was called upon in this process.

Their vision of the border complexities, of which they are a central element, reveals realities that do not seem to have been taken into account in the management of the refugee problem. Neither does their relationship with the land and homeland, which appears to be motivated by socioeconomic concerns, but is revealed by refugee perceptions and discourse as transcending this dimension.

If “agency and structure are mutually influential and interrelated in the shaping of emerging and integrated borderlands” as goes the core theory of border studies (Brunet-Jailly, 2005: 644), the contribution of this paper is its modest attempts at examining an aspect of agency that is important in understanding the motivations, beliefs and subsequent practices of refugees. It is the study of the refugee imagination through discursive and cultural strategies. The powers of deconstruction as well as of reconstruction of this imagination that are mobilized by the refugees to act upon a particular geographical context of continuity and discontinuity, of bridging and isolation, deserve particular methodological attention.

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