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

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CHAPTER 4

“You trample me, I crush you”: Humiliation and honour in *wàcce* violence

"*Je leur ai dit que je me suis bagarrée avec elle parce que c'est ma copine. C'est moi qui la baise*" (F: I told them that I fought with her because she's my girlfriend. It's me who fucks her), Nabou had told the police when they had arrested her after her girlfriend had reported her, in February 2020.[92] "*Je ne pouvais pas croire qu'elle me fasse ça après avoir été ensemble pendant presque deux ans*" (F: I couldn't believe that she would do this to me after we had been together for almost two years), she said as she recounted the events to me.[93] Her girlfriend had found out that Nabou had cheated on her, and when she confronted her with this, they had started a fight. Nabou broke her girlfriend's phone, stole three necklaces, as well as 45,000 FCFA (about 75 euros). Instead of going home after the fight had ended, her girlfriend had gone to the police to report Nabou. When they came to arrest Nabou, she admitted to having fought. She also told them that they were a couple. By doing so, Nabou humiliated her girlfriend. Her declaration not only expressed fearlessness towards the police, knowing very well that this could get her into trouble as well, but it also signalled to her girlfriend that Nabou refused to face the consequences of their break-up on her own. If Nabou was going to prison, so was she. This spin-off to their fight, involving the police in their ending relationship, informs us about a particular dynamic that I encountered with some of my *lesbienne* interlocutors.[94] Nabou had deliberately involved others in her fight with her girlfriend, in an attempt to harm her reputation. In *lesbienne* networks, this is referred to as *wàcce* (W: bringing down).

I have hesitated to write this chapter, because I do not want to perpetuate the (popular) representation in Senegal of *lesbiennes* as vicious youth. Writing about a number of *lesbiennes* who are occasionally violent to each other, and some of whom have made newspaper headlines and have experienced arrest, may, at first sight, appear to do little to balance the prevailing image of them. Although it is a challenge to write about violence when the representation of same-sex sexualities in Senegal is so negative, I think that we should not close our eyes to the destructive side to – some – *lesbienne* networks. Going beyond the level of public discourse and representation, analysing cases of *wàcce* can help us to understand the conditions under which *wàcce* emerges, what it means for dynamics within *lesbienne* networks, and what its consequences are for women's positions in society. This chapter thus revolves around the following question: *How should we understand the prevalence of* wàcce *violence between* lesbiennes*, when women are generally so concerned with keeping their intimate relationships a secret?* Drawing on the stories of a number of women who have either performed *wàcce* or who have been the object of a *wàcce*, I dissect its characteristics: its meanings, intentions, and outcomes, to understand how, paradoxically, *wàcce* is a form of agency for some women in a context in which discretion and secrecy around same-sex relationships are otherwise so important.

[92] All names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.
[93] Conversation with Nabou, 18 August 2020.
[94] *Wàcce* occurs among *gay* men too, but I have not compared their dynamics with those of women, as they are not the focus of my research.

Encountering multiple stories about *wȁcce* throughout my fieldwork, I learned that the tight-knit networks that are so essential to building *lesbienne* lives amidst economic precarity and rising anti-queer sentiments, can sometimes explode. "Slippages from seduction to aggression," Tinsley (2010, 56) argues in a book about women's same-sex eroticism in Caribbean literature, were part of working class women's same-sex networks where they had little to claim as their own in a colonial, patriarchal society. Violent conflicts over a lover, then, were dramatic expressions of their desire "for at least one prized possession" (ibid., 57). Referring to Tinsley, Dankwa (2021) adds that a "collectivization of love" is at play in women's same-sex relationships in Ghana, whereby women mediate their friends' relationships and exchange girlfriends between themselves. Such tight-knit networks, in which women share everything – from scarce economic resources, to housing, as well as lovers – inevitably occasionally leads to jealousy and (violent) arguments, with women envious to keep and possess the little that is available to them. *Wȁcce* thus engages a paradox: women need each other's care and support to be able to live their dissident lives, yet they also compete over the scarce resources that are available to them.

I draw upon literature on agency to tackle the question of why women would engage in *wȁcce* and, in doing so, expose themselves and others, when secrecy around one's same-sex intimacies is so important. Lila Abu-Lughod has drawn our attention to the fact that agency cannot always be equated to resistance, and that among feminists there is a tendency to romanticise resistance, blinding us to other forms of agency and meaning-making within norms and structures (Abu-Lughod 1990). Mahmood (2001, 203) argues for an understanding of agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create." Agency and structures co-produce each other, and therefore an analysis of women's agency in *wȁcce* needs to be accompanied by an exploration of the structures in which women live (Van Dijk, De Bruijn, and Gewald 2007). "There is no agency outside of restrictions," (Diabate 2020a, 19); instead, agency is relational, co-constituted in interactions between people, and dependent on changing positions of power and vulnerability. In *Naked agency: Genital cursing and biopolitics in Africa*, Naminata Diabate (2020a) zooms in on historical and contemporary examples of women's naked protests in Africa and its diaspora to argue that genital cursing and women disrobing in protest against political powers and institutions were a last resort for women who had no other, formal, means of addressing power. Building upon the work of these scholars, and particularly inspired by Diabate's work on naked agency, I understand *wȁcce* as a particular form of agency that emerges from a position of vulnerability. This approach to agency as emerging from positions of vulnerability helps me to make sense of what, at first sight, seems a senseless exercise that only worsens women's already precarious situation, and it provides insight into the new inequalities and social hierarchies that are created through the practice.

What is *wàcce*?

Wàcce literally means "bringing down." J.L. Diouf's (2003) Wolof-French dictionary gives a literal use of *wàcce* in the sense of getting your luggage off the bus. Whenever I asked people outside of networks of *lesbiennes*, *gays*, and *ñi génn guddi* about the meaning of *wàcce,* they seemed puzzled.[95] *Wàcc/wàcce* is a Wolof word, but its everyday use does not extend far beyond: "*wàcc naa liggéey*" (W: I got off from work) or "*chauffeur, may ma wàcc*" (F/W: driver, allow me to get off [the bus/car]). There is a proverbial use of the word beyond this everyday context: when attending a festive ceremony such as a wedding or a baptism, a *géwël* (W: griot, praise singer) can comment on a guest's dazzling appearance with: "*danga wàcc koñ bi*" (W: you have brought down the neighbourhood). It conveys that the others look pale next to you. It is this figurative sense that provides insight into the meanings of *wàcce* violence, as both forms of *wàcce* are related to people's positioning in their social networks, and to the status that they command from outperforming others. Used primarily as a verb – and to a lesser extent also as a noun when people narrate an event of *wàcce* – it signals the agency of the people who perform and experience it.

The practice of exposing, often violently, a lover who has left you or someone who has humiliated your status, deliberately involves the neighbourhood or the family of the person under attack. It is a form of violence that is particular to some *lesbienne* and *gay* networks in Senegal. I have to stress *some*, because *sutura* remains crucial for most people to navigate their sexually dissident lives. Furthermore, most people have an aversion to violence and they attempt stay away from people who resort to it. Particularly men and women from higher social standing, for whom reputation damage is more imminent, stay far away from *wàcce* practices and the networks in which this occurs. There is, additionally, a youthfulness to the people who engage in *wàcce*. The women I met and heard about as doing *wàcce* were all relatively young, unmarried women (except for Adji, who was a young, divorced woman) who were still looking to position themselves in their social worlds, and they did not yet carry the responsibility of their own families and a (stable) job. For some young women and men living in precarious conditions, *wàcce* may be the only option that they see to claim a position in their social worlds.

A position of vulnerability does not always lead to violent means of expression like *wàcce*. Some people may, despite their vulnerability, see other options for claiming a position in society. In the context of prolonged economic crisis in Senegal, Mamadou Diouf (2002) has argued that some men in urban Senegal have turned to becoming rap artists and wrestlers, drawing upon their bodies to claim a presence and existence in the public sphere. For women, especially young and unmarried women, to claim a position

[95] Because of their proximity to *lesbiennes* and *gays* in the milieu of nightlife, *ñi génn guddi* were often aware of dynamics of *wàcce* occurring among some *lesbienne* networks.

in the public sphere is more complicated, as they are policed for their behaviour more than any other social group. The *lesbienne* milieu is not the only place where violence and humiliation occur of course. *Ni génn guddi* have also told me stories of verbal and physical violence that they encounter in the night, where defining moral hierarchies is also an important part of the tensions between women. Women explained to me how "*Guddi am na boroom*" (W: The night it has its masters), to say that witches and evil spirits (W: *jinn*) dominate in the milieu of those who go out at night, making women do evil things to hinder others in their work by making them physically sick or by taking away their clientele. Such reference aside, I have not looked into dynamics of violence among *ñi génn guddi*. What gives extra weight to violent behaviour in *lesbienne* networks, compared to other groups, is the presence of media and a public that are hungry for "scandals," and a public debate that pays excessive attention to the alleged vices of young *gays* and *lesbiennes* and their sexuality. Confronting these risks when you perform a *wàcce* might appear to be a stupidity for some, but it is a sign of strength for others. Particularly in a time of growing anti-queer sentiments, outing others – and by implication, yourself too – seems illogical, and arguably even has a negative effect on your own reputation. It is this context of anti-queerness, however, that makes acts of *wàcce* powerful. *Wàcce* is a response to the representation of same-sex sexualities in society: it can only be so effective because the threat of social ostracism and becoming the talk of the town is real.

