

Of Fake Champions and Bogus Anthroponyms: An Onomastic Approach to *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006) by Fatou Diome

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Article History: Submitted-14/07/2020, Revised-17/08/2020, Accepted-19/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

Abstract:

This paper examines how Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006) ironically and satirically uses the anthroponomical techniques of propriation, appellativisation and name-retention to bestow upon his atypical protagonists anthroponyms that articulate their illusive pursuits and deceptive rhetoric. Diome's fiction resorts to traditional name-crafting customarily utilized by the Seereer ethnic group to encode specific family ordeals or untoward events not dissimilar to the dire straits of postcolonial African communities that are grappling with the challenges of today's global economy. Remarkably, Diome refashions the Seereer onomastics relating to ethnic anthroponyms, mononyms, pseudonyms, and hydronyms whose denotative and connotative functionalities help the narrator unveil the shroud of mystery that hide the miserable life of immigrants in western countries. This onomastic strategy translates through a number of authorial intrusions aiming to deconstruct the reductive polarization at the core of the South-North emigration.

Keywords: South-North emigration, onomastics, anthroponomy, naturalization, name-retention, propriation, appellativisation.

"Names are abbreviations into which innumerable contexts are condensed."

Konstanze Fliedl

Introduction:

The growing presence, for various reasons, of African native languages in literary or non-literary bodies of texts written by Africans in Western languages often represents for non-native readers or native readers from different linguistic groups, a challenge that may limit the appreciation of the scope of social significance as well as the aesthetic refinement of African literatures. *The Belly of the Atlantic* originally written in French by Fatou Diome abides by this general rule as it includes a literary anthroponomy that largely draws on a clearly locatable ethnic group, the Seereer, in addition to its huge stock of old sayings, proverbs, wrestling chants, songs and poems which steep the narrative in the oral tradition of Diome's ancestors. If the author's primary intention was to "*demystify romanticized notions of France*" (Beer 45), she has probably achieved her goal by staging atypical characters named through the techniques of proprialisation, naturalization (adoption of names of foreign origin), and name-retention.¹ The novel includes a complex ethnic onomastics that transpires through anthroponyms, mononyms, pseudonyms and hydronyms allowing Diome to encode authorial intrusions while creating a denominational break between the literary names most of her characters bear, and the ethnic anthroponomy the reader might expect from the novel's social context. This paper discusses the main denotative and connotative functionalities of ethnic names given to characters, most of them mononyms that only exist in Diome's fiction. Interestingly, the author's literary onomastics sheds light on a multiplicity of cultural signifiers essentially pertaining to the Seereer ethnic group. We will finally examine how oral literary traditions converge with onomastic theories to shape *The Belly of the Atlantic* as a purely African folktale in which name-crafting beautifully serves the writer's didactic purpose.

Naming Rituals and Onomastic Typologies

The Belly of the Atlantic, by bringing a feminine dimension into Africa's trans-Atlantic migrant fiction, reverses a long-established literary tradition that would stage only male African soldiers, civil servants or students who travelled from African colonies to the French metropolis in a variety of circumstances. In this post-independence novel, a young woman named Salie (intradiegetic narrator of the story) meets in Senegal under undetermined conditions a French expatriate and gets married to him. Their marriage shortly shakes down after they have moved to France because the man's European family could accept nothing but a 'Snow White' for their

son. After her divorce, Salie decides to stay in Europe and pursue her studies, which brings her face to face with a bleak West at variance with the mythicized image she used to encounter in books and newspapers. Drifting into new social and economic paradigms, the divorcee adamantly casts the dark shadow of her unnamed husband into oblivion and takes control of her own destiny.

Unlike the circular itinerary of Samba Diallo in *Ambiguous Adventure* (1963) by Cheikh Hamidou Kane or that of Thiémoko Keita in *Sarzan* (1947) by Birago Diop, Salie's constant peregrinations between her village on the island of Niodior and Strasbourg in France via Mbour on the Little Coast of Senegal, reflect an assumed hybridized identity coupled with an indeterminacy about the geography of what is real home. In fact, her constant feeling of estrangement and emotional tension she shares with the reader (and not with her narratee) at the end of her story seems strongly tied to her "weird" surname which prevented her family from performing a proper naming ceremony on her behalf.

Diome was born into the Seereer ethnic group of Senegal where onomastic poems and incantations or family genealogies have been recited in social and religious rituals since time immemorial. Today, many Seereer communities still believe in the hidden power of names that connects with the possibility of destroying a person by only using their name.² Consequently in Niodior, the village where part of the novel is set, nobody shall call a person using their proper name after sunset because spirits and other witches could exert power on the bearer of that name or simply exterminate them. For the same reason, a woman who has recently delivered is allowed to speak loudly only after the naming ceremony of her new-born child, a fundamental ritual performed on the eighth day of the baby's birth. Therefore, Seereer populations, instead of directly calling the name of a person at night, prefer to address them as "marax."³ *The Belly of the Atlantic* perpetuates this onomastic tradition although Diome has refashioned it into a narrative technique that mirrors what Adelina Iliescu defines as the primary role of naming in fiction: "names frequently have an important function in (literary texts) and confer a particular aesthetic quality to them" (144).

