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Political Concepts and the Study of Democracy:
The Case of *Demokaraasi* in Senegal

It was about fifty years ago that Joseph Schumpeter ([1942] 1962) first advanced an understanding of democracy that focused on institutional arrangements.[1] Since then, the empirical study of democracy has largely become the study of electoral institutions. At the same time, however, careful students of democracy (such as Karl 1986 and Ottaway 1993) have come to recognize that many countries have adopted the formal institutions of democracy without having become more democratic in substance. These scholars rightly see that understandings of democracy that focus too narrowly on formal institutions are inadequate.

This article offers one remedy for that inadequacy. The remedy is to integrate thoughtfully into institutional analyses a study of purposes and ideals. It is important to recall that democracy encompasses both an ideal and a set of institutions designed to realize that ideal. As ideal, democracy has something to do with the goal of people participating meaningfully in their own governance, a goal that seems to require, among other things, the lessening of inequalities that inhibit such participation. As a set of institutions, Americans often associate democracy with elections, competition between political parties, and laws that guarantee political equality. The question to be posed here is the following: What would we make of a people who participated in the formal institutions of democracy, but attached to these institutions a different purpose or meaning? How adequately would a strictly institutional approach provide a meaningful framework for understanding their political life?

Politics in the West African country of Senegal presents an unusual opportunity to explore these issues. With the exception of a fourteen-year period from 1960 to 1974, Senegal has maintained a tradition of competitive politics that stretches back 150 years, so much of its population is by now well accustomed to voting and participating in the electoral process. This tradition dates, more precisely, to 1848, when France granted voting rights to the male African inhabitants of the "Four Communes" - the colony's four major coastal towns. Given this singularly rich history of multiparty governance in Africa, we might expect the citizenry of Senegal to have assimilated well the ideals of democracy.

To test this expectation, I will examine here the Wolof concept that corresponds most closely with the American concept "democracy." I focus on *concepts* because, as ordinary language philosophers such as J. L. Austin have taught us, concepts provide privileged access to shared meanings and ideals contained therein. I focus on *Wolof* because it is the most widely spoken language in the country. (It is understood by at least seven of every ten Senegalese.)

The value of such a conceptual approach is perhaps best illustrated by an example, one that I borrow from Austin's (1979) analysis of acceptable and unacceptable excuses. David Laitin does an excellent job showing how this study provides a clearer sense of our shared ideals or "standards" of responsibility:

> Although [Austin] is not explicit on this, one could derive from his discussion a guide
> to an anthropologist or ethnolinguist who came to study the English tribe. The

anthropologist should notice that it is acceptable to tread on a snail "inadvertently," tip over the salt shaker "inadvertently," but <u>not</u> to tread on the baby "inadvertently." "Inadvertent" means, according to Austin, "a class of incidental happenings which must occur in the doing of any physical act," and is used when that incidental happening causes some (usually small) distress. Our foreign anthropologist, in learning English, might capture the sense of "inadvertence" as meaning merely "unintentional" (which, incidentally, is the definition in my dictionary). Suppose he does tread on a baby in one of the native's houses, and offers, "I did it inadvertently." And suppose the native returns with "That wasn't inadvertence! That was pure callousness." What is our anthropologist to think? Is he getting a lesson in the English language (he used "inadvertent" when he should have used "callous"), or was it a lesson in morality (treading on a baby is far more egregious than treading on a snail; and for the former, a simple excuse is not sufficient)? In fact, what the anthropologist is learning is both the English language <u>and</u> the standards of misdeeds among English speakers (1977:154).

In a similar fashion, for a non-English speaker to learn what the word "democracy" means is to learn not only a piece of the English language, but also standards for calling something a "democracy." And for a non-Wolof speaker to learn what the Wolof roughly equivalent term means is to learn not only a piece of the Wolof language, but also standards for calling something by that term.

