Women in Senegal

Victor Munnik

"Naked woman, dark woman
Ripe fruit of firm flesh, dark ecstasies
of black wine,
mouth that makes my mouth sing
Savannah of clear horizons, savannah
that thrills to the
Tertent caresses of the East Wind
Sculputred tom-tom, taut tom-tom that
murmurs under the
Victor’s fingers
Your deep contralto voice is the
Spiritual song of the
Beloved.”

This tribute to Senegalese women is part of the work of the famous poet-preident Leopold Senghor, which established the small West African country (population 6 million in 1981) as a cultural centre in French West Africa. Women share in maintaining this cultural prestige — distinguished women writers like Mariama Ba and Anita Sow Fall, whose novels have won prizes in Senegal and Europe. There are women professors at the University of Dakar, and other centres of research. Senegal can also boast of being one of the first African countries to establish a rural development agency — Animation Feminine — which emphasizes the role of women.

In the twenty-odd years that Senghor ruled Senegal, women were allowed to improve their status considerably. Despite the influence of Islam and its traditional resistance to the education of females, there has been a sharp rise in the number of girls at school. In 1961 the ratio of boys to girls attending primary school was more than 2 to 1; by 1976 it had narrowed to less than 3 to 2 and the number of girls in school had more than trebled, from 41,000 to 131,000.

Before 1946 Senegalese women, even if resident in the four communes — political entities that had representation in the colonial French legislature in France — were not allowed to vote. In 1963 Caroline Diop became Senegal’s first woman deputy. In 1978 she and Maimouna Kane were the first women to attain ministerial rank in the government of their country.

The extent — and the limitations — of these improvements can be judged from the overall numbers involved: female membership of the national legislative body increased from 8 out of 100 in 1970 to 13 out of 120 ten years later. If the literacy figures for the population as a whole — 10 per cent

Dakar slum on the outskirts of the city. This is also the local market.
women to enter prostitution, a country, with peanuts the main crop.

For men and 1 per cent for women (1977) — cast a doubt on the extent of Senegal's cultural achievement, further doubts are raised by the lack of accurate data on women’s participation in the labour force, and specifically the agricultural labour force, and the paucity of statistics about incest, rape, prostitution, and violence both within the family and as part of traditional practices, which in this case include excision and infibulation.

Marie-Ángelique Savañe, a Senegalese sociologist, provides an impressionistic account of the position of women in the very different communities that make up Senegal.

By way of background: 80 per cent of the population of Senegal are adherents of Islam; 6 per cent are Christian and 3 per cent Animist. The major ethnic divisions are Wolof (36 per cent); Fulani (18 per cent); Serer (17 per cent); and Tukulor (9 per cent); other groups include Dyola, Malinke and Bambara.

In Savañe’s account, the cities are described as colonial creations in which banks, businesses and small industries are surrounded by a vast informal sector where jobs, though available, are insecure. Most women with jobs are employed in the service sector. Daily they face problems ranging from unreliable incomes to expensive transportation and anxieties about childcare. They are also torn between two worlds: defending African values that often trap them in positions of inferiority but also provide psychological security, while at the same time dreaming of a liberation into the (unattainable) world of bourgeois values and Western consumerism acted out by the women of the urban élite.

In the cities prostitution has increased to such an extent that it is now legally tolerated, though prostitutes remain subject to social ostracism. Public loitering and enticement are forbidden, however, and prostitutes must possess a health card from the Institute of Social Hygiene, which requires them to undergo regular medical check-ups.

It is still illegal to aid or abet a woman to enter prostitution, live off the earnings of a prostitute, or to run a hotel for purposes of prostitution.

Senegal is essentially an agricultural country, with peanuts the main crop. At a guess, women (estimated at 38 per cent of the labour force) provide more than 60 per cent of all agricultural labour. According to 1975 statistics, 87 per cent of women workers were employed in agriculture.

In the Casamance (to the South, a region with a separatist political movement) the Diola women have a certain autonomy — they freely manage their harvest and feed their children from their personal granary. They play an important role in rice production, and their status is enhanced by the practice of a special fertility cult. Yet even here the husband’s decisions go unquestioned, and a woman can never inherit land.

Their neighbours, the Malinga, are divided into castes. The women rarely appear in public. The women are excised and sometimes infibulated. Polygyny is prevalent. Under the 1973 Family Code, polygyny with up to four wives is legal. The man must, however, state at his first marriage whether it will be polygynous or not.

In the peanut basin, the deterioration of the overworked earth has caused exodus among the Serer people, made possible by the social mobility within this community. The lineages here are matrilineal — the maternal uncle being the moral authority for the woman and her children, even when she is under her husband’s rule.

Wolof society is constructed around the caste system, with a family composed of a male chief, free males and unfree, or dependent males. Both societies practise polygyny.

In the river region (bordering on the south of Mauritania) male migration is high, and women play an increasing role in agricultural production. The river region houses the Toucouleur, a strictly Islamic society, where women “exist only in relation to men. They are excised and given in marriage as soon as they are nubile, and their primary function is to reproduce”.

On the coast and the Saloum islands, fishing is very important. Serer, Leboue and Niominka women exercise a monopoly over the transformation of sea products — by hand. They salt or smoke the fish and then dry them, they pick oysters and mussels which they process into spiced wines in Senegalese cooking, and they are very active in the selling of fish in the markets and on the beaches.

It is through the web of duties and privileges in the enforceable marriage contract that females are oppressed, and Senegal is no exception to this general rule.

There are ten grounds for contested divorce, as well as divorce with consent. The male can no longer repudiate his wife (talag) although there is evidence that “suspicion of adultery” is now used against women in much the same way. A wife may divorce her husband, but then forfeits her dowry; a husband who divorces his wife is obliged to maintain her and her children.

Adultery (which must be proven when accusing a husband, but can be proven or merely suspected in the case of a wife) is punishable by a fine or imprisonment, and serves as a ground for divorce. Under the law, murder in the case of adultery is not illegal if a spouse finds the other spouse and the third party in the illegal sexual act. A wife who abandons the marital home can be fined — the amount of the fine is within exactly the same limits as that for adultery: CFAF 20 000 to 100 000.

There is paid maternity leave (6 weeks pre- and 8 weeks post-delivery) for employees under family law. Under the Social Security Code women married to workers, single women workers, or women workers whose husbands are not employed, are entitled to maternity allowances until a child is two years of age.

Though the sale of contraceptives is technically illegal, they can be obtained from pharmacies, clinics and some private doctors. In 1978, of women in union between the ages of 15 and 49, 4 per cent used birth control (with abstinence accounting for 67 per cent of this number). Abortion is legal only in case of danger to the woman’s life. A strong religious taboo against abortion exists in both Muslim and Roman Catholic communities.

Bibliography

