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Situating "wicked" women: gender panic and savoir vivre in urban Senegal

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CHAPTER 2

“It is better to be
a trickster in our
hypocritical society”:⁵⁰
Crafting “wicked” lives

Contrary to *féministes* who engage in public debates to advance their position in society, other women choose to avoid the spotlight. Women's agency in pushing back against gender norms is not limited to speaking out publicly, or to feminist activism. In this chapter, I present women who largely avoid the public sphere as they shape their dissident lives. Instead of *ceasing* the practice of *sutura*, they *seize* its affordances to create and navigate space for their dissident lives (Oudenhuisen 2021b). In the chapters that follow, I analyse women's agency that is distinct and distant from public debates about gender and sexuality. In the interstices between anti-queer sentiments and vocal feminist activism, many of my interlocutors make use of ambiguity and elusiveness to pursue and persist in gender and sexual dissidence. Because the women in this chapter do not adhere to a politics of confrontation or a struggle for sexual rights, their practices often escape the view of academic research and policymakers, although they may be tacitly known in their communities. Remaining distant from, and silent about, public debates about gender and sexuality is crucial in a time where such debates become increasingly tense. Although public debates are not central to the lives of most of my interlocutors, they do influence their opportunities to live so-called wicked lives. Silence, Malhotra and Rowe (2013, 2) write, "allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said." It allows people to survive by "not coming into full view" (Ahmed 2021, 304).

Not coming into full view is about more than keeping silent about one's dissident practices, or staying away from overt debates about sexual rights. It is also about being able to adjust to different situations. Supposedly wicked women resemble what Kwame Otu (2022) refers to as "amphibious subjects": subjects who are able to move between and across different terrains, adjusting their appearances and attitudes where needed, while enjoying what all these different contexts offer them in terms of finding belonging, friendship, education, knowledge, and opportunities for work. Amphibious subjectivity, Otu argues, is a form of "queer self-making" that is characterised by a multiplicity of embodied forms, spaces and language identifications. Such fluidity helps people to escape labelling, and this is helpful for navigating gendered expectations. Women draw upon a variety of modalities to maintain elusiveness and ambiguity around their persona, activities and relationships. To explore how they do so, the following question guides this chapter: *How do elusiveness and ambiguity enable women to craft liveable lives as "wicked" women?*

⁵⁰ Interview with Arame, 30 September 2020. Her original quote in French is: "*Mieux vaut être un tricheur dans notre société hypocrite.*"

The capacity to take on multiple forms and to invent and reinvent strategies to get by are indispensable abilities of life in the postcolonial era, particularly since the 1980s, after economic crises and Structural Adjustment Programmes transformed African economies (Banégas and Warnier 2001; Mbembe 2001). In Senegal, such resourcefulness has been captured in the idea of the “Wolofisation” of Senegalese society. Scholars identified this process of Wolofisation as referring to a process of social transformation whereby more and more people speak Wolof and adopt Wolof cultural values and ideas of success, as a consequence of the economic crisis that hit Senegal in the 1980s (Cruise O’Brien 1998; M. Ndiaye 1998). Where the French language had previously secured people jobs with the early postcolonial state, Wolof became the language of survival in urban Senegal in a context of economic crisis (ibid.). In the early post-independence period, *les évolués* (F: the civilised ones) or *ku jàng ekool* (W: those who have been to school) – who had enjoyed formal education in French – were the groups who had access to social and political success, as they held positions in the French-speaking government, or had reasonably well-renumerated and well-respected jobs in education (M. Ndiaye 1998). The economic crisis and the ensuing Structural Adjustment Programmes resulted in a decline of the state, which subsequently led to a dwindling status of the francophone intellectual elite. The Wolofisation of Senegalese society was characterised by the emergence of a new elite of entrepreneurs. Referred to as *Móodu Móodu*, these successful urban entrepreneurs challenged the ideal of success through schooling and employment as a civil servant that *évolués* or *ku jàng ekool* previously embodied (ibid.). *Móodu Móodu* reveal a process of social transformation whereby diplomas are no longer a guarantee for success, but where innovation, risk-taking and a practical *savoir faire* can get you far. The fact that it is hard work to succeed in tying ends together, becomes apparent from the many popular expressions in Wolof that emphasise the role of work in having success (Havard 2001). Such expressions include “*liggéey, liggéey rekk*” (W: work, work only [to succeed]), “*jëf jël*” (W: if you work, you win), and “*ñax jareñu*” (W: only sweat pays). Such new roads to success point at the moral economy of resourcefulness that has proven to be crucial in postcolonial Senegal.

In *Bricoler pour survivre*, Abdou Salam Fall (2007) provides further insight into the many ways in which Senegal’s urban poor tie together various economic activities and social networks. He argues how the industriousness of people who collect and resell plastic waste for recycling, or who craft stoves with the little threads and pieces of metal that they collect from construction sites, are indispensable for millions of households that survive on a couple of euros a day. These *débrouillards* are indispensable industrious figures in an urban context that does not *a priori* value their contributions to the economy. The word *débrouillard* does not have a singular translation into English, but it appeals to the inventiveness, streetwiseness, and resourcefulness of people to get by under challenging circumstances. The *débrouillard* resembles the hustler, a concept that is also often used

in relation to masculine providerhood in a context of material precarity and racial discrimination (Van Stapele 2021). The *débrouillard* or hustler is not only concerned with earning an income, but also with their positioning in the family and in society. People's strategies to survive in the city are born out of material precarity, but they have also become a way of life.

Where a moral economy of resourcefulness is part of the everyday survival for millions of Senegalese, I contend that gender- and sexually dissident women have to add an extra layer to this resourcefulness: they also need to navigate a moral economy of not-knowing, which I define as the moral obligations of people to uphold ambiguities concerning dissident practices. The space for dissident practices depends on your, and your family's, ability to maintain a sense of not-knowing around such practices. A moral economy of not-knowing connects those who conceal to those from whom something is concealed, because the latter take an active part in maintaining a not-knowing (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020), or because they are presumed to be wanting to know about that which is withheld from them (Kirsch 2015). Not-knowing is not about not knowing per se, but about the decision to not acknowledge the knowing explicitly, so as to avoid open conflict. Maintaining a sense of not-knowing about others' situations is a moral choice that expresses care for others (De Klerk 2012). Drawing upon Smart (2011), Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk (2020) speak of a "choreography of secrecy" to signal the active participation of all the actors who are concerned with keeping a secret. In this choreography, relational dynamics and hierarchies of age, gender, and class inform how the dance of secrecy is danced, in addition to existing cultural norms of discretion and verbal indirection (Dankwa 2009; Hardon and Posel 2012). I explore the different modalities by which women maintain a sense of not-knowing, in an attempt to capture how women craft dissident lives.

"It is better to be a trickster": The use of humour and deceit to navigate stigma

I start with the story of Ndella and Arame, two women who were respectively in their mid-twenties and early thirties when I met them in 2020.⁵¹ They were in a relationship with each other, and they shared with me how they have managed to sustain their relationship by coming up with *pexe jigéen* (W: women's solutions) whenever problems arise. The idea of women's solutions reflects the fact that women, more than men, are under moral scrutiny for their behaviour, and that this requires particular solutions to dodge accusations and to avoid stigma. *Pexe jigéen* was a recurring phrase that I heard when women told me how they had navigated a particular struggle with their families or in-laws.

⁵¹ All names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.

I turn to ideas about trickster figures from older anthropological literature to understand how women like Ndella and Arame navigated accusations of so-called wickedness, and how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis societal expectations. Trickster tales are found in cultures around the globe and they have appeared in many different guises, from Anansi the spider in West Africa to Prometheus in Ancient Greece, and in the forms of coyote and the hare in North American indigenous cultures (Edmonson 1970). In storytelling around the world, the trickster has been described as a figure who devises strategies to make it out of challenging circumstances by outsmarting others. Tricksters are variously described as being clever, creative, deceitful, and selfish. They outsmart others, breaking rules and transgressing taboos along the way. They are either considered a “culture hero,” whose actions are at the service of humanity, a “selfish buffoon,” who violates the most fundamental of social values for personal gain, or a combination of both (Boas 1974[1898]; Lowie 1909; Radin 1972). Tricksters are ultimately ambiguous characters and they have the “ability to live interstitially, to confuse and to escape the structures of society and the order of cultural things” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 148).

Trickster tales reflect strategies of resistance and survival under adverse conditions, and they have travelled from West Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas with the slave trade (Levine 1977). In these different stories, trickster characters find ways to overcome alienating conditions through their creativity and wit. In such tales, trickster figures are “weak, relatively powerless creatures who attain their ends through the application of native wit and guile rather than power or authority” (ibid., 103).

I am interested in the trickster as a living person who is embedded in their own social environment. The trickster’s capacities to embody ambiguities, flexibility, and indeterminacy is important in a context in which people’s behaviour is increasingly policed. The trickster embodies the contradiction and friction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint, and they reveal the tension between the moral demands of communal life and people’s individual desires. Trickster behaviour is, by the way, not a particular characteristic of so-called wicked women. Evoking the concept of “*une économie morale de la ruse et de la débrouille*” (F: a moral economy of cunning and resourcefulness), Banégas and Warnier (2001, 8) argue that new figures of economic and social success in post-SAP (Structural Adjustment Programmes) Africa include Cameroonian *feyman* and Mauretanian *tcheb-tchab*, who “elevat[ed] scam to the rank of an art of living” (ibid., 11).

How do women like Ndella and Arame make use of trickery to survive, and what social tensions does this bring to the surface? Ndella was twenty-six years old when I met her in 2020. Born in a suburb of Dakar in a poor family, she grew up first with her grandparents in a village, and later with a paternal aunt in Dakar. Since 2019, she

has been living with her girlfriend Arame, and Arame's family, in Thiès. Both Ndella's parents are *débrouillards*, who earn a living with odd jobs. Ndella has two older and two younger siblings, all four of whom grew up with their parents. When Ndella was two years old, she was sent to her maternal grandparents in a village north of Dakar. It was an investment in the future, to ensure that at least one of the children would receive an education. Some families send some children to school while keeping others at home. Others send children to work at a young age, and yet others send children from the same family to different types of schools for different lengths of time. All of these are strategies as families navigate economic precarity and aspirations for their children's and their own futures in Senegal (Grysole 2018). Because of a lack of financial resources, her parents first sent Ndella to her grandparents in the village. During her time with her grandparents, Ndella attended a Quran school. Islamic education is believed to teach children important values that will lead to more solidarity and help for kin later in life. It is also thought to provide children with *baraka* (divine blessing) which is necessary for their success in life (Buggenhagen 2001). After six years of Quranic schooling in the village of her grandparents, she returned to Dakar, to live with her aunt and uncle, who then enrolled Ndella in a public French school. Child fostering, the practice of children growing up with relatives other than their biological parents, is a common practice in Senegal (Vandermeersch 2002) as well as in other parts of West Africa (Alber, Martin and Notermans 2013; Alber 2018; Goody 1982). Children are fostered out to relatives or friends for purposes of education, or because fostering out children is believed to strengthen the relationships between the adults. Women may furthermore be given a child if she has not birthed herself. The ubiquity of fostering practices does not mean, however, that it does not lead to conflicts. In Ndella's case, the fact that she outperformed her cousin at school, obtaining her BFEM exam (exams at the end of middle school) when her cousin failed those same exams, was a reason for her aunt to stop paying Ndella's tuition fees, arguing that the private school that Ndella was attending had become too expensive. Ndella did not believe that they really could not bear the costs anymore, for it was her uncle who lived abroad who was paying for her school fees.

