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Recommended Citation

Judy Scales-Trent, *Make-Believe Families and Whiteness*, 18 Wash. U. J.L. & Pol'y 47 (2005).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/journal_articles/827



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Make-Believe Families and Whiteness

Judy Scales-Trent*

The only way you will understand this story is if I start out by telling you that there are six major ethnic groups in Senegal: Wolof, Sereer, Pular, Diola, Toucouleur, and Mandingue. And you need to know that my husband is Sereer.

This story took place one afternoon as we were taking a very long car trip south from Dakar to Niodior, the fishing village where he was raised and where his family still lived. After traveling for several hours, we reached a part of the road where there were no signs of life—no houses, no shops, no women selling fruits and vegetables on the roadside, no flocks of sheep, no cars or buses or horse-drawn wagons. We were alone on the road, and that's when we saw the police car heading for us, signaling for us to pull over. My first thought was that this was not good. All of a sudden I felt isolated, helpless. Perhaps the policeman just wanted money. This had happened before: a policeman sees me in the car (a person with light skin), figures that I am a tourist, and thinks that perhaps there is money to be made.

So we stopped the car.

The policeman walked over, looked in the car window and asked my husband for his papers. Abdou gave him the papers, then replied, without looking at the policeman, without any sign of a smile, "If you are Diola, don't even speak to me."

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My heart stopped! Had my husband lost his mind? Why on earth would he pick a fight with a policeman out in the middle of nowhere? The policeman was as startled as I.

“What did you say?” he asked.

And Abdou repeated, looking away from the policeman, looking way off into the distance, “I said, if you are Diola, don’t even speak to me.”

My heart sank. Surely we were doomed! Would I spend the rest of my life in a Senegalese jail? Under the jail?!

But the policeman paused for a minute, thinking.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Niodior,” Abdou answered.

At that, the policeman started to laugh, and Abdou joined in. The policeman tossed the papers back in the car, and stooped down to look in the car window:

“Monsieur, your wife is very beautiful! Madame, your husband is very handsome! Have a safe journey!” Then he walked back to his car, still laughing, and was gone.

After I started breathing again, I asked Abdou what that was all about. Why did he tell the policeman not to speak to him? He replied that the policeman was his cousin. But I still did not understand.

“Why did you speak to him like that? What side of the family was he from? And why didn’t you introduce me to him?”

He explained that he didn’t mean “cousin” in the sense that I understood it; he didn’t even know the man’s name. What he meant was that the policeman was his “cousin” because the policeman was Diola, and the Sereer and the Diola were make-believe cousins.

“But how did he know you were Sereer?” I said.

“Because he knows that Niodior is a Sereer village.”

“But how did you know that he was Diola?”

“What?! You didn’t hear that accent?!”

So this was my introduction to *cousinage* in Senegal—a system of make-believe families created across ethnic groups, a system maintained by friendly joking.

As I became more familiar with this system, I learned to participate in it and enjoy it. On another occasion we had just arrived at our favorite seaside resort in Touba Dialao for the weekend. As we were sitting at the terrace restaurant, Abdou and the waiter started a

conversation in Wolof, the *lingua franca* in Senegal. I didn't understand the conversation, but I enjoyed the fact that it included much bantering and much laughing. After a few moments, the young waiter put on a very serious face, looked at me, and said in French:

"But Madame, I am very worried about you."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because, Madame, you might not know this, but during the night, the Sereer turn into hyenas!"

"Ah, thank you so much for telling me this," I answered, with my own very straight face, "I should probably get a separate room for tonight."

He agreed.

Another day, on a boat trip, a stranger who was Peul said:

"Madame, you know perhaps that your husband is my slave."

"Oh, I thought you were his slave!"

"No, he is my slave. Not only that, but he eats too much rice. You know the Sereer eat rice all the time."

"But I hear that the problem with the Peul is that they eat too much bread!"

"Well, yes, that's true too!"

Thus, through the system of *cousinage*, we made connections throughout the country, wherever we went. It was usually a brief conversation with a waiter, a cab driver, or someone we met at a wrestling match, but it opened the door to smiling and laughing, and it made life a little easier and a little more pleasant.

Joking about who eats too much rice or too much bread, joking about who is whose slave—this is the system of *cousinage*, the creation of make-believe families across ethnicities in order to reduce ethnic tension. Because if you are Mandingue and your "cousins" are Diola, you had better not get into a fight with a Diola, for they are your family too.

