

**The Challenge of NICTs and Their Role in Urban Change:  
The Case of Touba**

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## Introduction

The city – often considered to be a sort of time-lapse snapshot of the changes occurring within a society – is made up of a complex of powers, social interactions and material objects. It is regarded as the cradle of civilization: the innovative focal point from which technical progress is disseminated to the rest of the country. Information and communication, with their capacity to control power and people, are therefore important elements in this process. Today, cities are experiencing rapid and unprecedented changes in borders, citizenship and urban environment; new socioeconomic groups, influenced by new information and communications technologies (NICTs), are emerging from the shadows or reinventing themselves.

Since the beginning of the century, cities have been the epicenter for the progressive penetration of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Senegal. Could one argue, then, that these technologies are one and the same with urban life itself; that their success in the urban milieu is attributable to the fact that their networking capacity is inextricably linked to the essential nature of the city?

Historically, Senegal has been highly receptive to changes on the world stage and has, for some time, gambled heavily on the potential of NICTs. The transistor, which brought revolutionary changes in urban and rural life, played a major role in the birth of nationalism and political awareness in Senegal. In an environment dominated by oral communication,<sup>1</sup> State-controlled radio broadcasting has been a tool for the reproduction of power. What, then, is the social and political impact of liberalizing and transnationalizing the audiovisual media, and the impact of ending the State's control over tools of mass propaganda, such as radio and television?

The Société Nationale des Télécommunications (SONATEL), Senegal's national telecommunications company – one of West Africa's most successful companies and Senegal's second-largest business in total sales – undertook a bold initiative, beginning in 1985, to develop telephone service. The telecommunications system, which was implemented gradually and consists of an all-digital fiber optic network providing extensive national coverage, is second to none in West Africa. SONATEL's 1992 decision to authorize private marketing of telephone service was an important step in bringing telephony to the population at large – a process that has continued to expand usage to a mass scale. A number of studies examining telecenters in Dakar and elsewhere in the country have already been conducted.<sup>2</sup> SONATEL continues to modernize its basic network, providing expanded teleservices and facilitating

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<sup>1</sup> The independent Senegalese State understood very early the primary role that radio could play, and implemented a development policy consisting essentially of eliminating the tax on radios. As a result, the number of radios grew from 125,000 in 1960 to 180,000 in 1964. Sagna Olivier, 2000 - Les technologies de l'information et de la communication et le développement social au Sénégal: un état des lieux. UNRISD, Research Programme on Information Technologies and Social Development, 62 p.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Sagna O. 2000. The study by Gaston Zongo, within the work overseen by Annie Chéneau-Loquay (Enjeux des NTIC en Afrique) is, however, the one that deals with the question in relation to Senegal.

development of the information superhighway<sup>3</sup> -- a process that should make the Internet available to the average Senegalese at a rapid pace unmatched by other mass technologies. In the last three years alone, there has been an extraordinary increase in the number of minutes Senegalese have spent online.

The new revolution in ICTs provides a foundation and launching pad for a “civilization of the universal,” to use the words of Léopold Sédar Senghor, and poses a major challenge for Senegal, with its increasingly urban, internationally-oriented society.

Touba, the country’s second-largest city (with a population of approximately 500,000) and a major religious center, will be a testing ground for observing two intersecting forces: increasing urbanization and the use of NICTs. The development of Touba – unlike Dakar, where the State played a primary role in creating the city – occurred as the result of an initiative undertaken by the Mourides, a Muslim sect, at the beginning of the century, aimed at replacing the traditional social structures of Wolof society (Senegal’s dominant ethnic group, representing approximately 45% of the population). This sect, which today accounts for more than one third of the population, is a powerful socioreligious group, known for its agricultural and commercial activities, its deep-rooted traditions, its increasingly international orientation and its capacity for adapting to innovation.<sup>4</sup> In the regions where it has gained control, and in the city – where the modernizing force of urban production serves as a tool for promoting its social and religious interests – it has made itself a major presence.

