

## **TRADITIONS AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, CULTURAL BARRIERS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: THE EXAMPLE OF SEREER WOMEN IN SENEGAL**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Deeply rooted in their culture, the Sereer Siin community organizes their social gender relations in an absolutely phallocratic mode. In this respect, it is opportune, in this analysis, to put on surface the role and place that traditions have transferred to the woman Sereer Siin in social stratification. It will also be interesting to highlight the intrinsic link between lineage and political, social and economic function among the Sereers Siin community.*

**KEYWORDS:** Sereer, Lineage, Traditions, Enslavement, Woman, phallocratic

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### **INTRODUCTION**

"The culture is at the beginning and at the end of any development," the statement from Leopold Sedar Senghor highlights the primacy of the role that culture plays in African societies. Indeed, the African Sub-Saharan populations who evolve in relatively identical traditions view the hierarchy as the backbone of their political and economic social organization. With a phallocentric character, such an organization affects an incongruous part to women in the political and economic sphere. The principle of authority is naturally left to men who are believed to detain experience of knowledge and therefore the power of "decision and guidance. They are considered to be the center of all social interactions and incarnate the symbol of centralized power. So, it will be noted in ethnic communities like the Sereers one in Senegal an awkward tradition through which the woman is turn into an 'object'.

The situation of Sereer women is defined with much ambiguity. Women belong to their clan and lineage of origin as long as they remain unmarried. 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 'object', means of exchange and matrimonial alliances between two families. They are owned by everybody, but they have nothing in possession. They are not entitled to anything except to deal with of menial works and take care of their families-in-law.

Indeed, women define themselves in the contradictory relation of a form of alliance and exclusion. This double articulation of the status of Sereer women brings about a problem of social organization among the Sereer community in Senegal. Indeed, in this society, women exist as a female entity with practically non-existent powers. In their original clan they play second roles. In their conjugal families they are isolated and have no possibility to aspire to any earthly law.

In our analysis, we will manage to define the structural position of women in the Sereer community. What will lead us to see how the natures of the lineage and clan system constitute some obstacles to the release of women and their change of status. It will also be 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 Empowerment.

### **A phallocentrism which stiffens men to enslave women**

Without pretending to standardize the female identity among the Sereer communities, we strive, through this article, to put on surface the place that the Sereer Siin<sup>1</sup> society in Senegal offers to women.

Indeed, among the Sereers Siin, the notion of female gender bears a particular subjective perception. The role assigned to the woman in their society is very telling as far as her status and socio cultural identity are concerned. The stratification of her phallocratic society reserves her ridiculous roles. She deals with «domestic and maternity tasks and the socialization of children from birth to the age of initiation<sup>2</sup>»; while men are concerned with some tasks they believe to be more honorable. Tasks such as “War, hunting and farming<sup>3</sup>.” 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. This social imbalance encloses the woman in her second class citizen status and deprives her of any business initiative. She appears as a yes-woman who makes do with second roles, being judged not to be capable to assume top-levels political and economic responsibilities. She carries on her shoulders the heavy burden of a asymmetric society that, in a way or another, draws the balance of social power in favor of men. The latter control, therefore, the female fate they want to be predictable and static. And George Balandier to clarify that:

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 workforce<sup>4</sup>.

In their capacities as farmers, Sereers 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 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. The subordinate position of Sereer women prevents them from being productive actors in the economic domain. This social pattern reinforces the rule of Sereer male and pulls women down the social pyramid.

In the Sereer society, the woman is under the control of agnatic lineage. This puts her in a “social position of inferiority and subjection.<sup>5</sup>” What condemns her in a dependent standpoint and in total submission to men in her conjugal residence. Indeed, the lineage organization of such a kind of society finds its grounding force on organic and hierarchical considerations:

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 clan<sup>6</sup>.

This ideology of hierarchy implied by the agnatic lineage makes woman an eternal servant deprived of all basic rights. She cannot pretend to a hereditary advantage or aspire to be a

depository of any right on land or on other kind property belonging to the agnatic family. She is said to be a wandering being, hence this 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 affect her any power over the substance of her agnatic family. The right to have access to "land, livestock, and children is based on kinship (...), on the birth (inbreeding)<sup>7</sup>". As a woman, she can not claim a noble political status. The succession of political power is a man's game. "*O Tew née maadokha*" (the woman has no right to be a leader). She 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: "property (land, slaves, cattle) were passed through uterine in the regions of Kayoor at Baol and Walo<sup>8</sup>".