Customarily, Seereer parents would meticulously choose proper names for their children by referring to temporal or sociological landmarks like seasons, the order of births, the number of brothers or sisters born into the family, the circumstances and number of deaths in households,

the property of the baby's parents, etc. During naming ceremonies, some close relatives were assigned specific roles for the social and spiritual immersion of the newborn into the group (it was given a ritual bath by a designated person before the naming ceremony). Of course, the attachment to an ethnic onomastic tradition was not peculiar to the Seereer community of Senegal. For instance, in Helen Oyeyemi's novel entitled *The Icarus Girl* (2005), the old patriarch Oyegbebi takes pride in revealing that his name means "kingship lives here" in Yoruba language. He also feels duty-bound to choose the name Wuraola (gold in Yoruba) for his granddaughter born in Britain of a British father. The Seereer of Senegal with the *ciif* (pronounced [tʃi:f] and meaning spirit-children), the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria with the *ogbanje* and the Yoruba in the South Western part of Nigeria with the *abiku* share the same tradition of spirit children "said to be married to the spirit world while here on earth with human community" ⁴ (Iroegbu 205). In order to exorcise the spirit in such "anomalous figures," Seereer families would provide atypical names like Soxar (you will not grow to grind millet) for female babies or Xooxan (you will not grow to go to the farm) for males. According to this belief, spirit children could choose to live in human families a hundred years thanks to the appropriate names their parents had gifted them at birth while lots of other children chose to prematurely return home because of the unsuitability of their names.⁵

With the emergence of Christian and Muslim onomastics, Seereer communities have almost lost the dynamics of names that once singularized their rich ethnic anthroponomy tying individuals to their groups and to their dead ancestors. Diome's naming system which largely derives from common nouns or phrases in her native tongue may be understood, among other motives, as a commitment to the onomastic tradition of her ethnic group, which naturally correlates with her reluctance to appropriate a foreign naming heritage that has, today, practically replaced that of her community.

Ethnic Anthroponomy and Proprialisation

Through Salie's satirical tone and hyperbolic language in many episodes of the novel, the writer discloses her quasi-obsession to reverse the dangerous trend of illegal emigration across the Atlantic Ocean. Hence, *The Belly of the Atlantic* could be read as a literary pamphlet on emigration although Monsieur Ndétare, one of the figures that dominate the narrative, is doubly sedentary. Ndétare, Salie's former schoolmaster, is portrayed as a strong-willed figure that has

not left the island for twenty years because of his subversive trade unionist activities.⁶ Most unexpectedly, the novel's proper name Ndétare (the Seereer transcription of this word would be "ndeetar") is never used as a permanent first name or patronym either in the writer's community or in any other language spoken in Senegal including Wolof, the lingua franca of the country. The Seereer, the ethnic group that lives in Niodior, actually use "ndeetar" to designate somebody whose name is forgotten or unknown. The anonymous status of "ndeetar" presupposes that the addressee is physically absent and cannot therefore respond to their call.

The novelist underscores the particular use of "ndeetar" by Seereer people when Monsieur Ndétare invites Salie to his house to have some *bissap* (local soft drink) or a coconut. The young woman promptly accepts the invitation saying: "*I like both, if 'teacher' doesn't mind*" (Diome 128). Nowhere in the text does Salie directly and in his presence address the schoolmaster as Ndétare; instead, she intentionally withholds the man's "personal" name and calls him "teacher," using this common noun inappropriately. Yet, in the absence of the educator, she always refers to him as Ndétare, which somehow tallies with the etymological meaning of the appellation. As a Seereer speaker, the narrator has shown full awareness that "ndeetar" can function as a name only under specific circumstances, but never as a personal name permanently assigned to somebody. Accordingly, Ndétare of *The Belly of the Atlantic* can be seen as a literary name the novelist has effectively invested with a dynamics that is antonymic to what Phong Guyen calls an "*emblem of knowledge,*" or a "*social identifier (I belong to a given group insofar as I know and use the names that that group believes to be important)*" (Nguyen 36). In Ndétare's example, a general noun (again called appellative), has been turned into a proper name reinforced by the presence of the honorific appellation Monsieur, through the process of proprialisation described by Milan Harvalik: "*proprialisation (again called onymisation or deappellativisation) is a process that takes place through the act of proprial naming, the result of which is a new lexical unit that bears all the signs and properties of a proper name*" (Harvalik 11).

