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Confidant par excellence, advisors and healers: women traders’ intersecting identities and roles in Senegal

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Characteristics associated with West African women traders often hinge on their resilience, ingenuity and savvy business practices under precarious economic conditions and changing ecologies. Moreover, traders are defined, identified and classified by their trade and the commodities associated with their trading practice. However, a social analysis and ethnography of trading practices challenges this taxonomy and suggests the relational and social embeddedness of such economic transactions and the unexpected intersecting roles traders perform as confidants, advisers and healers. This paper examines the multiple roles that Senegalese traders embody and perform and the vast repertoire of knowledge and cultural registers they employ as advisers on sexuality, matrimonial affairs and conjugalty. It posits to reframe trade and the marketplace, not only as a fulcrum of economic transaction, but also as locus of affective interactions, performative-counselling practices and fluid space where traders impart knowledge to their female clientele on a wide spectrum of issues such as sexuality, conjugalty and the aesthetics of intimacy. Lastly, it seeks to unveil new analytics and theorising on the evolving, embodied and performative roles of women traders and market women, while proving contextual and culturally-textured insights on ‘counselling’ and its interpretation in Senegal.

Keywords: women traders; market; counselling; confidants; Senegal

Don’t be fooled by my unattractive stall. It hides the cure for many ailments. Behind this curtain, I have advised many young brides and married women, first wives, second wives, employed and unemployed women, and young and old women. I have been here for many years. Just ask for my name. (Xaaritu Jiggeen Yi, [55], a trader in Dakar)¹

Introduction

A priori, the economic categories and functions of women traders appear as dominant tropes and markers of identity. These identifications reflect and privilege their economic roles, identities and practices. Characteristics associated with West African women traders within their broad, classed and occupational categorisations often hinge on their resilience, ingenuity and use of savvy business practices under precarious economic conditions and changing ecologies, particularly in the Sahel region (Lo 2005, 2011). Their metaphoric identification as market women, as aptly argued by Clark (1994, 2001, 2010), House-Midamba and Ekechi (1995) and Seligmann (2001), stands as a generic categorisation across various African market settings. Moreover, traders, by their very practice, are defined, identified and classified by their trade and the vast array of commodities associated with their trading practice. Their central role in household economy and

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maintenance is also recognised within changing social and economic contexts and the reordering of the household economy under periods of shock and increasing poverty. Within a neoliberal framework and development discourse, their positioning and identification as ‘growth reserves of African development’ are predominant. Such a framing is also juxtaposed with their acclaimed roles as buffers of economic vulnerability during times of economic upheaval and crisis (McDade and Spring 2005) and contributors to livelihood diversification strategies and household survival.

Such orthodoxies point to economic determinism, ascribed positionality and labelling, suggesting an essentialist construction of their social attributes. Revealed within such constructions are also uni-dimensional and fixed identities and categorisations that render invisible their social and relational functions and performative roles (Lo 2005, 2011) obscured by economisation. Such constructions impel an interrogation of normative characterisations of market and trade as one epistemologically tied to economics and commodity exchange, and empirical enquiry of the multiple social roles and functions women traders can embody and perform. Thus, the main analytical focus and impetus of this paper is to uncover and elucidate the communicative dimensions of the daily practices of women traders, which are concealed in a parochial conceptualisation along economic, labour market and livelihood categories, and to analyse these practices in terms of counselling. It argues that underneath the reductive representational framing and social identity of women traders transpires a wider range of social functions and relationality, such as counselling, that suggests multiple embodied and intangible social roles and identities. These fluid and embodied identities emerge through a close social analysis of the social relations that shape their trading practices, intertwined in monetary transactions that also unveil registers and substantive issues of counselling within Dakar urban markets and social life. The urban social life is punctuated by informality, the material struggle for livelihood, vibrant street life and the public and private performances of symbolic cultural rituals and events (weddings, funerals and baptism) that cement familial and social relations.

