

**Senegalese Émigrés and
New Information and Communication Technologies**

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Contents

Introduction

Émigrés adopt NICTs and strengthen “long-distance relations”

Fixed telephone and the exponential increase in teledensity

The cellular telephone, or the implosion of a new technology

The fax and its use in economic and administrative affairs

Television and camcorder: In tune with the social life in the country of origin

The presence of television in the villages, thanks to sets brought back by émigrés

The camcorder: Making up for the lack of images

Radio: An old technology with new advances

Illusions and glimmers of Internet penetration in émigré communities

NICTs and financial transfers from émigrés: Toward the globalization of capital

Formal instruments for money transfers: Capturing the “manna” of émigrés by simplifying the procedures

BST(Banque Sénégal-Tunisienne) and Money Gram

CBAO and Western Union

The Postal Service falters, its money transfer methods obsolete

Problems with classic methods of transferring money and the emergence of new informal instruments as a result of NICTs

Making funds available through the intermediation of merchants: “Virtual” transfers

Kara International exchange: An instrument for informal transfer of funds

Collection of money: A commonplace commercial transaction

The transfer transaction: A payment order by fax

The proliferation of money transfer offices and the Kara crisis: A setback in gaining expanded access to NICTs

NICTs, socioeconomic recomposition and the dynamics of Senegalese international migration

NICTs and the interdependence of the local economy and émigrés’ countries of origin: “When Lombardy sneezes, Ndiambour catches cold”

NICTs and social restructuring within the migratory system

NICTs and informal globalization

Conclusion

Bibliographic references

Introduction

International migration has been a vital element in Senegal's evolution over the last two decades. While this is not a new phenomenon, the migration of Senegalese to other countries grew rapidly between 1980 and 1990, and has had significant social and economic implications. Above all, there has been, during this period, an increase in both the number of destinations and the points of origin, thus posing more complex issues with regard to the country of origin. The need to establish "long-distance relations" – i.e., the set of economic, financial and social ties between émigrés and the country of origin – becomes all the more urgent when the receiving countries are farther from Senegal and have fewer links to the mother country. The émigré is an actor whose life evolves across different geographic spaces. The migratory system is structured between different poles: the countries of origin, the host countries and investment zones. In order to organize and enliven this complex network, the émigré must ensure that information is able to move between the different poles of the system, operating, despite the distance, through a process of nearly constant interaction. Émigrés – like anyone working within a network in an environment of expanded distances and a high degree of mobility – have a need to communicate.

New information and communication technologies (NICTs) are the modern tools (cable, satellite, the Internet, telematic applications) that facilitate the circulation of ideas and bring together data and people. This study attempts to shed light on the role of NICTs in the "long-distance relations" between émigrés and their families in their country of origin. The ways in which these technologies are used and appropriated by émigrés are complex. In the specific context of this study, dealing with the places of origin of émigrés who have long lacked connection with the modern communications network, the phrase "new technologies" may be disconcerting to the reader. Indeed, the landline telephone may be old and commonplace in Dakar, while it is just becoming known in M'Benguène, the village in the department of Kébémér that has just emerged from technological isolation, thanks to investments from its national émigrés in Italy. Thus, as Mucchielli (1998: 9) observes, "the analysis of contexts and, consequently, of approaches at work in the communications realm, is therefore fundamental." Our field research was set in the central-west region of Senegal. The onset of chronic drought at the beginning of the 1970s seriously endangered peanut production, which represented the primary agricultural industry, and led to the mass departure of its inhabitants to Italy in the mid-1980s. This study analyzes the appropriation of NICTs by the émigrés and the rationales it engenders, which, according to Mucchielli (1998:10), are "organizational rationales of power and knowledge and of hierarchical power, a cultural rationale of propriety, a cultural rationale of *savoir-faire*, psychosocial rationales of fear of the loss of prestige or control..." As with any innovation, NICTs bring into question age-old beliefs and knowledge, long-established positions and well-established local structures.

Given the climatic difficulties and the socioeconomic context – deflation in the public sector, with "voluntary departures" and the onset of unemployment – migration abroad represents one of the main responses to the ongoing crisis. The development of NICTs coincides with a growing need on the part of Senegalese émigrés for carrying out financial transfers, something revolutionized by the use of information technologies such as the fax and telephone. Our study of financial transfers by Senegalese émigrés in New York¹ has shown the preeminent importance of informal structures, due to the adoption of NICTs. Indeed, bank

¹ Tall, S. M. 1998 : 73-90.

transfers were more dependable, but informal transfers were faster and more accessible. Nevertheless, there is an overlap between international finance and telecommunications. Old technologies have a way of becoming new with the help of modern media: radio, with frequency modulation, television, with MMDS and digital technology, the telephone, with satellite technology.