Nevertheless, to reduce the financial burden on her family, Ndella decided to switch to a public high school. The year before her exams, however, she wanted to switch back to a private school. The turn towards private schooling is common in Senegal, where strikes continually disrupt the education at underfunded public schools (Grysole 2018). When she discussed this wish with her aunt, she initially agreed. When the school fees were due, however, her aunt said nothing. In November, all her classmates had started the school year, but Ndella could not join them because her school fees had not been paid. She decided to pay her school fees herself: 65,000 FCFA (100 euros) registration costs and 35,000 FCFA (53 euros) at the end of every month. *"C'est en ce moment que j'ai commencé à fréquenter les hommes quoi"* (F: It was at this time that I started seeing men),

she said, chuckling. “*J’avais des copains, je faisais le mbaraan*” (F : I had boyfriends, I did *mbaraan*). *Mbaraan* refers to sexual relationships in exchange for material support in the form of gifts or money (Foley and Dramé 2013). Although practicing *mbaraan* enabled Ndella to go back to school to attend her exam year, she still missed a lot of classes, particularly at the end of the month, when she was concerned with collecting the money for the next month’s school fees. Her aunt saw her leave the house in her school uniform every day, but she never directly asked Ndella where she got the money from. Her silence was a deliberate form of not-knowing, which is indicative of the relationality of secrecy (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020). Ndella likewise said nothing, so people must have thought that her aunt was paying her school fees. Ndella failed her *baccalauréat* exams (exams at the end of high school) two years in a row, after which she decided to drop out of school in 2017. When she went home to her parents to celebrate Tabaski (Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice) that same year, she stayed. No one batted an eye when she just stayed after the feast was over. Her aunt did not call her to ask her when she was coming back for the school year. “She continued doing *mbaraan*, to be able to pay rent for a room with her brother at her parents’ place.” Arame: “*Tu faisais le mbaraan pour régler tes problèmes!*” (F: You did *mbaraan* to solve your problems!) To which Ndella responded,

Ah, si tu me voyais, tu n’allais pas penser que j’avais ces problèmes. Tu allais même penser que je suis une fille d’une grande famille, elle manque de rien... gâtée. Parce que c’est ce que j’incarnais. J’avais pas de soucis, je m’habillais bien (F: Ah, if you saw me, you would not think I had any problems. You would even think that I was a girl from an important family, who lacked nothing... spoiled. Because that is what I embodied. I had no problems, I dressed well).

Appearance meant more to her than just the desire to dress well. It was a way to survive in a family that she felt had abandoned her. Her reference to embodying that she was well-to-do is important for maintaining a sense of dignity, which so many of my interlocutors referred to as an important driver for how they navigated social and material precarity.

The fact that Ndella did *mbaraan* was not directly considered a problem by her family. As long as she helped solve her family’s financial problems, they did not bother where the money came from. When Ndella spent her money on herself, however, the response was different. She recalled how, as a teenager, she liked to go out with her friends to the city or to the beach, instead of staying at home with her family. One day, after such an outing, her father had called her *caga* (W: “prostitute”). Calling women *caga* expresses a fear and condemnation of uncontrollable women, especially when they are found to keep their income to themselves instead of sharing it with their family. Prostitution in itself may not always be perceived as a problem, but the way that earnings are spent is

scrutinised by family members. It is the expectation of reciprocity that undergirds the (dis)qualification of prostitution. In a study of prostitution in colonial Nairobi, White (1990) argued how prostitution was not always met with disapproval: in the 1930s, among the Kikuyu, prostitution was seen as a legitimate means for women to earn an income, if the revenues of this work were directed to family livestock herds that had been lost due to droughts. If women used the money to make a living independent of the patriarchal family, however, the practice provoked disapproval. The independence with which Ndella disposed of her financial means, going out with friends, and beyond the sphere of control of her family, had earned her the accusation of *caga*.

Later, when she had started dating Arame, who paid for her school fees, and who often picked her up with her car, she was called a *caga* again. Ndella's family accused Arame of "buying" their daughter into "lesbianism" with the gifts that she bought for her, and the professional training that she was sponsoring for her. With her money, Arame supposedly "*détournait*" Ndella (the French verb *détourner* means to turn away, deflect, seize control). The phrase *détournement de mineurs* (F: diversion of minors) regularly features in news articles as a conviction in court for rape or sexual harassment committed against a minor. It is also part of a discourse about "homosexuality" that suggests that innocent children and teenagers are lured into "homosexuality" or "lesbianism," especially by someone with money (and additionally perhaps with the promise of travel to the West). It reveals the anxieties of parents losing control over their children's life decisions, and it expresses a fear that this further worsens their already precarious economic situation (Pierce 2016).

Ndella and Arame met each other and started dating in March 2018. Ndella was introduced to Arame via a mutual friend, to whom Ndella had expressed her interest to "*découvrir ce que font les filles entre filles quoi. Avec la sexualité et tout... mais je veux pas être ça*" (F: discover what girls do among girls, you know. With sexuality and all... but I don't want to be that). She recounted how she had become curious, "*parce qu'il y avait beaucoup de rumeurs en ce moment au Sénégal. Les gens parlaient des lesbiennes tout le temps. Donc je me suis posée la question, comment font les filles entre elles?*" (F: Because there were a lot of rumours at that moment in Senegal. People spoke about *lesbiennes* all the time. So, I asked myself, how do girls do it?) And so the two met, and although Ndella had been clear at the start that she was not looking for love but simply to discover sex with a woman, things turned out differently, and the two started a relationship soon after.

When the two met each other, Ndella was still in a relationship with a man, with whom she planned to get married. After a couple of weeks into her relationship with Arame, Ndella discovered that she was pregnant. Arame tried to convince her to keep the baby, because it would provide her some more room for a relationship with Arame. Ndella was afraid, however, of what people would say when they would find out that

she had got pregnant before marriage. With these considerations on her mind, Arame and Ndella decided to talk to the man and ask him to marry the pregnant Ndella. If they married quickly, people would not have to find out that she had been pregnant before their marriage.

On the day that they spoke to him, he seemed to understand and accept the situation. The day after, however, he called Arame and he asked her to confirm that Ndella was pregnant. Sensing that he was recording their conversation, which he could use to cause Ndella trouble, Arame denied Ndella's pregnancy and the conversation they had had the day before. She quickly warned Ndella about what had transpired, and, indeed, the man then called Ndella to ask about her pregnancy. She also denied it and said that the pregnancy test that they had showed him had belonged to a friend. Because it was April, the two had fooled him with an April fool's joke, they said. After this conversation, Ndella decided definitively to have an abortion. A friend put her in touch with a doctor who does abortions in his private clinic. Before she could have this abortion, however, her boyfriend tried to get Ndella into trouble by telling her family that she was pregnant. Ndella had forgotten her mother's health booklet in his car. He thought that it was Ndella's own health booklet. He called Ndella's sister and told her about Ndella's pregnancy, arguing that he even had the proof with her health booklet. Lucid as she was, Ndella thought about a way to prove to her sister that she was not pregnant: she put some betadine on a sanitary pad before heading home. While recounting this story to me, she and Arame laughed, and Arame exclaimed: "*Pexe jigéen, quoi! Elle est une vraie tricheuse!*" (W/F: Women's solutions! She's a real trickster!) He had attempted to trick Ndella, but Ndella and Arame outsmarted him by creating "evidence" for their story.

Having found a way to fool her boyfriend and her family about her pregnancy, Ndella additionally tricked her boyfriend by claiming that he had never given her money for commerce. He had bought cosmetics, wigs, and handbags worth about 1000 euros for her to sell. After the pregnancy situation, he asked for them back but she denied that he had ever given her anything. She had safely stored the goods, which she had indeed been selling one by one. The revenues allowed her to "*arranger mes petits problèmes*" (F: arrange my small problems). Although he could not prove what he had given to Ndella, he did call a police officer in an attempt to get the goods back. Ndella used the pregnancy situation against him, and argued to the police officer that her boyfriend had also tried to deceive and shame her by falsely claiming that she was pregnant. Recalling this memory of how the two had tricked Ndella's boyfriend and her family together made them laugh, because they had indeed been humorously deceitful. "*En ce moment j'étais une vraie actrice. Je tournais des films kay, comme pas possible!*" (F: At that moment I was a real actress. I was shooting incredible movies!).

Arame's assertion that Ndella is a trickster helps us to understand Ndella's acts to get out of the situation with her boyfriend and her pregnancy as tactics of humour and deceit. Ndella refused to take the sole responsibility for her pregnancy. Her boyfriend would soon return to Canada, where he also resided, and Ndella would be left to deal with the stigma of having a child out of wedlock. The way she handled this, making sure to avoid the stigma of a pre-marital pregnancy, but also still drawing a maximum amount of profit from the fact that he was considerably wealthier and had offered her products to sell, is indicative of Banégas and Warnier's (2001, 8) characterisation of much life in postcolonial Senegal as marked by a moral economy of cunning and resourcefulness.

Later on in their relationship, other problems emerged, for which their quick wit did not suffice as a solution. Soon after she had handled the situation with her by then ex-boyfriend, it was her friend who had introduced her to Arame who got her in trouble. Ndella had left some of the goods that her boyfriend had bought for her with this friend, who had helped sell the products, for which she would give part of the revenues to Ndella. When Ndella dropped by to collect her money, her friend refused to pay her. Thinking that it was a money issue, Ndella told her friend not to worry and to keep the money. When she noticed, however, that her friend started ignoring her when they ran into each other in their neighbourhood, she understood that the concern was not financial. Recounting how she lost her long-time friend, Ndella said:

Ici, on n'aime pas partager nos amies. Elle a dit à sa maman qu'elle ne voulait plus me fréquenter, parce qu'elle avait découvert qu'on est des lesbiennes. Puis, sa maman a vu ma sœur. Elle lui a raconté: 'il faut que tu dises à Ndella qu'elle arrête de fréquenter Arame, parce que Arame n'est pas bien, elle est lesbienne.' Voilà... ma sœur, puisque elle ne garde rien, elle est allée dire ça à ma maman. Les gens commençaient à m'ignorer. Moi je ne savais rien. Mais je vois que tout le monde change quoi (F: Here, we don't like to share our friends. She told her mother that she did not want to see me anymore because she had found out that Arame and I were lesbiennes. Then, her mother met my sister. She told her: 'you should tell Ndella to stop seeing Arame, because Arame is not a good person, she is a lesbienne.' My sister, because she doesn't keep anything to herself, told everything to my mother. People started ignoring me, but I had no clue what was going on. But slowly I saw that everyone was changing).

Exposing Ndella and Arame as *lesbiennes* was a way for her friend to hurt Ndella. Ndella was initially not alarmed by the fact that her family hardly spoke to her. She had not developed very close relationships with her parents or siblings because she had not grown up with them. One day, however, her parents called her and said that they wanted to talk to her. Ndella recounted that,

Ils n'ont pas prononcé le mot, mais ils ont dit: 'il faut que tu arrêtes li ngay dox. Tu traînes beaucoup dans la rue. Tu ne passes pas la journée. On ne sait pas où tu es. Tu as des matériels qu'on ne peut pas t'acheter. Tu as un téléphone cher.' Ils ont commencé par ça quoi. J'ai rien dit. J'étais surprise quoi. Pourquoi maintenant? Ici, les gens savent que tu fais ça, mbaraan, mais puisque tu apportes quelque chose, on ne dit rien. Après ils ont continué: 'on ne veut plus te voir avec ta copine là, Arame.' La nak, j'ai dit non (F: They didn't pronounce the word, but they said: 'you have to stop li ngay dox (W: the way you're behaving). You hang around on the streets a lot. You don't spend the day at home. We don't know where you are. You have things that we cannot buy for you. You have an expensive phone.' They started with that. I didn't say anything. I was surprised. Why now? Here, people know that you're doing that, mbaraan, but as long as you provide for things, people don't say anything. And then they continued: 'we don't want to see you anymore with your (girl)friend, Arame.'⁵² There, however, I said no).