Women who *wàcce* another woman draw the attention of their family or neighbourhood to the immoral behaviour of the other woman. They *wàcce kër ga* (W: bring down the house) or *wàcce koñ bi* (W: bring down the neighbourhood). The intention is to draw the attention of the direct environment to harm the other's reputation by shaming them for offending particular morals. This makes *wàcce* highly embedded in broader social relations. In a premeditated form, *wàcce* is a performance, with an audience being drawn into the conflict in an attempt to gain something out of it. It can also, however, be an impulsive emotional response when someone feels their dignity is threatened. When *wàcce* follows a break-up between lovers, the violence may not be directed only at the person who broke the bond, but it might also involve their family because, to some extent, they are held responsible for the discontinuation of the relationship. The pressure of heterosexual marriage is so strong for many women that it makes sustaining *lesbienne* lives difficult. When a woman leaves her female lover to marry a man, the frustration that that woman may feel as a result of being put aside, can lead to *wàcce.* In 2019, several newspapers reported the verdict of a woman who had attempted to set fire to the house of her female lover. She was convicted to one year in prison for "*actes contre nature*" (F: unnatural acts, i.e. same-sex conduct) and "*destruction de bien d'autrui*" (F: the destruction of property). I discussed this case of *wàcce* with Nafissatou, who knew the woman and had spoken to her after the event. She told me that the woman had felt betrayed, as she had been providing for her lover and her lover's mother financially. When her lover decided to

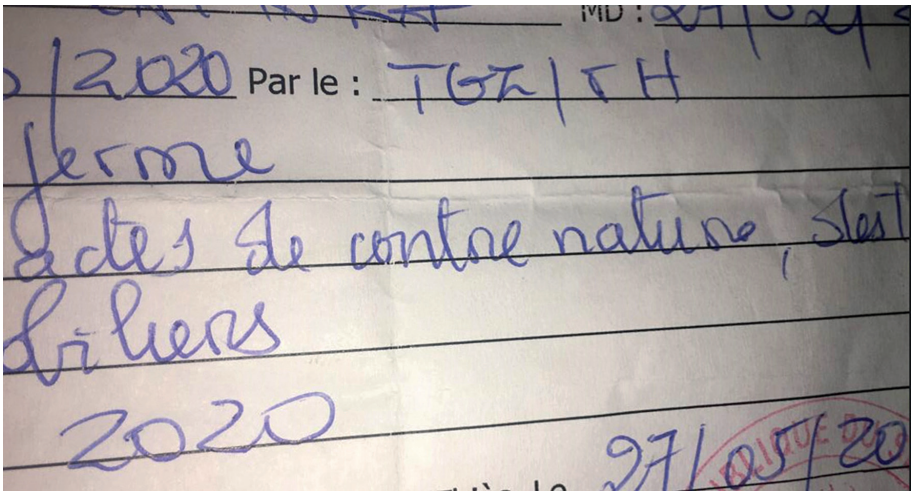
get back with her (ex-)husband, her lover may have interpreted this as, as a woman, she would never really be acknowledged as the provider for her girlfriend. She was painfully reminded that their relationship was never meant to last. To *wȁcce* the house of her lover, then, was perhaps a way to protest this impossibility and an expression of the feeling of powerlessness that this gave her.

To *wȁcce* a woman who you feel has wronged you, for example by leaving you to marry a man, as in this case, is to expose her moral wrongdoing to others. To *wȁcce* someone is to bring her down from a state of moral virtue, by showing the environment that she, too, despite a pretence of success, is a *lesbienne*. Women sometimes talked about it as "*wȁcce ba zero*" (W/F: bringing down to zero), to signal that someone had been destroyed to the ground. Perhaps more boastful than truthful, it nevertheless indicates a wish to make someone really feel the consequences of *wȁcce*. This echoes George Meiu's (2020, 577) description of "intimate exposures, performative attempts to unmask signs of social failure hidden beneath appearances of respectability, to peel off – in speech or deed – an outer, visible stratum (e.g. clothing) of bodies and relations and bring to light their troubled underlayers." Like intimate exposures, we might understand *wȁcce* as a complaint against a culture of appearance, or what women often phrased as "hypocrisy." Intimate exposures, and women exposing someone else's "hypocrisy," are about showing that someone is not better than you (we're all *lesbiennes*). Refusing to be humiliated by others' pretenses of success and sociability, women stage conflicts as "ways of negotiating multiple marginalisation and becoming-relevant as movements towards mattering and visibility" (Henriksen and Miller 2012, 454). By shaming others, they attempt to turn the tables and become visible in a brighter light themselves.

"*Lesbienne* scandals" and the consequences of *wȁcce*

By telling the police that the fight Nabou and her (unsurprisingly, now her ex-) girlfriend had engaged in had been one between lovers, Nabou had thus exposed her girlfriend as a *lesbienne* to get her into trouble. The case was taken to court, and both of them were convicted to one month in prison for fighting. Nabou was convicted for another two months for theft. During the court hearing where the verdict was pronounced, which I attended, the judge made no mention of their relationship. The note given to Nabou upon her release from prison, however, mentioned "*actes contre nature*" as one of the reasons for her conviction.[96]

[96] Part of the note that she had sent to me. I have cropped it to erase the details that could possibly identify the case, the judge, and Nabou's identity.



Part of the release papers Nabou received. Photo: Loes Oudenhuijsen.

The law that criminalises same-sex conduct is applied in obscure ways. With often no evidence of the occurrence of same-sex acts, judges present other things, such as the presence of condoms and lubricants in an apartment, as "proof" of the occurrence same-sex acts (Human Rights Watch 2015). While such "evidence" is irrelevant in the case of women, women have, albeit more rarely than men, been put on trial for supposedly *lesbienne* behaviour (ibid.). When I spoke to a judge to try and find out what had happened around Nabou's conviction, he argued that women are never convicted for same-sex acts because their sex is not considered real sex, as it does not involve penile-vaginal intercourse.[97] Nabou's release papers suggest a different opinion when she was judged.

While Nabou's declaration of her fight as a passionate one between lovers was intended to hurt her girlfriend, she did not come away unscathed herself. "*Wallahi sur la tête de ma mère, je suis une prisonnière. C'est comme en prison ici. Je ne sors pas. Tout le monde parle de moi*" (F: I swear to my mother's head, I'm a prisoner. It's like prison here. I don't leave the house. Everyone talks about me), she said when I visited her in August 2020, a couple of months after her release from prison.[98] At the time, she was staying with her great-aunt in a very quiet house, around the corner from her aunt's house. Her aunt, her mother's sister, was the only family member who was currently on speaking terms with Nabou. She had offered Nabou this place to stay after Nabou's parents refused to talk to her since her arrest. Nabou and I had met at a party two weeks earlier, and she explained that this had been the first time she had gone out since her release from prison. News about her arrest had spread in the town she lives in, which is small enough for people to recognise her in the few bars and clubs in the town centre. She avoided town for a while,

[97] Interview with judge, 4 September 2020.
[98] Conversation with Nabou, 18 August 2020.

hoping for people's attention to shift to the next "scandal." She was already known to be rather aggressive and to engage in street fights with others. Because of her fearlessness, she might not have foreseen how far the effects of her declaration would reach this time. Not only did people on the street look down upon her – something she had grown rather used to as a big, masculine-looking woman with long dreadlocks and tattoos – but her entire family (except for this one aunt) had stopped talking to her, and even her *lesbienne* network seemed to believe that she had gone too far this time, and they largely avoided her. She felt lonely: "*Ci samay jafe-jafe dama wéet. Kenn mënul comprendre li ma dund*" (W: I am lonely with my problems. No one can understand what I am going through). A couple of weeks later, she decided to break her solitude by talking to a journalist from one of the most widely read newspapers in the country. In a full-page interview, she hinted at her violence as a form of protest, arguing that many *gays* and *lesbiennes* are "rebels" who have had a hard time in their families, and who, as a result, have decided to revolt against the lack of consideration they experienced.[99] With this interview, Nabou turned the blame back onto those who have stigmatised her and other *lesbiennes* and *gays* for disregarding morality. Instead, she argued that the lack of education and attention on the part of parents and educators may be at the root of the problems that occur among *lesbienne* youth today.

