

# Omar Blondin Diop: Seeking Revolution in Senegal

Wednesday 25 March 2020, by [BOBIN Florian](#) (Date first published: 18 March 2020).

**For nearly fifty years, one figure has embodied revolutionary politics in Senegal: Omar Blondin Diop, a young activist and artist who died in 1973 while imprisoned at Gorée. Our understanding of liberation movements in Africa tends to focus on struggles in colonial settings, yet Florian Bobin argues that sixty years after Senegal's independence, Blondin Diop's life, work, and legacy helps reveal what revolutionary politics looks like in a neo-colonial state.**

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In 2013, the family of Omar Blondin Diop organized [a memorial ceremony](#) for him, forty years after [his death at Gorée](#). For centuries, the island had been a major transit point for ships deporting enslaved African captives to the Americas. As part of the commemoration, his relatives installed [a portrait of him](#) in his former cell, now an exhibit of Senegal's main historical museum. The picture captured him in 1970 just after he had been expelled from France, where he had been living for a decade. When the photograph was taken, he was a 23-year old student-professor in philosophy. Like many other students at the time, he was swept into the May 1968 protests. But five years later, he was more than a radical dissident – Omar Blondin Diop became a myth. When he died in prison fourteen months into his three-year sentence for 'being a threat to national security,' authorities in Senegal claimed he committed suicide. Most had good reason to suspect he was murdered. Ever since, his family has tirelessly [demanded justice be done](#), and artists alongside activists have taken the lead in holding on to his memory.

The assassination of Omar Blondin Diop cannot be understood as an isolated incident, but as one tragic episode in a long series of tenacious acts of state-led repression in Senegal. Decolonisation in Africa has often been the story of the birth of newly independent states in the 1960s. However, the [persistence of foreign interests](#) backed by national governments became a common sight in former French colonies. Well into nominal political independence, burgeoning autocracies largely stifled revolutionary prospects of emancipation from capitalism and imperialism. We don't often hear of [resistance movements in Senegal](#) during Léopold Sédar Senghor's rule (1960-1980) because his regime successfully marketed the country as '[Africa's democratic success story](#).' Yet, under the single-party rule of the Progressive Senegalese Union, authorities resorted to brutal methods; intimidating, arresting, imprisoning, torturing, and killing dissidents [1]. Omar Blondin Diop was one of them.

Omar Blondin Diop was born in the French colony of Niger in 1946. His father, a medical practitioner, had been transferred from Dakar, the administrative capital of French West-Africa, to a small city near Niamey. He did not hold radical positions, but colonial authorities suspected him of anti-French sentiment because of his involvement with trade unionism and support of the socialist French Section of the Workers' International [2]. The metropole monitored what it labeled 'anti-French elements' because of their fear of [growing anti-colonial movements](#). Once Blondin Diop's

family was allowed to return to Senegal, he spent the better part of his childhood in Dakar. At the age of 14, he settled in France, where his father enrolled in medical school [3].

For much of the 1960s, Blondin Diop lived in France. He spent most of his secondary education in Paris, where he attended a prestigious teachers' college and pursued his study of classical European thinkers, from Aristotle and Kant to Hegel and Rousseau. There, he began frequenting leftist circles. This is a time when anti-capitalist movements in Europe drew inspiration from China's Cultural Revolution and strongly opposed American military interference in Vietnam. Usually, Africans who pursued activism in France focused on politics from their home countries. Blondin Diop, for his part, had [a foot in both worlds](#). Shortly after hearing about the Senegalese activist, radical filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard selected him to play in the movie *La Chinoise* (1967) [4]. In 1968, the 21-year-old student-professor actively partook in debates organized by far-left groups [5]. Inspired by the writings of Spinoza, Marx, and Fanon [6], he cultivated theoretical eclecticism – in and out of Situationism, Anarchism, Maoism, and Trotskyism, he never exclusively held onto one given ideology [7].

