From ‘ethnic’ and ‘faith’ communities to identity politics?
A journey into the self-representations of Senegalese immigrants in Italy.

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ABSTRACT

The organisers of this conference have suggested that the current debate about multiculturalism is characterised by a historical move towards an emphasis on “identity politics” and “faith communities”. According to some, this shift should be welcomed, as it favours the coexistence of cultural diversity within societies. Other observers, instead, believe that the same shift poses a threat to the principles at the basis of multiculturalism and that it could open the way to social conflict and to ethnically or religiously based claims. In this article, I shall address such questions by examining the case of Senegalese immigrants in Italy, looking at the use they make of “ethnicity” and “religion” in the construction of a shared identity and exploring the potential that both elements hold in developing into active politics of identity.
Identity politics voices the claims and defends the interests of minority groups that perceive to be living in a situation of social injustice (Calhoun 1994). As such, “identity politics” must not be confused with “social identity”, inasmuch as the latter is the mere point of departure, around which political action is then organised. Furthermore, some have suggested that social identity at the basis of identity-disputes itself is often a fuzzy and opaque element (Goldstein and Rayner 1994). If we restrict our field of interest to issues of multiculturalism, however, the base-sources of identity politics initiatives can be easily reduced to two main elements: *ethnicity* and *religion*.1

Ethnicity and religion - together with the State - correspond to two of the poles indicated by Baumann (1999) as forming the “multicultural triangle”. While on the first corner the State defines who is a minority and who a part of the dominant civil culture, on the second corner *ethnicity* is often reified and associated with cultural identity. Similarly, on the third corner *religion* `can sound absolute, that is, it can be made to sound as if it determines objective and unchangeable differences between people` (ibid.: 21). At the centre of the triangle lies culture, the key to the multicultural riddle, simultaneously product and outcome of all three elements.

In the multicultural game, ethnicity and religion are the two elements that can be actively moulded minority groups: both have a key role in the construction of shared social identities and of collective representations of themselves as well as of the host society. Given this, both elements may be utilised by immigrants in the process of shaping their relationship with the local immigration context and in defining their attitudes of openness and closure towards it.

Current trends in migration practices, and in particular the rapid emergence and establishment of transnational forms of migration, make the issues just illustrated of particular interest. Transnationalism, in fact, is characterised by the maintenance of strong ties across the country of origin and of immigration (Vertovec and Cohen 1999), a trait that can pose serious threats to multicultural aspirations in host societies. Transnationalism, in fact, may be pushed as far as gaining a character of resistance and desire for self-isolation on behalf of the migratory group. What effects this form of migration might have on the development of ethnic and faith communities, on instances of identity politics and, ultimately, on the chances of multicultural cohabitation in the country of immigration: these are the questions I wish to address in this article, by looking at the case of Senegalese immigrants in Italy.

**SENEGALESE IMMIGRATION IN ITALY**

Senegalese migrants offer a particularly interesting case study for the analysis of the relationship between ethnicity, religion and identity. Their migration configures itself as having a strong transnational character and this national group often bears the traits of a *labour diaspora* (Cohen 1997), made up mainly of first generation male migrants who maintain strong ties with the country of origin, where they all dream of one day returning. The transnational character of Senegalese migration is particularly strong in those countries in which Senegalese migration is a fairly recent phenomenon, among which Italy has rapidly become the second destination for Senegalese emigrants. The works of many scholars confirm that in this country the Senegalese bear the characters of transitory, rather than settled, migration (Riccio 2001a; 2002; 2003).

The composition of Senegalese migration in Italy is largely male, mainly from the Wolof ethnic group and affiliated to the Murid brotherhood. Most Senegalese living in Italy leave their families at home. Being a transmigrant for a Senegalese therefore requires spending long periods of time away from Senegal, trying to return at frequent intervals and with the ambition of creating for oneself and

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1 For general considerations on the relation between multiculturalism and identity politics see Scott (1995).
one’s family an economic, social and spiritual life in Senegal (Grillo 2000: 13). Practically all Senegalese are orientated towards return to their homeland. Senegalese immigration in Italy started at the end of the 1980s, as a result of restrictions to entry introduced by other countries in continental Europe. Despite this almost accidental beginning, Senegalese immigration in the country evolved at a rapid pace, making this community the tenth national group in terms of presence and the largest community from Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, almost 54,000 Senegalese are resident in Italy, with strong concentrations in the North of the country, where they are mainly employed as unskilled, blue collar workers.

