


Chapter Eight

West Africans: Trading Places in New York

Paul Stoller

In February 1999 four members of the New York Police Department's (NYPD) Street Crimes Unit gunned down Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African immigrant. The killing, which took place in the vestibule of Diallo's apartment building, triggered a still unresolved controversy. Many of the details of the senseless police killing remain obscure. A few facts are clear. The police fired forty-one shots, nineteen of which struck Diallo, who died immediately. Before the fatal incident, Diallo, who was only twenty-two years old, lived quietly in the Bronx. The four plainclothes police officers mistook Diallo for a local serial rapist, whom, they said, Diallo resembled (Cooper 1999).

The ongoing research on which this article is based has been generously supported through grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, West Chester University, and from the National Science Foundation (Law and Social Behavior Program). Parts of this article have appeared in different form in Anthropology and Humanism 7(1) (1997) and in American Anthropologist 96(4) (1996). I thank Nancy Foster for asking me to contribute this essay to New Immigrants in New York and to Jeanne Tumash McSorley for her critical reading of the present essay. The names of the traders mentioned in this article have been changed to protect their privacy. The quotations attributed to the various traders are derived from ethnographic interviews conducted in New York between 1993 and 1998.
A lethal mix of linguistic confusion, cultural misinterpretation, and racism probably led to the killing. Much of the press coverage of the Diallo tragedy has focused on the brutality of the killing and on the increasingly racist contours of NYPD-minority community relations. Mayoral press conferences and interviews defended the overall professionalism of police behavior. Mayor Giuliani, in fact, called for calm so that the "facts" of the case might be determined. Opponents of the mayor's police policies staged a demonstration in which speaker after speaker condemned police brutality against minorities. Triggered by the media's tunnel vision, the political implications of the Diallo incident quickly eclipsed the young man's personal tragedy.

Even so, careful readers of the coverage might have gleaned a glimpse of the young West African migrant's life in New York City. Sidebar articles described Diallo's life. He was born in Lelouma, Guinea, a Fulani village situated on the Fouta Toro plateau of that West African nation. He came to New York City in 1997, one of thousands of young West African men who in the past ten years have left their homelands to come to New York City to seek economic opportunity. Like many West Africans in New York City, Diallo settled in the Bronx among relatives: first with his uncle and then with two of his cousins. Work consumed much of Diallo's time. "The three roommates hardly saw each other, because they all worked so many hours, striving to make their way in a new country. Amadou Diallo, who peddled socks, gloves, videotapes, and other goods on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan, usually left each day by noon and did not return until midnight" (Waldman 1999). Coverage of memorial services and demonstrations presented brief portraits of the West African presence in New York City. Readers learned about such voluntary associations as the Guinean Association of America. They also learned that Diallo's parents had long been associated with international commerce. His father, in fact, manages businesses in Vietnam (see Weir 1999; Sachs 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). And so for a fleeting moment the Diallo tragedy brought into focus the city lives of West African merchants who occupy trading places in America.

The surprisingly detailed media attention to the Diallo case, however, was short-lived. Journalists made limited mention of the fact that Diallo was one of thousands of street traders in New York City who established small vending businesses during the 1990s. Their reportage also omitted that Diallo's journey to New York is a contemporary version of the centuries-old tradition of long-distance trading in West Africa. In fact, the Fulani from Fouta Toro, the region where Diallo came from, have long mixed commerce, religion, and politics (Boville 1995; Curtin 1974; Gregoire 1992) And so it is not at all surprising that like his forebears, Diallo, a pious Muslim, would leave Guinea at twenty years of age to seek commercial opportunities in a distant and exotic land.

This essay, which describes and analyzes the city lives of recent West African immigrants to New York, is based on field research conducted in Manhattan from 1992 to 1998. During those years I was a participant observer at street markets on 125th Street and on 116th Street, both in Harlem, and along Canal Street between Broadway and West Broadway. Field research in New York resulted in more than 100 informal interviews and twenty life histories. The research was a natural extension of roughly seven years of fieldwork conducted intermittently among Songhay-speaking peoples in the Republic of Niger between 1976 and 1990. That experience enhanced my capacity to grasp many of the nuances of contemporary West African social life in New York.

In the essay I attempt to describe the multifaceted city lives of men like Amadou Diallo. What global forces, if any, led West African long-distance traders to come to New York City? What has been the history of their immigration? What are the political, economic, and social dimensions of their social lives in New York City? The remainder of the essay consists of two parts: (1) a short history of recent West African immigration to New York City, and (2) a description that focuses on how West African immigrants have adapted to the political, economic, and sociocultural realities of life there.

**West African Immigration to New York City**

Small numbers of West Africans, mostly students, have been migrating to New York City for more than fifty years. In the 1990s West African immigration expanded significantly. Although most of the recent immigrants from West Africa, according to immigration statistics, come from Ghana and Nigeria, the focus of this essay is on the increasingly visible community of Francophone African immigrants, many of whom are street vendors in Harlem and in midtown and lower Manhattan. (New York City Department of City Planning 1999) These vendors come from Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Some of the Nigerian vendors, in fact, come from villages where I conducted fieldwork between 1976 and 1990.

It is impossible to know just how many West African immigrants live in New York City. Figures from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which refer to legal immigrants intending to settle in New York City, are usually too low; figures from various African immigrant associations are often inflated. These figures, no matter their source, make no reference to the thousands of West African itinerant traders, who are either import-exporters or African art dealers, who come to the United States for three to six months at time.