Due to his political activities, Blondin Diop was expelled from France to Senegal in late 1969. Alongside other [Senegalese comrades who had studied in Europe](#), he founded the Movement of Marxist-Leninist Youth. The grouping later gave birth to the influential anti-imperialist front *And Jëf* (To Act Together), which would be forced into hiding until the early 1980s. [Pushing back formal structures](#), Blondin Diop promoted artistic performance. He developed the project of 'a theater in the streets that will address the concerns and interests of the people,' closely related to Augusto Boal's '[Theatre of the Oppressed](#).' Expanding on art's revolutionary potential, Blondin Diop writes: 'Our theater will be a collective and active creation. Before playing in a neighborhood, we shall know its inhabitants, to spend time with them, especially the young people [...]. Our theater will go to the places where the population gathers (market, cinema, stadium). [...] It is especially important that we make whatever we can ourselves. [...] Moral conclusion: Better death than slavery' [8].

Independent Senegal was also a neo-colonial space. Senghor had initially opposed immediate independence, advocating instead for progressive autonomy over twenty years [9]. So, when he became President, he regularly called upon France's support. In 1962, Senghor wrongfully accused his long-time collaborator Mamadou Dia, President of the Senegalese Council, of attempting a coup against him – Dia was later arrested and imprisoned for over ten years [10]. In 1968, when a general strike broke out in Dakar, the [police suppressed the movement](#) with the help of French troops. By 1971, Senghor's embrace of France seemed to reach its peak with the state visit of French President Georges Pompidou, a close friend and former classmate [11]. For over a year, Dakar had been preparing for Pompidou's 24-hour stay. On the official procession's main route, authorities rehabilitated roads and buildings, attempting to 'invisibilise' the city's poverty.

To young radical activists, Senegal's reception of the French President was an open provocation. A few weeks prior, a group inspired by the American Black Panther Party and the Uruguayan Tupamaros set fire to the French cultural centre in Dakar. During the actual visit, they attempted to charge the presidential motorcade. But they were caught. Among those convicted were two of Blondin Diop's brothers. He, too, believed in direct action but was not involved in planning this attack. He had returned to Paris a few months earlier, after the lift of his entry ban [12]. Distressed, Blondin Diop decided, with close friends, to leave France to train for armed struggle. Aboard the Orient-Express, they [crossed all of Europe by train](#) before arriving in a Syrian camp with Fedayeen Palestinian fighters and Eritrean guerilleros. Their plan was to kidnap the French ambassador to Senegal in exchange of their imprisoned comrades [13].

Two months into military training, Blondin Diop and his comrades left the desert for the city. They were hoping to garner support from the Black Panther Party, which had briefly opened [an](#)

[international office in Algiers](#). A split within the movement, however, forced them to reconsider. After swinging by Conakry, they moved to Bamako where part of Blondin Diop's family lived. From there, they reorganized.

In Novembre 1971, the [police arrested the group](#) days before President Senghor's first state visit to Mali in over a decade. Intelligence services had been monitoring them for months. In Blondin Diop's pocket, they found a letter mentioning the group's plan to free their imprisoned friends. Extradited to Senegal, he was sentenced to three years in prison. For the more significant part of their days at Gorée, detainees were not allowed to leave their cells. To minimize interaction, experience of daylight was restricted – half an hour in the morning, another half hour in the afternoon. Days became nights, nights were endless, and torture was the norm.

Omar Blondin Diop was reported dead on 11 May, 1973. He was 26 years old. The news came as a bombshell. Hundreds of [young people stormed the streets](#) and graffitied the capital's walls: 'Senghor, assassin; They are killing your children, wake up; Assassins, Blondin will live on.' From the very beginning, the Senegalese state covered up the crime. Going against official orders, the investigating judge started indicting two suspects – he had discovered in the prison's registry that Blondin Diop had fainted days before the announcement of his death, and the penitentiary administration had done nothing about it. Before the judge had time to arrest a third suspect, authorities replaced him and closed the case [14]. Every May 11 until the 1990s, armed forces would surround Blondin Diop's grave to prevent any form of public commemoration.

For decades, Omar Blondin Diop has been [a source of inspiration for activists and artists](#) in Senegal, and elsewhere [15]. In recent years, exhibitions, paintings, and movies have revisited his story – one which sadly resonates with contemporary politics. The authoritarian methods deployed by Senegal's current administration illustrate how [impunity feeds off of the past](#). President Macky Sall's regime has repeatedly sought to [suppress freedom of demonstration](#), [embezzle public funds](#), and [abuse of its authority](#). So long as governmental accountability serves no other purpose than an attractive concept to international donors, practices from the past are bound to live on. In Senegal today, people are still [imprisoned for demonstrating](#); activists like [Guy Marius Sagna](#) are time and again intimidated, arrested, and [unlawfully detained](#). In this context, the state has unsurprisingly refused to [reopen Omar Blondin Diop's case](#). But as his family's saying goes: 'No matter how long the night is, the sun always rises.'