### Status of attribution

The social status of the Sereer woman puts on surface 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. Any idea that aims at questioning man's power is systematically repressed. And with a one-side oriented customary law, man has the latitude, in the name of the too peremptory character of male power, to divorce his wife without the risk of being punished by the traditional law: "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 repudiation<sup>9</sup>". 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 of the one 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 reasons<sup>10</sup>".

The woman, in the land of sereers Siin, is subjected to the duties of silence and obedience. In case she breaches these obligations, moral and physical sanctions are provided by the custom. She can be beaten by her husband, or put in quarantine by her in-laws. 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 Sereers Siin is highlighted in this song that is to be 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 who can not aspire to a right, not even among her in-laws, is always invited to endorse the qualities of patience, docility and perseverance in silence. Conjugal life being regarded as synonymous of subjugation and a vassalage relationship, she must be prepared to bear the "burden of the household"<sup>11</sup>. This Sereer wedding song, rich in moral lessons, helps to welcome women in their marital house. It exhumes the main idea of the duties and obligations of the Sereer bride. 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 norms"<sup>12</sup>.

To the meaning it refers " *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. Hence this song imploring forgiveness and magnanimity:

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 grate help in releasing me from my marital obligations and duties.]

### **Female bondage**

In a phallocentric system the power of man stands on respect and 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. He is the "*yale mbiine*" (the only owner and chief of the house) that imposes his will to the woman who is simply reduced "to a servant, and domestic"<sup>13</sup>.

Regarded as simple object of pleasure, the woman, in the Sereers Siin community has the obligation to satisfy the male pleasure. Indeed, her body is a space that fills the pattern of rest for the husband, whose "power is expressed through the attributes of sexuality"<sup>14</sup>. His authority bears the hints of a phallic symbol that affects the power of fertilization. Man is like a god father. He embodies the force of creation. Therefore, the woman is conceived as a state subject that undergoes the manly desires of his "*Koruum*", that is to say of her man, her chief, her husband. Indeed, it is this sexual arbitrariness which gives man the right *de seigneur* that strengthens the social injustice in the phallocentric Sereers Siin society. In fact, the social norms are organized in a way that man is able to use his male powers on the body "of the one enslaved by birth"<sup>15</sup>. The latter, is believed to be less intelligent and less strong: " *néé néekétééne a yornorkhna nééne yiif léé tééne a yornokhtuu*" (as her breasts are falling, as her spirit remains obtuse "). She is emotionally stigmatized by such a design. As such, the male Sereer exerts an absolute power over the woman. Such is the social injustice, the socio-cultural barriers that enclose the female being in a medieval and feudal relationship with the male being. As a consequence, it becomes important to note that male domination over his female "subjects" remains fundamentally despotic and totalitarian.

Despite this open-air prison where evolves the woman, she is 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 movement<sup>16</sup>. The woman integrates social standards in her daily mission that consists in defining herself not in relation to her ideal-self, but in relation to the Other, her husband. 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. She is, actually, condemned in a position of "the Other that is not me"<sup>17</sup>. The woman among the Sereers Siin is socialized in a way 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. She incarnates the features of the female "*Kersa*" in an enchanted posture.

The status assigned to her is directly linked to her so-called weaker sex. Her role is intimately associated with the identity of "*Yalo Naafée*" (The one who wraps herself with a loincloth). 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"<sup>18</sup>.

The Sereer woman can be observed in an enslaving passivity which happens to be the opposite of her existence, which necessarily presupposes her dependence on a patriarchal system. A system which, in fact, determines her personality at any time and in any place. Her dependence gives ground to her powerlessness. The work of bondage she is confronted with (pound millet, prepare 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 absorbs her energy, alienates her conscience and prevents her from liberating herself from such a degrading mental slavery. Her ideas are set within the limits specified by the male body. She does her homework and gives satisfaction to the conduct expected from her by men. This Sereer woman is put in contribution to the achievement of the happiness of her husband. Moreover, in case of death at a young age, the husband of the deceased woman is allowed, by traditions, to take, without any conditions, the sister of his deceased wife as a substitute wife. The old man, Joog Sène confirms: "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"<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, the mere fact that the woman delays to have or not to have at all children is viewed as a curse among Sereers Siin. This rather satirical song is quite illustrative:

*A tew o timmer sakée ngaak*

*Té diarée guékèle no mbiine*

*A rimeel rmээр o kiine*

*Diaré sipaa ngaak no maakh*

[A woman who can not impregnate does not deserve to be kept at home.

She has been begotten, but she can not beget. This woman does not deserve to be kept in a matrimonial home.]



