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Drammeh, Sheikh Moussa

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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Jane Edward, Dr. Benjamin Hayford, and Kojo Ampah
Interviewee: Sheikh Moussa Drammeh
Transcribed by: Michael Kavanagh

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is November 3rd, 2009 and this is an Oral History interview with the Bronx African American History Project. We are here today to interview Sheikh Moussa Drammeh, who is an important leader of the Islamic community in the Bronx. Conducting this interview will be Dr. Jane Edward, Dr. Benjamin Hayford, Kojo Ampa and Dr. Mark Naison. So, Sheikh Drammeh – we always begin by asking people to spell their name and give their date of birth.

Sheikh Moussa Drammeh (SMD): Okay. Sheikh Moussa Drammeh. S-H-E-I-K-H M-O-U-S-S-A D-R-A-M-M-E-H. February 4th, [19]62.

MN: We also always begin by asking people to tell about their families. Where did you grow up and could you describe your family history?

SMD: I was born in Gambia, a town bordering Senegal, called Tendrami Joka(sp) or you call it [unclear]. My mother is Gambian. My father is Senegalese. So, I went to school in Senegal and pretty much, that's it.

MN: What language did you grow up speaking?

SMD: Wolof.

MN: Wolof. Did you learn Wolof in school or what language did you speak in school?

SMD: No, everybody speaks Wolof in the area in which I grew up because even though in Gambia, English is the official language, local languages are more nationalized...

MN: Right.

SMD: ...and there are areas in which pretty much one particular language dominates all. In my case, Wolof was the dominant language that almost everybody uses Wolof, even if they have other languages

MN: Right. Was true in the schools?

SMD: No. Most of our schools then were madrasas so, you know, the teachers and the students, everybody uses Wolof language. Even writing letters and everything was done in the Arabic letters but Wolof language.

MN: Arabic letters and Wolof language?

SMD: Yes, so everything is done through Wolof language.

MN: So, you were educated in the mosque?

SMD: Yes, yes, the madrasas.

MN: The Madrasas?

SMD: Yes.

MN: And how old were you when you began school?

SMD: Six years old. Most of us began our fourth year of school when we turn six. Seven becomes mandatory. Between six and seven, yes.

MN: And, how far did your education go in, what is the term, madrasas?

SMD: Madrasas. Madrasas education is first to memorize Koran. After memorization of Koran, then you begin to go deep into the Islamic studies which you will lead you to Arabic language. I went as far as completing Koran four times. I am going through the final stages of memorizing it but it was not completed because I got into business to make money. Money took over—pretty much, I guess.

MN: Do you have any other schooling other than Madrasa?

SMD: No. Nothing.

MN: Do they teach mathematics and science in the Islamic schools [madrasas]?

SMD: No. They do not teach math. What they normally teach when you reach certain educational level is the Islamic science, which all surrounds the Koran and Islamic studies. That is why you see a lot of Islamic scholars but they may not have math or even science background because most of the education surrounds the Koran, Islamic studies and Arabic language.

MN: What was the economic base of your family? Was this an agriculture region? A city? How did people support themselves in that community?

SMD: It was purely agricultural life that surrounds the whole area. People depend on the agricultural production and do their feeding, their business, [and] their bartering system. All life depends on the agricultural gain or, I would say, loss.

MN: And, what was the major crop?

SMD: The major crops in Gambia and Senegal up until today are peanuts, rice, sorghum and millets.

MN: Were these produced for world market, for export, or more for internal use?

SMD: While I was there [Gambia and Senegal], my knowledge of the world market was not there. But now I know the peanuts that we grow and the millets are being exported mainly to European countries – to a point where even the farmers themselves don't have enough food to eat.

MN: Wow. Did your family own their own land?

SMD: Everybody, almost everybody, owns more land than they can cultivate because we live in villages that are not far from the forest and land is not our problem. But, the agricultural tools or machinery we never had.

MN: So you didn't have tractors?

SMD: No, you have these small tractors that are very small. I mean, not efficient to do anything.

MN: When you were growing up, did you imagine that you were going to be someday in the United States? Was this a dream of yours?

SMD: Not in the beginning – because in the beginning I didn't know of the United States. But later on there were people that grew up in my village that went either to the Middle East or went to Ivory Coast because Ivory Coast was one of those countries that even though it was next door to us. But, a lot of Senegalese were going there [Ivory Coast] and Gabon and later on France and Italy and then the later part of my schooling, America became the destination of choice. For the longest, my dream was to come to America at any cost. [Laughs].

Dr. Jane Edwards (JE): You talked about the Wolof language. Are there other languages spoken in Gambia, other than Wolof?

SMD: In Gambia, there are many languages but I think the four or five main ones are Fulani, Mandinka, Jaha [Jola] and Wolof and Sereer. I think these are the five main languages in Gambia and Senegal. There are other languages, probably thirty plus other languages

MN: You said at a certain point you became more interested in business. What business opportunities were there in your town?

