

EP.2

Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road Mouhamadou Lamine Dia

Carolina: I am Colombian and have been living in Italy for nine years. I arrived in Milan in autumn 2014. It was a tremendous shock; my senses were confused. I could still feel the warm breeze of the Pacific Ocean on my skin, but all around me was a city enveloped in a dense fog, where it was dark by four in the afternoon. I still feel distressed when I have to bid farewell to summer, as the days get shorter and I can feel the autumn chill setting in.

No one leaves home without taking this deep fear of the unknown with them. Telling our own story and listening to others' stories about the lives we have left behind makes us feel accompanied on this adventure. Today, I am opening the diary of Mouhamadou Lamine Dia, born in Dakar, Senegal, a non-conformist man who decided to emigrate because he did not agree with the established order, because he did not agree that freedom of movement was the exclusive prerogative of the few.

Lamine: At the age of 13, I discovered that there are things that are not permitted to me, purely and simply because I'm African and I said no and rebelled. If my life will be what I make of it, I can't be stationary.

THEME: Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road

Carolina: When asked who we are, we repeat autobiographical memories, but often what we remember comes from other people's stories. It is almost as if what we are is part of a collective narrative, a story that takes the form of a novel with scenes, characters and plots.

Lamine: Who am I, Lamine? I'm the result of numerous connections. I'm the result of encounters. I'm the result of facts. I'm the result of love. I still see all the love that was there. Because my dad, in order to go with my mum, had to question all those things there that were sacred to my grandparents. It was as if they were written in a holy book, things that you could not even reflect on. But he went beyond those things there, willing to challenge anyone who stood between this great love. So love came into my story, because I like

to tell it, because when you come from something that should not have existed it almost seems like a miracle.

Carolina: Lamine's parents had a forbidden union. Lamine comes from the Wolof culture, which has a caste structure based on the division of labour. Lamine's father belonged to a higher caste, which was not supposed to mix with lower castes such as the fishermen's caste, to which Lamine's mother belonged. There's a belief that marrying a person from a lower caste closes the door to success and fortune. However, his father was a non-conformist man with a strong personality.

But Lamine's father died when he was just 12 years old, leaving him in the care of his mother, and in particular his grandmother, a major figure in his life.

Lamine: My grandmother is a knowledgeable person. In Africa they say a knowledgeable person is a wise person and she could transport herself within her belief. On those days in which you arrived and thought you were a little too small, a little too weak, lacking the weapons to deal with everything. She conveyed this serenity, bringing out your strengths. That was the extraordinary dimension of this woman. Whenever I felt a little sorrow at the absence of my dad, I would see that skinny woman behind me, always with that big blue dress she wore, exuding a strength that could move a mountain. She was capable of generating the tranquillity that only waves before the sea at night can generate. She cradled you in her love of life. She cradled you in her faith in you.

Carolina: When Lamine was 13 years old and in middle school, he was a child who was curious about why things happen. He grew up in a world where the order of things seemed to be already established, but he continued to observe everything carefully and ask questions, even though he did not receive satisfactory answers.

The only person who could answer him was his aunt Barbara, the French wife of an uncle of his who had lived in Bordeaux for more than 10 years. She, together with his cousins from this mixed marriage, came to Dakar every summer on holiday. For Lamine, these visits were an opportunity to discover a different world and to better understand his own world.

Lamine: This tall blonde, a lover of philosophy, who used to answer these 'whys' that had never been answered. That's where a relationship started to develop that I didn't have with my other aunts, even though we spoke the same dialect. Aunt Barbara would come on holiday. She didn't physically live there every month, but for the months or weeks she was there, I used to

ask questions about religion, as well as about polygamy, and we would talk.

Carolina: But in these meetings, Lamine also realised the contrasts between his country and the country where his cousins lived. One evening, Aunt Barbara promised him that once he passed his eighth grade exam, she would take him to France on holiday. Lamine was looking forward to learning about France, to seeing with his own eyes the places his cousins talked about every summer. So he put a lot of effort into his eighth grade exam, studying every day and even giving up football. And he managed to pass the exam.

Lamine: The next day, accompanied by my uncle, I went to get my passport and it was ready within a week. I looked at it. I never thought I would own one. None of my friends ever had one. I felt so cool! But my enthusiasm didn't last long. It was not enough just to have a passport and a plane ticket, which my aunt would have paid for. Barbara had just informed me that I was different from my cousins. For them to come to Senegal, they just had to buy a ticket and come, but I had to have a visa. What does that mean? I, who have never accepted anything without a satisfying explanation, just couldn't understand..

