



**THE AGING SENEGALESE DIASPORA
IN MILAN:
SUCCESSFUL MODELS,
RETURN TRAJECTORIES, AND
CHALLENGES OF ELDERLY PEOPLE
BETWEEN SENEGAL AND ITALY**

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Marco Gardini, *The Aging Senegalese Diaspora in Milan: Successful Models, Return Trajectories, and Challenges of Elderly People between Senegal and Italy*

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INTRODUCTION

From the colonial period to the 1970s, France has been the main country of destination for the Senegalese diaspora. The French and Senegalese academic debate on migration has paid considerable attention to the mobilities connecting Senegal and the former colonial power, focusing on – among other things – how kinship structures and gender and generational roles have been reproduced or reconfigured in a transnational space deeply structured by longstanding cultures of migrations (see, for instance: Dia 2008, 2013; Diop 2008; Timera 2010; Timera and Garnier 2010). In the late 1970s, when France started to implement more strict immigration policies, the Senegalese diaspora diversified its European destinations. Italy was one of them, and migrants from Senegal started to arrive in the 1980s, working mainly as street vendors but also contributing to an industrial system that was starting to shrink. Migrants of this first generation are now approaching or have reached retirement, have spent a large part of their lives in Italy, were joined by wives and had children in Italy, in many cases have obtained permanent residence permits or citizenship, and are now facing the many challenges connected to aging in a diasporic context.

In the last thirty years, studies on the Senegalese diaspora have focused on the forms of inclusion/exclusion of migrants in different Italian regions (Schmidt di Friedberg 1993, 1998; Mboup 2000; Sinatti 2000; Riccio 2000; Castagnone et al 2005), the organisation and vibrant life of migrant associations (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994; Ceschi and Stocchiero 2006; Riccio 2006, 2007, 2014; Zingari 2020), the social, political and economic impact the diaspora had on the country of origin (Melly 2011; Mondain and Diagne 2013), the changing imaginaries of Europe that the diaspora have elaborated in different periods (Riccio 2005; degli Uberti and Riccio 2017), and the social, economic and political factors affecting different stages of the migratory trajectory, from arrival to their potential return (Sinatti 2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Cavatorta 2018). In dialogue with the vast literature on Senegalese migrants in other European countries (see, for instance, Marfaing 2003) and with studies conducted in Senegal (Melly 2010, 2011; Piga 2013; Ifekwunigwe 2013; Mondain and Diagne 2013; Hannaford 2017), many of these works have stressed two common features of this diaspora: its gender imbalance, since most of its members



have been young men in search of better working conditions and social emancipation, and the idea that migration represented for them only a stage on a life trajectory that saw a successful return in Senegal as the main objective. Many of them preferred to leave their wives and children behind and maintained strong social networks between themselves and the country of origin. If these features still hold true for many members of the Senegalese diaspora in Italy, after more than thirty years it is possible to find an increasing number of examples of men who never came back, were joined by their families, had children in Italy, and decided to spend what was left of their life trajectories in Italy. Like any other diasporic community, the Senegalese one too is today composed of different generations of migrants, with different motivations, plans and aspirations (degli Uberti and Riccio 2017), and must face the challenges of aging in a transnational space.

In this report I will focus on the experiences and difficulties of elders of this diaspora: people who belonged to the very first wave of migration in Italy and who are now renegotiating their role *vis à vis* their country of origin, their diasporic community, and Italian society. This work is the result of fieldwork research conducted between 2018 and 2020 in Lombardy, under the framework of TAAD (“The Aging African Diasporas: Perspectives from Lombardia”), a project led by Prof. Alice Bellagamba (University of Milano-Bicocca) that for three years has investigated the meanings of aging for members of the Eritrean, Senegalese, and Egyptian diasporas in Lombardy. During this period, I met and interviewed 54 members of the Senegalese diaspora (39 men and 15 women) between 50 and 65 years old¹. They were part of that generation of Senegalese migrants called *modou modou* (abbreviation of Mamadou Mamadou), who – despite being at first stigmatised for their rural origin – soon replaced graduate students in Senegalese perception as symbols of success due to the money they were able to earn abroad (Riccio 2014). During our conversations we explored how migratory trajectories influenced the multifaceted meanings of successful aging, the issue of return and the difficulties associated with it, the renegotiation of

¹ Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were held in Italian or French. After the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic, the interviews took place online.

the elders' role into diasporic networks *vis à vis* younger generations, and the impact that Covid19 had on their lives.