Between 1990 and 1996, according to estimates in *The New York Times*, the number of West Africans in New York City increased from 44,000 to near 88,000 (Jacobs 1999). Even if this estimate is perhaps a bit high, it can be said that hundreds, if not thousands, of the Francophone West African immigrants to New York City work not as highly paid diplomats, but as unskilled wage laborers. Although census figures, which refer mostly to Ghanaian and Nigerian immigrants, show Africans to be a highly educated group, many of the recent Francophone immigrants come from families of long-distance traders who usually
don’t possess specialized technical skills or university diplomas. Most of them have become, like Amadou Diallo, street traders in Harlem, Brooklyn, and Lower Manhattan, where they share market space with African Americans, Jamaicans, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Pakistanis, and Afghans. Some of the Francophone immigrants who are literate and have obtained Employment Authorizations Permits from the INS drive medallion cabs, which are licensed; others, who are also literate, drive so-called gypsy cabs, which are often not regulated by City Hall. The more successful Francophone West African traders have used their profits to open restaurants or boutiques like Kaarta Textiles, a shop on West 125th Street in Harlem that sells cloth and clothing from West Africa. Other merchants operate thriving import-export businesses. Unlike other recent immigrants to New York City, the Francophone African street vendors have a dispersed pattern of residence. They live in small clusters in Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn and therefore have not constructed communities that dominate a particular neighborhood. They often keep to themselves and have little to do with the Ghanaians and Nigerians who comprise more numerous and more tightly knit communities.

From spring through fall groups of mostly Francophone West African traders pack vans with exotic leather goods and jewelry made in Africa and baseball caps and T-shirts—with the logos of American sports teams—made in China and Korea. They travel throughout what they call the “bush”—Indianapolis, Kansas City, Detroit—following the circuit of African American cultural festivals and trade shows.

Not all Francophone West Africans living in New York City, however, are merchants. Many of them work as store clerks, security guards, and grocery store delivery people. On the Upper West Side of Manhattan, for example, stock clerks in Price Wise Discount Drug Stores—along Broadway—often speak Wolof, the major Senegalese language, as they take inventory. In 1997 their boss, the manager, was also Senegalese. At Lexington and Ninety-second Street on the Upper East Side of Manhattan one can sometimes overhear a sidewalk conversation in Songhay, a major language in the Republic of Niger, as several Nigerians take a break from delivering groceries. In November 1999 a loosely organized group of West African deliverymen staged a demonstration in front of the Food Emporium at Sixty-eighth and Broadway on the Upper West Side. They protested poor work conditions and low pay and talked to the media about their difficult lives in America (Jacobs 1999).

Although the West African contribution to New York City’s exponential explosion of multiculturalism may be little known, the recent expansion of social diversity in New York City is widely acknowledged. New York City is one of the principal destinations of recent immigrants—documented and undocumented—to the United States. As new groups of recent immigrants have established communities, many urban, suburban, and even rural areas have become “suddenly” diverse and different. The emergence of difference, in turn, has undermined the myth of the American “melting pot,” which, for some Americans, has made the specter of new immigration a bitter political issue of national scope. By the same token, the new immigration has sparked much political debate in local contexts. The West African presence in Harlem, for example, has sparked a great deal of political discussion, which ultimately triggered the dissolution of the African Market on 125th Street in October 1994 (see Stoller 1996; Fortes and Stepick 1993; Davis 1990; Dugger 1996).

Global Restructuring and West African Migration to New York City

The increased migration of Francophone West Africans to North America evolves directly from global restructuring. As a complex of economic, political, geographic, and sociocultural phenomena, global restructuring has spurred the growth of multinational corporations, imploded notions of space and time, triggered the outplacement of manufacturing from the First to the Third World, prompted the outsourcing of industrial parts and the downsizing of corporate payrolls, stimulated the emergence of globalized financial markets, brought on the feminization of the workforce in rapidly proliferating export-processing zones, eroded large sectors of the American middle classes, and induced the exponential growth of the informal economies (see Coome and Stoller 1994:251; see also Harvey 1989; Sassen 1991; Mollenkopf and Castells 1991).

This complex of relations, however, has led less to the global integration of human and economic resources than to the polarization of rich and poor (Sassen 1991, 1996; Mittleman 1996). This polarization is quite evident in sub-Saharan Africa, a region of the world in which the number of poor had been expected to rise by 85 million to roughly 265 million by 2000 (Mittleman 1996). Economic problems in West Africa, for example, have recently been exacerbated by the World Bank’s program of insisting that credit-hungry West African governments live within their means no matter the volatility of international currency markets (Callaghoy and Ravenhill 1993). One result of these policies was the 1994 devaluation of the West African franc that in one day lowered the Francophone West African standard of living by 50 percent. The devaluation affected the lives of millions of people, including traders who liquidated their inventories in West Africa and headed to New York City.

To demonstrate how these global forces influenced individual migration patterns, consider the case of Idrissa Dan Inna, a Nigerian trader on 125th Street. After obtaining a tourist visa from the American Embassy in Niamey, Niger, Idrissa arrived in New York City in February 1994, two weeks after the World Bank orchestrated the devaluation of the West African franc by 50 percent. Idrissa said that the devaluation had ruined his business in Niger. With twelve children to feed, he liquidated his inventory, obtained a visa, and bought a round-trip ticket to New York City. With the return portion of his ticket, he bought inventory. Several days after his arrival he was conducting business on 125th Street.
Idrissa Dan Inna, who spoke French and a smattering of English, came to New York City for two reasons. First, he wanted to avoid working in France, where new immigration laws provoked the harsh treatment of African aliens. Second, compatriots who had spent time New York told him of unrivaled opportunities there.