Why? Why did they, whose father is my mother's brother, have this right and not me?. What was it based on and who decided this? I was smarter than Jean. I was doing ten times better than him at school. Moussa and Greg used to get tutoring from me and they used to be my fans in football, so why should they have more privileges than me? Billions of questions that were never answered.

Carolina: From this point, his outlook on life changed; he began to inform himself, reading up on and exploring topics such as slavery, philosophy, colonisation, African resistance and the struggle for decolonisation.

Lamine: At the age of 13, I discovered that there are things that are not permitted to me, purely and simply because I'm African and I said no and rebelled.

Carolina: It was at this moment that Lamine made the decision that drove him to study hard and prepare for the big leap that would change his future.

Lamine: I was growing up. The decision I had made the day after my end-of-middle school party to fly to France WITHOUT A VISA, which cracked my cousin Jean up, was reinforced by the history lesson on the Industrial Revolution I had just finished. One of the teachers I admired most after grandma had just woken up the

sleeping commander in me. He introduced the lesson with these words that I'll never forget in my life: "While Africa is infected with immobility, Europe is beginning unprecedented economic growth." Immobility? No and NO. If my life will be what I make of it, I can't be stationary.

Carolina: Lamine continued studying because he had already planned to go to university, knowing that this was the key to fighting against immobility.

Now in his final year of high school, he had to prepare for the most important exam in Senegal: his school-leaving diploma, the exam that opened the door to university, the place where the big changes take place.

This time, too, he succeeded: only two students in his class managed to pass the exam. His grandmother was very proud, but Lamine did not want to celebrate yet, because he felt it was just the beginning. He wanted to go to university to try to change things.

Lamine: And there, everyone wants to graduate so they can go and study in France. And I didn't understand this. I began to read Frantz Fanon. I began to learn about the writings of Cheikh Anta Diop, after which the University of Dakar was named. And I started to wonder why we all necessarily wanted to go there? Because that desire was the very chains we never cast off. And I used to ask myself why I should go and study there? And so many of my friends would tell me that they would go there to improve their lives. And I also began to wonder what a better life means? What does happiness mean? How can you expect happiness in a place where you aren't welcome? How can you go to a party and have fun if you aren't invited? Why this contempt for Mother Africa and all that she has given us?

Carolina: Lamine began his university career in the Faculty of Humanities. This experience allowed him to rub shoulders with thousands of other students from all over Senegal, all united by a desire to change things.

After graduating, the time came to put into practice the choice he had made after middle school: Lamine wanted to go to France, but not to seek a 'better life'. Instead, he wanted to contend with that country that enters Mother Africa's house without knocking, but demands that Africans get a visa to enter.

During the summer holidays, he reunited with his cousin Jean.

Lamine: One evening at the beach he reminded me of the time after the school-leaving party that I'd said – delusionally in his view – that I would enter France without a visa, and he laughed again. Do you want to enter in my suitcase? Or do you want me to give you my passport? It expired in six months anyway. I still can't explain it but I replied: what do you do after it expires? I throw it away and get another one. It had just occurred to me that I could try to travel with his passport. We ended the evening after a couple of beers and I asked him if he was joking when he said he would give me his passport. He said no. So I told him we'd discuss it again.

Carolina: Lamine found a way to go to France without knocking. For the first time he did something in secret from his grandmother. His cousin Jean gave him his passport on the condition that he would not tell anyone.

But Lamine did not leave immediately. It's not easy to take such an important decision, so six months passed. His cousin's passport had now expired. But the idea of leaving kept running through his head and one day he made up his mind: he would leave for France with that expired passport.

Lamine: It was a grey Friday in October. After dinner I said goodbye to my grandmother and asked her to pray for me as I was leaving for France. She did not even believe it. I was just like my dad. I loved joking and she thought I was joking that time too. She asked me to say hello to my uncle and all the family in France. I was on my way to France with an expired passport. By paying here and there, I managed to get myself on board. I was on the plane to Bordeaux holding a small suitcase and a book by Rousseau (The Social Contract).

Usually I'm very calm, but that day I wasn't at all. Me black as ebony, holding a mulatto passport. I was nervous and Amélie, my travelling companion without whom I wouldn't have been able to enter, realised this.

