

Crack Cocaine in Paris: A Little-known Dimension of “Globalization from Below”

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Over the past 50 years or so, the *modou-modou*—a contraction of Mohamed and Mamadou, which colloquially designates a street vendor in the Wolof language—has become an almost habitual figure on the Parisian streets, from the tourist districts to the most disadvantaged areas. Peddling jewelry, African objets d’art and knick-knacks for holidaymakers, as well as illicit psychotropic substances, the *modou*, contrary to appearances, is not an isolated wretch, a sort of *luftmensch* condemned to wandering. The *modou* is a subject in a very special world. A world irrigated by transnational community networks, by commercial networks specializing in the import-export of legal and illegal goods, and by legal and illegal financial flows, in which the web of “globalization from below”¹ is woven day after day—a globalization that is “cultural, not just economic,” working “underneath the States, in their cracks, their shortcomings,” whose “players are unexpected—the ‘ants’ of international trade, who weave the web of innumerable networks, ‘informal notables’ from the Maghreb or Senegal, mafiosi, etc.”² One aspect of this is the crack economy that developed in the Paris region from the 1990s onwards. A phenomenon that has lasted for some thirty years, characterized by its great stability, and which has seen migrant networks of Senegalese origin gradually acquire a kind of monopoly of supply on a segment, albeit marginal, of the French drug market. A reality that belies the prevailing view of a loosely structured trade, driven by single men almost as disaffiliated as their customers.

Cocaine-Free base

Over the past 25 years, cocaine use in French society has risen sharply. According to the latest data published by the *Observatoire français des drogues et des tendances addictives* (OFDT), cocaine use reached an unprecedented level in 2023, putting France well ahead of the United States in terms of prevalence among the adult population. Between 2000 and 2024, it rose from 0.3% to 2.7% of the over-18 population, or around one million people.³ While the overwhelming majority consume it via the nasal route (sniffing), a minority, 0.3%

1 Tarrus A., *La mondialisation par le bas*, Balland, 2002.

2 Tarrus A., *op. cit.* 2002.

3 Spilka S., et al., «Levels of illicit drug use in France in 2023,» *Tendances*, OFDT, June 2024.

of the adult population, prefer the smokable route.⁴ This involves a chemical transformation process consisting of heating the hydrochloride mixed with ammonia or sodium bicarbonate. The mixture produces a solid crystallization conducive to the smokable route. The effect on users is much more rapid and brutal than that of cocaine. Its relatively short duration encourages users to multiply their intake, which generally leads to rapid dependence. In France, this form of cocaine is marketed under two main names: “free base” and “crack,”⁵ which in fact refer to the same product, but to different audiences and modes of circulation. The former refers to relatively socially integrated consumers who make their own product, while the latter refers to deeply marginalized street users in certain districts of northeastern Paris, supplied by dealers specifically positioned in this market.

The Emergence of Crack

While it's difficult to trace the origins of crack cocaine, the most serious hypotheses point to its appearance on the American market in the late 1970s, via users belonging to West Indian immigrants, particularly Jamaicans, who had developed the habit of smoking cocaine or, rather, base paste. The encounter with this intermediate product between coca and hydrochloride is thought to have been due to a shortage of precursors, notably ethyl ether, in Colombia. Some traffickers decided to move the refining of cocaine paste-base (PBC) to the West Indies, or even to export it directly to Florida, hoping to generate local consumption of PBC (basuco) similar to that in Latin America. Some cannabis users will get into the habit of smoking PBC and, by emigrating to the U.S., contribute to the development of a specific demand for smokable cocaine. As the use of PBC did not spread, drug dealers succeeded in producing crack cocaine by adding bicarbonate of soda or ammonia. Crack cocaine expanded rapidly in the poorer neighborhoods of American metropolises, particularly among blacks and Hispanics.