Her parents' phrasing of Ndella's behaviour as "li ngay dox" (W: what you're doing, the way you're behaving) can be a discreet way of referring to (sexual) behaviour that is unspeakable. *Dox* (W: to walk, to move) is also used to criticise a woman's movement in public space, beyond their family's control. Here, Ndella's parents may have criticised her for leaving the house too much, and for engaging in relationships and activities that they had no grip on and that they could not take part in. Their problem with Ndella's relationship with Arame may have principally been a question of money and control, and less about their supposed same-sex intimacies, at least initially. Ndella explained that,

Peut-être ils savaient pas de l'existence [des relations amoureuses entre femmes]. Ils sont pas trop dans les réseaux sociaux. Ils savent pas ce qui se passe, qu'il y a des filles qui sont ensembles. Ma maman elle ignore tout [...] Mon papa nak, c'est en ce moment qu'il a répété le mot qu'il m'avait dit quand j'avais... je pense que j'avais onze ans. En ce moment il m'avait traité de caga [...] Plus tard, quand mon oncle m'avait convoqué pour une autre réunion avec la famille, ils ont demandé si Arame était une lesbienne. J'étais furieuse qu'ils m'avaient convoqué juste pour parler de ça. Ma mère a commencé à crier: 'ne me parle pas! On veut plus jamais te parler! Toi... ce que tu vis, on le sait tous!' (F: Maybe they didn't know the existence [of romantic relationships between women]. They are not very connected to social media. They don't know what's happening, that there are women who are together. My mother ignores everything [...] My father, however, it was at this moment that he repeated the word he used when I was... I think I was eleven years old. At this moment he called me caga [...] Later on, when my uncle summoned me for another family meeting, they asked me if Arame was a lesbienne. I was furious that they had summoned me just to talk

⁵² The French word "copine" can mean both female friend and girlfriend.

about this. My mother started screaming: 'don't talk to me! We don't want to talk to you again ever! You... what you are living, we all know it!').

A few days later, the situation had escalated further, and Ndella heard kids in her neighbourhood yell as she passed, "*Xool leen ki, faram jigéen la!*" (W: Look at her, her boyfriend is a girl!). This was when she realised that everyone knew. When she returned home in the evening, she talked to her mother once more. She started screaming again and, because it was late at night, neighbours came out to see what was happening. "*Nu mu tudd? Gouine, affaire yooyu... Elle a utilisé le mot*" (W/F: What's it called? Dyke, that stuff... She used the word). That is when she called Arame, who came to pick her up. The two left to stay with friends in another city for a couple of nights, after which Ndella moved in with Arame and her family in yet another city.

Although her family came after her to ask her to come back, the two managed to convince their families that Ndella had to stay in Thiès for work purposes. When Ndella did move in with them, Arame's mother convened the two women in her room and, Arame recounted, "*Elle nous a traité de tous les noms, elle nous a tout dit. 'Vous faites pas ça, vous êtes des femmes... tout le monde raconte n'importe quoi.' Mais tout le monde l'aime dans la maison. Elle a été une personne adorable. Maintenant on nous laisse*" (F: She called us all sorts of names. She told us everything. 'You don't do these things, you are women... people are saying all sorts of things, you know.' But everyone in the house loves her. She has been an adorable person. Now they leave us alone). Worried about what Ndella's stay with them would do to the image others have of Arame and the family, Arame's mother felt that she had to make clear to them that they should be concerned with how they behave, and with how others perceive them.

While they were at ease with Arame's family, Ndella's family continued to pressure Ndella to move back to Dakar. Ndella's mother emphasised that she still expected Ndella to get married. By then, Arame had started talking to her about the Yàlla-Yàlla, a sub group of the religious Murid brotherhood that she belonged to. Ndella accepted Arame's invitation to join her to gatherings of the Yàlla-Yàlla, where she met her future husband. He was Arame's *marabout* (religious guide), and he and Arame had been dating previously. Arame introduced Ndella to the *marabout*, who quickly showed romantic interest in her. When they became close, Arame was initially upset, but quickly realised that it could be good for Ndella to date him, and perhaps even marry him. And indeed, a couple of months into their relationship, he married Ndella. The two do not spend much time together, and Ndella has continued living with Arame. Since their marriage, Ndella said, "*Tout est ok dans la famille. Il n'y a plus de problèmes. Personne ne soupçonne plus rien. C'est une bonne couverture*" (F: But since then, everything is ok in the family. There are no more problems. Nobody suspects anything anymore. It's a good cover).

To which Arame confirmed,

Le respect est revenu quoi. On va ensemble là où on veut. Donc tout est ok, quoi. Manaam [W: c'est-à-dire], ils ont oublié toutes les histoires. Ils se disent que, bon, elle est mariée quoi. Maintenant, pourquoi j'ai accepté le mariage de Ndella avec le marabout? Il m'a carrément avoué qu'il était amoureux d'elle. Et qu'il lui voulait aucun mal. Moi aussi... même si nous étions ensemble, il y a toujours quelques rumeurs. Sa mère qui lui dit: il faut avoir un mari. Donc il y a des choses quoi. Elle n'était pas carrément en sécurité. Il nous restait un tout petit peu. Et si Ndella peut le supporter un tout petit peu, pourquoi pas se marier avec lui pour faire plaisir aux parents et à la société? Et ce serait une belle couverture pour nous. On peut vivre ce qu'on vit, sans que les autres s'en rendent compte (F: Respect has come back. We go together wherever we want. So everything is ok, you know. That is to say, they have forgotten all the stories. Now, why I accepted Ndella's marriage to the marabout? He told me straight out that he was in love with her. And that he meant her no harm. Me too... and even if we were together, there are still some rumours... her mother who tells her that she should have a husband. So there are things. She wasn't exactly safe. There was still something for us to do. And I said to myself, if Ndella can stand him a little bit, why not marry him, to please the parents and society. It would be a nice cover for us. We can continue what we are doing, without others noticing).

Ndella's marriage to the *marabout* had been a sacrifice that had allowed them to continue their relationship. They had considered another option, namely travel to Europe, but they had realised that this would be too complicated. Arame said,

C'est pour ça qu'on a choisi cette méthode. Parce que ça fait mal aussi de se voir tout le temps indexé par les gens. Que les gens te regardent d'un autre œil. Ça fait mal. Mieux vaut nak, être un tricheur, comme on vit dans notre société hypocrite. Qu'est-ce que tu peux faire? Mieux vaut être un tricheur comme eux. Pourtant c'est ça... ce que tu vis, c'est personnel, c'est pas la peine d'écrire ici 'Je suis lesbienne.' C'est quoi, pour que les gens sachent? Si on avait pu voyager, on n'aurait même pas pensé à ce mariage. Mais c'était la meilleure option (F: That's why we chose this method [of having a child with their marabout]. Because it hurts to be critiqued all the time. That people look at you differently. That hurts. It is better to be a trickster, as we live in our hypocritical society. What can you do? It is better to be a trickster like them. That's it you know... it is personal, it makes no sense to write here [she points at her forehead] 'I am a lesbienne.' What is that, so that people know? If we could have travelled, we would not even have thought about this marriage. But it was the best available option).⁵³

⁵³ Interview with Ndella and Arame, 30 September 2020.

That Ndella and Arame thought that marriage was the best option to regain respect from their families is no surprise. Marriage and parenthood remain central to obtaining adult status in Senegal (Gilbert 2017). Marriage remains the only socially accepted union from which families can be built, and cohabitation without marriage is frowned upon. Women in particular are stigmatised for perceived promiscuity when they live independently from their families or a husband. Marriage also carries religious importance, as people believe that it is through marriage that a woman can access heaven (Dial 2008; Gilbert 2017). Globalisation and urbanisation have led to changing ideas about marriage, and among young urbanites, polygyny and the idea of marriage as a contract between two families are losing appeal. Middle-class women increasingly emphasise companionate marriage and emotional proximity (Neveu Kringelbach 2016), and, as a result of economic precarity and high emigration rates, an increasing number of people find themselves in transnational marriages (Hannaford and Foley 2015). The facts that marriage nevertheless remains a central social and religious expectation in Senegal, and women who have passed their twenties constantly feel the pressure to marry, does not mean that women do not find ways around marriage (Miller 2024). Women's possibilities to postpone, forgo, or end their marriages depend on their ability to perform other gendered norms such as caring for kin, and raising an income to provide for parents and other family members. As the story of Ndella and Arame shows, marriage does not signal an end to same-sex relationships; moreover, marriages can also be entered strategically. Their consideration of the options to travel abroad, and to marry the *marabout* were attempts to enhance their possibilities of living together and fulfilling their dreams. These dreams certainly included living together as a couple, and to have a family together, but they also included professional ambitions. Ndella's marriage to their *marabout* was not only the best available option for the two to have a child, but it also helped them, said Arame,

Pour avoir la paix. On vise loin, on vise à devenir des personnes publiques. On veut avoir un impact dans la société, occuper certaines rôles. C'était évident qu'on devait le faire, parce qu'ici, on juge l'apparence. Donc tout ce que tu peux faire pour masquer tes erreurs, tu le fais, si tu veux être une figure publique. Tu comprends? Si un jour je serai un ministre, ou quoi que ce soit, les gens diront comme: 'Ndax xam ngeen lesbienne la woon?' C'est sûr que les gens vont sortir et dire aux autres, 'tu vois cette femme? C'est une lesbienne, je la connais bien' (F/W: To be at peace. We aim far, we aim to become public figures. We want to have an impact on society, and occupy certain public positions. So, it was evident that we needed to do this. Because here, we judge on the basis of appearances. So, everything you can do to cover up your mistakes, you will do it, if you aim to become a public figure. Do you understand that? If one day I will be a minister, or whatever, people can be like: 'Do you know that she was a lesbienne?' It is for sure that people will come out and tell others 'do you see that woman? She is a lesbienne, I know her well').

“Et ça détruit ton image” (F: And that destroys your image), Ndella added.

To avoid a tainted image, Ndella and Arame have shown a wide range of *pexe jigéen* (W: women’s solutions): creative responses to navigate dissident desires, material precarity, family expectations, and the looming threat of stigmatisation. Ndella’s decision to practice *mbaraan* was informed by a desire for financial autonomy, for having the possibility to pursue one’s own choice of education, and for maintaining a sense of dignity – making a good impression in the eyes of others. The way the story unfolded, with Ndella first being called *caga* and later *lesbienne* together with Arame, to being told to “stop what she was doing,” shows the risk of her family actively not-knowing turning into overt stigma when relationships are not carefully managed according to the expectations of reciprocity. Ndella and Arame had to navigate the tensions of becoming “known” (exposed) as *lesbiennes* in a context of anti-queer sentiments, which have changed the ways in which women’s relationships are viewed. To do so, they had to craft other solutions, such as Ndella’s marriage to their *marabout*, so that their families would stop being concerned by their relationship. Arame’s suggestion that “it is better to be a trickster like them,” points at the trickster’s capacity to hold up a mirror to society. The trickster plays with people’s perceptions, appearing to others in a certain way while also remaining elusive. The trickster reveals that an appearance is sometimes just that: an external show, an impression that does not necessarily reflect the full reality. Again, not allowing yourself to be in full view might be how you survive.

