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From Social Peace to Code of Silence: The social ethics of *sutura* in Senegal

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From social peace to code of silence: the social ethics of *sutura* in Senegal[1]

Normally translated as discretion, sutura *is an important local value in Senegal. Its protective regime starts with the idea that being discreet has an inherent social value. In its ideal dimension it is said to be a warranty for social peace. Its rather pragmatic consequences, on the other hand, are felt on communication, generating uncertainty and ambiguity; on the social construction of gender, highlighting that protection is unequally distributed; and on the political sphere, where certain subjects, perceived as private, struggle to be represented.* Sutura *is here described through several complementary and contradictory interpretations. At the same time, as a defensive mode of communication and an ethics of privacy, but also, paradoxically, as a dark cover or a code of silence, protecting the shortcomings of Senegalese patriarchal cultures.*

Keywords: discretion, privacy, sutura, Senegal, gender, social peace, code of silence

Da paz social ao código de silêncio: a ética social da *sutura* no Senegal

Normalmente traduzida por discrição, a sutura *é um valor local importante no Senegal. O seu regime de proteção parte da ideia de que ser discreto tem um valor social inerente. Na sua dimensão ideal, diz-se que é uma garantia de paz social. As suas consequências bastante pragmáticas, por outro lado, fazem-se sentir na comunicação, gerando incerteza e ambiguidade; na construção social do género, evidenciando que a proteção é distribuída de forma desigual; e na esfera política, onde certos assuntos, vistos como privados, lutam para serem representados. A* sutura *é aqui descrita através de várias interpretações complementares e contraditórias: ao mesmo tempo, como um modo de comunicação defensivo e uma ética da privacidade, mas também, paradoxalmente, como um disfarce obscuro ou um código de silêncio, que protege as lacunas das culturas patriarcais senegalesas.*

Palavras-chave: discrição, privacidade, sutura, Senegal, género, paz social, código de silêncio

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Being discreet about private affairs is characteristic of Senegalese social life and is important in most people's social expectations. So much so that personality traits like rashness, bluntness, carelessness are easily considered character flaws in local moral compasses. Flaunting is also poorly perceived. But what does discretion mean exactly in a country where people's doors are seemingly open and being welcoming (to have *teraanga*, or hospitality) is part of basic sociality? *Sutura* is normally translated as discretion (Diouf, 2003). Nevertheless, for an anthropological analysis of a social environment, discretion cannot be considered solely as discretion, as it is socially and culturally embedded. In light of that, the social practice of being discreet, or put another way, protecting one's privacy, or intimacy, is considered social awareness, but also a sign of politeness, and a defense against the prying of others.

The impression that people try to keep everything from being revealed – even their emotions – is often overwhelming, because it generates a great deal of uncertainty in social interactions. In this social environment, politely showing correctness and normative social behavior is, most of the times, a step to be considered a "good" person. On the contrary, the negative is frequently a problem, a sign of overt conflict and a menace to social peace. Not long ago, discussing with a couple of women in a *gare routière*, we ended up agreeing that, in Senegal, people fear *bët ak lamine* (lit. eyes and tongue), meaning the look of others (their prying eye) and rumors (or what is said about us). This is the reason why people often deflect questions about the truth of what they think, are, and do. It's the reason they speak vaguely about their activities and whereabouts. But the way you avoid the things you do not want known also counts. It's why people often joke to change the subjects that make them uncomfortable. It's also why all sort of smoke screens are created all around. Because being cordial is socially relevant and it is equated with having a good education. Although trying to be discreet, people will also avoid establishing boundaries in a straightforward way, because of how politeness is such an important social asset. In this context, euphemistic languages and suggestion are considered better than straightforwardness, which is seen as dangerous and associated with a negative attitude.

Above are some of the communicative strategies that contribute to keep one's *sutura* intact. In this text, *sutura* will have center-stage and hopefully it will be rendered its due importance, as a central social value, in a wide range of Senegalese social relationships. There are several dimensions of the concept of *sutura* that matter to the analysis of social life in Senegal.

The first two dimensions, the ideal and the pragmatic, will occupy the first two sections. First of all, I will look at how social behavior is codified around

the idea of keeping what is private away from the public space. For Sylla (1980), for example, *sutura* implies the recognition of human frailties and is a warranty for social peace. Secondly, the social disposition to behave in a discreet way has important implications in human communication. Its impact on communicative strategies helps define the types of information most people accept or refuse to discuss in public.

The third and fourth dimensions of the concept of *sutura* are the gendered and the political and they are intertwined, among them and with the first two dimensions. These will occupy us mostly in the last two sections of the article, first with a discussion of how the language of dignity goes along the need to keep appearances in society. Then by showing how, as a gendered concept, *sutura* appears in its capacity to work as a cover for the shortcomings of patriarchy, and a crisis in masculinities, becoming a culture of silence, a "dark cover" (Gueye, 2019). As a metonym for the notions of honor and femininity (Mills, 2011), it also influences the domains of gender and sexuality, by determining the politicization, or not, of certain "private matters". Certain individual rights, for example, see their access to the public sphere limited by a markedly moral language.

Sutura is, then, a rather ambiguous social value which needs attention due to its structuring effect in social interaction and its importance in the handling of the truth in the public sphere. The next ethnographic example will introduce us to one of *sutura* main consequences, uncertainty.

A dog is a cat and a cat is a dog: discretion or a defensive mode of communication

Monsieur Dias, a high-school teacher in Keur Momar Sarr, northern Senegal, belonging to one of the Senegalese ethnic minorities, and me, cross each other, nearby the elementary school.[2] I'm coming from a parents meeting, where I represented my wife's younger brother. As we start chatting about local manners and forms of communication, we discover that our common ground is our foreignness and we both feel it is sometimes hard to "read" people in this place. People always seem to be secretive about everything concerning their personal

[2] This particular interaction took place somewhere between 2011 and 2013, my longer period in Senegal, probably in 2012 actually, when I was doing fieldwork for my PhD thesis and was starting to shift my main focus to gender issues. At the time, I was also becoming an independent speaker of Wolof. But although this interaction is from that period, the data used for this article is not bound to this particular time. The moment I understood the power of *sutura*, right around the time of this encounter, was just the start of my exploration of the concept. During the following decade I kept trying to understand better the implications of this particular sort of discretion, more often than not upon dealing with Senegalese people, in my social network, and finding problems with oversharing my thoughts, just like Mr. Dias.

affairs. We both feel that we are always a step behind in figuring out the real angle on things.