In designating one of her key characters Ndétare from the beginning of her story down to the end, Diome would transgress the lexical norms governing the Seereer language if her text were entirely or partly written in her mother tongue. As evidence of the author's attempts to mask that linguistic transgression, the Seereer terms she has directly transcribed into French. For

example, Ndétare, Wagane Yaltigué, Sankèle, Sédar, and Soutoura (all characters in the novel), would be correctly written Ndeetar, Wagaan Yaal Tige, Sanjel, Sedar and Sutura if the text was translated in Seereer. Particular attention should be paid here to the literary strategies used by Diome to negotiate the phonological differences between Seereer and French as observed in the gemination in *ndeetar* and *wagaan yaal tige* (the gemination occurs here because the underlined consonants are normally elongated by Seereer speakers), added to the accents astutely grafted onto Seereer names to meet the sonority requirements of the French language. Visibly, the author is less successful in bridging the linguistic gap between Sankèle and *Sanjel* because the velar nasal sound [ŋ] (the same as the English [ŋ] in sung) does not occur in French, and, conversely, the French nasal vowel [ã] is inexistent in the Seereer language. The writer's literary strategy that consists in smoothing the passage from Seereer to French is probably grounded in her intention to standardize and harmonize the reading of her narrative in the eyes and ears of non-Seereer speakers, more specifically her Francophone readership. Even if her effort may be deemed ill-advised by some scholars engaged in the preservation of endangered languages like Seereer, this harmonization seems legitimate on the part of Diome whose aim, when writing her novel, was certainly not to assist her threatened native tongue, but rather to widen her audience and share her literary commitment more conveniently. It stands to reason that even though this is achieved unintentionally, Diome has provided a tremendous support to the Seereer language in bringing to the foreground the virtues of solidarity and togetherness characterizing her minority group.

With regard to Monsieur Ndétare, the context and chronology of events in Diome's story rule out the possibility of the schoolmaster's true anthroponym being forgotten by, or unknown to, Salie as the man himself took the responsibility for enrolling her in his class at a time when her own family was skeptical about the necessity of women's schooling. By naming Salie's confidante and friend "ndeetar" Diome has combined both the proprialisation and name-retention techniques, perhaps with the intention, among other motives, to hide the Marxist educator's name so as to protect him or his family, given that *The Belly of the Atlantic* is widely acknowledged as a semi-autobiographical novel.

From another perspective, Diome's onomastic system is, in many instances, reminiscent of the tradition of interludes or morality plays performed in Britain after the shift from mystery

plays to secular drama in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As an illustration, some Seereer speakers would readily use *everyman* to translate “ndeetar” into English. The name both suggests the anonymous status of the character (no gender distinction with “ndeetar” as it designates both males and females), and the quasi-universal moral ideals the schoolmaster continuously enforces among the young people who play soccer under his coaching. As well, mutual esteem, good companionship and loyalty are virtues common to *Everyman*, the English allegorical play, and *The Belly of the Atlantic*. As connoted by the name Ndétare, there persists, until the end of the narrative, a cloak of mystery surrounding the personal history of the schoolmaster. Except his short courtship to Sankèle which the narrator has summarized in a few pages, none of his intimate hopes, fears or ambitions is revealed. The man’s relations to the exterior world have remained ambiguous even for Salie, one of his few friends in the village. While the Seereer term “ndeetar” offers the image of a traditional mask concealing a good portion of the teacher’s past, the old fisherman sees behind this mask the figure of the white colonizer actively working for the promotion of the French language and culture. Thus, the name Ndétare perfectly suits this enigmatic character as the author has been consistent with her name-retention strategy and ambiguity down to the close of the story.

Another relevant aspect of Diome’s literary onomastics is the scarcity of patronyms in the story (she makes a single allusion to the narrator’s surname when she recalls the circumstances of her “forcing” her way into the world), as opposed to many Senegalese works of fiction like *So Long a Letter* or *The Beggars’ Strike*, well-known for their abundance of Wolof patronyms. As Salie’s “*birthday reminded people of a disastrous day*” (Diome 160-161), no naming ritual was performed on her behalf, which largely explicates her reticence to bestow authentic surnames upon the characters around her. Stated differently, Salie, an unwanted daughter, has always suffered from her surname, Diome, which she has borne as a burdensome guilt after she realizes the enormous sacrifice made by her grand-mother to raise her: “*I had to suffer the loss of honor, bringing up an illegitimate child in this village*” (Diome 161).

If Konstanze Fliedl has contended that “(names) are supposed to mark the singularity of a person, to denote uniqueness and guarantee individuality” (155), Diome’s literary onomastics contradicts this view in many aspects as she has intentionally coined in *The Belly of the Atlantic* at least a half dozen of proper names that designate distinct categories and not individualities.

