

Embodied memories

Another perspective on research in Africa

This exhibition gathers a series of portraits, family stories and social facts collected in 2012 alongside an anthropological study on traces and memories of science in Niakhar. Its intention is to foreground personal points of view of those who work at the ground level of an international health and demographic research site in Africa. It is also a way to visually query the meaning of African bodies and agency in the context of global health and post-independence relations.

The Niakhar zone was created as a Senegalese demographic research site in 1964, and became over the years an extremely well documented area and a strategic locale for public health and medical research in Africa. Run by a French public research institute – Institut de recherche pour le développement – the multiple studies (mainly demographic surveillance, medical research and social science surveys) conducted among the inhabitants of the area have durably imprinted local memories, bodies and family stories.

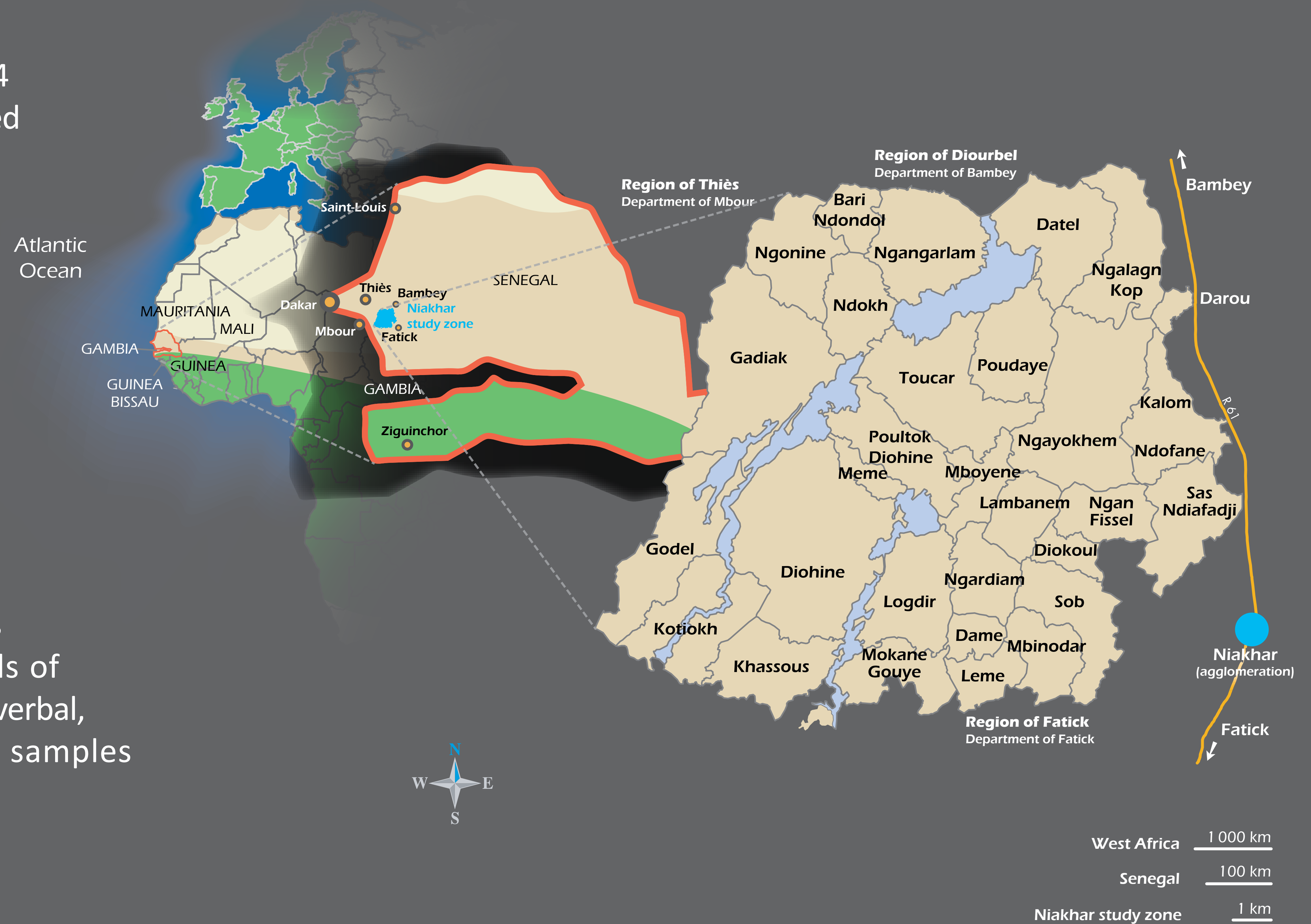
Five decades of research have left ambivalent emotional and physical traces. Throughout the villages and hamlets of the area, the medical care provided alongside data collection has particularly imprinted memories. Many inhabitants have worked or collaborated for the French Institute, and various sat down to recall old memories of the field. Some fieldworkers reminisce on their career in relation to witnessing the effect of healing on the bodies of individuals. Other inhabitants bear the names of foreign scientists their parents knew or had bound to in the past. Others, because they are the ones, among hundreds, who benefited from vital medical assistance, appear as living traces of an unforgettable help. In the end, embodied memories of the research site of Niakhar are revealed through the subjective and individual choices and commitments that inhabitants and research staff have regularly made at the margin of research itself.