The choice of Touba as a site for studying the appropriation of NICTs in Senegal – by individuals and, especially, by urban societies – is both appropriate and provocative. While Touba serves as a laboratory for analyzing Senegal’s increasing urbanization and the parallel formation of translocal identity – a result of the society’s massive, worldwide diaspora – it is also home to a sect whose values and practices, while changing under the influence of that diaspora, have retained their singular character. Thus, while the present analysis will be relevant to Senegalese society as a whole, it will reflect the particularities of the Mouride brotherhood. It is this dialectical ambivalence that makes a study of Senegalese society by a member of that very society particularly interesting.

One must be careful not to confuse the site and the objective of this research. The author’s interest in the appropriation of NICTs in Touba arises solely from Touba’s ability to reveal the dynamics and changes within the Mouride brotherhood. The city is, in fact, one of the sect’s many population centers scattered throughout Senegal, Europe, Africa, the United States and elsewhere. However, it serves as the central unifying force – a place of return, a gathering point for family and friends.

In today’s network society, which, according to Castells, is becoming increasingly widespread, “two opposing forces are struggling to remake our world and our lives:

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<sup>3</sup> Senegal is the second most Internet-connected country after South Africa, according to some sources. See *Jeune Afrique*, June 15-21, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Guèye Cheikh, 1999 - *L’organisation de l’espace dans une ville religieuse: Touba (Sénégal)*. Doctoral thesis (new regime), Louis Pasteur University in Strasbourg, 650 p.

*globalization and identity... globalization of strategic economic activities. A specific form of organization: networks. The flexibility and instability of work, and the individualization of labor. A culture of virtual reality created by a diversified system of media that communicate with each other and have universal penetration. And the transformation of the basic material dimensions of life, space and time: network society is a place of flow and of "non-temporal" time, which are an expression of its dominant activities and governing elites."*<sup>5</sup> Added to this, in apparent opposition to this movement, is the identity that manifests itself more strongly than ever, defying cosmopolitanism, *"in the name of cultural individuality and individuals' control over their life and environment."*<sup>6</sup>

Territory is a theoretical framework derived from the geographic projection of a society's structures and values. It is an identity-based concept, carrying legal, social, cultural and emotional significance, often defined by the sense of belonging and by the emergence, within it, of collective representations. The author's hypothesis is that NICTs constitute the new territory (beyond the national and international realms) to be conquered by the Mourides. The projection (desired and actual) of marabout society – its political functioning, its cultural and religious realities and its economic dynamism – into an ever-expanding space, both in Senegal and abroad, makes "territory" an appropriate term of reference and basis for analysis.

The limits that can be placed on territory depend, however, on the dominance of the society and the extent to which it controls the geographic space. The appropriation of territory may be ethnic, religious, linguistic and/or political in nature, or may be based on other values or identities. The territory can be continuous or discontinuous, material, virtual and/or ideal. NICTs constitute territorializing tools that weaken or eliminate constraints on the realities of distance and space.

These technologies transform territory, and can themselves constitute a territory for a given group. The utility of the notion of territory lies in the fact that it is seen not only as a reality, but also as a quest, a utopia. Given the presence of State enterprises and the globalization of trade, ideas and cultures brought about by the revolution in communications technologies, it is reasonable to ask just how autonomous is this territory. Mouridism appears to be an example of a society that, while possessing a strong local identity, becomes transnational and follows the trend toward globalization by harnessing NICTs. It thus invents a form of migrating religion in which new territorialization is constantly renewing and reshaping the religion's symbols.<sup>7</sup>

The general objective of this study is to examine the impact of the development of NICTs on a religious city that, increasingly, resembles other Senegalese cities; and, by doing so, to gain an understanding of the mechanisms by which such technologies are appropriated by this constantly changing urban society. A study of Touba should

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel Castells, 1999 – *Le pouvoir de l'identité*. Fayard, p.11 and 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bava Sophie, Guèye Cheikh - *Le grand magal de Touba*. Exil prophétique, migration et pèlerinage au sein du mouridisme. Forthcoming in *Social Compass*, September 2001.

facilitate an understanding of the behavior of this *urbi et orbi* group, and its relationship to NICTs. There will also be an examination of the appropriation of new technologies by what are often considered anti-Western Islamic societies.