As it happens, there is a Wolof word, *demokaraasi*, that is etymologically linked to the English-language word "democracy." *Demokaraasi* derives from the French *démocratie*, a word most likely introduced into Senegal during the early twentieth century. It was at this time that French colonizers were building the foundations of the modern Senegalese state and, most importantly in this context, expanding the use of elections. Like its American rough equivalent, the Wolof term today can be used to refer to electoral institutions and multiparty competition. Both Wolof and American concepts share, in short, similar institutional referents. The main question, however, is whether there are also similar standards or ideals involved.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The first section explores the meaning of this Wolof concept *demokaraasi*. The second section briefly compares the meaning of this Wolof concept with that of the American concept of democracy. The third section investigates the semantic origins of *demokaraasi*. The fourth section uses this understanding of *demokaraasi* to shed light on aspects of political practice in Senegal that would otherwise seem peculiar. The last section draws out the most important implications of this investigation.

The Meaning of *Demokaraasi*

What does this Wolof concept *demokaraasi* mean? I spent 14 months in Senegal in 1991 and 1993 conducting field research. During that time, I interviewed about 175 Wolof-speakers on their views of politics and *demokaraasi*. Based on these interviews, it seems that *demokaraasi* involves three interrelated ideals. The first ideal is *evenhandedness*: treating people fairly. As the son of a marabout stated:

> *Demokaraasi* means to treat people evenhandedly. If you have two bowls for two people, if you intend to put food in one, you need to divide it up equally. One shouldn't get more than the other. That shows that *demokaraasi* prevails, because you treated

the two people the same. In Wolof we say that "the mother of twins lies on her back." To permit each infant to suckle a breast as it likes, when it likes - that is *demokaraasi.*

Similarly, a farmer explained:

> *Demokaraasi* means that when you have two wives, you have to do everything possible to avoid arguments in the household. If you have something, you need to distribute it equally.[2]

The second ideal is *mutuality:* sharing responsibility for one another's well being. As an elderly farmer put it:

> When there's work to do we come together to do it. When someone falls ill, we come together to cultivate his field. If something happens to one of us, everybody helps him out financially. When someone is sick, the women go to the well to fetch him water. That is our *demokaraasi* here [in our village].

Another farmer:

> You're weaving a thatched roof for your hut. Here you can do it all out in the field. You place the frame on the ground, you put it together, you plait the straw. You do everything. But you can't lift it yourself. It's too heavy to pick up. You have to call someone to help you. You call one person, you call another. Together you all lift it up. That is our *demokaraasi.*

The third ideal is *consensus:* the achievement of agreement. As a blacksmith explained:

> There is *demokaraasi* in our village because each time we disagree, we straighten things out, we mend things.

A Catholic teenager from the capital city, Dakar, expressed himself in similar terms:

> *Demokaraasi* is to agree, to form 'one.' Even if you are many, to be able to form a bloc and work together. To form one is to support one another, to discuss among yourselves. Even if agreement is difficult, you need to do all you can to reach a consensus.

In the course of my research, I used a quota sampling strategy to ensure that it had represented speakers of different age, sex, class, caste, education, religion, dialect, ethnicity, and area of residence. This interview data showed considerable uniformity in how *non-French speaking* Wolofones understood *demokaraasi.* For almost every interviewee the concept seemed to involve (as the excerpts above suggest) one of these three interrelated ideals: evenhandedness, mutuality, or consensus. I say these ideals are interrelated because they all seem to involve a sense of interdependence and community-wide solidarity. Jointly these ideals constitute what we might describe as a notion of "cooperative caretaking."

Democracy and *Demokaraasi* Compared

Space does not permit here an extensive discussion of what American citizens and social scientists ordinarily mean by "democracy." Suffice it to say that American notions of democracy seem to correspond most closely to the Wolof notion of cooperative caretaking in their emphasis on consensus and equality.