***Kóoba*: Knowledge of the night**

Ndella, who had done *mbaraan*, first to pay her own school fees, and later to pay her rent and to solve her family’s financial issues, reveals how *mbaraan* can be a form of transgressing gender norms for women as they take control over their sexual, emotional, and economic lives to accomplish their own ends. People engage in commercial sex, Hunter (2002, 101) argues, “not as passive victims, but in order to access power and resources that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures.” *Mbaraan* is identified in Dakar as a recent phenomenon and the term itself has only been in circulation since the 1990s (Morales-Libove 2005). Urban poverty has made various forms of sexual-economic exchange, including *mbaraan*, common practice, and these have come to play an important role in the lives of many young women as they seek ways to get by (Biaya 2001). Abdou Salam Fall (2007, 169) describes *mbaraan* as “une forme de partenariat multiple développé avec des soupirants dans un jeu de négociation informelle en entretenant l’espoir auprès du partenaire occasionnel de son choix privilégié... permet aux filles... de se faire dépanner financièrement” (F: form of multiple partnership developed with suitors in a game of informal negotiation by keeping the hope alive with the occasional partner that he is the preferred choice... [which] allows women to be supported financially). *Mbaraan* may have its origins in

women's habits of gathering multiple suitors who would enter into competition with one another to win the love of this woman (Aduayi-Diop 2010). By showering her with gifts, they would try to outcompete their rivals. This "game of negotiation" (F: *jeu de négociation*) (Fall 2007, 169) alludes to the ambiguity and fleetingness of women's positions in these relationships.

Mbaraan is thus related to resourcefulness. According to Fouquet (2007), the social and moral legitimacy of *mbaraan* comes with women's craftiness and resourcefulness with respect to navigating multiple boyfriends simultaneously without visibly displaying an interest in material gains of money and gifts. Playing this game is not only about extracting money from male partners, but it also relates to the craftiness to maintain ambiguity of one's intimate relationships vis-à-vis family. Elusiveness and ambiguity are key to such craftiness and they manifest in the mobility of women's residence, the multiplicity of names and appellations they adopt, their work, and the networks of friends that they tap into at different moments. Although *mbaraaneuses* (women practicing *mbaraan*) are considered to be materialistic and unscrupulous, they are not as badly perceived as "prostitutes" (Fouquet 2011). Partly, this is because of the discretion with which *mbaraan* takes place: women who do *mbaraan* are secretive about the nature of their relationships. Space also plays a role: where *mbaraaneuses* are not linked to a particular milieu, *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night) are often found in bars and night clubs. The practice of *mbaraan* also reveals, however, how most women continue to rely on men to make ends meet (Foley and Dramé 2013).

If prostitution is associated with a particular milieu, and if women who are known to frequent this milieu risk stigmatisation as *caga*, *ñi génn guddi* nevertheless display craftiness to escape being labelled *caga* and the stigma that goes with this. The choice to speak about "those who go out" is one way in which women speak discreetly about their connections to nightlife. Maintaining a sense of elusiveness is key for women who refer to themselves and their friends as *ñi génn guddi* or *kóoba*. *Kóoba* is a code name for social outcasts, including *ñi génn guddi*, and it refers to a variety of dissident practices in nightlife, as well as to the knowledge that is required to navigate the pleasures and dangers of this life successfully. Elusiveness allows women to carve out space for their dissident lives without compromising their relationships with family and outsiders to the milieu.

Coura was 29 years old when I met her in Saint-Louis in the summer of 2021. I had met her during a bar visit to meet a sex worker association in Saint-Louis. I had gone to the bar with Aminata who, as a peer educator, organised such activities in different bars in the city. On evenings like these, she would encourage women whom she knew lacked a *carnet sanitaire* (F: health booklet), to come to the health clinic where she worked for a free HIV-test and free condoms. Coura and I had a brief chat on this evening in the bar,

and we exchanged numbers so that we could meet again in Dakar, where she would soon travel in order to “*lijjanti Tabaski*” (W: prepare for Tabaski [the Islamic feast of Sacrifice], earn money).⁵⁴ “*Adduna dafa metti*” (W: life is difficult) she said, and preparations for Tabaski, included buying expensive *getzner* fabric for outfits for herself and her family, a wig or new hair braids, as well as onions and potatoes for the feast meal.⁵⁵ “*Te suma xeesul, nit ñi dañuy wax: dafa am perte, moo tax mu ñuul*” (W: And if I’m not white [clear skin, achieved with whitening lotions], people will say: she lost something, that’s why she’s black). Indeed, when I met Coura a week later in Dakar, and I explained to her again the purpose of my research, mentioning that I was studying the lives of *travailleuses de sexe* (F: “sex workers”), she started by saying that she is not a “sex worker.” An hour into our conversation, I learned that Coura has a *carnet sanitaire*, which means that she is registered as a “prostitute” with the health authorities. Initially responding negatively to my question was a way of confronting me with the prejudices I might have about her life as a “sex worker.” Her response had puzzled me, after all, I had met her at an outreach activity of a sex worker organisation. It revealed, however, that a category like “sex worker” has limited explanatory power: it works primarily for legal and health authorities to “identify” people and to execute health projects. In her own self-understanding, *ñi génn guddi* was a more apt term to describe the propriety with which she navigated going out at night for commercial sex with finding other ways of earning money, and living her life as a respectable woman who lives with her mother most of the time.

The discourses around “sex work” in Senegal are informed by the legal regulation of commercial sexuality. Selling sex is legal, provided that so-called prostitutes register in a government clinic, go for regular medical screening, and attend education sessions (Foley 2017). It is illegal for anyone under the age of twenty-one to practice prostitution, and younger women, and anyone else who is unregistered, are considered *clandestines*, and they work illegally.⁵⁶ The result of registering as a “prostitute” includes access to testing for sexually transmitted diseases and the provision of condoms, but it also works as evidence that a woman is a “prostitute.” Registered “prostitutes” facilitate the state’s desire to control women’s sexuality, whereas *clandestines* threaten the efficacy of STI and HIV prevention and treatment programmes, thereby posing a threat to the health of the nation (ibid.). In fact, the regulation of prostitution functions as a mechanism for excluding women who do not conform to sexual norms, and it provides a framework for control over women’s sexuality (Bowen and Bungay 2016; Tamale 2011b). Moreover, the stigmatisation that registered “prostitutes” face inside the institutions

⁵⁴ Tabaski is the name used in Senegal for Eid al-Adha, the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice, which honours the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice one of his sons as an act of obedience to Allah. Before he could sacrifice his son, however, Allah offered him a lamb to sacrifice instead. Every year, Muslims commemorate this intervention by ritually sacrificing sheep.

⁵⁵ Popular, high-quality fabrics that people buy to make outfits particularly for festive occasions. They are produced in Austria and they are very popular in Senegal and other West African countries.

⁵⁶ Male “sex workers” are also excluded from registration as same-sex sexual conduct is illegal.

that provide medical care for them feeds into, and legitimises, the stigmatisation of “prostitutes” in society at large (Foley 2017; Fouquet 2007).

Women like Coura are wary of the surveillance that comes with registering, and they have devised ways to avoid such control. Using a *certificat de perte* (F: proof of loss) after reporting a lost identity card at the police, Coura could register at the health clinic under another name.⁵⁷ She obtained a new identity card after she lost the previous one, yet she has carefully kept her *certificat de perte*, so that she does not have to confirm her identity with her ID card. She attends a clinic outside of Dakar for the monthly medical check-ups that come with registration as a “prostitute,” to avoid running into too many people she might know from downtown Dakar. Her ways of navigating *clandestinité* and registration are another example of not coming into full view as a way to survive.

Beyond the health clinic, she goes by different names and she has multiple sim cards. Her family does not know the name that she goes by at night, which is again different from the one with which she is registered at the health clinic. Such practices to remain elusive reflect the multiple positions that women like Coura embody, at once dutiful daughters and so-called wicked women. She had moved to Dakar in 2012 and started going out at night as a way to support her mother financially. Her mother is a *voyante* (F: clairvoyant) and, according to Coura, used to be fairly successful. She had an important, wealthy client in France, but she got into financial trouble when she lost this person’s business. Although Coura does not know what happened to the woman and why she stopped consulting Coura’s mother, she suggested that another *voyante* must have done something to sabotage her work, out of jealousy. Determined to support her mother financially, Coura shared her earnings with her mother. Knowing very well the advantages and disadvantages of both registration and clandestinity, she navigates the possibilities and constraints that both afford her as she moves between work – commercial sex and petty commerce – and locations, between Dakar where she goes out at night and Saint-Louis where she lives with her mother. In all these different locations, she conceals different layers of her life and body to maintain an image of respectability (Meiu 2020).

“*Je n’aime pas les nigériens, j’aime les parisiens*” (F: I don’t like Nigerians, I like Parisians), said Coura as she turned down a man who had presented himself to her as an “*américain*,” someone who had been to the United States. I had joined her to a club in a residential neighbourhood in Dakar. He spoke to her in English as he proposed to take her out for a drink. Coura did not believe that he had been to the U.S., and she suggested that he was Nigerian.⁵⁸ She preferred people who had been to Paris, a city that she equated with class. “*Tu les connais, les tubaab yu ñuul?*” (F/W: Do you know them, the whites who are black?),

⁵⁷ Interview with Coura, 25 June 2021.

⁵⁸ Fieldnotes, 16 July 2021.

she asked me. Being born in Saint-Louis, she considered herself to be someone with class too, and therefore one of the names that she goes by in nightlife includes a reference to her hometown. “*Tu sais, les Saint-Louisiennes sont très civilisées, plus que les Dakaroises. Tu le vois, elles ont fait les bancs*” (F: You know, Saint-Louisiennes are very civilised, more so than Dakaroises. You’ll notice it, they have been to school). Coura’s reference to women from Saint-Louis as particularly civilised has historical roots. As the first capital of French West Africa and a creation of the French in 1658, Saint-Louis remains in the memory of Senegalese a place of nobility, economic grandeur, and cosmopolitanism (Kane Lo 2014). Having turned down the *américain* whom she thought was a *nigérian*, she turned to me and said that she would soon head to Almadies, one of the chic neighbourhoods in Dakar that is known for its high-end bars and clubs. “*Je ne fréquente pas les endroits comme [nom du bar] où ils te paient 5,000 FCFA, et où tu dois travailler toute la nuit pour avoir suffisamment d’argent*” (F: I don’t go out to places like [name of bar] where they pay you 5,000 FCFA (8 euros), and where you will have to work the entire night to earn enough money). She hissed and shook her head as she continued, “*Quand je vais à [nom du bar] aux Almadies, je rencontre des hommes qui t’emmènent au Radisson. Ils t’emmènent à des vies que tu n’as jamais connu*” (F: When I go to [name of bar] in Almadies, I find men who will take me to the Radisson hotel. They take you to lives you never knew).

Fouquet (2007) refers to clandestine “sex workers” adoption of ideas, habits, and know-how from other parts of the worlds – Coura’s reference to “lives you never knew” – as “strategies of extraversion.” Fouquet draws upon Bayart’s (1999) conceptualisation of “strategies of extraversion” as the ways in which postcolonial African political elites took advantage of their dependency on the West, to their own benefit. They adopted, for example, Western norms of democracy in ways that consolidated their own power. Strategies of extraversion could include, in addition to the political domain, the economic or cultural domain – the main idea being that “sovereignty in Africa is exercised through the creation and management of dependence” (ibid., 228). Women’s strategies of extraversion, Fouquet argues, show how worldly knowledge, ideas, and practices constitute a form of self-making for women. Such strategies concern the adoption of elements from other cultures to obtain local objectives in a way that creatively adjusts and transfers the meanings of such practices (Fouquet 2007, 104; see Bayart 1996). Emphasising her appearance and her work as civilised and chic, Coura shaped her “desire for elsewhere” (Fouquet 2007) through her presence in nightlife. Going out at night allows women like Coura to construct a different life story – one with financial autonomy – to escape from some forms of social control, and to gain access to the Western world by learning about other cultures from *tubaab* (W: white, European/Western person) and *tubaab yu ñuul* (W: whites who are black, i.e. Senegalese who have been to Europe) boyfriends and clients.

