

### Seydou Coulibaly

**Interview date:** January 30 and 31, 2001

**Location of interview:** Bartram High School

**Country of origin:** Mauritania

**Ethnic group/language group:** Bambara

**Religion:** Non-practicing Muslim

**Profession:** Apprentice ESOL teacher at Bartram High School

**Level of education:** Doctoral studies not completed

**Location of residence in Philadelphia:** Wynnewood

*Mr. Coulibaly came to the United States in 1989 to pursue his graduate studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He stayed there until 1996. He moved to Philadelphia when his African American wife became the Executive Director of the Barnes Foundation.*

*Mr. Coulibaly does not socialize much in the African community. He is extremely pro-America and considers becoming a citizen of the United States an achievement in itself.*

### Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Seydou Coulibaly (SC)

#### [START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Tell me your name please.

SC: My name is Seydou. Spelt S-e-y-d-as in “David”-o-u. And the last name is Coulibaly. It’s spelled C-o-u-l-i-b-as in “boy”-a-l-y.

LS: I bet you have to say a lot, spell your name. Where were you born?

SC: I was born in Mauritania, in the Western part of Africa. Actually we say Western part. Just politically you say western part, but the truth of the matter is that Mauritania is in the northwestern part of Africa. It has borders with Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, Mali, and the Atlantic Sea.

LS: When you tell people where you are from, do most people not know about Mauritania?

SC: Oh, yes. Mauritania is not a well-known country here. It’s not like the way people would recognize a name like Senegal and ---

LS: Kenya.

SC: Kenya, yeah, Kenya is a well-known country because of ---

LS: Nigeria.

SC: Nigeria, umm-hmm.

LS: And your ethnic group is ---

SC: Bambara. Actually, the name is Bamana. We are mainly in Mali, but in the southeastern part of Mauritania, where I am from, there are few Bambaras there, living in that part of Mauritania.

LS: Is Bamana the name of the people, the language, or it is separate from Bambara?

SC: No, the westerners would like to say "Bambara," but we say "Bamana." Bamana, Bamana means "to refuse the existence of God." So my people didn't believe in God and that's the meaning of "Ba" means "refusal" or "to refuse." "Ma" is God. Bamana. But, with time, there were Bambaras or Bamana converted to Islam or to Christianity, and we call them Bamana Nkunandi(?), which means "the lucky Bambara" because people believe now that these Bambara became Muslims or Christians, that they could go to heaven, so they are lucky [both laugh] You like --- [break in tape]

LS: Okay. And your native language then is Bamana?

SC: Ahh, my native language is definitely Bamana. But since I was born and grew up in Mauritania, I would definitely say that I speak without any problem Hasaniya, as the main language in Mauritania. And I also speak Arabic, French, and, hopefully, English. My mother is from a different ethnic group, Soninke.

LS: So she is Soninke?

SC: A-ha, so I speak Soninke, too. So these are more or less the languages that I speak.

LS: You differentiate Hasaniya from Arabic?

SC: Yes, there is a slight difference between Hasaniya and Arabic, but if speak Hasaniya very well and you understand it very well, you shouldn't have any problem understanding the classic Arabic. I mean by that the written Arabic. There is a difference between what we call "Arabia al Fosha," which is the

classic Arabic, and what we call “lehejat.” In all Arabic countries, there are people who have their own dialects, that what we call “lehejat.”

LS: What’s “fus-ha(?)”?

SC: “Fus-ha(?)” is the classic one.

LS: Is the classical.

SC: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Okay.

SC: The written and the spoken Arabic --- ( ) --- that what you’ll find in papers, that what the officials of the government, members of the government, the presidents or the kings or the emirs would use to address their people.

LS: And even in Mauritania? What do the officials use there?

SC: In Mauritania, it’s a little bit interesting. At the beginning, the officials used French to address the government and I would say that the --- what we call in Mauritania, “taarib,” which means the introduction of the Arabic language in different sections of the government, and in education particularly, actually started with me, started with my generation.

LS: Arabization?

SC: Mmm-hmm. We were the first to start with Arabic in first grade. Actually, it’s just the year before us, so we are part of the same generation.

LS: And when did that start?

SC: It started in ’67, ’68 --- 1967, 1968.

LS: And Mauritania got its independence in 1960?

SC: We got our independence November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1960 from France.

LS: So there was a little bit of a lag before they started to Arabize the education?

SC: Yeah! Mmm-hmm, definitely, you can say that. That is why members of the government in Mauritania, including the President, they did not address the Mauritanian people in Arabic until late. I

would definitely say that the current president would definitely be the first one to address Mauritanian people in Arabic.

LS: And the other ones ---

SC: Ah yeah, definitely, but for sure, during some meetings with local people, they would use Hasaniya, but when it comes to a major declaration or a major statement regarding, let's say, the anniversary of independence or if there is a major event going on in the country, the president then used to use French to do that, because in Mauritania we also have in the southern part, I am talking --- by "south" here I mean the Senegalese valley area. You have people there who do not speak Hasaniya and who do not understand it. And the same thing for Arabic. They don't speak Arabic and they don't understand it. Therefore, in order for them to understand, you have to address them in a language they would understand. And since the leaders who were in charge in Mauritania did not speak the native tongues of these people, the only way to address them was in French.

LS: But your mother's family is from Mauritania for generations?

SC: Oh no, actually the history of my family is extremely interesting. Right now I am citizen of United States of America and I am telling myself that maybe it's in the blood to be moving from one country to the other. When my grandfather came to my current hometown, where I was born and where I grew up -- - the town is called Ayoun, in the southeastern part of Mauritania ---

LS: Southeastern part?

SC: Uhh-huh. That portion of Mauritania was still part of what was known as the French Sudan. You know, in Africa we had two Sudani. We had the one for the English, the British, the British Sudan, the current Sudan, and we had the French Sudan, which is currently known as Mali. So my grandfather came from that area. He just crossed the border, coming from Nioro. Nioro and my current hometown are not far away --- that far away from each other. So, basically, when he came that part of Mali was still --- that part of Mauritania, that part of Mauritania, was still part of Mali. There was a fighting between tribes, fighting known in Mauritania as "mush-gad(?)." "Mush-gad(?)" is the name of the fighting --- ahh ---

LS: Ethnic fighting?

SC: No, actually it was more related to religion than anything else. You know, even within Islam we have different sects and you had on one side the followers of Ahmed Hammala, Sheikh Hammala, who was a well-known religious leader in Mauritania, Mali. He even had followers in Ivory Coast, in Burkina, and in Senegal. You can find them ---

LS: Like a brotherhood?

SC: Yes, exactly. So that fighting was between the followers of Ahmed Hammala and people who --- Tinwajib --- who were mainly following the Kadriya sect of Islam. While the Hammalism(?) --- and Hammalism still exist --- is the Tinwajib aspect of it. So, to make a long story short, the French administration decided that the best way to control tribes in that area, so that there would not be any fighting in the future, because during that fighting many people were killed, the French administration thought that the best way to control these tribes would be to take that portion of the colony of Sudan and attach it to the colony of Mauritania. So that's how my grandfather, his immediate family and the people who used to live in that area, from Sudanese, they became Mauritanian with the territory.

LS: I see.

SC: And my mother, actually, didn't come to Mauritania until she got married to my father. That was in 1958. So after she got married to my father ---

LS: She was from --- ?

SC: She was from Mali.

LS: She was from ---

SC: Yeah! My mother grew up in Bamako, the capital city of Mali.

LS: Oh, okay.

SC: And my father met her there. He used to travel with a big truck that his father owned. And he saw my mom there. And since my mom is originally from the same town as my father and grandfather, Nioro in Mali, he married her. So my mother was the second wife. So his first wife was his cousin. The marriage didn't work. They got divorced. Then he got married to my mother.

