Whose American dream?

The ancient division and tug between first-generation immigrants and their western-educated children puts the future of New York's Little Senegal in jeopardy

BY MAGGY DONALDSON

The aroma of grilled fish and sizzling peppers drifts through the air. Elegant women in elaborate headscarves meander between shops, taking advantage of Saturday's slower pace. Between the sights, smells and cacophony of French and Wolof, it feels like Dakar. But this is Harlem's Little Senegal, an enclave of émigrés in New York City. African supermarkets, call centres and beauty salons line the streets, evidence of the entrepreneurial chutzpah that transformed the once seedy neighbourhood.

One storefront is a religious bookshop, which feels more like a living room. A girl with stubby braids sleeps. Her younger brother babbles in toddler Wolof. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are heavy with Qur'anic teachings in Wolof, French, Arabic and English. The owner Daaray Kamil has called New York home for more than a decade. He had wanted to do accounting for his friends, but had a dream about Cheikh Amadu Bamba, the father of the Sufi Muslim sect, Muridism. Inspired to change course, he opened a bookstore dedicated to Muridism.

The shop is a family affair. His brother and sister-in-law work next door in their clothing store Oprama, named after Obama and Oprah. His wife Coumba Gueye helps on weekends, both children in tow. The toddler beams at me. "My son loves all the women who come in the shop," Daaray says, before telling the boy: "You can only have one wife in America."

The women of Little Senegal glue the community together. Daaray prides himself on self-sufficiency, but much of his success depends on Coumba. Daaray also drives a cab, while Coumba picks up the slack in the shop and at home. She welcomes visitors with a *café Touba*, coffee spiced with Guinean pepper and cloves. It packs a punch that shames Starbucks; the drink was created by Cheikh Amadu Bamba and is named after the holy city of Touba in central Senegal. Murids consume it at least as often as they pray.

Coumba takes time to open up, but frank words seasoned with exasperation pour out when she starts comparing New York to the life she so sorely misses in Dakar. "I'm not going to stay here all my life and be miserable. Right now I feel so tired and not rewarded. The longer you stay, the more you dislike the lifestyle. I only work. I can't go outside with my kids." Coumba works full time as an office assistant at Toubamica, the community's premier mosque. It's her first job since completing her accounting degree at Hunter College (she had studied accounting in Senegal). She came to New York in 2006, after persuading her husband to let her join him.

The Senegalese who came to New York in the 1980s were mostly men, a formerly pastoral population who turned to more commercial ventures. They dispersed to metropolitan centres in Europe, North America and Asia, creating a diaspora connected by a trade circuit. It wasn't until at least a decade after the initial wave that women and children began joining them.

Knowing what she knows now, Coumba says she never would have left Senegal. "I think life is very hard here, especially as a woman. What frustrates me here is that you have to do a lot of things alone. Back home, you have help with everything. You have your family, and you pay a live-in maid, and they take care of you. But here it's too expensive."

She took the Certified Public Accountant exam after finishing her degree, but failed. She plans to try again, but working and running a home make studying a challenge. Coumba says Senegal allows women to have more fruitful family and social lives, while succeeding in careers. "In Senegal, a lot of women are encouraged to get education. They can get a good job, or open a business. I feel like there is discrimination to get jobs here, as a woman."

Community organiser Jebe Diagne feels the future of the community rests on its women. He is a leader at the Association des Sénégalais d'Amérique (ASA), a centre in Little Senegal.

Shopping on 116th Street in Harlem, the primary commercial hub of Little Senegal

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The centre provides resources for community mainstays as well as new arrivals, but it's primarily occupied by men. Jebe says if that doesn't change soon, the future of Little Senegal looks bleak: "Women are the cornerstone of the community. If you want to see change here, they need to be involved. But even in the structure of the organisations, you always see – because of some cultural or religious cleavage – a net separation between the tasks and the roles women and men have to play."