> *It's a Saturday morning in October 2020. As I walk home from an appointment at the medical clinic for a friend, I receive a phone call from Mariama.* "Tu as vu le journal aujourd'hui?" *(F: have you seen the newspaper today?), she asks. Which one? I respond.* "[name of newspaper.] Mon amie vient de m'appeler pour m'informer. Nabou a pété un câble. Un entretien de tout un page Loes, et avec sa photo! Elle parle du fait d'être lesbienne. Je n'ai pas encore vu le journal, mais je te jure, c'est grave" *(F: My friend just called me to inform me. Nabou has lost her mind. A full-page interview Loes, with her photo! She talks about being a lesbienne. I haven't seen the newspaper yet, but I'm telling you, this is bad). I tell Mariama that I will quickly buy one and send her the interview. She is in a village where she does not have immediate access to the newspaper. I rush to the boutique and immediately see the article announced on the front page. I quickly take a photo of the front page and the interview, and send it to Mariama. Two blue check marks tell me that she has immediately read my message. She calls me again.* "Loes, elle est folle ou quoi? Cette fille me fait peur... non sérieux, dafa wàcce réew mi! J'ai peur Loes, j'ai peur qu'elle ait secrètement pris des photos lors de notre mariage. Si elle veut vraiment nous exposer, elle pourrait les publier, et on serait foutus" *(F/W: Loes, is she crazy or what? This girl scares me... no seriously, she has brought down the country. I am scared Loes, I am scared that she has secretly taken photos at our wedding [the wedding of Yacine and Mariama that I*

[99] I am paraphrasing here to avoid the reader's ability to look up the article on the internet and find Nabou's real identity.

described in chapter two]. If she is really after exposing us all, she could publish them, and we would be screwed). I try to calm Mariama by saying that Nabou does not have photos of the wedding. After all, Nafissatou had asked everyone to hand in their phones before the start of the event, precisely to prevent photos or videos to be taken that could accidentally, or purposefully, end up in the wrong hands. "Mais elle était avec son telephone à un moment donné, Loes" *(F: But she had her phone at some point, Loes), Mariama continued. I understood her fear, and I started to feel it too. It would not be the first same-sex wedding that would lead to a media "scandal" in the country and result in the imprisonment of some, and the flight of others.*

In the interview, Nabou explained that she had become a *lesbienne* in her sports team. She explained having been lured into "lesbianism" by girls who had offered her a lot of money. Furthermore, her involvement in same-sex practices was, she argued, the result of the neglect she experienced from her family. She perfectly played into existing stereotypes about "lesbianism" as occurring primarily in sports teams, and about "homosexuality" in general as being a cult that youngsters are lured into with money. Moreover, the supposed neglect of her family aligned with anti-queer discourse that suggests that a narrow focus on *gay* men in anti-queer sentiments had led to a "lesbianisation" of society. The interview was a continuation of Nabou's *wȁcce* but her target had changed from her ex-girlfriend to all other *lesbiennes*. Feeling abandoned by her *lesbienne* network, she might have played with the idea of dragging more women into her misery by threatening to expose them.

Wȁcce can play out at different scale levels. At this level of "bringing down the country," Nabou was playing into the strong anti-queer sentiments in society by speaking the unspeakable about the supposed increase of *lesbiennes* in the sports milieu, hereby exposing an entire group. In this sense, this was different from the typical interpersonal *wȁcce*, where women seek to humiliate one particular person in an attempt to restore their own dignity. Nevertheless, the general exposure of Nabou's embeddedness in *lesbienne* networks, could potentially lead to consequences for individuals, if Nabou was tempted to divulge more about her relations. This is what Mariama was afraid of. When I called Nabou upon Mariama's request, Nabou shared that she was indeed considering talking to other journalists, who had already started contacting her after the initial publication, eager to milk this story.

She concluded the interview by stating that she wanted to quit the *lesbienne* way of life, and that she was praying to God that she would find a husband and have children with him. A couple of months later, when I was staying with Nafissatou, both Nafissatou and I received messages from Nabou asking for help to apply for asylum for persecution based on sexual orientation. Nafissatou suggested that Nabou had tried to create such problems for herself in Senegal precisely so that she could prove that it was no longer

safe for her in Senegal. Whether Nabou had premeditated her flight from Senegal when she decided to give the interview I do not know, but the interview had surely had more unintended, negative consequences on her situation in Senegal. Having lost her network, she had few people to count on for support in finding a job or setting up a small business. She left for Morocco, perhaps temporarily, to find new opportunities elsewhere.

In this case, Nabou had approached journalists herself for an interview. She probably had quick success given the country's extensive tabloid press that is eager to exploit and exaggerate such cases for commercial gain. What was shocking about this interview, is that Nabou admitted publicly that she had engaged in *lesbienne* practices, a disclosure that is unspeakable in Senegal. The article fit, however, in a series of "*lesbienne* scandals" that have been published over the past couple of years, some of which have been instigated by *lesbiennes* themselves.

In April 2020, a "scandal" was reported in various Senegalese media outlets. Via two anonymous Instagram pages, videos and photos of a number of women had been posted. According to my interlocutors, these pages had been created from the United States, where a friend of the woman who intended to *wàcce* her ex-girlfriend lived. They had allegedly been created specifically for the occasion, to be able to disseminate the photos and videos of these young women anonymously. Both pages had a very small number of followers, but it had been enough to get the images to circulate widely. As a result of the exposure of these photos, some women went into hiding for a while, as they waited for the situation to calm down. The dissemination was rather successful: a day or two after the publication of the photos, I received them from several of my interlocutors. While in the initial days following the "scandal" my interlocutors were still unsure about who exactly had published the photos, they all agreed on the fact that it had been an act of revenge.

As people tried to find out what had happened, I learned that it was about a woman who had taken revenge on her ex-girlfriend for leaving her. Her ex-girlfriend had supposedly got involved with another woman while she (the one who had commissioned the publication of the videos and photos) had been imprisoned for theft. When she was released from prison, and had found out about her girlfriend's new lover, she had entered a WhatsApp group with *lesbiennes* on her ex-girlfriend's phone, and she had taken photos and videos from the group to publish them online.[100] Instagram pages were created to publish the photos anonymously. The women who were exposed through her act had quickly found out who had published them, however, and the story about the woman's prison sentence further spread and it reached me too, despite the fact that I

[100] There are many WhatsApp groups, some with dozens of members, in which *lesbiennes* exchange info, gossip, and photos of girlfriends and women looking for a girlfriend. I was repeatedly warned by interlocutors that such groups are dangerous, because people with bad intentions can easily enter such a group and take the – sometimes rather sexually explicit – photos and videos and divulge them.

knew neither her nor any of the women involved. Because I do not know the woman in question personally, I will not speculate further about the exact intention of her act. Like in the previous example of *wàcce*, however, we may wonder why someone would commit such an act and simultaneously put herself in danger of being outed. Hawa could not believe it had happened: "*Je ne sais pas comment quelqu'une peut être aussi bête, stupide et méchante. Elle se vengera. Celle qui a fait ça, l'autre se vengera, c'est sûr. Que l'on se prépare au pire*" (F: I do not know how someone can be such a dumb, stupid, and mean idiot. She will take revenge. The one who did this, the other one will take revenge, that is certain. That we prepare for the worst).[101] Fortunately, it did not lead to another "scandal," and Senegalese media soon lost their interest in the case.

In the days following the initial publication, two articles appeared in which two of the women whose photo had been published argued that their photo had accidently found its way to this publication, and that they themselves are not *lesbiennes*. One was a married woman and mother of two children, and the other was a football player. These two women sought to restore their reputation by trying to argue that they are not *lesbiennes*. These publications draw attention to the serious consequences that such media "scandals" can have for people. For the football player, the article was not enough to solve the problems she had with her parents since the event. In August, about four months after the publication, I came across the woman's photo in a WhatsApp status update of a friend. The woman had got married that day, and my friend had attended the wedding. Fadiga, who was also her friend, had not been able to attend the wedding but she had spoken to her a couple of days prior to the event. Not having been able to return home after the end of the football season, the only way she knew how to resolve the problem was to get married. In addition to affecting the lives of individual women, the "scandal" risked reinforcing negative stereotypes about women footballers being (indiscreet) *lesbiennes*. To counter accusations of "lesbianism," which also came from one of the coaches on the team, several women had distanced themselves from the woman who had appeared in the "scandal," arguing that they were not like this. These women had to do a lot of work to restore relationships with their families, in their sports teams, and in other networks. Sometimes, big sacrifices have to be made to appease one's family, which may include getting married. The consequences of *wàcce* can be long-lasting.

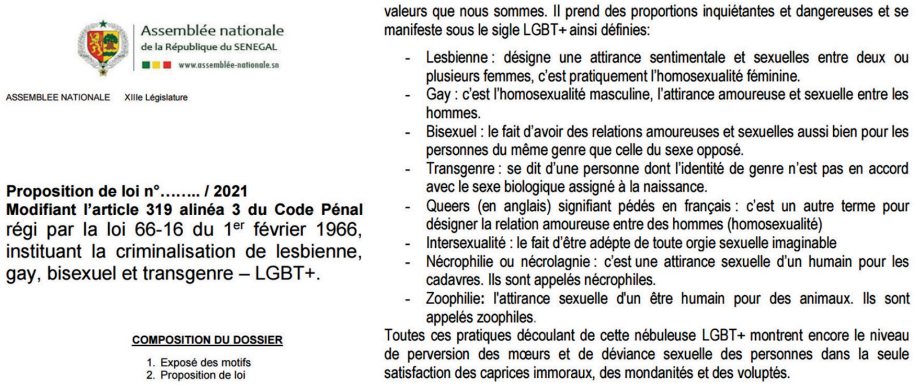
Although *wàcce* as a practice of violence is specific to some *lesbienne* networks, the Senegalese media sensationally cover instances of violence between co-wives in polygynous marriages too. Newspapers regularly report on cases of women who have attacked their co-wives physically, sometimes using knives, petrol, or other utensils (Seneweb 2018, 2022, 2023).