Carolina: On the plane to Bordeaux, Lamine felt very agitated. The woman sitting next to him noticed and asked him if he was OK. She was a French lady named Amélie. She was very kind. They struck up a conversation. When she was getting off the plane, Amélie was struggling with her suitcases and a heavy drum she had brought as a souvenir from Senegal. Lamine offered to give her a hand.

They reached the security checks together. He stayed beside her, as if seeking support at the most tense moment. Then, the police beckoned. It was his turn. Lamine took a deep breath. Adrenalin made him feel his every

heartbeat. Would they realise that he was travelling with a passport that wasn't his and, moreover, was expired?

Lamine: In my backpack was 'my' passport and ticket. I had her djembe as well as my suitcase. It was her turn but she asked me for my passport. At first, I didn't want to get her into trouble but then she insisted in front of the policemen watching us and I gave her my passport. As if by a miracle they checked hers and had already looked at mine. Bon retour. I had just passed the controls without realising. I entered France by plane and without a visa.

Carolina: The tension from the trip gave him a headache and nausea for a whole week. In Bordeaux, when his uncle and cousins opened the door and were faced with Lamine, they were surprised. "You're out of your mind," they told him. But he replied: *"I wasn't crazy. I couldn't take it any more. I didn't and couldn't remain stationary."* He did not immigrate for economic reasons, but to challenge the system that decides who can and can't travel.

Lamine: This may be a self-denunciation, but I am so proud of it that I would very proudly go to prison. I've already declared it to the French authorities because I didn't feel at any point that I was doing something irregular: I entered France with my cousin Jean's expired passport. This was the thing I had to do. It was the only way I could think of at the time to be able to denounce and above all not have to endure something that was enormously unfair: on what grounds can some people in the world move freely, while others have to apply for visas? Some even risk their life for a better future. I have never felt illegal or 'sans papiers' as it is termed there, simply because for centuries, I've never felt illegal in my own home. Besides, if man can go to the moon – now there are even missions to Mars – and no one has ever called them illegal, but rather they are rewarded and praised, I as a human being should not and could never feel illegal on Earth.

Carolina: Lamine experienced extraordinary moments in Bordeaux, where he made friends with people from all over the world with different languages and religions. He hung out with Romain, went out with Juliette, and played with Alain: all of them are French, but none of them colonised him and none of them considered him an illegal immigrant. Although his migration represents a form of rebellion against a system that continues to exert control in Africa, he feels no resentment against individual French people.

Lamine: But I also wanted to go and say to my French peers: look, on the other side of the world there are people like you who have the same

aspirations as you, but do not have the same rights. I claim the right to freedom for all the children of the world, I claim the right to happiness for all the children of the world, I claim the right to live in a free and healthy world for all the children of the world. That's what my rebellion is about. It wasn't personal. It was never something I wanted for myself. I wanted liberation for all my friends. I wanted the same rights, nothing more or less. I just wanted to understand why someone has rights and someone doesn't have rights.

Carolina: Today, Lamine lives in Italy and is dedicated to education. He teaches African culture to young people of different nationalities attending Italian schools, so that they can advocate equal rights for all in the future. During these meetings, he tries to raise awareness among young Africans of their history and potential.

Lamine: Now the revolution is to make young people aware. The first job I did in Italy was a workshop on African music in a middle school in Bergamo. And when I entered that school, with the gaze of all these children, of this mixed class of Italy that is changing, of Italy that is being coloured, I felt a moral duty to give back to these children all the extraordinary things that the world has given me.

I did an online meeting with some middle school kids in Padua and after the meeting the teacher wrote to me in the chat that there was a pupil who wanted to say hello to me, but didn't feel like talking in a group and I said: of course! She was a 14-year-old girl, born here to Senegalese parents, who had never been to Senegal and she told me something that really touched me. I am a little too sensitive and I recognise that. She told me: from tomorrow I'll be able to tell everyone I'm proud to be from Senegal too. She said: I used to be ashamed to talk about Senegal. But the Senegal that you represented, that you described to me, that you talked about, is my Senegal.

Carolina: Lamine built his own path in two European countries, France and Italy. Today, thinking about the big change he decided to make, Lamine is often reminded of his grandmother's teaching in Senegal: go and find your place in the world.

Lamine: (Lamine says his grandmother's memorable sentence in Wolof and translates it into Italian)

"Your life will be what you make of it; you are at the helm and you can steer it where you want."

Migrant Diaries. Stories of Life on the Road is produced by Radio Papesse with Botafuego Audio.

The voices you have heard are those of Mouhamadou Lamine Dia and Carolina Valencia Caicedo.

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