Jebe is worried about the kids and says their success directly links to the success of Senegalese women. "Women are the backbone of a family. They really need to get more involved in their kids' education. But you know the realities of immigrant life. That holds them back, for sure, from fulfilling that responsibility."

The young are an Americanised generation who will shape the future of the New York diaspora. But many youths relate differently to their roots than do their elders: New York is home, while Senegal is the cool aunt who lets you have ice cream for breakfast. "They spoil you when you go back," says Mamediarra Ndiaye, 21. "I would love to at least live there [for a while]… But I wouldn't say move. No matter how fun it is, there are more opportunities here." Mamediarra was born in New York to devout Murid Senegalese parents. Though she speaks fluent Wolof, she talks English with siblings and friends, and doesn't know French, Senegal's official language.

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For Mamediarra, tensions don't really flare until it comes to dating. She is committed to avoiding a traditional arranged marriage. "I don't want to jump into something and not know the person. I want to date and at least know who I'm about to marry." She is going to do that without her father knowing. Mamediarra wants to marry a Senegalese man, and despite her affinity for American culture, she sees herself taking on a leadership role in Little Senegal. Her parents are both active community members. "I feel like I could just follow their footsteps, even if they leave. I want to be able to know my people."

Mamediarra is involved with the Young Adults' Association, a new arm of the ASA. She's joined there by Cheikh Lo, 21. Like both Jebe and Mamediarra, he points to gender issues and a generation gap as key problems threatening Little Senegal. "The older people and the young, they are living in two different worlds. The young see the old as people who don't know anything about life. Because their time has passed; they don't really understand the world now. Many young people, they don't want to be in touch with older people because of that. Many parents, they bring their children here, but after a few months they kick them out of the house."

As soon as he turned 18, still in school, his father told him that as an adult, it was time for him to contribute rent. Cheikh was shocked at what his father demanded he take on. "It was a hard time. I can say, the hardest time in my life." Cheikh couldn't pay, so his father kicked him out. He crashed with a friend for a month, eventually finding a job waiting tables. He went to high school for eight hours, worked the dinner shift, and went home to do homework until two or three in the morning.

He survived, and is now in his third year at Bronx Community College. But Cheikh doesn't resent his father. "I know that's the way he sees life. I learned responsibility… At the time I left my father, there were some things I couldn't do without him. But by living with myself, I decide what I want to do. Whatever I need, I do it myself."

Cheikh decided he wanted to write a book, and did just that, publishing a book on the teachings of Cheikh Amadu Bamba, which Daaray sells in his shop. "I come from a small town," Cheikh says. "The people there, all they know is working. You have to work. We have the power to change our own lives. If you wait on people to change your life, you will never go anywhere."

But Cheikh is an outlier among the youth of Little Senegal. According to Jebe, the community is at a crossroads as young people, shaped by a childhood in a culture foreign to their parents, drift from their roots and values. He describes problems, including alcohol and drugs, that aren't getting solved because no one brings them up. "In this neighbourhood, parents don't have control of their kids because there's a communication gap that is often ignored. And for them, the only solution is to send them home. Which is not a real solution. We are raised in a way that we have to mostly keep a lot of problems affecting our kin in the family. You don't want other people to know about it, because you're afraid they're going to talk about it… and you're going to feel embarrassed."

The youth association meets in a narrow backroom of the ASA, where a few young men and Mamediarra discuss their future. All agree on the importance of education. "The main problem is a lot of parents here, they are uneducated," Jebe says later. Jebe hopes that by giving Senegalese youth a space at the ASA, the community can foster an inter-generational dialogue that will uplift the community and ensure its continuation. "It's been a little difficult. But still we're here, with great hope, that even if it's [only] one or two who will be profiting, and taking advantage of what you're doing... that's a great achievement."

After the meeting, the young leave the adults to talk West African politics over a *café Touba*, with a Senegalese soap opera blaring out from the old television. The future leaders of Little Senegal leave for another Saturday night on the streets of Harlem, rapidly tapping their smartphones.

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