[101] WhatsApp conversation with Hawa, 23 April 2020.

The media write about it sensationally, and people often explain such cases as exaggerated jealousy from the woman, but one could argue that this articulates their protest against the societal norm and law that enable, and even encourage, polygyny for men. By attacking a co-wife, they protest polygyny and the unequal treatment of the different wives in their union. Women's resistance to the challenges of living in polygynous marriages are part of Wolof traditions: in the ritual of *xaxar* (W: to insult someone, to air their dirty laundry), in which co-wives engaged in verbal fights during a wedding ceremony, women were allowed to express their anxieties and frustrations about having to share their husband with another woman (Gueye 2010a). Gueye argues that although the ceremony is gradually disappearing, the *xaxar* that are still organised have become increasingly serious, and they often lead to physical fights between the women. *Xaxar* songs are a space for women to criticise the arrival of a co-wife, a situation that they often have not had any say in. The fact that in *xaxar* the attack is directed at the co-wife, and not the husband who decided to marry another wife, reveals how society pits women against each other (ibid.). Similarly, in media portrayals of violent conflicts between co-wives, where the focus is on women's interpersonal violence and their supposed hot-headedness, the role of husbands and their families are wilfully ignored. Women fighting among themselves, whether they are *lesbiennes* fighting and destroying each other's property or co-wives in polygamous marriages attacking each other or sabotaging the other wife's work, suits heteropatriarchal power: women's so-called wickedness is purportedly proven by their aggression and, in the case of *lesbiennes* specifically, their moral degeneracy seems apparent from their indecent behaviour. This representation of *lesbiennes* is perpetuated through the material and discursive power of media, as well as of political and religious authorities with an interest to "confirm" that same-sex desiring persons are a threat to the moral stability of the nation.

A recent striking example of the role of politics in the negative representation of *lesbiennes* and other gender and sexual dissidents, is the law proposal that was submitted in December 2021. A collective of religious organisations called *Àndd Samm Jikko Ji* (W: Together for the preservation of our values), together with a number of parliamentarians, submitted a proposal to the government in 2021, in an attempt to further criminalise dissident genders and sexualities. They argued that the current law that criminalises "acts against nature" is too vague and too lenient vis-à-vis the supposed growth in LGBTQI+ identities. The definitions of the different elements in the LGBTQI+ acronym that they listed in the proposal are remarkable. Their definition of *lesbiennes* was as follows: "*Désigne une attirance sentimentale et sexuelle entre deux ou plusieurs femmes, c'est pratiquement l'homosexualité féminine*" (F: Refers to a sentimental and sexual attraction between two or more women, it is practically female homosexuality). Both "sentimental and sexual attraction" and "Between two or more women" attracted my attention. When the media report about *gay* men they use different wording: the definition of *gay* did not include "sentimental

attraction," nor did it explicitly mention the possibility of multiple men being involved. The definition of gay read: "*C'est l'homosexualité masculine, l'attirance amoureuse et sexuelle entre les hommes*" (F: It's male homosexuality, the romantic and sexual attraction between men).



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ASSEMBLEE NATIONALE XIIIe Législature

Proposition de loi n°…….. / 2021
Modifiant l'article 319 alinéa 3 du Code Pénal régi par la loi 66-16 du 1er février 1966, instituant la criminalisation de lesbienne, gay, bisexuel et transgenre – LGBT+.

COMPOSITION DU DOSSIER

1. Exposé des motifs
2. Proposition de loi

valeurs que nous sommes. Il prend des proportions inquiétantes et dangereuses et se manifeste sous le sigle LGBT+ ainsi définies:

- Lesbienne : désigne une attirance sentimentale et sexuelles entre deux ou plusieurs femmes, c'est pratiquement l'homosexualité féminine.
- Gay : c'est l'homosexualité masculine, l'attirance amoureuse et sexuelle entre les hommes.
- Bisexuel : le fait d'avoir des relations amoureuses et sexuelles aussi bien pour les personnes du même genre que celle du sexe opposé.
- Transgenre : se dit d'une personne dont l'identité de genre n'est pas en accord avec le sexe biologique assigné à la naissance.
- Queers (en anglais) signifiant pédés en français : c'est un autre terme pour désigner la relation amoureuse entre des hommes (homosexualité)
- Intersexualité : le fait d'être adépte de toute orgie sexuelle imaginable
- Nécrophilie ou nécrolagnie : c'est une attirance sexuelle d'un humain pour les cadavres. Ils sont appelés nécrophiles.
- Zoophilie: l'attirance sexuelle d'un être humain pour des animaux. Ils sont appelés zoophiles.

Toutes ces pratiques découlant de cette nébuleuse LGBT+ montrent encore le niveau de perversion des mœurs et de déviance sexuelle des personnes dans la seule satisfaction des caprices immoraux, des mondanités et des voluptés.

Part of the text of the final draft of the proposal for a new law as it was sent to Parliament in December 2021.

Although I cannot say for certain that the authors of the text consciously and purposefully made this distinction in the definition of *gay* and *lesbienne*, I am nevertheless inclined to see the definition of *lesbienne* in the proposed legal text as an expression of the fear that *lesbiennes* are women who conspire against men in groups. The authors' definition of intersexuality as "*adepte à toute orgie imaginable*" (F: adept at every imaginable orgy) also sounds ludicrous, but is probably a deliberate attempt to demonise intersexuality as a hypersexual practice.[102] The way in which *lesbiennes* are described in the proposal fits with the media representation of them. In the media, "scandals" often report about the activities of a "*bande de lesbiennes*" (F: gang of *lesbiennes*). Such appellations are not generally used to classify groups of *gay* men. When women group together, they escape patriarchal control and supposedly engage in the destructive practices of criminality, prostitution, or lesbianism. The supposedly sentimental nature of *lesbienne* attraction that the proposal speaks of becomes visible in the way in which mediatised "scandals" about *lesbiennes* often refer to violent fights among women. The equation of lesbianism to violence is not unique to Senegal: Lynda Hart (1994) demonstrated how the representation of lesbians as criminal deviants in popular culture of the West in the 1990s has its origins in the historical conflation of sexual and criminal deviancy in nineteenth-century Europe.

[102] The representation of LGBTQI+ sexualities as vulgar, even bestial, was further achieved through the definition of the "+" in LGBTQI+. Although the "+" is generally meant to be inclusive of any non-normative gender or sexual identities not captured in LGBTQI, the authors of this proposed legal text took another turn by adding zoophilia and necrophilia to the list of sexual identities that they explicitly sought to criminalise.

The looming fear of *wàcce* keeps many women at a distance from *lesbienne* networks, which was also reflected in Yacine's quote in Chapter Two, in which she explained that she had decided to stay away from sexual rights organisations until her own wedding, because, according to her, there were always people who entered such organisations just to get information in order to expose people. It was not uncommon for me to hear interlocutors complain about the behaviour of women in *lesbienne* networks. Interlocutors sometimes likened the behaviour of women who did *wàcce* to the behaviour of women footballers, whom some also considered to expose themselves too much, with their masculine appearance. Whether there is indeed more violence between *lesbienne* women than among other sections of the population is impossible to verify, and it is not the question that interests me here. For sure, cases of violence in *lesbienne* networks are exposed in the media, who gladly blow up stories to scandalous proportions for commercial success. What sells better, in a time of heightened anti-queer sentiments, than stories that seem to confirm the claim that *lesbiennes* and *gays* are vulgar persons without respect for any norm of decency or for the cultural importance of *sutura*? The responsibility of the press is thus enormous, but leaks to the press do occur, and they can come from within *lesbienne* networks. The combination of virulent anti-queer sentiments and the existence of a large scandal press makes such leaks to the media an effective element in *wàcce*, particularly when there are no voices in the public domain that can counter such representation of same-sex sexualities. To understand why some women do occasionally resort to violence in such a context, I now turn to a discussion of their social positioning.

Wàcce as naked agency

With the newspaper with Nabou's interview in my hand, I walked to Ndeye's. We discussed the article – Ndeye knows Nabou – and the practice of *wàcce* more generally. She said:

> *C'est seulement dans le milieu, les kóoba, qui font ça. Souvent les filles qui font le wàcce, sont des filles qui se foutent de ce que les gens disent d'elles. Peut-être sa copine vit en cachet, mais les gens savent déjà ce qu'elle vit. Elles ont eu des problèmes, donc elles se foutent des gens* (F: It's only in this environment, the *kóoba*, who do this. Often, the girls who practice *wàcce* are girls who do not care about what other people say about them. Their girlfriend may live secretly [her same-sex intimacies], but people already know what she lives. They have already had problems, so they do not care).[103]

[103] Conversation with Ndeye, 4 October 2020.