According to the annual report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (2020), one third (32.6%) of the 102,112 Senegalese citizens living in Italy reside in Lombardy. The majority (61.1%) of them have permanent residence permits and the 72.4% are men, who are mainly occupied in the industrial sector (45.4%). Women are for the most part (60%) unemployed. Around 10% are people over 60 years old. These data, however, do not include either undocumented migrants or the many Senegalese who gained Italian citizenship (26,881, between 2012 and 2019) and therefore are no longer included in migrant statistics, despite them representing an important part of the Senegalese diaspora. Some of the elders I met belonged to this group and were considered to have achieved the culturally and socially shaped model of successful aging.



WHAT YOU NEED TO AGE WELL

Ibrahima² is a 59-year-old man who lives in the province of Milan with his wife and his two children. Born in a rural village in the Diourbel region, he arrived in Italy in 1988 to join an uncle who, a few years before, had migrated from Senegal to Marseille and, from there, to Brescia. For a couple of years Ibrahima worked as a street vendor, then in 1990 he found a job in a factory, where he has spent the rest of his working life. Contrary to many other Senegalese migrants who prefer to leave their families behind, in 1995 his wife joined him with their first son and two years later they had a daughter. All the family has now acquired Italian citizenship. Both of their children went to university and currently are working in Milan.

Compared to other cases, Ibrahima's migratory trajectory was relatively successful, and he soon emerged as an important point of reference for following waves of migrants in his neighbourhood. He was the head of a local association that provided help and support to newcomers and collected

² Interview with Ibrahima, 30th Sep 2018, Milan. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to guarantee the anonymity of my interlocutors.

money to finance projects in their village of origin. As a mediator between the Senegalese diaspora and the local municipal administration, he was a well-respected figure in town, and he was proud of having built a path towards successful aging. As he remarked:

“To age well it is necessary to have five things: a home, a job, documents, children who live nearby, and health. Home and work are the most important things for an immigrant and the first things you need. Then the documents. At first you can be hosted but soon you must be able to find a good job to pay your rent or take out a mortgage. The work is therefore important. And not just any job. You must be lucky enough to find a regular, permanent job that allows you to put away your contributions and get to retirement. That is the question. Many have worked illegally for years as *vu cumprà* [the derogatory term that Italians used to refer to Senegalese street vendors, coming from ‘*vuoi comprare?*’/do you wanna buy?], NA] or have had long periods unemployed or have started putting away contributions late, so they find themselves elderly but still do not have enough contributions to retire with a good pension. For example, I was lucky and found a job immediately, but, in any case, I started putting away contributions late, at 28, so now I still have to work many more years, before I can retire...”

For Ibrahima, as for the great majority of the people I interviewed, a good economic position was crucial to achieve the markers of a dignified old age, but this was possible only via a positive migratory trajectory. A profound work ethic, the morality of having followed Italian procedures to regularise one's immigration status, being a good Muslim, and having met the many expectations of the family members left in Senegal were constitutive part of this successful model. According to him, retirement represented the moment at which a member of the diaspora could finally call himself an 'elder' and the fact of not having yet accumulated enough pension contributions was for him a source of great distress. He perceived his (few) years as a street vendor as wasted time.

Like Ibrahima, many of my interlocutors stressed how elderhood meant being finally able to profit from the many economic and social investments they made during their life. These investments included not only the many remittances sent to the country origin to help family members in need, build a new house for themselves and their family, and start a new economic activity, but also the time spent working with local associations or in giving aid and support to younger members of the diaspora. As Ibrahima stressed: “Becoming an elder in the diaspora means that you have to acquire responsibilities towards the newcomers but also Senegalese associations here in Italy: village associations, religious associations, national ones, etc.” The importance of these associations at a national and transnational level has been widely acknowledged (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994; Ceschi and Stocchiero 2006; Riccio 2006, 2007, 2014). As Bruno Riccio (2014: 277) has pointed out: “the experiences of Senegalese associations in northern Italy [...] seem to show that the transnationalisation and inclusion in the receiving context reinforce each other.” Associations guarantee forms of mutual help among members of the diaspora, interface with Italian institutions, organise cultural and sport events, and take care of the repatriation of the bodies of those migrants who died in the diaspora (both due to the scarcity of Muslim cemeteries in Italy and because the great majority want to be buried in Senegal), but they are also important for channelling funds towards the country of origin, sometimes reshaping generational and gender hierarchies (Riccio 2014: 275).