West African Traders in Harlem

Attracted by the global lights of New York City, many West African traders, like Idrissa Dan Inna, came to New York not to settle, but to make as much money as possible and then return home. After arriving they soon found that their lack of English, limited technological knowledge, and murky immigration status made working in the regulated economy almost impossible. Facing this brute reality, they entered the informal economy, many of them becoming street vendors.

Before 1990, the primary West African practitioners of informal street trading were Senegalese men vending from tables set up along midtown Manhattan sidewalks. Given the regulatory difficulties of obtaining a vending license from the City of New York, the majority of Senegalese conducted unlicensed operations (Ebin and Lake 1992; Coombe and Stoller 1994; Stoller 1996). By 1985 scores of Senegalese had set up tables in front of some of Manhattan’s most expensive retailers along Fifth Avenue. Such a cluttered Third World place in a First World space soon proved intolerable to the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association. Headed by Donald Trump, the association urged City Hall to crack down on the unlicensed vendors.

Following the cleanup, Senegalese vendors relocated to less-precious spaces in midtown: Lexington Avenue and Forty-second Street near Grand Central Station and Thirty-fourth Street near Penn Station, to name two locations. They worked in teams to protect themselves from the authorities and criminals. One person would sell goods at a table. His compatriot partners would post themselves on corners as lookouts. Another compatriot would serve as the bank, holding money safely away from the trade. In this way midtown side streets became Senegalese turf.

As more Senegalese arrived in New York City, the vending territory expanded north to Eighty-sixth Street on the Upper East Side and south to Fourteenth Street near Greenwich Village and to Canal Street in Lower Manhattan. In some areas the Senegalese replaced vending tables with attaché cases filled with “Rolex” and other “high-end” watches. By 1990 the Senegalese had a lock hold on informal vending space in most of Manhattan. Backed by the considerable financial power of the Mourids, a Muslim Sufi brotherhood in Senegal to which many of the vendors belonged, the Senegalese soon became the aristocracy of West African merchants in New York City (Ebin and Lake 1992; Coombe and Stoller 1994; Stoller 1996). When merchants from other West African countries (Mali, Niger, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Cote d’Ivoire) began to immigrate to New York City in 1989 and 1990, the Senegalese had already saturated the lucrative midtown markets, compelling them to set up their tables along 125th Street, the major commercial thoroughfare in Harlem.

Although African Americans have a long history of vending on the streets of Harlem (Bluestone 1991; McCoy 1940; Ofosky 1971), the 125th Street informal market gradually took on more and more of an African character. Between 1990 and 1992 the so-called African market grew substantially. Although vendors reported the business along 125th Street to be fair during the week, on weekends the market swelled with shoppers. By 1992 the African market had become one of New York City’s tourist attractions—one of the photo opportunities for tourists on double-decker tour buses following uptown routes.

The success of the market provoked a spate of political problems. Harlem business and political leaders lobbied the Dinkins administration to disperse the “illegal” market. Dinkins attempted to disband it but backed down when confronted with a raucous demonstration. The beginnings of the Giuliani administration, however, meant the end of the African market on 125th Street. On October 17, 1994, Mayor Giuliani declared street vending illegal on 125th Street. Although the 125th Street Vendors Association staged a protest, the vendors did, indeed, disperse. Many of the West African vendors moved their operations to the new Harlem market of 116th Street and Lenox Avenue. Owned and managed by Malcolm X’s Masjid (mosque) Malcolm Shabazz, the majority of this market’s vendors were from West Africa.* Still others who had obtained employment authorization permits from the INS found work as security guards or in low-skill factories, restaurants, liquor stores, or drugstores. Following the market’s demise, some of the traders moved away from New York, seeking wages labor in more rural areas where the cost of living was lower. Several vendors returned to West Africa. Like Amadou Diallo, the majority of West African street vendors live in apartments with one or two of their compatriots. Vendors who work the 116th Street market usually live in Harlem or the South Bronx. Traders who work in Lower Manhattan often live in Brooklyn in buildings where the occupants are exclusively West Africans. None of the vendors that I have met live outside the New York City limits.

A Profile of West African Traders in New York

As the brief journalistic portraits of Amadou Diallo suggest, the population of West African street vendors is almost completely male. Most traders, young and middle-aged alike, are either single or leave their wives and children in West Africa. No matter their marital status, they wire home as much money as they can. Several of the hundreds of vendors that I have met since 1992, however, have married American women and have started North American families, which usually means that they support families on two continents.

In Islam these transcontinental family practices present no moral or legal problems even if they sometimes increase the instability of marriages. In fact, the prac-
tice of settling in an exotic land, if only for a period of years, and starting a family extends the longstanding West African tradition of long-distance trading in foreign lands (see Rouch 1956; Cohen 1969; Brenner 1993; Gregoire 1993). A generation ago, for example, large numbers of Nigeriens settled in Ghana, married Ghanian women, and raised families. Most of them returned to their already well-established families in Niger, leaving their new families in Ghana. From Niger, they would try to send money regularly to Ghana and would periodically visit their Ghanian families. The vast majority of contemporary traders in New York City, however, do not marry American women.

There are also an increasing number of female traders, mostly Senegalese, who have sold dolls, jewelry, and cooked food at both the 125th Street and 116th Street markets in Harlem. Some of these women are middle-aged entrepreneurs who divide their time between Senegal and New York City. Others accompanied their husbands to New York. A number of Senegalese women have also opened thriving hair salons in Harlem and Brooklyn.

