

Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA)

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Homeland Is the Arena: Religion, Transnationalism, and the Integration of Senegalese Immigrants in America* by Ousmane Oumar Kane

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OUSMANE OUMAR KANE. *The Homeland Is the Arena: Religion, Transnationalism, and the Integration of Senegalese Immigrants in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 313 pages. Cloth US\$35.00 ISBN 978-0-19-973231-9.

Ousmane Oumar Kane's book, *The Homeland Is the Arena: Religion, Transnationalism, and the Integration of Senegalese Immigrants in America*, focuses on Senegalese migrants in New York City, detailing their religious and associational lives over the last thirty years. Kane considers migrants' experiences both integrating into U.S. culture and maintaining ties to life in Senegal—they are “transnationals.” In particular, he examines how religion—for most of them Islam—plays a major role in how they maintain ties across continents. The book is divided into three main parts: the first considers the history of Islam in Senegal including the shifting relations between state, religious leaders, and citizens; the second examines how migrants integrate into American society; and the third analyzes how they maintain connections with their home country. The wide scope of the book means that it is a useful work not just for scholars studying Africans in the diaspora, but also for scholars of religion and globalization.

Kane's main contribution to immigrant studies is his focus on two understudied areas: religion and associational membership. He demonstrates how the *da'ira* (Sufi associations) that immigrants join play not only spiritual roles, but also economic and social ones as they help migrants in times of need and provide community. Kane's examination of Islam illustrates how transnational immigrants' religious practices in the U.S. transform their own religious experiences and organizations and also those in their home and host countries. For example, as *da'iras* in the U.S. formalize to become nonprofits, leaders may be elected instead of appointed, as they are in Senegal. Furthermore, Kane argues that the importance religion plays in migrants' lives may slow processes of secularization in the host country.

One of the strengths of the book is Kane's detailed exploration of immigrant life, particularly the history of Senegalese settlement in New York, the work that immigrants conduct, and the variety of associations to which they belong. While the main focus is on religious organizations, he also analyzes others, including all-African associations, pan-ethnic organizations, and rotating credit groups. Kane's discussions of how these organizations change over time illustrate how paying attention to immigrant associations can provide insight into issues of integration. For example, some organizations may register as nonprofits to benefit from the legal status and from better access to resources; however, such acts can have other consequences, including

making them more inclusive, thus undermining their earlier goals of building social solidarity amongst particular migrant groups.

Another important contribution to immigrant studies and work on U.S. culture is Kane's exploration of why Senegalese Muslims are able to live in New York with little harassment by law enforcement and citizens. This fact is particularly surprising since they are both black and Muslim, categories that are often discriminated against. Kane argues that the immigrants' relative acceptance is due to being perceived as "good Muslims" and "good blacks." Such stereotypes stand in opposition to Muslims of Arab descent who are targeted as "threats" and native-born blacks who are categorized as lazy criminals. This discussion complicates how religion and race are understood in the U.S. and deserves further exploration.

In his research, Kane used ethnographic methods, including interviews, participant observation of meetings and religious services, and analysis of video and audio recordings of events and broadcasts as well as the membership database of a major immigrant association. While he gives a good overview of his methodology, he does not discuss his own positionality as a researcher. I wondered about the details of his connection with this community and how it may have affected the kind of data to which he had access and his interpretations of it. I would have also liked it if he used interview data more heavily throughout the book. When he does so, such as in a chapter that focuses on immigrants' shifting understandings of gender, these words vividly illustrate the tensions between men and women. Throughout the book, I wanted to hear more from his interlocutors about how they understood their identities as transnationals or how they navigated the demands of membership in multiple associations.

This book provides important insight into the lives of Senegalese living in New York and the immigrant experience in general. While it is useful to scholars for its insights into the study of religion and associations amongst immigrants, it could also be used with undergraduates. Doing so would help them to develop an understanding of these immigrants' daily lives, the diversity of Islam, and the nuances of how race and religion are understood in the United States. ✨

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