LS: And she went to Ayoun?

SC: Yeah, yeah, exactly. After the marriage, he brought her to Ayoun. So my elder brother was born in 1960 and I was the second child. I was born in 1962. February 28, actually. My birthday is coming soon.

LS: That's right. That's my son's birthday.

SC: Oh, I see. I am telling my kids, "I am old, I will be thirty-nine very soon." "No, mister!" I said, "Yes! I will be thirty-nine." [SC laughs]

LS: Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling in Mauritania as you were growing up?

SC: Ah, I did my elementary and my secondary schooling in my hometown. So I was educated in Ayoun up to the level of my high school diploma, what we call, in Mauritania, the *baccalaureate*.

LS: You did the *baccalaureate*?

SC: Yes.

LS: If you had a secondary school, Ayoun was pretty big?

SC: Yeah, by our standards, we'll say that, although I strongly believe the year I got the *baccalaureate*, in '82, I think we were twenty-three people to get *baccalaureate* that year. And it was a huge deal, because before that we can count on one hand, how many people got the *baccalaureate*. So twenty-three was a huge number then. And I also believe --- I am not sure about my statistics --- but I think that year the high school was most likely around a thousand student, the whole high school.

LS: Did it attract from around the region?

SC: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. It was the only ---

LS: Was it a boarding school?

SC: No, it was a regular public school. And all the people who live in that area --- ( ), the name of the region where I was born --- they all went to the same high school and with time also since some neighboring area started to eliminate --- I think in Kiffa first, which is the capital city of Asaba(?), the third area in Mauritania --- they didn't have a *lycee*, a high school. And as soon as the kids from Kiffa were about to go the *lycee*, to the high school, they would send them to my hometown. So they would do their schooling. So the same thing for kids from Hadu Sharpey(?). Nema was and is still the capital city for Hadu Sharpey(?). So, *le Lycee d'Ayoun* is a high school of Ayoun where I got my *baccalaureate* in

'82, was a place where kids from Hodh el Harghi, Gharbi, from Asaba, and from Tagant(?) --- the name of another region in Mauritania --- would come to finish their high school.

LS: Did they live with relatives or live with other families?

SC: Some lives with relatives, some lives with friends to their families, and then we had what we called *internat*. Kids would stay on campus. We had dorms for them there, they would eat there, and the school was a place where they would study and it also was a place where they were living.

LS: So you did the *baccalaureate* in French?

SC: Yeah, I did. I did.

LS: At what point did you shift from Arabic language education to French language education?

SC: Actually, I am one of the people they call in Mauritania, "mosdeweegin(?)." "Mosdeweez(?)" is an Arabic word which means bilingual. You have the choice in Mauritania. You have the choice between focusing on Arabic, in that if you go for that option you'll do all your education in Arabic and you will become what we call "*arabisant*." Or you can focus completely on French, "*francisant*," and you can be in between. That is what we call mosdeweegin(?) or bilingual. So that's how I did my high school.

LS: But do your parents speak French?

SC: Ah yeah, yeah. Both my father and my mom --- actually my mom, bless her heart, she is still what we call in *matronne*(?) in French. She helps woman ---

LS: Sure. ( )

SC: *Sage femme* would be a higher level, she is not at that level, but although many people agree on --- I totally agree with them that after doing the same job for thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two years that she has the knowledge that maybe some doctors don't have. And, uh, that has been her job since the late sixties, helping women to give birth. So she has been doing that and she is still doing it.

LS: Amazing.

SC: And my father passed away April 13<sup>th</sup> 1999. Mmm-hmm. So.

LS: And they both have some education?

SC: Uh, yeah. I wouldn't call it an advanced education, but for people who were born during that time, in that part of Africa, I would say it's more or less an okay education. With the kind of training, for example, my mom got --- she got the opportunity to work for a hospital and she has been doing that. She is still doing it up to now. Therefore there are many things related to medical field, she was educated in that domain. So, that's more or less the kind of education they got. But I would definitely say that I got the most advanced education in my whole family, my immediate family.

LS: Is your brother still in Mauritania?

SC: All my family, all without exception, and my hope is that since now I am a citizen of the greatest country we have in the world --- and I am telling that on a regular basis to my student, I am originally from Africa but I am American now and I am very proud to be it --- my hope is that hopefully I will get the opportunity to bring the younger sisters I have. They are still high school kids.

LS: Okay.

SC: Uh-huh. And hopefully they will get an opportunity that I didn't get, which is to finish their schooling at the level of high school first, and then have the opportunity to do their undergraduate and maybe graduate studies right here in this country. So my hope is that I will be able to do that, but for the moment financially I cannot.

LS: But as an American citizen, it's a pretty direct thing for ---

SC: Yeah, yeah, I think there is a law, I am not very sure about the naming. I think it's Family Reunification Act or something like that would allow me to do it.

LS: Yes. And citizens can do it --- citizens have the priority to do it and then after those quotas are --- permanent residents can do it but they don't have priority, citizens have priority. So that's how it works.

SC: Mmm-hmm.

LS: If you ever need a good lawyer, there's an excellent immigration lawyer -- he's actually in this directory --- who was in the Peace Corps in Mali and he speaks Bambara and French.



SC: Oh, that's excellent.

LS: And he's a very good --- he's helped a lot of people, especially for that community. Okay, so you do your *baccalaureate*, what happened then? How did you end up in the United States? That was probably not the place people were focusing on at that time.

SC: After doing my *baccalaureate* in Mauritania, I really wanted to become a military man. My mom was strongly opposed to it. She said that would not happen. And I even remember applying for, to become what we call *officier de la gendarmerie*, but if you apply for these kinds of things they do what we call in French *enquete de moralite*, which means, they would, uh, it's a kind of investigation to make sure that you are the right kind of person they should really train for this job.

LS: Oh.

SC: You don't have any crime in your background, you never did anything wrong that would disqualify you for the job.

LS: *Avois les enfants naturelle(?)*.

SC: Mmm-hmm. So it was only when they went to do the *enquete de moralite*, the morality investigation, that my mom found out that I was going to do *gendarmerie*. *Gendarmerie*., I don't know if you have its equivalence in English. A sheriff would be more or less close to it.

LS: Yes, exactly. They don't --- there's only police and military. There's nothing in-between.

SC: Yes, exactly. So she made sure that wouldn't happen. Then I was interested in becoming an administrator. In Nouakchott, we have *L'Ecole Nationale d'Administration*. It's a national school for administrators. That's where Mauritania train and is still training people for administration. I applied to take the test there and finally, I didn't take the test because the timing of the test coincided with a vacation time and instead of staying in Nouakchott, the capital city to take the test, I decided that I would go home. That's how I missed the test. So I had to stick to History and Geography, and History and Geography were not my choice. But the administration, they had that privilege, once students are done with their high school education, they would sit down and said, "Okay, based on the result, this person should do this, that person should do this." So that was completely up to the government. But now my

understanding is that they no longer have that system. So they decided that I would be excellent in History and Geography. And, during that very first year, I remember someone contacting me about a scholarship for Journalism in Russia, the former Soviet Union. I was not interested at all. [LS laughs] People have always said ( ) are the big fans of the western world, the pro-Occidentaux, things like that. So I was never interested in going to the former Soviet Union to become a journalist. And I also know that degrees from the former Soviet Union did not have much respect in Mauritania. So I stay in the capital city and I got my education there in History and Geography. After two years, I got we call in French, *le diplome d'etude universilaire generale* in History and Geography ---

LS: And it was at the university?

SC: Yeah, it was at the university, the only university in Nouakchott. Actually, for the story, I am one of the very first people to graduate with the Master in Geography at the University of Nouakchott. We are the very first one, what we call *la premiere promotion*. We are history for the University of Nouakchott in the Department of Geography, because after four years we were the first ones to get the Masters Degree in Geography.