**Florian Bobin's research focuses on post-colonial liberation struggles from the 1960s and 1970s in Senegal. This article is by no means a finality, but one contribution within a much larger biographical research project. It has been made possible thanks to the precious time and resources of Omar Blondin Diop's family members, friends, and acquaintances, as well as activists and researchers. Sincerest acknowledgments to: Dialo Diop, Cheikh Hamala Diop, Alioune Sall 'Paloma', Ousmane Blondin Diop, Pape Konare Niang 'Niangus', Alymana Bathily, Jean-Claude Lambert, Omar Blondin Diop Jr., Mareme Blondin Diop, Khaly Moustapha Leye, Roland Colin, Antoine Lefébure, Gilbert Vaudey, Bertrand Gallet, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, Marc-Vincent Howlett, Patrick Talbot, Marie-Angélique Savané, Aziz Salmone Fall, Karim Ndiaye, Papalioune Dieng, Ndèye Fatou Kane, Kibili Demba Cissokho, Bara Diokhane, Barka Ba, Majaw Njaay, Khouma Gueye, Alhassane Diop, Hugues Segla, Fatimata Diallo Ba, Vincent Meessen, Pascal Bianchini, Françoise Blum, Martin Mourre, Omar Gueye, Christelle Lamy, Leo Zeilig, David Morton, Tristan Bobin.**

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**P.S.**

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**Footnotes**

[1] Research on revolutionary politics in Senegal under Léopold Sédar Senghor's rule is still underway. Over the past decade, a significant number of works have deepened our understanding of the period. As follows, a list of major ones: Pascal Bianchini, "[The 1968 years: revolutionary politics in Senegal](#)" (*Review of African Political Economy*, 2019); Ibrahima Wane, [Chanson populaire et conscience politique au Sénégal. L'art de penser la nation](#) (Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 2013); Roland Colin, [Sénégal notre pirogue : au soleil de la liberté](#) (Présence Africaine, 2007); Roland Alassane Diagne, [Momsarew ou le pari de l'indépendance](#) (2014); Sadio Camara, [L'épopée du Parti Africain de l'Indépendance au Sénégal \(1957-1980\)](#) (L'Harmattan, 2013); Mactar Fofana Niang, [Trajectoire et documents du Parti Africain de l'Indépendance \(P.A.I.\) au Sénégal](#) (Les Éditions de la Brousse, 2015); Pascal Bianchini, "[Les paradoxes du Parti africain de l'indépendance \(PAI\) au Sénégal autour de la décennie 1960](#)" (2016); Ousmane William Mbaye, [Président Dia](#) (2012); Omar Gueye, [Mai 1968 au Sénégal, Senghor face au mouvement syndical](#) (Éditions Karthala, 2017); Abdoulaye Bathily, [Mai 68 à Dakar ou la révolte universitaire et la démocratie. Le Sénégal cinquante ans après](#) (L'Harmattan, 2018); Françoise Blum, [Révolutions africaines : Congo, Sénégal, Madagascar, années 1960-1970](#) (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014); Françoise Blum, "[Sénégal 1968 : révolte étudiante et grève générale](#)" (*Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2012); Bocar Niang and Pascal Scallon-Chouinard, "['Mai 68' au Sénégal et les médias : une mémoire en questions](#)" (*Le Temps des médias*, 2016); Yannek Simalla, [Sénégal contestataire](#) (2017-2020); Amadou Kah, [De la lutte des classes à la bataille des places : le destin tragique de la gauche sénégalaise](#) (L'Harmattan, 2016).

[2] This information was provided by Dialo Diop (brother of Omar Blondin Diop) in conversation with [Cases Rebelles](#) (9 May, 2018), and [Omar in Memoriam](#) (11 May, 2018).

[3] This information was provided by Cheikh Hamala Diop (brother of Omar Blondin Diop) in conversation with Florian Bobin (12 July, 2018 & 4 July, 2019).