Several prominent American political scientists (Dahl 1956; Key 1961: 27-53), for instance, have pointed to an underlying societal consensus that makes democracy possible. Even critics of contemporary American democracy (Pateman 1970; Pitkin and Shumer, 1982) are attracted to ideas of consultation, deliberation, and consensus building, and often incorporate them into models of "participatory," or "deliberative," democracy. But while consensus can be a precondition for, or part of, the democratic process, few Americans would argue that democracy is, *tout court*, the achievement of agreement, which is what the Wolof concept *demokaraasi* has come to mean in some of the above statements. Shorn from *demokaraasi*, in other words, are notions of governance or collective decision-making that provide the context for deliberation and consensus building in American scholarly theories of democracy. Two friends who fight and then reconcile have achieved *demokaraasi*, but not democracy.

Americans also sometimes use democracy to mean a state of social equality, often brought about by an agent that eliminates, or at least dampens or makes irrelevant, privilege and distinction. One such democratic leveler is the New York subway. In the words of a newspaper columnist:

> Perhaps more than any other institution in the city, the trains are the great democratizer, where the maid and stockbroker sit side by side, sharing in the same advertisements for relief of hemorrhoids and the tales of woe spun by bedraggled panhandlers (*New York Times*, August 31, 1991).

In a related usage, democracy can also mean a state of distributive equality, in which an advantage or privilege previously enjoyed by or reserved for a small number of people gets extended to a wider population. Gourmet ice cream is such a benefit. Thus a writer described the invention of this "affordable luxury" as "street-corner democracy in action: for five gooey mouthfuls, a secretary could eat as well as Donald Trump" (*Washington Post*, March 26, 1989).

Basic to both American and Wolof concepts, it appears, is some notion of equality, whether it takes the form of social equality (the equality of maid and stockbroker riding the same subway train), distributive equality (the equality experienced by the secretary who can eat the same ice cream as Donald Trump) or fairness (the equality of a mother nursing her twins without partiality). The leveling or homogenizing democracy of the subway or gourmet ice cream converges with *demokaraasi* used in the sense of fair treatment.

The equalities of democracy and *demokaraasi* show further similarities insofar as both are only partial. In *demokaraasi*, there is no leveling of status between mother and nursing infants, or between polygamous husband and his wives. What is important is that guardians and benefactors treat those under their care or patronage evenhandedly. In democracy, hierarchy exists as a kind of background condition. It only makes sense to speak of the democratizing effect of the subway if stockbroker and maid were in some meaningful sense unequal before they went underground. And of course, this inequality still exists while they ride the subway, or while the secretary eats the same ice cream as Donald Trump. Stockbroker and maid share only subway inconveniences; Mr. Trump and the secretary share only ice cream. It is, in effect, the leveling of particular inequalities that counts as democracy.

To sum up, then, democracy and *demokaraasi* are related in meaning, which is not surprising since they are linked historically by way of *démocratie*. In their institutional aspects, they are related insofar as they are both used centrally to refer to electoral institutions, but may also be used to refer to a wider range of institutions and everyday situations. In their ideal aspects, they are related insofar as both entail some notion of partial equality. Where *demokaraasi* departs from the American English term is in its

coupling of participation in electoral institutions with ideals of social welfare, and the consequent extension of the concept to refer to a range of actions that promote collective security.

The Origins of the Wolof Meanings

The question thus arises: How did *demokaraasi* take on this distinctive set of meanings? One obvious hypothesis is that they originate in the French concept *démocratie* from which *demokaraasi* derives. This hypothesis is all the more plausible given Rousseau's vision of communitarian democracy, and the egalitarianism of the French revolution. To evaluate this hypothesis it is essential to investigate the historical diffusion of the concept from France to Senegal, and from francophone Senegalese elite to the non-French-speaking masses. To do this, I examined all the available Senegalese newspapers, party organs, and political tracts dating from the mid-19th century to the present.

Based on this survey, it appears that this French term was not used widely by the Senegalese elite until the mid-1970s, a development that coincided with the reintroduction of multiparty politics after eight years of single-party rule. It was at this time that vying factions of the political elite discovered the importance of defining the term in ways that advanced their own interests. The governing party, wishing to justify its continued rule, argued that true *démocratie* entailed only the right of political parties to organize freely and trumpet their agendas openly. An opposition excluded from power, in contrast, insisted that the measure of real *démocratie* was, in fact, party turnover. The meanings attributed to this French concept, it appears, have been shaped more by the political struggles of the moment than by age-old notions of egalitarian democracy.

