

SOCIAL BELIEFS AND CRAFT PRACTICES

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Traditional Senegalese society was and still is organized along "caste" lines, that is to say, by distinct social categories which group individuals and their families according to specific occupations.

A caste is a group of individuals who do particular kinds of work and distinguish themselves socially by that work. Within each caste, individuals have specified relationships with each other, following practices specific to their group. The skills of each caste are passed from father to son, and from mother to daughter, vertically, but they also travel horizontally since initiation and other forms of education are carried out collectively.

In traditional Senegalese society, each individual learned his father's and his ancestors' skills: the individual became a jeweler or a cobbler if his father and his ancestors were jewelers or cobblers. And initiation into the ancestors' trade was mandatory. An individual was obliged to learn not only the occupational skills associated with a particular caste but also the accumulated knowledge of its customs and beliefs. It was and still is impossible to escape one's caste. The prejudices and beliefs attached to a caste attach to the individual. Individuals are born into a caste and belong to it all their lives.

Modernization contributes, of course, to the decline of traditional occupations and of traditional initiation into them, particularly in urban centers. But, even so, the beliefs, prejudices and customs associated with each caste still endure. In villages, tradition and crafts are still prevalent and exclusive.

Within the society, however, castes are not closed autonomous groups isolated from one another. Relationships between castes are based on work, on tradition and on social beliefs. These relationships were first incorporated in the reciprocal exchanges of labor. Undoubtedly, certain castes have had the value of their labor progressively diminish during the course of history. The devaluation is the result of a number of factors including colonization, which introduced new kinds of work and the capitalistic division of labor. As a result,

in urban centers, tradition became less determinate.

Nevertheless, the stratification of society into castes remains permanent; and that permanency is always noticeable, especially during social events such as weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals, in which members of different castes customarily perform particular tasks. Not anyone who wants to can be master of ceremonies for a certain family's social event; one has to be the family's *griot* or praise singer. And in exchange for obligations met and services rendered, the griot, like his parents before him, expects considerations and gifts.

Historically all men belonged to specific castes and all were free, except slaves, members of the lowest group, which was not truly a caste, since domestic slavery was the result of warfare and raiding. The practice of African slavery was intensified in the 18th and 19th centuries, driven by the triangular economy tying Europe, Africa and America. In this practice any person could become a slave, domestic or exported, and at the time, any slaver risked becoming a slave himself as a result of defeat.

Generally speaking, castes appear as groups which are hereditary, endogamous, occupation specific and connected with one another through hierarchical ties.

The *G   r* or Nobles

The caste of nobles, called *g   r* in Wolof, is at the top of the caste hierarchy. An important segment of this caste formerly did not have a materially productive occupation. That segment was composed of royal families: the Damel of Cayor, the T  gne of Baol, the Buur of Sine, the G  l  war of the Wolof region, the Ceddo of the Manding area, and others. Members of this segment usually governed society and led armies. The other part of the *g   r* caste are the *baadolo*, agricultural peasants who were not craftsmen. They represented the majority of the population.

The ideal virtues associated with the position of *g   r* are basically *joom* (honor and dignity), *mun* (patience) and *kersa* (decency) which each *g   r* is obliged to enact through behavior, appearance, way of dressing, and the like.

Theoretically all other castes of craftsmen, called *neeno*, work for the *géér* caste; and every *géér* family has relationships with workers from the other castes, specialized in the various occupations. Every *géér* and every *géér* family is obliged to offer gifts and services to the members of the *neeno* caste who serve them. These relationships of exchange are hereditary, rendered perennial through custom.

The Tegg

The second caste in the social hierarchy is that of jewelers and blacksmiths whom the Wolof call *tegg*: they share the common occupation of working fire-heated metals by hitting or pounding them. Other characteristics distinguish them from one another. Jewelers generally work with precious metals, gold and silver mostly, sometimes using the lost wax method; they fashion wearable objects of small size (earrings, rings, pendants, necklaces, and the like) guided only by aesthetic principles. Blacksmiths on the other hand, are traditionally specialists in making utilitarian objects (axes, adzes, hoes, knives) and weapons (guns, spears, sabers, knives, swords, arrowheads.) Jewelers and blacksmiths are thus essential in Senegalese society: they fashion all the tools necessary for economic production and social function, the ornamental objects and tools commonly used in domestic life.

Metalworkers also fulfill a variety of religious, cultural, social and political functions: they are mediators, both among living members of social groups and between the worlds of the living and the dead. They organize funerals and secret societies; they can be counselors to or messengers between political powers. Metalworkers' wives are equally multi-talented; they assist women who are sick, giving birth, or dying, and they also are potters. The multiple social roles the *tegg* play and the mysterious quality of fire and the forge explain the ambivalent feelings they generate: respect and fear, admiration and spite among others.

Traditionally each *tegg* or *tegg* family is attached to one or more *géér* or *géér* family and that relationship is transmitted from one generation to the next. Theoretically, a *tegg* gives higher priority to the manufacture of those objects commissioned by his *géér* and the latter can require his punctual services at any time. In exchange, the *tegg* receives goods and services from his *géér*, notably during important events occurring in the *géér* family. Standing obligation and reciprocal exchange are enforced by both parties; to agree to it always and everywhere is part of the ethical code of each caste. Although in the old society the *tegg* usually worked only when commissioned, in the modern world the *tegg* produces a variety of pieces which he exhibits in shop windows and offers to potential clients. Nevertheless, the particular relationships between *tegg* and *géér* still exists.