For Coura, this was much more attractive than the lives of many married women around her. Comparing her life to that of the maid who lives with her and her mother, after Coura learned how her husband treated her, Coura considered her life as an unmarried woman who “goes out at night” to be preferable:

Il ne lui donne jamais 1.000 F. Mais elle aime son mari tellement... moi je comprends pas. C'est ça que je dis quand je dis que les hommes vont te tuer... ils font tout avec toi. Ils couchent avec toi, ils t'ençeignent, mais ils ne partagent jamais une centime. Ça c'est pas une vie dé! Tsssh. Je ne l'accepte pas. (F: He never gives her 1,000 F CFA. But she loves her husband so much... I don't understand. That's what I mean when I say that men will kill you... they do everything with you. They sleep with you, they impregnate you, but they never share a cent. That's not a life! Tsssh. I don't accept that).⁵⁹

Navigating stigma is also about finding ways to explain one's behaviour as the better option. Comparing the affordances of “going out at night” with the hardships of marriage helped Coura to legitimise her choices as driven by good intentions. Women may explain their reasons for “going out at night” as being borne out of economic distress rather than out of a quest for pleasure, and their unmarried status as a result of the absence of a suitable husband or the wish to continue with studies and pursue a professional career.⁶⁰ Coura explained her current choice for “going out” instead of getting married as a more preferable option in view of the suffering that many women endure in their marriage. While Coura also relies on men for money, she experiences more autonomy in acquiring and subsequently spending this money. “Going out at night” can give women this autonomy to craft their own trajectories, to discover other worlds through their encounters with others in nightlife. Clandestinity, Fouquet (2007, 108) argues,

Est une stratégie qui permet de synthétiser des rôles parfois opposés ou très distants [...] de manipuler son image pour tirer profit des occasions: autant de 'savoir-faire,' indexés à des 'savoir être,' qui ouvrent certains possibles, autorisent l'accès à certains gains matériels et symboliques (F: Is a strategy that makes it possible to synthesise roles that are sometimes opposed or very distant [...] to manipulate one's image in order to take advantage of opportunities: so much 'know-how,' indexed to 'savoir-être,' which opens up certain possibilities, authorising access to certain material and symbolic gains).

⁵⁹ Conversation with Coura, 25 June 2021.

⁶⁰ Since the 1990s, many Senegalese men have migrated abroad in search for work. Furthermore, high unemployment levels in Senegal have made it increasingly difficult for people to get married. To remain unmarried until well in your thirties is thus no longer necessarily deemed wicked (see Buggenhagen 2012, 97).

Ñi génn guddi, in other words, create a moral economy of resourcefulness and not-knowing that characterises urban life for women in Senegal. For Fanta too, who was thirty-nine years old when I met her in 2022, marriage appeared tougher than her previous life as a *ku génn* (W: someone who goes out). When I met her at a social event arranged by a sex worker organisation, she said that she had stopped “going out” four years earlier when she got married. After two decades of going out as an unmarried woman, she got married in 2018 when her then boyfriend, previously her client, had, quite suddenly, visited Fanta’s family to ask for her hand. Fanta had received a phone call from her mother who asked her to come home immediately. Fanta briefly discussed the matter with women from the sex worker association that she was in a workshop with at that moment. The chair of the association encouraged her to go home and accept the marriage, because being a married woman was considered a better option than being a *ku génn*. Reflecting on what has changed over the last four years since her marriage to Moussa, Fanta sighed,

Depuis quatre ans, damay souffrir. Génn moo gën a néex séy. Ci milieu dama fa gis bânneex. Ci milieu danga fay gis lu néex te danga fay gis lu bon. Lépp am na fa. Dëgg la, man dama fa gis bânneex. Ndaxte gis naa fa ay góor yu fonk jigéen. Dañu lay wax ay wax yu néex, dañu xam amour. Dañu gën a xam amour sama jëkkër. Bi ñu séye ba léegi gisuma amour ci moom (W/F: For four years, I have been suffering. Going out is better than marriage. In that environment [of going out at night], I experienced joy. You see good things and bad things. It’s all there. It’s true that I’ve seen lots of good things, I’ve met men there with respect for women. They talk to you in a nice way, they know love. They know love better than my husband. Ever since I married him, I haven’t seen love).⁶¹

When asking her what this joy was or meant to her, she said: “*Danga am xalis, danga teeral sa bopp*” (W: You have money, you look after yourself). The satisfaction that she experienced from “going out” was enhanced by the ability to sustain herself with the money that she earned. With the Wolof expression “*teeral sa bopp*,” which resembles the English expression to stand on one’s own two feet, Fanta conveyed the autonomy that she had when she was able to look after herself and her children.

Fanta had started going out at night at a very young age as she regularly accompanied her grandmother into town to beg. She recounted how she was about thirteen or fourteen years old when she first received a significant sum from an older man, who had invited her to join him at the bar across the street. She learned that the women who hung around the area were mostly waiting to be solicited for sex, and after that first encounter she joined them. The fact that she had accompanied her grandmother to beg in Dakar’s city

⁶¹ Interview with Fanta, 21 March 2022.

centre, indicates the poor background that she is from. “*Suma jangóon duma génn*” (W: If I had been to school, I would not go out), she said as she complained that she had not been able to secure a partly paid position at the sex worker association that she was a member of. Unable to secure a stable, if only partial, income through the sex worker association, Fanta sought other ways to support herself and her three young children.

Having children complicates how women maintain *sutura* with regards to their commercial sex activities, because others may know that these children were born out of wedlock. Nevertheless, women craft ways to avoid family members knowing that they still “go out at night” for survival, for example by maintaining physical distance from their families, which allows women to tell a different story about how they earn an income. Because having young children may interfere with working at night, women may leave their children with their parents, and send home money on a monthly basis, to facilitate the children’s care (Venables 2007). Fanta had also asked her mother to care for her two sons when they were young, when Fanta still “went out at night.” This way, a woman’s children are shielded from the work that their mother does, and she can avoid gossip in the neighbourhood about being a “bad” mother who exposes her children to supposedly immoral practices.

When her mother’s health deteriorated to the point that she could no longer look after the children and ensure that they would go to school, Fanta took her children home with her. By then she had married Moussa and had a daughter with him. To be able to pay for her sons’ school fees – both had absent fathers, with one living abroad and the other one being in prison the last time she had heard – she found a job as a cleaner. Moussa, her husband, and the father of her four year-old daughter did not contribute structurally to Fanta’s expenses or those of her children. She worked for the cleaning company in the early mornings, so that she could be home with her children for lunch, but this job does not pay much, and she has lost the financial independence that she had prior to her marriage. Pointing at the vinyl flooring in her room, she said: “*Xoolal bi mu xottiku. Bu bees bi 6,000 FCFA kese la jar, waaye bëggul ko jënd. Est-ce que c’est normal? [...] Jafe na lire intentions góoru Sénégal. Aka mën nañu fénn!*” (W/F: Look at how it’s torn. A new one only costs 6,000 FCFA (about nine euros) but he won’t buy it. Is that normal? [...] It’s hard to read Senegalese men’s intentions. Oh how they are good at lying!).⁶² The financial autonomy of being able to provide for one’s needs, which, in addition to having a clean, proper room, includes being able to offer new outfits to one’s family for religious holidays like Tabaski (Eid al-Adha) and Korité (Eid al-Fitr), had made Fanta proud, and had gained her respect from her family for whom she was able to provide. She lost this ability upon marriage, when she was asked to stop going out and stay at home to look after the children.

⁶² Interview with Fanta, 25 March 2022.

The sense of autonomy that going out affords women does not mean that they do not depend on others. Under conditions of economic precarity, people need networks to make ends meet. Moreover, with the particular dangers that are associated with the milieu of going out, which can include violent clients, the risk of contracting STIs, and the influence of alcohol and drugs, sharing tips and tricks on how to navigate such dangers is essential. Support networks come in the form of sex worker organisations, of which Fanta was also a part, but there are also more informal and direct ways of support that women sustain together. Fanta told me,

Bëgguma ànd ak samay morom. Caga, góor-jigéen ak gouines, ñoom ñépp benn lañu, dañu vulgaire. Say morom duñu lay jox cér. Damay ànd ak samay dóom wala samay rakk wala samay yaay (W: I don't want to hang out with my peers. "Prostitutes," gays and lesbiennes, they're all the same, they're vulgar. Peers don't give you respect. I hang out with my children, my younger siblings or my mothers).

One of the children she referred to is Ngoné, whom she was introduced to by a friend. When they met, Ngoné had recently moved to Dakar in search of work, and her dream was to open a boutique to sell clothes. She had started going out at night in order to earn the money needed to set up such a business. Her intention was to do this temporarily to save enough money. As soon as she opened her business, "*do amaat jot puur góor*" (W: you won't have time for men anymore). She looked forward to that moment, because "*góor dañu lay sonnal*" (W: men, they fatigue you).⁶³ Ngoné had come to see Fanta today because she wanted to do an HIV-test. She is not registered as a "prostitute," so she does not go for the regular medical check-ups that registered "prostitutes" do. Knowing that Fanta has good access to a health clinic via the sex worker organisation that she is a member of, Ngoné had come to ask Fanta to take her there. Fanta had hosted Ngoné for a couple of months earlier, when the two had met in a bar, and Ngoné had told her that she had left her room after the neighbourhood had started insulting her and calling her *caga*. Fanta explained that this was "*ndax li mu sol. Stylam dafa vulgaire. Léegi tan na sax*" (W: Because of what she wears. Her style is vulgar. It has improved now).

Fanta provides Ngoné with advice on how to avoid being stigmatised, and she has encouraged Ngoné to change her way of dressing, at least during the day. Keeping up a respectful appearance is important to be able to maintain a sense of not-knowing about one's whereabouts. In the months that Ngoné stayed with Fanta, the two went out together, and Fanta helped Ngoné find her way in Dakar's nightlife. "*Milieu bi dafa graw, danga fa gis ay nit yu bon. Bëgguma sama doom di ko dund*" (W: The environment is bad, you see bad people there. I don't want my children to go through this.) By advising Ngoné about places, people, and practices to avoid, she hoped to spare her of some of

⁶³ Conversation with Ngoné, 21 March 2022.

the bad things that can happen in this milieu. “*Dafa niite*” (W: She is lucid), Ngoné said about Fanta’s advice. “*Dama téel a am fit, moo tax*” (W: I was courageous early on, that’s why), Fanta added in agreement. Her long-standing experience of going out at night to various places in Dakar, including in the more dangerous zones on the outskirts of Dakar, where international truck drivers were stationed, taught her the necessary courage to survive in this environment.

When Fanta speaks about her children, she signals a relationship to often younger, less experienced *ñi génn guddi* whom she familiarises with the milieu and provides guidance and advice. While acknowledging the difficulties that she faces as a *ku génn* in Dakar, the formation of close bonds with other women who go out at night has allowed Fanta to learn and transmit ways to survive in a challenging context, and create a life that may be more liveable than married life as she is currently experiencing it. For women like Coura and Fanta, elusiveness has been a key tactic for playing with people’s perceptions as a way to avoid stigma. The multiple identities that Coura takes on allow her to navigate and embody different positionalities and to draw on what these afford her. Fanta’s mothering relationship to younger women in the nightlife milieu indicates how resourcefulness and not-knowing are practices that are learned and transmitted through and to others. An analysis of these bonds are at the heart of the next chapter, in which I elaborate how women cultivate kinship bonds that enable them to create and transmit such knowledge and know-how.