**Investigating counselling in the shadowland of Dakar’s urban markets**

Counselling as social practice is unveiled through the concealed social and communicative dimensions of women traders practices, empirically examined in Senegal in two urban market sites in Dakar. The selected sites Marché Sandaga in the city centre and Marché Tîlène help ground the analysis in the lifeworlds of selected women traders who voluntarily participated in the interviews that become informal and uncensored dialogical exchanges. Methodologically, this enquiry draws from interviews with a dozen women traders aged 25–55 years, mostly illiterate, married in polygamous households and daily commuting from the populous suburbs to Dakar city centre in search of a livelihood. They characterise their economic activities in the precarious informal economy as *jiggen jiggenlu*, a marked and distinctive gendered identity, imbuing the popular idiom *goorgoorlu* or *l’art de la débrouille* in French – literally the art of making ends meet, with a gendered interpretive meaning and archetype (Lo 2011, 163). They ‘shift the meaning of survival into a gendered terrain, conveying a reality of survival that is not intrinsically male, but female too’ (Lo 2011, 163). Their narratives provide empirical grounding to the ontological premise of counselling in the social context of two urban markets. They also unveil the multiple and intersecting roles women traders play as *confidant par excellence*, counsellors and healers in the context of their trading practice.
The interpretive basis derives from the cross-examination of individual narratives from women traders and their eclectic female clientele representing different social identities of professional women, housewives and young women, supplemented by in situ observations of social interactions between women traders and their female clientele at marketplaces. Marketplaces are points of convergence of all social categories and women across age, ethnicity, class and marital status. The shared characteristics among the traders are their occupational category, representing small-scale traders of seasonal vegetables, incense, Karité, herbs from the indigenous pharmacopoeia, crafts, beads and handcrafted textiles. The selected informants, based on purposive sampling, represent women traders who specialise in the marketing of cultural artefacts and basic commodities for daily consumption. Such artefacts and commodities reflect the repertoire of sensuous goods such as thiuraye (incense), bine-bine (bead belts), betio (intimate and sexy cloth wraps), specially styled textiles and cloths and the assemblage and assortment of numerous feminine corporal adornments, which constitute the aesthetics of intimacy (Lo 2010a, 2010b), illustrated in Figure 1.

The spatial location in the market reflects women’s class category as they occupy stalls rather than big air-conditioned shops selling high-return goods such as electronics or imported fabric and cosmetics.

The methodological and epistemic choices prefigure and underpin the search for contextual analytics to illuminate the social-cultural embeddedness of their trading practices concealed and intertwined in economic transactions that include intangible, immaterial exchanges and flows of information and knowledge. They represent dialogic sites for counselling, or xellal in Wolof.

This paper is structured in three parts. First, it examines counselling as embedded in women traders’ market practices and also theorises counselling and considers its multiple

Figure 1. The stall of a woman trader selling hand-crafted goods, such as betio (intimate and sexy cloth wraps), bine-bine (bead belts) and thiuraye (incense). Source: Lo.
local meanings. Then it maps out concealed social and communicative dimensions in women traders’ market practices and the discursive formations of the ‘market women’ that are largely over-determined by tropes of marketisation, survivalism and economism. The third section shifts to a discursive mapping and repertoire of counselling practices and the ways knowledge is mobilised. Central to this analysis is the emergence of specific substantive issues of conjugalcy, sexuality, family and reproductive life that fit within the social repertoire of counselling documented in this social context (Dakar marketplaces and urban social life) and within this current temporal frame.

In Senegal, due to local custom and Muslim edicts, overt discussion of sexuality and marital emotional relations is often taboo, thus typically pushed into the private sphere, within gender- and age-specific spaces and women’s social circles. However, these selective sets of counselling topics are not the only issues related to counselling that women talk about. They are embedded in larger coded and overt discussions of existential questions and dilemmas, the angst of daily life, matrimony, fashion, sexuality, reproductive health, marriage and family life, as well as personal politics and managing familial, intra-household and intra-women dynamics. Thus, no absolutist claim is made of a homogenous and unified set of counselling topics. The topics of sexuality, reproductive health, conjugalcy (i.e., marital life) and the aesthetics of intimacy emerged through conversations with women traders and in that way shaped the analytical scope and boundaries of this empirical inquiry. The frankness of the topical conversations in the paper’s second section may seem surprising, but not incongruous, given that women traders’ intersecting identities, the commodities they sell and their competition in marketing creative and imaginative local erotica, cultural artefacts and basic agricultural commodities catered to gender-specific needs and conspicuous consumption.

Finally, the paper broaches the social significance of these practices and dynamics within the broader political economy of health service provisions, the framework of women traders’ intersecting roles, their embodied and performative counselling practices and their epistemic implications.

**Xellal, polysemy and interpretations of counselling**

In the Senegalese context, the Wolof vernacular for counselling, *xellal*, suggests more than mere information sharing: it also refers to *yed*, to advise when you make a mistake, and *yar*, to educate. The polysemy of counselling reflects cultural translations and transactional spaces, entwined in cultural registers and an amalgam of social and communicative practices that are mutually constituted. In academic theorising, while ‘counselling’ as an analytic construct and practice features prominently in psychosocial and medical scholarship and debates, it spans several registers and domains of enquiry in African scholarship. A scant but evolving scholarship grapples with ‘counselling’ in various African contexts and across distinct disciplines and modes of inquiries. Counselling is largely analysed in the context of family planning and reproductive health services and focuses on the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Angotti 2010; Burchardt 2009; Carter 2008; Obermeyer and Osborn 2007), and psychotherapy (Nwoye 2011, 2012).