In other words, Nabou had little to lose; indeed, women practicing *wàcce* generally have little to lose, and both social and economic factors help explain why someone might be drawn to violence. Many women who perform *wàcce* have grown up in poverty and have experienced little choices with respect to their future, both in terms of securing a job, and often also with regards to the pressure to marry. Furthermore, many have already had problems with their families because of their sexual dissidence. Violence is part of many of my interlocutors' lives, many of whom have experienced different forms of violence at home, in school, or in their everyday urban environments. Whether it is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, or symbolic violence, its ordinariness informs how women may look at violence and normalise it. In nightlife, sometimes as a result of substance abuse, violence is even more prevalent than elsewhere. Against the background of structural violence that many poor urban *lesbiennes* face, violence may become a last resort when one feels humiliated in all spheres of life (Groes-Green 2009; Katz 1988). Violence may help in transforming feelings of victimhood and humiliation into power, by temporarily dominating someone by subjecting her to your violence, and damaging her reputation, so that she will bear the consequences of her decision to leave you. *Wàcce* can become a familiar reaction for women who are not afraid of the consequences for their reputation. If there is nothing left to lose, someone can hardly take revenge on you, and even the possible consequence of imprisonment may not be terrifying enough to withhold someone like Nabou from doing *wàcce*.

This brings me back to Naminata Diabate's (2020a) concept of naked agency. Tracing a long history of genital cursing and women disrobing in protest against political powers and in Africa, she argues that genital cursing foregrounds the agentive possibilities that arise from positions of vulnerability and precarity. In her discussion of women's naked protests, Diabate argues how, for these, women their bodies were the only weapon they had. They proved to be a powerful weapon because of the cultural meaning that is attached to the exposure of female genitalia in some societies. One of the cases in Diabate's book is the historical Women's War of 1929, in which thousands of Igbo and Ibibio women performed a collective genital shaming gesture, showing their naked buttocks to horrified soldiers and British colonial administrators, in a protest against female taxation and the colonial incursion in Igboland. Rather than accepting symbolic interpretations of genital cursing as emanating from women's bodies' supposedly innate mystical powers, Diabate urges us to take a closer look at the dialectical movement between positions of victimhood and power. She suggests that dire material conditions and the lack of options weighed more heavily in women's decision to disrobe than their belief in the mystical power of their naked bodies.

The concept of naked agency must be understood figuratively as much as literally, as the vulnerability and precarity drove women's decisions to strip naked. Stripping naked

was a last resort to draw the attention of those in power. The figurative nakedness of women's agency also lies in the open-endedness of their actions, or "open strategies" as Diabate (2020a, 17) calls them, with complex and unstable outcomes. The women's protests were successful in that the British colonial authorities agreed not to tax women. The British continued taxation of men, however, and their control of market prices continued to influence women's economic opportunities. Furthermore, despite some political changes instigated by the Women's War, women remained excluded from most political processes (Falola and Paddock 2011). It is this exclusion from political processes that explained women's resort to violence, in the absence of institutionalised access to power to affect change. Their agency was informed by a very restricted context.

Although women who perform *wɔ̀cce* do not directly attack political institutions, the ways in which they resort to a form of violence with the potential to hurt others who are in a (slightly) better position, resembles Diabate's analysis of naked agency. For women who perform *wɔ̀cce*, physically and verbally humiliating another *lesbienne* to strip her of her *sutura* is the only power they have over others. *Wɔ̀cce* is a constant negotiation of power relations between the women and their targets, and the outcome of women's intentions – however intentional their acts may be – can never be presupposed. With the media's hunger for "scandals" and rising anti-queer sentiments, the potential consequences can be far-reaching, and they expand beyond women's direct environment. "Agency is always co-constitutive, because the agency of the women stops or slows down where that of their targets begins or speeds up" (Diabate 2020a, 37). It does not suffice to look at women's intentions only, and exploring other people's interpretations of the acts, whether they are bystanders, those under attack, police officers, or family, is equally important for an understanding of the effects of *wɔ̀cce* on women's positioning in society.

Women's naked protest, either to shame individuals who offended community morality or to oppose a (colonial) government's injustices, have many precedents in a variety of African societies. Dating back to precolonial societies, naked protests have also been deployed by women to shame individuals or groups who broke society's morals. In northwest Cameroon, among the Kom, *anlu* was a practice whereby groups of women performed rituals to shame and ostracise individuals who broke community morals, and particularly those who offended womanhood (Nkwi 1985). *Anlu* produced a temporary reversal of the normal order of things, as transgressive practices such as showing one's sexual organs, or using someone's compound as a public latrine, were momentarily sanctioned in order to show the gravity of the infraction. Shouting obscenities was an important part of *anlu*, and it is also a part of *wɔ̀cce*, as I will show with another case shortly. Although *wɔ̀cce* is not naked protest in a literal sense, the objective of shaming someone who has offended morality, is what *wɔ̀cce* has in common with a practice like *anlu*. Both practices constitute momentary transgressions of civility that are intended to

draw attention to those individuals who are breaking society's moral values. In a context in which maintaining the privacy and honour of oneself and of others is so important, the emotional and violent outburst that come with *wàcce* can be considered a form of naked agency.

Literal nudity continues to be deployed against governments to protest injustices. Stella Nyanzi's naked protest in 2016, protesting Makerere University's move to lock her out of her office after a dispute she had with the management, and in 2019 during a court hearing when she was sentenced to eighteen months in prison for cyber harassment after she had insulted the president in a poem that she published online, are some of the most recent examples. About her decision to use nakedness as a form of protest, Nyanzi has said:

> If you're living in a country where democracy died many years ago, the legal system does not have fairness, you have been pushed to the wall, and you feel you are being humiliated, what can you do? Of course you will have to look for the best way to show how you are aggrieved and mine was to strip naked so that I can be heard. (Guyson 2016)

Wàcce never addresses political injustices directly, but the commonalities between *wàcce* and such collective political protests is that they occur in a context of few other means to voice one's discontent. The occurrence of women's naked protest against colonial governments and the later post-independence governments, makes sense if we consider how an important consequence of colonialism was that women's power, influence, and authority were significantly reduced with the further spread of patriarchal and religious (Islamic and Christian) gender ideologies. Seeing their power in the public domain reduced, women returned to (precolonial) practices of collectively shaming men who abused their power. Looking at how, why, and when some *lesbiennes* in Senegal today resort to violence and the public humiliation of their adversaries or ex-girlfriends, we have to understand where these women come from in terms of their positions in society and their lack of other, institutionalised means to hold people accountable for abuse of power and trust. With little authority to claim, *wàcce* can be a last resort for young, unmarried *lesbiennes* to shame others as a way to avoid shame for oneself.

On honour and shame

Shame as a means of social control becomes apparent through the centrality of honour (W: *jom)* and shame (W: *gacce*) in Senegalese societies. *Jom* signifies self-esteem and self-respect, and it refers to feelings of personal dignity (Ly 2016, 85). *Jom* and *gacce* represent two sides of the same coin: when your honour is affected, the consequence is a feeling of shame (ibid.). *Jom* constitutes the ability to meet social expectations, but it is

also about the willingness to make offers in order to save your respectability. The need to maintain your honour *coûte que coûte* comes from the serious consequence of losing it, which is abandonment by others. "*Nit bu ca jom jogéé dara desatu fa*" (W: if a person's honour is gone, there is nothing left) (Sylla 1978, 88). Refusing to be shamed means to refuse to be degraded to the status of second-class or non-citizen. *Jom* is one of the key elements that constitutes what it means to be human (Ly 2016, 107), and protecting your honour is thus a question of survival.

Women who perform *wàcce* paradoxically transgress norms of modesty and respect for others, but they do this to protect or re-establish their honour in the group. Women who perform *wàcce* are considered to lack feelings of shame and self-respect, because they expose themselves as violent, vulgar, and *lesbiennes*. For the women themselves, however, *wàcce* is the only way that they feel able to restore or save their honour in their network of *lesbiennes. Wàcce* creates a particular form of *lesbienne* sociality, but only if we consider what makes *wàcce* emerge as a form of agency is the unique combination of social and material precarity and anti-queer sentiments.

Wàcce relates to questions of honour and shame through its defiance of discretion (*sutura*). According to Wolof ethics, honour and shame are mediated through *sutura*, the dynamics of which, in turn, are informed by multiple hierarchies of power. In addition to the gendered expectations that wives protect the *sutura* of their husbands, the general expectation is that people reinforce the honour of their superiors by keeping their secrets and by abstaining from airing the other's dirty laundry in public. In a study of *sutura*, Ivy Mills (2011) argues how the deployment of *sutura* often designates an unequal power relationship. Casted *géwël* (griots, praise singers) are supposed to protect the honour of *géer* (noble, free men) by publicly praising their patron in speech and song, and by hiding their secrets. Restraint is a virtue that is valued for all Senegalese, but it is particularly expected from persons of good moral standing, and they are expected to avoid sharing their emotions in public and to demonstrate self-control by avoiding speaking and moving excessively (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Sylla 1978). Casted *géwël*, on the other hand, can expose their body publicly in suggestive dances, or they can tell lewd stories and jokes, and publicly insult people if they do not comply with their requests for patronage. This is because *géwël*, as a result of their low status as casted persons, are without *sutura* (Mills 2011). Such public denigration can kill, socially, the noble in question. Thus, the ability to force the noble's hand is often ascribed to the *géwël*. *Géwël*, in turn, do not die, socially, for they have no honour to lose. The caste system has lost some of its structuring capacity in Senegalese society, but other phenomena have come to occupy the place of the dishonourable subject in the Senegalese imaginary. The threats to communal life that *góor-jigéen* (W: man-woman, currently used as a slur for homosexual men) supposedly pose, the degradation of morality that "prostitutes" embody, and the lack of piety that

rogue wives of Sufi *shaykhs* are thought to display, leads to the exclusion of these subjects from an idealised honourable community in ways similar to what previously happened to *géwël* (ibid.).