In France, crack emerged in the mid-1980s in Guadeloupe and Martinique, then quickly took root in mainland France, and particularly Paris, via users from the West Indies.⁶ At the time, the supply, which tended to be small-scale, was run by West Indian dealers, who were themselves often users, in a context where many drug users were looking for substances to complement heroin, whose use was booming at the time. Part of the heroin supply in Paris was therefore handled by Senegalese networks. This was also the case in other French cities, notably Marseille. They are made up of former itinerant dealers in African art objects and jewelry, whose economic environment was affected by the arrival heroin in the

4 Spilka S., *op. cit.* at 2024.

5 Gandilhon M., and Cadet-Taïrou A., “Cocaine based in mainland France: recent developments,” *Tendances*, 90, 2013.

6 Marchant A., «L'arrivée du crack à Paris, entre fantasmes et réalités,» *Swaps*, 70, 2013.

early 1980s. The traditional trade, particularly rooted in the Ilot Chalon, a run-down neighborhood adjacent to the Gare de Lyon railway station and home to a concentration of North African and sub-Saharan immigrants, tended to decline as a result of the massive presence of drug addicts and police raids, favoring the transition from itinerant sellers to a much more lucrative trade; a gram of heroin was then trading at 600 francs, or 200 in today's euros, according to the testimony of one importer: "I was forced [...] to close one of my three stores, as many of my salesmen, whose earnings hardly exceeded 1,500 francs a month, opted for the more lucrative sale of heroin."⁷ From then on, when crack arrived on the scene, these networks, which had already gained experience on the heroin market, had no difficulty in conquering the monopoly of crack resale on the Paris market. All the more so as, from the 1990s onwards, Senegal became a transit zone for cocaine produced in Latin America destined for the European market, via the port of Dakar in particular, while cocaine and crack consumption began to develop there. Interestingly, crack emerged in Dakar in the early 1990s at roughly the same time as in Paris: "Crack has been making inroads in Dakar since 1993. The minimum dose, half a stone, is only worth 2,500 CFA francs (3.8 euros)."⁸ However, one question remains unanswered: the history of the encounter between Mouride migrants and crack cocaine. It is possible that it took place in the 1980s in New York's Spanish Harlem district, just as the crack epidemic was beginning to develop. Senegalese emigrants had a strong presence in the street market for African art objects.⁹ This American initiation may well have spread to France and other European countries.

Mouride Transnational Trading Networks

This hegemony of Senegalese, or rather Wolof, networks on the Parisian crack market has never really wavered. Today, even if the players involved are diversifying, trafficking is still mainly carried out by men of Senegalese origin, belonging to the Wolof ethnic group, which accounts for 45% of the population. The persistence and deep-rootedness of these networks in the Paris crack market over the past three decades can only be explained by the existence of a genuine ecosystem rooted in strong community dynamics (in Senegal as in France), enabling the networks to withstand the test of police repression, and even attempts to oust competitors, as was the case in the 1990s and 2010s with the beginnings of the establishment of dealers belonging to the "cités" universe. In this respect, the role played by transnational networks stemming from the Mouride Sufi brotherhood—a term derived from the Arabic *murîd* meaning "aspirant" or "postulant"—is crucial. As a specialist in transnational Mouride networks writes,

7 Beau N., «Raser l'ilot Chalon et après?» *Le Monde*, 1984.

8 Labrousse A., (ed.) *Dictionnaire géopolitique des drogues*, De Boek, 2015.

9 Mandel J.-J., «Le djihad capitaliste de la confrérie des mourides», *Histoire et société*, December 2013.

their commercial activities are driven by “groups whose coherence and effectiveness are based on membership of the brotherhood.”¹⁰

Almost all the *modous* involved in the French crack trade belong to this group. Today, the Muridiya appears to be the most powerful brotherhood in Senegal, to the point of constituting a veritable state within the state, influencing the course of elections and ensuring, through a dense network of charities, a form of social peace. Some estimates put its membership at five million, or between 30% and of the Senegalese population. Touba, the religious capital of the Mourides, is Senegal’s second-largest city after Dakar. Every year, this capital is the scene of the Grand Magal, a huge gathering in tribute to Amadou Bamba, born in 1853 and died in 1926, the founder of the brotherhood at the end of the 19th century during French colonization.¹¹ While the brotherhood is part of the tradition of African confraternity Islam, it is distinguished by a number of singularities that explain the presence of its members on a number of markets, both licit and illicit, in Senegal and the rest of the world.