With specific reference to the HIV epidemic, counselling ‘[i]ntensifies education, and it amplifies the range of problems perceived to require external therapeutic intervention’ (Burchardt 2009, 335). Within a discursive frame, the ‘counselling process acts as a means of producing “HIV-positivity” through a regulated ensemble of discursive practices’ (Burchardt 2009, 335). As practice, ‘counselling sensu strictu is based on the face-to-face interaction between the counsellor and the counselled subjects’ (Burchardt 2009, 335). As
aptly argued by Burchardt (2009), ‘it allows for a more profound inculcation of health messages and is often organised in a follow-up process, which deepens the educational effects and social control’ (335). Even though Senegal records a very low rate of HIV/AIDS (0.7%) (ANSD 2012) and has benefited from institutional support and increased access to counselling services, recent scholarship interrogates the structural contexts for service provision and voluntary counselling and testing services (Dramé et al. 2012), and the implications of transactional sex (Foley and Dramé 2013). Questions have also been raised about the low use of counselling mechanisms and facilities, the efficacy of the facilities as a counselling service provision and alternatives such as peer counselling and the mentoring approach (Arcand et al. 2011).

Beyond the predominant HIV/AIDS epidemic scholarship and analytical frame, counselling is deployed to address a range of medical, psychosocial ailments. Counselling practices often hinge on emotional and spiritual healing associated with traditional healers and marabouts (Koranic teachers and spiritual guides revered for their mystical power) (Baldé and Sterck 1994; Moodley and West 2005) by virtue of the cultural cosmogony and indigenous practices in the Senegalese sociocultural context. Counselling also hinges on indigenous psychological healing systems (Nwoye 2012) and traditions, and extends to mental health needs created by the impact of political and community-based violence, physical, structural violence and traumatic experiences (Kagee, Naidoo, and Van Wyk 2003; Okech and Kimemia 2012). Using indigenous approaches to community counselling (Lazarus, Seedat, and Baptiste 2009), it is also geared towards post-traumatic healing and recovery and psychosocial rehabilitation (Ager, Boothby, and Bremer 2009, 526). Foremost among these repertoires of counselling is counselling practice that reflects and adheres to prerequisites of specialisation, credentialing and professionalisation (Aluede, McEachern, and Kenny 2005) and expertise (Burchardt 2009, 337), thus enshrined in educational and healthcare sectors (Richards et al. 2012) and the overarching educational ethos. These practices and the realm of professional counselling contrast with indigenous counselling practices and the privileged social position of the practitioner and healer, which are distinct from the technocratic ethos and framing of counselling as an institutionalised practice.

Curiously, the performative roles of non-practitioners have generally eluded recognition, much less investigation, so this enquiry focuses on the daily, ubiquitous social context of counselling and the performative, relational dimensions it encompasses. Counselling is analysed as a performance across social domains, set issues and repertoires. Sharpening the analytic focus on differently situated actors and unrecognised categories creates a dynamic interpretation of counselling and invites us to consider counselling as a social form. Following views of counselling as form of verbal interaction (Carter 2008), I locate xellal in its Wolof context and discursively map how it is performed and manifested in a range of fluid and informal social settings such as marketplaces and interactions between traders and their clientele. Beyond commodity exchange, service and cash transactions, what is shared in these trading practices and spaces is a range of knowledge repertoire, which hinges on tacit knowledge (Lambeck 1993, 10–11; Lo 2005). Women traders’ narratives reveal their flexible identities as advisers, confidants par excellence and healers but, even more, these narratives illustrate an epistemic gap in both academic literature and common views of their survivalist livelihood strategies, one caused by an obvious and overriding association with their economic practice.
Counselling in situ: uncovering and situating the social and communicative dimensions of women traders’ market practices

Managing the household economy and family members’ wellbeing through the satisfaction of their basic needs, the provision of care and nurturance, and self-fashioning – affirming their own sense of clothing style and aesthetics – occupy an important place in many Senegalese women’s decision-making. They are seen as consumers during reproductive age and as potential clients for the assortment of creative feminine accessories that tease sexual and erotic imaginaries. My encounters and interactions with women traders in Dakar’s urban markets were interspersed with open and uncensored dialogues about such artefacts and their place in Senegalese conjugal sexuality and the aesthetics of intimacy.