LS: So you studied four years there altogether?

SC: Yeah, four years altogether. We had two years studying History and Geography. You do both together. Then you get what we call *le diplome d'etude universilaire generale*, which is the diploma for general university studies, things like that. Then from the third year you have to choose if you like to be specialized in History or in Geography. If you are going to be specialized in History, you have different branches in History that you can pick from. If you would like to be specializing in Geography, you have the choice between what we call *l'amenagement du territoire* and *la geographie physique*. And I chose *amenagement*. *Amenagement* is between Physical Geography and Human Geography. You take both into consideration. So, after four years, I got my Master in Geography. That was in 1986.

LS: And then what? What happens?

SC: It was very interesting. It was very interesting, because after getting my Master in Geography I really never got a chance to work for the Mauritanian government. Just two years before I graduated, we had in

charge someone by the name of Maaouiya --- uhh, not Maaouiya --- Mohamed Khouna Ould Heydalla. He was the president of the country. And funding institutions like *le Club de Paris*, *le Fond Monetaire International*, *la Banque Mondiale* --- the Paris Club, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank --- they were trying to ask him to implement some programs and Mohamed Khouna Ould Heydalla strongly opposed it, because he thought that these programs will put many Mauritians out of work. And in a country like Mauritania, where all the people who are educated get their jobs from the government, to tell the government you cannot hire them anymore, it's more or less like putting these people on the street.

LS: *Le plan d'ajustement structurel*.

SC: Yeah. *Le plan d'ajustement structurel*. There was a military coup in '84. There was a military coup in '84 and we got a new president, Maaouiya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya. He's the one who --- he's still president, sixteen years now. So Maaouiya understood that the situation of the country was extremely bad, the country was in extremely bad shape, and he had to listen. He had to listen to funding institutions. After all, he didn't have any money, the country was broke. He adopted what we call in Mauritania, *le PREF. Le Plan de Redressement Economique et Financier*. And that program did not allow the --- what we call in Mauritania *la fonction publique*, the government, to hire people freely as they used to do before. Therefore, I did not get any job with the government in Mauritania. I became jobless. So I had ---

LS: Normally, you should have expected to get a job in *la fonction publique*?

SC: Oh, yeah. Exactly. So basically what I did was to try to get side jobs, actually I cannot call them side jobs, because they were the only jobs available to me. I did few studies. I also worked for the paper in the country as a freelance writer. I wrote some articles related to educations. And it's funny. I have some of these articles with me because I had the intention to photocopy them for someone. So I did that for about three years and I was not --- it was not a lot of money but it was better than nothing. They paid me one thousand of Mauritania money --- 1,000 ouguiya --- for each article that was published. So if I write an article and it's not published, I don't get paid for it. So 1,000 then, that will --- I strongly believe in '86 it was just about ten dollars per article written. And I managed with that. Then, during the process in '86

and '89, I got a job with the direction of the statistics, the Statistic Office, the Census Office, to head the census in the third area in Mauritania, *la region de l'Assaba*. So I did that. And, uh, uh --- that's more or less it, freelance writing ---

**[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]**

**[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]**

SC: Okay, so I was saying that I did that job with *la Direction de Statistique*. I supervised the census operations in the third area of Mauritania, and after the census I had to go back to Nouakchott and I did the freelance writing with Chaab which was the national --- the daily in Mauritania. So, if I published I get the ten bucks per article. And if I am not published, I have nothing. So someone told me --- I believe that it was towards the end of '88 or the beginning of '89 --- that the US Embassy was giving scholarship for Mauritanian students to come to the US. I said, "That's extremely interesting." So the person advised me to apply for one. I applied for it, I had a lot of time. After all, I didn't think that it would hurt at all to apply. You never know how things would work out. And to make a long story short, I was one of the people selected for the interview. There was a delegation, I believe, people from New York who came there and we had an interview with them and I was one of the people selected to come for my Master degree in this country. So in November ---

LS: In what field?

SC: Ah, Range Management, Renewable Natural Resources. And the funny thing, you know, I used to tell people that my whole life has been a drama. I really never got the chance to do what I would like to do. I am always somewhere else. Life has been a drama for me. When I applied for the scholarship, the intention was to do *amanagement de territoire(?)*. They had a huge problem trying to define *amanagement de territoire(?)* in English.

LS: Yeah.

SC: And the funny thing is that *amanagement de territoire(?)*, the concept *amanagement de territoire(?)* started in this country. During the Depression, one of the programs for Roosevelt, the New Deal, Tennessee Valley Authority was one of them.

LS: Mmm-hmm.

SC: And the French Minister of the Interior, I believe it was Gaston Defferre, looking at the history of United State, decided to bring that concept in France. So he created, I believe, *le Direction*

*d'Amanagement de Territoire*(?), trying to look at what was done with the TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority, to apply it to France.

LS: *Amanagement*(?) usually translates as “planning,” right?

SC: Yeah.

LS: Like *amanagement linguistique*(?)?

SC: Yeah. *Amanagement*(?) is always “planning” but if you say “*de territoire*”(?) then --- “territorial planning”? It wouldn’t make many sense to them, so we had to go through trying to figure out --- because I got my Master, my *maitrise* in Geography, and I was specialized in *amanagement de territoire*(?). And the reason I was specialized --- we even had that branch at the University of Nouakchott, is because the Finance Minister, Colonel ( ) Amadou Babali(?) --- I believe he is still alive --- he had also an office within his department called *le Direction d'Amanagement du Territoire*(?) and since he was one of the military leaders, he asked the university to train some people who would be working for that department. So the reason I am not working for that department is because of all these things coming from International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and *le Club du Paris*(?). They were no longer allowing many department to hire. So hirings were done only for Education and Health, you see? And even there you have to be extremely lucky to get what we call *fiche budgetaire*. So --- I forgot where I was.

LS: So, when you came to the United States, first of all where did you go to?

SC: I went to the University of Arizona in Tucson. I call Tucson home. I will definitely call Tucson home. It’s a great city. I love --- I love Tucson. I strongly believe people are great. And ---

LS: The climate was probably ---

SC: Ah, yeah. Ah, yeah. That was --- as I used to say, that was another mistake, because --- I don’t regret being in Tucson. I love it. The only regret I have about it is I never got the chance to defend my dissertation, and ( ) come there. In Tucson ---when I --- I didn’t find out that I was going to Tucson, I believe, until I got my plane ticket. Because when I came and applied for different schools, I think that the process started in Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania, they asked me to write down three universities. And I went to see someone who did his training here, ( ), who was the Director of

Agriculture in Mauritania. At one point, he was the director of the school ( ), agricultural school in Mauritania, and he wrote down names of three universities.

LS: Because you didn't know anything about them?

SC: I didn't know anything about them.

LS: Did you speak English at all?

SC: Oh, no. I didn't. I still remember my very first sentence in English, although, you know at the level of the high school sometimes they give you maybe one hour per week. Then I was very interested, trying to learn a little bit of English with the Peace Corps, I believe. I think the Peace Corps had a center or something like that. So anyway, when I came I didn't speak it at all. And the day I believe, I would like to believe, that I started speaking English was at Georgetown University when I said, "I am sorry, so sorry, what's the matter, I broke your glasses." [both laugh] I strongly believe that was the enlightenment for me. And I stayed at Georgetown University at the American English Institute for about five to six months.

LS: Oh, you went to Georgetown before you went to ---

SC: Oh yeah, oh, yeah. From Nouakchott, they send me to Georgetown University. So I studied English there and actually during that period I met my current wife.

LS: Was she also studying there?

