

**WEAVING THROUGH ISLAM
IN SENEGAL**

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WEAVING THROUGH ISLAM IN SENEGAL

Laura L. Cochrane

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

WEAVING NESTS OF CLOTH: IMAGES AND PRACTICES

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

Laura Cochrane's work on weaving households in specialist places within Senegal adds strikingly to several different themes in the ethnography of Africa and in the theoretical understanding of sustainable practices of development among artisanal groups in less well-known corners of the world. Her book also illustrates the symbiotic and supportive relationships from the national to the familial level that are requisite if such sustainable practices are to persist. Additionally, the book gives its readers a clear insight into the special roles played by Sufism as a branch of Islam in underpinning weaving as a trade with its spiritual significance in creating a meaningful cosmos of practices that unites Islam with indigenous religion and with artistic impulses.

Particular ethnographies often teach us important lessons about the possible combinations of factors that may unexpectedly come together to produce a unique local cosmic spectrum. Cochrane draws both on her own fieldwork and on corroborative writings by other scholars of West African societies to delineate a surprisingly harmonious picture of religious pluralism (in the co-existence of Sufi and Christian weavers via shared urban contexts) and in the relatively benign influence of nationalist themes and local perspectives in the activities of a broad-based indigenous NGO that helps to direct and undergird the business enterprises of individual weavers. Overall political stability at the national level is no doubt important here, and recent elections in Senegal with the changing of the Presidency may have some future effect on the situation. However, what comes through in the account is the symbiosis of nationally based marketing strategies with intense local inventiveness and resilience, in the face of often trying economic conditions. All is not easy, and negative

aspects of conflict between people are evident in the incidence of accusations of sorcery between rivals at local levels. Such accusations spring out of complex varieties of both indigenous and Islamic ideas, engendered by fears of the jealousy of competitors in weaving and by adverse experiences of failure or loss of bodily health. Overall, these fears also exist in an expressive cultural environment in which spirits of various kinds are thought to influence people's daily affairs, and in which experiences themselves are conditioned by a continuous subjective awareness of the presence of spirits. This intimate apprehension of the spirit world adds a dimension to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*: *habitus* here is a part of the cosmos, and because of religious pluralism it also implies multiple intersecting worlds of interpretations.

In her analyses Cochrane uses the concept of belief effectively, not as a matter of abstract cognition, but as embodied in practices. She stresses that weavers operate in a perceived world in which their beliefs deeply inform their material activities. There is a mingling of practices based on kinship and lineage ties with the co-presence of 'spiritual lineages' of weavers formed around local Sufi orders. The compatibility of Sufism with the development of ideas about religious Saints, emotional and personal commitments of faith that give opportunities to women, and the inextricable blending of popular pre-Islamic values, all impart a unique texture to the ethnographic account.

Cochrane explains her own intellectual lineage in discussing the immediate regional ethnographies into which her account is inserted. The comparisons can go further. In terms of the cosmic significance of weaving, Janet Hoskins' study of the Kodi people on the island of Flores in Eastern Indonesia comes to mind (Hoskins 1994). In terms of the blend of collective and individual creativity, Katherine Giuffre's study of artists in the Cook Islands can be cited (Giuffre 2009). On Sufism and its stress on both pilgrimage and love, Pnina Werbner's work on Pakistani Sufis gives us obvious parallels (Werbner 2004, Werbner and Basu eds. 1998). And for the special characteristics of Sufi practices in gendered contexts in various parts of Africa and elsewhere our own edited volume "Contesting Rituals" is very relevant, particularly in its emphasis on peaceful aspects of religious practice (linked in Cochrane's study to the principles of 'humanity' espoused by the national NGO) (see here Stewart and Strathern eds. 2005). Finally, on the particularly charged status of weavers as esoteric artisans we may compare Susan Rasmussen's work on blacksmiths among the Tuaregs of Niger (e.g. Rasmussen 1995).

Beliefs, practices, and images emerge strongly as themes from this fine, densely woven study (writers are also weavers of word patterns). Cochrane instances certain oral traditions in Central Senegal in which ancestors are said to

have learned to weave by surreptitiously observing a bird weaving its nest, thus giving a naturalized account of the origins of a human craft. Analogously, in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, men sometimes compare their ritual dances with the displays of the Birds of Paradise, whose plumes they wear for these dances. In another image, one of Cochrane's interlocutors, the manager of an artisanal campus, explained patchwork as a mark of a diverse community in which different people come together, like the different squares of material that are joined to form a single piece of multi-colored cloth. Differences are re-composed into common purposes, and the purposes of trade are subsumed in a wider cosmos of spiritual awareness. Cochrane's study provides its readers with a model of alternative development, deeply set into local history and religion, but tied also into national and international networks that the people mobilize to sustain their life-worlds

Notes

* Prof. Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Prof. Andrew Strathern are a husband and wife research team in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and are the 2012 De Carle Distinguished Lecturers at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. They are also Research Associates in the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and have been Visiting Research Fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan, during parts of every year from 2002-2012. Their long-term, diverse, and creative research work has been published in over 45 books and over 200 influential articles on their research throughout the Pacific, Asia (mainly Taiwan), and Europe (primarily Scotland and Ireland, also on the European Union). Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Self and Group: Kinship in Action* (Prentice Hall, 2011). Their recent co-edited books include *Contesting Rituals: Islam and Practices of Identity-Making* (2005, Carolina Academic Press), *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008), *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009) and *Ritual* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). They have broad interests which embrace and engage with global issues, utilizing their cross-cultural linguistic skills, a powerful comparative and interdisciplinary approach, and a uniquely engaged scholarly gaze. Their current research and writing is on the topics of Political Peace-making and the new arena that they are developing on Global Disaster Anthropology Studies.