And what of the Wolof concept? The French concept *démocratie* has no direct equivalent in traditional Wolof. As a result, members of the political elite have attempted to convey their views to the wider population by using Wolof concepts and metaphors - many of which derive from local Islamic culture and pre-colonial traditions. Of course Islamic and pre-colonial traditions are not monolithic. Both are multifaceted and encompass a range of values and practices.

Why were some aspects of these traditions integrated into contemporary understanding of *demokaraasi* and not others? The answer seems to lie again in the competition between ruling party and opposition. Each has tried to advance its particular political interests by borrowing selective elements of these traditions. Yet some borrowings have been more effectively conveyed than others, and not all have been understood by the broader population in ways intended by the elite. Let me give just one example.

Over the past decade, the ruling party has relied heavily on a particular metaphor derived from Islam to disseminate its views to the wider non-francophone population. When giving speeches in Wolof, the current President - Abdou Diouf - often repeats that "the mosque is there; whoever wishes, may call his faithful to pray. That is *demokaraasi*." The mosque, according to this metaphor, is the locus of electoral competition. Political leaders are muezzins; their programs are calls to prayer; and voters are the faithful. Competition between muezzins - this is *demokaraasi*. Why did President Diouf choose *this* metaphor? For one, he is using an image rooted in Senegalese culture to render this term meaningful. But on another level, Diouf is also engaging in a battle to define the concept in a way beneficial to his party by conveying the idea that *demokaraasi* entails the freedom of opposition parties to trumpet their agendas, but little more. The political leader is free to beckon to potential voters in the same way that the muezzin stands atop the minaret to summons the faithful to prayer.

The metaphor, however, carries other, unintended meanings. The function of the muezzin in Islam, we may recall, is to announce the hour of the five daily prayers. In Senegalese Islam, there are no standard procedures for choosing or appointing the muezzin. And rarely is there open competition for the position. In fact, any given mosque may have several muezzins who rotate their responsibilities. These sociological realities appear to have shaped how uneducated Senegalese have come to see *demokaraasi*. If a mosque can have several muezzins at a time, why can't Senegalese *demokaraasi* accommodate several presidents at a time? Why must voters choose only one?

The logic may seem stretched, but it is a natural extension of the metaphor. Indeed one Senegalese cartoonist, known as an acute social observer, poked fun at people who think in just this way. His cartoon strip follows the travails of a character named Goorgoorlu, the Senegalese every-man. In one strip, Goorgoorlu and his friend Tapha watch the four candidates in the 1988 presidential elections make their campaign promises on television, after which Tapha asks Goorgoorlu if he knows who he is going to vote for. Goorgoorlu declares:

> For Landing Savané who promises me work, for Mbaye Niang who promises education in national languages for my children, for Abdou Diouf who guarantees me peace and *demokaraasi*, and for Abdoulaye Wade who promises me rice and fish every day. I'm no longer undecided. I'll vote for all four.[3]

When Tapha tries to explain that he can't vote for all four, Goorgoorlu rebuts defiantly: "Why not? We have *demokaraasi*, no?" What this cartoon suggests is that the mosque metaphor may be giving rise to understandings not altogether intended by its propagators. Still, this example shows how the meaning of *demokaraasi* has been shaped by the interests of the ruling party, although in a distorted way.

Another important factor that has shaped the meaning of this Wolof concept relates to the precarious economic conditions of many Senegalese. By one definition of poverty (an inability to maintain a daily intake of 2,400 calories per adult per day) about 33% of the population was "poor" during the 1992 harvest season. Estimates are that during non-harvest seasons and during years of bad harvest the poverty rate climbs to 60% (World Bank 1995, 1-2). While by this definition a majority of poor people live in rural areas, many urban dwellers are also vulnerable. Structural adjustment programs, put in place in the early 1980s, have hit urban areas hard. Privatization and the lowering of protectionist barriers led unemployment rates in Dakar to jump from 16.6% in 1976 to 24.4% in 1991 (ibid., 18).