SMD: The most successful business then was the green tea and sugar [business]. Everybody drinks tea three times a day, even today. Therefore people need to get to the tea and the sugar. That was the business of choice for most people. And, what made it very profitable was that in Gambia there was no duty—it was duty free. And in Senegal, the same tea that you [would] pay one hundred dollars in Gambia, in Senegal, it would be more than one thousand dollars. That was the difference. It was so huge that people used to risk their lives, even though they were

shooting [s], you know, with the customs agents. But, people risk their life to go to Gambia to get tea and coffee and sugar and bring it to Senegal and become very happy businessmen. That is what I was doing too.

JE: So, the tea was grown in Gambia?

SMD: No, it's a China tea—China's green tea. Because [of] the Africans in the Middle East, everybody uses China's green tea.

MN: How did you get a hold of the Chinese green tea?

SMD: Because they were import/exporters that would go and bring them from China and from different part of the world and then retail them – or sell them – or sell to the other wholesalers – or wholesale to the retailers.

MN: How old were you when you started going into business for yourself?

SMD: About ten years old.

JE: That was early!

MN: Ten years old?

SMD: About ten years old.

MN: And how did you find somebody to do business with you?

SMD: Well, it doesn't matter which country you go to West Africa, West Africans are entrepreneurs. Anything that is sellable, you find a man or woman to sell it to you. [All laugh]. Finding an entrepreneur to show you how to begin your entrepreneurial career is not difficult. Everybody is entrepreneurial. Even if they are farmers, they still have some type of entrepreneurial spirit aside. For me, it was not difficult.

JE: Did you get any support from your family, like your Father or your Mother?

SMD: Actually, my Mom died when I was about four years old. My Father died when I was about nine, ten. That's when I really begin to focus more on the business side while I was in school all the time.

MN: Did you have other relatives who took care of you when your parents passed away?

SMD: Well, yes. As usual, in Africa it takes a village to raise a child. The whole village is extended family members. Your father died, you move to your uncle's home. In some cases, if my Mom was alive, my Mom will be married to my Father's younger brother. That's how it works. And you merge your families and everything continues on. We briefly moved to our Father's younger brother, but the lifestyle there is that you become independent because you fend for yourself. The little tip is not that I had become so successful that I even support the adults. You're there as one of the members but when you are not being supported by anybody.

MN: Right. How old were you when you took your first trip abroad to another country and then Gambia?

SMD: Well, Senegal and then after that was to New York. I was twenty four years old.

MN: Did you have friends or relatives in New York?

SMD: I had – I believe it was three or four or five months prior to my arrival, there was another guy that spent about a year in my village. When I came, he was already here, five months prior. That was the only person. Then, when I came, later on I found out that I had distant relatives – distant, distant relatives and some of them are still here.

MN: Right. In your village, were their people that were receiving remittances from people in other countries? Was this something in your village – that they had relatives abroad?

JE: Did they send money back to...?

SMD: No. What happened from where I came from, most of us began to migrate in the late eighties. I was one of the first individuals to actually leave the area. There were not many people.

MN: So you were like the pioneer?

SMD: One of them, yes.

JE: When was that?

SMD: That was 1986.

JE: Okay.

MN: You came to New York?

SMD: I came August 27th, 1986. [Laughter]

MN: And which borough did you move to?

SMD: When I first came, of course JFK is in Queens, they took me to Brooklyn. [Laughter]. I spent fewer days there, and then I came to Harlem. I believe I spent at least a year in Harlem. 109 and Third Avenue.

MN: Right.

SMD: And 111 and Third Avenue. From there, then I move to Parkchester ever since.

MN: How did you support yourself when you first came to the United States?

SMD: The Senegalese community is caring – and I don't know about all the immigrants. I don't even know about all the Africans but I know the Senegalese in particular. Most of the Gambians carried there communal spirit in supporting the new member. Until now, when you come from Senegal, for example, they will find you a home. They will get your proper clothing and they will get you start up capital. Whatever you do, they will get you start up capital so that you can do your business and that's why you have some of these Senegalese who come here and a couple of months later driving cab because the money for the cab insurance, license, is paid [by] the Senegalese friends or the Senegalese individuals who are already here.

MN: So you were seen as Senegalese when you came here and were adopted by that community?

SMD: Because it's the same, Senegal and Gambia is the same exact thing. The same language, the same family, everything is the same thing. Since my last days in Africa were spent in Senegal, so when I came, I pretty much came as a Senegalese.

Dr. Bernard Hayford: Senegalese passport?

SMD: No, Gambian passport – everything. And also, there were more Senegalese around than Gambians. Most Gambians began to come to the United States from 1990 onward.

MN: Right.

SMD: Senegalese began to come in the early eighties, eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five. Therefore, even a lot of Gambians would come and stay in homes that are occupied by Senegalese families.

MN: What was your first economic niche? What was the first job you got?

SMD: The first job then, for the Senegalese and Gambians, was street vending. Almost everybody that comes, the first thing you do is ... they will take you to Twenty Eighth Street and get you started with either pocketbooks or sunglasses or scarves.

MN: Twenty Eighth Street is where the suppliers are?

SMD: Twenty Eighth Street and Broadway used to be the hub for all this street vending because they use to wholesale all these types of products.

MN: Right

SMD: Now, things have changed.

MN: Where was your first street location?