The Uude

Uude form the third caste, that of cobblers; they work with leather, which they tan, prepare, dye and decorate in the manufacture of knife sheaths and sword scabards, sandals, horse saddles, bags, billfolds, belts, amulet cases and leather bracelets. Like the metalworkers in traditional society, the leatherworkers were attached to *géér* or *géér* families from father to son. This tradition has been perpetuated until now, but like the metalworkers, the leatherworkers do not restrict their clientele.

Undoubtedly, Senegalese leatherwork, particularly that of urban centers, has long been indebted to the leatherwork from the Maghreb, not only for its styles of footwear, typically, *babouches* or Turkish slippers, but also for the acquisition of tanned skins. Senegalese cobblers preferred the tanned pelts imported from Morocco and Tunisia for two main qualities: they were easier to work and they were stronger than locally available pelts. Nevertheless, in recent years Senegalese cobblers have produced a varied array of styles of slippers for the Muslim holiday of Tabaski. These are tanned by the leatherworkers in Senegal. The skins are dyed in vibrant colors which have replaced the more pastel colors of the Maghreb skins. Local goat and sheep skins are used more and more for everyday use, whereas the very costly tanned skins imported from the Maghreb, are saved for the manufacture of *babouches* for the wealthy.

The dynamic quality of this craft can be measured by its abundance of products, variety of styles, number of workshops in various districts, and low asking prices. Like the weavers and the sculptors, the leatherworkers are organized into guilds, each workshop having a specific hierarchy. Nevertheless, the tools of the trade have remained traditional.

The Rëbb

The weavers, named *rëbb* by the Wolof, form the fourth caste, which is fast disappearing because of modernization and the textile factories that have appeared in our country. Although in traditional society weaving provided cloth for all clothes, today it produces cloth mainly for women's wrap-around skirts and the large men's robes called *boubous*.

In rural areas weaving is still practiced by families, and they maintain the same kind of exchange relationships with other castes as those already described.

Within the caste of *rëbb* (weavers), are also the *maabo* (woodcarvers). Woodcarvers produce utilitarian objects like mortars and pestles, drums and dugout canoes, benches and chairs, basins, plates, forks, ladles, statues and masks. Today, their various products are sold all over the country and sometimes exported.

Usually settled in the crafts neighborhoods of urban centers or in family workshops, woodcarvers are traditionally organized in guilds. The head of the guild is

responsible for the gathering of primary materials and for the marketing of products. Sometimes he directs young apprentices to market the carvings in hotels and markets, in airports and public squares, or he sends them abroad. This is why we can now see young woodworker merchants selling statues and other African art objects in large European and American cities. They are called *bana-bana* and their merchandise is known as "airport art."

Woodcarvers are known for their linguistic play and impertinence. In that, they resemble the griot, masters of language. Their wives do several kinds of work, such as braiding the hair of women from other castes, particularly the *géér*, making women's beaded belts worn around the waist and small intimate apparel called *m'becho*; and mixing ingredients for incense. Beaded belts, *m'becho* and incense are designed for sexual allure. Women of the woodcarver caste have their own beaded belts that sometimes weigh several pounds and move so as to attract attention to their hips. They have special dances with their beads and hips. All these customs and behavior are socially accepted because woodcarver castes have traditional license to ignore modesty and reserve. Each caste follows a particular code of ethics; it creates a way of life according to its rules and shapes the attitudes and behavior of its individual members. Thus, one may know, sometimes ahead of time, the kind of reactions and the answers an individual might give, depending on the customs and ethics of his caste.

The *Géwal*

In pre-literate societies, where writing and modern means of communication did not exist, the spoken word and the use of language were essential to social organization, to relationships between individuals and to transmission of knowledge, ideas, and values. This is the reason the griot (oral historian) is without a doubt the most well-known and popular figure of traditional Africa, and of Senegal in particular.

The griots, or *géwal* belong to the fifth caste. Traditionally, they are considered to be of inferior status and are the troubadours, musicians, singers, oral historians,

praise singers, and the like who generally serve noble families. In traditional society they also played other roles, such as messenger, confidant, and public entertainer. They used to praise and glorify the *géér*. They told of the heroic feats of warriors. They taught history and instilled social values in younger generations. They might also serve as social mediators and masters of ceremonies. Attached to *géér* families for generations, the griot received gifts and other goods and was often totally dependent on them.

The *Jaam*

The *jaam*, or slaves, do not in fact constitute a caste. Descendants of past prisoners of war, in many cases, they held inferior status. They depended their whole lives on their masters for food, lodging and clothing and could be inherited by their master's heirs. Every above-mentioned caste could own slaves. *Jaam* were at the exclusive disposal of their master. They were the ones who usually cultivated their master's land and performed what are known as "servile" activities. But the slavery system has gradually disappeared in African societies because of its interdiction by the modern state system and also because of changes in world-view.

These different castes are very separate, even today, and relate to each other only in a traditionally approved manner. For instance, marriage arrangements are still endogamous: marriages are allowed only between people of the same caste. It is extremely rare that a *géér* marries a *tegg* and, a *tegg's* trying to marry a *géér* would be an insult to the *géér* family in question. In urban centers however, tradition and custom are becoming less important because of modernization and the changing of popular consciousness; traditional taboos are gradually being eliminated.

Although they have often been perceived as a reason for stagnation in traditional society, castes have contributed to the maintenance of social cohesion. Caste-based production has filled the basic needs of African populations, contributing essential technology and social organization. In traditional Africa, they were elementary forms of social classes.