An interesting feature of Senegalese immigration in Italy is that this national group has a proven tendency to form congregations (Knox 1995) by clustering in certain neighbourhoods and giving birth to what an outsiders eye would regards as immigrant ghettoes. My research was carried out in one of such places: an urban area in Northern Italy known as Zingonia, which hosts strong concentrations of Senegalese immigrants. This town is located between the cities of Milan and Bergamo, in one of the most highly industrialised parts of the country. What is left today of an urban experiment started in the 1960s is a highly spatially segregated area, made up of industrial quarters still extensively occupied by small enterprises and, in the immediate surroundings, a number of residential blocks planned to house blue-collar workers. The area shows the typical traits of an urban periphery, with most of its housing areas left to degrade. From the 1980s this has become a privileged place for the settlement of foreign immigrant work force, who find employment in the local factories. The Senegalese were among the first to access Zingonia and were soon followed by immigrants of other nationalities.

As many other Senegalese congregations in Italy, Zingonia has become a place of reference for many Senegalese and has gained the fame of being a “Little Senegal”. Alongside its many residents, in fact, this urban settlement attracts also large numbers of Senegalese of passage, as it hosts religious meetings and celebrations, formal and informal services, as well as numerous other occasions for sociality.

What is the role of ethnicity and religion in the establishment of these strongholds of Senegalese presence such as Zingonia? Both the ethnic and the religious argument seem to come together in the definition of this migratory group’s identity. However, the two elements appear to have quite different outcomes as regards identity politics claims and issues of multiculturalism.

**THE RELIGIOUS ARGUMENT OF THE MURID TAALIBE**

Senegal is a prevalently Muslim country. Islam is practiced through the belonging to Sufi orders (*tariqa*), corresponding to four main brotherhoods: the Muridiyya, Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya and Layène. The Murid brotherhood is specifically Senegalese and was founded in 1883 by Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké. It has its religious headquarters in the holy city of Touba, where the largest Mosque in Sub-Saharan Africa rises. Despite the recent birth of this *tariqa*, it is rapidly growing in size and importance in Senegal and - most importantly - in the Senegalese diaspora abroad. Today the Murid, who have played an important role in commerce for a long time, have established large mercantile communities that expand beyond the borders of Senegal and have led to an important presence of their commercial activities or businesses in France, the U.S. and in Italy. They constitute a true commercial diaspora and the organisational structure of the brotherhood has proven great versatility in adapting to immigration contexts in foreign land (Carter 1997, Diop 1990, M. Diouf 2000, Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

2 Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké is also referred to as Serigne Touba (Wolof for ‘Holy Man of Touba’), or Khadimou Rassoul (Arabic for ‘Servant of the Prophet’).
In Italy as well as elsewhere, scholarly attention for the Senegalese has underlined how the networks of this Islamic brotherhood have played an important part in activating, shaping and establishing current Senegalese migratory chains (Bava 2003; Carter 1997; Riccio 2004 and 2006; Schmidt di Friedberg 1994). Although Murid immigrants in Italy are no longer exclusively engaged in commercial trade and have fully entered the employment market as paid labour, the brotherhood has been central in the initial establishment of places of reference for Senegalese immigrants such as Zingonia. This and other “Little Senegals”, in fact, have developed mainly in the vicinities of Dahiras founded abroad. The Dahira is a religious centre and corresponds to the association of disciples (taalibes) who are followers of the same marabout or spiritual guide. In urban settings, this brotherhood is typically structured into Dahiras, a derivation from the classic rural form of the Daara or Koranic school (Carter 1997, Copans 2000, Diop 1982).

The model of the Murid migrant, often original of the rural areas around the saint city of Touba, well applies to the first wave of Senegalese who arrived in Italy. During the 1980s they were mainly dedicated to informal peddling and informal international trade, however they were soon followed by people attempting to sell their labour force first on a seasonal basis, then on a permanent basis all the year round. A major factor pushing the Senegalese towards regular jobs was the fact that a valid employment contract then became the necessary condition to acquire legal status in Italy and to renew the right to stay. Changes in the legislative framework, therefore, favoured the mass movement of Senegalese migrants from the South to the North of Italy, where more job opportunities were available, so that the Senegalese progressively turned to paid labour as their main occupation and places such as Zingonia attracted them as magnets. Once the first settlers had arrived here, others followed shortly after, thanks to a strong demand for workforce. On the basis of hearsay, mouth to mouth reports, etc, the Senegalese in Zingonia rapidly grew by following the meshes of those who had already settled here. In the span of only a few years, their network in Zingonia was well established and institutionalised.