The West African traders are almost all practicing Muslims. If they are able, most of them pray five times a day and follow Muslim dietary restrictions, meaning that they avoid pork products and buy lamb and beef from Muslim butchers. Traders at the 116th Street market attend Friday Sabbath services, called jumma, at the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz on 116th and Lenox. They also observe Ramadan rituals, fasting from sunup to sundown during one prescribed month of the year. During Ramadan in 1996, the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, managers of the 116th Street Harlem market, prohibited the daytime sale of cooked foods in their market space. Muslim clerics from West Africa, many of whom are Islamic healers who treat the traders' physical disorders with herbal medicines, routinely visit New York City. Traders also seek their advice about social and/or psychological problems.

The traders often face a bevy of social and economic problems in New York City. They usually live in outrageously expensive substandard housing located in crime-infested neighborhoods. Like all peddlers, their fortunes rise and fall with the seasons. In summer they can make a good deal of money; in winter sales usually plummet with the temperatures. Although they have some access to medical care, few, if any, of the traders have medical insurance. Although many of the traders have confidence in Western medicine, they sometimes find it linguistically as well as culturally difficult to explain their problems to medical staffs who often have difficulty understanding their limited English.

For most of the traders the defining social problem, however, is their immigration status. Traders with permanent resident status (holders of green cards) are a very small minority indeed. Their status enables them to travel and work more or less as they please. Traders with employment authorization permits, which are issued to immigrants who have married American women or who have been granted political asylum, are also free to work in either the formal or informal sector. They must renew their authorizations every year. Sometimes the INS re-stricts travel to the work permit holder's country of origin. A Senegalese trader in Lower Manhattan who possesses an employment authorization card told me how the INS turned down his request to visit his ailing mother in Senegal. They required official documentation of her illness.

Many West African traders in New York City, however, remain undocumented immigrants. This status makes many of them hesitant to travel outside of New York City, where, according to many people I've talked to, they are more fearful of American law enforcement. Lack of documentation means that traders often avoid going to physicians, postpone English instruction at night schools, keep their proceeds in cash rather than bank accounts, and fail to report the theft of their inventories. Although I don't know of any undocumented West African traders who have been deported, many of them fear being placed in detention and sent home—in disgrace. They spend much of their time trying to obtain what they call "papers." They hire immigration brokers to fill out forms and immigration lawyers to represent them at INS hearings. As one undocumented trader from Niger put it: "Life in New York is full of uncertainties." Like most of his compatriots, he does not plan to settle in the United States; he will remain until "the time is right" to return.

**West African City Life in New York**

So far it is evident that the community of West African traders in New York City is profoundly fluid. Although many of the men who migrated to New York City in the early 1990s have returned home, they have literally traded places with younger relatives—brothers and cousins—who have maintained businesses set up by a pioneering kinsperson. As previously mentioned, only a small percentage of traders have married American women and have started families. Many of these men, who are among the most successful traders, hope to raise their children in both New York City and West Africa. The vast majority of traders say that they've come to New York City to exploit an economic situation and will return to West Africa when they've made enough money to return home with dignity. It sometimes takes years for many traders to reach this goal.

Given this set of priorities, few of the traders aspire to American citizenship. They also feel little social connection to the communities in which they live. As a result they contribute little to community life in places like Harlem, where I've often heard shoppers grumbling about how the African traders have exploited them. The ongoing expression of this attitude has reinforced a low-grade fever of resentment between West African traders and African American shoppers. The sociocultural, legal, and political tensions of living in New York City have also hardened negative impressions that many West Africans hold of American society. Many traders perceive America as a violent, insensitive, time-constrained place in which morally depleted people (non-Muslims) don't have enough time to visit one another. To buffer themselves from social privation and cultural alienation, West
Africans have formed informal credit groups or more formal mutual assistance groups like the Guinean Association of America. Many traders are also links in international economic networks, the cores of which are based in Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Guinea, and The Gambia. These cartels, based on real or fictive kinship ties, have existed in West Africa for centuries; they have been the foundation of long-distance trading throughout West Africa. During the past ten years, they have been extended to North America. It is to these networks that many West African traders in New York City owe their economic or social allegiance, or both. These socioeconomic realities mean that the dynamic community of West African traders in New York City has little social stability and few formal institutions.

This brief outline of West African social life in New York City lacks a human face. Who are these traders? What specific problems do they face, and how do they resolve them? What is the quality of their lives in New York City? In describing some of the life issues faced by West African traders, I attempt to demonstrate how they confront and resolve—with varying degrees of success—medical problems, regulatory dilemmas, and cultural alienation. As will become evident, these problems are inextricably linked.

Health, Fear, and Politics in New York City

Moussa Boureima, who has lived and worked on the streets of New York City for more than five years, suffers from rheumatism. The condition, which makes his knees ache, his ankles swell, and his joints stiffen, is aggravated by the fact that he sells his merchandise outside—in the damp chill of fall and winter as well as the stifling humidity of summer—at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. Despite his continuous discomfort, Moussa has been hesitant to see a physician.

"I don't speak much English," he says. "Not enough to explain what's wrong with me. Last year I found a doctor on Seventy-second Street who spoke French. He gave me a shot and my pain went away, but it came back. I don't want to go to a hospital. I have no papers. I don't want any trouble."