Rapid social changes occur as a result of the relations between émigrés and their families living in Senegal, who survive thanks to contributions sent from abroad. These émigrés thus gain a decision-making power in the management of domestic affairs, facilitated by NICTs. The use of detailed qualitative surveys sheds light on the social implications. For example, through the use of enterprises specializing in the long-distance sale of foodstuffs, émigrés pay for the expenses of maintaining their families by relying on merchant networks and on the facilities provided by NICTs. Émigrés make it possible for their families to access NICTs by paying the fees for connection of fixed telephone lines or by providing them with cellular telephones. Émigrés often guarantee payment of bills. For the needs associated with long-distance management of the domestic realm and of their personal affairs, émigrés are introducing other means of using NICTs.

How, then, do émigrés appropriate NICTs? What is the role of NICTs in eliminating the physical element in the financial transfers of émigrés and promoting the circulation of private capital? What is the role of migrants in the penetration of these technologies in villages that are, a priori, isolated? What are the social and economic implications of accessibility to NICTs? This study attempts to gain an understanding of how Senegalese émigrés and their families who remain behind are served by these new communications tools and how, in turn, these tools influence their lifestyles. Thus, the study is built around a consideration of this dialectic of passive and receptive use of NICTs, and their dynamic and active appropriation. By relying on the opportunities offered by NICTs, émigrés, thanks to their money and savoir-faire, are attempting to instill a new dynamic in their relations with families who remain in their country of origin. Thus, this study is focused squarely on the link between technological innovation and social changes, under the influence of one key actor: the émigré.

The methodology combined a macro approach (an inventory of local and national statistics on teledensity) and a micro approach (a qualitative analysis of changes brought about by NICTs at the local level). Collection of statistical data on telecommunications companies made it possible to construct a quantitative foundation on the rapid changes that the telephone has undergone in Senegal. It also made it possible to provide a status report on the telephone: number of subscribers and connections, changes in the nature and number of calls, the origin and destination of calls, etc. Qualitative surveys (focus groups, semi-structured interviews (SSI), interviews, structured surveys and participatory surveys) were conducted. The study of long-distance relations between émigrés and their families in the homeland was carried out using a combination of qualitative and statistical data collection on the role of NICTs in the financial transfers of Senegalese émigrés through specialized entities. The analysis of certain reference sites visited frequently by émigrés rounded out this research. These sites represent extensions of Senegalese media in the host country – providing a glimpse into Senegal.

Émigrés adopt NICTs and strengthen “long-distance relations”

As soon as émigrés manage to find work in the host country, they re-establish ties with their families back home. For this, the telephone is the most frequently used tool. Often, émigrés take collective responsibility for the charges of providing electricity and telephone service in

their villages. They ensure access to a telephone line and pay for the bills their families receive. Émigrés also bring back, during their vacations in their home country, various electronic products (cellular telephones, televisions and radios, camcorders), which help equip their homes with improved technology. They appropriate new communications tools by bringing them into their own environment. They use NICTs in a manner at odds with the nature of the technologies, i.e., they adapt them to their personal-use needs, which often are different from the original intended use of the technology. In practice, the ways in which NICTs are used flows from a complex process of appropriation, making an instrument – even one as personal as the cellular telephone – a communal instrument through which their villages gain access to the broader world. The social function still remains the dominant factor in the process by which émigrés appropriate these technologies. The telephone expands the circle of interpersonal relations beyond national borders, eliminates the time delay in communications, and makes communication a dynamic and interactive process.

Fixed telephone and the exponential increase in teledensity

In 1985, SONATEL was created by the separation established between postal and telecommunications services. The inventory of fixed telephone lines on which it had a monopoly was approximately 206,000 lines in 2001, representing a growth of nearly 20% per year. This figure was 23,000 at the time of SONATEL's creation in 1985. On a smaller scale, the pace of development can be measured by the number of telephone connections. The change in the number of landline telephone connections was particularly rapid in the region of Louga, as a result of émigrés who built houses, which they equipped with telephones, also paying the initial installation fees for the family as a whole. Thus, the first investment of migrants is the telephone used to maintain relations with the family in their home country. It is as if the telephone were a means of extending the home space in the new country – this, given the fact that the family structure is based on oral communication. The number of subscribers tripled in less than seven years in Louga, growing from 1,821 to 5,963. This growth is all the more paradoxical for the fact that the regional economy has experienced structural difficulties related to the dependence of the local economy on peanut cultivation, which has been strongly affected by the drought and by the drop in worldwide flows. The financial repercussions of emigration to Italy, which has been particularly strong, are partly responsible for the increase in teledensity in the Louga region. The region, where there had been no telephones outside the cities and in the adjacent villages, began to see growth in telephone service.

