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

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Summary

This dissertation analyses women's gender and sexual dissidence in relation to social transformations in Senegal. The Senegalese public discourse is characterised by "gender panic": a broad public concern with women's unruly practices, and sexuality in particular, that emerges as social transformations bring about shifts in gender relations. As a result, sexualities are virulently policed, and particularly "homosexuality" is brought to the public attention as a problem that jeopardises Senegalese supposedly traditional values and ways of living. Through a focus on women's everyday lives, this dissertation explores how women shape their lives while navigating public debates, gender panic, and the policing of gender norms that results from this panic in Senegal.

This thesis follows a qualitative methodology, and it draws upon ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2022 with three groups of women who, in one way or the other, transgress Senegalese gender norms: *féministes* (F: feminists), *lesbiennes* (F: lesbians) and *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night, that is who engage in commercial sex). By bringing together three groups of women who are differently positioned in society, and who have consequently largely been studied separately, this dissertation challenges the compartmentalisation of research that is common in gender and sexuality studies. Particularly in a time of right-wing nationalism and populist rhetoric that has appropriated identity politics as a way of pitting groups against one another, undoing the fragmentation of society into isolated, supposedly incompatible identities and groups is crucial. The analytical concept "wicked" helps in this regard. It brings together a variety of women whose behaviour has come to be seen as a threat to the social and moral order. It shows how different acts of dissidence, such as same-sex love, commercial sex, or vocally contesting particularly gendered norms such as *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) and *muñ* (W: enduring, persisting silently in the face of hardship), coalesce and bring about forms of agency whereby the supposed differences between these women are sidestepped. The term "wicked" allows for a deeper understanding of women's positioning as they respond to, but also as they generate social transformations.

In four empirical chapters, this dissertation sheds light on the many different ways in which supposedly wicked women craft ways to live their dissident lives. It starts and ends with the role of the public sphere in delimiting women's agency at the precipice of supposed wickedness.

Chapter One explores how *féministes* give shape to their agency in the public sphere in a context of gender panic. This context, and particularly the virulent anti-queer debates of the last years, highlights new tensions concerning women's agency. From these debates emerges a picture that, despite an increased visibility of *féministes* and a growing presence of women in the public sphere in positions of leadership, there is little room for a

questioning of gender and sexual norms. Female sexualities remain seriously policed, and the efforts of women to acquire the right to abortion in cases of incest or rape are heavily combated. The domain of sexual rights proves to be a contentious terrain, and anti-queer sentiments in particular mark the precipice of supposed wickedness in the current era.

Because for most Senegalese women publicly debating questions of gender and sexuality is neither a possibility, nor a desire that they hold, Chapter Two zooms in on 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. This Chapter foregrounds the experiences of *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* and how they seek space to live their dissident lives. It demonstrates how women craft liveable lives for themselves through the use of trickery, secrecy and ambiguity.

Chapter Three expands this idea of women's craftiness by arguing that this is learned and developed in conjunction with others. It explores how so-called wicked women create and transmit a *savoir vivre*, a knowing how to live, together in a challenging urban context. This chapter analyses women's kinship bonds as a site of knowledge production. Although often considered to be living different lives and to have different concerns in terms of health and rights, this chapter shows that *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* often live together and share a *savoir vivre* in networks of kinship. Despite the importance of such social relations and kinship bonds for women to survive together amid economic precarity and societal expectations, their relations are not free from conflict.

Chapter Four reveals how the forms of sociality that women construct for a collective *savoir vivre* are fragile, affected by the broader societal context that criminalises and stigmatises their relationships or work, and by an economic context of scarcity of jobs and resources. Women's tight-knit networks, in which everything is shared – from scarce economic resources, to housing, as well as lovers – inevitably occasionally lead to jealousy and (violent) arguments. Scarcity breeds jealousy, and some women are envious to keep and possess the little that is available to them. This Chapter analyses how practices of violent exposure and humiliation, which women refer to as *wàcce*, has emerged among some *lesbienne* networks. The practice of *wàcce* 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.

Bringing together the experiences of a diversity of women sheds light on how different forms of agency emerge, depending on women's social positionalities. Women from all different walks of life are affected by gender normativity and gender panic, but the degree to which they are under scrutiny, and the ways in which their behaviour is judged, differs. This dissertation identifies three key factors that affect societal responses to women's

dissident practices, as well as women's abilities to live supposedly wicked lives: social status, financial autonomy and embeddedness in communities.

Women's abilities to deviate from gender norms without being stigmatised as wicked depends on their social status. Social and cultural capital enhance women's opportunities to speak up in the public domain. Financial autonomy, too, is indispensable for being able to defy family expectations. The leeway that financial autonomy allows women to make their own decisions does not, however, set them free from family expectations and judgement. To sustain a so-called wicked life, women are also firmly embedded in communities. By sharing resources, spaces, and *savoir vivre* to survive collectively, women forego economic and social poverty that would foreclose the possibilities to sustain sexually dissident lives.

The transmission of this *savoir vivre* enables women to develop the necessary multiple crafts of secrecy, elusiveness, and trickery to survive and live well under adverse conditions. But more than surviving, their craftiness also displays a potential to undermine the disciplinary agendas of religious and political leaders. Women embody and navigate multiple and supposedly conflicting identities, occupations, kinship attachments and social obligations as they craft a collective *savoir vivre*. *This savoir* vivre proposes a nuanced perspective on dissidence and the seemingly ever-increasing polarisation that gender and sexual dissidence appear to evoke across the world. Women's knowledge of how to live well *(savoir vivre)* reminds us that we cannot do without each other, even if we do not get along.