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The site of Niakhar

The site of Niakhar was created in 1964 as an observatory to document expected rapid demographic change in rural Senegal. It has progressively developed as a strategic locale in Africa for demographic surveillance as well as for vaccine and public health research. Located 135 km from Dakar, in the rural region of Fatick, the zone under observation is now home to some 43,000 inhabitants spread across 30 villages and hamlets. Five decades of research has generated hundreds of published scientific articles based on verbal, biological and ecological data and samples collected locally.



Map reproduced based on the work «*Recherche intégrée sur la santé des populations à Niakhar*» (Integrated research on the health of the populations of Niakhar) under the direction of Jean-Philippe Chippaux. IRD Editions



Robert and André Diatte, Niakhar

Robert (left) and André Diatte (right) pose in the family living room, in a house which used to be the hut of André Lericollais, a French tropical geographer, with whom their father worked as a fieldworker two decades ago. André was born when Lericollais lived in the family compound and bears his first name. Robert is a versatile fieldworker in the site of Niakhar.



Amy with her son “Docteur Doudou Diop”, Diohine

Amy, a former participant in a meningitis vaccine trial conducted in 2007, poses in her hut in the village of Diohine with her son, «Docteur Doudou Diop». Pregnant with her son when she took part in the trial, she decided to name him after the clinical research doctor who monitored her pregnancy. Doudou is one of many local children who bear the name of a researcher, fieldworker or physician who worked on a regular basis in the area.



Henri Collomb Diouf, Niakhar

Henri Collomb Daly Diouf holds a photo of his namesake, the French military psychiatrist Henri Collomb. After Independence, the physician created the «École de Fann» (The Fann School), an internationally renowned post-colonial psychiatric centre. He worked with several research assistants in Senegal including the young man's father, the late Tekhei Diouf. This picture was taken inside the makeshift psychiatric hospital created and run by the former research assistant for several years in Niakhar.



Latyr Diome, Toucar

Latyr Diome was born inside the zone of Niakhar and has travelled throughout the area as a fieldworker since the 1990s. Like many fieldworkers and researchers, he appreciated the “social side” of his work. One day he explained that he was interrupted during a routine investigation, when he came across a mother helpless before her child convulsing. He decided to strap the child to his back using a cloth and then drove him to the nearest health centre on his motorbike. Thanks to his quick thinking and efforts, the child received treatment in time and Latyr earned deep gratitude from the family.



