

A Cultural Festival in the Senegal River Valley: Reinventing Local Traditions for Returning Migrants

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The organization of cultural festivals in the villages of the Senegal River Valley has become a major priority of Haalpulaar hometown associations based in Europe and the United States.

This is an apparently surprising turn for associations that have traditionally occupied themselves with development initiatives aimed at bringing concrete improvements of living conditions experienced in the Haalpulaar immigrants' home villages. Yet conversations I had with leaders of such associations in France and the United States indicate their conviction that cultural festivals can in fact play an integral role in strategies aimed at development of their home villages. In 2008, I participated in one such cultural festival held in the village of Thilogne, where I acquired an interesting perspective on the nature of the stakes, players, discourses, cultural performances, and artisanal exhibitions that bring these events to life as development initiatives.

It is striking to observe that the cultural practices being performed during the festivals tend to be of little relevance to contemporary village life. Rather, they constitute a recreation of particular traditions, customs, and performances that their creators perceive will be admired by returning migrants, visiting urbanites and tourists as an exotic reflection of a lost cultural past. One fascinating example of such reinvention of tradition is the cultural practice of *Thiayde*, a carefully choreographed event whereby processions of young women engage in ritual competition for husbands. According to one informant, Aminata, age 54, and a resident of Thilogne, *Thiayde* competitions were held between groups of women from neighborhoods between which there existed friendly rivalries. Such friendly inter-neighborhood rivalries were sustained by the frequency with which men from each of the neighborhoods took



wives from the other.

The *Thiayde* featured peaceful yet lively confrontations between young women on both sides, each with the objective of getting their own men to marry within their own neighborhoods, while luring as many men as possible from other neighborhoods to marry there as well. The women of each neighborhood spend countless hours preparing, crafting praise songs they use to promote themselves and lyrical diatribes used to target women of the opposite camp. *Thiayde* were often organized around the *Taske*, a Muslim feast celebrating Abraham's sacrifice. To begin the *Thiayde* competition during *Taske*, the groups of women would leave their neighborhoods around 5:00 pm and walk slowly toward the center of the village, each with a lead vocal carefully selected for her excellent voice. While walking, they begin singing their praise songs, following with the lyrical diatribes upon their encounter with their rival groups. The rival groups meet at around 7:00 pm at the center of the village, surrounded by spectators who listen carefully to the raucous proceedings. The *Thiayde* conclude with each side inevitably claiming victory, as their members disperse and straggle

back to their respective neighborhoods.

"The *Thiayde* is not practiced anymore by the younger generation," lamented Aminata, who is charged with organizing the *Thiayde* during the cultural festival. "For our generation and those preceding it, participation in the *Thiayde* was a rite of passage for young women who had yet to be married. We would spend all year creating songs, and throughout the months leading up to *Taske*, carefully consider the types of clothes and jewelry we planned to wear for the competition," she added. Now women of the younger generation put on their finest clothes and jewelry to watch their men compete on the soccer field. For these women *Thiayde* is a relic reserved for the cultural festivals that take place every two years. In their new incarnation as part of a reinvented tradition, *Thiayde* songs have been adapted to the new circumstances, often in the form of praise songs honoring successful migrants, the hometown associations, and the village as a whole.

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