Aside from his health, Moussa has a number of other very serious concerns about city life. With the money he earns from the sale of baseball hats, gloves, and scarves, he has to pay $450 per month to rent an apartment in a substandard building in the South Bronx. He also has to pay for his electricity, gas, and telephone. His daily transportation on the subway, food costs, the price of medication as well as necessary investments in new inventory quickly sap his financial resources. After he has paid his bills, he sends the remainder of his money to Tahoua, Niger, to support his wife and eight children.

Moussa migrated to America in 1994 because the economy was bad in Niger and there was little work in West Africa. He came to America without "papers." After three years of working outside at Harlem street markets, he had worries about his health. Given the approach of cold in the fall of 1997, for example, he dreaded the possible medical consequences.

Traders like Moussa Boureima often avoid hospitals, doctors, and nurses. One reason may well be cultural. A few traders have expressed a distrust of Western medicine. Several traders I know consult itinerant West African healers, herbalists who are Muslim clerics, to deal with both physiological and psychological problems. These healers travel to New York every four months or so, bringing with them fresh medicines from West Africa. Between 1994 and 1998, one such healer, Alpha Loga, traveled between Niger and New York City fourteen times.

For the great majority of West African traders, avoidance of public hospitals has less to do with a distrust of Western medicine than with a fear of the INS. Despite relatively light harassment from the INS, every West African trader I've met has expressed fears of detention and detainment. The fear of being turned into the INS ebbs and flows with the intensity of political debate about immigration.

In the summer of 1995, for example, there was much talk at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market about Congress's proposals that would bar children of illegal immigrants from public schools and force public hospitals to report undocumented aliens seeking medical treatment. Although traders tend to be critical of Mayor Giuliani's police policies, his sharp criticism of these proposals won their praise. Mayor Giuliani said that refusing to treat sick people in public hospitals was morally wrong. "It's just out of a sense of decency," he said. "I can't imagine, even in parts of the country where views are harsher than they might be in New York, that they're basically going to say, let people die." (Firestone 1993). Indeed, Mayor Giuliani sued the federal government to uphold Executive Order 124, signed by Mayor Ed Koch in 1985, that prohibits city agencies from supplying information on a particular immigrant to the INS unless he or she is accused of a crime.

Given Mayor Giuliani's public assurances about maintaining the confidentiality of undocumented immigrants seeking New York City services—especially at public hospitals—why would a fairly well informed man like Moussa Boureima continue to avoid public services? The vast majority of West African traders that I've met take such assurances with a grain of salt. Despite Mayor Giuliani's federal lawsuit on behalf of New York City and Executive Order 124, the U.S. District Court found in favor of the federal government, which in effect repealed the executive order. Giuliani appealed the lower court decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals, which in May 1999 also found in favor of the federal government. Put another way, if Moussa Boureima, an undocumented immigrant, goes to the public hospital in New York City, he may well be reported to the INS. This sequence of events reinforces an overriding concern of most West African traders in New York City: can they trust outsiders—people whom they think misunderstand them? Although several public officials seem to support the rights of immigrants, most Americans, from the standpoint of West African street ven-
dors, think immigrants pay no taxes and use up the ever-shrinking pot of public service resources—all of which contribute to Moussa Boureima's aversion to New York City public services.

Cultural Isolation

Although the vast majority of West African street vendors I've met in New York City express profound appreciation for the economic opportunities they enjoy and exploit in the United States, they invariably complain of loneliness, sociocultural isolation, and alienation from mainstream American social customs. These conditions, which lead to a diminished sense of control over one's life, have had an impact on the subjective well-being of men like Moussa Boureima and his compatriots Boubé Mounkaila and Issifi Mayaki (Mirowsky 1995; Mirowsky and Ross 1991).

Intensified by cultural differences, feelings of isolation from the larger sociocultural environment can have a significant impact on physical and psychological well-being. This kind of social isolation limits the range of activities and interaction in which people participate; it also reduces feelings of control and competence. Indeed, cultural alienation—living in a social environment where one cannot control, impact, or shape one's surroundings—can lead to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness (Mirowsky and Ross 1991; Tahmaseb-McConahy and Obudiate, 1998). This lack of control compels Moussa Boureima, who is sick, to avoid hospitals; it convinces Boubé Mounkaila, that he can do little to resolve regulatory dilemmas provoked by the City of New York and the INS.

The presence of family, however, may well diminish some of the negative effects of immigration. Accordingly, the absence of family is one of the greatest deterrents to securing a sense of well-being among many West African traders in New York City. Constructed as lineages, the families of traders are usually their primary source of emotional and social support. Caught in the regulatory limbo of being an undocumented immigrant, Issifi Mayaki is unable to return to West Africa to see his family, whom he longs for. He says this situation frustrates him and sometimes makes him mean-spirited. For most West Africans in New York City, family is paramount. Even though they feel isolated and lonely in New York City, they have come to America, they say, to support their families back home.

For the African psyche, the collective or the group is the ideal. For the African, the clan, the ethnic group is the base for unity and survival. The unit of identity among Africans is "we" and not "I." According to an Ashante, Ghana proverb, "I am because we are; without we I am not and since we are, therefore I am." Therefore all shame, guilt, pain, joys and sorrows of any particular individual are partaken by the group. The major source of identity is, therefore, for the African, the group, beginning with the smallest unit: the family. (Nwadiora 1996:118)

Although this statement oversimplifies Africa and Africans and misses the tensions that arise when individuals are routinely subjected to group pressures and responsibilities, it nonetheless captures an essential cultural difference between West Africans and most Americans (see Hofstede 1980). For most West Africans, the ideal, if not the reality, of a cohesive family that lives and works together is paramount. This ideal, however remote, has survived regional, national, and international family dispersion. It leads men like Moussa Boureima, Issifi Mayaki, and Boubé Mounkaila to regularly phone their kin in West Africa; it compels them to send as much money as possible to help support their wives; their children; their cousins; and their aging parents, uncles, and aunts.