I found this system so fascinating that I spent several weeks in January conducting interviews about *cousinage*. And I learned a lot. I learned that *cousinage* is practiced not only between ethnic groups, but within ethnic groups. For example, there are many Sereer groups in Senegal—Sereer Sine, Niominka, Ndoute, Safène, None, Palon, Baol. They live in different regions, often speaking a form of Sereer incomprehensible to other Sereer groups. And they practice

cousinage between various Sereer groups for the same reason—to create and maintain connections, to reduce conflict. There is also a *cousinage* created by family name. Thus, since my husband is Sereer Niominka, and since his last name is Sarr, his cousins include not only Diola and Peul (other ethnic groups), and not only Sereer Sine and Sereer Baol (other Sereer groups), but also anyone with the last name of Ndiaye, Thiam or Diop. The system of make-believe families creates a tight weave of many different groups throughout the country.

I also learned that there are rules of appropriate behavior when engaging in the joking that creates and maintains *cousinage*. The primary rule is that one must tease with respect: one does not have the right to harm one's "cousin," either physically or psychologically. The point is to create a situation where both parties laugh. Thus, it is specifically forbidden to insult your "cousin's" mother or father.

You have the right to give orders to your cousin and you have the right to take all of his possessions. But you shouldn't forget that he also has the right to give you orders and the right to take back his possessions. You and your "cousin" are equal. You must also remember that if you harm your "cousin," the harm will come back to you. Thus there is a great incentive to treat one's "cousins" well.

Who is permitted to engage in this bantering? Everyone. Women may tease men; the young may tease the old. The entire society is entitled, and encouraged, to participate in the creation and maintenance of these fictive families.

I heard many stories about how this concern for one's "cousins" manifests itself. A Diola student told me that in his village, when there were big celebrations—a marriage, a baptism—people would ask, "Where are the Sereer?" They would be invited to eat first, and to eat as much as they wanted. He explained that it gave his neighbors pleasure to see the Sereer eat a lot because that reinforced the system of *cousinage*. He also told me that when he was younger, the villagers took very good care of their school teacher, who was Sereer. A large part of the rice grown in the village was reserved for him. And he remembers walking with his grandfather and schoolteacher among the orange trees and hearing his grandfather say to the teacher, "This orange tree is for you. This one is for your wife. And this one is for your children."

Mamadou Sarr told me that years ago his work required him to visit many villages. He remembers that when he arrived in the Diola village, the women would call out, “The Sereer is here! The Sereer is here!” They would then run out of their house and throw bucketsful of water on him as he ran, laughing, from house to house. Eventually he would “save” himself by running back to the truck and locking himself inside, at which point the women would bring him armloads of oranges, mangoes, and bananas.

I asked the young university students if this system still had some resonance in their lives. Did it still have the powerful influence it must have had years ago, before widespread migration to the large cities, before the influence of television and the internet? The students thought that the influence was weaker in the cities, and weaker among the young, but they still could think of current examples. Pathé Guèye told of teasing his roommate by asking him if he wanted his bread (“since you Mandingue eat so much bread”); another said that when he noticed that two classmates’ argument over religion was heading towards a fist-fight, he told them that they could not fight each other since they were cousins.

The most amazing story I heard of the continuing influence of *cousinage* involves the quasi-rebellion in the Casamance region of Senegal, a conflict that has lasted over twenty years. Several people told me variations on this story:

A group of rebels who were Diola stopped a bus in the Casamance region and told everyone to get out. They were going to kill everyone except the Sereer. The Sereer person on the bus told them that they had to kill him too: “Kill all of us, or let us all live.” The rebels were in a quandary since they were forbidden by the ties of “family” to kill the Sereer. As a result, they decided not to kill any of the people on the bus.

I’m not sure I believe this story, but since I heard it many times, I consider it an important statement about the continued power of this ideology in Senegalese life.

“How did *cousinage* start?” I asked. “How did you learn about it?” I heard several stories, but this one is my favorite:

Three women—one Diola, one Toucouleur, and one Sereer—left the village together to wash clothes in a nearby stream.

Each had a basket of laundry on her head and a baby strapped on her back. When the women reached the stream, they put down the laundry, then laid the babies under a nearby tree. After a while, as it started to grow dark, a ferocious animal came out of the high grasses and began to slink towards the babies. The terrified women ran towards the babies, each one grabbing the one closest to her: the Diola woman picked up the Toucouleur baby, the Toucouleur woman picked up the Sereer baby, the Sereer woman picked up the Diola baby. The women saved each other's children, and ever since, we have been cousins.

As one law student explained, "This is like a contract which our forefathers signed."

