Agnes Hann
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
a.c.hann@lse.ac.uk

Selling an 'image of leisure': women's small-scale trade and consumption in Dakar, Senegal[1]

Abstract: *This paper analyses urban Senegalese women's small-scale trade in consumer goods. It is argued that these traders' work practices and the consumption of their wares are linked to ideas about social visits, the importance of appearances, leisure time and gender.*

Keywords: *Senegal; Dakar; women; small-scale trade; consumption; appearance*

Introduction

The ethnographic material that I present in this paper is drawn from a PhD thesis chapter on Dakar women's remunerated work.[2] In Senegal, *liggéey*, or work, is conceptualised as a predominantly masculine activity - indeed, it is a crucial component of men's gendered identity.[3] Although many women in Dakar 'work' in the sense of *liggéey*, I encountered many others whose income-generating activities - often intermittent, short-lived, unstable and not very profitable – were *not* considered to be *liggéey*. This paper focuses on just one of those activities – *commerce* – or trade. Many women in Dakar engage in *commerce*, purchasing small quantities of imported consumer goods, for example clothes, shoes, perfume or mobile phones, which they then sell at a profit. They do not work from a fixed location but shift their merchandise through networks of friends and family to whom they extend credit, combining their business with

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[2] The thesis as a whole explores the connections between urban livelihoods and family, kin and other social relationships, and how these structure the everyday lives of non-elite Dakar women. It is based on fieldwork undertaken in Dakar from November 2007 until September 2010. Topics that are dealt with in other parts of the thesis include: marriage and romantic relationships, housework, the in-laws, motherhood and parent-child relations, as well as women's associations and family/community events.

[3] However, Senegalese women's participation in the urban workforce is readily acknowledged by Dakarois and has received attention within the scholarly literature. Anthropological accounts of Senegalese women's income-generating activities have tended to focus on women whose work falls under the rubric of *liggéey*, notably market traders (Le Cour Grandmaison 1969, Lecarme Frassy 2000, Heath 1988, Perry 2005, Guérin 2006, Callaway and Creevey 1994, Hall-Arber 1988).

social activities.[4] On the one hand, they have an important 'provisioning' function within the networks of a globalising consumer city (Hannerz 1980).[5] However, I wish to emphasise in this paper that urban Senegalese consumption and the concrete practice of *commerce* should be understood with reference to local ideas about social visits, dress and appearance, leisure time and gender. I suggest that for women in Dakar, *commerce* becomes a distinct income-generating practice precisely by virtue of its guise as a leisure activity.

Dieyna the *commercante*

Dieyna, who is in her early thirties, has traded intermittently since I first met her eight years ago.[6] Dieyna describes herself as a *commercante*, and her occupation is listed as such in her national identity card. One of her more memorable projects was when she travelled across the border to Gambia with a friend who was a more established *commercante* and returned with a small holdall full of women's shoes. However, she generally purchased her wares on credit from wholesalers in Dakar, or obtained them through personal connections to sole traders importing to Senegal from abroad. Even when Dieyna had no stock, she spoke about her next project, which was usually more ambitious than anything she had previously undertaken, involving more valuable merchandise, such as mobile phones, and far-flung destinations, such as Morocco or, unsurprisingly,

[4] For the purposes of this paper, *commerce* and 'trade' are used to refer to this particular instance of women's work. However, it is important to note that in Senegal, the sphere of *commerce* in the most general sense of the word is arguably dominated by men. The sector's highest echelons are occupied by prominent traders, including some women (cf. Sarr 1998), who wield influence within extensive transnational trade networks (Buggenhagen 2012, Diouf and Rendall 2000). Additionally, many women engage in other types of 'trade', in marketplaces, for example, or from home as vendors of food items. A discussion of these types of women's work is beyond the remit of this paper, but forms an important part of the thesis chapter on remunerated work.

[5] Dakar is a consumer city in the sense that in recent times it has witnessed a sharp increase in the volume and variety of imported consumer goods. For more on commodities and consumption in Dakar, see for example Scheld 2003, Nyamnjoh 2005, Buggenhagen 2012 and Mustafa 1997.