SMD: My first day – my outing day in New York – they took me to Broad Street and Wall Street, right in front of the New York Stock Exchange. The person that I was with was a street vendor. I was fascinated by the traffic of people. They were walking fast and everybody carrying

their briefcase. I said wait a minute, who are these people and what are they doing. And then I said then to the person that I was with, this is where I belong. I don't know what they are doing but this is where I belong. [All laugh] And sure enough, a few years later, I was one of them. I became a stockbroker and then I was that. But that was the first outing.

MN: You became a stockbroker?

SMD: Yes

MN: Now that is a hell of a story!

SMD: The very first day I told them this is where I belong. I don't know what they are doing but they dress nice, they seem to be happy, they are walking fast. [All laugh].

MN: To make that path, from becoming a street vendor to stockbroker, did you have to get additional education?

SMD: Well, one thing that I did immediately after arriving here, I was so curious about everything. I mean, the TV, they are talking. I said I need to know what they are talking. But my education really picked up when Nelson Mandela came out of jail and they were showing him live. I needed to know what they are saying. I said, no, from now on I need to know what they are saying. I went, I got up, I went to Fourteenth Street, I bought a dictionary, which I still have. I didn't know anything. I bought a New York Times and I came home.

MN: You taught yourself English with a New York Times and a dictionary?

SMD: That – my introduction to the English language was a dictionary and a New York Times when Nelson Mandela came out, that day.

MN: And your language was Wolof.

SMD: Yes but ...

MN: Did you have any other languages?

SMD: Well, yes because I spent a lot of time in Senegal. When I came here, I was fluent in French, even though I didn't go to French school.

MN: Right.

SMD: But because I was in Dakar, and I was vendor also. I also went to evening French classes in Senegal.

MN: Okay, so you did have evening classes in French?

SMD: So when I came here I was speaking French to immigration at the airport and they had to get a translator. But I could ...

MN: So you taught yourself English from the New York Times and then what – was the progression? What are some of the other jobs you got?

SMD: You name them. Just like any other immigrant. I did – security guard. I worked in a restaurant. I drove a cab. I did whole lot of odd jobs.

MN: And, did you often do more than one job?

SMD: At the same time?

MN: Yes.

SMD: I only did that once. That was when I was working at a restaurant at the same time, learning to become a real estate agent.

MN: When you made these transitions, were there other people from Senegal who helped you with the transition or did you figure out these transitions for yourself? Let's say, you are becoming a real estate agent. How did you do that?

SMD: When – 1990 – the Wolof-speaking Gambians and Senegalese I would count in my hand who could really navigate in New York. There were very few competent English-speaking Wolof speakers. I became interested in real estate because the Senegalese and Gambians couldn't

find an apartment. But I say, wait a minute. Everybody get apartment. Why can't these people get an apartment? They are discriminating against them. I didn't know. I say, why do these people get apartments? Then they directed me to a real estate office, which is right behind us. One day, I went there and I told the broker, I want to be able to help my people find an apartment. What do I do? And, pretty much that's my introduction into becoming a real estate agent.

MN: How did you get into Parkchester? How did you end up getting your first apartment in this development?

SMD: Well, when I became a real estate agent there, then apartments and homes were no longer a problem to find because I had access to the inventory. The first apartment that I got in Parkchester actually came from an owner who used to be partnered to this real estate agency where I worked. It was not difficult – they were not any qualifications because he already knew who I was, except he didn't know how poor I was. [All laugh]

MN: Now, the movement into being a stockbroker, did this also involve working with the Gambian-Senegalese population?

SMD: No

MN: This was a more general –

SMD: Actually, even in real estate, you see, the intention was to help my people. But when I began and now the reality kicks in that these people are not discriminating these Africans. The problem was that when a landlord rents an apartment, whether it's one bedroom, two bedrooms or three bedrooms, to an African family or African – most of them were bachelors. Four people or three people, a month later you have twenty five Africans there. This becomes a burden and these people [Africans] refuse to acknowledge the injustice. Then people say, well, if this is the case, I am not going to rent them, period. And, I didn't know that. I thought that they were just being discriminated. So – when I got into real estate, then I realized – I said no. My intention was to help them but I cannot be part of this really because I know that this is not right. My renting apartments to the Africans, I can count it in my hand – a v-ery, v-ery small number. I don't think it is more five apartments, then I move on now to selling homes. None of my employment really had anything to do with the Africans, per say.

MN: While you were making this remarkable progression into the American economic mainstream, what was your involvement in the religious communities in New York City?

SMD: You know, one thing that has n-ever, e-ver stopped, not even for a brief moment is my religious activism. When I was eight years old, I organized the first community clean up. From then until now, I've always been part of some type of religious activity.

JE: So you organized that in the Gambia?

SMD: In the Senegal.

JE: Okay.