SC: Oh no. She was the director of Experimental Gallery at the Smithsonian. So after five or six months, they send me to Tucson, Arizona. I stay there until '96, I believe. Something like that.

LS: '96?

SC: Uh-huh. So, I finished my Master in --- I did a Master in Natural Resources, and after my Master I decided to continue for my PhD. Ah, sometimes I would like to see it as a mistake, but sometimes I would also like to see it as a blessing. You really don't know how God makes things work, you see. So I finished my Master in '93 in Natural Resources. With focus on Range Management. Then the funding was over. I decided that, since there was a political turmoil in Mauritania, that best way for me would be maybe just to continue and finish my PhD, since things were unstable on the other side of the ocean.

LS: Because you had planned to go back?

SC: Definitely, when you come, when you come to this country, when you come to this country, what you have in mind is to get the best possible education, and as soon as you are back in the country, you strongly believe that with a degree from the United State of America, the first power in the world, that most likely you will get the leadership role in your country. You see? So, I decided to continue for my PhD. And I did the PhD program, I passed my written exam, I passed my oral exam. I never got a chance to defend my dissertation.

[text deleted at request of interviewee]

LS: Had you already written your dissertation?

SC: Oh yeah, it was the third draft, it was the third draft. We did the fieldwork, we analyzed the data, that was the third draft.

[text deleted at request of interviewee]

LS: You went to Mauritania?

SC: Oh yeah, I went to Mauritania. Since I was in relation with my current wife, a relation that started in 1990 ---

LS: She did not come to Tucson? You went back and forth?

SC: Yeah, she did travel to Tucson to see me couple of times. And I did travel to Washington to see her couple of times. Although I would recognize that I was a kind of troublemaker because I had some other girlfriends in Tucson. That is just a confession. That's not supposed to be broadcast if you are going to make people listen to this. [both laugh] So anyway, I came back to the country with a K-Visa, a fiancée visa, because we decided that it was time to start a family and she has been extremely helpful. So then I got m --- after the normal length of time, I got my residency.

LS: Were you in Washington then?

SC: No. We --- when I came back, we lived in Detroit, Michigan. She was the president of the Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan. So we stayed there. That's where we got married, too. And she got a job in this area as the Executive Director for the Barnes Foundation.



LS: Where is that?

SC: The Barnes Foundation is a major art collection in Lower Merion.

LS: Oh, the Barnes Foundation?!

SC: yeah, my wife is the Executive Director of that foundation.

LS: Wow!

SC: So, that is how we got here in Philadelphia. And I like Philly. I think it's a wonderful city. If you like to learn anything about the history of America, you should be here. It is the best place for that.

LS: The Barnes Foundation are having trouble, isn't it?

SC: Ah, yeah, but I don't feel comfortable about talking her job at all.

LS: Okay. I know that you have a class coming in. [sound of students in the background]

SC: I have an advisory. They will come for thirty minutes, then from 12.30pm to --- [break in tape]

**INTERVIEW RESUMED NEXT DAY**

LS: Okay.

SC: And this is my work for my ---

LS: ( )

SC: Exactly.

LS: Okay, yesterday, we got to where you came to Philadelphia. Tell me, where do you live in the area?

SC: I live in Wynnewood. We are right behind the Jewish Community Center. It's between Haverford and City Line Avenue.

LS: And you live with your wife and your children?

SC: Ah, we don't --- we were not blessed with kids yet.

LS: Oh, I thought you said yesterday that you did have children.

SC: No, no. We were not blessed with kids yet. So there are only the two of us.

LS: Do you have any relatives in the US?

SC: In the United States?

LS: Mmm-hmm.

SC: I just learned that I have some cousins. And actually, uh, one of them says that he met me. He called me from --- I think he is in Colorado or Texas. I even don't remember. I got a phone call from him. He described himself and he said that he met me in Nouakchott. Up to now, I really don't recall his face, but he is one of the cousins from Mali and I believe that he is living in Houston --- that will be in Texas or somewhere in Colorado. I don't remember exactly. And from talking to him, I realized that I had two other cousins here. Actually, they are still here. So I have two other cousins.

LS: Are these cousins that you met ever in Mauritania?

SC: No. They are all from the Malian side.

LS: So you have never met them?

SC: I met one of them. I met one of them while he was a young boy. And, uh, the other one, the daughter of Somare(?) Mustafa, who was the Education Minister in Mali, I never met her. But I spoke to her and now we know that we are four cousins here in the United States.

LS: So you're a teacher here at Bartram High. What's your field? What subject are you teaching?

SC: It's very interesting what I'm teaching. I am teaching English as a Second Language.

LS: Okay.

SC: Most likely I am the wrong person to teach English, but I am teaching it. I think that I am learning with my kids. There are so many things I strongly believe I still do not understand and do not know in the English language. But as I teach them certain things, I become more aware of them. Ah, so ---

LS: How did you become an English teacher? An ESL teacher?

SC: I applied for --- I believe it was French and Science, for someone who had a Master in Natural Resources with focus on range management, I thought I would be a good science teacher.

LS: When you came here, did you have to do the certification process?

SC: Actually, right now I am what they call an apprentice teacher. An apprentice teacher --- you know there is a kind of crisis going on with the School District of Philadelphia. They don't have many teachers.

LS: Yeah, I know.

SC: Therefore they are looking for people who have a degree so that they would hire them as teachers, apprentice teachers. And the requirement for you --- you have more or less everything that a normal teacher has. The requirement for you is to go to school --- I am talking about education, to get certified within, I believe, I thought three years. Someone told me five years. I am not sure about that.

LS: How long have you been here?

SC: This is my second year. This is my second year. Before working for the School District of Philadelphia, I worked as a drill instructor at Villanova University.

LS: A what instructor?

SC: A drill instructor. Basically, that was with the French department. A drill instructor --- my job was to go over things that kids could not understand, or students could not understand with their regular instructors. That was in the French department. So I think I met with them at least twice, I believe it was twice or three time a week. I don't recall exactly. And we'll go over the things they did with the instructors they couldn't understand. So I would say more or less it was kind of tutoring, but to make me feel important, they called it "drill instructor." [SC laughs]

LS: My husband used to teach at Villanova. What's it like teaching here? I mean, it's kind of interesting, obviously ---

SC: It's very challenging. It's very challenging. You know, you have to love the job in order to do it.

You have to love it in order to do it. Teaching --- moneywise doesn't pay. My paycheck is --- the net is less than eight hundred dollars. Teachers put up with many, many things and many people do not understand that. But whenever I take a look at my kids and see the things they are going through, I always tell myself as long as my child, my student, can get up in the morning and walk into my classroom, as far as I am concerned, he or she passes that class. Because these kids are putting up with a lot. We even didn't have drinking water here. Two or three days I got two gallons of water from Mr. X [Exarhoulakos], who is the head of this department. So there are many things that kids have to put up with and I really don't think it's fair at all.

LS: Tell me what it's like, because you obviously live in an area that is so terribly different from this part of Philadelphia. But when you see what kids --- what the conditions that are here and what kids have to go through, does it remind you at all of being in Mauritania or is it completely different?

SC: No, I don't think about Mauritania. I am in America and I expect the first country in the world to give the first education to *all* its kids, without any kind of distinction.

LS: But it doesn't.

SC: It doesn't. And, you know, I was honored and I was blessed to be at the Renaissance Weekend four times. That is where I got the honor, the opportunity, to shake hand with President Clinton, to meet many wonderful people in this country. And even during the last Renaissance Weekend, I was on the same panel as Dick Riley, who was the Secretary of Education up to January 20<sup>th</sup>, when Bush took over. I always openly told all these people that there are things going on that are not fair. And basically I get the feeling that they kind of --- they are not happy with the situation, but in order to change it, it would require a law. You have to change the whole funding system. It's not fair that we spend about \$6,500 to educate a child within the School District of Philadelphia. At the same time, all you have to do is to drive away a little bit, a few miles ---

LS: Across City Line.