[6] Dieyna's personal circumstances have changed over the years, and she traded most consistently during periods when she was not living with her in-laws and did not have childcare responsibilities. However, these periods do not entirely coincide with her being unmarried and not having children. Dieyna has been married twice and has two small children, but there have been periods when she was married but not living with her in-laws, and a period after her first child was born when she was not the main caregiver for this child. Although women's position in the life cycle is a relevant structural factor, it is impossible to generalise about their employment opportunities on this basis alone.

the United Kingdom. She took pride in the items she was selling, which were from Europe, not China, and if they had 'Made in China' written on them then they were *chinois original* (Chinese manufactured, but good quality). It was not unusual for traders like Dieyna to advertise their merchandise by wearing examples of it.[7] Consuming their own merchandise served, in part, as a retail strategy, yet I shall argue that the presence of certain cultural expectations concerning dress and the concomitant pleasure and dignity associated with wearing nice clothes are also integral to the exchange process.

Mixing business and pleasure

Women like Dieyna generally sold their merchandise by visiting friends and family, or, less frequently, when they attended family or community events such as life-cycle ceremonies or association meetings.[8] Of course, they also sold to household members, visitors and neighbours. But social visits outside the residential neighbourhood expanded the pool of potential clients enormously - these women had few other ways of bringing their merchandise to potential clients' attention. Although selling on credit was always risky, by selling to friends' friends or neighbours, the *commercante* had some leverage when it came to extracting payment. When she had stock, Dieyna would make arrangements to visit friends in various parts of Dakar, many of whom she had not caught up with for some time. Her visit might be eagerly anticipated – 'Dieyna, she's been to Gambia and she's got some beautiful shoes with her; she's coming here with the merchandise later on'. Sometimes, however, a client might feel pressured into purchasing because she was already indebted, financially or otherwise, to the *commercante*. If the clients were not eager and impatient to purchase, the women would take time to catch up and socialise before the merchandise was brought out. Even though discussions about the style and quality of the goods

[7] Scheld (2003:210) also observes this practice in Dakar.
[8] References to *commerce* in the literature tend to describe it as a sideline activity at family ceremonies (Buggenhagen 2012) or at women's association gatherings such as *tuur* dance events (Morales-Libove 2005, Neveu-Kringelbach 2005). However, I found it to occur more frequently and systematically during social visits that had no religious, ceremonial or associational purpose, perhaps because there were fewer distractions and practical hazards involved.

were often lengthy, they were never the only topic of conversation. Negotiations about prices were swift and subtle, especially if the *commercante* did not expect immediate payment, which was usually the case. 'Just take it' [*jélal rekk*] – the *commercante* would tell her client, in a way that made it sound as if she were giving it away for free. Later, of course, there would be follow-up visits, sometimes involving new goods, whereby the trader would discreetly attempt to secure payment for items sold on credit months earlier. The crucial point in all this is that the nature and atmosphere of these visits, from the content of the conversation to the snacks and beverages consumed and the television programme running in the background, strongly resembled a social visit that did *not* involve *commerce*.

Social visits in Dakar are visits to friends or family that involve a distance that is usually too far to walk and requires some form of motorized transport. Neighbourhood visits that are within walking distance of one's house are different, as I explain shortly. Urbanisation and shifting residential patterns, as well as the sheer magnitude of extended family and social networks contribute to the prevalence of social visits; in Dakar, visiting and being visited by friends and family are essential aspects of social relationships. Despite the fact that they are frequent, sometimes even everyday occurrences, these visits require a degree of preparation and considered attention to one's appearance, especially dress, that may take quite some time. Although it may seem obvious that appearance is always a meaningful part of self-presentation and social interaction, it is worth examining the Dakarois attention to appearance in more detail.

Keeping up appearances

During a period when Dieyna was making the hour-long journey from the suburbs into central Dakar almost every day with her merchandise, she was always immaculately turned out. Carefully made-up, she often wore tight jeans and a bejewelled top, colour coordinating her accessories with the latter.