As the words of Ibrahima suggested, the active work put into an association is also of crucial importance for being acknowledged as an elder, since elders are expected to spend a significant part of their time providing advice to younger people and working for the good of the community. In line with the wide Africanistic scholarship that has stressed how elderhood in Africa has more to do with power and position than with age (see, for instance, Aguilar 1998, 2000; Van der Geest 1997, 2002; Oppong 2006; Bellagamba 2013; Coe 2019), elderhood in the diaspora is often socially constructed as a by-product of the number of years spent in the country of arrival and the relative success of the migratory trajectory. As Ousmane³, the 52-year-old president of another Senegalese association, remarked:

“Here I am considered already an elder, even if I am not so old. The reason is that I arrived 34 years ago, and I have accumulated a lot of experience helping other Senegalese to find accommodation, work and gaining documents here in Italy. Some of them were older than me, but here they consider me as their senior brother.”

If a successful migratory trajectory contributes to anticipating the moment in which a person is socially recognised as an elder, a failed one is often perceived as a trap that keeps people stuck in an indefinitely long adulthood or – worse – in a junior status. While it is true that members of the diaspora often tend to exaggerate their ages to escape the feeling of social marginalisation (Sayad 2002, p. 267-268), it is also evident that achieving a successful model of elderhood is particularly difficult. Consider, for instance, the case of Cheikh⁴, who arrived in Italy in 1987. After many years spent working as a street vendor in Florence and on the Romagna Riviera, in 1994 he finally found a job as a construction worker, a job he lost during the economic crisis of 2008. In 2010 he started working as a cleaner in the train stations of Milan. The last time he went to visit Senegal was in 2012. He has two wives (the first one spent a few years in Italy too but left him in 2004 and went back to Senegal; the second one never left her village) and five children (all of them in Senegal, except for the firstborn, who now lives in France and sometimes sends money to his father). When asked what elderhood meant to him, he replied:

“It should be feeling good, getting some rest after working, having children and grandchildren who love you, a big family ... but often it doesn’t ... things go another way [...] For example ... I ... I’m not very old yet, but almost ... I’m tired, I feel pain in my back, and still I must work ... because I don’t have my pension yet ... I have to work until I die ... always ... as I told you ... before I was a *vu cumprà*, then a labourer, then a street sweeper ... I did everything ... but I worked the first few years irregularly ...no contributions ... Then I found a regular job, yes ... better than nothing, but living in Milan is expensive ... rent, food, bills and everything else ... Then I’m here

3 Interview with Ousmane, 10th Jan 2019, Milan.

4 Interview with Cheikh, 12th Jan 2019, Milan.

alone ... As I said, my first wife is back in Senegal and the second is there too and my children too... I can see them only by phone call. It's almost 10 years I haven't seen them in person...I feel pain like an old man, but I must live like a young one. It is very hard."

Cheikh was aware that elderhood in the diaspora was not something one achieves 'naturally' but a status that depended on several political, social and economic factors linked to one's migratory trajectory. Among these factors, he also lamented how racism in Italy prevented him being recognised as an elder by non-Africans:

"There are also racist people here. They are stupid. They don't see your age, only your skin colour. They don't respect you and don't understand that you have worked for them also, that you spent a great part of your life here. Sometimes I look at young Italians and I think that I've lived in Italy for longer, but still I am considered a foreigner."

Cheikh's words resonated with the points of view of many others among my interlocutors. The Italian public debate often tends to ignore the historicity of the African diasporas in Italy and the presence of growing numbers of elders of African origin. The absence of this theme has a direct consequence on the way the African diasporas are perceived: it seems that only people of European origin must face the challenges of aging, while members of the African diasporas are constantly infantilised or treated as younger, and therefore inferior, members of European societies. Therefore, being recognised as an elder is important not only to renegotiate power positions towards other members of the diaspora, but also to try to enter a category that is perceived as less stigmatising than that of 'migrant'.