Those urban and rural dwellers who are poor or vulnerable (as well as those who perceive themselves as such) seek ways to maintain some level of security. Farming households diversify their income by sending members of the household to work as wage laborers in the city; they also balance their production for the market with subsistence agriculture. Both rural and urban dwellers evade burdensome government controls by participating in informal markets beyond state reach.

Poor and vulnerable populations also employ a number of social strategies to assure a measure of economic security. One such strategy is to turn to networks of kin, friends, and neighbors which form what might be called a social safety net. Such social arrangements appear to be common among groups of people who experience what Scott has called an "existential dilemma" of economic uncertainty (1976:25). In cases where barriers to collective action are not too high, material precariousness leads vulnerable populations to adopt some form of community wide insurance (Posner 1980). An ethic of cooperative caretaking provides the "emotional cement" required to maintain these protective arrangements (Wynne 1980:44).

The notions of *demokaraasi* held by many non-French speaking wolofones, it appears, is conditioned by this repertoire of normative and institutional strategies used by this largely poor and vulnerable population to respond to their precarious life conditions. That is, the Wolof concept (and the practices to which it refers) seem to reflect the economic predicament and survival strategies of most Senegalese.

Because notions of welfare and the concept *demokaraasi* are so closely linked, it may not be coincidental that images of sharing or apportioning food have become important metaphors for this Wolof term - be it the mother of twins who lies on her back, or the host who divides food equally between two bowls. Sharing food, after all, is a concrete way to establish trust and bonds of solidarity. One informant seemed to have these connections in mind when he explained:

> Eating together . . . , sharing is typically Senegalese. If you arrive somewhere you say "peace unto you," the host replies "come eat." This has always existed here. And it is this that has created *demokaraasi*. Yes, take the beggar - he goes around with his bowl asking for food. Any house he goes to they give him rice. That is pure *demokaraasi*.

Pure *demokaraasi* means giving on demand to someone needy who has nothing to offer back. It is a willingness to share, even if one gets nothing in return.

To sum up the argument to this point, I have shown that *demokaraasi* involves a notion of cooperative caretaking. I've also tried to trace the origins of this meaning to three factors: elite power struggles, certain mobilized elements of culture, and how people have responded to a pervasive condition of economic uncertainty.

Demokaraasi and Political Practice

We are now ready to use our deepened understanding of *demokaraasi* to shed light on aspects of political practice in Senegal that would otherwise seem peculiar. One facet of Senegalese politics that has often perplexed outside observers is individual voting behavior. Some Senegal-watchers lament the fact that many urban and rural poor fail to comprehend the significance of voting. These voters, the complaint goes, just do not understand how to play the "game" of democracy correctly. The perception that Senegalese voters are simply ignorant is particularly prevalent in the American diplomatic community. In 1991, the U.S. Embassy received a few hundred thousand dollars to strengthen democracy in Senegal. Most of this money went to producing booklets in Wolof and other indigenous languages that explained how elections and democracy work. The assumption was that uneducated voters would act as competent democrats if they could only be taught the purposes of democracy and the rules of the game.

This assumption is faulty. Recognizing the distinctive meaning of *demokaraasi* enables us to see that these people are not playing the democratic game badly. They are, rather, playing a game whose objectives are somewhat different. Because *demokaraasi* has been absorbed into concerns about social welfare, many Senegalese citizens have come to see participation in the electoral process as a means to reinforce the bonds of community solidarity necessary for collective long-term security. Consider the comments of this farmer:

> A while ago there were two politicians who were candidates for office. When they came to this village, we got together and asked each other "which candidate do you prefer?" Some chose the first candidate, others the second. When we saw the first candidate had more support, those who had initially chosen the second candidate

immediately joined the majority to make things run better. That is our *demokaraasi* here in this village.

This quotation is interesting because the meaning of *demokaraasi* for this villager is related to the fact that everyone eventually ended up *agreeing* on a candidate. The act of *choosing* - the key element of democracy in this statement - seems less important. The essence of *demokaraasi* for this farmer appears to lie in the final consensus achieved, and the social peace it ensured. Through the act of voting the villagers reaffirmed their ties of solidarity, and reinforced their safety-net.