The first is the valorization of exile, which encourages certain members of the brotherhood, whether rich or poor, students or street vendors, to go abroad to relive the experience of the founding Sheikh, exiled twice by the French colonial power to Gabon and Tunisia, and of the Prophet Mohammed, who had to leave Mecca for Medina at the time of the Hegira: “Migration thus becomes well-founded because it is seen as a divine test, or as a mission to reverse roles - to go and earn money from the Whites to strengthen the power of the brotherhood [...].”¹² Migration is also symbolically “colonization in reverse.”¹³ The second is the valorization of the brotherhood member’s enrichment, conceived as a sign of election, through a mystique of work and entrepreneurship which, according to some specialists, is the basis of a kind of Mouride ethic of capitalism comparable to that identified by Max Weber for Protestantism: “Work as if you were never to die, and pray as if you were to die tomorrow.” What seems to differentiate Mouridism from European Protestantism, however, is the absolute submission of the *talibé* (disciple) to the religious hierarchy of the marabouts, who combine, according to a Wolof proverb, “having, knowing, and power.” This submission manifests itself through an initiation ceremony in which the *talibé* kneels before his sheikh and pronounces a vow of obedience, reducing him to the status of “corpse in the hands of the washer of death,” and then through the regular payment a donation (*adiya*) which,

10 Salem G., «De la brousse sénégalaise au Boul’Mich: le système commercial mouride en France,» Cahiers d’études africaines, 81/83, 1981.

11 Monteil V., «Une confrérie musulmane : les Mourides du Sénégal,» Annales de sciences sociales de religion, 14, 1962.

12 Bava S., «Reconversions et nouveaux mondes commerciaux des mourides à Marseille,» Hommes et migrations, 2000.

13 Sall L., «Soufisme et utopie économique-religieuse : les entrepreneurs mourides sénégalais à l’assaut « des métropoles occidentales,» Lien social et Politiques, 2014.

in exchange, guarantees the follower magical-religious protection, through the manufacture of talismans, and the certainty of reaching paradise. In immigration, the same system is perpetuated by the dahiras, community living spaces where the marabout and his followers meet. These form the link between the brotherhood and the diasporas, who play an increasingly important role in financing its operations: *"Work, now often equated with money, has become a central value for Mouride migrants; it is mainly they who inject it into the brotherhood. When the dahira-s take up "collections" for work on the mosque and hospital in Touba, or for the organization of the pilgrimage, migrant talibé-s often pay at least five times more than non-migrant talibé-s. Just as a man pays more than a woman, there is a hierarchy in the sums paid."*¹⁴ In this way, she can count on donations from the large Wolof diaspora present in many countries, from the United States to Europe, and particularly in France and Italy, fueled by the accelerating waves of immigration since the late 1970s. A period marked by the crisis of the economic model established during colonization and based on the cultivation and export of peanuts. In line with its work ethic, the Brotherhood had invested so much in this activity that it accounted for almost half of the country's production at independence. The crisis of this economic model, due in particular to drought and soil exhaustion, led to numerous migrations to the cities and abroad, while forcing the brotherhood to look for other sources of income.

Over the years, these transnational Senegalese communities have built up economic networks, and some of them have become wealthy. Paradoxically, this process was encouraged from the mid-1980s onwards by policies advocated by the World Bank, based on criticism of protectionism. Lower import taxes led to a boom in import-export activities in the telephone, textile and automotive sectors, creating a kind of local *comprador* bourgeoisie. Some of the poorest members of the Senegalese diaspora have positioned themselves in certain segments of the more visible licit and illicit markets, such as cigarette smuggling, art trafficking, counterfeiting, tourist trinkets and ... the resale of heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine: *"In addition to refusing, sometimes violently, to sell hard drugs to Muslims, the Mourides are unique in that they can sell statuettes, trinkets, leather, clothes and drugs. Their own organization in networks enables them to invest in this or that activity which requires this type of organization."*¹⁵ By the 2000s, this was a reality found every European country where the diaspora was present. In Spain, for example, they are involved in heroin trafficking, while in Italy, according to the police, almost all the Senegalese arrested for drug trafficking belong to the¹⁶ brotherhood. In Senegal, the Brotherhood, in addition to its legal economic and charitable activities,

14 Bara S., « De la 'baraká' aux affaires : ethos économique-religieux et transnationalité chez les migrants sénégalais mourides, » *Revue internationale des migrations*, 2, vol 19.

15 Missaoui L., Tarrius A., *Héroïne et cocaïne de Barcelone à Perpignan : des économies souterraines ethniques de survie à la généralisation des trafics transfrontaliers de proximité*, OFDT, 1999.