SMD: When I came, there were Senegalese families. I will say a Senegalese family had just bought a one family home in Brooklyn and they found it – an association – a Sufi association. They used to meet there every Sunday and everybody come. The Africans, the African Americans, the Jamaicans and it was one of the most – African things I was [part of] out of Africa, where you have everybody come and cook a lot of food and eat and really get to know each other. And, from day one, I was involved. I was involved, and I believe two years later, there [were] some challenges in the community, where some people wanted to branch out, some people thought that maybe the people in charge were not doing what they were supposed to be doing and just like the normal bickering of an organization. One night, the leader of the group

went to Senegal and behind him, they had a gift from Senegal. They met this meeting – they met this man who is the leader like the devil – the worst devil. From that night, I said to myself, I can no longer be part of this because to me, this is not right. I knew the man's heart and what the man's doing. I witnessed the meeting and what they were saying about him, so I distanced myself from them. Immediately, I reconnected with another group until now, that also had just formed. I think about four or five Senegalese and Gambian guys who used to meet at one of the member's apartment. What they did was to go out in the community and raise funds and then bring it to the meeting every first Tuesday. When they come, they will just ask, who knows who is in need of funds. They don't even necessarily be African or anything and then people say, well, I was told this – okay, I have the number, the address – and if [one] thousand was raised and ten people need it, a hundred dollars each. That until now is still going and we were able to move from that in forming a corporation. And, through that, we bought a building [on the] next block – 2044 Benedict Avenue. That mosque is still going and collection is still going. Everything is still going. I have never stopped, not even once, participating in Islamic activities.

JE: What is the name of the group that you formed or it doesn't have a name?

SMD: The African Islamic Center.

JE: Okay.

MN: It's called the African Islamic Center?

SMD: Yes. They [are] right there. 2044 Benedict Avenue.

MN: Are most of the people involved Senegalese and Gambian?

SMD: Most of them are. I would say eighty percent Senegalese, ten percent Gambian, and five percent Guineans.

BH: So, at the New York Stock Exchange, did you Madrasa education back in Gambia work for you or work against you in any way?

SMD: No. It worked for me for simple reason that it give me the faith to know that if I want to do it I could do it. What the Madrasa background gives us is the boldness to go after even things that you don't have experience. When I went to Wall Street, I had no clue what [the] stock market was or anything. But, just like what I did with real estate. I just said, I will open an Islamic bank. Then, I begin to meet people and – they asked me what is my background and I said nothing. They said, you're crazy – what are you thinking, a bank? You don't even know what bank – what a bank does, whatever. Then, one day, I met an investment banker. A Pakistani investment banker, I would say a successful one. I sat down with him, and he said, let me tell you. You know what, I know you are not crazy, but I know you are clueless about this but I will give you some advice. I want you go – buy, I think, Wall Street Journal or New York Times. They have sections where people advertise to become a stockbroker. They will teach you how to toll-call and from there you will learn your way. From there, you will learn what bank and banking is. That is what I did [He laughs]. Bought the paper; I kept calling and [they kept] asking do you have M.B.A.? I said what is MBA? [Everybody laughs] They have this thing and that thing. Until I reach out to this guy, by the name of David Farshod. I said I am calling because I want to become a stockbroker and open a bank. He said okay. [He] talk [ed] and talk [ed]. I said okay. He said come, come! He thought it was a joke. I went, sat down with him and he thought everything was [a] joke. But, it's okay, tomorrow you come on by. I'll pay you hundred forty dollars a week. I said good! The next day, I came and I began. [Everybody laughs]

MN: So you began in his company?

SMD: His company – toll-calling and that's it [he laughs]. The rest is history. Three years later, I open my own investment bank on Wall Street.

BH: You opened your own investment bank?

SMD: Sahara Associates

MN: Wow! Sahara Associates.

SMD: On 80 Wall Street.

MN: Is it still there?

SMD: No because I left to come here.

MN: And, the company is still there?

SMD: No. The requirement of maintaining licensing and funds and whatever is too much. I really wanted to do this thing. I wanted to open an Islamic school so bad. I said, whatever it takes, including closing my office and that's what I did.

MN: How long ago did you do that?

SMD: 2000

MN: 2000?

SMD: Since 2000, we're here with the school. But what I did when we came here, I used my expertise to organize the first Islamic credit union here in the Bronx, which is the fourth in the state which is approved. The goal now is to be able to establish Islamic banking, by way of Islamic credit union.

MN: So, you have an Islamic Credit Union in this community?

SMD: Approved, but have not been in operation because of – we're undergoing facility renovation and stuff like that.

MN: And, it would operate out of this center?

SMD: Right here.

MN: How did 9/11 affect you and your community? Did you face discrimination or reverberation as a result of this?

SMD: Well, I think there has been so much written about us and 9/11. I think, we believe that we are, if not the only, one of the few Islamic organizations that never ever experienced any form of discrimination. Whether it is verbal, physical or even a phone call – never. The simple reason for it is that what we did before 9/11. We were ingrained in our community, people knew who we were. We were community minded prior to 9/11. When 9/11 came, New York Times reporters, Daily News reporters, Newsday reporters, went around the neighborhood and everybody said the same thing. We knew these people. These people were ordinary community members, and until today, that is exactly what happened. As a matter of fact, PBS – no, CBS, Channel Two, came and did a profiling of our Center and another Islamic school in Brooklyn. The largest Islamic school in Brooklyn called Al-Noor.