THE DREAMS AND CHALLENGES OF RETURN

Since many Senegalese migrants tend to perceive their migration only as one stage of a longer life trajectory which will end in Senegal, the Senegalese diaspora in Europe has been at centre of the growing scholarship analysing the topic of return and its potential for local development (Arowo-

lo 2000; Diatta and Mbow 2002; Black and King 2004; Van Houte and Davids 2008; Akesson and Eiksson 2015; Cavatorta 2018). Indeed, the great majority of my interlocutors linked the image of aging well to the desire to spend their final years in their country of origin and were considering translating this return into an occasion for starting new entrepreneurial activities. Governments, international organisations, and some scholars have stressed how return migration can be profitable for countries of both origin and arrival, as well as for migrants themselves. Research on this topic, however, has pointed out several limitations and ambiguities of this 'triple win' narrative (Cassarino 2004; Sinatti 2015a, 2015b; Cavatorta 2018). In contexts of rising xenophobia and concerns over migration in general, countries of immigration are naturally interested in presenting returning as a profitable and available option, both to avoid new elderly people joining the ranks of an increasing older population as well as to keep in the public coffers the social security contributions of the migrants who did not reach retirement. And yet, given the important role the elderly members of the diaspora play in guiding and helping new migrants in their efforts to integrate socially and economically, it seems that pushing them to 'go back home' could be not the cleverest choice. Countries of origin, for their part, hope to profit from the capital and knowledge of returnees to boost new economic activities, but they often lack a welfare state able to face the many difficulties related to old age. Moreover, members of the diaspora experience several difficulties in their return trajectory. Forms of economic and social marginalisation in the countries of arrival oblige migrants to indefinitely postpone their return until they feel to have accumulated enough capital, and many of them do not want to lose their social security contributions or the opportunity to profit of the healthcare system of the countries of arrival (cf. Cassarino 2004). As Lisa Åkesson and Maria Eriksson Baaz (2015, 19) have pointed out:

"Due to discrimination and segregation in countries of immigration, most migrants do not accumulate skills or knowledge that is useful for entrepreneurship. Moreover, they often lack insights into the workings of the local market and they possess a limited social capital, especially in terms of bridging ties".

“When asked what induced them to go back to Senegal, most migrants mention a mixture of motivations. The desire to invest economically is seldom the first priority. Instead, returnees indicate their wish to reunite with families and take up positions of responsibility as heads of households, to occupy a senior position in home communities, and to no longer endure the hardships of immigration. These motivations compensate for the fact that, for most, return corresponds to a significant loss in earnings compared with those when they were abroad, even among the most growth-oriented investors.”

Many of my interlocutors confirmed this tension between the strong desire to “go back” and the structural reasons that prevented them achieving it. Paradoxically, return is easier for those who have had an unsuccessful migratory trajectory because they were not able to obtain documents, were expelled, or did not find a job. As one of my interlocutors⁵ said: “Here [in Italy] you find only those who made it or those who are still trying and are finding some means of survival. Those who failed, even after many years of effort, went back.” But these returns are hardly considered good achievements in the countries of origin: rather, they are socially perceived as failures to be ashamed of and which undermine individuals’ aspirations of social mobility. As Giovanna Cavatorta (2018) has pointed out, those who fail in their migratory trajectory – i.e. are unable to accumulate and redistribute the expected economic gains – are often reintegrated into a subaltern position in their families in Senegal. A similar observation was made by Stefano degli Uberti and Bruno Riccio (2017, 356) when they pointed out the following:

“Against the background of the economic crisis that has also significantly hit non-EU countries, such as Senegal, the public social perception of *Modou modou* has also been greatly affected. Little seems to survive of his envied and heroic image of the successful migrants. The lack of respect towards his fellow citizens and the accusations of unfair competition which frame the prevailing everyday rhetoric on the

Senegalese migrant, are not only a sign of the ongoing socio-economic transformations occurring in Senegalese society. They also question the very role of the returning migrant, urging an analytical rethinking both of his implicitly favourable role and of the increasingly mediatized projects of ‘assisted voluntary return and reintegration’ that pledge to foster sustainable development in the local context of origin.”