As long as people manage to navigate family expectations, and maintain secrecy about their sexual and romantic involvement, *góor-jigéen/gays* or *lesbiennes* need not be dishonoured. Within *lesbienne* and *gay* networks, the distinction between a state of honour and a state of shame, is between, on the one hand, those who have managed to maintain their *sutura* and thus the respect from their family and others in society, and, on the other hand, those who have lost it through previous problems with their families for their same-sex relationships. Similar to the *géwël* and *géer* relationship, however, the one without honour has one asset compared to the one with honour, which is the ability to attack the honour of the other person. It is this space for agency, which comes with their generally lower status in the social hierarchy, that women employ when they decide to *wàcce* another woman.

Stripped of their *sutura*, their social positioning outside of what is deemed the honourable community gives these women greater freedom to show their passions compared to women from a higher social standing. Women who perform *wàcce* show a refusal of a status that Mills calls "social death," referring to having lost your honour and thus consideration of the community. They desire to live, and they actively resist their "social death" as they attempt to regain their honour. *W*àcce is thus connected to the importance of maintaining one's sense of honour. Regarding this importance, Sylla (1978, 91) notes:

> *Celui qui subit une humiliation, un affront et recule sans réagir s'entend condamner par les réprimandes les plus sévères telles que: moo ñakk jom (W: qu'il est dépourvu du sens de l'honneur); moo ñakk fayda (W: il n'a point de dignité); amul deretu gor (W: il n'a pas le sang d'un noble)* (F: Anyone who suffers humiliation or affront and backs down without reacting will be condemned with the most severe scolding, such as: he lacks any sense of honour; he has no dignity; he does not have the blood of a nobleman).

Wàcce can be a reaction to humiliation, and a last resort for women to avoid or respond to it. Faced with a loss of status in a network of *lesbiennes* that is so dear to them, which they draw so much from in terms of friends, lovers, support, and recognition for their lives – they attempt to take back control, and turn their feelings of victimhood and humiliation into power.

Turning the tables: The quest for respect and recognition in *lesbienne* networks

Women who perform *wàcce* are at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, having been exposed as *lesbiennes* before, and no longer enjoying *sutura* for their sexual lives. This does not mean, however, that these women lack the same respect and recognition in their *lesbienne* network. *Wàcce* is more than simply the result of a woman who has nothing to lose and who is thus informed by indifference with regards to exposure. *Wàcce* can be a way to acquire status within one's network, and particularly in the network of *lesbiennes* who go out to clubs and bars at night. In this network, many resources are shared as women depend on each other for almost everything: for friendship, love, sex, work, or income, as well as housing and care. A dependency on social relations is not unique to *lesbiennes*, but their networks are particularly dense, and, as a result tense, and restricted to a few places where they go out and meet each other in numbers. Moreover, in a societal context in which the pressure on women to get married is so high for women, and crucial to obtaining adult status, unmarried women have limited options to build a status.

One of the effects is that some of them turn their focus to the *lesbienne* milieu to build a status. "Deprived of other forms of capital, they emphasise their bodily resources," Annick Prieur (1998, 151) argued with respect to the feminine styles of the gay men and transvestites in her research in Mexico city. Appearance is important, and depends not only on financial means – the ability to dress and impress at parties and other social events – but it also depends on one's centrality in a network of *lesbiennes*. The frequency with which you are being talked about, your popularity in attracting girlfriends, and the amount of people you care for and who, in return, care for you, are all contributing factors. With regards to the latter, kinship bonds are invoked to emphasise loyalty and support. In the previous chapter, I described the development of bonds of "oddkin" (Haraway 2016) and mothering practices as an important aspect of *lesbienne* sociality in urban Senegal. Women like Adji, Fadiga, and Meta have mothered many women, supporting them materially, psychologically, as well as socially. These mothers are recognised to be mothers in their *lesbienne* network, and for this they get respect. Status implies hierarchy, however, and the quest for status can lead to competition among women. If a mother's position is challenged by another mother, the group (mother and her children) may *wàcce* this other mother to restore their power or dominance in their network. The paradoxical demands of appearance and visibility within *lesbienne* networks combined with the necessity of discretion with regards to same-sex relationships in society at large makes women vulnerable when they are the target of a *wàcce*.

In the previous chapter, I explained how Adji has become a mother to about fifteen women. Over the last couple of years, she has provided them with housing and food when

they needed it, and she has also been advising them on how to behave when facing the police. In return, her children give her respect and recognition – important symbolic capital. They are loyal to Adji when she gets into trouble with another woman, and she can count on them for help to *wȁcce* another woman. For a while, Adji has been in competition with Dieynaba who, like her, is a mother to a number of women. Their competition over recognition centres around visible performances of wealth, both in people and in currency. The ability to mobilise others when you need to *wȁcce* another woman to restore your position in a *lesbienne* network is a sign of social capital (Diabate 2020a). The parties that my *lesbienne* interlocutors frequented often had a *marraine* (F: godmother, host), who is both in a position to be honoured by visitors of the party and in a position to honour the artists animating the party. The *marraine* is expected to visibly throw money at the performing artist. While visibly throwing money at *géwël* and artists who praise you in their songs is required, the amount of money spent and the attitude with which this is done are carefully observed by others. While one should definitely not be stingy, the opposite might be read as too arrogant and out of place in a setting like this one where Dieynaba and Adji are in competition for their position in this network. After one such night in 2021, when Adji felt that Dieynaba's attitude as a *marraine* had been too arrogant, showing off her wealth and demonstrating contempt for Adji and her children, Adji's children initiated a *wȁcce*. After the party had ended, the group took a couple of taxis in the direction of Dieynaba's house, where they yelled obscenities, spilled the contents of garbage bins into her room, and demolished the doors and windows of her apartment. Adji had not requested her children to do this *wȁcce*, and she argued that it had been their own initiative to protect Adji's, and their own honour and status. This *wȁcce* had fizzled out without much further trouble for Dieynaba. Her landlord had not been interested in calling the police; indeed, his only concern was that someone would pay for the broken windows and door. About Dieynaba's personal status, Adji commented that "*De toute façon c'est une pute, tout le monde sait ce qu'elle vit*" (F: She's a prostitute anyway, everybody knows what she lives). Bringing down Dieynaba is not just about getting her into trouble in her neighbourhood by outing her as a *lesbienne*, it is also a way of teaching her a lesson in humility. Whenever Adji or Dieynaba feel that the other flaunts her wealth or pride too much, a *wȁcce* may be performed to bring her back down.

Wȁcce is part of the repertoire of Adji and her children as they claim authority and prestige in their social networks. In general, a certain penchant for drama characterises the lives of many women in the world of *wȁcce*. One day, when I visited Adji, she showed me the medical bills that she had recently paid for her girlfriend. The two had fought and when Adji had told her girlfriend that their relationship was over, her girlfriend had jumped from the second floor of the house. "*Elle voulait se suicider*" (F: She wanted to commit suicide), Adji said, laughing. She also had a scar under her left eye, caused

by Adji. They did not break up, and they lived together at the time of my stay. Her girlfriend helped Adji with her commerce (she sold skin whitening lotions), while they were looking for another job for her.[104] When I first met Adji, in June 2021, she showed me a video of herself lifting weights in the gym, to illustrate how she prepared herself physically for fights. Such preparation reveals the often premeditated character of *wàcce*. She shared such videos with her children as well, as part of her mothering revolved around transmitting the knowledge of how to be strong vis-à-vis anyone who would try to humiliate them, by mocking or insulting them or by stealing their girlfriend. By performing a *wàcce* collectively, Adji's children were trained in this practice of self-defence against humiliation.