Where a woman like Coura maintains elusiveness through a refusal to identify (register) as a “prostitute,” going by multiple names, and navigating her way in nightlife by seeking to go out to “classy” places, other women made use of the possibilities that religion affords women to adopt different, perhaps masculine, ways of dress. Religious allegiance and appearance also play a role in women’s attempts to maintain a sense of elusiveness and, paradoxically, religion creates space for dissident practices.

Religious ambiguities

Fama, a 27 year-old *lesbienne* who rented a room with her girlfriend in Dakar, told me how she had adjusted her sales ware when the *khalifa* (religious authority) of the city of Touba had prohibited *tiaya*, harem pants worn by the religious Baay Faal community, for women. Fama sold clothing to her network of *jump* (masculine-presenting women) friends, and the outfits that she sold for religious occasions such as the Magal – the annual pilgrimage of Murids to the city of Touba to commemorate the exile of the founder of the brotherhood, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba – were usually outfits that the religious Baay Faal community wore. The wearing of trousers was already prohibited for women in Touba, but *tiaya*, which are part of the *njaxas* (patchwork) outfit of Baay Faal, had

always been an accepted for women Baay Faal.⁶⁴ The *khalifa's* prohibition of *tiaya* for women coincided with an increase in anti-queer debates in 2021, after a large anti-queer demonstration had been organised in May 2021, and a proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ identities was being prepared. Fama, who, like many of her *jump* friends, felt comfortable in Baay Faal outfits precisely because they were not so feminine, quickly adjusted her stock for the Magal of 2021. Instead of *tiaya*, she now sold wide *boubou* dresses, still in Baay Faal style. Adopting a Baay Faal identity had provided space for Fama and her friends to present in a masculine fashion, even if she has had to adjust her style in response to growing anti-queer sentiments. Playing with people's perceptions and maintaining a sense of elusiveness around one's identities is crucial when public debates increasingly revolve around identifying sexually dissident behaviour.

Groups like the Baay Faal, and the Yàlla-Yàlla to which Ndella and Arame belonged, afford women some leeway from normative femininity. Baay Faal are, like Yàlla-Yàlla, a sub-group within the Murid brotherhood, and they are often recognisable by their patchwork clothing and dreadlocks. Their plain physical appearance is part of the embodiment of Baay Faal identity, which is further built through their manual labour for their *khalifa*, and a rejection of worldly luxury. Although the Murid brotherhood has shown conservatism with regards to gender and sexual norms, demonstrated by the *khalifa's* support for the anti-queer demonstrations and the proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ sexualities, the brotherhood paradoxically also accommodates marginal (gender) identities. Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla perspectives on spirituality have set them apart from dominant norms of religious piety and gender expressions. Drawing on a grammar of suffering as a means to come closer to God and to grow spiritually, Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla embody asceticism through modest and simple appearances, including patchwork clothing and dreadlocks (Audrain 2004; D. Ndiaye 2020). Both groups impose less religious constraints on people, not restricting the consumption of weed and alcohol for example, whereby they accommodate behaviour that is otherwise frowned upon in society (Havard 2001). For *lesbiennes*, adopting a Baay Faal or Yàlla-Yàlla identity allows them to tacitly transgress gender norms, embodying a certain masculinity that is tolerated by society. Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla are somewhat socially marginalised, but their followers nevertheless find comfort in their belonging to these religious groups (D. Ndiaye 2020), as it allows many youth to construct their own ethical, critical, religious subjectivities (Audrain 2004).

Like the vast majority of the Senegalese population, all of my interlocutors were Muslim, with different degrees of practice. Most of them did not, however, perceive their Muslim faith to be irreconcilable with having same-sex lovers. Some of my interlocutors did consider same-sex practices to be a sin, but they relativised it by saying that no one

⁶⁴ Women Baay Faal are sometimes called Yaay Faal.

is perfect and that everyone is somehow sinning. More often, however, they would say that God had made them this way, and that he would not have made them as such if he did not accept *lesbiennes*. Whether they found they were in sin or not, many of my interlocutors shared the opinion that Astou shared when she said to me, “*C’est comme un virus qui entre dans ton sang. Quand tu as commencé, c’est difficile d’arrêter*” (F: It’s like a virus that enters your blood, once you’ve started, it is difficult to stop).⁶⁵ Astou was in her early thirties when I met her in 2020. Her particular, and changing, relation to religion sheds light on what religious faith can bring women, both spiritually as well in terms of finding a space for themselves in Senegal as masculine-presenting women. Exploring Astou’s trajectory with the Yàlla-Yàlla gives insight into how women search for meaning-making and legitimation in their lives. At the same time, religious convictions may force people to show their true colours, and as women become more embedded in a religious community – for example through membership of a *dahira*, predominantly urban prayer circles of Murids that function both as religious gatherings and important networks of socialisation among Murid followers (Babou 2002) – these communities and their leaders (*marabouts*) may, at a certain moment, ask women to renounce dissident practices and to show religious piety.

Astou has worked as a primary school teacher in a rural area in northern Senegal since 2018. She comes from a modest family background, and because her father is blind and has been an active member of an association for blind people, Astou benefited from a scholarship to attend school. Very committed to learning, she was top of the class in both French and Arabic. When narrating her life until now, she remarked that she has always had two sides: first, she went to a Franco-Arabic school, where she received both a religious and secular-French education. She was good at, and enjoyed, both French and Arabic. At primary school, she recalled, she was very pious, prayed a lot, was veiled, and she would refuse to join in celebrating Christian religious feasts such as Christmas.⁶⁶ When she reached middle school, she changed to a French school. At this school, she befriended a group of girls who, Astou recalled, took pleasure in talking about the boys they fancied and who fancied them. Instead of covering her body with long dresses and a veil, Astou started dressing in a very feminine way, in tight-fitting tops, skinny jeans, and short skirts. She recounted how she experienced “*un dé clic*” (F: a click), however, when she was about sixteen years old. “*Les seuls moments où je me sentais moi-même, c’était pendant les cours d’éducation physique. Je me sapais tellement en tenue de sport, et qui dit tenue de sport, dit tenue d’homme*” (F: The only moments when I really felt myself, was during physical education classes. I dressed so well in sports outfits, and whoever says sports outfit, says men’s outfit). Soon, the sports outfits that she wore for physical education classes at school

⁶⁵ Interview with Astou, 26 February 2020.

⁶⁶ Many Senegalese are proud to say that Muslims invite Christian friends and neighbours to their celebrations such as Tabaski and Korité, and, vice versa, Christians will invite their Muslim neighbours and friends to Christian celebrations such as Christmas and Easter.

became her daily outfits. When a fire had destroyed all her clothes, “*C’est là que je me suis dit que.. ça c’est un signe, c’est un signe pour m’habiller enfin comme je veux*” (F: That’s when I told myself that... that is a sign, it’s a sign to finally dress as I want). At some point,

Tout le monde savait que j’étais lesbienne. Je le montrais vraiment, je draguais ouvertement les filles dans la rue. Je me considérais comme un homme, donc je croyais avoir le droit de le faire. C’est ainsi que les gens ont su que j’étais lesbienne. Je n’ai même pas pensé aux conséquences (F: Everybody knew that I was a lesbienne. I really showed it, I openly flirted with girls on the streets. I considered myself a man, so I thought I had the right to do so. This is how people knew I was a lesbienne. I did not even think about the consequences).

Feeling emboldened by her newfound style, she further challenged gender norms by going out whenever and wherever she wanted. She said, “*Je ne pouvais pas rester tranquille deux jours sans faire des bêtises, non. Je fugeais, j’allais chez des copines tu vois. C’était le bordel. Si j’étais pas assez intelligente...*” (F: Not two days would go by without me doing something stupid. I fled, away from home. I stayed with girlfriends. It was a mess. If I had not been smart enough...). When I asked her what “stupid” things she did, she responded:

Tu sais, dans notre mentalité, dans notre culture, tu ne peux pas dire à un homme: tu dois dormir à telle heure, tu dois être à la maison à telle heure. Un homme c’est un homme, tu le laisses faire ce qu’il veut. Et moi, c’est ça que je voulais en fait. Pouvoir sortir, aller, rentrer à l’heure où je voulais rentrer. Donc, c’était pas méchant. Moi, au moins, c’était pas la cigarette, c’était pas l’alcool et tout. Non, c’était pas ça. C’était juste un désir de free. Un désir de liberté que je voulais exercer aussi. Un désir d’homme qui peut à tout moment imposer son point de vue à tout le monde. En fait c’était plus ça. Puis, voilà, je fuguais, je partais... On m’appelait au téléphone, je répondais pas. Voilà, donc ma mère m’a expulsé de la maison à plusieurs reprises. Et je dormais dans la rue. (F: You know, in our mentality, in our culture, you cannot tell a man: you have to sleep at a certain time, you have to be home at a certain time. Men are men, we let them do whatever they want. And I, I wanted that too. I wanted to be able to go out, and come home whenever I wanted. It was not something bad, I was not smoking or drinking. It was just a desire for freedom. I wanted to have this freedom of a man, who can impose his perspective on the world at any moment. So, well, I fled. I left the house, and when people called me, I did not respond. My mother kicked me out of the house several times. And I slept on the streets).

When I first met Astou in the autumn of 2020, she no longer presented in a very masculine fashion. I met her together with her girlfriend Rokhaya at Nafissatou’s house. Ndella and Arame, their good friends, were also there. I wanted to know what had made her change her appearance, and when.

Mon changement est venu de deux choses: Rokhaya bien entendu. Mais la première chose, c'était le côté spirituel. Dans ce côté spirituel, j'ai toujours su... au fond de moi... parce que je suis musulmane... j'ai toujours su au fond de moi que Dieu, on doit le voir. On le voit, mais comment on le voit? Il faut aller chez un marabout qui l'a vu et qui peut t'y amener. C'est pas tout le monde qui peut t'amener là-bas, parce qu'il y a beaucoup de marabouts ici. Il doit avoir appris les enseignements de Cheikh Moussa Cissé. C'est ça qu'on appelle les Yàlla-Yàlla. Arame y était rentrée. Mais moi, c'était quelque chose que je cherchais, parce que au fond de moi, j'ai toujours su que je vais chercher... et en ce moment, elle avait un lien avec eux, et je lui ai dit: amène moi. On y est allée. J'ai pris mon chapelet et j'y suis allée avec elle. (F: My change came from two things. Rokhaya, of course, but before that, there was the spiritual side. From my spiritual side, I've always known... deep down... because I'm a Muslim... that God, we have to see Him. We see Him, but how? You will have to go to a marabout who has seen Him, and who can take you there. Not everyone can take you there, there are a lot of marabouts here. He has to have been taught the wisdom of Cheikh Moussa Cissé. This wisdom is what we call the Yàlla-Yàlla. Arame had entered there. But me, it was something I was looking for, because deep down, I have always known that I will search... and at this moment, she had a link with them, and I told her: take me there. We went there. I took up my rosary and went with her).⁶⁷

Astou was introduced to the Yàlla-Yàlla by Arame in 2010, and she was invited to join Arame's *dahira*, a religious association that brings together all disciples of a *marabout*. She talked about this introduction:

Ma mère m'avait encore expulsé de la maison à cause des Yàlla-Yàlla. Parce qu'elle se disait que, en plus d'être lesbienne, elle veut m'achever. Elle veut être Yàlla-Yàlla. C'est quelque chose qui est mal-vu. Parce que dans notre société, si tu dis que tu as vu Dieu, ils te prennent pour un fou. Ils disent même que c'est une secte (F: My mother kicked me out of the house again because of the Yàlla-Yàlla. She said that, in addition to being a lesbienne, she wants to kill me by being Yàlla-Yàlla. It is frowned upon. If in our society you say that you have seen God, they take you for a mad person. They even call it a sect).⁶⁸

Being kicked out of the house by her mother brought a certain freedom for Astou to follow her own trajectory. She joined Arame at the *dahira*, in search of a more spiritual connection to God. When the *marabout* in the *dahira* asked her what she was seeking, she also responded that she wanted to be a “normal woman” with “normal feelings.” She alluded, indirectly, to her same-sex desires, to which the *marabout* had also responded obliquely.