Monsieur Dias's colleagues have told him that he will have a hard time integrating if he doesn't change. For them, he has the bad habit of verbalizing what he thinks, how he thinks it, in an overly straightforward fashion. For Dias this is a handicap. He was brought up believing that, for communication to be effective, people must state what they are thinking, feeling, or wondering. But, in this village, as he puts it, "when people want to name the dog they say cat, and when they want to name the cat they say dog". We agree and laugh at our lack of proficiency in local parlance. Nonetheless, for him, this is alienating, especially because a certain suspicion has arisen among his colleagues due to his bluntness. He has been advised, by them, to learn to *teey* (be reasoned), and consider not revealing his real view on things, particularly in public. The truth shouldn't be, so easily, a public matter, because it can be overwhelming. The truth is, furthermore, someone's business, and revealing it might entail unwanted consequences, beyond the grip of those that exchange it. Keeping quiet about what we know, about those who are in our social vicinity (*nawle*), is respecting a social code, that of *sutura*.

When I had this encounter with Dias I was already aware of *sutura* as something I should understand better, in order to make sense of how local social interactions are often marked by forms of coded language. This episode was a reminder of how "everyday life and discourse are permeated by hidden messages" (Piot, 1993). I realized, then, that certain social relations, and moments, were particularly prone to this type of sensitivities. Interactional uncertainty, a "property of interactional dynamics" (Berthomé et al, 2012); but also ambiguity, in the sense explored by Charles Piot in Togo, where "situations that potentially offend or 'shame' someone […] remain concealed" (Piot, 1993) come to mind. So does opacity (Robbins, 2008). Nevertheless, all these seem to be more of an outcome of the coding of communication, catalyzed by the need to protect one's privacy (or intimacy), not exactly its constitutive matter.

Sutura, even if it pertains to individuals, it is also a quality of their social relations and social spaces. It is a social value that can help us understand different dimensions of communication but also public life, domestic space, family relations and social hierarchies. Because, even though "social engagement requires the knowledge of the other: of what he is thinking, planning, and expecting [...] we can never know the mind of the other, and yet we must act as if we do"

(Crapanzano, 2014). In abstract, it is a social value positively sanctioned by local society.[3]

In reality, *sutura* is better understood through contingency, in light of the negotiations it entails and the contradictions it heightens between silence and exposure. It is also something that is not often verbalized, it works more like an implicit code shared among people. Uncertainty, opacity, ambiguity, doubts about other people's thoughts and intentions, are consequences of specific forms of veiled communication. My foreignness and Dias's foreignness, helped our conversation to dwell on this particular sense. This underlined the different expectations in our interactions with people in the village. This highlights that "interactional uncertainty is not always reducible to accidental misunderstandings, but can also be constitutive or a 'built-in' element of various social settings" (Berthomé et al., 2012).

Dia's struggling to adjust in his work environment, and me, as an anthropologist, seeking to make sense of the local social environment. Both of us tried to explain our poor preparation for this "game". Our astonishment came with the realization that we had to get used to be mistrusted (see Carey, 2017), in light of our ways of expressing ourselves, too straightforwardly, lacking discretion, thus dangerous and mostly unreliable. My encounter with Dias was one of the first moments where I felt that a simple explanation wouldn't be enough to do justice to the importance people put in the capacity to do things unnoticed or without stirring too much attention. We have to bear in mind that this is a question of social sensitivities. That is, people would prefer not to be seen while doing "their stuff", so that their flaws wouldn't be apparent or their failures to be up to social standards discovered. This social sensitivity seems to be widespread across the territory, social classes and generations. It doesn't seem to be characteristic of a particular social setting, although urban and rural environments might pose different challenges to it. Being conscientiously aware of the need to keep *sutura* is a social conduct.

Sutura is indeed about discretion, but what does discretion mean, in this context? Why is being discreet socially valued in such an insistent way, especially in

[3] I should point out the following: although I tend to see *sutura* as a concept existing in Senegal, something one can find pretty much everywhere, no matter the religious group or the ethnicity, it is important to stress that different social groups deal differently with discretion. Mr. Dias estrangement in Keur Momar Sarr is a proof of the diversity one finds in Senegal. As a Manjack (or Ndiago) in a Wolof-Peul-Moor context, Dias deals differently with social interaction in relation to his peers, as I state in my text. So, I wouldn't want to overestimate the importance of *sutura* in Senegal by making it seem that it is an issue to everyone. But although I am aware that not all people act the same, the dimensions of secrecy and opacity are common in other ethnic groups, as can be seen by the works of Davidson (2010), Gable (1997), Gilsenan (2016), and de Jong (2004) dealing with these dimensions. I wouldn't want either to downplay the importance of *sutura* in the name of diversity, or in the name of ethnic ideologies. *Sutura* is indeed a thing in Senegal.

today's rather "exposed" society? Does that mean that transparent and reliable communication is impossible in such a scenario? Or is transparency a strategic error somehow? Why? Why do people connote discretion with protection of someone else's honor? What is *sutura* part of? Is it part of a specific form of morality embedded in Islamic faith?[4] Does that explain why the word also exists in Mali (Hernann, 2017), Sudan, or Egypt? Is *sutura* the core concept in a "Wolof" code of honor (Mills, 2011)? or part of a Wolof "moral philosophy" (Sylla, 1980)? Do ethnic "codes of honor" and moral ethnophilosophies exist? Is it part of national culture (Diouf, 2005)? or a culture nationally engaged with? Is it a dark cover (Gueye, 2019), or a code of silence (Kane, 2018)? An ethics of privacy (Hernann, 2017)? Or a defensive mode of communication?

As often happens with any social value, its boundaries are negotiated. There is no proper regularity in the type of situations "hidden" by *sutura*. It can emerge as the result of the need to be vague about one's own business. It can be demanded as the result of a family problem that should be kept from leaking to the public domain. Whenever *sutura* is discussed, it means something needs to be protected,[5] and there seems to be a heightened fear of social death (Mills, 2011), or degradation of self (Gilsenan, 2016). *Sutura* in itself is not explicitly mentioned all the time, sometimes it isn't even mentioned at all, it functions like a hidden pact. Despite that, it is there, underlying many strategies in social interactions, hovering over small talk and everyday life, like a shared code of conduct, as we can conclude from Dias's colleagues demands. It becomes a sort of reminder against transparency, as knowledge about others is power. Power to do harm, power to strategize, power to expose (*nettali*) and hurt dignity.