When I visited Adji again in January 2022, she had moved to a different apartment. Instead of one small bedroom and bathroom, she now lived in a well-equipped three-bedroom apartment. She was on the phone when I arrived, negotiating the price of a four-wheel drive that she wanted to buy. Neither she, nor her girlfriend had a driver's licence at that moment, but they were planning to start driving lessons soon. When she hung up, she immediately received another call from a client who asked for her advice on how to quickly whiten her skin for her wedding day the next week. Adji advised her to buy a syrup (5,000 FCFA, about 7,50 euros), mixed with her cream (8,000 FCFA, about 12 euros), as well as a soap (5,000 FCFA). How did you acquire this knowledge about these products? I asked. "*Je n'ai pas de réponse, c'est un don de Dieu*" (F: I don't have an answer, it's a gift from God), she replied. Her girlfriend nodded in confirmation. I learned that she had only started this business a year ago, and I was surprised by the number of clients that she had managed to gather in such a short time. They clearly paid her well too, telling from the upgrade in her apartment and the car she was about to buy. "*Encore, c'est Dieu… et des produits de qualité*" (F: Again, it's God… and good quality products). The growth of her business was accompanied by a move towards a different lifestyle. She had moved on, she said, and she had left behind some of her old friends and children, because their lifestyle no longer matched with Adji's. She hadn't seen Awa in a long time, for example, which she explained by her going to new "*endroits de classe*" (F: classy places), and she no longer wanted to "*fréquenter les petit jump*, *elles sont trop vulgaires*" (F: hang out with the small *jump*, they are too vulgar). Being quite successful with her business of selling skin whitening lotions to a large clientele outside of her *lesbienne* networks, she wanted to avoid being associated with the *jump* that she used to hang out with. She had also stopped boasting about her *wàcce* to me. "*À un moment donné il faut passer à autre chose. Il faut avancer dans la vie, quoi*" (F: At some point, you have to move on to other things. You have to move on in life, you know), she said.[105] *Wàcce* is temporary in nature, and with assuming more responsibilities in life, and with more to lose, most women will cease engaging with women who may do *wàcce*.

[104] Conversations with Adji and her girlfriend, 8 June 2021.
[105] Conversation with Adji, 24 January 2022.

Adji still applies some of the same techniques of self-defence, especially her verbal wit, to assert her position, now primarily as a trader who produces her own quality creams. She proudly shares testimonies from her clients on her WhatsApp status, which show how well her lotions work to bleach the skin. When she found out that someone had taken her photos and had published them on her own WhatsApp, pretending that they were her own lotions, Adji had not hesitated to call the woman to insult her. Not that she is a stranger to some trickery herself: she had published a video of my white skin on her WhatsApp with her own voice-over "*mashallah sama cliente bu wéex tàll*" (W: *mashallah*, my client who's snow white).[106] When I suggested that no one would believe that my skin had become so white with whitening lotions, she assured me that people would, because her products, which she mixed herself as a "*chimiste*" (F: chemist), as she calls herself, were of good quality, contrary to most of the whitening creams on the market. In her business, like previously in her relation to Dieynaba and other *lesbiennes*, Adji asserted her dominance through claiming moral virtue, authenticity, and authority. She earned her money and status through hard work and a talent for business, where Dieynaba supposedly goes out at night (W: *génn guddi*) to sustain her *lesbienne* lifestyle, and where other traders sold cheaply imported whitening creams while pretending to sell quality products.

Knowing that I spoke to *ñi génn guddi* for my research, Adji told me to advise them to stop *jaay boppam* (W: selling their body).

> *Ce n'est pas un travail digne… jamais une femme ne devrait vendre son corps. Le corps d'une femme est sacré. Kan moo júr ministres? Kan moo júr président? Jigéen. Les femmes donnent naissance à tout le monde, et seules les femmes peuvent donner naissance. Son corps vaut plus que de l'or. Il ne faut pas le vendre. C'est ma philosophie: travailler dans la dignité* (F/W: It's not a worthy job… a woman should never sell her body. A woman's body is sacred. Who gives birth to ministers? Who gives birth to the president? Women. Women give birth to everyone, and only women can give birth. Her body is worth more than gold. One should not sell it. It's my philosophy: work with dignity).

Assuring me that she has always "worked with dignity," also when she was still active with *wàcce*, Adji's move towards a new lifestyle nevertheless conveys her idea that such a lifestyle of violence and exposure is not a sustainable lifestyle. As a woman, to move on in life, as she called it, and to gain more respect, in a broader societal sense, she needed to let go of all too much violent drama.

[106] Arabic, literally meaning "God has willed it," and often used to congratulate someone, to indicate that something good has happened.

Where Adji had seemed to move on and had left *wàcce* behind, others have always tried to keep their distance from such practices. The challenge for women is to balance the demands of their *lesbienne* networks, useful for visibility and physical assertion as a way to build a status, with the demands of family and wider society for discretion and respectable and modest behaviour. The story of Fama, a twenty-seven-year-old *lesbienne*, illustrates some of the tensions that may come with striking a balance between status and respect in *lesbienne* networks and maintaining good relationships with family and neighbours. Whenever I discussed the topic of *wàcce* with her, she was always quick to distance herself from it. At the same time, her story reveals that it is not always one's own choice to engage in such practices or not. In Dakar's well-connected *lesbienne* networks, *wàcce* might just happen to you as you go through a break-up or if you challenge someone else's position in the network too much. Attempting to reconstruct one's reputation after *wàcce* may require you to accept someone else's status, and leaving the fights behind may be the only way to return to normalcy and restore relationships with family and neighbours.

Fama recounted how, in 2017, she was *wàcce* by Dieynaba, the same woman who competed with Adji over status in the *lesbienne* milieu. Dieynaba had been angry at Fama for having supposedly stolen her girlfriend Adama. Fama and Adama were not dating, but Fama had been accommodating Adama, who was her niece, for several months. Adama had experienced troubles at home with her own family, after they had found out that she had a same-sex lover. Her mother, who was Fama's half-sister, had sent Adama to Dakar to stay with Fama, and had asked Fama to look after her and to make sure she focused on her studies. In Dakar, Adama had started dating Dieynaba, whom Fama knew well. Soon, Fama's niece started neglecting her studies, spending most of her time in bars, and with her new girlfriend. At one point, Adama did not return home to Fama for a couple of days, and Fama did not know where she was, until a *gay* man they all knew told her that he had seen Adama at her new girlfriend's house. Fama alerted Adama's mother; the next morning, they took a taxi to Dieynaba's house to demand Adama return home. Dieynaba and Adama protested, arguing that Adama was free to choose where she would spend her time, but Fama had said, "*Adama et moi nous sommes liées par le sang, j'ai donc une responsabilité envers elle*" (F: Adama and I are connected through blood, so I have a responsibility towards her).[107] Adama's mother decided to take her home with her, outside of Dakar. The next day, Adama headed back to Dakar. In the meantime, Dieynaba had decided that she would not leave it at this and she decided to *wàcce koñ bi* (W: bring down the neighbourhood). She came to Fama's house with a couple of friends, in taxis loudly claxoning, shouting in front of Fama's house. Fama recounted to me what they had shouted: "*génnal Fama, dañu lay rey*" (W: get out Fama, we will kill you), and "*lesbienne la, day katt jigéen*" (W: she's a *lesbienne*, she fucks women), and "*dafa réew*"

[107] Interview with Fama, 1 August 2021.

(W: she's naughty, impolite).[108] To shout such indecent things in public is, needless to say, unspeakable. Fama was at home with her brother's girlfriend, who had temporarily moved in with Fama.[109] Precisely because Fama was so close with her family, and at this moment quite literally too, the *wàcce* was effective. Fama said of Dieynaba's choice to do *wàcce*,

> *Elle peut faire du wàcce parce que tout le monde connaît sa vie. Elle n'en a rien à foutre. Tout le monde la connaît, parce que parfois tu la vois dans les réseaux sociaux, dans les journaux: xoolal ki, lesbienne la… donc elle n'en a rien à foutre. Dafa def lu ko neex* (F/W: She can do *wàcce* because everyone knows her life. She doesn't give a damn. Everyone knows her, because sometimes you see her on social media, in the newspapers: look at this one, she's a *lesbienne*… so she doesn't give a damn. She does whatever she wants).

Dieynaba had not appreciated Fama meddling in her love affairs, so she had shown her power over Fama by publicly humiliating her. Being exposed and humiliated in one's neighbourhood is painful, but one can move out, and in a big city like Dakar, it is fairly easy to relocate to another neighbourhood in order to never have to confront the shame of meeting your former neighbours again. Being exposed among your own family, however, can cause you much more trouble. Since Fama was hosting her brother's girlfriend at the moment this *wàcce* happened, and she had heard the insults, she called Fama's sister to tell her what had happened. The next day, her sister and mother were standing on the doorstep having come to take Fama home to their village. As soon as they arrived home, Fama escaped and she took a bus back to Dakar. Realising that her family would probably not leave it at that, she decided to spend the night at her friend's place, rather than return to her own room. And indeed, a day later her sister, who is a police officer, returned to Dakar with a police escort to come and get Fama. They broke into Fama's room and took most of her stuff when they did not find her there. Fama decided to move to a different neighbourhood, because "*À ce moment-là tout le quartier pensait que j'étais un voyou*" (F: By then the entire neighbourhood thought I was a thug). This shows the potential of *wàcce* to really hurt and humiliate another person. This potential is only increasing with the growing anxiety over "lesbianism." It also points, once more, at the messiness of kin relations, and at the complex entanglements of biological kin and oddkin that can at once be great sources of well-being and security while also being sources of conflict.