SC: Across City Line. And see that within the same state, we are spending over \$12,000 to educate a child in Radnor. I think something is wrong and I strongly believe that the battle ground for civil right movement in this country should no longer that if Gore or Bush or anyone else should be president. It should be about education, making sure that every child in this country will get the best possible education. I find it interesting that you spoke about the fact that I was from Mauritania. Yes, I always told my kids --- since I am dealing with foreign kids here --- that they should feel very lucky to be here in this country. When I went to school in Mauritania, I didn't have electricity. I didn't have running water inside the classroom. I didn't have a school bus to take me to school. I didn't have tokens. There are so many things that I see our kids here at Bartram High have that I did not have over there. But in order for me to be a little bit upset about the situation of the some three thousand kids we have at Bartram, in order

to be able to do that, I have to forget about my Mauritania aspect. I have to compare them to the high schools in the suburb.

LS: Right.

SC: You see? It's ---

**[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]**

**[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]**

SC: So I was saying that as long as we don't have adequate funding, the situation will be bad for the kids. Because the basic thing we need to understand --- and I have said this many times and some people think that I am completely wrong. I remember saying at the Renaissance Weekend and some experts said that no, it's not about money, there are some other things going on. They were just afraid to use the word "mental problem" but I strongly believe that what many people think. I strongly think that the only way to solve the crisis of education we have in inner cities in America would be to face the reality. And to face the reality means to recognize that it's about fight against poverty. Teachers are complaining about parents not paying attention. The school board is blaming teachers for getting away with many things. The teachers union is blaming the school board for not doing everything they should be doing. Parents are blaming the teachers for not doing the right thing. I think that if we recognize that we are facing a poverty problem, that our schools are not funded adequately, if we understand that parents could be poor to a point where instead of focusing on the education of their kids, instead of figuring out how kids are performing at school, these very same parents could be poor to the point where their focus number one would be, "What should I do to put food on the table for the kids?" So if we are able to solve that poverty problem, to make sure that there good jobs in the neighborhood, to make sure that schools are funded in the right way --- just like the way we are funding schools in the suburbs --- I mean, give them more money in the city schools --- maybe that should help take care of the problem. Some people would say, "You know, even in the suburbs we have that problems, some of our kids are on drugs." But the kind of problems our kids are facing, I really don't think that kids in the suburbs are facing. These are tough issues.

LS: What's your rapport like with the foreign students and particularly African students? Do you feel like you have a special connection to them?

SC: Oh no, even yesterday --- yeah. yeah. I do have a special connection to them.

LS: With all foreign students or with African students?

SC: With all foreign students. Because --- and I tell them this on a regular basis --- your parents came here because they wanted a better life. I came here to get married and to get a better life, so I strongly believe that that alone is a strong connection. The thing that has disappointed me about my students, and I told them this just yesterday, particularly for my African students, many of them strongly believe that since they are from Africa, and I am from Africa, whether they work or not they should still get that “A.” You see? And what I am telling them, “No, it’s not how it works. You have to work hard to deserve, to earn your A.” I always explain to them that this is a very, very competitive country. In order for you to be successful, you have to show that you can do the job. You have to show that you got the right kind of training. Because the truth of the matter, this is my country. As I told you yesterday, I am American citizen now and I am very proud of it. Being citizen by itself I consider this as an achievement, going from a Third World citizen to becoming citizen of the first country in the world. So I thank you American people for welcoming me and making me part of your country. So I was saying that for my African kids, I told them very frankly, “You need to be competitive. If you are not competitive you will not going to be successful. This is a very, very competitive country and the other thing you need to understand is that in some instances since you have an accent, your accent could work against you. Some people, not all the people from this country, but some people, as soon as you speak with an accent, the first assumption is that you cannot do the job. So you have to show them that you can do it and the only way to show them that you can do it is to get the right kind of training, to stay focused and to do everything by the book.” You see? Ah ---

LS: Do you see your African students going through any particular problems as a result of having going through the experience of refugee resettlement or having been in camps ---

SC: Yeah.

LS: --- that you could feel like you understand better than maybe some other teachers?

SC: Yeah, yeah, I do. I do. That why maybe I am one of the very few teachers here who would give the African students a second, a third or sometimes even a fourth chance for a test. Because I know some of my kids went through a very rough situation that even an adult will have hard time to handle. I have a

student who told me that her grandfather was one of the people who worked with Samuel Doe, who was the president of Liberia, that he was killed the very same moment Samuel Doe was killed and that the enemies literally took his heart from his body, came to their house, and threw it there. So I also have kids here who told me that they saw firsthand people being killed. So we have kids from Liberia, from Sierra Leone, who saw situations like this. So you always see them not only as students, but you see them as a student with a very heavy background that I strongly believe that even some adult people will have hard time to handle. That why you have some of them who are very emotional, you have to understand it. And since I am an emotional person sometimes I will just send them to the office, but in the back of my head I understand very well the situation of the young men or the young women. I do not hold against them misbehavior from time to time. I do not allow it on a regular basis, but from time to time I try to understand them. I have kids here very young who lost Mom and Dad. We have a young lady from Senegal, Mam Astou Diop, she just lost her mother, they took her body back to Senegal.

LS: Oh, that's her?

SC: Oh, yeah, Astou Diop is here.

LS: I didn't know that. I heard that she had died, but I didn't know ---

SC: Yeah, yeah. And now Astou Diop is living with her sister. I think the sister is only eighteen or nineteen. Imagine ---

LS: And she's living alone with her sister?

SC: Yeah, she's living with her sister.

LS: There's no adult?

SC: There is no adult, Mom is gone. Father was here to visit Mom, Mom died, the father took the body back. We have another young man, actually two young students, Mohamed and his brother. They lost their father here last year, they are with Mom. We have another young man from Liberia who lost his mother during this school year. So we have kids who are dealing with tough situation. So on top of the trauma they went through in their respective countries, they have to adjust with life in America, you see?



And it's not always easy for them. Some of our kids have hard time to handle themselves with African American kids. There is all this --- there is always this cultural conflict going on.

LS: And how do you deal with that?

SC: To explain to them, these are the things --- the keys to success. From time to time, I talk to my kids about these keys to success. Ah, responsibility, respect, pride, ambition, goal-setting, determination, patient --- ah, patience, knowledge, confidence, friendship, manners, and self-discipline. Self-discipline is extremely important and the most important thing I always tell my students, "You must understand that we are different. Even in Africa, we are all --- or the vast majority of African people are black people. To be black in Africa doesn't necessarily mean that we all have the same culture. We have different cultures in Africa." I said, "You understand that very well. We have over one thousand dialects in Africa. You must understand that people from this country are from different backgrounds. You must understand that it's extremely important to recognize the difference, to accept the difference, and to respect the difference. So do not expect people to act or to behave like you because we all are different, we have different backgrounds.

LS: Do you think they expect African Americans to be like them?

SC: Sometimes they are shocked, but what I am telling them is that they must understand that the African American people, too, went through a very, very tough situation. The people who are coming from war torn areas, they must understand that people in America, whether we are talking about African American people, who came through slavery, at least the vast majority of them, they went through hardship.