Women traders’ transactions and monetary exchanges are infused with mundane conversations, interpellations and gestures and their views of counselling and counsellors are part of this economy, involving family members, relatives, friends and other familiairs who share their experiences and knowledge and help to resolve practical problems. Enmeshed in the quotidian, this local, informal practice of counselling differs from what takes place in a clinical setting. Informal social counselling permeates every sphere of Senegalese social life, from cooking and self-fashioning to marital issues, familial conflict mediation, and sexuality. For questions ranging from the everyday to the existential, the role of counsellor, adviser and confidant is played by many other social actors besides the traditional healer providing health remedies based on indigenous healing practices and pharmacopeia, the marabout, the doctor or the technical expert.

Marketisation and trade as embodied, performative and communicative social practices

From a generic ‘market women’ labelling and identification, individual traders choose distinct and differentiated naming (Lo 2005, 2011). One trader called herself ‘The Friend of Married Women’ (Xaaritu Jiggeen Yi) and insisted on this identity when evoking her relationships and conversations with her mostly female clientele, indicating the trust and intimacy of a confidant or adviser. Xaaritu Jiggeen Yi said:

My customers, jiggeen yi, the married women, also solicit my advice when they come to my stall to buy condiments. I give advice to women who confide in me their personal problems. So, in addition to selling vegetables, I lend an attentive ear to their problems and give them much useful advice as if they were my own relatives and family members.

Another trader who calls herself ‘Mother of Young Women’, (Yayu Xaleyu Jiggeen Yi), said that her stall ‘is a public and free social clinic where she can advise many troubled young women, those who despair to find a husband, endlessly waiting for the cola nut, and young brides.’ Her clientele often seeks advice on personal or taboo subjects ranging from ‘how to build good relationships with the in-laws’ to the use of intimate coquetteries and accessories of seduction and self-fashioning for special occasions such as weddings. Showing a display of a wide range of accessories, the ‘Mother of Young Women’ (53) told me that:

Many Fatou-Fatou [Senegalese emigrant women] come and visit me before they travel abroad. I also send my accessories as far as New York. You can find them in Harlem. I receive many demands and orders for my accessories from the Diaspora. My loyal clients even call me from Italy, New York, and Paris. I have many international clients and they do not hesitate to confide in me and ask for help and advice.

Clearly, such outreach extends beyond the territorial limits of the market and suggests dynamic loci of counselling that connects traders with a wider clientele in global flows.
Underscored in this enquiry are the skills, knowledge and competences that clients attribute to local women traders. Their expertise is thus validated, recognised and sought after. The ‘Friend of Married Women’ said:

I have not been to school, but I know a lot. I have also been sharing my knowledge with many women who are struggling in their marriage. They become my loyal clients and friends, mibok [relatives] over time.

This is also illustrated by Xaarity Jiggen Yi, who said:

I inherited this place from my ageing mother, and I have been here for more than 10 years. Now I have clients whose children have become my clients too. They show me as much respect as their own mothers, as I do the same and take care of them just like my own. I do not hesitate to praise them and reprimand them when necessary.

These accounts hinge on the fashioning of proximal affinities developed over time, based on durability and close social relations. They also hint at generational continuity and the fact that the marketplace has been historically viewed as an extension of other socio-spatial arenas of socialisation such as the privacy of the home, social clubs and women-only episodic and planned private gatherings.

**Marketplaces: the fulcrum and spatial extension of social counselling practice**

The interactions discussed above reflect the sociality of marketplaces, which beyond the monetary exchange serve the additional social function of counselling. Through communicative strategies and discursive practices, women traders and their clients build trust, negotiate intimate issues and fashion individualised bonds. Clark’s (2008) characterisation of ‘markets as sites of personalised relations’ (34) bears much analytical and conceptual relevance in this context, too, where marketplaces epitomise a material site and discursive space of counselling. The discursive practices and exchanges between traders and their clientele that one finds in these Senegalese market settings echo Guyer’s (2004) crucial analysis that money involves ‘linking disjunctive value registers’ (51), and Geschiere, Goheen and Piot’s (2007) extension of such ‘value registers’ to other domains (53). The value registers hinge on sociality, relationality, affect (i.e. emotion) and the exchange of information and advice, constitutive elements of counselling. In the Dakar market context, a range of bonds shapes the interactions between women traders and their clients, even though these relationships are circumscribed by market interactions. They point to the possibility of friendship within the cultural context of a commercial exchange and through marketing relationship (Price and Arnould 1999). Women traders also convert the act of selling into friendship and camaraderie, extending the value registers to many unsuspected, undervalued and unrecognised domains. As aptly argued by Aby (25): ‘we talk about the person, the personal, and the joys and hardships in our lives. I take the time to listen and also share my stories and concerns.’ Counselling can fit in these value registers, as intangible flow and value intertwined in the monetised exchange, albeit circumscribed within a commercial exchange. The communicative exchanges thus stray from the financial into the ontological and epistemic realm.