The absence of family has several psychological ramifications for many West African traders in New York City. Besides support, families provide a sense of trust and feelings of competence. As Issifi Mayaki has said, one can usually trust her or his blood kin. Generally speaking, the closer the blood ties, the greater the degree of trust. Absence of family therefore creates an absence of trust that leads, according to the traders I've talked to, to a considerable amount of stress and anxiety. For young men the absence of wives also means that they are in a kind of social and sexual limbo. They share profound cultural and social bonds with their wives, in whom they place great trust. In Niger, for example, marriage, which is sometimes between such close blood kin as cousins, family relations tie individuals into webs of mutual rights and obligations. Men expect wives, even during their long absences, to remain faithful to them. To avoid opportunities for infidelity, long-distance traders—who are also long absent—often insist that their wives live in the family compound. In this way, observant relatives—in-laws—not only enforce codes of sexual fidelity but also help raise the family's children. Many of the men, however, believe it is their inalienable right to have sexual relationships with other women especially if they are traveling. As Muslims, moreover, they have the right, if they so choose, to marry up to four women, though this practice is increasingly rare. These are some of the cultural assumptions that many lonely and isolated West African traders bring to the social/sexual relationships with women they encounter in New York City. To say the least, these assumptions clash violently with contemporary social/sexual sensibilities in America.

Like many Nigeriens and Malians in New York City, Moru Sifu talked of being lonely and feeling socially and culturally isolated during his time in New York City. A rotund man well into his fifties, Moru hailed from Dosso in western Niger. As one who had made the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, he was addressed by the title El Hadji. In his discussions of life in New York El Hadji Moru complained incessantly about city life. He did not like the food, detested what he considered American duplicity, and distrusted non-Africans. Between 1992 and 1994 he sold sunglasses on 125th Street in Harlem. Like Amadou Diallo, work and sleep constituted much of his life. El Hadji supported two devoted wives in Niger. "Our women," he said in August 1994, just before his departure, "know respect for their men. They also know how to cook real food. None of these Burger Kings
and Big Macs. Rice, gumbo sauce with hot pepper, and fresh and clean meat. That is what I miss. I want to sit outside with my friends and kin and eat from a common bowl. Then I want to talk and talk into the night. I want to be in a place that has real Muslim fellowship."

During his two years in New York City, El Hadji said that he had remained celibate—by choice. He did not trust the women he met. The women, he said, often took drugs, slept with men, and sometimes even gave birth to drug-addicted babies. "Some of these women even have AIDS. Soon I will be in Niger in my own house surrounded by my wives and children." There are many West African traders in New York City who share El Hadji Moru's attitudes. Like him, they have remained celibate.

Boubé Mounkaila, by contrast, has been anything but celibate during his time in New York City. Like his brother traders, he misses his family, including a wife he has not seen in eight years and a daughter born several months after his departure. Sometimes, when he thinks of his family, says Boubé, "my heart is spoiled. That's when I listen to kounti [a one-stringed lute] music."

From the time he arrived in New York City in 1990 as a twenty-eight-year-old undocumented immigrant, Boubé has had many girlfriends and is well known among fellow traders as a ladies' man. He is a tall, good-looking, and charming man. He has also become fluent in what he calls "street English." Because he sells handbags, most of his clients are women, old and young. On any given day a young woman might be sitting in Boubé's stall waiting patiently for him.

Boubé's girlfriends, however, are not limited to local women. Several female tourists who have come to the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market have been much taken with him. In particular, two European women, both in their mid-twenties, have visited on several occasions. One of them lived with him for three months in 1997.

Boubé's domestic circumstances are exceptional among West African traders in New York City. For most traders, life is much less dramatic; it follows a course experienced by men like El Hadji Moru Sisi or Amadou Diallo—one works, eats, and sleeps. In some cases a trader might have occasional interludes with women or develop a long-standing relationship with one woman. Issifi Mayaki's situation is more typical. He is a handsome and well-dressed man of forty years who speaks good English. Between 1994 and 1997 he developed a relationship with a single African American woman with a ten-year-old daughter. The woman is a social worker. Issifi met the woman when he sold African print cloth on 125th Street in 1994. She expressed interest in him. He told her that he had a wife and children in Africa. She said that she didn't mind. They began to see each other but maintained separate residences.

When Issifi began to travel to African American trade shows far from New York City, his relationship began to unravel. His girlfriend did not want him to travel to festivals. She became jealous of his wife in Niger. When he told her of plans to travel home, she did not want him to go. As a result, Issifi began to believe that American women wish to totally consume their men, which, he said, is not the African way. This cultural clash became the source of endless contention, and eventually Issifi and his girlfriend drifted apart.

In the fall of 1997 Issifi asked for advice about his immigration situation. He had met an African American woman in Chicago who had agreed to marry him. This marriage would be an arrangement in which she would receive a lump sum payment and monthly infusions of money in exchange for a marriage that would qualify Issifi for an employment authorization permit and, he hoped, permanent resident status (the green card). He had been following changes in immigration regulations and knew that he would have to take action by January 15, 1998, if he eventually wanted to become a permanent resident. He wanted to know if he would be able to return to West Africa to visit his family after he had obtained a work permit. Such travel would be quite difficult and risky under the new regulations, and he might have to wait three or perhaps ten years before he would be able to return to the United States.