Naming here becomes a literary strategy purposefully refashioned to unveil the hallmarks of some social categories, like that of the old fisherman and his exaggerated callousness towards Sankèle's baby whom he bundles up in a plastic bag before hurling it into the Atlantic. In the same manner, Monsieur Ndétare, through his undisclosed name, emblemizes that anonymous "army without drums, without gleaming uniforms" (Bâ 23) whose effort for the eradication of ignorance has, for many years, gone unacknowledged in many remote villages of Africa. However, during Salie and Ndétare's long conversation about the strong demographic growth on the island, Ndétare's mask signaled by the old fisherman has nearly fallen to reveal one dimension of his Malthusian philosophy, which, in some way, endangers the anonymous status warranted by his enigmatic name.

The propriation technique used in the formation of "ndeetar" equally applies to characters like Soutoura, Sédar and Wagane Yaltigué, all proper names that demonstrate the huge influence of oral story-telling on Diome's onomastics. In traditional storytelling sessions that would ritually be held in Seereer villages around a wood fire in the moonlight, the communicative skills developed by storytellers were highly appreciated. For instance, traditional storytellers would show genuine ability to engage listeners while designing effective strategies for a perfect reception of the moral lessons drawn from folktales. Among those strategies, name-crafting was of considerable importance. If good storytelling in the Seereer traditional society required talent in the use of mimes, chants, puns, rhyming, and the imitation of animal sounds, storytellers also needed to skillfully craft the names of their protagonists, which allowed their young audience not only to easily memorize the names of actors, but also to grasp the message encoded in these names. Because names speak volumes about their bearers, they offer immediate access to the message conveyed by folktales for all listeners capable of decoding them.

Wagane Yaltigué, one of the rare complete names in the novel including a forename and a surname (Diome often uses the onomastic technique of the folktale which mainly consists of assigning mononyms to key characters) is as well formed through the propriation word-forming described above, though the structuring of this name in Diome's text constitutes a slight infringement to the Seereer syntactic rules.⁷ Yaltigué was originally used in the Seereer language as a compound noun whose components need to be discriminated here. In actual fact, instead of the two words the author clearly distinguishes in Wagane Yaltigué, the name should be divided

into three parts: *Wagaan*, an authentic Seereer anthroponym literally meaning “*nobody can do it*,” “*yaal*,” an affixed noun that means “*owner*” and “*tige*” (pronounced [tigɛ]) translated “*the thing*.” The combination of the three components would give “*Wagaan Yaal Tige*” (*Wagaan owner of the thing*), which explicitly spells out wealth or even opulence. As a consequence, non-Seereer readers might mistakenly consider Yaltigué as a genuine ethnic patronym all the more so as Diome has unambiguously stated this in her text. The author has intentionally coined this patronym to satirize the eccentric and flamboyant Yaltigué, highly admired by the community elders because of his manifest assistance to some Niodior folk. However, some villagers who have probably forgotten that the man’s first name is “*wagaan*” (it can’t be done), request from him substantial money loans in order to send their children abroad; they never receive a dime. Literally, “*yaal tige*” should function in the text as a nickname, not as a surname. The family line of the Yaltigué the narrator ironically alludes to represents nothing but an illusion of reality because no patrilineage in the Seereer communities of Senegal resorts to this type of proprial naming for its descendants. And even though villagers like the old fisherman opportunely praise El Hadji Wagane Yaltigué, Salie, evidently, refuses to be impressed by either the man’s fake generosity or his wealth made conspicuous through his three wives, his many fishing boats and his gold teeth. His new name formed of an uncommon assemblage of a Muslim honorific title, an ethnonym, and a bogus patronym ludicrously confers to him the traits of a “*clever strategist behaving like those showbiz personalities*” (Diome 82). As his polysemic and spurious surname suggests, Yaltigué (*tige* is also a Seereer chaste appellation for a woman’s sexual organ), takes advantage of his wealth to appropriate women’s bodies. Through a hyperbolic image that signals both disgust and danger, the narrator depicts him as “*an old mosquito sucking the blood of the little Fimela girl*” (Diome 103), a teenager he has married to recover a debt her father owed him. Being congenitally crippled by his pompous name and its sexual connotations, El Hadji Wagane Yaltigué is condemned to permanently yearn for the unattainable while confronting the sarcasms which befit his egoistic pursuits; he has no chance of gaining the dignity and honor conferred upon the authentic dignitaries of his community since he bears a patronymic and euphemistic nickname, “*owner of the thing*.” As such, the literary functionalities of Yaltigué in *The Belly of the Atlantic* largely correspond to the signification of the proprial name theorized by Milan Harvalik: “*As soon as a general noun becomes a proper name, the importance of the set of*

connotations related to the appellative declines, the proper name becomes a sign, and, in communication, it operates independently of the original appellative” (Harvalik 11).