16 Labrousse A., *Observatoire géopolitique des drogues*, 2006.

is said to be involved in trafficking arms, cars, legal medicines and psychotropic drugs, which are the main cause of drug addiction in the country: “*Drug networks in Senegal are centred on Touba, the holy city of the Mouride brotherhood, whose status as an autonomous rural community—the State is absent, and in particular does not exercise any of the functions of maintaining order or controlling trade—makes it ideal for a wide range of trafficking activities: peanuts, arms, drugs, in particular.*”¹⁷ The majority of prisoners involved in drug trafficking (marijuana, heroin, crack) belong to the Brotherhood. Recently, the scandal of the exploitation of children forced to work in Koranic schools has hit the headlines, highlighting the predatory dimension of the domination over the faithful exercised by part of the religious hierarchy.¹⁸

Modous Networks in France: The One and the Many

For members of the brotherhood drug trafficking, like the trade in trinkets for tourists, is an economic activity (almost) like any other, serving to enrich the family clan and the meta-family that is the brotherhood. In France, as in other European countries, these two activities are at the heart of the *Modous'* itinerant trade, and they can switch from one to the other. Moreover, the brotherhood does not intervene in the way drug trafficking is organized. It simply receives part of the proceeds the form of donations to the religious hierarchy. The traffic should not be thought of as a hierarchical, pyramid-shaped organization: “*We don't have a boss, but we all know each other as Senegalese [...]. Street vendors generally belong to the same Sufi brotherhood, the Mourides. Well, the deal may not be in line with these religious precepts, but at least among us, nobody touches crack. That's a golden rule.*”¹⁹ The physiognomy of the trade resembles more a nebula made up of a multitude of independent, separate micro-networks, but linked together by ethno-religious affiliation producing forms of solidarity when necessary. An indicator of this fragmentation of trafficking could be the very high ratio between the number of crack dealers arrested and the number of users who are also arrested in Paris. Between 2015 and 2018, according to data from the Office central pour la répression du trafic illicite de stupéfiants (OCRTIS), this ratio reached an average of around 70%, compared with around 25% for all drug-related arrests in 2018 throughout France.

These networks, made up of a few individuals at most, are structured around the most experienced person, who generally has the skills to “cook” crack, and brings together dealers who generally belong to his or her family clan. They gen-

17 Fassin D., «La vente illicite des médicaments au Sénégal. Economies parallèles. Etat et société,» *Politique africaine*, 23, 1986.

18 Kane C., «Au Sénégal, scandales pédocriminels en série chez les maîtres coraniques,» *Le Monde*, August 11, 2023.

19 Kauffmann A., «Voyage dans l'enfer du crack,» *Le Monde*, September 18, 2018.

erally operate in large, open consumption scenes, which require a certain level of organization and cooperation between networks in order to manage the distribution of customers, the supply of product and the protection of the premises from police interference. There are also resale networks for a more established clientele, where the product(s) is (are) delivered to the customer's home, or by pre-arranged appointment. What is remarkable, and what makes these networks so strong, is the continuity of the traffic, which is ensured by a rotation of personnel made possible by a continuous flow of immigration. This is supported by the Senegalese diaspora in France, which numbers over a million people including those with dual nationality, and which is dynamic and well-versed in legal and illegal immigration channels. Some migrants arrive legally, thanks to short-term visas, for family or tourist reasons, while others arrive illegally, seeking asylum. Today, it seems that the majority are smuggled in via Italy or Spain, mingling with the ever-increasing flows from sub-Saharan Africa. Dealers already based in Paris provide support in terms of access to resources such as false papers, money and accommodation. Traffickers wishing to return home either permanently or, for example, for the Grand Magal pilgrimage, will ensure that they are replaced by a family member. Crack-making training is sometimes even provided in Senegal, with the blessing of a marabout who, for a few hundred euros, will give the trafficker an amulet to protect him from the vicissitudes associated with this type of activity, particularly from the police.