The social embeddedness of trade and the ubiquitous presence of counselling in trade practices are not just the domain of women traders, but extend to male traders as well. The substantive registers become markedly gendered as the cultural artefacts of intimacy such as betio and bine-bine as tradable goods, mostly made and sold by women, become also the central domain of women traders’ counselling practices and competitive trade advantage.
The detailed exchanges and accounts extend the analytical purview of trade and the marketplace, not only as a fulcrum of economic transactions, but also as a locus of affective interactions and performative counselling practices. They hinge on the marketplace as a fluid space where traders share information and impart knowledge to their female clientele on a wide spectrum of issues, such as conjugality and the aesthetics of intimacy. What lies beneath the logic of the market and economic transactions is a dual and interlinked social and economic praxis, rendered invisible by their ascribed identities as traders and surplus labour. The orthodoxies of the dominant interpretation of traders’ practices and subjectivities, within the economic matrix and economisation obscure the other performative identities and potential loci of counselling. They ignore the multiple subjectivities and roles of women traders in their dynamic and mutually constituted social and economic roles. Clearly, the social logic of trade relations contrasts with the orthodox framing of economic exchange, viewed through the prism of what Blaney and Inayatullah (2009) defined as ‘economised relationships’ (22). Yet, beneath cash transactions and the logic of commodity relations and presumed cold commodity calculation, lie context-specific and culturally-mediated socioeconomic exchanges. This is nothing short of a new taxonomy of the representation and categorisation of women traders and ‘market women’ that hinges on the social service they perform, even if such services are sometimes invisible, undervalued or discounted. Such insights call for a re-evaluation of commonly held assumptions about women traders’ roles and subjectivities, considering the underlying political economy of health and service provision in developing countries such as Senegal. In the context of neoliberal restructuring of health sectors, these services are chronically underfunded and reflect gender-based inequalities in access to healthcare (Lo 2008; Starrs 2006). The staggering deficits in healthcare delivery are aggravated by drastic cuts in public expenditure and steady disengagement of the state in essential social welfare provision (Akukwe 2000; Lo 2008; Ogbu and Gallagher 1992) and the fact that health care remains an expensive commodity (Lo 2008). Therefore, alternative service provision and counselling practices should be recognised and valued and the intermediary role of women traders should be brought into sharper focus. This is important, not only considering its social and cultural relevance and its tangible and intangible value, but also for its possible complement to specialised medical counselling infrastructure. Recognising this invisible intermediation offers new theoretical perspectives and possibilities to create symbiosis and complementarity between the social infrastructure of counselling as socially mediated and the technocratic, medical infrastructure of counselling services as institutionalised practice.

Issues and repertoires of counselling practice

Beyond the academic constructions of their identities as market women, female clients implicitly offer a different interpretation and assessment of women traders, attributing to them skills, tacit knowledge and technical competences. Their acclaimed expertise also has a generational continuity.

Some traders feel that they can advise on any topic, based on their own experiences and privileged positions in the marketplace where conversations among traders punctuate their daily trade practice. These accounts cohere with the view that it is through ‘lived embodied experience that knowledge of the self and the world become actualised’ (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, 7). Their market location and daily interactions are textured by lively exchanges that give a rhythm to their daily routine when waiting for customers. Others invoke the large number of confidences they receive from their many customers and
confidants, from a diversity of situational contexts, and the substantive issues exposed and discussed as part of a repository of knowledge, empirical case studies and experiences. They also point to cultural practices that cohere with Dei’s (2000) notion of the centrality of cultural memory as a site of local knowledge production. A few invoke their long genealogy, drawing from a repository of knowledge inherited from their parents and family genealogy. This pertains especially to those who specialise in traditional medicine and pharmacopeia and the marketing of herbs, medicinal plants and agricultural commodities. Also entwined in their narratives are issues of motherhood, managing women’s reproductive health, caring for an injured body and advising on the virtue of indigenous treatments and traditional herbal baths. Finding solutions to women’s ailments seems to be a shared concern among some women traders, who reveal their agenda as unleashing the secrets and power of traditional medicine and invoking what they perceive to be Dakar’s educated and urban women elites ‘lack of interest in and knowledge of traditional medicine.’ Fanta (46) explained that the majority of women only know the cosmetic usage of karité (shea butter). She then evoked her success in the multiple applications and uses of karité. As further illustration, she shared her experience with one of her clients:

One of my clients has undergone C-section and is having many conjugal problems. She often confided in me the difficulties she faced. I gave her advice on how to use karité and other secrets from our roots and local products from our pharmacopeia to ease her pains.