Fatou Diome’s novel stages other allegorical characters like Sédar and Soutoura whose names are both formed through propriation. In the Seereer language, “*sedar*” means “*he who will never be ashamed*” and “*sutura*” is synonymous with *discretion* imbedding a sense of privacy and dignity. The married couple of the local legend unsurprisingly committed suicide as they could no longer withstand the innuendos of villagers about the man’s impotence. Through Sédar and Soutoura’s decision to get swallowed up by the ocean, Diome pledges for the protection of people’s dignity and honor which, in her Seereer community, would mold men’s and women’s characters and determine their behavior, in all circumstances. The moral significance of the mononym Soutoura, in this context, is quite similar to Diome (written *Joom* in Seereer), the patronym of the author herself. Once Grandmother has explained to Salie that her surname, Diome, actually means “*sense of honor,*” the little girl grows self-confident and starts keeping her head up as she now feels proud of her father who was rejected by her family because his patronym was unknown in the village. Due, most probably, to her eagerness to support her granddaughter in desperate need of paternal identity, the old woman has altered both the pronunciation and significance of the patronym Diome (pronounced (*joom*) as a geminate consonant in Seereer), and has intentionally replaced it with the word “*jom*” (short consonant), which actually means in both Seereer and Wolof “*sense of honor.*” Still, Grandmother’s phonetic subterfuge has proven to be an effective strategy given Salie’s subsequent self-confidence evidenced by her excellent results at school.

Along with the aforementioned mononyms of *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Fatou Diome has remodeled genuine appellatives into literary names like Garoualé (written in Wolof *gaaruwaale* and meaning “*critically alluding to somebody*”), a verb derogatorily used in Wolof to bring into the conversation the demeanor of somebody present or absent and whom the speaker intends to attack indirectly. By naming her own cousin Garoualé, the narrator presumably wishes, conversely, to revive the well-known bantering tradition that characterized the relationship between Seereer cousins (*maasir* in Seereer). In traditional Seereer societies, young people naturally turned to their cousins when they thought of getting married. In Diome’s novel, the propriation appellation Garoualé encodes the good humor, the sincere affection and sense of

togetherness that combine to engender the village human warmth the narrator sometimes feels weaned off when isolated in her cold Strasbourg.

In the same vein, the name Sankèle (normally written *san̄kel* in Seereer) given to the sole person with whom Monsieur Ndétare has ever had a love affair since he arrived in the village, derives from the Seereer verb *san̄k* which literally means “*get rid of, sacrifice (person, object)*.” So, when Seereer speakers say “*ndeetar kaa san̄kel*,” they share the conviction that that person has been sacrificed by somebody for some reason. Hence, the name Sankèle has been purposefully reshaped to portend the sorrow of the seventeen-year-old girl which remains inextricably tethered to her sad existence.

Sankèle’s tragedy in which the narrative point of view shifts from Salie (she was not in a position to collect all the information delivered to the reader because she was too young when the event occurred) to a ubiquitous narrator represents an authorial intrusion aiming to place more emphasis on the inflexible fashion in which the old fisherman has exercised his patriarchal responsibility for the extermination Sankèle’s baby. Though uneducated, Sankèle is seduced by the passionate discourses made by Monsieur Ndétare and strongly rejects the man from Barbès. *The Belly of the Atlantic* has recreated here the same romantic pattern bringing together a Western-educated schoolmaster and an illiterate village girl dramatized in Wole Soyinka’s play titled *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962). However, if the love affair between Lakunle and Sidi ends inconclusively due to the village belle’s refusal to be impressed by her man’s empty rhetoric, Sankèle, by contrast, like all ill-fated daughters who bear such dangerous names, succumbs to Ndétare’s Marxist discourse and follows a forbidden path. Her chastisement by her ruthless father subsequent to the discovery of her pregnancy and her final evasion from the island are both reflected in her sacrificial name. In coining the mononym Sankèle, Diome has adamantly raised her voice against the religious and ethnic intolerance in her community. The inhuman treatment the old fisherman has meted out to both the baby and her mother stresses the traditional and colonial burden on both minority groups and outsiders like Ndétare. And because nobody knows his origins, his union with one of the village nymphs would ruin all the social engineering schemes upheld by Niodior elders. With the geographical location of Monsieur Ndétare’s accommodation behind Lake Nguidna on the outskirts of the village, anthroponomy, toponymy, and hydronymy merge into one reality that ostracizes the Headmaster.

Finally, Sankèle's descriptive and ominous name resonates as a motif of religious fanaticism and blind observance of traditional customs meant to denounce more vehemently such postcolonial norms and standards. Due to the "*evident affinity between the name and the character*" (Gordon 5), at least in the ears of the Seereer readers of *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Sankèle and her illegitimate new-born child were unable to escape their immolation on the altar of religion and culture. The name the young woman is assigned by Diome forebodes her complete erasure from the history of her community. So, even if Sankèle's mother keeps hoping against hope for her daughter's hypothetical homecoming, this shall never happen because her return to Niodior would jeopardize the solid anthroponomical structure supporting the diegesis of the novel.