The protection it grants comes along with the fear of exposure, or maybe I should say "negative exposure", or "exposure of the negative". How we perceive such protection (from exposure) is important in determining what we consider *sutura* to be: a positive social value that contributes to social peace (Sylla, 1980); or a negative one that contributes to silence victims, of gender violence for example (Kane, 2018; Khan, 2008). This is why who is protected is also of paramount importance for this discussion, as in Senegal social hierarchies of gender and age are a reality for many. As Webb Keane writes,

> power is produced through control over revelation and concealment [...] the authority or the capacity to keep something hidden would seem to be a source of

[4] A note is of relevance here. As we will see, *sutura* seems to be embedded in Islamic culture. Where does this leave Senegalese Christians? Although I can not really make a distinction between what *sutura* is to Christians and Muslims in Senegal, this remark has to be done. Further research could be done around this, although I suspect that this social value transcends religious ethos and is mostly a way of being in society at large.

[5] As can be better seen by the verbal form that has been adapted into the Wolof language: *suturaal*.

> power. We might all know at some level what others think but not have the right to say so in words. (Keane, 2008, p. 478)

This quote reminds us that the demand for something to remain hidden is not only about discretion, it can also involve other social requirements, especially in hierarchical societies like many West African ones.

A curious and telling example is the one discussed by Raphael Ndiaye, who trying to define the role of the journalist in African societies gives us an interesting approach to the idea of authority and its grip on information. Ndiaye quotes a footnote by Djibril Tamsir Niane, in *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, where the historian tells us that traditional *griots*[6] are rather reluctant to tell their stories. According to them, "White people have rendered science vulgar; when a White person knows something everyone else knows it" (Niane, 1960, pp. 78-79). Niane is not apologetic of this attitude of the *griots* but Raphael Ndiaye quotes this in order to apply the same formula to journalists. For local society it is as if "when a journalist knows something, everyone else knows it" (Ndiaye, 2012). This is illustrated by the Wolof expression for journalist, "*taskatu xibaar*"[7] (spreader of things heard, news) (cf. Ndiaye, 2012). Raphael Ndiaye goes further connecting the trade of the journalist, dealing with information, to tradition and to the

> context of the problematic diffusion of information and of the practice of the trade of the journalist in societies like ours [his], which place in the foreground of their values of reference discretion (*sutura*), and restraint (*kersa*); that value secret as modality for the management of knowledge and for a certain way of information, erecting the initiatic approach as the appropriate way for the acquisition of knowledge. (Ndiaye, 2012)

From this he derives the idea that tradition is conscious of the deformities, hindrances, concealment, augmentations, done by "those talking about what they hear". Those reporting are, then, imposed the presence of witnesses. "By default, it [tradition] limits, even prohibits reporting. Consequently, it tends to assimilate the report to the reporter and this one to a liar, calling both by the same name. It incites defiance, suspicion and dread" (Ndiaye, 2012). This markedly moral view on the free circulation of information[8] (Falcão, 2016), and the defensiveness stressed, show how *sutura* is closely linked with local forms of veiled

[6] Traditional bards, storytellers, often bearers of oral history and genealogies. In the past, in traditional Senegalese society, *griots* or *guéwel* (in Wolof), and *gawlo* (in Halpulaar), were part of the casted people.

[7] *Tas* means 'to divide, to spread, break down'. *Tas-katu* is the formation of a noun meaning 'the one who divides or spreads'. *Xiibar* is the term used for news or information.

[8] Which for example explains the moral panic associated with social networks.

communication. Information is withheld because of the danger represented by its circulation, which implies the possibility of its deformity. I will then call this pragmatic dimension of *sutura* a "defensive mode of communication".

Knowing how to deal with what we know about others is learnt from an early age. It is not uncommon, for example, for parents to promptly correct their children when they come to tell something about someone, reporting (*nettali*), or stiring-up (*boole*),[9] thus breaking the rules of restraint. A parent that limits this childish propensity for the lack of restraint is teaching the child a valuable lesson in sociality. Furthermore, revealing something that should stay hidden is especially serious if done in front of someone, thus becoming indiscreetness (*raawi sutura*). This puts information in the fragile situation of being exposed, and out of the private circle where it can be controlled. This modality for management of knowledge (or information) reinforces the idea of power.

These aspects of communication, connected to power and morality, have been explored in many different contexts by anthropologists, seeking to understand a myriad of adjacent concepts like lies (Gilsenan, 2016); secrecy (de Jong, 2004; Gable, 1997); knowledge transmission (Davidson, 2010); knowledge of others (Crapanzano, 2014); mistrust (Carey, 2017); opacity and the role of intention in linguistic communication (Robbins, 2008); uncertainty (Berthomé et al., 2011); ambiguity (Piot, 1993). All these dialogue quite straightforwardly with *sutura*. However, it seems to me that the field of "anthropology of ethics" might be the most interesting to consider in this context. Raymond Massé, for example, tells us that "the anthropology of ethics is interested in power relations, but to the extent that those powers define the moral models judged acceptable and limit, within diverse sub-groups, the access to alternative models of behavior" (Massé, 2009). Massé also stresses how morality is normally thought about "within traditions", but these are far from coherent, and are actually quite fragmented, marked by incoherence, tensions, and contradictions (Massé, 2009, p. 35).

Social ethics of privacy

My first ethnographic example took us to a rural context, where two foreigners discuss about their hardships talking to people in a Senegalese village. Locality is important but one of the first problems of dealing with a concept such as *sutura* is understanding exactly where it marks its presence. It is at once a so-

[9] *Bayil nettali!* Or *Bayil boole!* are common phrases heard when mothers correct their children. The first one sparks the fear that the child will become accustomed to talk about what he heard or saw and "tell it elsewhere", while the second sparks the fear that the child will become accustomed to put people against each other.

cial value with consequences on communication, as we just saw, but also a spatial logic, that starts on the domestic space where the organization of space itself promotes *sutura* (see Hernann, 2017, p. 6). In a discussion with an Arab linguist, I was told that *sutura* is the curtain (or veil) covering what is most private, it can be a division in people's house's,[10] it can be people's thoughts, or intimacy. Andrew Hernann (2017) also underlines *sutura*'s materiality in space, one that is especially problematic to his Timbuktian interlocutors in a refugee camp in Niger, cramped up in small spaces that don't allow for their necessary privacy. This same population discuss their nostalgia of Timbuktu with Hernann which, according to them, is a city that is itself covered by *sutura* (Hernann, 2017). Behind this spatialization is the fact that in contexts where people privilege "open" domestic spaces, spaces where main doors aren't closed, and people come and go, it is necessary to have "privacy in the absence of privacy" (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