As previously mentioned, Issifi, like many West African traders, distrusted the establishment, which is why he chose not to consult an immigration lawyer about his situation. He eventually decided not to go through with the marriage.

"When the time is right," he said, "I will go home and start a business. My younger brother will come to run things here."

Other West Africans have made other domestic arrangements. Abdou Harouna, who, like El Hadji Moru Sisi, comes from Dosso, Republic of Niger, is not a trader but a "gypsy" cab driver. Abdou, who now calls himself "Al," came to New York City in 1992. In 1994 Al married an African American woman, not simply because he wanted to obtain immigration papers, but because he had fallen in love. His wife is a primary school teacher, and they now have a five-year-old daughter and live in Harlem.

One of the Nigerien traders, Sidi Samanze, has two families: one in the South Bronx and another in Niamey, Niger. At the young age of thirty-eight, Sidi has become a prosperous merchant who runs a profitable import-export business that requires him to travel between Niger and New York City seven to ten times a year. Sidi is perhaps the ideal model of West African trader success. He came to the United States in 1989 and sold goods on the streets of midtown Manhattan. He invested wisely and realized that the American market for Africana was immense. He saved his money and went to Niger to make contact with craft artisans. In short order, he began to import to the United States homespun West African cloth, wool blankets, leather sacks, bags, and attaché cases as well as silver jewelry.

After obtaining an employment authorization permit, Sidi established a family in America by moving one of his two African wives (and her children) to New York City. In 1994 he became a permanent resident. As a permanent resident, Sidi is able to travel between the United States and West Africa with few restrictions. Because he travels to Africa so frequently, Sidi has become a private courier. For a small fee, he takes to Africa important letters or money earmarked for the fam-
families of various traders. From Africa he carries letters and small gifts to his compatriots in New York City. The freedom to travel also enables Sidi to find new craft ateliers in Niger. During his six-week sojourns in Niger he of course tends to his other family.

This pattern is a contemporary version of West African polygynous marriage practices. In Western Niger, for example, prosperous itinerant traders establish residences in the major market towns of their trading circuit. According to many Nigers, husbands, they try to pay equal attention to their wives and children in order to minimize the inevitable disputes that arise, especially when co-wives live in one compound.

Sidi is particularly proud of his youngest son in New York City. The boy, Soumana, attends public school in the South Bronx and has been put in a program for gifted students. In the summer of 1995, Sidi boasted of his son's performance. "He is so smart. He's very good in math, and never forgets anything. He was the top student in his class. The school gave him a certificate. I speak to him in Songhay," he continued, "so he can visit Niger soon. He does not yet know his country. But I will send him there when he is old enough for middle school. I don't want him to go to middle school in New York. The schools are not good, and he'd be exposed to bad people. I'll send him to my family in Niger so that he will learn discipline from his relatives. I want to send him to an American school in Niamey. That way, he'll know French as well as English and he'll be able to choose a university in Africa, France, or the United States. He'll be a real citizen of the world." Many of the traders share similar aspirations for their children.

Fellowship and Religion

Whatever the family circumstances of the traders, they invariably complain about the lack of fellowship in America. This lack takes on many dimensions. Traders often complain, for example, of the formality of American social interchange. In March 1998 a Malian trader said that for him America was almost like a prison:

There are so many rules, here. Your time is scheduled. You cannot just drop by and see someone; you have to make an appointment. People are in too much of a hurry. They take no time to talk with one another. Everything is so tight. In Africa we are freer. Even if you are a stranger, people will invite you into their house and talk to you. Here that never happens. America is a prison. In Africa there is more fellowship.

The search for companionship among compatriots leads many West Africans to endure deteriorated conditions so that they may live in a "vertical village" like the Park View Hotel, "Le Cent Dix," at 110th and Lenox in Harlem. The majority of the Park View's tenants are Francophone West Africans. There are similar "villages" in high-rise as well as garden apartments in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

West Africans have also attempted to generate fellowship through the establishment of "national" associations. There are such groups as L'Association des Guineans aux USA, L'Association des Maliens aux USA, L'Association des Senegalais aux USA, and L'Association de Nigériens de New York. The associations are usually connected in some way or fashion to the diplomatic missions of the various Francophone African countries. Meetings are held once a month, often at a particular nation's United Nations mission. During the meetings, issues of mutual concern are discussed. The associations hold receptions for major Muslim and national holidays. They sometimes collect funds to defray a compatriot's unexpected medical expenses. In the case of a compatriot's death, they also contribute funds to ship the body back to West Africa for burial.

Although West African traders speak highly of their particular associations, their participation in the regular activities of the organizations—the monthly meetings—is infrequent. Only a few traders among Nigers, for example, are active members. The vast majority of Nigers have neither the time nor the inclination to attend association meetings or events. One reason for this infrequent participation has to do with a fault line that runs deep in Nigerian society—between the educated elite who run the associations in New York and the less educated traders and peasants who are "represented" by the associations.

Many West African traders in New York City seem to derive their greatest sense of fellowship and social support from Islam. The religion of Muhammad unquestioningly structures their everyday lives and keeps alive their sense of identity in what, for most, remains an alien and strange place. During my seven years of ongoing conversations with West African traders in New York City, the subject of Islam has been invariably raised, especially when the conversation turned to the quality of life in the United States. They say that in the face of social deterioration in New York City, Islam has made them strong; its discipline and values empower them to cope with social isolation in America. It enables them to resist the divisive forces that they believe ruin America families. The great buffer to their cultural dislocation is the perception, held by almost all the traders that I have met, that Islam makes them emotionally and morally superior to most Americans.

