Malian traders in the Senegalese capital

By Gunvor Jónsson

In Dakar, the capital of Senegal in West Africa, there is an abandoned train station which lies not far from the harbour. If you peek through the metal wire fence that surrounds this impressive structure, you can get a glimpse of the empty arrival and departure halls, and if you walk around the back, you might notice a small group of traders lined up against the old railway tracks which are overgrown with weeds. This is the former terminus station of the Dakar–Niger railway line that stretches all the way from the Atlantic coast and eastwards into the interior of West Africa, ending at the River Niger by the capital of the landlocked neighbouring country, Mali. Since 1923 and up until the turn of the second millennium, this railway was the only means of direct transport to Dakar that was available to the majority of Malians. The terminus station in Dakar was a hub for the city's Malian population and a point of convergence for a great variety of travellers, beggars, civil servants, migrant labourers, and traders.

The Malian traders I met in Dakar during my 12 months of fieldwork in the city in 2013, generally traced the origins of their community back to the pioneering kola nut traders, who imported these precious nuts from the Ivory Coast, either by ship or on the railway via Mali, to the port of Dakar. Several Malians settled in Dakar in the late 1960s, after the fall of the socialist regime in Mali which had discouraged emigration and commerce. These Malians had previously participated in the so-called *navétanat*, one of the most important migrations in the modern history of West Africa, involving the seasonal agricultural labour migrations of men to the peanut plantations of Senegal and The Gambia (David 1980). Peanut

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production provided the economic base of French colonial rule in the region, and constituted the principal source of revenue for the post-colonial Senegalese state. A series of severe droughts and the falling world market price for peanut oil undermined the peanut economy, and some Malian cultivators therefore decided to settle in Dakar where they transformed themselves into kola nut traders, drawing on their transnational family networks in Mali and the Ivory Coast to facilitate their businesses.

Initially, these Malian traders stored their shipments of kola nuts at *La Gare*, the terminus train station in Dakar, in three big old warehouses that were no longer used by the state. Gradually, the kola traders were able to acquire warehouses, offices and accommodation in a neighbourhood in the vicinity of *La Gare*. They were still present in that neighbourhood in 2013, even though most of them had abandoned the kola trade and instead become forwarding agents and transporters. One of the most successful kola traders had founded the *Mosqué des Bambaras* – a mosque for the Malians living in this neighbourhood, the former epicentre of the Malian kola trade in the city.

Since the beginning of the railway, Malian women known as *bana-banas* had been travelling back and forth on the passenger train with goods that they traded with the populations in the towns and villages along the line (Lambert 1993). When the kola traders abandoned *La Gare*, a female *bana-bana* took over the warehouses and pioneered the wholesale import and trade in dried agricultural produce (*fruits secs*) from Mali. Subsequently, a Malian wholesale market gradually emerged around *La Gare*, as a new wave of Malian immigrants associated with the *fruits secs* business entered the stage in the 1980s. *Bana-banas* acted as suppliers to the Malian traders at *La Gare* and also sold their own goods that they displayed in the doors of the warehouses or on pieces of cardboard on the ground. Additional warehouses were built, and a retail market began to sprawl around the terminus station. The female *bana-banas* who came with goods on the passenger train from Mali often used *La Gare* as a dormitory in between the two trains; other *bana-banas* would seek a host among the big Malian kola nut traders settled in the capital city.

However, in 2009 the Senegalese authorities evicted the traders and demolished the Malian market at *La Gare*. In its place a *Grand*

Théâtre – which was a gift from China – was constructed, as part of the president's neoliberal vision for the capital, aimed largely at attracting foreign investment (Melly 2013). The Dakar–Niger railway was privatised in 2003 and in 2009 the new owners, a Franco-Canadian consortium, decided to take the passenger train out of service. This was the train that the *bana-banas* had been travelling on with their goods. Thus the Malian women, whose businesses and livelihoods depended on the railway and its terminus station, had their trade infrastructure pulled from beneath their feet.

However, this did not lead to the disappearance of Malian trade in the Senegalese capital. Instead, several smaller Malian markets emerged in the vicinity of the old train station. These dispersed traders were connected through kinship and credit networks and their shared history at the former market, and they continued referring to themselves as '*les gens de La Gare*' (the people from *La Gare*). However, supply and customers had dwindled. As one market woman told me, 'After the market was destroyed, people say that, "Now there is nothing at *La Gare*, so we're not going there anymore"'. The supply trucks from Mali preferred stopping in the northern suburbs of Dakar instead of venturing south to the Malian markets in the congested city centre; the customers followed suit. Most *bana-banas* stopped bringing Malian goods to Dakar and only continued their journeys to the capital in order to purchase goods for sale back in Mali.

Several of the remaining Malian market traders seemed to have little commercial rationale for perpetuating their businesses in the city centre. Instead, they largely persevered on the basis of their memories of the profitable trade they had enjoyed at *La Gare* and their sense of belonging to this place and its trading community. In contrast, most of the *bana-banas* had re-oriented their trading networks and were drawing on new infrastructures to facilitate their businesses. Several of them were acting as middlemen on behalf of traders based back in Mali, who the *bana-banas* supplied with goods that they collected in Dakar. One entrepreneurial female *bana-bana* had started up a bus route in 2003 for passengers travelling between Bamako and Dakar. A few years later, she started up her own bus company, and several other Malian bus companies started appearing in the following years. Some of the Malians based in Dakar were

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'La Gare': the terminus train station of the Dakar–Niger railway in the Senegalese capital, 2013. ©Gunvor Jónsson

catering to the *bana-banas* who had been deprived of their temporary accommodation at *La Gare* and of the possibility of transporting their goods on the passenger train: informal enterprises had sprung up in 2009, renting out bedrooms and simultaneously providing trucks that would transport the *bana-banas'* goods back to Mali.

This contribution has tried to dissect the diasporic black box, by disentangling some of the different networks, generations and waves of Malian migrants in Dakar, as well as the histories, memories and imaginaries that might be involved in a process of diaspora formation. The Malian market traders appeared to show the signs of an emerging diasporic mentality, as reflected in their self-designation as 'the people from *La Gare*'. Only time will tell whether this imagined community will persist, perish or transform itself, in the face of persistent and dramatic developments in the urban environment and the wider socio-economic landscape they inhabit. □

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