If return is relatively easy for those who failed in their migratory trajectory, but reinsertion is not, those who had a positive migratory trajectory (and can legitimately think they have fulfilled the role they were expected to perform) experience nonetheless several obstacles in translating it into a successful return. These difficulties are not only related to the risk of losing their social security contributions if there is no agreement between Senegal and the country of immigration (as in the case of Italy, for instance) or the fact that the Senegalese health system is perceived as insufficient to take care of the health problems connected to ageing, but also to the increasing responsibilities and the new identities they acquired as members of the diaspora. Ibrahima, for instance, spent a considerable amount of his remittances on building a new house in his village of origin and to buy another one in Dakar, with the hope of going back once he reached retirement. However, his wife Ndeye⁶ thought otherwise. As she told me:

“We cannot return, except for short periods. Our children were born or grew up here in Milan. They are becoming adult now. Soon they will have children too and will need our help as grandparents. We will have our responsibilities as elders here, not only to our children and grandchildren, but also for the other young Senegalese who are arriving. [...] People sometimes think that it is possible to go back unchanged, a little bit richer of course, but unchanged. That’s not true. When you spend the greater part of your life abroad you are not the same person you were when you left. I feel more related to Italy now than to Senegal. Most of my friends are here.”

5 Interview with Issa, 05th Jun 2019, Milan.

6 Interview with Ndeye, 26th Nov 2018, Milan.

The transformative nature of migration was at centre of Ndeye's narrative. What she envisioned was a retirement characterised by increased and circular mobility, with a few months a year spent in Senegal and the rest in Italy, in order to maximise the social and economic benefits of her migration, to have access to the Italian health system and the retirement pension, and nurture her social relations at both ends of her migratory trajectory. Ndeye's plan was shared by many of the elders of the Senegalese diaspora I met who had Italian citizenship or permanent residence permits. 'Return' for them meant the opportunity to spend more time in Senegal after retirement, but without losing the strong connections they had established with their country of immigration. Many stressed how after having spent so many years in Italy, they did not feel entirely comfortable with the idea of going back to Senegal once and for all. This was perfectly in line with the points also discussed by Lisa Åkesson and Maria Eriksson Baaz (2015: 10) when they stressed:

“In contrast to dominant conceptualisations, we do not understand ‘return’ as being the ‘natural ending’ but rather as a partial return to a place where the migrants once lived. Hence [...] most of the returnees in the cases analysed should be seen as transnational returnees or circular migrants. Nor do we view returnees as being people with an inherent identification with and duty to assist an assumed ‘homeland’. [...] While many display a strong identification with this place and call it their homeland, they also often articulate strong feelings of estrangement towards this homeland, describing themselves as ‘outsiders’, as ‘different’ and ‘not really fitting in’. Moreover, they also often identify themselves with the country they partially left, describing themselves as also – and sometimes even mainly – Europeans.”



GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

The “classical” and growing scholarship on age and generational conflicts in Africa has long pointed out how the important social and political role of elders is far from being uncontested (Aguilar 1998, 2000; Oppong 2006; Bellagamba 2013) and how African elders are not always able to achieve the honourable and powerful status that they expected (Van der Geest 1997, 2002; Coe 2019). This also holds true for the elders of the diaspora, who must constantly renegotiate their authority and social position in relation both to the newly arrived migrants and to their own children and grandchildren born in Italy. These, of course, represent two very different challenges, which put elders in often ambiguous and contradictory social positions. As Marith Kristin Gullbekk Markussen (2020) showed in the case of older Somali refugees in Norway, elderly men have difficulties in maintaining the degree of authority they expect. The condition of subordination and marginalisation they suffer in the context of arrival have thrown them into a situation in which they feel they are “no longer worth anything”, in which they are unable to guarantee economic support for the family and in which their word is no longer heard by the younger members of the diaspora: “Nobody comes to Baba for advice”. This creates a deep frustration that feeds on the radical discrepancy between the dominant models of masculinity and seniority they hold and their concrete life experience. A similar feeling was expressed by some of my elderly Senegalese interlocutors, who lamented how the migratory trajectory of younger generations was much more individualised and potentially “amoral” according to the standards of previous generations of migrants. Modou⁷, the leader of a local branch of the Muridiya brotherhood in the province of Brescia, stressed this point very clearly during our conversations:

“Things have changed. When we arrived, we asked the help and the advice of our fellow kinsmen who were

⁷ Interview online with Modou, 20th Apr 2020.

already here. We came to send money home and we had strong relationships with our villages as well as with other Senegalese people here. Now it's different. A friend of mine discovered that his nephew was in Italy four months after his arrival. The guy didn't say anything to his uncle before leaving, nor after he managed to arrive. Young people think they can do it on their own; they don't want elders giving them advice, or people saying, 'This is good, this is bad'. We have been here for a long time. We know everything, but they don't care."

These words resonate with research conducted in Senegal on the changing public attitudes toward migrants in the last forty years: narratives that have been characterised by a progressive deterioration of the prestige and morality associated with the generations of migrants of the 1980s and 1990s and a certain degree of disillusionment with the gains that can be achieved through migration (Melly 2011; Ifekwunigwe 2013; degli Uberti 2014; degli Uberti and Riccio 2017). Elders of the diaspora tend to stress how younger migrants are more unruly and less prone to contribute to the collection of money organised by associations to help each other in case of need or to send back the bodies of dead Senegalese people. For their part, younger members of the diaspora I met consider the *modou modou* generation a "privileged one", that still managed to have access to good jobs, permanent contracts, and less strict migrant policies, while they often face more precarious social and economic conditions that prevent them achieving the markers of a successful migratory trajectory. They also criticise the paternalistic and commanding attitude of many elders of the diaspora, their control of many associations, and their effort to present themselves as moral guides and advisors. Not only do elders feel their social position is threatened by younger migrants, but they must also renegotiate their role in terms of their children and grandchildren born in Italy. Compared to other African diasporas, the Senegalese one has been composed mainly of men who have tended to avoid family reunification and preferred to leave their wives and children in Senegal. As Fedora Gasparetti (2011: 218- 223) has pointed out:

"Compared to other immigrant groups, a startling number of Senegalese migrants opt to relinquish family reunification,

choosing instead to leave family members behind. Many migrants point to the economic motives for this decision. Families in Senegal tend to be large, sometimes comprising several wives and many children. Migrants calculate that their wages would not be sufficient for a large family to live on in Italy, where the cost of living is much higher than in Senegal. Other reasons are more nuanced, involving worries about value systems and potentially corrupting influences. [...] It is extremely important to Senegalese parents that their children grow up respectful and hardworking. Many Senegalese migrants we interviewed in Italy claimed that they found Italian children to be spoiled and disrespectful, and worried that their children would turn out the same if raised in Italy. Some were worried about the temptations that living in Italy would offer to their children and the many opportunities to lose their moral compass. Others cited the importance of learning Wolof and growing up in a wolofphone environment as the main motivators of their decision to repatriate their children."

And yet, several of my interlocutors (generally those who had permanent working contracts and residence permits or Italian citizenship) chose at some point to bring their wives with them and to raise their children in Italy, in order to provide them with more opportunities, and having it in mind to settle indefinitely. Of course, given the high costs of raising children in Italy, this had consequences on the quantity of remittances they were able to send to Senegal, and this tension emerged as particularly relevant for many of my interlocutors. Moreover, many of them stressed several tensions with their grown-up children. In this case the card of the elders' greater knowledge and experience of the context of arrival could not be played. On the contrary, for those who are born here, who consider themselves Italians and have little or no first-hand experience of Senegal, elders tend to appear too closely linked with their country of origin and to stereotypical "African traditions". As Wely⁸, a fifty-year-old woman who joined her husband in Italy twenty-eight years ago, said:

"Our children [25 and 20 years old, AN] are not interested in Senegal, even though we obliged them to spend months there since

⁸ Interview online with Wely, 18th Mar 2019.

their childhood... Maybe we insisted too much [smiling]... They are more Italian than Senegalese: they love us, but sometimes they do not follow our ideas, they do not behave as good Muslims, they drink, they do not pray, they do not care about their village or the other Senegalese people here. I hope that when we are older, they do not abandon us in some old folks' home!"