Maintaining a permanent link with the country is therefore a vital necessity. Including for the supply of cocaine to be based. Indeed, it seems that the *Modous* do not buy from "native" wholesalers and semi-wholesalers, especially those from the housing estates. This is a world in which they have no confidence and which they fear because of the sometimes-violent disputes. The use of "community" networks would be preferred, to ensure a regular, low-cost supply of cocaine from West Africa. As a result, a kilogram can be traded in Senegal for around 15,000 euros, while in the Paris region, the price is twice that. In this context, some networks make joint purchases from wholesalers, preferring to traffic small quantities of cocaine carried by "mules," usually women, using air transport. On the outward journey, these mules may carry cash from the various trafficking operations. When it comes to repatriating crack money—according to some estimates, generated over 200 million euros in France in 2017—in addition to using legal transfer systems such as Western Union, preferred technique is the *hawala*, which means "trust" in Arabic. This system is a kind of "clearing house" which, by definition, has the advantage of avoiding the physical movement of money. The proceeds of the traffic are generally entrusted to a merchant based in the Paris region, who, in exchange for a commission, will instruct a correspondent, generally operating in the import-export business in Senegal, on whom he has a claim to pay the sum to family members back home.

Police and Penal Response

Until recently, the fight against crack cocaine trafficking has never really been a priority for law enforcement agencies. This is probably due to its highly localized nature, in a context where the fight against drug trafficking has long been characterized by a policy of numbers. Indeed, the fight against crack trafficking is not very rewarding for the police, if only in terms of seizures, which appear tiny compared with those of cocaine and cannabis resin. Some police officers also point to a kind of demobilization due to weariness in the face of a penal response deemed lax and incapable of preventing drug traffickers from reoffending, and of enforcing decisions to expel drug traffickers from the country at the end of their sentences.

Over the years, the police response has been merely reactive, dictated more often than not by recurrent mobilizations—the first as early as 1993/1994, the second in the early 2000s with the “collectif anticrack,” and the most recent in 2018 with the “Stop the crack market” petition—by local residents adjacent to open drug scenes, particularly in the Stalingrad district. While these irruptions, widely reported by the media, have led to significant measures such as the creation of the Priority Security Zone (ZSP) in the 19th arrondissement in 2013, and the Local Group for the Treatment of Delinquency (GLDT) in 2016, the public response has essentially been based on a so-called “saturation” policy aimed at exerting pressure on users and dealers by mobilizing large numbers of staff on the trafficking territories on an ad hoc basis, in order to limit their presence. This policy has resulted in the geographical displacement of drug trafficking in Paris and the inner suburbs. But in recent years, in view of the scale of the nuisance caused by crack, public policy has changed its approach. In 2022, the Minister of the Interior, Gérald Darmanin, declared his intention to eradicate trafficking in Paris. He even traveled to Senegal to meet with his counterpart in order to get that country to take back its nationals subject to an obligation to leave French territory (OQTF). It would appear from Antoine Félix Abdoulaye Diomé’s statements that the reception was frosty, with the Senegalese minister denouncing a marginal issue based, what’s more, on “clichés” targeting the Senegalese community.

Two years later, we have to admit that far from having disappeared, trafficking continues in Paris. The tougher penal response to trafficking is proving insufficient to dissuade would-be traffickers. A survey carried out by the daily *Le Monde* in the town of Louga showed many young people wanted to immigrate to Paris to traffic.²⁰ Although the law provides for sentences of 20 years for the manufacture of narcotics, and 30 years if the offence is committed by an organized gang, the maximum sentences are barely four years, which can be reduced to two or three years’ imprisonment if the sentence is adjusted. A recent illustration of the failure

20 Foucher (de) L., De Louga au Sénégal à Paris, sur la route du crack, *Le Monde*, October 6, 2022.

of the criminal justice system is the case of a crack dealer arrested and released under judicial supervision, only to be rearrested three months later for manufacturing crack cocaine. The verdict? A one-year suspended prison sentence and an electronic bracelet. While the dismantling of the major open scenes, from La Colline in 2019 to Forceval in 2022, has certainly made trafficking less visible, according to observers on the ground, the *modous* have adapted, while other players attracted by a booming cocaine-based market are coming to the fore.²¹ Crack, which has long been specific to Paris, is now spreading to other cities, while networks from outside the *modou* world are getting involved in the resale of the product.

*This analysis is based in part on data published by the study, “Crack en Ile-de-France,” conducted by INSERM and OFDT in 2019 at the request of the Ile-de-France Regional Health Agency. For the part dealing with crack supply, data collection was based in particular on the analysis of investigation reports for crack trafficking, supplemented by ethnographic observation, interviews and focus groups with law enforcement agencies. A full summary of the study is available here: [field_media_document-5842-eisxac2b1.pdf \(ofdt.fr\)](#)

21 Pfau G., TREND Report Paris, 2024.