MN: Yes, I know that.

SMD: Al-Noor and our school is only other school. They did a profiling and they saw Al-Noor with security guards, surveillance cameras and fence and everything. Our school people [were] working, disciplining, playing outside, doors are open, no security, nothing. The question was how same Muslim community, but this one is trying to protect itself, the other one is just like business as usual. We never had any problem with it ever. As a matter of fact, we unfortunately, as they said, every tragedy brings some benefit to some people. What 9/11 did was, because that was the opening of our school, the fourth Islamic school in the Bronx, opened the same day.

BH: Same day?

SMD: Same day. That publicity went around the world and media from around the world, you name them came. Every since, we are still doing what we have been doing.

MN: In your school, are the young people from a lot of different countries?

SMD: Yes. It's a – diverse. Even though it's a small school, pretty much everybody is from a different place.

JE: Can you give some examples of countries?

SMD: Well, we have from Yemen, from Morocco, of course America, here from the Bronx, Senegal, and Pakistan, and India, and – these are the main countries. Some from Guinea and Mali – we have a student from Mali.

MN: Now, I am fascinated by the Chinese Halall restaurant across the street. Are they connected to this institution?

SMD: It's a funny question you ask. I was opening the same exact restaurant – the same exact thing. I had ten thousand Chinese menus, which I show you the sample. And, I was opening it right here, back there. Our office there was the restaurant. I had a partner. The agreement was that I would provide the facility, I would provide the management, I would provide everything and, he would provide the money. Sign everything. He put some money and we begin to work. Later on, he changed his mind. He said I want to sell my share. I'm no longer interested. I said no problem just give me some time to advertise it. We advertise it, we found a buyer. The person came and like it and bought his share, even gave him profit. Now, this new buyer, who bought half of this restaurant, also gets \$22,000 check to the contractor. They opened the place. \$9,000 to the kitchen; they came in everyday. And, then changing his mind again this time, I said no. I'm not going to – worth my time fine anything. You change your mind, you liable for completing it. I'm not going to go after you for what's left but what you have spent, that's your business. That's was the thing. But, what they did while they knew that, they went around trying to sell their share. That's when they went to this guy Moussa [He laughs]. They went downtown, talked to Moussa, told Moussa that we're opening a Chinese restaurant, same thing as the one he was running in Manhattan, come and see it, this way if you like it, you'll buy our share. Moussa came there and find the place not ready and then Moussa walked up the street and there was another Chinese restaurant, same place but not Halall. [He] talked to the Chinese guy, the guy said I'm selling mine [my share]. Moussa said, why would I buy half if I can buy the whole thing? That is enough reason. So Moussa betrayed him, bought his, kicked them out so, that is how this restaurant came about. [Everybody laughs]

JE: So it has a history

MN: Right

SMD: But everything – I'll show you my menu. Everything. Same exact thing. Same exact menu, same thing. Because I went to Moussa, several times, even with my wife. I said to Moussa come to the Bronx. They are a lot Muslims and they need Halall Chinese food. Moussa said I am not going to touch the Bronx.

MN: Right

JE: Moussa is from China or from?

SMD: Yes, from China. Moussa said I am not touching – and I said if you don't do it, I'm going to do it. He they said you do it. I went through everything. I went to Chinatown. I joined the civic organizations so that I can get access to the Chinese speaking cooks and everything. When everything is said and done, I had everything ready. [Everybody laughs] Now, Moussa finally came and bought it. That is the story with the Chinese restaurant.

MN: Are there other Hallal restaurants in this area?

SMD: Yeah, there are a lot of Bengali and Pakistani. There even African restaurants in this area.

MN: Oh, because –

JE: We should get some food. [She laughs]

MN: Are there a few African restaurants in this area?

SMD: There is one by here, Jallo Restaurant, on Westchester Avenue. The other one but they are at least one right here, not far.

BH: What about the curriculum of this school here? What do you teach here, the kids?

SMD: The curriculum of the school, the state gives you – or the state requires you to meet or exceed the standards. How you plug in what you plug in, that is up to you. All they want to know is at the end of the year, the students have achieved the educational level that the public schools or the other schools would have given.

MN: Right, with the math and reading tests.

SMD: With the math and reading tests. What we do now is we get the standards and we take and select the books that we deem are suitable to our setting and use them. On top of that, we also have the Islamic studies curriculum, which are the Quranic reading and writing, Arabic understanding, comprehension and Islamic Studies. That's what we do.

BH: What about the teachers – are they certified by the state?

SMD: Non-public schools, certification is not required but it is highly, highly recommended because the more experience the better. Because of the limited resources that we have, not all the teachers are certified, but all of them are qualified. They have Masters Degrees and stuff like that. The good thing about Muslim schools is that a lot of Muslim women are highly educated but very often you find them to be just housewives and do nothing, which means you can have them as qualified teachers and their income is now the income of about a head of a household, which is a very, very good opportunity for people like us. They can take minimum because they believe that their teaching is a contribution to the Muslim community.

BH: Is Islam a requirement to be enrolled here? Do you have to be a Muslim to be accepted?