Thus, the endogamous or exogamous polygamy was and remains to be one of the most widespread cultural practices among the Sereer Siin community. By the advantages that tradition grants to him, the man has naturally a right to get at least three wives. The first wife is chosen by the boy's father or his maternal uncle. She is designated under the noun "*O Tew O kayenaak*". This wife is selected and given to the boy as a thank-giving present, in regard to the services the boy has done in the name of the well-being of all the members of the paternal and maternal lineage. This wife will, all her life long, fulfill the mission of "*O Tew o yook noff*" (a wife for male comfort). Her must is to blossom sexually her husband, whose services to his family's members are said to be very satisfactory.

The second wife is known as "*O Tew O Tebb*" (the younger wife). This woman can also be the wife "inherited" by a younger brother from a deceased elder. She is supposed to play the role of a henchwoman to dote her husband. She must always seek to satisfy the whims of her male bed partner.

The third wife officiates as a mistress. She is identified through the noun "*O Tew wa koob*" (the woman in the bush). She is often older and must be married by a man of the same age. She generally lives in a village that is miles away from the one of her husband. She provides mainly libidinal function for an advanced-aged man.

Women in this patriarchal society, is, whatever can be her age, neither more nor less a body that is to satisfy the desires of her "owner". And the following wedding song remains indicative:

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 members<sup>20</sup>", the traditional African family in general, and the Sereer family in particular is a space of which structure is based on functional components which, while giving the man a dominating power, confines the woman in an enslaving momentum. Indeed, the silence of the married woman is as valuable as gold is. She is compelled keep silence as long as she lives in her marital house; whatever can be the vicissitudes to which she would come across with. Thus, "a woman may horrify an eye to black butter 'because it will be a visible trace of her state of' a beaten woman <sup>21</sup>".

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. She dares not complain, she does not even have a right to do so. To protest against her status would mean to question the established social order. 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 abused<sup>22</sup>. " Her dignity, her image of "*O Tew No kiine*" (someone's property) are measured by her capacity to subjugated herself to the dominating power of his "*yaale mbine*" (her master-owner) without

indignation. "The design of dignity implies, in our societies, a woman's ability to stoically endure the excesses mistreatments that are exerted against her<sup>23</sup>."

The family institution among the Sereers Siin is a coercive cell for women. She is beaten, insulted, tortured, without having any opportunity to rebel against the social order. 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, the famous saying among Sereers : " *Kou O tew aa moughnena 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).

Customary bedrock of the family institution does not favor women's freedom. It updates the social levers that keep women in a state of day in day out vassalage. She should neither be cantankerous, nor critical. Her knee should always yield to the desires of her husband. The latter, who is favored by customary law, sometimes, if he is a Muslim believer, has a recourse to the *Holly Coran* to justify his power over women. As it is written:

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 them<sup>24</sup>.

The condition of Women among the Sereers Siin community is then concealed in a difficult fate. She is and remains to be an inferior creature who cannot but aspire to the happiness of her husband. Hence, 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 folly<sup>25</sup>."

As a being said to incarnate evil and imperfection, temptation and original sin, she can not be allowed to enjoy financial, economic or political powers. Rather, she should be subjected to a recovery plan by "the most virtuous and evil master of his body<sup>26</sup>". She is a victim of a quite reductionist and absolutely demeaning vision. Her physical weakness is not without making of her a being isolated on the sidelines of her society and treated under the negative lens of a male selfishness.

## CONCLUSION

Traditionally captured by a logic of domination, man, in the Sereer Siin society, refuses to be part of a social anthropological perspective to change the status of women. The absence of a prescription for a redefinition of the social roles prevents the Sereer women from struggling so as to free themselves from the shackles of the family institution, so as to contribute permanently and effectively to the building of the local development of their country.

Without a reshaping of social relations between men and women a dynamic production and entrepreneurial will hardly find a positive echo among the Sereer Siin women. The latter must be repositioned in the public and domestic space to free their productive and creative energies to contribute to the emergence of a new Africa.

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 with their economic and political

potentials. The medieval pattern of patriarchal society must be challenged and defeated for a spurting of "a feminine spring" in the land of Sereers Siin in Senegal.

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- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there are several sereers communities in Senegal. 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*.
- <sup>2</sup> 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)
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* (Translation is mine)
- <sup>4</sup> George Balandier. *Anthropo-logiques*. Paris : PUF, 1974, p.14. (Translation is mine)
- <sup>5</sup> 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)
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* (Translation is mine)
- <sup>7</sup> *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, p.44. (Translation is mine)
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp.144-145. (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)
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- 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 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)
- 26 *Ibid.* (Translation is mine)