For someone in the Ouakam neighborhood of Dakar with whom I have talked to not so long ago, *sutura* was not a big problem.[11] Because of where she lived, she considers people hardly know each other anymore, and she felt that she could easily live without the harassment of neighbors, probably because of her big house, protected by high walls and lush plants. *Sutura* is mainly dependent on sociality and close social relationships, and so the capacity to keep one's business private is highly dependent on personal, or familial space. For someone else commenting on this social value, in the context of big extended families, still the main mode of living pretty much everywhere in Senegal,[12] cohabitation often means there can be no *sutura,* or that it becomes problematic. Individuals lack personal space due to living conditions. This view though is mainly applicable to the individual, and we shouldn't forget that the idea of privacy has deep historical origins, dating back to "Aristotle's distinction between the public sphere of political activity and the private sphere associated with family and domestic life" (DeCew, 2018). Its use, though, is far from being uniform (DeCew, 2018), which means that it is culturally and historically constructed. Fadwa El Guindi, for example, alerts us that in Arabic and Islamic contexts, "privacy is based on a specific cultural construction of space and time [...] Space in this construction is relational, active, charged and fluid, 'insisting' on complementarities [...] A dis-

[10] Linked with the idea of *awrah* (the intimate parts that should be kept hidden). This also connects *sutura* with the body.

[11] This particular discussion took place in Ouakam in 2019. The person is a well-known musician in Senegal, living abroad.

[12] The results from the last Demographic and Health Study (2017) done in Senegal show that "households in Senegal have an elevated average size (8,7 people by household), with differences according to the place of residence (9,9 in rural areas against 7,5 in urban areas). In Senegal, two in five households (41%) have nine or more people" (ANSD, 2017, p. 13). My translation.

tinctive quality of the Islamic construction of space is how it turns a public area into a private space, without the entry of a stranger" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 154).

Beyond the spatial logics that protect most families' privacy, other discussions provide us with a sense of how *sutura* summons several different yet related implications between what is known of someone and what is kept from the public. In Mali, Aissatou Mbodj-Pouye has studied writing practices of local villagers, literate and non-literate, looking at how personal notebooks were kept (and to what purpose). The importance of writing emerges as a possibility to keep one's "secrets" without having to ask other people to write them down. People responded to Mbodj-Pouye, using interchangeably the terms "secrets" in French and *gundo* in Bamanan, making this researcher at odds to disentangle notions of privacy, confidentiality and secrecy,

> what appeared as a mistranslation by my assistants, turning "personal" into "secret", in fact reflect to a great extent the common sense of *gundo* as a term. The lexical field it belongs to ties it to the idea of *sutura* (a term derived from Arabic, conveying the notion of discretion) and oppose it to the idea of publicity: preserving *gundo* versus saying or doing something "mɔgɔ ŋɛna" (literally in the eyes of other people – open and publicly) or "kɛnɛ ma" (in the open). [...] Very often, *gundo* is used to point to a private domain, a domain of one's own, or concerns business that the speaker considers to be theirs. (Mbodj-Pouye, 2013, pp. 209-210)[13]

Mbodj-Pouye further tells us that *gundo* is a metonym for privacy and that it can be related to "more restricted uses referring to specific bodies of knowledge whose social transmission and public enunciation are controlled" (Mbdoj-Pouye, 2013, p. 210). This idea takes us back to the control of information in the previous section, and it also shows how in other West African societies, beyond Senegal, there is also a double link between *sutura*, individual and family privacy, communication and closure, and what is public, open, and social. In this sense, it seems to me that *sutura* is a form of socialized privacy, or a sort of "ethics of privacy" (Hernann, 2017).

The ethical element is very well expressed by Assane Sylla's definition in his *Wolof Moral Philosophy*. His text explores a set of local Wolof concepts that con-

[13] Concerning the probable Arabic origin of the word, I'd like to quote two very different sources. First of all, Andrew Hernann, who tells us that "A Songhay word, *sutura* most likely derives from the Arabic *satara* (Cowan, 1980). Both terms simultaneously reference both a social and a metaphysical index. On the one hand, as various Timbuktian scholars emphasized to me, *sutura* references familial and individual covering, screening, and veiling – that is, collective and individual privacy. On the other hand, it also evokes divine assistance and protection. […] Asserting that *sutura* is rooted in both the Qur'an and various ahadith, most Timbuktian religious intellectuals argue that the concept is universal throughout the Muslim world" (Hernann, 2017, p. 4). Secondly, Fadwa El Guindi, "*Satr* is a[n] [...] Arabic term, a derivative of another root (s-t-r). It refers to the veil, curtains and sanctity. The verb means 'to shield, to guard, to cover, to protect, to veil'" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 88).

tribute to his theoretical effort of ethnicizing morality.[14] *Suturë* (written in this form) is one of them. For this Senegalese philosopher, this social value:

> Is what hides, in eyes of the public, someone's weaknesses and defects, allowing to be apparent only what makes a person look respectable. It's an appearance of purity, honesty, competency, etc., behind which weaknesses and defects are hidden. A fundamental moral precept wants us to respect other people's "*suturë*", meaning that we shouldn't in any manner disclose, when we know it, other people's weaknesses, without a serious motive. (Sylla, 1980, p. 94)

Sylla draws from this the idea that this notion "lies in the perfect conscience of human incompleteness", and that "Wolof thinking"[15] is capable of assuming the need for a "veil of indulgence to hide our little failures: sins, incompetence, masked infirmity, poverty etc.". Sylla sees in this an important practice for the maintenance of social peace. The same idea is expressed more recently by an Islamic preacher, Iran Ndao, in his commentary to a controversial program, prohibited from exhibition after only two episodes, *Kawtef*.[16]

> Harming people is not worth it. A real Person should not harm its peers. I once heard Serigne Cheikh in the 'foire de Dakar', saying: "what I know about this country if I told it, the country would sink". It's not because I want to keep my own image that I should harm someone else's [...] I can accuse Fatima of something serious and she might be sure of being able to clean her image, but if she does it, Iran's image would be harmed, so you say to yourself 'I'll let it go until next time'. That is the honor of the past. A Person is careful before harming the image of those who are close to him/her.[17]

As for those that fail to keep this "veil" over weaknesses, theirs and those of the people in their social vicinity (*nawle*), they can expect social death (Mills, 2011) or, at least, "ethical vulnerability" (Hernann, 2017). Social death or ethical vulnerability are the consequence of the loss of *sutura* (*xàwwi sutura*). The need to protect one's image, or "to protect someone's honor", is well present in the verbal form of the concept, frequently used in Senegal, *suturaal*, which represents a wolofisation and is a marker of its importance in Senegal. This emphasizes the

[14] It's not hazardous that one of his main references in this book is Placide Tempels.