It is particularly the religious dimension that has given Zingonia its fame among Senegalese, confirming the fact that places of worship easily become ‘major avenues for contact for members of the diaspora’ (Ajibewa and Akinrinade 2003: 6). In Zingonia, the seat of the Dahira and of the Senegalese Association Touba are to be found just outside the area of the residential blocks, in a warehouse on the outskirts of the industrial quarters. On a weekly basis, it attracts large numbers of people. The Dahira is used not only for weekend prayer sessions, but also for meetings with religious authorities on visit and for the celebration of Islamic religious festivities, which attract large numbers of Senegalese from other Italian cities. The fame of these celebrations has risen to a point that at times they cannot be hosted in Zingonia for lack of space and are therefore organised by the members of the Dahira elsewhere in the Province:

«At one time we used to meet in our homes to pray: maybe twenty of us would line up and pray. We used to pray all night Koran, Xassaid and Koran again. Then more and more people started to come and we could no longer fit in our homes. So then we rented the Dahira in a warehouse and started praying there. Then even more people started to come and again the place became too small. That was when we bought that place. Still more and more people came ... For the last Maggal of Touba it was packed. We couldn’t all get inside. Even Korité and Tabaski we can no longer celebrate at the Dahira, and we are forced to put our prayer mats in the street. What if it rains? Now we want to buy an even bigger warehouse»

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3 Annual Murid pilgrimage to the holy city of Touba, which attracts millions of people from all over Senegal and abroad. In the major destination countries of Senegalese migration celebrations are organised simultaneously.

4 The two most important Islamic recurrences. The first marks the end of the Ramadan, the month of fasting. The second commemorates Ibrahim’s sacrifice to God.
On the occasion of the celebration of a *Gàmmu* in which I took part in Zingonia, I filled my diary with a description of the colourful scene. From the early hours people were arriving from the entire Province of Bergamo and beyond. Busloads of pilgrims crowded into the area. It was hard to say how many people had gathered there, but they certainly exceeded a thousand. The day was long and people had maybe even travelled from far away. Inside the *Dahira*, food and drink were prepared *in situ* with makeshift equipment and distributed to all, while groups of men chanted in small circles. It was not only the religious aspect that caught my eye, but also the way in which the event formed an excuse for reunion, exchange of updates with friends and acquaintances who live elsewhere. Such forms of exchange, moreover, were to take place not only locally: camera flashes proved that one after the other snapshots were being taken and three video-cameras were positioned around the open space to document the entire event. Visual materials like these are then exchanged with Senegal and other *Dahiras* elsewhere.

The development of Senegalese places of worship in Italian settings dominated by a post-Fordist character is not a novelty. In his research on the Dahira Murid in Turin, the headquarters of formerly booming FIAT automobile production, Carter describes a similar experience. This author suggests that a parallel may be drawn between the strong symbology associated with past dreams of splendour in post-Fordist cities and Murid current dreams of splendour for the city of Touba: both bear the characters of ‘invisible cities’, understood as ‘a complex ideology or discourse about possible cities, cities of memory, and imagined cities that become the focal points of certain communities in a particular location’ (Carter 1997: 22). Furthermore, the brotherhood plays an important role in recruitment processes in regular employment, thanks to a strong association between the principles of Muridism and an ethic centred around the value of work (Carter 1997; Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

The role played by religion in Zingonia and in other Senegalese settlements proves to be a central one. On occasions such as the *Gàmmu* described above, as well as other religious gatherings organised by the Tijan and the Layène, I registered the participation of all Senegalese, regardless of the brotherhood of which they are followers. This confirmed that all these religious celebrations were perceived and indeed practiced as occasions for the reinforcement of national religious fervency as a whole. Religious festivities turn into the gathering of a scattered population and the recordings made of these events constituted an attempt to knock down the barriers of geographic distance and experience a shared moment of celebration.

What are the drawbacks of this importance of the religious dimension on issues of identity politics and multiculturalism? It is interesting to observe that religion has not given rise to any form of self-mobilisation on behalf of the Senegalese. Rather than becoming a tool to set borders with the outside and organise a set of identity-based claims and actions, the function of religion seems to be oriented towards the inside of the Senegalese community. It constitutes common grounds for identification and it has a consoling hold on all. It freshens up memories of homeland, of its values and integrity. Because of this tight correspondence between Zingonia and its religious dimension, however, this city is often perceived as a place in which exchanges with Italians and other immigrants should be reduced to a minimum, leading to a predominance of relations with fellow-countrymen:

«One does not come to Zingonia looking for distractions. If anything it’s the opposite: it’s the Senegalese who from Zingonia go elsewhere if they search for distractions»

(interview with SF).