Touba was established as a religious city in 1888 by Sheik Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of a mystical Muslim sect that has gained a large membership over the past hundred years. It is headed by a *khalif general* or supreme khalif – the founder’s biological and spiritual heir. This person represents the founder’s ideal vision of the capital – a city created to give the religion a worldwide presence. And, indeed, the sect has transnationalized itself and exported its religious and cultural symbols, as well as its social and economic practices.

As a sequel to the rural and urban phases of territorialization, Mouride society is devoting its full energy to realizing its founder’s vision: that of creating a site that can serve both as a place of religious devotion and as a moral and social haven. The capacity for innovation and adaptation is evident in Touba’s urban society, which is utilizing the full potential of NICTs to enhance the society’s internal functioning, while at the same time bringing it into greater contact with the world at large. Touba serves as the focal point for the Mourides’ various population centers, both in Senegal and abroad, while NICTs are used to promote the group’s identity, disseminate its religious objectives and conquer the virtual territories of the Internet.

Touba recently became the second-ranking city in Senegal (after Dakar) in terms of both population and telephony. Thus, Senegal’s urban structure, oriented primarily to the coast, is enhanced by the presence of another large city in the interior of the country, providing a counterbalance to the overwhelming influence of Dakar. However, despite this new national prominence, Touba does not enjoy the administrative status needed, according to national law, to be a city/commune, making it what must certainly be the largest “village” in the world, with an estimated half-million inhabitants.

According to the 1988 census, more than 90% of this population is of rural origin. However, in terms of the rules and values in force within the city, Touba benefits from its extraterritorial status and from being a free zone. Thus, it is not subject to the prohibitions instituted between 1945 and 1968 covering the nation’s schools and health care facilities (which were viewed as instruments of Westernization) or to the bans, effective since 1985 within the private domain, on alcohol, gambling, soccer and movies.

Touba’s extraterritoriality has acted as a stimulant to an economy that is based on trade and religion – an economy whose viability has long been questioned. Today, Touba seems to have a greater draw than Dakar, and this religious city is now becoming a large metropolitan area, acting as a new center of economic activity and trade. Some are already calling it the “capital of the informal sector.” For tens of thousands of international Mouride émigrés, it is favored as the special place of return, a sort of Jerusalem – a symbolically important, ostentatious but, increasingly, economically viable center.

The major telecommunications companies – SONATEL and SENTEL – once they formulated a catch-up strategy for the Touba market, committed themselves to a

forward-looking, speculative investment policy. For SONATEL, as well as for its competitor, SENTEL, Touba is the second-ranking population center in both cellular and fixed telephony; in order to meet increasing demand in this important region, numerous projects have been designed. Given Senegal's current rage for cybercafés and public Internet-access points, it is worth considering what significance this trend has for Touba, where over 85% of the population is illiterate in French. Although the city's life and functioning relies on the contribution of international émigrés, Touba also suffers from extreme poverty. Thus, it remains a question as to how the telephone and the Internet can be adapted to the city's informal sector and to its numerous economic refugees.

The Mourides – who created transnational groups in the countries where they have a presence – not only use NICTs extensively for organizational purposes; they also utilize them in their interaction with the city and with the families who remained or moved there. Today, the invention of new forms of urban management relies on NICTs, which make it possible to apply special land management rules.

Does the concept of a religious city imply particular NICT practices? What role does the worldwide web play in promoting the image of the sect and its capital? The Internet is already an important tool for the Mourides' proselytizing efforts, with websites that extol the sect's power and provide information on its online life. Are the Mourides, therefore, already in an advantageous position in the struggle for knowledge and content, a contest for which Senegal, as a whole, is completely unprepared? In an environment in which the State's role is of decreasing importance, a variety of indicators confirm that progress and innovation is being led more and more by the private sector and by civil society.

A broad analysis indicates that the rapid appropriation of NICTs in Touba is the result of fashion, fascination, opportunity, the need for information, the importance of keeping informed, the quest for individual affirmation and the desire for autonomy.

### **Methodological approach**

This study uses statistical sources and qualitative surveys to identify correlations between the extensive development of NICTs and social changes within the city.

The approach combines a macro level, which has an exploratory function, and a micro level which examines the appropriation of NICTs by the relevant actors. These two

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