⁶⁷ Interview with Astou, 2 February 2021.

⁶⁸ Interview with Astou, 2 February 2021.

He responded that if she really wanted it, she would have it. “C’est là que je me suis dit que tout dépend de moi” (F: It was then that I realised that it all depended on me). Despite her great interest in the Yàlla-Yàlla, however, she soon left the *dahira*, “à cause des filles” (F: because of girls). Recounting her time in the *dahira*, she told me:

Je m’étais retirée dans un village. J’étais focus sur lui, il n’y avait plus de filles dans ma vie. J’avais même plus de portable. J’étais focus sur lui. Ça durait comme ça. Mais il y avait cette tentation des filles là... toujours... et puis, tu sais, Dieu il nous met des obstacles sur la route, toujours des obstacles pour nous tester, pour tester notre amour envers lui. Il faut être forte, il faut pas céder à la tentation. Mais moi j’y ai cédé. J’ai mangé la pomme d’Eve et d’Adam. Je l’ai mangé... même pas croqué, je l’ai avalé (F: I had retreated to the village. I was focused on him, there were no more girls in my life. I didn’t even have a mobile phone any more. I was focused on him. For a while, it went on like that. But there was that temptation of girls there... always... and then, you know, God puts obstacles in our way, always obstacles to test us, to test our love for Him. You have to be strong to resist the temptation. I was not, I ate the apple of Adam and Eve. I ate it... I didn’t even bite into it, I swallowed it entirely).

Astou could not choose for devotion and piety entirely if this meant that she had to sacrifice her same-sex relationships. She left the *dahira*, and after having finished high school, went on to study Arabic at the University in Dakar. After she left the *dahira*, she also went back to her earlier masculine style of dress. At university she met her current girlfriend, Rokhaya, in 2015. Rokhaya was a tutor on the course that Astou was taking, and she supervised the exams that Astou’s class took. “Durant tout l’examen je l’ai observé. Je voulais mieux la connaître, donc devant tout le monde je lui ai demandé: mariée ou célibataire? Et je lui ai donné mon numéro. Mes anciennes habitudes de la drague ne m’avaient pas quitté!” (F: During the entire exam, I observed her. I wanted to get to know her, so in front of the entire class, I asked her: married or single? And then I gave her my number. My old habits of flirting had not left me!). They soon started seeing each other regularly. Early on in their relationship, Astou said to Rokhaya that she wanted this to be sustainable, and that she knew that she had to change her style of dress for that, to avoid people from suspecting they were in a romantic relationship. One day as the two got dressed, Astou decided to try on Rokhaya’s clothes.

Et c’est en portant ses habits, et en mettant son voile que je me suis dit: voilà, c’est ça que je veux. Il me fallait ça, parce que c’est pas seulement le fait de s’habiller comme une femme. C’est en mettant son voile et ses habits que je me suis rendue compte que je me sentais à l’aise en étant voilée. C’était pas pour la religion, c’était pas pour le fun, c’était pas pour le buzz. Parce que actuellement, parce que c’est jolie, parce que c’est à la mode.

Pour moi c'était rien de ça. J'ai pris le voile, parce que je me sentais à l'aise, parce que ça cachais plus ma masculinité qu'autre chose (F: And it's when I wore her clothes, and her veil, that I realised that this was what I wanted. That is what I needed, because it is not just a question of dressing like a woman. When I wore her veil and her clothes, I felt at ease being veiled. It wasn't for religion, it wasn't for the fun of it, it wasn't for the buzz. Because you know, the veil today is pretty fashionable. It was nothing of that all for me. I felt at ease because this hides my masculinity the most).

She felt at ease with this type of dress, and she also realised how it changed the way others looked at her. Expressing religious piety afforded her the possibility to play with her elusive identities. Her choice to veil coincided with her move into working life, for which a respectable outfit was required anyway. Because both Rokhaya and Astou are now veiled, people who see the two together, have never questioned the nature of their relationship, at least not openly. Astou's change of allegiance from the Yàlla-Yàlla, with their relatively relaxed attitude towards ways of dress, to her wearing the veil, shows how religiosity is a dynamic process in which women balance religious convictions with personal desires, family expectations, all the while navigating how they appear to others. Six years into their relationship, they have maintained the image of being best friends. In addition to their style of dress, Rokhaya's married status furthermore removes any suspicion that people might have of their relationship. And because both have a stable, relatively well-paying job, they are able to go out of town occasionally to enjoy their relationship. Financial independence must not be underestimated as a factor that allows women's relationships to thrive. Astou's evolving appearances were informed by changing contexts and life-stages, but also by the need to remain elusive and maintain a sense of ambiguity about her relationships. The next section demonstrates how, in addition to ambiguity and elusiveness, secrecy may be a necessary practice to create space for women's dissident practices.

Secrecy at a same-sex wedding

In the summer of 2020, I attended the wedding of Yacine and Mariama, two women of, respectively, twenty-eight and twenty-seven at the time.⁶⁹ In a context of rising anti-queer sentiments, in which mediatised “scandals” and subsequent witch hunts, about the supposed threat of “homosexuality,” have often revolved around the organisation of supposed gay marriages, it is remarkable that Yacine and Mariama decided to organise a wedding. This context makes secrecy about such an event extra important. Secrecy

⁶⁹ Given the legal restrictions on same-sex conduct, this wedding was not legally recognised. Yacine and Mariama, as well as the guests who were present, referred to it as their wedding, however, to signal the significance of the event for their relationship.

supposes that those from whom information is withheld have a desire to know (Kirsch 2015). This makes secrecy a social practice that creates boundaries between insiders (those who know) and outsiders (those who don't know), constituting social inclusion and exclusion (ibid.). The sociality of secrecy also means that a group identity can be produced as a result of the sharing of a secret (Johnson in Kirsch 2015). The wedding that Yacine and Mariama organised with the help of Nafissatou, and in the presence of other *gays* and *lesbiennes*, contributed to the creation of a “communit[y] of secrecy” (Hardon and Posel 2012, S4) which, in addition to masking dissident practices, binds people together (Pierce 2007). While keeping silent about the event to others was very important to avoid ending up with a mediated “scandal,” the organisation of such an event was also a way to create a sense of community and belonging, which is a productive side to the necessity to conceal same-sex practices. The way the wedding proceeded, described in the vignette below, reveals a number of things about *lesbienne* and *gay* networks in today's Senegal, and the place of secrecy therein.

*When Yacine and I arrived at Nafissatou's place around 9 pm, the first guests have arrived. I know some of them, they regularly stop by the house. Nafissatou invited these men on purpose, in an attempt to draw less attention to the party than we would with a group of only women. Outside, we passed three guards, whom Nafissatou had hired to ensure the safety of the party. The atmosphere inside is tense and I overhear a discussion between one of the men and Nafissatou. The man does not trust the caterer of the party, who is Mariama's aunt. No one knows her, she is not a member of lesbienne and gay networks. This is rare, and people are usually very careful to invite only people whom they know, in an attempt to avoid the news from spreading outside their circles. Nafissatou tries to calm him by saying that Mariama's aunt has experience with organising private parties for big men, which means that she is used to seeing all sorts of relationships and sexual behaviour that she has to keep quiet about. I am not sure if he is convinced, but we must continue the final preparations. There is still a lot to do, and the stress of it all means I am not feeling very festive. The past days have been a hassle to get this wedding organised. Yacine and Mariama had left a lot of work until the last minute and yesterday afternoon, we were all surprised when the hotel that they had booked for their wedding party, suddenly cancelled their reservation. A quick discussion about the possible alternatives led to the conclusion that the wedding could be held at Nafissatou's house. A number of elements have to be skipped, out of fear of drawing attention to the party. The surprise act by a famous Senegalese artist is cancelled, and the group of *ngoyane*⁷⁰ with their *calebasse* instruments are all, except for one, sent home with some money.*

Nafissatou opens the wedding ceremony with a word of welcome and a household notice: all phones have to be handed in. 'No photos or videos shall be taken, except for discreet photos

⁷⁰ Traditional bards from the Seereer ethnic group.

which will be taken by Loes. We don't want Mame Mactar Gueye⁷¹ to join our party here!' This makes everyone laugh, and Nafissatou passes around a reed basket for people to put their phones in, which she safely stores in her room. It is past midnight when the ngoyane starts to sing. As she praises Yacine and Mariama, and blesses their marriage, the two stand up to give her money. A lot of small bills are ostentatiously thrown to the ngoyane, who moves on to praise some of the other guests, who, in turn, also have to stand up to give her money. Then one of the guests joins in the praising, and he, a true performer, stands on a chair to loudly sing for the brides. Another guest, who had been in the kitchen to clean some of the food stuff, peeks his head around the corner and anxiously commands the performer 'woyal ci suuf!' (W: sing softly!). Another man joins in the singing, and asks me to take his photo. 'I've been on all the social media platforms already, I don't care if my photo goes around again!'

When the praise-singing is over, we take a break to eat and drink, before moving on to the ceremonial part of the evening. Yacine and Mariama take a seat on the couch, their golden wedding rings displayed in front of them on the coffee table, on a white cushion in the shape of a heart that Yacine and I had bought a couple of weeks earlier in Paris. The ceremony is brief and simple, with no master of ceremony to speech, and no vows expressed between the brides. [Name] and I, the witnesses of respectively Mariama and Yacine, hand over the rings, which they slide over each other's ring finger. When they have done so, the crowd starts yelling 'Kiss each other!' We all yell and applaud as they do. When Yacine and Mariama sit back down on the couch, they radiate joy, as they watch us all continue our cheerful banter. After they cut the three-tier wedding cake, Nafissatou and I take this moment to hand them our gift. When they have unpacked their gift, a big painting by an artist friend of mine, the two speak a few words to thank Nafissatou for making this wedding possible, and to thank me for all the practical assistance to organise this evening, already when I was in Paris with Yacine, and here in Dakar with both of them. They are joined by one of the men, who wants to thank Nafissatou. 'Ken du moom!' (W: there is no one like her!), he says. 'You can have problems with your father, your mother, your entire family... but Nafissatou is always there. She has always been there for us. As a community, we have gone through a lot of problems, and Nafissatou has always been there for us.'⁷² It is a beautiful way to end this evening.

⁷¹ Mame Mactar Gueye is the vice-president of the NGO Jamra, a faith-based civil society organisation that is very active in debates about (sexual) morality, and that has been one of the loud voices in anti-queer debates.

⁷² My interlocutors often referred to their same-sex relations and friendships as community ('la communauté' in French). I mostly employ the term network for their relations, because community connotes a sense of harmony and shared (political) interests, which does not fit the context of lesbienne and gay networks in Senegal. When quoting my interlocutors, however, the term community can appear.



The wedding ceremony of Yacine and Mariama in 2020. Photo: Loes Oudenhuisen.