Between 1960 and 1990, subscriptions grew to over 100 telephone lines in Kébémér. With the development of emigration from Kébémérois to Italy at the end of the 1980s, the Société nationale des Télécommunications (SONATEL) fielded many requests. The increase in the number of fixed-telephone subscribers is linked primarily to the boom in residential connections. In 1990, in the city of Kébémér, 60% of the lines belonged to decentralized State services, NGOs and commercial enterprises. The number of fixed-telephone subscribers in Kébémér tripled between 1991 and 2001. This trend was reversed in 2000, with domestic subscribers representing 90% of the number of telephone lines. Émigrés held 60% of domestic subscriptions – located, above all, in new areas of the city. The proliferation of lines occurred particularly in the new outlying neighborhoods occupied by émigrés. There, they made real estate investments in well-off areas, systematically equipped with telephones, in order to keep in contact with the family during their time abroad. SONATEL officials estimate that émigrés account for nearly 400 telephone lines (or half of the subscriptions) in Kébémér. It is difficult, without a quantitative survey, to distinguish émigrés from non-

émigrés in the population of subscribers. As a result of the telephone, émigrés can transmit financial resources, stay abreast of developments with their relatives, and identify investment opportunities in their country of origin.

Moreover, it is difficult to limit the number of persons using a telephone line to the subscriber or location where the phone is installed. Telephones can be acquired in the neighborhoods, without any financial compensation. Thus, existing fixed telephone lines are being used communally. Total coverage of the country by portable telephone service ensures that rural areas are able to skip the costly obstacle of having to install landline telephone networks.

The cellular telephone, or the implosion of a new technology

The cellular telephone, which developed rapidly in Senegal, represents a response to the mobility of the Senegalese people and was rapidly integrated in a social milieu characterized by orality and illiteracy. Beyond the functional aspect of this technology and the fact that it became part of the habits and customs of the people, its role in the process of social differentiation was a factor in its appropriation by the well-to-do segments of the society. In addition it has been widely adopted by the general population, in an attempt to emulate the wealthier segments. The cellular telephone was an instrument of social prestige. However, the possession of a cellular telephone is matter of nuance in terms of social prestige – both as regards the type of phone and the type of subscription. Access to this communications tool depends solely on having a cellular phone and paying for connection through one of Senegal's two providers (SONATEL and SENTEL). Competition favors a lowering of connection and communications costs and, as a result, an increase in the number of cellular subscribers. The development of cellular telephony has been particularly rapid, with the number of SONATEL's cellular lines increasing by a factor of more than 150 in less than 5 years: from 1,395 lines in 1996 to 6,942 in 1997, 22,110 in 1998, 73,472 in 1999, and 150,000 lines in 2000. (Data taken from the annual reports of SONATEL, published in December of each year.)

SONATEL had more than 200,000 subscribers in 2001, while SENTEL (the number two provider of mobile telephone service) had nearly 50,000 subscribers. Given that the price of the cellular telephone is still prohibitive for the vast majority of Senegalese – many living in poverty – its rapid development may seem paradoxical. However, according to the results of our survey, with a sample of 100 persons with cellular telephones in rural settings, 97% received them free from a relative and 95% of the donors were émigrés who left the telephones behind during their vacations in Senegal. An analysis of the appropriation of the cellular telephone in two villages studied shows the complexity of its use by the population. These two villages, without fixed-telephone service, suffered from under-supply, despite their proximity to the city of Kébémér. The two individuals with cell phones (Khady Diagne and Sarah Sène) were young people who, as of March 2000, possessed the only cellular telephones in their villages.

“Alizé Khady Diagne”: The umbilical cord linking Gade Kébé with the rest of the world

Khady Diagne is a married émigré of approximately 30 years of age living in the village of Gade Kébé, in the Louga region. His village of just under 150 inhabitants, 2 kilometers from Kébémér (the administrative center of the department), has no landline telephone. In order to communicate with his wife, the husband, who emigrated to Italy, left her a portable telephone that he used during his last vacation back in Senegal. This represents the sole material link between the village and the outside world. This personal tool – the portable telephone of Kady Diagne – is known in the village by SONATEL’s commercial name, “Alizé Khady Diagne.” All of the inhabitants of this village adopted this single instrument of communication, which linked the village to the world beyond. The “Alizé de Khady Diagne” fulfilled, among others, the following functions:

- as a reception point for domestic calls for all of the villagers. The Khady Diagne number functioned, in reality, as the common number for the community. Often, the wife who possesses the telephone gives the phone to a child, who is then responsible for bringing it to the intended recipient;
- as an instrument for disseminating information on family ceremonies. News of people living in the village (family events, death notices, administrative meetings) are communicated to Khady Diagne, who is responsible for calling the people involved;
- as a point of contact for village girls who work as domestics in the nearby city and need to communicate with their employers;
- as the intermediary for street merchants (known as “banas banas” merchants), who need to contact their clients and correspondents, or who need to know the status of the markets.

This example gives an idea of the transformative capacities of a personal communications tool, such as the cellular telephone, to become a community instrument for relaying messages between the village and the outside world. An entire system of solidarity and a complete social structure are at the heart of this appropriation. Here, the cellular telephone, a personal tool *par excellence*, is shared among several people. Just as telecenters democratized access to

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