[15] I keep this expression, because it's the one used by Sylla, but it is highly problematic. This is not the place to make a critical assessment of this particular work though.

[16] The video with this public opinion is no longer available online.

[17] Iran Ndao, which is a moralizing pundit in Senegalese media, speaks here of an honor from the past, in the sense that contemporary Senegal seems, to him and other male preachers often occupying the public space, to undergo a "crisis in social values".

ethical stance coded into *sutura*, but the emphasis, so far, is on "what protects", i.e. the veil, and not on "what is protected". This conception emphasizes the vital space where what can be harmful to one's social image is under a veil, or cover, physical or symbolical. What becomes problematic is not what is being protected *per se*, but the fact that it might be exposed, because as Ivy Mills points out, "a bad deed that is not visible to others does not incur dishonor until it is exposed" (Mills, 2011, p. 3).

We've been focusing on the veil itself, and less on what it is covering. The next sections will allow us to focus on what is protected and start to give a different outlook on *sutura*, one that is less idealistic and more contingent.

Dignity and appearances

Assane Sylla's positive definition of *sutura* falls short of explaining how it sometimes ceases to be a social ethics to become a culture of silence – a meaning that can be considered a corollary of much more recent approaches to Senegalese social life. Values like *sutura* are those type of values often cited to be part of core "traditional" values and social identity, cited in self-reflexive discourses referencing ideal behavior and normative social relationships. Keeping one's *sutura* is as much a question of social and physical space, as it is a question of one's social relations and recognized social dignity. Individual dignity involves social relationships, but social ranking is also linked with the dignity of one's *nawle* (those sharing the same social ranking). Ndáte Yalla[18] explains it to me with a short story.

> My father told me one day that, once, my mother had scolded me in front of a stranger. He said to her: "This is the last time, because she is your *nawle*, the blood in her veins is the blood in yours". Well, my mother knows well she is my mother, why would he say that the blood in my veins is the blood on hers. It's the notion of *nawle* that's very strong among us. It's an alter-ego. […] *Nawle* is the question of dignity, the dignity that you have […] if someone says that someone is their *nawle*, it means that you have the same dignity […] and for me that's equality.

Harming the dignity of those in one's social vicinity (*nawle*) is, then, harming oneself. This principle is the same establishing that a veil hiding people's frailties is to be kept. Nevertheless, public image is especially prone to social analysis.[19] An example is the book *Retour d'un si long exil* by Nafissatou Dia Diouf that tells

[18] Fictional name of a university professor in Dakar with whom I have spoken in fieldwork conducted between July and August 2019.

[19] See also Ivy Mill's PhD thesis, chapter 2 (Mills, 2011, pp. 61-117).

the story of the cab driver in Dakar, Modou Cissé. He reflects on how his work allows him to be the spectator of life in the city. And he tells us: "One must understand something: in Senegal, everything is a matter of dignity. A question of *sutura*. One cannot get enough to eat but it is essential to keep up appearances" (as translated by Molly Krueger Enz) (Enz, 2014).[20] Modou describes how the crisis has affected the transport market for taxis, and how the "cars" (*carrapide*) have been gaining ground on them. He then completes the picture by describing how "the snobbish clients or those used to a certain standing" (Diouf, 2005) take the cheaper "cars" until the entry of the city and finish off the course in his taxi, just to keep the appearances, and their *sutura.* In the last 500 meters "they swell their chest once more and go back to wear their dignified look" (Diouf, 2005). Nafissatou Diouf's anecdote shows, in a rather ironic way, how dignity and *sutura* are interwoven, talking about a Senegal where hardships have made it difficult to keep a certain social ranking, and thus creating a disconnection between the social expectations and reality. A further ethnographic example can stress how these dimensions are connected. This example will also underline other less straightforward aspects.

A man at a loss[21]

Sy is a man that gained social prominence from an early age. He earned it through his father, a notable man who was an important link between the rural population and local administration. In his mid-twenties, Sy became an interlocutor of powerful actors investing in rural development. Soon, his social and symbolic capital allowed him to widely redistribute wealth among his kin and at large to people of the village, thus increasing even further his power. His aspirations made him enter politics with a large basis of social support. At the peak of his strength, Sy nearly managed to overthrow a political opponent, once his protector, just before he started losing everything. The powerful investors stopped investing, other actors came and chose other interlocutors. Sy lost his job and all activities he has tried subsequently have pretty much failed. All he invested in his social standing started to crumble and he came to a point where he hardly even left the house and just went by claiming old favors and asking new ones.

During this process of loss of social ranking, which started around a decade ago, one person has kept the balance for the social image of the family, his first wife, Fatim B. When I met them Sy was at the heyday of his political activity,

[20] For the original: Diouf, 2005, p. 162.

[21] This story takes place in Keur Momar Sarr around 2020. The people concerned, which I will leave anonymous for obvious reasons are people I have known for almost twenty years now.

Fatim B would be around the house giving *teraanga*[22] to the many guests and coordinating the house activities, which included a fair amount of politics. At this point, there was no seeming need for Fatim B to have her own economic activity, apart from some businesses with cattle and cloth. Some years later though, she had become the main source of income in the house. Nowadays, she is the only one. The years in the gap had been quite difficult ones, where she had to rely on creating debt to keep the house standing, and not letting anyone know how things were problematic. Sy, now a bitter man, blamed her for his demise, incapable of accepting his downfall he clinched to a hollow masculine power, which he used with mischief. Fatim B now sold in the market every week, but even against the better judgment, in an economic sense, Sy would often prohibit her from going. He would also forbid her from visiting members of her family, or going to ceremonies, especially in the moments when their relation was more tense. Sy said to me that she would tell around that he was good for nothing and that she was the one putting all the money in the house. Hearing that his wife had talked about his situation was perceived as a breach of *sutura* (*xàwwi sutura*), to which he responded to with reprimands and corrective measures, never being successful in more than increasing even further the divide between the two.