Timague and his mother Amy, Ngayokhème

In 2007, Timague took part in a meningitis vaccine trial. During the study, he accidentally fell from a tree and was unable to move. The village chief contacted the French institution's fieldworkers by telephone who arranged for the young man to be evacuated to a hospital in Dakar. He was saved, but has remained partially paralysed. The inhabitants of the area often refer to Timague's presence as a proof of the institution's ability to challenge local destinies. Timague himself corroborates this, explaining that he wouldn't be here today if the French institute hadn't helped him.



Ousmane Faye and his son Pape, Ngonine

Ousmane Faye (left) was recruited by the French Institute in 1987. His first assignment consisted in recruiting children of the zone in a vaccine trial while also monitoring its population through demographic interviews. Here he poses with his son, Pape Ababacar Saddhikh Faye, who took part in the vaccine trial. The boy's participation, like that of the other fieldworkers' children, have formed a strong argument in gaining the other inhabitants' confidence in science when introducing the first large scale clinical trial in the area..



Abdou Diouf, Niakhar

Abdou Diouf explains that he worked as an «agricultural extension worker» in different regions of Senegal for over eighteen years before joining the team of the “Niakhar Fieldworkers.” Like his colleagues, he travelled around the area on a motorbike and was housed by the local inhabitants. When he stopped working for the French Institution in the 1990s, he became a spare automobile and scrap metal worker in the town of Niakhar where he created his own workshop.



Aissatou Diouf, Niakhar

Aissatou got her first contract with the Research Institute 20 years ago. Mother of five and the family's main wage-earner, she has been involved in many research projects as a fieldworker. She has no qualms about travelling and living on site, like her male counterparts. She regularly explains the content of the research to the inhabitants. When each project is launched, she competes with many other inhabitants of the area who also want to work for the Institute. Here, she is posing in her elder son's hut she was able to build after a research contract.



Abdou Diouf - Adiouma Faye - Bassirou Fall - Ernest Faye - Diaga Loum - Latyr Diome - Émile Ndiaye - Moussa Sarr - Ngor Sine - Samba Diouf - Samba Diatte - Tofene Ndiaye

Over five decades of scientific activities in Niakhar, fieldworkers have been at the heart of the dialogue between researchers and participants. Their “intermediary” status and their low profile in scientific publication have not always conveyed their crucial role in the creation and development of the zone. Their contribution to the site of Niakhar started in the 1960s when several members of the State Statistical Department joined the Franco-Senegalese team as fieldworkers and facilitators. Since then, the area has continued to be a source of young recruits to accompany epidemiologists, physicians and social scientists in the field. While some have eventually been given permanent contracts, the scarce documentation on their “social role” has made them inconspicuous actors in the research process at Niakhar.

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This exhibition was created in collaboration with the *Institut de recherche pour le développement*

Photographs and texts: Ashley Ouvrier

Ashley Ouvrier has been working on social relations in Niakhar since 2006 and has published a book entitled “Faire de la recherche médicale en Afrique – Ethnographie d’un village-laboratoire” (Karthala - 2014). She is currently a post-doctoral Anthropologist at the University of Paris-Diderot.

These photographs were taken as part of a study on the traces and memories of medical research in Africa carried out in collaboration with Aissatou Mbodj-Pouye (anthropologist at the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research)) and Aissatou Diouf (multidisciplinary fieldworker in Niakhar).

The combination of photography with ethnography was carried out as part of the MEREAF (Memorials and remains of medical research in Africa) programme: a research programme financed by the Agence nationale de la recherche (French national research agency) and run by the UMI 233 TransVIHMI (Translational Research Applied to HIV and Infectious Diseases) (IRD, Université Montpellier 1, Université Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Université de Yaoundé), the Université Paris-Diderot (Paris 7), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the University of Amsterdam. In Senegal, this programme is the responsibility of professors Mamadou Badji and Alice Desclaux.

Written consent was obtained for all photographs. This ethno-photographic project was approved by the National Ethics Committee for Health Research in Senegal. It was exhibited at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar in February 2014 for the 50th anniversary of the site and then travelled as an outdoor exhibition in the three main villages of the zone of Niakhar: Toucar, Ngayokhème, Diohine and Niakhar.

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