Whether we are talking about white people, we must understand ---and since I am teaching them American history too --- that many white people came here because they wanted to have a better life. Life for them in England was not good at all. They didn't have the religious freedom, they didn't have the freedom to do many things they wanted to do. Therefore, America was obviously the right place for them, and they also must understand that white people, for example in Georgia or in Australia, were sent to here, many of them coming straight from jails in England. So they must understand that we have all kinds of people here in this country with different backgrounds. We all are here because we strongly

believe that we can get a better life here in this country. You look at the history of Japanese Americans. They went through hardship. History has taught us what happened to them during World War II. You look at the history of Chinese Americans, who were not allowed to own property here in this country, despite the fact that they built the railroad --- that was more or less what some people believe that they were supposed to do and nothing else, uh, in the Pacific area. So I always talk to my students about this. But the interesting thing is that even within the African community, the African students I have here from time to time, uh, they have some problems. I personally was accused by my students here of favoring people from French-speaking countries. [SC laughs] Yeah, that's --- I have --- I have ---

LS: Is there any truth to that?

SC: Oh no, not at all. I see my students as students. Actually, my favorite students, actually --- I am ashamed to say this, but my favorite students, actually, are from Asia. I have kids from Cambodia. They're tough kids, they are wonderful, they do an excellent job, they listen. I have kids from Bangladesh who are very good. I have one of them who from time to time could be handful(?). And I have some kids from Africa who are good, too, but we have over one hundred people here, within the ESOL program. It's obvious --- as we say in Africa, whenever you are dealing with more than three people, some of them will be a little bit hard to handle. And these are the ones who think that I am favoring my French-speaking people. Because for them, I am from a French-speaking country, therefore I am favoring them and I am kind of against people from Liberia or Sierra Leone. There is no truth to it.

LS: Do you think that you will continue on and become certified or do you plan to do something else?

SC: I would like to get my certification. I would like to get my degree in education. Actually, I went through a tough situation with La Salle. I was denied the defense of my dissertation, that was at the University of Arizona. At La Salle University, after taking eight courses, I was disqualified from the program, ahh, because I strongly believe that actually there is, there is ---it's a legal matter going on right now. I do not feel comfortable discussing it. But I strongly believe that there was a discrimination against me. During the summer practicum, I was the only black person to take the practicum, and I was the only person who was not allowed to have the kind of preparation time that my other classmate had. We were

thirteen people. I was the *only* black person and the *only* person scheduled in such a way that I would not have that time to be ready for my class.

LS: A summer education practicum?

SC: Yeah, yeah. At La Salle University. So since it's a legal matter, I am not going to talk about it, but otherwise I would have graduated at the end of last semester or for sure I would graduate this semester because the requirement was, I believe, to take thirty-two credits, so --- but right now I am taking my classes at Temple University. I took two courses. I got two "A's." But officially I am still not admitted. I am still not accepted into the program. The last time I checked with them was yesterday. They are still waiting for the recommendation letters. And I spoke to the people who were supposed to send it and they told me that they send it.

LS: Is this a Masters program in Education?

SC: Yes, it's always Master in Education and certification. They are combined. They are combined.

LS: Well, I wish you luck.

SC: Thank you.

LS: Are you in contact with many people from Mauritania?

SC: No, I am not. I am not. I was the president of the African Students Association at the University of Arizona. And I would tell you frankly that I am kind of disappointed in my dealing with many Africans, not all of them, but many of them.

LS: Here in Philadelphia?

SC: Not in Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, I decided not to really have any contact with them. The only ones I've contacted so far are over the phone. I do not have any African friend here. Less than, less than I will say three, four weeks there was a substitute teacher from Mali who came here to substitute here for one of my colleagues, Mr. Couriyan(?), who is very sick and I am very sorry about that, he is a wonderful young man. So the substitute told me about the fact that he was from Mali, and since I am originally from Mali, we start talking. We exchanged phone numbers. I think I called him once or twice. But I never visited him and vice-versa. He also told me about the presence of another young lady who is a good friend

of one of the cousins I have in United States. So I speak to her from time to time, but the only Africans I've met so far are my students.

LS: Is that because you don't feel like you need that connection or because you're in the United States and ---

SC: I frankly believe that I am at a point where we have a different way of thinking. And, uh, I don't feel like being around a place where there will be any kind of bashing against the US because as I told you I am a citizen and I am very proud of it. I took citizenship oath and this is my county. So there are people who are not there yet and they would easily do some kinds of bashing, so --- Since in this country anyway we recognize the freedom of expression, they can say whatever they want, but I just don't feel that it will be appropriate for me to put myself in a situation where I would even listen to those kinds of statements.

LS: Are a member of any kinds of associations?

SC: Ah, no. Ah, no.

LS: What's your social group like? I mean, you're married ---

SC: My social life?

LS: Mmm-hmm.

SC: Extremely boring. [SC laughs]

LS: You're married, I mean, do you ---

SC: I am sorry to say that my day starts at usually between 6:15 and 6:30. I would take a shower. By seven o'clock I am sitting in front of my TV set. I am a political junkie. I would like to listen to the news. My wife hates it, but you ask me about any news here in this country, I would tell you --- I would even tell you who is the representative of this or that state. And who said what and why. Not only I would observe --- I would watch the news, but I would like to express my opinion about everything. That, too, is a problem with my wife. So by 7 am, I am in front of my TV set. I would watch Katie Couric and Matt Lauer, whatever they have to say. Katie is part of my family now. When she lost her husband, I sent her a card because she is in my living room every morning. [SC laughs] So, uh, but I will make sure by 7:25,

7:30 --- usually around 7:30, because I would like to watch the local news that's at 7:25. Usually by 7:30,

7:35 I'm in my car, on my way.

LS: What time do classes start here?

SC: 8:14.

LS: 8:14?

SC: 8:14.

LS: What kind of ---

SC: But teachers are supposed to be here at 8.00, but if you check the front desk you'll always find that I am here at 8:05, 8:07, 8:10, something like that. So I will come here, teach the first, second, and third period. Then for the first period I have my preparation. Between 12:00 and 12:30, I have my homeroom, my advisory, I get my wonderful African American kids. By the way, if I tell them that I am African American, they don't accept it. "You are from Africa." I said, "Yes! I am originally from Africa, but now I am US citizen. Therefore, I am African American." "No, Mister, you are not!" [SC laughs]

LS: Is your wife African American?

SC: Oh, yeah, my wife was born right here in Camden.

LS: Oh, she was.

SC: Oh, yes.

LS: So her family's here?

SC: Umm-hmm. Her mother is from ( ), Pennsylvania.

LS: So your wife must have been happy to ---

SC: Oh, yes, this is her area. She knows this --- actually, she worked for, she worked for the --- I think it was Governor Casey. Oh, yeah. This is home, this is her area.

LS: Do you socialize a lot with your wife's family?

SC: Ahh, they --- the mother is here, we speak from time to time. Her father is married to another person. He is a retired dentist, so he is in Florida enjoying himself, enjoying his retirement.

LS: Is it time for your class? [someone has entered room?]

SC: No, this is a young man from Ethiopia who is always disturbing. By the way, he's even not my student, but from time to time I give him one buck, fifty cents. He loves that. So we are talking about my schedule. After my homeroom, I have my lunch time. I after my lunch time, I have my six and seventh period. After that I go home, if I don't have class, but twice a week I have class at Temple University. From here I will drive straight to Temple University, stay there until 7:30, 7:35, then drive back home, and be at home around maybe 8:15, 8:30. I will come there a little bit tired. My wife also would like to have her time, because you have to pay attention to the wife, too. This is America, you have American woman. [SC laughs] You have to give her her time, too. You have to watch with her movies you do not like to watch. [SC laughs] So, my whole life has been a drama. Usually, by nine, I would like to watch Larry King. I would sneak out to upstairs. There is another TV set there, see what Larry King has on, if it is interesting, I will stay there in the bedroom, knowing that she will be a little bit upset. But if there is nothing interesting, I will go down and act like I am really enjoying the show she is watching. So, usually by ten, I would like to go to bed. Ahh, if I haven't read the paper by then, for sure I would read it before sleeping. I will grab it with me upstairs and read it very quickly, to get out what's written there. And I really love to sleep by between 10 and 10:30. So it's a kind of very boring schedule. And during the weekend, usually with my wife, we like to go to the Borders. I love country music, and since I cannot by all these wonderful country CDs, I will go to Borders, to the upper floor. I will go to the country music area and listen to different country CDs there.