All along Fatim B has kept the appearance of normality to those outside the household. The outbursts of violence during the years were continuously present, but the economical hardships of Sy, a man with a certain social ranking, exacerbated them. These were kept in silence more often than not. Fatim B would stay at the house in moments of stronger tension. Women, and men, in the family – the husband's sisters or her sisters –, and also a restricted group of friends of the family, would repeat the formula "*muñal, lu metti yagul*"[23] – 'be patient, bad things don't last'. His social ranking was frequently presented as an excuse to keep things quiet, under the cloak of *sutura*. People would exhort Fatim B to excuse him, "*Suturaal ko!*" (protect him), in the name of the family, and she is, until this day, keeping appearances, for her sons and daughters she says, not because of what people ask her. The permanent negotiation inside the household, for autonomy and power, creates an ambiguity where appearances are kept for the sake of the family's reputation, while at the same time allowing mischievous relationships to thrive at the expenses of the victim.

[22] *Teraanga* is Wolof word translated as hospitality and is a social requirement of all those that want to have a relevant social standing.

[23] *Muñ* is the Wolof word for patience, and it is another social value often associated with gendered versions of women's idealized "good behaviour". A good woman, wife, mother, is often told to "be patient" in the face of hardship. As a part of the model for "good wifely behaviour" *muñ* often becomes a cornerstone of social pressure, because no matter what, women will be told to "stick it out".

One particular situation has struck me as problematic, Sy attempted on Fatim's life in an outburst. This particular crime became public, but throughout the years, in this haven of domestic violence, most haven't. People came bursting in the house trying to separate them and immediately tried to contain the damage. As people intervened to, once again, try to downplay what was going on, authorities also became aware of what was happening, namely a local police agent, the *sous-prefet* and the *adjoint sous-prefet*,[24] all representatives of the local authorities. None of them tried to pursue this man, instead they tried to deal with the situation through informal conflict management, a mere call back to reason, despite the fact that Sy had committed serious offenses, punishable by law. This is an extreme case and Fatim B considered the plaint herself, but the first obstacle came by with the fact that none of the people in the family, men or women, was available to support her. Immediately she understood that a medical certificate was also going to be difficult, and the assemblage of the case very complex. It ended up by being normalized as an issue inside the couple, to be dealt with "*jubboo*" (an arrangement). Health authorities, law enforcement and administrative authorities, none were capable of going beyond this framework, showing not only connivance with patriarchal power and violence, but also the failure of the judicial system in guaranteeing the enforcement of human rights.

In a less dramatic fashion Donna Perry describes how, in rural Saloum, households have also been affected by the demise of patriarchal power. As a consequence of men's increasingly economic problems, and difficulties to keep their status as providers, a crisis in masculinity seems quite real and all sort of "gendered grudges" are exacerbated. When someone tells Perry that "I don't want anyone to laugh at my husband" because she is concealing "household strife from the public eye" (Perry, 2005, p. 219), and respecting *sutura*, a space for forms of gender violence is being opened.

With increased autonomy "new domestic tensions emerge around issues of labor, financial control, mobility, space, and sexuality" (Perry, 2005, p. 209). Nevertheless, social life has adapted to hardships and everywhere in Senegal we can assist to the growing importance of women in household revenue. Despite being discrete about it, and frequently allowing their husbands to take credit for the upbringing of their offspring, or the maintenance of the house, in reality they are frequently the ones making the most relevant inputs.

Marame Gueye, analyzing a popular song from the 1960s (Fatou Gay's song), reminds us that most times the image of the perfect household is only illusory.

[24] The Prefect and his Deputy.

"The culture advocates *sak*[25] or *sutura*, which is the idea of make-believe or being discrete. […] Often, women carry the burden of making the household look harmonious by finding ways to supplement the husband's financial contributions and covering his shortcomings" (Gueye, 2011).

Dignity is then achieved by investing on the necessary appearances. The boundaries established are negotiated inside the household. Men can keep a certain status as women allow for dignity to be kept by *sutura*, but despite the clear contrast between ideology and social practice, and the fact that this "protection" granted to men comes with the claim for more autonomy from women (Perry, 2005). On the other hand, today's victory can become tomorrow's grudge, giving way to violence, rendering the protective regime of *sutura* a rather ambiguous one, meaning that not all people are granted the same protection. The embeddedness of *sutura* in a hierarchical, patriarchal, Islamic society, makes it a regime of protection that favors those in power, thus creating a rather important ambiguity between the idea of *sutura* as a social ethics of privacy, and *sutura* as a matter of dignity. Despite that, it is noticeable that in itself *sutura* is not forcefully what renders protection to the powerful, although that might be a consequence of a misogynous society. As Oudenhuijsen (2021), talking about queer lives points out, "*sutura* is not a totalizing framework that represses dissidents. Rather than disabling queer expression, the gender and sexual normativity that constitutes the norm of *sutura* has been shown to provide room for queer lives" (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 48). The main expression being "provide room", this means that *sutura* can and is appropriated by people needing to escape society' judgement.

Women are at the heart of this discussion – and so is violence – but not all authors agree on the link between gender and *sutura*. Nicolas Faynot (2017), for example, in an article discussing the reception of the contemporary series *Dinama Nékh*,[26] rightly sees Maimouna and Daro as two opposite models of femininity. One posing as sober, fragile, educated, *bari kersa* (easily ashamed) – Maimouna, the real catch for the men, representing the perfect balance – and Daro, loudmouth (*bari wax*), extravagant, speaking out her points of view no matter the social codes, and *ñak kersa* (without shame). The preferences of the Senegalese with whom the researcher engages are Maimouna, the real model, where Daro represents the anti-model. According to Faynot, his interlocutors seem to have been captured by how *sutura* is dramatized. He stresses the interpretation of *su-*

[25] *Sak* or *Sag* (see Diouf, 2003, p. 298): Honor; Pride. *Sago*, most probably with the same linguistical root, is also an important social value, and can be translated by the ability to master oneself (*maîtrise de soi*).