Occasionally, and especially on Fridays, the 'western' outfit would be replaced by a locally tailored ensemble, which would also be enhanced by matching jewellery, shoes and handbag. Sometimes, she incorporated the items she was selling into her outfit. When I asked her why it took her so long to get ready, she made no reference to her *commerce*. Instead, she explained how important it was for people in general to think that she had no financial worries – times may be tough, but it wasn't good for other people to know this. It could give people reason to 'talk', or gossip, and being the subject of gossip was potentially very dangerous. On the one hand, the 'black tongue' (*làmmiñ bu ñuul*), somewhat comparable to the 'evil eye', had the potential to disadvantage, harm, or even kill the subject being spoken about. Although anybody could be the victim of malignant gossip (*cat*), those who were most vulnerable were those who stood out from the crowd, lacked discretion and drew attention to themselves. However, fear of this type of harmful gossip was most strongly associated with ostentatious behaviour and looking too showy. For this reason, I was not sure whether Dieyna was worried about becoming a target of this kind of gossip herself, or whether she was actually more concerned that an appearance of poverty might lead others to speculate that she could be a perpetrator - in Senegal, as across much of Africa, witchcraft accusations are often levelled at the poor and the marginalised.

Scholars of Senegal have remarked that an appearance of wealth acquires specific meaning within a highly stratified social system based on patron-clientage.[9] In the pre-colonial era, this form of social organisation characterised the ethnic groups that dominated the Senegambia region.[10] Wealth (*alal*) is associated with the capacity for largesse (*teraanga*), and therefore the high status of a patron.[11] Of course, social stratification in the Senegambia region,

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[9] Diop 1981, Heath 1992, Irvine 1974.

[10] These included the Wolof, Séeréer, Pël and Tukulóor (Fulani peoples), Màndeŋ (Mandinka) and Saraxolle (Soninke); the notable exception were the Jola of the Casamance region in Southern Senegal who had a more egalitarian system.

[11] However, this is complicated by the fact that an appearance of wealth can also be interpreted, depending on the context, as a reflection of somebody else's high status, for example one's patron, husband or father (Irvine 1974, Scheld 2003, Heath 1992). A degree of fluidity probably always characterized patron-client relations in Senegal – a Wolof proverb reminds us that 'one person's sheep is another person's lion' [*xarum waaay, gaynde waay*].

which traditionally took the form of endogamous, hereditary occupational groups ('castes'), has undergone significant transformations since the pre-colonial era.[12] Although some of the 'traditional' occupation-based distinctions continue to persist in urban Senegal, they are increasingly blurred. This is due to the decreasing practical relevance of the traditional occupations, more intermarriage across groups, and, crucially, the increased anonymity that the city affords its inhabitants. A Goffman-esque observation about the importance of appearance in an urban environment where identities are often partial and anonymous is especially salient when we consider that traditionally, social identities were more rigid and differentiated, and social mobility more restricted. Suzanne Scheld (2003) reinforces this argument further by noting that during the earlier days of urbanisation, clothing served as a marker of status for the emerging urban elite, usually employees of the colonial administration, and that in contemporary Senegal clothing still functions as an signifier of 'urban' and 'rural' identity.

Scheld also observes that in Senegal 'correct, respectful and civilised dress and appearance … have Islamic religious signification' (2003:163), arguing that dressing correctly is a way of disciplining the body comparable to the completion of ritual prayers and associated purity and bodily cleanliness. My informants in Dakar would often use the terms 'dressing well' (*solu*) and 'being clean' (*set*) in a single breath. They did not usually refer explicitly to Islam, however, but simply stated that this was normal, correct behaviour that demonstrated 'respect for oneself' (*bëgg boppam*). I would suggest, however, that quite apart from the link with Islam, a consideration of cleanliness further illuminates the importance of dress and appearance in Dakar.