Naturalization and Name-retention

In this narrative, Diome seems to resent borrowing anthroponomical designations from foreign or other Senegalese ethnic languages; nonetheless, such names as El Hadji, Madické, and Moussa have been naturalized or ethicized by the Seereer community of the story. *The Belly of the Atlantic* resorts, in many instances, to name-retention combined with either proprialisation (this occurs in the mononym Ndétare examined above) or naturalization and *ethnicization* onomastic techniques.

While French, Portuguese, English, or Belgian missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were engaged in a massive conversion of people in African colonies with clear-cut denominational differentiation and an imposition of Christian names over ethnic anthroponomy, the Islamic religion almost simultaneously took its toll on African traditional onomastics. This religious trend of forename naturalization has noticeably displaced the Seereer authentic onomastics in the same way as it has mitigated "*the symbolic weight of names*" (Iliescu 144) that prevailed in pre-Muslim and pre-Christian Africa. The religious title El Hadji, together with Madické and Moussa, are among the foreign names Diome has borrowed from Muslim or Wolof anthroponomical systems. The existence in Senegal of over twenty ethnic communities striving all to preserve their traditional onomastics while borrowing personal names from one another, in combination with the recurrent displacements of populations for various purposes resulting in interethnic marriages and other social interaction amply justify the *ethnicization* of these three names.

Madické, a highly affective name in *The Belly of the Atlantic*, was commonly assigned by Wolof communities to a returning traveler, or more traditionally, to a deceased ancestor who had been reborn into his family. In Diome's text, the turn of events completely reverses the first meaning of the Wolof appellation. Salie's brother has, for years, entertained the unrealistic ambition of travelling to France and then to Italy in order to meet his idol, the soccer player Maldini. At the end of the novel, Madické unexpectedly renounces his project (even his sister is flabbergasted at his behavioral changes) and decides to stay home and set up a new business from the money parsimoniously saved by Salie. Prior to that important step in his life, the young man was so obsessed by the soccer world champion that many people in Niodior nicknamed him Maldini. Despite the wretched life on his island, Madické irrationally endeavors to look like his idol (Salie fondly calls him Maldini's double), thereby giving this episode the features of doppelganger fiction reinforced here by the striking similarity in the sonority of Madické and Maldini. Ironically, the metonymical affiliation created by the consonant and sound affinity in these two names is, *in fine*, thwarted by the fierceness of the Atlantic Ocean, which substantiates Diome's pessimism over the dream of self-accomplishment through the integration into Western societies entertained by many irregular immigrants. Madické's illumination, by dint of a quasi-miracle, has opened his eyes to the plight of a myriad of immigrants throughout the world. The epiphany-like narrative technique Diome has brought into play through the young man's immediate self-consciousness is germane to an "*experience of luminous radiance (claritas) wherein a particular thing serves to illuminate a universal and transcendental form*" (Kearny 148). After Madické has for long months listened incredulously to the warnings of his sister, something indefinite, out of the blue, awakens him to the reality of his situation. He suddenly becomes aware that he can forego emigration, eke out a living from his little shop, and gain financial stability, like the two emigrant returnees on the island. In the last chapter of the novel, Diome's ultimate solution to the overarching issue of emigration to the West runs counter to the appellative character of Madické who amicably calls upon his sister: "*you ought to come back: you'll never really be at home there, you know that*" (Diome 182). The uncommon suddenness of Madické's discovery of the "*transcendental truth*" about emigration (some readers might even think the event is unlikely) is often interpreted as an illustration of Salie's strong desire to ward off for her beloved brother all the hardships experienced by her fellow immigrants, which, by the same token, not only alleviates for her the potential burden of the young man's upkeep in

Europe, but also allows the narrator to remain consistent with her own assessment of, and solution to, illegal immigration.

By contrast, figures like Gnarelle (pronounced *ñaaareel*) appear stunted by their bad inclinations; unlike Madické, they are purposefully denied any psychological depth. As a consequence of her inability to distance herself from her traditionalist and opportunistic mother, Gnarelle remains blind to the glaring reality that total dependence on men's sexuality constitutes a serious impediment to women's self-reliance and affirmation. Because she is empty inside, Gnarelle cannot rise to the level of the strong and affectionate homonyms named Ramatoulaye in Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) and *So Long a Letter* (1979) by Mariama Bâ. El Hadji Yaltigué's adulterous wife deserves neither ethnic name nor naturalized name, nor even a nickname. She is just *the second wife*, an archetype that embodies both weakness and deceitfulness. Gnarelle's trademark-like appellation is illustrative of Diome's aversion to that type of scheming African women who rely on mystic practices and feigned submissiveness to survive in a man-dominated world.