[26] A dramatization of contemporary relations between women and men, with two main characters, Maimouna and Daro, two *mbaraneuses* (see Foley & Drame, 2012, on *mbaraan*) who dedicate their time to create the perfect setting to manipulate men.

tura as "preservation of appearances", sending us to a footnote to tell us that this is the most salient characteristic of *sutura*, and not so much J.-F. Werner's version as "behavioural norm made of modesty, discretion, and respect for the other" (Werner as cited by Faynot, 2017, p. 10) or Ismael Moya's for whom *sutura* is a "sense of discretion" (Moya as cited by Faynot, 2017, p. 10). *Sutura* is thus, for Faynot:

> a notion situated between honor and modesty, that points to the ability of veiling certain aspects, in order to preserve and protect one's own reputation, one's family or/and husband. *Sutura* is not a typically feminine value, but it's more often worn by women because they're the one's assuring a certain set of values. As the mother of Codou tells me (54 years, married), "women preserve it and men hide behind it, that's why women worry more than men". (Faynot, 2017, p. 10)

In fact, *sutura* is much more than simple discretion. But it is also more than the preservation of appearances, as the example of Fatim B and Sy show clearly. It involves questions of honor and modesty, but it also implies consequences at the level of social interaction, social ranking, dignity, and gender. The concept in itself might not be always a gender marker, but as Faynot himself recognizes, women are the main holders of this culture, and expectations on them are heavier too. *Sutura*, in the sense of 'veil that helps to keep something from the public eye' talks directly to the gendered dimensions of social inequality, gender discrimination and access to the public sphere, because the "most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale – the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude – the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence" (Graeber & Wengrow, 2018). *Sutura* might not be a feminine social value in itself, but it surely affects femininity. The next section will try to focus on the effects of *sutura* on gender issues.

Sutura as a dark cover: a gendered concept

In one of the few research works directly focused on the importance of *sutura*, Ivy Mills considers this the "core concept in the Wolof code of honor" and:

> The virtuous practices and states that *sutura* indexes include discretion, modesty, privacy, protection, and the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure. Since *sutura* refers to the boundary between the state of protection (life) and the state of exposure (death), I would like to suggest that it is the Ur-concept of Wolof honor. (Mills, 2011, p. 3).

I'd like to emphasize the following parts of this quote: "the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure" and "boundary between the state of protection (life) and the state of exposure (death)". Ivy Mills discussion of *sutura* is certainly one of the most relevant I have come across, and her statement is complemented when she tells us that

> in discourses on ideal feminine behavior, it is *sutura* that is most often held up as the cornerstone of feminine honor [...] Indeed, *sutura* has come to produce gender difference itself, making a break with feminized *sutura* a break with legible womanhood. It is articulated to the norm of feminine submission to masculine authority, and wifely submission to the husband in particular. (Mills, 2011, p. 4)

This idea is disputable as single cultural model as in Senegal, feminities are quite plural and have managed to find their own spaces and places to escape the "Islamized Wolof gender ideology [that] advocates women's seclusion and voicelessness" (Gueye, 2011, p. 69). Quite telling examples are the *aventurières noctambules*, described by Thomas Fouquet study of the night; and the forms of strategic emotionalities represented by the *mbaraneuses*[27] described by Ellen Foley and Fatou Maria Drame but also dramatized in *Dinama Nékh.* The most poignant example though, of how Senegalese feminities are not only about submission, is the importance that women's "social movements" have gained since the nineties in Senegal (see Gueye, 2015).

If we analyze *sutura* only on an ideal dimension, we will miss contemporary negotiations around it, in the private realm of domestic spaces, and also in the public sphere (see Oudenhuijsen, 2021). For Mills, "a new regime of morality in which disclosure became more ethical than concealment, and the peace of the community became less important than obtaining justice for those who have been wronged" (Mills, 2011, p. 12) has changed the social ethics of privacy that kept the most powerful under protection. But is this true in all corners of society? As we saw in Fatim B's and Sy's example, the answer is no. *Sutura* is still an important social construction with non-negligible consequences. Exposing "cases of rape, incest, pedophilia, domestic violence, adultery, embezzlement, corruption, conflicts between co-wives, and infanticide" (Mills, 2011, p. 12) might grant audiences to programs like Ahmed Aidara's *Teuss*, but everyday life is still marked by the regime of protection in many instances, and so is communication. A political reading of the concept should emphasize both that as a non-gendered social concept *sutura* is thought to promote social peace, and that as a gendered concept it

[27] *Mbaraan* is the feminine multipartenariat.

is perceived as contributing to gender discrimination and violence. *Sutura* is not gender neutral, since all gender analysis is, in itself, political.

In February 2018, a certain philosophy professor called Songué Diouf appeared in *Jakkarlo*, a television program in TFM, talking about rape. The case might seem a *fait divers* as many other. Senegalese media have been producing scandals for quite some time. Exposure of non-normative behavior is common, as is social commentary, confrontation of points of view, and sometimes endless discussions. The boastful Songué Diouf authoritatively asserts that rape is bad but men (first assumption: only women are raped) are led to have the desire to rape because of how women dress. The rapers are bad, but those who are raped are also bad. In Diouf's words: "they do everything to get raped". The type of cretin logic employed is the type that transforms victims into culprits with pure rhetoric and no useful information. But what would be just another buffoonery (although the man's tone was grave and full of self-righteousness) was meant to stir a debate. Senegalese society hasn't been completely deaf or blind to campaigns such as #metoo, which was translated into #balancetonsaïsaï[28] for example, and the timing of Mr. Songué Diouf was just bad. Reactions were quick and the case was soon tagged as an apology of rape. Not only the commentaries kept on maintaining the case under social scrutiny in social media and in the media in general, but authorities also took interest and action. The new element in this *affaire* seems to be the fact that this time round this type of symbolical violence was not about to wear off easily.

Ndèye Fatou Kane, for example, writing in *Le Monde* (Kane, 2018) re-inscribes the whole thing in the context of sociocultural values and domestic space:

> In Senegal, evil is inside the house. It operates insidiously, breaking the victim that is forced to live not only with the trauma of a non-consensual sexual relationship, but also with the insistent look of everybody, because she is, in the end, the one to blame […] She should have covered herself! […] When it comes to sexual violence, the women in this country – even if there are exceptions – are strangely voiceless […] But then again, in a society where *sutura* and *muugn* are erected as cardinal values, why would we be surprised? *Muugn* could be assimilated with the propensity to stoically endure hardships. A trait of character well prized in women that, associated with *sutura*, keeps on constraining women to continue to allow battering. (Kane, 2018)

[28] *Saï Saï* (or *Saay Saay* according to Diouf, 2003) means someone that is a thug, a crook, a criminal. It can also be used in non-negative way to mean someone who is naughty. In the sense of the #balancetonsaïsaï hashtag it means 'denounce your aggressor', referring to a common trope of the *Tonton Saay Saay*, which can be translated as the 'crooked uncle', meaning that person that lingers around a victim in all proximity.