Anthropologists commenting on the phenomenon of 'dressing well' in Dakar tend to overlook, or perhaps take for granted, the fact that it only occurs during *leisure time*. The majority of women and men, who perform domestic, menial, or other kinds of 'dirty' work on a daily basis, are certainly *not* expected to dress

[12] Over the past century and a half, the region has witnessed the dismantling of the pre-colonial kingdoms, French colonial rule and eventual independence, mass conversion to Islam, the rise of a cash crop economy followed by severe economic decline, and ongoing urbanization.

well when they are working.[13] Wearing ugly, worn clothes whilst working does not lower the wearer's status and it does not render the worker unclean or vulnerable to negative gossip .[14] However, appropriate attention to appearance is expected outside working hours. Most women and men will wear 'nice' clothes for just a few hours in the afternoon or evening when the work of the day is finished. Some men may do so just once a week, on a Sunday, when they have a full day off work. Dressing well is especially important at religious and family ceremonies, as these occasions have profound religious and social meanings.[15] Generally speaking, cleanliness and proper dress clearly demarcate the activity undertaken as leisure, not work. This is why visits within the residential neighbourhood do not normally have the same status as 'social visits', especially for women. They frequently take place during the working day, as women wearing 'work' clothes briefly visit neighbours to borrow a cooking utensil, announce some news, or simply greet the family.

Women, men and work

Thus far, I have suggested that there are several, related factors that underpin the high value urban Senegalese place on appearance. First, people take measures to avoid becoming not only the targets, but also the presumed perpetrators of malignant gossip, and dress well in order to avoid attracting negative attention. Second, attention to appearance is arguably especially important in an urban environment where a degree of anonymity characterises much social interaction and where identities are often only partially revealed. In Dakar, this manifests itself against a backdrop of the relatively rigid and differentiated social identities and constraints on social mobility engendered by the traditional hierarchical occupational categories. Third, ideas about

[13] Work clothes usually consist of second hand European clothing, or clothing that was new when purchased but now shows severe signs of wear and tear.
[14] A minority of (elite, mostly highly educated) Dakarois perform work that is not primarily physical. The few jobs that do not involve dirt and heat, which generally take place in air-conditioned offices, are accorded a higher status than the types of work that the majority of the urban population engages in.
[15] Discussions of dressing well in urban Senegal have tended to focus on 'dressing up' (*sañse*) at family or community events, which require particular types of tailored clothing to be worn (Buggenhagen 2012, Buggenhagen 2010, Morales-Libove 2005).

cleanliness and correct dress resonate within an Islamic belief system. Finally, I have argued that the cultural expectation of 'dressing well' is a way of distinguishing leisure time from work. Social visits to friends and family outside the residential neighbourhood are one of the most frequent leisure activities in Dakar; they are also the primary setting for women's small-scale *commerce*.

Consumer items, especially clothes, are the principal means by which women and men achieve an appearance that signals that they are not working, and meet the cultural expectation of dressing well in the context of leisure time. Given this general demand for consumer items, and a high demand for buying on credit, we can see that women's small-scale *commerce* is fulfilling the maxim of supply and demand. It is striking, however, that these female *commercantes* do not have male counterparts. Although many men trade in similar kinds of consumer items, including women's wear, they do it more systematically, in shops, markets or as ambulant traders. This is because as men, their work is expected to take the form of a daily routine that involves leaving the house and allows for only limited leisure time. This is not to imply that all men are actually earning money, but rather that there is a strong gendered requirement that they do so, which means that even men who have no fixed employment make an effort to leave the house in the morning. Conversely, although many women in Dakar are earning money, in many cases, their income-generating activities, for example vending snacks or braiding hair, will not take them far from the house.[16] Women's primary roles are perceived to be as wives and mothers, and although their housework and childcare responsibilities can be time-consuming, there are acceptable ways to outsource them. Consequently, women may legitimately aspire to live a life of leisure in a way that men may not. For these reasons, I suggest that for women in Dakar, *commerce* is a feasible way of earning money precisely by virtue of its guise as a leisure activity. The *commercantes* are selling more than just consumer products; they are, I suggest, selling what could be called an *image of leisure*. It is their image as well-dressed, comfortable and leisurely women, consuming in