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5 During which the birth anniversary of prophet Mohamed is celebrated.
Proximity among Senegalese results in the reproduction of an environment in which conformity to tradition and integrity is preserved. Some will even attribute a miraculous nature to the town, as if its importance as a symbol of religiosity and place of intense spirituality emanated a protective haze over its people:

«Zingonia is our place of Islam. It is peaceful for us. There is all one needs: work, home, Daara»

(interview with VS)

«The fact that we Senegalese are here is very important, because we pray and bring peace. Thanks to us Zingonia is very lucky. [...] In other countries, for instance, there are many problems: the water avalanche [Tsunami], people die, aeroplanes fall ... We bring peace by praying the Koran and Shaikh Ahmadou Bamba’s word. It’s very important: where people pray there is always peace and one will never find the problems you see, for instance, in Iraq or in Turkey. [...] In Zingonia there have never been these problems: it’s because we pray and protect it»

(interview with BN).

Religion is often indicated as going hand in hand with tradition and loyalty. Those who argue in favour of the town as an Islamic reference and an island of peace praise the reciprocity and solidarity ties that are almost physically tangible in this translocality. The clustering of Senegalese in Zingonia favours proximity, nearness and forms of material and cultural mutual support:

«Zingonia gives you an advantage: we Senegalese live as a community. It’s like that also in Senegal, it’s a tradition of ours and we do the same in Zingonia. Nobody here would leave a Senegalese on the street. If one has nowhere, no home to go to, I have to offer him a bed and help him out. All Senegalese think this way. If a Senegalese dies here, I can’t leave him here. I must send him to Senegal. Everybody must help each other. All Senegalese in Zingonia live this way»

(interview with SS).

The importance of internal solidarity, community and physical proximity in Senegalese tradition is indicated in the Wolof saying mboolo moy doole (tr.: united we stand, divided we fall). The meaning of this saying is repeated in another Wolof proverb: nit nitaay garab-am (tr.: man is man’s best remedy). The same values of internal solidarity, community and physical proximity, however, also have drawbacks. Living in a bubble, particularly in the case of residents, is not very different from those expatriate communities made up of skilled Westerners immigrating worldwide. Instead of taking place in the high-status, prestigious areas of international cities, the conservative Senegalese tends to self-segregate himself in the immigrant ghetto. Those who feel at ease in Zingonia, however, have no critical perception of the closure in which they live. They translate the attitude of local society towards them as perfectly pacific, of total acceptance and inspired by the principle ‘live and let be’:

«If we Senegalese can live here, in the country of the Italians, it means the Italians are good people. If they were bad people, I wouldn’t live well here. Ndax ñoom dañu laabir [tr.: they are warm-hearted]. [...] In Zingonia we have created a Daara in the middle of the factories and every weekend and each Islamic celebration we all go there to pray and read the Koran, but no Italian has ever disturbed us. That’s why I say Italians are good here»

(interview with VS).
The voluntary isolation that some Senegalese create around themselves cuts them off from what there might be in the world outside Zingonia, hindering the chances of a multicultural dialogue with Italian society.

THE ETHNIC ARGUMENT OF URBAN ELITES

Over the years Zingonia and other similar Senegalese strongholds in Italy have become an important point of reference not only for rural Murid migrants, but also for the members of successive emigration waves coming from the home country. While the first Senegalese to arrive in Italy had been forced overseas by the deterioration of livelihoods in the rural economies of their places of origin, in later years the devaluation of the local currency brought with it a financial crisis, pushing also urban elites into international migration (Eurostat 2000). As a result, Senegalese immigration in Italy started gaining new, emerging features and witnessed the increasing arrival of young urban elites. Furthermore, Italy became the destination not only for members of the Muridiyya, but also for adherents to other Islamic brotherhoods, as well as for Catholic minorities.

For these newly arrived immigrants Zingonia rapidly became an important base, providing them with acceptance and support. In Freidmann’s words, these areas of strong immigrant concentration «by virtue of migrants’ proximity to each other, offer material and cultural support and ease the psychological pain of coping with the strains of surviving in a city where none of the familiar cultural cues are present» (Friedmann 2002: 309). As one of my interviewees explained:

«Zingonia is a bit like our place of birth: we were born here, we have grown here and Zingonia has become a point of reference for every Senegalese»

(interview with HD).