[108] *Katt* is a vulgar way of referring to sexual intercourse, and it is used when insulting someone.
[109] Fama's brother's girlfriend had come to Dakar to hide her pregnancy from people back home. Being a Christian woman in a relationship with a Muslim man, her family had not agreed with their wish to get married. In the meantime, the woman had got pregnant, and though this might advance her case within her family for marriage, she came to Dakar temporarily to escape the gazes and judgements of neighbours in the small village.

Despite having been in trouble with her family and her neighbourhood after being *wàcce*, a couple of years later, things have calmed down. Fama is respected in the neighbourhood in which she currently lives, and she has restored the relations with her family. Even her sister, the police officer, with whom she did not speak for five years after these events, is back on speaking terms with her. Fama has worked on her relationship with her parents and siblings over the past few years, by supporting her family financially whenever she can, and by respecting important family gatherings during religious holidays and ceremonies like baptisms, marriages, and funerals. She therefore has good reasons to stay away from *wàcce* dynamics. She is very critical about women who perform *wàcce* in order to "be the buzz," as she referred to being seen and talked about in their *lesbienne* networks (Oudenhuijsen 2021b). Fama does recognise the importance of being talked about and being visible in the milieu, and she achieves this, among other things, by engaging in romantic relationships with multiple women at the same time. Although managing multiple relationships is tricky in itself, Fama makes great efforts to carefully balance being talked about and being seen with many women, while not allowing intense emotions to take over, which could lead to a *wàcce* if one of them finds out that Fama has other girlfriends. Likewise, she has tried her best, and with success, to create a stable housing situation, which includes good relationships with her neighbours. When I visited her in February 2022 she proudly told me how her neighbours had told her mother, who had come to visit, that Fama was such a gentle, respectable woman.

> *Ils savent que je suis lesbienne à cause de mon style et du fait que je vis avec Souadou. Mais ils s'en fichent, je ne crée pas de problèmes dans le quartier. Je suis toujours aimable avec les gens, je salue tout le monde, j'offre des pièces aux gens si j'en ai* (F: They know I'm a *lesbienne* because of what I wear, and the fact that I live with Souadou [her girlfriend]. But they don't care, I don't cause any trouble in the neighbourhood. I am always friendly to people, greeting everyone, offering people small change if I have it).

Fama tries to avoid getting into trouble with Dieynaba again, who has a larger network to mobilise support from, but whenever the two meet each other, Fama acts cool around her.

> *Si je montre que j'ai peur… comment puis-je l'expliquer? Elle t'humiliera. Elle te pousse à dire certaines choses. Elle t'humiliera, quoi* (F: When I show fear… how can I explain it? She will humiliate you. She will push you to say certain things. She will humiliate you, you know).

Fama refuses to show any sign of Dieynaba's power over her. At the same time, by avoiding her, she confirms Dieynaba's status in this network. It is important for people to defend their honour by refusing to be humiliated, also, or perhaps especially, when you face mockery regularly. The quote in the title of this chapter, "*tu me piétines, je t'écrase*" (F: you trample me, I crush you) refers to this necessity to get the upper hand in a fight. It is the motto of Awa, one of Adji's children, who had learned from Adji how to fight back when she is mocked, and how to keep her dignity whenever she faces the police. Having experienced quite some mockery in *lesbienne* networks for a lack of urban suave in her early days in Dakar, and being ridiculed by strangers for her masculine appearance, Awa has developed a fieriness and readiness to fight anyone who acts like they are superior to her. In an ethnography of *jotas* (effeminate homosexual men) and *vestidas* (transvestites) in Mexico city, Annick Prieur (1998, 83) demonstrates similar reasoning from her interlocutors about their street fights: "Up to a certain limit, you must accept that people pester, but after that, you have to fight back, to keep your status," said Mema, her principal interlocutor and gatekeeper. For these men, living at the margins of urban society, their capacity to fight back was essential to claim a presence in their social worlds. Mema, Fama, and Awa's ideas about status and humiliation seem to align, when Mema furthermore added, in response to Prieur's question about the black eye he had got from the particular street fight she had witnessed, "If I don't defend myself in that situation, I'll get into a vicious circle, and will get a lot more trouble later. Everyone will try to assert himself" (ibid.). If Awa turned away from violence, and accepted being mocked or insulted, she would be seen as acquiescing to her marginal positionality in urban networks, including the *lesbienne* networks. It is this desire to become relevant, then, that leads women, occasionally, to turn to violence.

Conclusion

This chapter sought an answer to the question of how we should understand the prevalence of *wàcce* among people who are generally concerned with keeping their relationships a secret. However paradoxical it may seem, *wàcce* violence and the exposure this means for the *lesbiennes* involved can thus be made sense of if we consider the forms of sociality that emerge in their tight-knit networks. *Wàcce* acts are constitutive of alleged wickedness, because of their revealing of social problems, in what many consider uncivil and inappropriate ways. Through questioning why women would violently out their peers, and themselves, in a context of growing anti-queer sentiments, I have begun to see the many different stakes involved in *wàcce* dynamics. Rather than seeing *wàcce* violence as purely destructive, it is a way for some women to take back control and re-position themselves in the world. Seeing women as either victim or perpetrator of such violence would be reductive of the complex context in which they live. If we analyse the reasons why they turn to *wàcce* violence, and the effects on their positions in the urban milieu,

on their status in society, and on the strength and depth of their social networks, we can understand how women are both victims and agents in their social worlds.

Through *wàcce*, women expose another person's moral wrongdoing. Women who perform *wàcce* invoke notions of reciprocity and morality when they attack another woman for offending these values. The women who perform *wàcce* attempt to re-establish moral boundaries and hierarchies in their relationships with (former) lovers, friends, and others in their networks. Because shame informs communal inclusion and exclusion, *wàcce* practices of exposing and shaming someone for being a *lesbienne,* are an attempt to shift ideas about who should be excluded. *Wàcce* hereby engages with social status both within *lesbienne* networks, as the capacity to mobilise others to *wàcce* others builds reputation, and beyond those networks in society at large, by attempting to reveal someone's unsocial practices. By performing *wàcce*, women turn their humiliation into power, however temporary. *Wàcce* is certainly risky behaviour, also for the women who perform it, but it is one of the many risks that women face in their environment. While, at first sight, it may appear to be a mere eruption of violence and a lack of emotional restraint, upon closer inspection it is about much more than just punishing another woman for having hurt you. It is about restoring one's own reputation and sense of worth.

This analysis of *wàcce* among *lesbiennes* in Senegal builds upon the work of Serena Dankwa (2021), Gloria Wekker (2006), and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2010) who have written about violent conflicts between same-sex desiring women. Tinsley (2010) has argued how rivalries between lovers and friends in same-sex networks are intensified by a context that has granted women little to claim as their own. Conflicts, then, are an expression of women's desire to possess and keep the little that is available to them. Dankwa (2021) has analysed how the potential for conflict and abuse in women's same-sex relationships can also be the result of age differences. The authority that comes with women's seniority, can lead a more senior woman to attempt to control the (flirting, romantic) behaviour of a younger lover (Wekker 2006), and age gaps between women carry the potential of abuse by an older woman of her younger lover. Attending to the dynamics of seniority in women's same-sex relationships allows for a deeper understanding of the relational nature of power hierarchies and dynamics in women's romantic relationships. This chapter contributes to this scholarship on women's same-sex networks by analysing some of the outcomes of violent conflicts among women.

I have shown how the practice of *wàcce* has the potential to create new social hierarchies and inequalities between women who are somehow all positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. *Wàcce* serves the negotiation of social hierarchies in these women's networks, where successful performances of superiority – in appearance, verbal wit, and physical domination – gain women respect and recognition in their network.

The ability to mobilise the most (girl)friends when they need to *wàcce* another woman, confirms their status in their networks. Women who perform *wàcce* quite literally fight for their honour, when they feel they have just been stripped of it. Women's reassertion of their honour is not one that is detached from the rest of society, and it is simultaneously a repositioning of oneself in one's networks of relationships – both in *lesbienne* networks, in their families, and in society.

The cases in this chapter of women who do *wàcce* invite us to rethink conceptualisations of agency and social status. People's capacity to act upon their own life does not exist in a vacuum, and is not free from constraining socio-political contexts and the relationships that people are embedded in. But depending on one's positionality in society, people have different possibilities to survive and to create space for their supposedly wicked lives. Where the *féministes* in Chapter One possess a certain amount of cultural capital to take part in public debates about women's rights and positions in society, most of my interlocutors who are *ñi génn guddi* or *lesbiennes* lack this capital. In various other ways, women have shown ways to navigate stigma concerning their supposedly wicked behaviour. For all of them, sticking together has been crucial. However, the tight-knit networks of oddkin and friends that they developed consequently also create the conditions for conflict in a context of material precarity and social exclusion. Care and solidarity coexist with conflict and violence. These conflicts between *lesbiennes* in particular, in which they violently exposed their peers for the moral injury that was inflicted on them, reveal *wàcce* as a form of naked agency for women who have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Emerging from a context of vulnerability and victimhood, these women turn to violence as a last resort, to restore their honour. Even when such acts backfire on them.