Wely was happy to have raised her children in Italy and had foreseen that growing up far from Senegal would mean they would behave differently and incorporate other values, but was firmly convinced that elders in Europe were treated disrespectfully compared to Senegal and was particularly concerned that her sons could treat her that way when she was older: "I would go back to Senegal rather than be sent to a nursing home!" Her husband⁹ (65 years old) shared her concern and expressed how difficult it was for him to maintain the stereotypical models of elderhood he had in mind:

"In Senegal, the more you grow older, the more people tend to respect you and think you have experience and your voice matters. Here, the more you grow older, the more your voice is not heard. Younger people think that your experience doesn't matter any more, that you belong to a different time and world. That what you can teach is worthless. That you are fragile. But we have seen the world more than them. We travelled more than them. But even if we have suffered and worked for them, they think they can live without us".

The efforts to maintain and consolidate good relationships with children and grandchildren was of crucial importance for many of my interlocutors and was considered an important asset for guaranteeing a good old age. Far from being an individualised, biological process, "good ageing" emerged in all its intersubjective nature, not only because it became an arena to reinforce authority and social respect over the younger generation, but also because people recognised the fact that "good ageing" also depended on the life trajectories of

children and grandchildren. This point was particularly stressed by Mame¹⁰, a 67-year-old woman who joined her father in France in the 1970s, then moved to Italy in the 1990s with her husband and now spends part of the year in Senegal and part in Milan, where two of her three children live with their respective families:

"[...]when you get older you don't think so much about yourself ... you think about your children and grandchildren ... and you are calm only if they are fine ... otherwise you have thoughts ... you don't enjoy old age ... because if your children have problems you would like to help them, but maybe you no longer have the energy or the means to do it ... so yes, it is very important ... I could not stay here [in Senegal] if my children had problems ..."

"COVID MADE ME FEEL OLD AND FRAIL"

Since part of this research was conducted during the Covid19 pandemic, this topic was at centre of many conversations with my interlocutors. As it has been often remarked, the pandemic made several structural problems of Italian health and economic systems more visible and had important consequences in strengthening social inequalities. The effects of the pandemic and the correlated lockdowns impacted with greater strength on those who already belonged to the more vulnerable parts of the population. My elderly interlocutors were particularly concerned both regarding their health, and also for the consequences related to the restrictions on movements inside and outside the Italian territory, as well as for their social life in general.

Despite being more exposed to the harsher effects of the pandemic, many of my interlocutors who were over 60 years old were working in economic sectors that did not stop during the lockdowns. For them this was a great contradiction that implied a certain degree of political indifference toward those who had not the "privilege" of working online. In April 2020, during the first Italian lockdown, I had an online conversation with Keba¹¹, a 63-year-old man who worked in a factory near Brescia

⁹ Interview online with Mamadou, 16th Sep 2020.

¹⁰ Interview online with Mame, 12th Mar 2019.

¹¹ Interview online with Keba, 20th Apr 2020.

that was included in the list of essential economic activities. As he said:

“Apart from a severe backache, I am in relatively good health. But now I am worried, because I am over 60 and I am obliged to continue to work. Covid made me feel old and frail. But I cannot give up my salary. I am near the pension age now. And with the lockdown my life is only work, work, work...Which means that I am losing all the moments that make life happy. All the opportunities for enjoying life. And when you are old, these opportunities are all the more important because you start to think that you do not have much time left.”

Keba knew that his condition was also shared by many people of Italian origin of his age who were obliged to work during the pandemic because they were employed in economic sectors deemed necessary, and this view was shared by many working elders whom I met. The pandemic offered them an opportunity to rethink their social belonging in terms of age and class, rather than origin: “Covid does not differentiate between Italians and Senegalese. We are in the same boat this time,” Ibrahima told me, while his wife added: “We are equally exposed now. It is not about origin or citizenship now; it is about what job you do.” The point was sarcastically stressed also by Mamadou, a 62-year-old night-shift worker in a wholesale vegetable market: “Let’s hope that now that they have discovered that we are indispensable, they will increase also our salary!” Despite recognising the necessity of forbidding physical gathering, many remarked how they missed the possibility of visiting local Mosques or centres for prayers, how difficult it was to give up religious celebrations or other public gatherings, and how “inhuman” the prohibition of attending funerals during the lockdowns was. Social media and online video-calls partly made up for the absence of physical contacts, but for those who lived alone or with abusive partners the lockdowns became cages of fear. Dame¹², for instance, was a 64-year-old man who lived alone in a little apartment in Milan. He had arrived in Italy in 1990 and he had worked in a factory for twenty years. Then the factory closed, and he spent these last ten years between long periods of unemployment and some precarious and informal jobs, many of them without any social security