LS: Do you eat Mauritanian food at all?

SC: Whenever I can eat my African food, I will eat it. Therefore I will cook for myself. And my wife wouldn't eat what I cook.

LS: Oh, she doesn't like it?

SC: No, she thinks it's too rich for her. But here, usually, I would go and eat Chinese food. I love Chinese food. They eat like us in Africa. They love rice and meat.

LS: Do you know about the Senegalese restaurant?

SC: No, I don't. As I told you, I haven't ---

LS: I gave you that directory?

SC: Yeah, you did.

LS: At Lansdowne and 61<sup>st</sup> there is a Senegalese restaurant, called Fatou and Fama. I was there yesterday.

It's very good.

SC: It's very good? Do they have *chebujian*?

LS: They have *mafe*(?)

SC: *Mafe*.

LS: *Chebujian* sometimes but since Americans don't eat as much she usually has *mafe*, *yassa*, and then she has a lot of soul food.

SC: Oh, that's interesting. I will definitely visit that place to see.

LS: Okay. [sounds of kids in the hallway] Are your students going to come in?

SC: Uh, yeah.

LS: Oh, okay. Let me just ask --- are your parents still alive?

SC: I told you my father died, but my mom is still alive, and we are right now twelve brothers and sisters.

LS: Do you support people at home? Do you send money home?

SC: Oh, definitely, definitely, definitely. That's part of Africa. You do not exist as a separate unit. You are part of a family, so you support them whenever you can. And since they believe that since I am in America, they think I own America.

LS: Of course. You could send them a million dollars home, right?

SC: [SC laughs] They think that in America, you can just walk the street and grab money.

LS: Of course, isn't that true?

SC: But you can come at 12.30 if you would like to finish the interview.

LS: Yeah, I should do that.

[Interview interrupted]

[Interview resumed]

LS: So you grew up eating rice and meat?

SC: I grew up eating rice and meat. Almost every single day for lunch.

LS: You have peanut sauce, *mafe*? That's what everyone says is the big Bambara dish.

SC: Yeah, *mafe*. I still --- when I came here, I didn't know how to cook, but, um, with time I learn. From time to time I cook it here.

LS: Do you have any trouble to get particular kinds of ingredients or is it all stuff you can get from a regular grocery store?

SC: Umm, I can --- the main ingredients like okra, peanut butter, uh, tomato --- usually can get the main ingredient from any department store.

LS: Are you religiously active?

SC: No, I am not.

LS: So you don't frequent any mosque?

SC: No. I guess the last time I even saw a mosque --- actually, I didn't even get the opportunity to enter in it --- that was last year when the father of one of my students died, a young man from Guinea. I am still teaching him. It was found that there will be a prayer on his body. So I went there with my colleague, Mr. Kurian, and we had to come back before the prayer because we thought that the prayer was --- would be done 11:00, 11:30 --- I don't remember exactly --- we had to come back for our afternoon classes, so --  
-

LS: Right. What mosque was it?

SC: I really don't remember the name, to tell you the truth.

LS: In Philadelphia?

SC: Yeah, it was in Philadelphia.

LS: Do you know there's a new Bambara mosque?

SC: Oh, that's interesting. No, I never heard about that.

LS: There is a new mosque ---

SC: Who is the imam?

LS: He's from Ivory Coast. His name is Sangare(?).



SC: Sangare(?)? Hmm, that's interesting.

LS: And he does the hutba(?) in French and Bambara.

SC: That's interesting.

LS: It's near the zoo. I think it's 42<sup>nd</sup> and Girard or something like that. They're organizing a big tabasky(?) thing. But they're inaugurating it a week from Sunday.

SC: Oh, I see. Good for them.

LS: It's, umm --- the other mosques ---

**[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]**

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

LS: I could find it for you if you are interested.

SC: Okay, no, I am not a religious person.

LS: You are not a religious person? Have you always been like that or was it when coming to the United States?

SC: No, it has been always been that way. I think, uh --- I do pray on regular basis but there are many things that I don't do. Like I eat pork, that's forbidden by Islam. I don't observe Ramadan, so I don't fast. Many of my students are surprised.

LS: Did a lot of your students --- were they observing Ramadan?

SC: Not a lot of them but some.

LS: Because that's kind of young to be doing it anyway?

SC: Yes, that's true. That's true.

LS: But when you were in Mauritania, were you required by your family to observe these things? When you were a minor?

SC: Not really. Actually, the interesting thing is that my father and my mom, they never required us to do those kind of things. To pray, and I pray here --- yes. But beside that, no. Like to force us to observe Ramadan, no. So they did not have to worry about eating pork because we don't have. [SC laughs]

LS: There were no pigs there?

SC: Yeah, so that was not a problem.

LS: You were saying before that you send money home to support your family. How do you do it? Do you do Western Union or a bank transfer?

SC: I do Western Union. And whenever I am aware of a Mauritanian going back home who knows my brother or any of my friends, sometimes I can use that channel, too. But usually ---

LS: And your brother is still out in ---

SC: My elder brother is in Nouakchott.

LS: So he can ---

SC: Oh, yeah.

LS: --- pick up the money.

SC: Mmm-hmm.

LS: I see.

SC: My elder brother is in Nouakchott, and I have another brother living there. He is an accountant with an agency there. So it's --- in Africa, at least in my culture, you as a separate unit, you as a separate unit, you do not exist. You are always part of a chain, you see? And since my father passed away, every single person inside my family should assume responsibility, and you do whatever you can based on the possibilities you have. As I told you earlier in this interview, as a teacher I am broke. But I always manage to make sure that my younger sisters who are there would at least have something that would allow them, let's say, to keep food on the table or to buy clothes, things like that. So you are always ---

LS: Is your wife understanding of that or that a kind of foreign concept to her?

SC: Yeah, it's a foreign concept to her. It's kind of foreign concept to her. But these are kind of things that --- maybe I am at fault, but I strongly believe in those kind of things that I wouldn't even accept to discuss it with her. You see? That's just how life is. I would be completely --- if I have, let's say, just what to send them --- I would send it even if that would mean that I would be broke for a week or two. They are the absolute priority. They would come before me. But, uhh --- it's, umm --- you have to do it.

LS: When was the last time you went home?

SC: The death of my father. I was there April of '99, when he passed away.

LS: Has your wife ever gone with you?

SC: Ah, no.

LS: Would you like to take her sometimes?

SC: For sure she will be there. But I don't like her to be shocked with the difference. My --- the difference between --- the standard that she is used to as an American and the African standards. She was in Africa, she was in Nigeria, and she was in Benin, so ---

LS: Was she surprised by how people live?

SC: I really don't think that she came across the ordinary life of the ordinary African man or woman.

LS: Because she was a tourist?

SC: Yeah. More or less, more or less. Yeah, you can say that. But for sure she will visit Africa with me, I don't doubt that a second.

LS: How do you fly when you go to Nouakchott? Do you go through Dakar?

SC: Ah, the last time I travel, yeah. I flew Air Afrique from New York to Dakar. Then Air Mauritania from Dakar to Nouakchott. And coming back Tunisia Air from Nouakchott to Dakar again. Then Air Afrique from Dakar to New York.

LS: One of the things in this project is that we are going to have an exhibit. It's going to open next October and we are trying to inform the public that there is an African immigrant community, which most people are aware to some extent, if only they take a taxi or whatever.