The novel's onomastic satire brought to light through the man from Barbès and Mr. Sonacotra serves a similar purpose; by the agency of these two essential figures, Diome most probably seeks to deride the "modou modou" (Wolof nickname consisting of the repetition of the first name Modou), a mythical type of emigrant once celebrated and held in high esteem in many Senegalese communities. The man from Barbès and Mr. Sonacotra perfectly fit in this category and since they are more representative of a category than anything else, Diome felt inappropriate to bestow upon them any first names or family names. Their poor conditions and itineraries are, to a large extent, common to all those non-educated emigrant workers swarming from all parts of Africa to Europe. The man from Barbès, owing to his neurotic keenness to mystify his village relatives and neighbors, is seen on his island "*as the symbol of successful emigration, ... faces turned polite on meeting him, and even the sand softened as his long starched boubou swept by*" (Diome 18).

In the voice of the traditional storyteller, Salie utilizes the full power of African oral arts to picture the man from Barbès as a mere upstart whose ludicrous bragging both infantilizes him and stresses the illusiveness of his pursuits. Salie scornfully labels the returnee a "*dog's master*," then a "*guard dog*" when he rises up to the position of watchman in a supermarket, a painful

experience he has never shared with his Niodior admirers lest his “dignity” be eroded. And whereas Faat Kiné in Ousmane Sembène’s eponymous movie *Faat Kiné* uses French words to castigate polygamy, Salie of *The Belly of the Atlantic* devises names as a “*weapon [...] against the pretentious, the uprooted, the ungrateful, the helpless*” (Niang 137).

Barbès being the vast Eighteenth Paris Arrondissement where third world shoppers flow all day long for promotions and clearance events, the ambition of the man who bears this name can only be limited to what his namesake can offer him, specifically low-priced and used goods to take home. Though founded on fantasy, the glittering imagery used by the returnee to describe the mythical city of Paris negates and even deconstructs Salie’s lucid analysis of irregular emigration, all the more successfully because the man now lives a fully accomplished life on the island. Still, if the man from Barbès seems less ingenious and fortunate than Mr. Sonacotra, Salie’s distant cousin deserves an only acronym he owes to a French estate company. Going from one odd job to another, Mr. Sonacotra has managed to smuggle his senior wife into France through the stingy management of his food supplies. Surely, he could bear the same name as the man from Barbès as both immigrants devote their lives to what Christopher Hogarth calls a “*layered accumulation of myths, wives, children, and money*” (Hogarth 7). More explicitly, almost all the items on the shopping list of Mr. Sonacotra are bought second hand in areas like Barbès where both documented and undocumented immigrants go discount shopping when preparing their trips back home. Albeit the many commonalities between the two Niodior emigrants (they both come from impoverished families, are polygamists and dependent on menial jobs), there exists some discrepancy in their aspirations and lifestyles. In the same manner as the man from Barbès has striven to save money in order to build a new house in his village, Mr. Sonacotra has kept nourishing the illusion of owning a home in France where he could enjoy his “patriarchal privilege” with his two wives. His venture appears bolder and more radical than the rather balanced polygamy of Issa which straddles two continents in *Celles qui attendent* (2010) by Diome.⁸ Since Mr. Sonacotra dwells in a Sonacotra hotel and dreams of reconstructing a home in France, his appellation has turned into a mere trope whereby its bearer’s future remains, in Phong Nguyen’s terminology, intricately and metonymically tied to the object of his desire, a home.

Due to the tenacity of the postcolonial constructs that enhance the Manichean divide between the North and the South, Salie's desperate appeals continue to fall on deaf ears. Notwithstanding, the young woman firmly stands her ground and maintains an unbridgeable gap between her and the paperless immigrants like the man from Barbès. This symbolic distance translates in the novel through the narrator's effort to objectify her assessment of irregular immigration on the one hand, and the great deal of subjectivity of her fellow immigrants on the other hand. Salie steadfastly creates a discursive hiatus that definitely sets the two visions apart. Neither in France nor in Africa does she ever meet the two men, making any convergence of ideas non-negotiable. The young woman, in her eagerness to transcend her "subalternity," abhors directly addressing this type of blind immigrants in the same way as she abhors bestowing upon them genuine anthroponyms likely to generate genuine personal identities.

The onomastic distance created here by Salie can be viewed as another trope that structures part of the novel while maintaining a narrative tension until the end of the story. The ideological distance between Salie and her fellow immigrants mirrors the cultural distance between her intellectual pursuits and the material accumulation in which the man from Barbès indulges. The onomastic and ethnic distance between Ndétare and the community of Niodior is reflected in the wide gap between the past of the island and the present which witnesses the dismantling of people's cultural and religious heritage. Finally, to the metaphorical distance between Madicke's former aspirations to migrate and his future in Niodior corresponds the physical distance the narrator has to cover each and every time she feels the vital need to leave Europe and reconnect with home.