When I was in Senegal, *cousinage* was an enjoyable, playful way to interact with strangers, nothing more. But the idea that this society self-consciously and specifically decided to create make-believe families in order to eliminate ethnic strife is a very powerful one. As I reflected on this system of make-believe families in Senegal, it reminded me of the system of clans within the Iroquois Confederacy.

Sometime between 1000 and 1400 A.D., Deganawidah, a Huron spiritual leader, visited five tribes which had been warring with each other for hundreds of years: the Onandaga, Cayuga, Oneida, Seneca and the Mohawk. He went to spread the idea of peace. Deganawidah told them that they should create a confederacy of these five nations. The result was the creation of the League of the Iroquois, the Haudenosaunee. And when the tribes created this League, they also created The Great Binding Law, Gayanashogawa.

The leaders who created this Confederacy had great foresight, for they knew that agreeing to create a confederacy did not ensure peace between groups that had been warring for centuries. Therefore, in order to create a situation, which would reduce the possibility of war, they created make-believe families—"clans"—across tribal lines. There were eight clans: Wolf, Bear, Beaver, Turtle, Hawk, Snipe, Deer, and Heron. Before the creation of this clan structure, a Seneca might have had little hesitation in going to war against the Mohawk or the Cayuga. But after the creation of this confederacy, a Seneca in the Turtle clan now had many new "relatives"—relatives who were Mohawk, Turtle Clan; Cayuga, Turtle Clan; Onandaga, Turtle Clan;

and Oneida, Turtle Clan. How could the Seneca make war against the Mohawks, since they now had Mohawk “relatives?” The hope was that war would no longer be possible.

To ensure that members of this new confederacy took their new clan “family” seriously, the Great Binding Law stated that since members of the same clan were now family, they were forbidden to marry. This mandate holds sway even today. It has the effect of strengthening the concept of make-believe families in the Iroquois Confederacy. But it has another important effect: it forces members of one clan to marry a member of another clan, thus weaving even more tightly the strands linking the tribes.

I thought a lot about these two societies, Senegalese and Iroquois. Societies separated by language, by culture, and by geography, but societies, which made a similar political decision: the decision to eliminate warfare between their member groups by creating make-believe families.

And that led me to thoughts about white America, which made a very different political decision: the decision to create warfare between the black and white groups by making believe that real families do not exist. This is one way that white America maintains its dream of racial purity; this is one way that America creates “whiteness.” And white America has used, and still uses, many techniques for maintaining the fiction that real families created across ethnic groups do not exist:

By enacting rules and regulations which state that a child with a white parent and a black parent is not a member of the white family;

By shunning the child with a black parent and a white parent, to ensure that that child stays away from the white group;

By pretending that this child does not even exist.

I am thinking of the federal guidelines, which tell the states that a child with a black parent and a white parent should be listed “black” on the birth certificate. I am thinking of the family of Senator Strom Thurmond, which pretended for so many years that his daughter—their sister, aunt, cousin, niece, grandchild—did not exist. I am thinking of George Washington’s friend, Colonel Cocke, who left

Washington's house in disgust after seeing an old slave who looked just like him.

This is not news to you. You know this literature. And you have more stories you could add to this list. But somehow, putting the American story into the same picture with *cousinage*, looking at America along with the very self-conscious creation of make-believe families by the Senegalese and the Iroquois, emphasizes the meanness of the white American spirit. For it was not only the Senegalese and the Iroquois who had this choice. White Americans too could have made a political choice that would have furthered the goals of equality, brotherhood and peace. They didn't even have to create fictive families to do it. They could have simply accepted the creation of real families across tribal lines, and peace might well have followed.

But they didn't. Instead, white America chose the fantasy that certain real families did not exist. They chose the disruption of real families.

They chose war.

Now I know that when I describe *cousinage* to you, I am romanticizing Senegal to some extent. Of course Senegalese hate and kill each other like everyone else. They are human, too. The rebellion in southern Senegal reminds us of this. Also, tension and warfare within a country don't have to be across ethnic lines. Senegalese may not be concerned about ethnic tension, but there are those who fear violence between Islamic brotherhoods. Nonetheless, I have great respect for this political effort to create a system of make-believe families in order to forge a tradition of peace.

And I wonder: how would all our lives have been different, if this new country, America, had decided to follow these ancient models of peace?

I thank the many Senegalese who were kind enough explain *cousinage* to me: Khady Diakhaaby, Adama Diof, Idrissa Gassama, pathe Guéye, Bada Ngom, Mamadou Sarr, and Charles Sow. I am grateful also to Taunya Banks and Papa Demba Fall for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. Special thanks, of course, go to Abdourahmane Sarr, who showed me how *cousinage* is lived.