SC: Yeah, they think we all are from Nigeria, or from Liberia, or Sierra Leone.

LS: People are not --- as you know, especially coming from a country that most people have never heard of that, you know there is a high level of ignorance concerning Africa. But is there anything in particular that you would like to communicate, to have communicated to the American public about Africa or about the experience of immigration or anything like that?

SC: Basically, I would like to tell the American people that Africa is a huge continent. That Africa is three times the size of United States of America. That although we are black people in Africa, we have different cultures, different backgrounds. Africa is home to over one thousand dialects or tongues, if you want. Africa is a continent extremely rich, but also a continent of poverty since people are not getting anything from the wealth there. Africa is home to all kinds of natural resources you can imagine. We have diamond, we have gold, we have iron, we have copper, and yes, we have oil. Whenever we speak about oil, we think of Middle East. The truth of the matter is that about twenty percent of oil used in United States of America is from Africa. And this number is even going to be higher. So there are so many wonderful things there in Africa, but as also I pointed out it's a continent of poverty because the ordinary African man or woman is not getting anything from the wealth of the continent. So, without any

hesitation I would say Africa is home of the most brutal dictatorship you can think of. Therefore, the support that American people --- and since I am one of them right now --- could give to the African people is to make sure that, uh, uh --- contact your representative, contact your congressman, your senator, whoever you think is in leadership role within the community. Contact your city council member, your mayor, your governor to put a kind of pressure on African governments so that they would give --- they would accept to share the wealth with their people and they would ease up a little bit on the people who are really suffering from the situation.

LS: Do you think that immigration has transformed you?

SC: You know ---

LS: As a person?

SC: Yes, it did.

LS: In what way?

SC: Because when I went home, I would see certain things that I wouldn't believe, and my friends would tell me, "Shut up, these are the things that you left. They were here when you left."

LS: Like what?

SC: There are *so* many of them. For example --- let's take the example of small buses that we use for public transportation.

LS: Yeah.

SC: To see, for example, that the bus could be full to the point where you have people standing literally in the back of the bus grabbing something so that they wouldn't fall off. And you'd see the police officer on the street not saying anything or he would just stop them and would get maybe one or two dollars. These are things that are extremely shocking to me.

LS: Just because you'd forgotten that it was like that?

SC: [pause] Maybe there is something inside me that would like me to forget it. Maybe there is something inside me that is telling me the standards I've seen in America --- maybe *my* people, too, in Africa deserve that kind of standard or should have that kind of standard. You know --- you always wish the

best for people you know. Sometimes you even wish the best for people you do not know. Therefore maybe there is something inside me more or less in denial with what I left. And if we can lift up things a little bit that will be extremely helpful for people in Third World countries and in African countries particularly.

LS: What is it like to be married to an American? In terms of growing up, seeing a certain kind of relation between men and women and then having an intercultural marriage? Is it not been --- you were here long enough or ---

SC: I think I've been here long enough to understand that no matter what the situation is, it doesn't matter if you are married to an American woman or to an African woman. And by the way I can show some of my writings here since back home. I was kind of prepared to accept that my wife would be someone who is fully aware of her rights. That my wife would understand that this is a partnership. That she is my best friend and I am her best friend. That we are in this together. And I would frankly tell you --- and if you ask some of my friends in Tucson, Arizona, they would definitely tell you that I told them that I was sure that I was going to get married to an American woman. And so it's not like a surprise to me. I was prepared for something like that. [showing LS] This is a very old writing, by the way. This is from 1987 and I am writing about the situation of woman in Mauritania and I was not happy at all about it. The Mauritanian government tried to bring Mauritanian woman into the decision-making power and some of my own friends were making fun of it and I got extremely upset. I wrote this article about the emancipation of woman in Mauritania, "*En Emancipation Encore Freinee*", which means there is still a stop or ---

LS: ( )

SC: Exactly, exactly. [reads from article in French] [break in tape] I was always a strong supporter of ( ) other things I wrote related to what a woman should be doing. I mean, to be active participant in the development of the country. Because I strongly believe that in Third World countries, if we accept that women represent about fifty percent of the population, we cannot eliminate that much. We cannot eliminate half of the population and say that the other half is going to do the job. And even in the other

half you have to eliminate the old people who can no longer work and you have to eliminate the children who cannot work. Therefore, if we really would like to develop our Third World countries --- and I am telling them this, I told them that while I was one of them and I am still telling them this right now --- you cannot say that about twenty to twenty-five percent of people will assume the development of the whole country. You have to open up doors for women.

LS: Mmm-hmm.

SC: And that has always been my position. But what I find interesting is that despite all the things I strongly believe in my head, things I wrote about, when I came here in this country many people didn't really think that I was that feminist. Some people thought that I was following the right wing.

LS: Why? From what you did or what you said or they made an assumption?

SC: I think there are things that I did not fully understand. I was completely ignorant. I must tell you that. There are things, there are things I did not understand about America. For example, I used to oppose affirmative action. And right now, even if I hear someone opposing affirmative action, I would easily insult the person because I think the most important experience --- the most important learning experience that I've had has been to teach at Bartram High. If I look at my students, knowing that there are certain basic things they do not have, if these student can make it to the graduation, to tell them on top of that you have to compete for the spots with kids from the suburb, that we are going to eliminate affirmative action, that's not fair to them. So I was ignorant when I opposed affirmative action then at the University of Arizona. And I am also opposed to abortion. I haven't changed my mind about that. And that's also is not very popular with my female friends. They think that I am just another pig. [SC laughs] Ah, there are ---

LS: Does that have a religious base?

SC: No, no, no, no. It has *nothing* to do with my religion. I just, I just, I just, I just see a fetus as person. That's --- there is nothing I could do about it. I just strongly believe that it's a stage of development and we all going through. And I haven't changed my mind about it. Even in the case of incest, I think that abortion should be okay. But even saying okay in the case of incest, I am still feeling guilty.

LS: But what about when you see these young students pregnant?

SC: It's very sad, it's extremely sad. It's extremely sad. As a matter of fact, I believe that last year we had a student who got a baby. Before that her sister had a baby. It's extremely sad. Something must be done. I fully understand the right of women to have full control over their body. I am just saying that I personally do not like it. But I do have a full understanding about people who are against abortion. That is the bottom line.

LS: That's interesting. Tell me just before we end here, because I know your class is going to come --- what do you miss most about Mauritania?

SC: My mother.

LS: Anything else?

SC: She was very strong woman who raised thirteen kids. And I miss my father, who is no longer alive. I miss my younger sisters, my brothers. I miss friends that I grew up with.

LS: Anything besides people? Anything about the way of life?

SC: I miss, I miss places I grew up in, places I used to see, go around. A lot of memories, whether I am talking about my elementary school, my secondary school. These are memories, but I am in America. I am very glad to be here. It's a great country.

LS: What about the way of life? Do you ever miss the pace of life or the climate or the sociability of people? Or those aren't things that matter to you?

SC: You always miss those things, but not to the point where they would overwhelm the very, very good luck I got to be living here in this country. You see?

LS: Umm-hmm. What do you miss the least?

SC: Huh. I would say the weather. When we have this, ah, kind of dust storm coming to Nouakchott. So I am not missing that at all.

LS: Would you recommend to other people to immigrate to the US?

SC: Definitely. This is the greatest country in the world and --- good life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The founding fathers of this country recognized that long time ago. I think it's still true. And I think anyone who can do it, should definitely do it. That's the bottom line.



LS: Would you help people to do it, if you could?

SC: If I can, respecting all the laws of the country, why not? Whenever you can help a child, a mother, a father, a young man or a young woman to move from whatever bad situation he or she is in to a better life, why not? You should definitely do it and I think American people are already doing it throughout the world and we are very thankful.

**[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]**