[4] Actress and author Anne Wiazemsky describes Blondin Diop's encounter with Jean-Luc Godard, her partner at the time, in her novel *Une année studieuse* (Gallimard, 2012, pp. 157-158). Upon learning that the filmmaker was looking for 'a Marxist-Leninist student,' her friend Antoine Gallimard suggested casting Blondin Diop, a close companion of his. Charmed by the Senegalese activist, Godard later selected him to play Comrade X—his 'own role'—in the film *La Chinoise* (1967).

[5] Historian Michelle Zancarini-Fournel highlights Blondin Diop's role in student mobilizing in 1968 (they had crossed paths a few times) in her piece 'En souvenir d'Omar' for the collective book *Étudiants africains en mouvement : contribution à une histoire des années 1968* (Éditions de

la Sorbonne, 2017, pp. 11-12). 'He probably didn't go much to class that year, but he was at all the debates organized by far-left political groups,' she writes.

[6] This information was provided by Alymana Bathily (a close friend of Omar Blondin Diop) in conversation with Florian Bobin (9 July, 2019).

[7] Alioune Sall 'Paloma' (a close friend of Omar Blondin Diop) insists on the necessity of understanding Blondin Diop as a complex, multi-faceted being, in [his testimony](#) for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his friend's death (10 May, 2013).

[8] Artist Vincent Meessen published Blondin Diop's 'Urban Theater Project' (circa 1970) in his artist book [The Other Country](#) (Sternberg Press, 2018, pp. 38-39).

[9] This information was provided by Roland Colin (chief of staff for President of the Senegalese Council Mamadou Dia, 1957-1962) in conversation with Étienne Smith and Thomas Perrot for [Afrique contemporaine](#) (2010, p. 118).

[10] Since Senegal's independence in 1960, President of the Council Mamadou Dia had been increasingly calling for decentralizing public administration and empowering peasant communities. Towards the end of 1962, tension mounted within the ruling party (Progressive Senegalese Union), between sympathizers to Senghor and Dia. Among the former, some decided to table a vote of no confidence against Dia's government. At the time, every decision went through the party first, provided that it was the only recognized political force. Dia opposed a motion he deemed illegitimate and Senghor accused him of 'attempting a coup against him.' On December 18, 1962, Senghor ordered the arrest of Dia, alongside ministers Valdiodio N'diaye, Ibrahima Sarr, Joseph Mbaye, and Alioune Tall. They were incarcerated in the arid region of Kedougou until 1974. Mansour Bouna Ndiaye (a young official within the ruling party in 1962) and Roland Colin (chief of staff for Mamadou Dia, 1957-1962) offer two thorough first-hand accounts of the 'December 1962 crisis' in their memoirs *Panorama politique du Sénégal ou Les mémoires d'un enfant du siècle* (Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1986, pp. 136-154) and *Sénégal notre pirogue : au soleil de la liberté* (Présence africaine, 2007, pp. 253-293). Colin also testified in [Archives d'Afrique](#) (Radio France Internationale, 2019).

[11] Léopold Sédar Senghor and Georges Pompidou met in 1928 at the prestigious secondary school lycée Louis-le-Grand. Maintaining a [a strong friendship](#) throughout the years, they later collaborated politically, practically non-stop, between 1962 and 1974. While Senghor was Senegal's President (1960-1980), Pompidou became France's Prime Minister (1962-1968) and President (1969-1974). When Pompidou visited Dakar in February 1971, Senghor [declared on the airport apron](#): 'The Senegalese people feel particularly honored to receive the President of the French Republic. [...] Because the French-Senegalese friendship dates back to nearly three centuries. [...] I am pleased to host in my country an old classmate from high school, and a friend.'

[12] Senegalese authorities prided at President Senghor's involvement in the reversal of Blondin Diop's ban from the French territory (*Livre Blanc sur le suicide d'Oumar Blondin Diop*, République du Sénégal, 1973, pp. 14-15). Historians Françoise Blum and Martin Mourre expose his possible motivations in their article [Omar Blondin Diop : d'un monde l'autre](#) (Centre d'histoire sociale des mondes contemporains, 2019): 'Police sources explain this intervention by Senghor's wish to rid Senegal of the very active Omar Blondin. He would have preferred knowing he was in France. For our part, we instead think that Senghor was concerned that the student pursued the brilliant studies he had started to become one of the flagships of Senegal's future elite.'



