

Thiaroye-sur-Mer, land of emigration

The gaping wounds of illegal emigration

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Journalist, editor, literary critic, Souleymane Ndiaye trained and mentored several generations of Senegalese journalists and writers. Also known as "the peasants' journalist," he passed away in January 2016.




N'Goné Fall

Born in Dakar in 1956, Boubacar Touré Mandémory belongs to the generation of photographers who emerged in the 80s, at a time when studio portrait photography had given way to documentary and news photography. The development of free media and the decline of national photo agencies led to the emergence of professional freelance photographers who gave a new impetus to the industry. Touré Mandémory was one of the initiators of the Dakar Month of Photography in the 90s, and contributed to the development of private press agencies. By elevating photography to the status of an artistic practice, he encouraged its entry into galleries and museums.

After exploring portrait photography, Touré Mandémory turned to documentaries, focusing on research and analysis of African societies. Famous for his low-angle views and snapshots, his themes are veritable aesthetic and socio-cultural manifestos. His series on African capitals, the populations of the Niger River, the rap phenomenon and urban cultures in Dakar, and the ethnic minorities of Senegal have helped to break down the outdated image of a continent tied to obsolete traditions, plagued by drought, famine and authoritarianism.

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For the past two months, Boubacar Touré Mandémory, an avid image collector, has been working on illegal emigration in Thiaroye-sur-Mer. The fishermen's village on the outskirts of Dakar which became a municipality in 1996, has been hit hard by the "Mbëkk mi" phenomenon. This expression refers to the prodigious rush of young Senegalese to the Canary Islands aboard canoes. I was in Thiaroye in 2006 when Air Europa planes dropped 6,000 illegal immigrants from Spain onto the Saint-Louis airport landing strip. The deportees were in a state of shock, unable to comprehend what was happening to them. For my part, I couldn't understand the madness of the "Mbëkk mi".

I accepted Mandémory's invitation to follow him, to write down what photography alone cannot describe, to see clearly. Two weeks spent in Thiaroye may help explain the tragedy that is ravaging the Senegalese youth. Thiaroye-sur-Mer awaits its 200 sons who left for the Canary Islands and never returned. No one in this 18th-century village is betting on their death.

The setting hasn't changed. I always used to enter Thiaroye-sur-Mer through the cinema door. There used to be a dark room where young people came to vent their inner turmoil. The CDEPS¹ took the place of the cinema which the unimaginative authorities decided to close. Without knowing it, they were paving the way for illegal emigration. What can you do when you're deprived of cinematic fantasy, if not leave? The beautiful CDEPS building is certainly not attractive. There's nobody there. To calm my anger, I take a deep breath of the village sea air with its aroma of fresh fish and vegetables. The wonderful Thiaroye-sur-Mer market is just a few yards away. You can guess the sea at the end of the main street which ends in a narrow, sandy alley.

The rails on which the rare trains of Industries Chimiques du Sénégal (ICS) run, industries whose activities have drastically declined, don't look very impressive. The kids who are supposed to be at school or at home, rummage through the garbage. They seem happy to splash around in the filthy, foul-smelling water left over from the latest floods which wash over the rails and run down to neighboring houses. President Wade who loves the suburbs, would do well to come and see. A long stroll through the fishing village convinces me of one thing: Thiaroye is suffering from environmental degradation. Rising seas, beach pollution, mini oil spills, the Senchim pesticide factory, pipelines belonging to the Société africaine de raffinage (SAR) and the looting of fish stocks. The streets and homes are crowded. Thiaroye is no exception to Dakar's shameful "soukisation". The population is increasing rapidly. 50,000 souls, I'm told. I'm thinking of the old figure: 30,000. No doubt due to the high birth rate. The fisherman marries young and has children. His hard work quickly wears him out. He retires at the same age as the professional footballer puts away his boots. Perhaps it's a pleasurable way of renewing the workforce that has to feed the family. No doubt also the massive arrival of peasants driven out by poverty, who stop, intimidated at the gates of the capital. I wander through the narrow, sandy streets that await the construction of the housing estate and restructuring to widen - regularly announced and always postponed. The houses are still huddled together. The construction frenzy of recent years has spread to Thiaroye-sur-Mer. It's unbelievable how many small rooms are being built in the courtyards of houses that no longer exist. You build as you can, without any

1 Departmental center for popular and sport education.

respect for established standards. A group of young people, American rappers style. They're making tea. Arona and Daouda know the photographer I'm looking for. "Every day, he's there. We talk about Thiaroye-sur-Mer, the "Mbëkk mi". They are unemployed. The word comes out of their mouths immensely. They must doubt that I understand what the word means. The absence of a prospect, the death of hope. Poverty in a nutshell. Even wrapped in dignity, I can see and feel it. Aprons and other "floor vendors" of made-in-China products for Negroes block the way. The Thiaroye of yesterday which flooded Dakar's markets with fish and vegetables to the point of calling cabbage "Thiaroye meat", is no more.

In Thiaroye-sur-Mer, all roads lead to the beach. The magic of the sea is still at work. The blue of the sea, the sun still soft at 9 o'clock. Hundreds of brightly-colored pirogues line the beach, littered with filth and fish remains. The proud canoes wait in the sun for the fish to return. Fishing no longer feeds the man. Offshore, a boat. Perhaps one of the many predators that plunder with impunity the Senegalese coasts, once rich in seafood.

I don't have to wait long for Mandémory. The beach is his headquarters. Everyone knows the photographer, from the oldest to the youngest. Mandémory, adopted by Thiaroye-sur-Mer, takes friendly pictures in complete freedom. The Lebou is hospitable and kind. But you have to be careful: he doesn't let anyone walk all over him.

When Mandémory arrives with hurried steps, a bowl of large shrimps bought for 5,000 FCFA, a pittance, in one hand and the Nikon in the other, it's to take me to the Pénc in the Marène district. A makeshift dugout on the beach, where the locals keep a watchful eye on the sea and chat about things. The Pénc, as every neighborhood has one, is the place to socialize and exchange ideas. Locals and strangers alike, come to bring and take news. Pénc regulars are all victims, in one way or another, of illegal emigration. Repatriated illegal immigrants, fathers and mothers awaiting the hypothetical return of their children who have left for Spain, wives who dream every night of a husband who has "disappeared" on the roads to Spain, young people who want to try their luck, everyone has their own "Mbëkk mi" story. Some tell me in the Pénc about their experiences of illegal emigration, others in their cosy homes. All are waiting for the return of a son who left by canoe for the Canary Islands.

Souleymane Ndiaye