SMD: No, you don't have to be a Muslim. You just have to accept our by-laws, just like you would go to a catholic school, just like you go to Fordham University. You can come from all backgrounds but the by-laws are the by-laws and you have to accept it.

BH: What are some of your by-laws here for the school?

SMD: Well, the by-laws meaning that, first of all, first and foremost, you have to honor that this is an Islamic school. All the practices, you must participate. It is not an 'I'm not Muslim so I cannot pray'. No. The homework in Arabic, the homework in Islamic Studies, the homework in the Quran, you have to participate fully. And all the ceremonial activities, you have to participate. And, if you accept that then [there is] no problem.

BH: Do you have any non-Muslims here?

SMD: We used to, not anymore. What we have is we have new Muslims. We have kids whose parents are new to Islam.

MN: Is there a mosque in this building or are there other mosques in the area?

SMD: There is a mosque. The mosque is back there, I will show it to you – because, you cannot take these kids to other places. You have to find a place, a Masala, where they pray, and that's what we do. Also, we have all daily prayers, five daily prayers and then we have Friday prayer ceremony so that people come from the outside

MN: How large is the entire community that uses this facility? About how many people, or on a given, let's say week, participate in your various activities?

SMD: As you can tell, you saw those political signs. We are very progressive and we are into you name it. It is a politics, social services, religious, whatever it is. The place is open to all community groups and meetings. All sorts of meetings, whether it's foster care meetings, political meetings, whatever, they celebrate, taking place here.

MN: This is a community center?

SMD: This is a community center, but everybody comes because here we have three separate organizations, under pretty much the same leadership. We have the religious corporation, and then we have the food-based corporation, and then we have the community based corporation. Each deals with particular constituents so that you will not mix religious activities with community activities because we get funding for some of our community programs from some of the politicians but they cannot fund religious activities, so they have to be separate.

MN: Right

BH: How close is this school to a Madrasa in Gambia?

SMD: What do you mean?

BH: How would you describe it – what are the differences between this school and a Madrasa, a typical Madrasa?

SMD: There is a huge, huge difference. You see, in Gambia, you concentrate on memorizing the Quran and then if you speak Arabic, then you are educated. But, which is unfortunately [a misnomer]. Here, the kids study everything. As a matter of fact, last year 100 percent of all of our students passed all the exams. In fact, two of them passed with 100 percent. That did not affect their Quranic memorization. That did not affect their Islamic studies. That did not affect anything. This is a huge difference. That is why – one of the reasons why we started the school was because we wanted to enable Muslim parents to have Islamic school in the West so that you have one stone kill multiple birds

MN: [He laughs]

SMD: You have these kids who are sent to Africa. Well, they memorize Quran but what else do they know? What else can they do? They come back here and what else can they do? Drive cabs. They do not know anything about anything else. You speak Arabic language, so what? It's a language. You can't function in the Bronx with only knowing Arabic language. Here, we have a whole concept of – comprehensive way of raising kids, which is very important.

BH: What about the concept that relates to the fact that Islamic education tries to separate itself from Western education? How do you deal with that?

SMD: No, there is no separate – education is education. There are some people who try to separate it. It is not the Western education. It is sometimes, the stupidity within the society that is bad, but education is education. There is no separation. Becoming a mathematician, a scientist, expert on these subjects – it's the same thing. The discipline is where you find a huge difference. We are not going to allow our child to come with the baggie pants and texting girlfriends and boyfriends and talking bad stuff or cursing or talking to a teacher in a way that is – I can't say. The difference is the discipline, the environment, how you treat yourself, how you treat your teacher, how you treat your family – huge difference. But in terms of getting the knowledge, it is the same thing.

BH: If you were in the Gambia, they say you have to finish it – you have to quit school to go into business, right? You did back at home.

SMD: Well, because unfortunately a lot of the things are informal. You don't have to go into business because you can use also as an intrinsic type of thing. But you don't have this luxury. Now, the way they are ruining this madrasas is that it is almost seven days a week thing. Kids have no time but just to learn and learn and learn. That's why three, four, five years, they memorize Quran. But memorizing Quran is important, but what can you do with it?

BH: You pursued remembering the Quran to the detriment [unclear] the education that they need.

SMD: Yeah, when in Gambia and Senegal, when you in the Muslim world, when one memorizes the Quran ...

BH: You are educated.

SMD: You are the top. It doesn't matter whether you know how to tie your shoes.

BH: Okay [He laughs]. And how old will they be at that point?

SMD: Some of them are younger than nine years old. That's how they will cramp the Quran in your brain. Some of them are younger than nine, ten, eleven years old.

BH: Do you find anything wrong with that now that you are here? Do you see that there are real limitations [to] that education? The western education?

SMD: No. Huge [problems] because from seven to eighteen, this is a prime time to push subjects that are important. [Subjects such as] math, science and all other good things, including the Quran and Islamic studies [are important]. I don't want my child to spend the first fifteen years just memorizing the Quran. Before, this is what I believe. I thought that that was it. You memorized it, you're secure. Now I realize that there's a fallacy to that. I would not – That's why I am not doing it. My children are here. The goal is that they will be able to have all the subjects in time, including Islamic Studies and Quran – memorizing the Quran.