Evidently, Senghor saw himself in Blondin Diop: both were Senegalese, French-educated, and classically trained in the humanities. Perhaps, he believed that his younger compatriot could pursue his political agenda. But Blondin Diop famously disapproved of it in the strongest terms. By the late 1960s, the authorities had been closely monitoring him; it seemed apparent that they preferred to have him out of the country.

[13] This information was provided by Alioune Sall 'Paloma' in conversation with Françoise Blum and Martin Mourre for [Maitron](#) (8 May, 2019).

[14] This information was provided by Moustapha Touré (chief investigating judge of the High Court of Dakar, initially in charge of Blondin Diop's case) in conversation with [La Gazette](#) (21 December, 2009). In this interview, he recounts the state's efforts to intimidate and coerce him during his investigation: 'I had made the decision to indict the prison officers who had custody of detainee Oumar Blondin Diop. There were three of them, but I had only charged two of them, waiting for the third. At the time, we were in the absolute reign of a single party. The order that was in place left little room for maneuver for senior officials like us. And yet, I had responsibly and fairly fulfilled my duty as a judge, where others would have chosen to do something else, by obeying orders emanating from the political authority. I naturally refused and came to the decision to indict, because I was convinced, against the advice of my department and the state, that the detainee could not have committed suicide. This was impossible under the conditions in which the autopsy report sought to accredit the thesis of suicide. I was reinforced in such a belief by the prison logbook [registry]. It carried edifying mentions in this regard. This logbook did indeed mention that detainee Oumar Blondin Diop had fainted during the week in which he was pronounced dead by suicide. Nowhere was a medical examination mentioned in this same logbook, in order to determine the causes of the recorded fainting. The circumstances revealed credible and consistent evidence, tending to prove that the suicide, officially mentioned to justify the death of Oumar Blondin Diop, was in reality made up. So, I decided, in the secrecy of my investigative office, to indict. After this indictment, deemed bold at the time, I was immediately transferred. Ten days later, I was promoted to president of the Court of Dakar and adviser to the Court of Appeal. Let's say that at the time, it was like a kind of a promotion-sanction which tried to hide its true nature.'

[15] Accounts of Blondin Diop often focus solely on his activism, and not so much on his art. When he became a martyr figure, deeply traumatized activists, as well as artists, held on to his memory. Before his assassination, he had nurtured strong connections with artists who would later form the Laboratoire Agit'Art. In 2019, artist Mbaye Diop painted a mural of its members (Issa Samb 'Joe Ouakam', Djibril Diop Mambéty, Bouna Medoune Seye, Mame Less Dia, Mamadou Diop Traoré) on the wall of the Ngor Yaadikon Complex, and included Blondin Diop in it. As follows, a list of major pieces influenced by Omar Blondin Diop: [Portrait d'Omar Diop](#) (Issa Samb 'Joe Ouakam', 1974); [Degluleen mbokk yi](#) (El Hadji Momar Sambe 'Mor Faama', 1975); [Omar Blondin Diop](#) (Heldon, 1975); [Lettre de Dakar](#) (Libre Association d'Individus Libres, 1978); [Le lait s'était caillé trop tôt](#) (Issa Samb 'Joe Ouakam', 1983); [Le Temps de Tamango](#) (Boubacar Boris Diop, 1998); [Omar 4.0. Hommage à Omar Blondin Diop](#) (Bara Diokhane, 2013); [Le malheur de vivre](#) (Ndèye Fatou Kane, 2014); [Congrès de Minuit](#) (Laboratoire Agit'Art, 2016); [L'enterrement d'Omar Blondin Diop](#) (Issa Samb 'Joe Ouakam', undated); [Omar B.D.](#) (Issa Samb 'Joe Ouakam', 2017); [Omar in May](#) (Vincent Meessen, 2018); [La Cloche des Fourmis](#) (Laboratoire Agit'Art, 2018); [Hommage à Omar Blondin Diop](#) (Lebergedeliledengor, 2019); [Omar Blondin Diop, le laborantin](#) (Mbaye Diop, 2019); [Just a Movement](#) (Vincent Meessen, 2018-2020).