It is important to note that elections may also endanger *demokaraasi* and the social survival strategies of which it is part by threatening to splinter community solidarity with the divisiveness of factional rivalries. For this reason, some Senegalese prefer not to participate in elections at all. Following the 1993 presidential elections, a farmer told me the following:

> I didn't vote for anyone in these past elections because I'm a leader in this village. I only watch and observe because I don't want to alienate anyone. Elections cause relations between people to deteriorate. I remain neutral. Everyone likes me and respects me . . . so I don't side with any political party. . . . In our village you can't separate voting from other aspects of life.

Elections, then, provide the occasion for *demokaraasi* to be either strengthened or subverted, by both furnishing an opportunity to reaffirm solidarity and presenting a risk that it will be shattered.

What all this suggests is that in an environment dominated by economic uncertainty, poor electors sometimes use their votes to make this environment less precarious, by solidifying bonds with kin and other community members. It follows that what has appeared to some observers as democratic incompetence might better be seen as proficiency in a different effort.

An understanding of *demokaraasi*, in sum, casts new light on certain Senegalese voting behaviors - behaviors that makes sense once we understand the objectives that guide them. The main point is that voting is just one of many strategies used by poor Senegalese to achieve collective security. It follows that choosing leaders or influencing public policy is not among the chief intentions of (at least some) voters in casting their ballots.

Summary and Implications

Recognizing that democracy encompasses both institutions and ideals enables us to see that similar institutional arrangements in different cultural contexts are *not* necessarily imbued with similar meaning. Senegal shares with the United States the most significant institutional features of democracy (namely regular elections). Ideals of *demokaraasi*, however, depart in significant ways from American ideals of democracy. While the ideals embedded in the two concepts overlap at points, they diverge insofar as *demokaraasi* refers to collective security in ways that democracy does not.

To ignore this divergence blinds us to the fact that many illiterate Senegalese voters are playing a different game, with different aims and rules. Where an institutionalist is likely to see incompetent democrats, we discover able players of *demokaraasi*, a discovery that changes our understanding of the nature and purpose of Senegalese electoral institutions. If students of democracy aspire to understand the meaning and social context of the behaviors they observe, they cannot assume that American ideals of democracy are universal. Local communities assimilate Western ideals selectively and transform them to fit their

own life-conditions. Thus it is risky to equate democracy with what the Chinese call *minzhu*, what the Czechs call *demokracie*, or what the Senegalese call *demokaraasi*. The ideals and practices that infuse American institutions are not universal. Social scientists thus need to make explicit the presuppositions of their own behavior as well as those of the Chinese, Czechs, and Senegalese.

In making explicit such presuppositions, a close attention to language has much to contribute. Language, after all, is an important medium of political action. Social scientists can, therefore, take political language as an object of inquiry, and use this inquiry to garner insights into shared understandings about the political world. This kind of linguistic inquiry, of course, requires some self-reflection on the part of researchers about the everyday meanings of their own concepts. To understand better the state of democracy worldwide, in other words, it is essential to ask what "democracy" (or its rough equivalent) means - both to ourselves as scholarly outside observers *and* to local practitioners. We are, in the end, likely to miss something when we make generalizations about the political practices of a society without reflecting on both *our* and *their* distinctions and categories.

Notes

1.　　　I am most grateful to the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Abroad Program, the West African Research Association, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for supporting this research.

2.　　　Note that Senegal is a predmoninantly Muslim society, and polygamy is fairly widespread.

3.　　　Goorgoorlu is calling the candidates by their familiar names. "Savané" is Landing Savané, Secretary-General of *And-Jëf/Mouvement Révolutionnaire pour la Démocratie Nouvelle*. "Mbaye Niang" is Babacar Niang, Secretary-General of the *Parti pour la Libération du Peuple*. "Diouf" is President Abdou Diouf. "Ablaye" is Abdoulaye Wade of the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais*.

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