What Kane calls a "culture of rape"[29] where *sutura* plays a role, is what motivated Mariama Khan, a poet, activist, and filmmaker, to show her film *Sutura: What Judges Need to Know about Rape in Senegal*. The film was commissioned by the Brandeis University and shown in a conference in Accra. In the report entitled "The role of the judiciary in promoting gender justice in Africa", we can read that "The film highlights the attitudes, perceptions and myths that often surround gender-based violence [...] and shines a light on the reticence many rape victims have in reporting their crimes (at home and to authorities) or pursuing their rapists due to the cultural value placed on *sutura*, 'discretion'" (Partners, 2008).

Both Mariama Khan and Ndèye Fatou Kane denounce how *sutura* is in fact something that can promote a culture of silence around delicate subjects such as gender violence. This reaction against voicelessness and silence is in fact part of a wider trend of questioning the status quo, one especially visible since the liberalization of media and the advent of mobile technologies. In the last decades a profusion of local series dramatizing social life, stemming from its origins on the filmed *théâtre sénégalais*, has captured imaginations and allowed for widespread social commentary. One such series has been aired between 2018 and 2019 and is called *Maîtresse d'un homme marié*, written by Kalista Sy. This series has been the object of criticism because it exposes the social problems once protected by *sutura*, like domestic violence, rape, polygamy, and other issues. Marame Gueye, commenting on those criticisms calls *sutura* a "dark cover" (Gueye, 2019), while praising Marème's character in the series as

> a courageous representation of a Senegalese woman who does exist in real life, but whom the male-centered culture does not want to publicly acknowledge on the grounds of religious morality. [Because] In one episode, Marème points to her sexual parts and proclaims: "*Sama lii ma ko moom, ku ma neex laa ko'y jox*" (My thing is mine, I give it to whomever I want). (Gueye, 2019)

This sort of empowerment is the antithesis of another type of empowered "legible womanhood" (to use Ivy Mills's expression) that inhabits the public sphere and represents well *sutura*. A case happened during 2019 that involved the murder of a young girl called Bineta Camara is an example. Bineta was killed by a man close to the family, with an attempted rape, and the case became a public matter, because the father of the girl was a member of APS, the party of the president Macky Sall. The negative publicity around the events, the intensity

[29] This might be an overstatement but given the circumstances, of the text being published in international media as a protest article, of someone militantly engaged, it is understandable that the stress might permit the free use of language. Rape is a big problem in the country but its extent is difficult to assess, which makes it impossible to affirm that it constitutes a "culture".

of the speculations was met with the public re-signification of the victim and the murder as a "fight for dignity", Bineta's refusal to lose her virginity to her aggressor led to her death. Over the death of this unfortunate young woman a representation of piousness is drawn, epitomizing the model woman, who preferred to stay indoors than go out, be attentive to the needs of the family, pray and learn the Koran. A discourse of acceptance of her death as God's design (*"dañuy ko japp Ndogalu Yalla la"*) and a certainty that her righteousness will grant her God's favor, gave way to a problematic "construction of piousness", drawn not only to protect the memory of the girl but also of the family, but sort of diverting the attention from the essential, gender violence. Anyway, against this current many women felt this case to be the "last drop" (*lu* ëp *turu*) and came to the public claiming for the death penalty for such cases.

We can sense how sensitivities take into account what's public and what's not, and how femininity is trapped between a duality in the public sphere, where *sutura* becomes more than just a social value of protection of privacy, and comes to epitomize the feminist formula "the private is political" and women's liberation. The politics of exposure of *sutura* do not just cover for gender-based violence and sexual violence, they actually mean that victims cannot show their victimhood, but also that those not conforming to gender normativity will be forced into silence and invisibility. This is what happens, for example, with homosexuality, as pointed out by a report by Human Rights Watch,[30] where a whole section is dedicated to *sutura*, understood as a "Senegalese form of privacy in the absence of private space" (Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 54). According to this report it is imperative to keep

> "hidden what needs to be treated carefully" (p. 54), especially because in Senegal secrecy must exist "in the absence of privacy" […] Because no space is entirely private and inviolate, and because most aspects of individuals' lives are entwined in family and community life and thus visible, individuals have to negotiate the public domain". (Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 53)

Despite the increasing demands for the occupation of the public space, discourses on purity are still important symbolical frameworks clashing with individual liberties. The visibility of individual choices, for example, can be perceived as a violation of *sutura*, which is why "the recent visibility of men who have sex with men […] appears [...] as immodest display, or 'flaunting', by homosexuals who are seen as flaunting the rules of *sutura* by being visible" (Human Rights

[30] The report is entitled *Fear for Life: Violence against Gay Men and Men Perceived as Gay in Senegal*.

Watch, 2010, p. 53) turning them into offenders of *sutura*, that is, of violating the moral code in a country taken by a rampant homophobia (see Sarr, 2018), instead of victims, whose names are dragged into the public sphere.

Conclusion

In a field of negotiations for human rights and citizenship, concepts such as *sutura* are wrapped in ambiguity. The positions represented by those criticizing the rule of *sutura* reinforce how the boundaries imposed are object to negotiations, especially for women. In contemporary Senegalese society certain values still thought to be central are questioned, drawing light to how they contribute not only to a framework of religious piety and metaphysical protections, but also to one of fundamental rights of individuals. This makes knowledge of this sociocultural value a very important asset when studying these societies.

The shift from a regime of protection to one of exposure is still ongoing but there are signs that social bonds and family discretion are no longer fully cloaked under a veil. I would like to close this text reminding that "every culture is contested from its interior, that local moralities are also objects of criticisms, and that sometimes tradition doesn't mean much beyond the authoritarianism of elites or certain sub-groups" (Massé, 2009, p. 38). *Sutura's* embeddedness in a patriarchal Islamic society highlights it as a regime that protects those that can aspire to be protected. There is inequality in this protection and that marks the ambiguity between *sutura* as an ethics of privacy, and *sutura* as a matter of dignity, between *sutura* as an important element of social peace, or *sutura* as a cloud shrouding all that is negative.

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