

“I was Born in the Bush!” Migration, Adventure and Home Politics in the Diasporic Life of a Gambian Diamond Dealer

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‘From the bush to the world at large’ is the best expression to summarize the life history of Solo Darboe – a 75 years old Gambian diamond dealer (and one of the magnates of post-independence Gambia) – as presented by Solo himself during our 2008 conversations. Born in a small agricultural settlement of the Upper River Gambia – as he proudly remarked by asserting “I was born in the bush” - Solo travelled for almost fifty years. Following the developments of the diamond trade, he lived in Sierra Leone, Congo Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Antwerp, Monrovia, Tel Aviv, and Angola. Involuntarily, the expression I used also echoes Donald Wright’s seminal work – *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa* (2004) – which first accounted for the historical impact of globalization on the River Gambia (indeed a century long node of commercial, cultural and social networks expanding towards Europe, America and the Sahara). Unlike Wright, I am not so interested in exploring how global connections incorporated the River Gambia and transformed local communities. I would rather like to underline the creative and dynamic reaching out to the world played by Solo and other members of his generation from the 1950s on. In so doing, I mean to show how diaspora bonds with the home country long predate the discussions on migrants’ remittances, co-development projects and political participation which have been engaging transnational approaches to migration from the 1990s. Solo and his diasporic fellows significantly invested in national politics while their conception of ‘home’ – or more precisely of what they, their families and The Gambia were to become in the future - was significantly shaped by their experiences abroad. Even the study of a single life history, and from a “very small place” like The Gambia, can help pulling out African experiences from the world history corners in which they are too often constrained.