contribution. Dame always refused to be joined by his two wives and children and focused all his life on sending back remittances, with the hope of returning one day as a successful elderly migrant. During our conversation he stressed how he regretted this choice: “I am alone. And my children are all grown up now, and we do not talk very much. Being here made me miss important moments with them and now it’s too late.” The loss of his job meant a large reduction in how much money he was able to send back, and his role at the pinnacle of this chain of remittances was soon taken by his eldest son, who had migrated to France 5 years previously. On the one hand Dame felt relieved; on the other he perceived that his social role in his family was crumbling. The lockdown increased the feeling of loneliness of Dame, who developed a great fear of contracting the virus and dying. During our online conversations he remarked how loneliness made him think repeatedly about his health:

“I feel like I am becoming hypochondriac. I’ve started to wash my hands every hour, even if I do not go outside. Sometimes I feel the need to wear the mask at home too, even if there is nobody. I know that is irrational, but when you are alone your mind plays bad tricks [...] I spend my time praying to clean my mind from these thoughts [...] The videocalls with my family and friends are not helpful. During the call...ok! But later I feel more alone than ever.”

The fear of contracting the virus was so great for Dame that he continued to stay home even after the formal end of the lockdown, using up the last money he had and starting to ask for the financial help of his eldest son and the friends belonging to Senegalese associations. Starting from a position of relative privilege, Dame progressively saw his opportunities and dreams crumble after the loss of his job. Given his already precarious condition, the pandemic and the lockdowns hit him particularly hard. The last time we had a call, he told me that he was seriously thinking of going back to Senegal “with empty pockets”, since he felt that the successful model of elderhood he had planned to achieve in the diaspora was no longer an option for him.

¹² Interview online with Dame, 28th Apr 2020.



CONCLUSIONS

This report has focused on four topics that emerged as particularly relevant during the interviews and conversations I had with men and women who belonged to the first generation of the Senegalese diaspora in Italy: the social and cultural meanings of successful aging in terms of its relationships with more or less successful migratory trajectories, the issue of return, the social position of elders in relation to their own offspring and the new generations of migrants, and the role that Covid had in their self-representation of ageing. Despite being still composed mainly of people between 20 and 60 years old, the Senegalese diaspora in Italy is facing – and will face increasingly – the challenges of aging, with all the related implications in terms of decent pensions, health and care policies, and a meaningful renegotiation of elders' role in a transnational context. While these challenges are also shared by their Italian counterparts, the specificity of ageing in the diaspora emerged as particularly relevant for my interlocutors. Many stressed how “ageing well” was strictly related to the relative success of their migratory trajectory in terms of economic and social capital and involved a complex redefinition of elders' social roles *vis à vis* their countries of origin, their contexts of arrival, other members of the diaspora and younger generations with different backgrounds. Contrary to dominant Western narratives that depict aging either as a process of irreversible decline and fragility or as a condition that must be postponed at all costs by reproducing models of an endless youth, many elders of the Senegalese diaspora valorised the aging process as an important asset for reinforcing their social status, authoritativeness, and prestige, thus reproducing – in different forms and into a mutated context – the valorising narratives of age widely shared in many African contexts. Rather than being a time of decline and of retirement from active life, for them aging was a time of increased social and geographical mobility, during which cultivating social relations was crucial and playing an active role in society became not only socially required but desired. The problematic point was not how to deal with age, but rather how to be recognised as someone who had acquired enough symbolic and material

resources during his/her migratory trajectory to be socially recognised as a respected elder. Elderhood was not something to avoid or to try to postpone, it was a difficult but prestigious social position that people tried to achieve practically and discursively, in order to gain respect and recognition not only from other members of the diaspora but also from an Italian society that tended to consider them more as “migrants” than as “elders”.

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