[16] This is why, practically speaking, it makes more sense for the *commercantes* to sell to other women: in addition to the fact that socialising is generally characterised by a degree of gender segregation, women are more likely to be around the house than men. It is also more appropriate for women to purchase consumer items than men. Men are also expected to consume and dress well when they are not working, but they are expected to have fewer occasions to do so than women.

accordance with cultural and gendered expectations, that helps make their wares attractive, as well as signalling to potential clients that business is going well.[17]

Conclusion

In line with the theme of this workshop, this paper has sought to make visible the connections between a particular type of work, namely women's small-scale *commerce*, and the entitlement to consume in urban Senegal. I have argued that the two are not merely joined in a cycle of supply and demand, with the *commmercantes* providing clients with consumer goods on credit. Rather, the practice of *commerce*, which generally takes place during social visits, is facilitated by a cultural and gendered expectation of consumption and dressing well in the context of leisure time. This is connected, on the one hand, to specific cultural and historical factors including fear of gossip, hierarchy and patron-clientage, the development of urban identities, and Islam. It is also shaped by ideas about men and women's roles and the way in which work time and leisure time are gendered.[18]

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[17]See Scheld (2003) and Buggenhagen (2012) for further examples of how consumed clothing can be converted into future gains.

[18] In this paper, I have emphasised the distinctly 'Senegalese' aspects of consumption and women's small-scale trade. However, I do not wish to reify 'Senegalese culture' or 'traditional pre-colonial society' in my analysis, although it is important to note that there are documented precedents for women's *commerce* in the region, the most famous being the 19th century *Signares* (Brooks 1976). Rather, I have tried to draw attention to some of the material and historical factors that mediate the high value that urban Senegalese place on appearance. It has also not been my intention to advance an argument about the liberating aspects of commodities and the opportunities that globalisation and changes in manufacturing and distribution processes have created for Senegalese women – far from it. It is important not to lose site of the enormous inequalities that characterise the global capitalist system of production within which women like Dieyna are entangled. Over the eight years that I have known her, the significant changes in Dieyna's financial circumstances were shaped more by her marriages and divorces than by her *commerce*. Sometimes I felt frustrated and angry on her behalf when she explained that so-and-so had told her, yet again, to come back again at the end of the next month for payment, although she always remained resolute that the person *would* pay up and reprimanded me for my negative attitude. But despite Dieyna's insistence to the contrary, there were always clients who refused to pay their debts, and who either had to be forgiven for the sake of maintaining good relations or, less frequently, disappeared off her radar. Sometimes she ended up 'eating' the money that was earmarked for her business, diverting it to meet other needs. This was not helped by the fact that her payments were more likely to trickle in throughout the month than to be concentrated around the end of the month – reflecting the more general patterns of distribution and circulation of money amongst Dakarois. More successful, less vulnerable traders were able to inject more capital into their projects, worked with larger amounts of stock, found it easier to keep their business and personal accounts separate, and therefore avoid 'eating' the money they made from sales, and were in a better position to enforce payment, or at least to be more selective about who they did business with. Many women in

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Dakar, however, are not able to join the ranks of these 'big' *commercantes* and follow a path similar to Dieyna's. In addition to these 'structural' disadvantages, women like Dieyna also faced contestations concerning the morality of their work. I argue in my thesis that debates over the morality of *commerce* are influenced by, but are not reducible to anxieties over individualistic accumulation. Most of the *commercantes* that I knew were gregarious, talkative women, and indeed, being able to speak well was crucial to their entrepreneurial success. However, speech, as well as physical mobility, was sometimes associated with a lack of restraint and propriety, both within traditional Wolof sociality as well as within Islam (Heath 1988). Arguably, this partly explains why *commercantes* were sometimes accused of being greedy. The boundary between 'she has money' (she is wealthy) and 'she likes money' (she is greedy, or she has money but does not redistribute it) was one that many traders struggled to negotiate.

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