Nafissatou's joke during the wedding that Mame Mactar Gueye would arrive at their doorstep if any details about the wedding leaked, as well as the warning to sing softly, are indicative of the caution with which the wedding proceeded. Despite the utmost discretion with which this wedding had to be organised and the extra safety measures that had to be taken once the location was moved from a seaside hotel to Nafissatou's house, a festive evening was organised for and by a circle of *gay* and *lesbienne* friends. When I reflected back with Mariama on her marriage to Yacine, she said the following about their choice to get married:

L'idée générale c'était de pouvoir montrer notre amour. De pouvoir sceller ce lien-là devant des personnes qui nous considèrent, qui ne nous jugent pas. Et qui nous acceptent telles que nous sommes. [...] Je peux dire que la communauté nous a aidé à réaliser nos rêves. Nos projets de mariage, nos projets de vie commune et tout cela. [...] Je dirai pas comme une belle-famille, mais comme une famille. Des amis. Des personnes avec qui tu as des liens. Des personnes que tu considères, des personnes qui sont importantes. Qui ont gagné une place importante en fait dans ta vie. Et je me dis que, la communauté a joué ce rôle, avec notre mariage, durant l'organisation. Je me suis sentie parmi la communauté depuis (F: The general idea was to be able to show our love. To be able to seal this connection in front of people who respect us, who do not judge us. And who accept us for who we are. [...] I can say that the community has helped us to realise our dreams. Our marriage project, our projects of communal living. [...] For me, I would not say they are like in-laws, but like a family. Friends. People

with whom you have a connection. People you consider, and who are important for you. For me, the community has played this role, before, during, and after the organisation of our wedding. And I have felt part of this community since.)⁷³

The realisation that one needs community to build a life as a same-sex couple had led Yacine and Mariama to ask Nafissatou for help in organising their wedding. Visibility or claiming rights and recognition in wider society was not at the basis of their decision to get married, but rather their wedding was a way to connect with other *gays* and *lesbiennes*.⁷⁴ Yacine has lived abroad since she finished high school in 2013, so she did not have a big network of *lesbienne* friends in Senegal. Mariama had been thinking about joining an organisation for *lesbiennes*, but she did not consider it safe to do so. Yacine commented, “*Il y a toujours des gens qui entrent dans ces organisations juste pour avoir des infos, et après ils dénoncent les gens... c’est mieux de rester dans l’ombre*” (F: There are always people who enter such organisations just to gather information, after which they expose people... It is better to stay in the shadows).⁷⁵ Precisely because of their distance to these networks, they needed the help of someone else, someone who was well-embedded in such networks, to make their wedding a success. It had been quite a search to first find, and then convince, Nafissatou to meet with them. Having witnessed the malicious infiltration of same-sex circles before, Nafissatou had initially been reluctant to assist two women who were unknown to her networks. After a number of long conversations over the phone with Yacine, and in person with Mariama, she had come to trust the women’s intentions, and she agreed to pursue with the organisation. Despite the risks of organising such an event, they found a way to organise the wedding.

According to Nafissatou, their wedding was the first ever female same-sex white wedding organised in Dakar, with a white dress, a three-tier cake to cut, wedding rings, and two witnesses. During the event, they shared their wish to be the first same-sex couple to organise a *ngente* (W: name-giving ceremony traditionally organised a week after the birth of a child) with other *lesbiennes* and *gays* in a couple of years. And a day after the wedding, when two *gay* men stopped by Nafissatou’s house while we were still there cleaning up the party from the night before, Yacine and Mariama got into a conversation with the men about organising a *mbaxal*, a meal that is typically organised for women in the week after their wedding to discuss married life and sex with female

⁷³ Interview with Mariama, 31 March 2021.

⁷⁴ In addition to mediated panics about alleged same-sex marriages happening in Senegal, anti-queer voices often refer to same-sex marriage and state that these will never be allowed. Anima Adjepong gives the example of Ghana, where the president reiterated in 2021 that same-sex marriage will not happen under his reign. Similarly, in Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act was passed in 2013. In both cases, sexual rights activists had never demanded for the right to marriage. Instead, queer activists demand access to health, education, employment, and other basic rights, such as being able to live their lives without fear for discrimination and violence (Adjepong 2023).

⁷⁵ Conversation with Yacine, 15 June 2020.

friends and relatives, in the next couple of weeks.⁷⁶ Paradoxically, the risky choice to organise a same-sex event at this moment in Senegal, enabled Yacine to construct her life as apparently heterosexual. Yacine and Mariama had plans to have a child together, but knew that they would also need to present a husband to Yacine's family. Mariama had already been married and subsequently divorced, and she has two children from this marriage, so there was less pressure on her to get married. To find a *gay* man willing to marry Yacine, they sought the help of other *gays* and *lesbiennes* to discuss their plans with. Their wedding thus also served the purpose of building a network of friends with whom to discuss and realise their future plans.

While the wedding was organised with utmost care to avoid drawing the attention of the neighbourhood and other outsiders, the relationship between Mariama and Yacine was perhaps not a total secret to everyone beyond this "community of secrecy" in which the wedding was organised. Whenever Mariama was in Dakar, she stayed with her mother and her younger siblings. Having seen both Mariama and Yacine wear their new wedding rings, I asked Mariama if her mother would not ask her about her new ring. She responded,

Bien sûr, elle m'a demandé deux fois: 'mais toi, tu t'es mariée avec qui?' Il y a même une de ses amies qui a dit: 'mais pourquoi tu lui demandes ça? Elle n'est pas mariée.' Et elle dit: 'Ah tu sais, les enfants d'aujourd'hui-là, ils font toujours ce qu'ils veulent. Peut-être elle s'est mariée et moi je ne suis pas au courant.' Et je sais pas... j'ai dit ça à Yacine: 'je pense qu'elle sait quelque chose.' Mais connaissant ma maman, je sais que même si elle sait quelque chose, elle ne va pas m'en parler. Elle va laisser comme ça la chose couler quoi. Et moi, bon, peut-être si, et seulement si, je suis vraiment obligée de lui en parler, je le ferai. Mais si non, je ne pense pas le faire. Mais je sais qu'elle a des doutes en fait. Elle me voit avec Yacine. Elle a vu le cadeau d'anniversaire que Yacine m'a offert, qui a écrit 'soulmate' et tout ça. Elle n'est pas bête, je la connais. Mais tant qu'elle ne dira rien, moi aussi je vais rien dire. Je vais jouer le jeu comme ça (F: Of course, she asked me twice: 'But who did you marry?' One of her friends even said: 'But why are you asking her that? She's not married.' And she said: 'Oh, you know, kids these days, they always do what they want. Maybe she's married and I don't know.' And I don't know... I told Yacine: 'I think she knows something.' But knowing my mum, I know that even if she does know something, she's not going to say

⁷⁶ Traditionally, newly married women organise an afternoon with her close female friends and kin, after having spent her first nights with her husband. The married woman will prepare *mbaxal*, a doughy rice dish seasoned with chili pepper and lemon juice that is prepared during nuptial ceremonies. It is often prepared on the 3rd or 8th day after the wedding, to celebrate that the bride has lost her virginity – and using the occasion to talk and teach her about sex, albeit through indirect speech. *Mbaxal* is considered a women's dish, and it is also shared by women during the month of Ramadan, when they are menstruating and thus do not fast. I learned about the tradition of *mbaxal* from Nafissatou (Interview with Nafissatou, 19 April 2021).

anything to me. She'll just let it go. And me, well, maybe if, and only if, I really have to talk to her about it, I will. But if not, I don't think I will. But I know she's having doubts. She sees me with Yacine. She saw the birthday present Yacine gave me, with 'soulmate' written on it and all that. She's not stupid, I know her. But as long as she doesn't say anything, I'm not going to say anything either. I'll play the game like that).⁷⁷

The way Mariama's mother avoids pushing Mariama to say anything about her ring shows how secrecy is a "choreography" in which different people are involved, each acting out their part to keep things unspoken (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020). Even if Mariama's mother knows what is going on between Mariama and Yacine, the two actively maintain a sense of not-knowing towards each other. Keeping this secret is an expression of Mariama's mother's care towards Mariama, and it is a shared concern for both Mariama and her mother, on whom public knowledge of her daughter's same-sex relationship would also reflect negatively (see De Klerk 2012).

Conclusion

Growing public debate about LGBTQI+ sexualities jeopardises so-called wicked lives in Senegal. The 2021 proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ identities, by defining LGBTQI+ identities and then criminalising these, reveals not only growing anti-queer sentiments, but it also signals an investment of political and religious actors to freeze identities. My interlocutors in this chapter, as opposed to those in Chapter One, mostly stay away from these debates, looking instead for ways to avoid sexual rights discourse to live their dissident lives. They oscillate between same-sex and cross-sex commitments, tapping into the support networks of sexual rights- and sex worker associations, while also retaining a critical distance from them. They respond to particular expectations of femininity, sexual restraint, conjugality, and motherhood by developing *pexe jigéen* (W: women's solutions) that enable them to avoid coming into full view, which would make them vulnerable to criticism and stigma. Through their engagement with a variety of groups, from religious groups to *lesbienne* networks, and to their own families, women find ways to navigate potential stigma by remaining elusive, and sometimes by maintaining secrecy. Whether it is the shifting ambiguity of religious and gender appearances that Astou embodies, or the tricks and humorous deceit that Ndella and Arame played to escape stigma: by playing with people's perceptions of them, these women have found various ways to circumvent direct confrontation about their relationships.

In many of my interlocutors' stories, financial independence appeared to be indispensable for being able to defy family expectations. Providing for one's family

⁷⁷ Interview with Mariama, 31 March 2022.

not only refrains family members from speaking out against the sources of income, as Ndella's story about her doing *mbaraan* revealed earlier, but it also provides women with the means to move away from their families in an attempt to live their lives as they desire. The leeway that financial autonomy affords women to make their own decisions does not, however, set them free from family expectations and judgement. The figure of the trickster has helped me to understand how women like Ndella and Arame devise creative solutions to navigating stigma. Like tricksters, supposedly wicked women depend on their wit and ingenuity for their survival and to navigate and balance social expectations and personal desires. Like Otu's (2022) "amphibious subjects," so-called wicked women demonstrate an adaptability and flexibility towards their appearances and attitudes, which allows them to carve out some space for their dissident practices. Such craftiness creates room for dissidence, but adopting a trickster modality in itself is not enough to remain elusive. In a context in which disclosure and exposure increasingly characterise the Senegalese public debate, women's craftiness needs to be embedded in a moral economy of not-knowing.

This moral economy of not-knowing includes the "choreography of secrecy" that women dance with their families who are equally concerned about keeping dissident practices a secret. Public knowledge of their daughter's dissident practices would also reflect negatively on family members, and therefore Mariama's mother does not pry into her daughter's relationship with Yacine. Moreover, for a woman like Coura, who "goes out at night," avoiding identification as a "prostitute" and going by multiple names allows her to maintain a sense of not-knowing towards her family, but also towards Senegalese health authorities. *Ni génn guddi*, in other words, create a moral economy of craftiness and not-knowing that characterises urban life for women in Senegal.

Although going out at night signals women's dependency on men to make ends meet (Foley and Dramé 2013), it also affords women some financial autonomy to provide for their families (Fanta) and to postpone marriage (Coura). Dependency on others paradoxically brings women some freedom. This reveals how elusiveness and secrecy provide room for dissident practices while women simultaneously maintain responsibilities and attachments to their families. Family ties remain important for Ndella too, despite the many challenges that she faced with her family, both when she lived with her aunt, and later when her family found out about her romantic relationship with Arame. And where women cannot always count on their biological families for support, they develop kin relations with each other that allow them to survive. The community of secrecy that has emerged through the organisation of Yacine and Mariama's wedding shows, similarly, that there are things that can only be realised as a group. In the next chapter, the importance of living together takes centre stage, as I show how "odd" kinship bonds (Haraway 2016) are formed as a way of creating and transmitting a *savoir vivre* together.