More recent young urbanites, however, tend to reject the image of Zingonia as a “place of Islam”, as they couple this ideal with backwardness and closure. This does not imply that they refuse religion as a core value, but rather that they seek for identification in more secular grounds. These migrants therefore turn to “ethnicity” as a valid alternative to “religion” on the basis of which they attempt to construct shared commonalities.

Young migrants of urban origin are often the advocates of cultural events, generally involving music and “ethnic food”, that are organised in Zingonia and its surroundings. Their action is promoted by Senegalese laic associations, which often move in association with members of local authorities who display particular sensitivity towards promoting integration, in the name of an ideal multicultural town. Such occasions for public encounters and exchange with Italians and immigrants of other nationalities, however, are not well accepted by the first generation of Senegalese and reason for disapproval of such initiatives generally takes a religious and conservative taste:

«Not all Senegalese take part [in cultural events]. Some of us are against these things because religion is against these forms of entertainment, others simply don’t have time for them»

(interview with SS).

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6 The CFA Franc was devaluated in 1994.
Ethnicity and religion appear to be clashing, opposing ways for the construction of a shared identity among the Senegalese. However, they are also associated with aims that go beyond the need to reconstruct a social identity in immigration:

«It is our way: religious events are always those attracting more people, because it is a spiritual question a question of belief, where people do not expect anything in return. Cultural initiatives, instead, like those promoted by the association, struggle to attract people»

(interview with AG).

Whereas religion emerges as inward looking and aimed at the preservation of internal characters of solidarity, ethnicity appears to be open to dialogue with the other. Typically, in fact, cultural events wish to attract not so much a Senegalese audience, but rather they are the occasion for the Senegalese to propose an image of themselves, attracting the curiosity of the locals.

If the promoters really do believe in the multicultural dialogue between Italians, Senegalese and immigrants of other nationalities that appears at the core of so many of their slogans, initiatives and fliers is however a fact that still has to be assessed. One of my respondents in the field suggested that:

«In our cultural events we provide what they [the Italians] expect. It's as if we were a cinema for them. They are not truly interested in exchange, though: they want ethnic, tribal things, that give them an aphrodisiac sense. I shall never stop being surprised at the fact that these people say “Ah, I’m all for integration”, but then they want me to do the things they want to see. It’s like saying “The Senegalese are ok, but only when they do the things I like”. And what about when we do our own stuff? Then they no longer agree»

(interview with AG).

Rather than a vehicle for multi-cultural dialogue, ethnicity, in the words of respondents I have cited here, becomes the means for establishing social borders and differences. Furthermore, immigrants appear to be gaining awareness of the opportunity to make an instrumental use of ethnicity. It is not so much the religious associations, but rather the laic ones that could attempted advancing claims as regards local society. This risk is even more true if one considers the strong conditions of spatial segregation in which the Senegalese of Zingonia are living. Furthermore, if the chances offered to them in terms of housing, employment, access to infrastructure and services may be considered acceptable by the Murid rural migrant, the same may not be true for younger immigrants of urban extraction. Social inequalities, therefore, may very well lead in the coming future, to a turn in the use of ethnicity among the Senegalese.

CONCLUSION

As emerges from the considerations just made, the Senegalese appear to have very diversified patterns of common identification and to seek for very different ways of expressing their “Senegaleseness” in Zingonia. Religion and ethnicity both appear to be central elements in the construction of a sense of shared identity among the Senegalese. The power of attraction that this translocality exercises on Senegalese immigrants, however, makes it difficult to speak of a true local “community”. Ethnicity and religion, in fact, appear almost to be mutually exclusive as the Senegalese choose one or the other as the core value around which they construct a shared identity. For all Senegalese, Zingonia remains a place in which the transnational network recognises itself and grounds itself in immigration. The rural Murid and the urban youths, however, relate very
differently with this town, which becomes the expression of diverse positions as regards not only a shared sense of national and social identity, but also openness and closure towards local society. Among the Senegalese of Zingonia, “faith communities” express no desire for multicultural dialogue, but rather they promote self-conservation and hence isolation from the surrounding context. “Ethnic communities”, instead, seek for exchange and confrontation, however bringing with them the risk of developing into forms of identity politics and giving voice to claims based on an instrumental use of ethnicity.
REFERENCES