This individual account points to the pertinence of a knowledge repertoire rooted in distinctive social practices and cultural frameworks (Heyd 1995) and indigenous knowledge, when women traders claim intimate knowledge of the value and medicinal virtue of the traditional commodities they sell.

Whether such knowledge is tested in situ or not, there is an implicit assumption of their efficacy and a propensity to advise on the use and virtue of specific medicinal plants used for women’s reproductive health. As Fanta (46) put it:

I advise new mothers our traditional bath to realign their pelvic basin and help them maintain a good shape. Pregnancy and motherhood are testing for women’s bodies. If you do not do the right thing, the proper massage and herbal restorative baths, you are done. You see the frequency of C-sections these days; young women forget to take care of their bodies through pregnancy and after delivery.

The questions of women’s reproductive health and safe motherhood are areas of concern and tenuous economic challenges that reveal the lack of adequate health services or commitments to maternal health, hence the persistent high maternal mortality rate and the prevalence of unsafe motherhood in Senegal. Fatou (36), under conditions of anonymity, suggests that:

When young and inexperienced women confide in me their insecurities and concerns, I give them advice. I can tell when they are inexperienced and I gently show them how to use the betio and bine-bine. I also point them to other products and vendors if they need more stuff than I can provide.

Saly (30) confided that ‘with these beads and incense concoctions, I have taught many brides how to accessorise and spice up their marital lives and keep their husband.’ Thus, through these exchanges and dialogues emerge counselling registers on conjugalty and marital relationships that draw from the rich cultural repertoires and endogenous accessories of intimacy, as well as reveal local aesthetics of intimacy. As aptly conveyed by a client, Coumba (28):
The desire and imperative of maintaining a position within the household hierarchy push women to much creative ingenuity to maintain a position of being the favourite wife or to consolidate a rank of the first wife, hard to be unseated.

These accessories occupy a special place in conjugal sexuality, considering the overt and often fierce competition between spouses within polygamous households – estimated at 35% in Senegal and 25% in Dakar (ANSD 2012) – and its tributary of complex intra-women and intra-household dynamics. Beyond conjugality, clients give credit to women traders for their advising role in marital affairs, as claimed by Rose (44):

Some clients will just stop by to chat and confide in me when they are having troubles with their husband, co-wives or in-laws. My shop is never empty. This is as important as selling them something. We build long-term relationships and durable friendships.

This insight underscores the mediating role of traders of familial and household affairs. Through their advice, they also offer support to women of reproductive age who seek to negotiate and consolidate social ties. This is particularly pertinent to the complex Senegalese household configuration and the intricate web of social relations with in-laws on issues such as authority, recognition and decision-making (Lo 2005, 2008). Conversely, counselling, as ‘an added bonus’, immaterial commodity and precursory or post-script of a cash transaction, reverberates in many places in marketplaces and influences the relationships between traders and their female clientele. The act of buying and selling cannot be dissociated from counselling. It is both an art and an imperative in trade.

The meanings attributed to counselling in this context can be twofold. Firstly, given the economic context of trading, this can be interpreted as a covert strategy for building customer loyalty and fidelity to increase revenue – practices intrinsic to economic ventures and essential for their livelihood as petty traders. For a few traders in this study, ‘giving an informed opinion, advice can help and boost business.’ Secondly, the interpretive meaning of the function of counselling hinges on a benevolent act of feminine solidarity, ‘woman to woman solidarity’. As aptly argued by a trader: ‘we are all women, before being traders’, thus evoking a spirit of benevolence, camaraderie and altruism. These practices, combining covert local marketing strategies in their trading practices with a sense of feminist solidarity, appear to be mutually constituted and intertwined in market transactions, imbued with affect (Lo 2005, 2011).

Clients’ accounts confirm these views. For instance, narratives from a married woman, a regular client, emphasised such mutuality and the counselling ties that bind buyer and seller, enmeshed in such economic transactions. Soda (27) said:

I prefer to go to Marché Tilène rather than the supermarket as I know that I can always have an entertaining conversation and ask for advice about anything that is troubling me from the vendors, woman-to-woman. I cannot do that at the supermarket. The vendors are under surveillance and have no time for a long chat or confidence.