El Hadji Harouna Soulay is a forty-five-year-old Nigerian who made the expensive pilgrimage to Mecca when he was thirty-four years old. El Hadji Harouna embodies the aforementioned sense of Islamic moral superiority. Between 1994 and 1997 he sold T-shirts, baseball caps, and sweatshirts from shelves staffed between two storefronts on Canal Street in Lower Manhattan. He works hard to support one wife and fourteen children. He also sends money to his three brothers and four sisters. His mother and father are both dead.

On a rainy day in December 1995 El Hadji Harouna sat under an awning on the steps of Taj Mahal, a radio and electronics store on Canal Street near West Broadway. He pointed out two seemingly down-and-out street hawkers, both African Americans, employed by the owners of Taj Mahal.
You see those men there," El Hadji Harouna said, referring to the hawkers.
They know only their mother. Sometimes they don't even know who their father
is. That's the way it often is in America. Families are not unified. Look at him,"
his face has not once returned there to visit them. Why do you think it is better
in the free market? At least in spirit? I want to get back to my
family compound where we can all live together," El Hadji Harouna stated
emphatically. "Can parents here depend on their children to take care of them when
they are old? I do not think so. If children sit at home and eat their
parents' money, but they think they owe it to themselves and not to their parents. My children
phone me every week and ask me to come home. When I am old even if I have
money, my children will look after me. I will not do work. I will eat, sleep, and
talk with my friends."

El Hadji continued his conversation but now concentrated on religion. "My
Muslim discipline gives me great strength to withstand America. I have been to
Mecca. I give to the poor. I rise before dawn so that I can pray five times a day,
every day. I fast during Ramadan. I avoid pork and alcohol. I honor the memory of
my father and mother. I respect my wife. And even if I lose all my money, if I
am able, Inshallah, to live with my family, I will be truly blessed." Like most of
the traders I have encountered, El Hadji's faith is inviolable.

Membership in the community of the faithful—the community of Muslims in New
York City—creates for many West Africans a spiritual bond, provides a source of
social support, and constructs a buffer against the stresses of city life in New York.
Like any religion Islam provides explanations about the existential absurdities of
life. It supplies an always already set of explanations for the sociocultural problems
of Muslims living in societies in which Islam is not a major sociopolitical force.
For many traders in New York City, Islam as a way of life is seen as morally
superior to other faiths practiced in the United States. And yet, being a member
of the community of the faithful does not dissipate a West African trader's financial
difficulties, nor does it eliminate the stress of potential illness or the existential
doubts brought on by cultural alienation.

A number of writers have recently depicted West Africans in New York as
uniformly savvy entrepreneurs who easily solve the economic, political, and social
problems they confront in America (see Millman 1997; Perry 1997). These heroic
portraits are at best partial. There are certainly many West African traders who
flourish in New York City; there are just as many, I think, who, for any number
of reasons, continue to lose ground in their ongoing battles with economic priva-
tion and cultural isolation.

Even if traders adapt successfully to city life in New York, very few of them
have expressed a desire to settle permanently in the United States. Even so, they
want to preserve their economic gains and maintain the flow of money from the
streets of New York City to the dusty paths of their West African villages. How
to solve this dilemma? Recently, many of the more successful traders, both docu-
mented and undocumented, have brought their brothers to New York City. They
live together, during which time the younger brothers work and learn the business.
In time the older brother will return to West Africa, leaving the business in the
trustworthy hands of kinsmen. They will have, in every sense of the phrase, enga-
ged in the process of trading places.

Notes
1. Press coverage of the Diallo tragedy was surprisingly thorough. The New York
Times sent a reporter to Guinea to cover Amadou Diallo's funeral. Since then,
reporters have seemed to be more sensitive to issues of African immigrants in New
York. A case in point was the November coverage of a strike by West African
grocery deliverymen.
2. The New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division reports that
for 1990-1996, 10,914 West Africans were admitted to New York City as per-
manent residents. The statistic does not include temporary migrants (students,
exchange visitors, government officials) or undocumented migrants. This total is
considerably smaller than the estimate reported in The New York Times, which
considers West Africans included in the official total.
3. The expansion of the gulf between rich and poor in New York City has created
space for the rapid growth of the informal economy, which is unregulated. Lack
of regulation means that the informal sector includes street vendors as well unli-
censed day care service. It also includes a craftsperson who builds furniture in an
area not zoned for manufacturing. See Coombe and Stoller 1994; Castells and
Portes 1989
4. In November 1998, the Masjid moved the market from the busy corner of 116th
Street and Lenox to a space on the south side of 116th Street near Fifth Avenue.
5. There is a trader ethos that is well depicted in Jean Rouch's wonderful film Jaguar.
Although Rouch may have romanticized the adventurous aspects of long-distance
trading in West Africa, he is quite right about the trader's expectations of respect.
After a long sojourn in foreign lands traders are accorded local reverence if and
only if they return home with goods and perhaps enough money to "retire" to the
village as a respected elder.
6. The Mourids, a Senegalese-based Sufi brotherhood, are well organized in New
York City. Many Senegalese street vendors are members and owe their allegiance
to their sheikh in Touba City, Senegal. Less well organized purely economic net-
works exist among non-Senegalese. See Malcolmson 1997; O'Brien 1971.
7. Women in polygynous marriages tended to avoid discussions about the internal
dynamics of their households—especially with a male researcher. Accordingly, I
have no data on their attitudes to polygynous arrangements—national or trans-
national.
References