

THE ECONOMICS OF MIGRATION IN SMALL TOWN SENEGAL

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In the small Wolof town where I did research people are proud to call themselves farmers. Centuries ago their ancestors settled in the central Senegal River Valley and they have lived off of their crops ever since. But these days no family can make ends meet without some sort of cash infusion. Most rely on men who have migrated abroad, working in France or Italy, to send monthly remittances. This influx of money makes for lively commerce. Each day the morning market bustles with women doing their daily shopping and just as many women sitting behind small tables with something to sell. The market square is lined with workshops and small stores. The place hums with activity and the air is lively with jokes and greetings shouted to passersby.

Households have an equally lively air to them. Large extended families live together in rooms arranged around a central courtyard. Women sit in the shade engaged in daily tasks while keeping an eye on the small children tottering about. Elders sit in the background quietly taking in the scene. But in many cases most of the adult men are missing. Their presence is fleeting, marked by short annual visits and frequent phone calls. Their absences leave the households feeling less than full, but keep the granaries from becoming empty.

The lives of Senegalese migrant men in European cities cannot be understood without first understanding the sociocultural and economic contexts from which they have come. My research is an attempt to foreground the context of home in these men's lives and to show the centrality of their social and economic remittances to life in small town Senegal today.

My research focuses on the economic and social aspects of life in the rural Senegal River Valley. From August 2015 through August 2016 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. I spent 10 months in a small town which typifies the culture of migration seen throughout the Senegal River Valley. Next I spent 2 months between France and Italy visiting the migrant men whom I had previously met during their trips home to Senegal.

My research questions focused on the ways that people negotiate family finances and social dynamics in this transnational context. I studied the local economy in the Senegal River Valley; the ways that remittances are spent and how this influx of cash has created a new range of economic horizons for some while other money-making possibilities have dried up. I looked at the ways that migrant experiences are interpreted in the small town context and the ways that people are adapting to changing

circumstances and opportunities both at home and abroad.

While my research is an ethnographic case study of one particular town I am hopeful that in my writing the voices of community members and the power of their experiences will come through and enrich discussions of labor mobility from the peaceful regions of the Sahel to destinations abroad. More broadly I hope that my work can help to clarify and better contextualize the current state of transnational labor migration between West Africa and Europe.

Ben Burgen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology and a former FLAS fellow (Wolof). Portions of this research were funded by a Fulbright-Hays DDRA, the University of Florida Graduate School, the Sabel Research Group, and the Department of Anthropology.