The perception of the different sites of exchange and the marked difference stated between the modern supermarket, the formal and hyper-regulated and controlled space are suggestive of the different types of social relations and affective bonds that differentiate the formal, modern supermarket from the open and informal marketplace. In the supermarket, relationships are constricted by the formal transactional space and strict regulation of professionalism, time management and efficiency, which appear limiting and constricting. These two different economic milieus shape different types of relationality and social interactions.
**Women traders’ knowledge registers**

In the marketplace, *xellal* works as a regular practice in the socio-cultural context of Dakar’s urban life. It is embedded in traders’ communicative practices that constitute fluid and informal sites and discursive spaces of counselling practice, proffered by non-experts and social categories not a priori credited for or associated with social counselling and healing. As aptly argued by Xaaritu Jiggeen Yi (55): ‘people see at first the basic goods we sell, rarely the invisible knowledge and vast experiences behind the products and our humble stalls.’ Using their intersecting positions and practical knowledge as ‘women, mothers, and traders’, these multiple and mutually constituted locations and intersecting identities serve as a point of reference to give credibility to their advice and the knowledge they share and impart to their clientele. Reified in these accounts is a claimed epistemic position and *privilege* that is encoded in their experiences and practices, as sites for and repertoires of counselling practice. Their interlocking identities and trading practices in these epistemic contexts reflect their vast repertoire of experiences and knowledge registers. This makes explicit the ontological basis of their knowledge, and what we might call techne, the practical productive knowledge (Flyvberg 2001) that enterprising women accumulate through their practice, formative years of apprenticeship, and experiences (Lo 2005, 2011). Such knowledge, embodied in their identities, constitutes archives of experiences and a valuable repository to draw upon in the negotiation of social relations and social reproduction in light of their gendered position in the household organisation.

Women traders thus reflect an ontology of differently positioned social actors from the experts by virtue of their practice and cumulative knowledge. They embody the ‘ordinary’ vicarious everyday *confidant par excellence* and are uniquely positioned by being both close to a large clientele and by playing dual roles as counsellors and traders in the marketplace. In these gendered and communicative sites, women discuss intimate issues like sexuality, including such topics as condom use or even Viagra, along with the matrimonial arrangements and hierarchies in the polygamous Senegalese family. These views rhyme with Sembene’s Film *Faat Kiné* (2000), which expressively portrays a distinct category of Senegalese women’s sociality in which friends play a crucial role in counselling on many issues such as remarriage and sexuality. The ubiquitous, fluid transactional spaces of counselling resonate culturally.

Thus, marketplaces, women traders and their clients should properly be understood as vital to analysing social life, economic practices and healthcare in Senegal. This implies an epistemic shift (Lo 2005) from seeing women traders merely through the prism of their subaltern market positions and trade practices to recognizing their crucial role as intermediaries in providing social services, consolidating social ties, creating an aesthetics of intimacy and assisting in women’s wellbeing by counselling in conjugal and matrimonial affairs. One also must recognise the tacit knowledge these women accumulate and transmit to their female clientele, as well as the multiple registers that comprise their knowledge base and social counselling practices. This recognition has deep and promising implications for counselling epistemologies and further enriches and extends counselling analytics in the Senegalese context and in similar social and cultural contexts.

**Conclusion**

This paper uncovers the social and communicative dimensions of Senegalese women traders’ market practices and the multiple, manifest and latent roles that they embody and perform. It illuminates some of the knowledge repertoires and cultural registers they
employ as advisers and confidants in a wide array of social situations and topics such as sexuality, reproductive health, conjugality and the aesthetics of intimacy. While this paper’s empirical context is Dakar’s urban markets, personal comparative experiences about women traders in other regions and sites in Senegal suggest that counselling practices are not exclusive to the urban market space. Nor is counselling on marital issues the sole prerogative and terrain of women traders but extends to other social categories and permeates other highly gendered spaces, such as hair salons, beauty parlours, offices and the home. Similarly, counselling practices can be discerned in the daily work of women traders in other towns or markets in Senegal and other locations, indicating the ubiquity of these counselling practices and the privileged positions of women traders as confidants par excellence. Counselling and selling are intertwined in market practices, hence the analytical and conceptual pertinence of establishing the nexus between trade and counselling. This also ruptures the meta-narrative of market women and infuses new analytics in the representational politics and the discursive framing of their identities and economic functions.