Their webpages are: (<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/sandspublicat.htm>) (<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/>) and (<http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>).

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My debt of gratitude goes to the many weaving communities of Thiès and Ndem. Conversations with weavers, their families and community members are the motivation for and the foundation of this ethnography. While I changed many names to protect informants' identities, the absence of their names here does not take away from the personal gratitude I have for these individuals. The following people in Senegal have made my stays there possible and enjoyable: in Yoff, Victoria Fletcher and Papis, Sarah Klein, Abdoulaye Bamba Ngom and his family, Ndeye Samb and her family, Pape and Yacine Sene and their family, Baye Mouké Traoré, Veronica Zeitlin and Marian Zeitlin. In Thiès, Léon Aga Boton and Ramatoulaye, Amadou and Cheikh Tall and their family at the Artisan Village, Ibou Cissé and his family, Becky Denton, Gabriel Diouck, Modou Diouf and Binta, Alioune and Astou Fall and their family, Ibrahima Gueye, Ibrahima Mané, Aïsatou Mbeye, Dan and Marietta Morgan, Djeneba and

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With such tremendous support, I take responsibility for any unintentional errors: all mistakes in my weaving and in this text are my own.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION, ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION

I conducted most of this research in French, including formal interviews and conversations, with some conversations in Wolof. All translations are my own. I have used the standard Wolof orthography in use in Senegal for all words except for names. For example, *x* is pronounced like the German *ch*; *c* is pronounced like the English *ch*; and double vowels are simply elongated sounds. When followed by a vowel such as in *ñeeño*, *ñ* is pronounced like the English *ny*; while when *ñ* ends a word such as in *sëriñ*, it is pronounced like the English *gn*.

For names of historical and contemporary people, I have used the spelling that they used or use. I have used the standard Wolof orthography for names of people who lived in the precolonial era (many of the people in Chapter 2). For example, I have used the Wolof spelling for nineteenth century military leader El Hajj Umar Taal, while I have followed Papa Ibra Tall's and Rama Tall's spelling for their names. To avoid the confusion of repetitive last names, I use first names to refer to contemporary informants. Three exceptions are Sëriñ Babacar Mbow and Soxna Aïssa Cissé, to whom I refer as Sëriñ Babacar and Soxna Aïssa, reflecting the respect of those titles; and MSAD Director Papa Ibra Tall, to whom I refer as Director Tall or Tall to reflect his status.

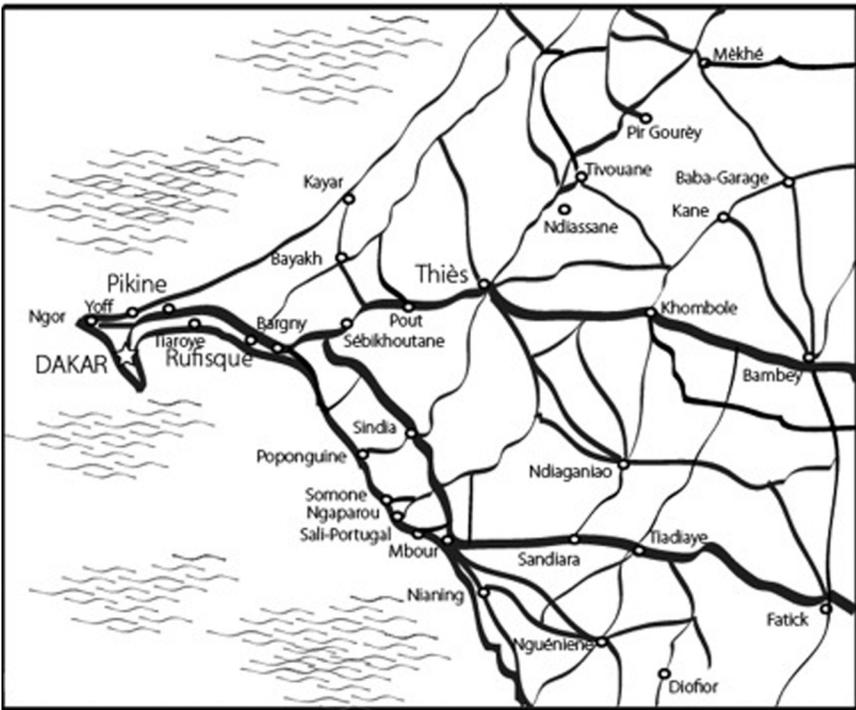
Names of cities have also changed in spelling over the past 200 years. While Ndem has one fairly consistent spelling, Thiès has several. Thiès is the French spelling, in use on contemporary maps and city signs, and thus is the spelling that I use. Cees is the Wolof spelling, and indicates the local pronunciation of the city's name (/chës/).

Figure 1



The greater West African region. Illustration by author.

Figure 2



The Dakar area and the area of central Senegal that encompasses Thiès and Ndem. Ndem is located several kilometers north of Bambeý. Illustration by author.