MN: And then go to Harvard and Yale.

SMD: No – they go to our Harvard and Yale here because our goal here is to set up an Islamic university.

MN: Oh, so you are aiming for an Islamic university after your secondary school?

SMD: Our motto is pre-K to Ph.D.

MN: W-ow!

JE: Okay. That's good.

BH: How far are you right now?

SMD: Ninth grade. [Everybody laughs].

BH: Are there any Islamic rules, customs, traditions that you have to forgo to get a school going?

SMD: No, not Islamic rules. Muslim stupid rules but Islamic, you can't change it. But of course every Muslim country may have some cra-zy ideas. For example, women should not have higher education. Women should stay home and just give birth and cook and clean. Or they say a woman should not have a leadership position. These are not Islamic rules. These are cultural roles which we try to tear down.

BH: A country like Saudi Arabia, with all the education that people have there. Most of them went to the England to go to school. The still maintain that the woman should not drive a car, go to a movie, drink alcohol, stay home with the husband...

SMD: And they own half of the property [rather] than nothing.

BH: That's right. That's right – even in New York here.

SMD: In New York here, the Plaza – all these things.

BH: How come this idea has not been triggered through them? I mean they are rich, too. How come this idea of modernizing Islamic education as a means to go through them?

JE: The problem is because how you interpret Islam. It goes back to the interpretation that is what we say because...

BH: The interpretation – that's right.

SMD: By the way, in Saudi, they are very progressive. I mean, things are changing.

BH: Jordanians, there is more salary [unclear].

SMD: I know. But, no. You have to understand one thing also. Islam is a way of the life. The way you interpret the way of life is what keeps Muslims where they are. But in terms of

progression, as he said, some of them are well educated. They are western educated individuals. But when they go to their own cocoons, they have to maintain that way of life, according to the dictums of society. It has nothing to do with Islam, per say.

MN: Now, what about the Sufi tradition. You had mentioned that your – this community in Brooklyn was connected to that. Is that's something that is significant in Senegal and Gambia?

SMD: Well, almost I would say nine out of ten Muslims in Senegal and Gambia are part of Sufi. Either nine or at least eight out of ten are Sufi. As anything in life, there are pluses and minuses. When you go to the Sufi brotherhood, you will find the most generous individuals, the most humbled individuals, the most hard-working individuals, the most communal oriented individuals. [These are] the pluses. The minuses are that Sufi is a hierarchy, just like anything else. You always have somebody at the top and you will have masses [that] will always fight for one thing. And also, there may be sometimes ago, beyond the limits in terms of praising a person or even a praising of the profits to the point where you think the profit is not a human being. They may even give it a form of God, I mean, like it's a man. Good man, probably yes, but it is a man. These are the things that you have the plus and minus. Also, Sufi, some of the Sufi followers, they could be so submerged into their beliefs that they will do whatever it takes, if the [person higher up in the hierarchy] says so.

JE: Which order is common, especially in Gambia? Which Sufi orders are common?

SMD: In Gambia, the three biggest Sufi brotherhoods are the Tijaniya, Qadiriya, and Muridiyya. I would say that ninety percent of all the Senegalese and Gambians are either Murid or Tijaniya.

MN: Could you spell those?

SMD: Murid is M-U-R-I-D. Murid. Then the movement is Muridiyya or Muridism. Tijan is T-I-J-A-N. Tijaniya or Muridiyya.

JE: This is what I got. [unclear] Tijaniya and Muridiyya and actually they name it after the leaders who first founded the movement, right?

SMD: No. Tijaniya was named years after Sir Ahmad al-Tijani. But Muridiyya is a word to be – I think in the Arabic world, what is Murid?

JE: To like.

SMD: Yes. [Muridiyya means] to like and to be submissive, I think.

JE: And I think [unclear] actually is – it came after the Al Abdul Qadir and Al-Jilani

SMD: Yes, Al Abdul Qadir and Al-Jilani. Yes, those two. But now, the Tijaniya and the Muridiyya all came out of the al Qadiriya. Qadiriya was the first Sufi order. Now, Muridiyya branched out and Tijaniya also branched out from Qadiriya. But Qadiriya is not the most known brotherhood in West Africa – I mean in Senegal.

MN: It looks like in the Bronx today there is a very significant Gambian population. How does this affect Gambia as a society that there are so many Gambian's living in New York and the Bronx? Is this helping to reconstruct or build-up Gambian villages and cities or are the people here disconnected?

SMD: The Africans were never disconnected. If you see a disconnected African, then you see a v-ery, v-ery strange African [Everybody laughs]

SMD: Disconnection is the least to describe Africans. You may not have money to send, but you don't get [disconnected]. But, in every African country – I mean I read a study recently when we were organizing our credit union – there are African countries that the remittance from the expats is a huge percentage to the GDP. Every African country benefits from the remittance that they receive from each citizen from abroad, including Gambians here in New York.

JE: Can you tell us briefly about your family here in the US?

SMD: My family. My fourth wife is there listening to you. I have three children –

BH: Where is she?