The cultural insights of *xellal* and its interpretations in the Senegalese context demonstrate the need to recognise and value the multiple social functions women traders embody and perform, particularly in the domain of counselling, and call for an epistemic validation of their vast repository of tacit knowledge. Furthermore, the fluid boundaries between counselling and trade documented in this paper inspire an epistemic recognition and valuing of their informal social roles in the marketplaces that operate as open and social clinics for various social ailments. It becomes imperative, then, to uncover the epistemic blind spots (*Lo 2011, 174*) characteristic of fixed categorisations in order to transcend the fixed vocabularies of ‘market women’ and to validate and actualise their agentic power, multiple roles, identities and spheres of intervention. Recognising and better understanding such intersecting roles is promising in envisioning complementary responsive and culturally adaptive delivery systems and intermediaries. This is especially relevant considering the current political economy of healthcare provision under neoliberal restructuring. The implications are also epistemological. By bringing to the fore the intangible social contributions and assets (*Lo 2005*) of market women and traders, an attempt is made to address an epistemic gap evident in the representational discourses of market women’s identities. Extending such repertoires offers possibilities in bringing into analytical purview the everyday practice of counselling embodied by women traders while suggesting further theorizing of the fluid boundaries, intersections and dynamics between trade and counselling in African contexts such as Senegal.

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**Note**

1. All names are pseudonyms, [55] signifies the age of the informant.

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Résumé

Les caractéristiques des femmes commerçantes en Afrique de l’Ouest dépendent souvent de leur résilience, de leur ingéniosité et de leur sens des affaires, dans des conditions économiques précaires et des élogies en évolution. De plus, les commerçantes sont définies, identifiées et classées en fonction de leur type de commerce et des marchandises associées. Cependant, une analyse sociale et
une ethnographie des pratiques du commerce remettent en cause cette taxonomie et suggèrent l’existence d’une intégration relationnelle et sociale de ces transactions économiques; et l’existence de rôles inattendus et interconnectés de confidantes, conseillères et guérisseuses, joués par les commerçantes. Cet article examine ces rôles multiples, incarnés et joués par les commerçantes sénégalaises, ainsi que le vaste répertoire de connaissances et les registres culturels auxquels elles se réfèrent en tant que conseillères sur la sexualité, les questions matrimoniales et la conjugalité. Il postule qu’il est nécessaire de repositionner le commerce et le marché, non seulement en tant que point d’appui pour les transactions économiques, mais aussi en tant que siège d’interactions affectives, de pratiques de counselling performatives; et aussi en tant qu’espace fluide où les commerçantes transmettent à leur clientèle féminine leurs connaissances sur de nombreuses questions comme celles de la sexualité, de la conjugalité et de l’esthétique de l’intimité. Enfin, l’article tente de dévoiler de nouvelles techniques d’analyse et théorisations sur les rôles évolutifs incarnés et performatifs des commerçantes et des vendeuses sur les marchés, tout en validant des éclairages contextuels et sensibles aux particularités culturelles sur le « counselling » et sur son interprétation au Sénégal.

Resumen

Las características que se asocian a las mujeres comerciantes de África occidental muchas veces se centran en su resiliencia, ingenio e inteligencia en sus prácticas comerciales a pesar de unas condiciones económicas precarias y ecologías en proceso de cambio. Además, se define, identifica y clasifica a las comerciantes en función de sus negocios y bienes relacionados con su práctica comercial. Sin embargo, esta taxonomía es cuestionada en un análisis social y una etnografía de las prácticas comerciales donde se indican el arraigo relacional y social de tales transacciones económicas y las funciones inesperadas interconectadas de carácter relacional y social de las comerciantes en calidad de confidencias, asesoras y curanderas. En este artículo se analizan los diferentes roles que personifican y desempeñan las comerciantes senegalesas y el amplio repertorio de conocimiento y registros culturales que emplean como asesoras en materia de sexualidad, asuntos matrimoniales y de pareja. Se propone redefinir el comercio y el mercado, no solamente como un lugar para la transacción económica sino también como un centro de interacciones afectivas, prácticas funcionales de asesoramiento, y espacios fluidos donde las comerciantes imparten sus conocimientos a la clientela femenina sobre un amplio espectro de cuestiones, tales como la sexualidad, las relaciones matrimoniales y la estética de la intimidad. Por último, en este artículo se pretende revelar nuevos aspectos analíticos y teorizar sobre los papeles dinámicos, personificados y funcionales de las mujeres comerciantes y las mujeres que trabajan en el mercado, presentando perspectivas contextuales definidas culturalmente en lo que respecta al asesoramiento y su interpretación en Senegal.