Furthermore, Moussa (the Muslim name for Moses), one of the few characters in this novel endowed with authentic anthroponyms, serves the purpose of reducing the ethnic distance mentioned above. He has become an onomastic distortion to the novel's general rule because his quasi-neutral name derives from a foreign anthroponymy though it is very common in West Africa and in the Maghreb. Shipped back home empty-handed, Moussa unmistakably foils the man from Barbès. He also epitomizes this category of young African athletes who are lured into complex business networks devised by enigmatic personages like Monsieur Sauveur (which literally means in French *savior*). Aided by his ironic surname, his nebulous financial resources and thorough knowledge of corruption mechanisms in African postcolonial administrations, the

French gentleman roams African cities and designs hidden tactics that boil down to a reenactment of the colonizer-colonized relationship. Hence, the neocolonial maneuvers which Monsieur Sauveur judiciously disguises under the garb of his messianic name appear as much destructive as the colonial condescendence of his anonymous ancestors.

Moussa's drowning in the famished Atlantic ocean because of his incapacity to negotiate his transitioning to Europe reaffirms the author's strong rejection of the neocolonial construct of emigration, at the same time as it emphasizes her skepticism about the gain from the all-out onomastic naturalization that imposes foreign names upon Africans, whether Muslim or Christian. Indeed, such hegemonic schemes deceitfully designed under the guise of religious orthodoxy deny African populations their onomastic legitimacy which foregrounds the construction of genuine ethnic and cultural identities. By painting Moussa of Niodior as a sexually disturbed youth with suicidal inclinations, Diome postulates that such cardinal virtues as courage and prudence, both prerequisites for personal growth, are not compulsorily contingent upon the onomastic choices made by outsiders for African populations.

Conclusion

In pre-Islamic and pre-Christian Seereer communities, personal names were bestowed following a well-established onomastic tradition that tangibly tied individuals to the group and to their ancestors. Names encoded either family histories or the community's immediate concerns, in correlation with the cyclical nature of existence. Diome's literary onomastics derives its strength from the peculiar use of proprialisation, appellativisation, and name-retention characterizing both the Seereer onomastics and the art of storytelling in African traditional societies. Her onomastic ingenuity has resulted in the creation of both a fascinating and heartbreaking narrative embellished by a dramatic irony that has refashioned some naming strategies Seereer populations would design to address specific family ordeals not, in actual fact, dissimilar to the traumatic events Africa experiences in *The Belly of the Atlantic*. Largely inspired by the tradition of her ethnic community, the author has, through her ironic anthroponomy and derisive style, boldly lifted the shroud of mystery that has hidden the wretched life of undocumented African emigrants for decades. Central to Diome's literary commitment is her urge to rise above the reductive polarization that often hinders a sober representation of the contentious South-North migration.

Endnotes:

¹ Proprialisation is used in this paper as per Milan Harvalik's definition of that linguistic transition. Proprialisation occurs when a general noun or group of nouns (appellatives) is transformed into a proper name whereas appellativisation, which is the opposite process, occurs when a proper name turns into an appellative.

² On the magic of names in primitive societies in general, see Konstanze Fiedl for an insightful analysis of this phenomenon (pp. 57–58).

³ marax: anonymous appellation for anyone in the group who, by identifying the voice of the caller and the urgency of their need, should know he/she is the addressee.

⁴ For a dramatization of the *ogbanje* in Igbo society, refer to Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1977) or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Ben Okri in his *Famished Road* (1991) stages an *abiku* protagonist named Azaro. Even Sarah of *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi believes that her daughter is an *abiku* child.

⁵ Traditionally, the Seereer ethnic group would use the verb *return* when a new-born child passed away, as people believed that children born into the community came from the world of dead ancestors who had decided to be reincarnated.

⁶ Salie: short for Salimata, is much more affectionate than the full name; it suggests here the close relationship between Grandmother and her granddaughter in spite of Salie's rejection, because of her surname, by the rest of the community.

⁷ Some Seereer folktales stage characters designated by mononyms like Ndaanaaw (heron), Moon (hyena), Ndun (serpent eagle), Kayaafi (the revenant), etc.

⁸ In *Celles qui attendent* (2010), Issa's Wolof wife lives in Africa and his Spanish wife in Europe. Here, the protagonists are named Arame, Bougna, Lamine, Issa, and Coumba, names which all derive from the Muslim-Wolof anthroponomy. The ethnicization of these names reflects the huge influence of the Wolof culture upon Diome's other publications as well as her strong desire to widen her audience, as Rosia Beer explains in her study.

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