SMD: She is there. Sherina, Sherina! [trying to get the attention of his wife]

JE: [Unclear]

SMD: That is my fourth one. [He laughs]

JE: What do you mean your fourth one? [Everybody laughs]

SMD: If you going to have four [He laughs]. And then we have three kids, two girls and a boy.

BH: With her?

SMD: Yes, with her. I met her Mom in real estate.

BH: O-oh

SMD: You see. It was well worth it.

BH: I guess so [Everybody laughs]

SMD: And then later, her Mom regrets meeting me [he laughs].

MN: Is she a Muslim convert or was she brought up a Muslim?

SMD: No. She is what they call American Muslim – Muslim by name but drinks and parties with her family. They do whatever macka jakundu [unclear] they do. [Everybody laughs]

JE: What about now? Is she still doing that or has she changed?

SMD: Who?

JE: Your wife.

SMD: No, actually my wife pretty much was not part of it, or very – because when I met her, I don't know how long ago – 15 or 14 years ago – she was in school. So then we were able to get her to the right side quick. She was not affected that much. [Everybody laughs] But, her family is still messed up.

JE: Are you planning to marry more than one wife, according to Islamic traditions?

SMD: You are recording. We are in New York. I know, not far from Utah. [He laughs].

JE: Okay. Okay. You don't have to answer that.

SMD: You want me to go to jail? [He laughs].

JE: N-o, N-o

SMD: No, you asked. No – no.

JE: I know you are not going to do that. I know that.

SMD: No – no. I am not saying that. I am just saying we are in the Bronx. [Everybody laughs]

JE: Okay [Everybody laughs]

SMD: I don't want to be in Utah with Mormons and – [Everybody laughs]

MN: Right. I am fascinated by the idea of creating an Islamic university. Because, what if – who is your oldest child? Is it your son?

SMD: My daughter.

MN: Your daughter, who is fourteen?

SMD: No. Whose twelve years old.

MN: What if she reaches eighteen years old and you are not ready to create the university?

SMD: No, we are ready. It's – we are ready. We're ready. We will be ready.

MN: You will be ready?

SMD: Yes.

MN: W-ow.

BH: Would it be an [unclear] 'extended' university or an Islamic focused University?

SMD: No, just like Columbia University, just like Fordham University. The difference is the size. The same end because the picture that we have in front of us every day is Liberty University with ...

BH: Virginia...

SMD: Yes.

MN: This would involve – you would have a religious tradition but a variety of disciplines.

SMD: Absolutely. [We will have the disciplines] engineering, law, technology and medicine.

BH: You are doing great.

SMD: Thank you.

MN: W-ow.

BH: Are you committed to any other African organizations than the ones in this area?

SMD: United African Congress and then the African Union, their Foundation.

BH: United African Congress – what do you do?

SMD: Nothing. [He laughs]

MN: Is this a Bronx based or a citywide...

SMD: No. [He laughs] Actually it's a national organization. They do a whole lot of things—I do take back. No, but it's a great organization – it's eleven years old.

BH: Very recent. Eleven years old?

SMD: Yes. Eleven year organization that has dynamic individuals; a lot of potential and the goal is to provide service delivery to the Africans, continental Africans especially. Then the African Union Foundation, which holds the African Union celebration every year. At the City Council now, we are trying to set up an African Union Start Academy, which is that sign you saw there. Dr. Jan is one of our members – our contributing doctor.

BH: African Start Academy?

SMD: Yes. I want to set up a charter school where the team is African Union Team Charter School.

MN: Then you would have two schools. You would have the Islamic Leadership Academy and the African Union Star Academy.

SMD: Yes.

BH: Do all these have to be approved by the state education department?

SMD: No, the Islamic Leadership [Academy] is already approved – we are already approved. Everything is done. It is just time. This school is a charter school. A charter school is a publically funded school, not a big deal.

BH: Where do you plan to retire? Do you plan to go back to Africa or ...?

SMD: No. Muslims we don't retire [JE laughs] because we have different stages – three stages in life. You have the education period, the productive period and then transmitting your wisdom [wisdom] and expertise period, which is the final stage. You can't retire.

BH: Do you plan someday to go back to Africa to live there?

SMD: Well, one thing – I don't know. That is something that I really don't have the answer. All I know is that I will never cut off my connections and ties to the continent. If building becomes my friend, I can perhaps develop some things there. There are homes and businesses and schools there. But, when that will be, I don't know.

BH: How often do you go back and forth? How often do you go back home?

SMD: I have never been back home.

BH: Never been back home?

SMD: No.

MN: Are you in touch with the problems in Senegal and Gambia?

SMD: Every second, every day.

BH: Where do you get this information from?

SMD: Telephone, friends going back and forth, family members – everything.

Dawn Wallace: I am at the end of this tape. I could just change tapes—

MN: I think we could – this has been amazing. I want to thank you for an absolutely extraordinary interview. I am so glad we have it on video tape because we are going to show it in college classes. I think you have told us a great deal about your experience, but also about Islam and also the way you work in this community, which is truly extraordinary. Your vision of education [is remarkable]. I feel honored to have been able to give you this forum.

BH: I am very impressed with your personal drive to reach any level.

MN: Thank you very much.