

# WHAT A TIME TO START A JOB: THE PANDEMIC AND THE NEW RECEIVING COORDINATOR

June 29, 2020



Moussa Thiam, Coop Receiving Coordinator. Photograph by Caroline Mardok  
*By Frank Haberle*

In the relatively worry-free days of last September, longtime Brooklyn resident and Coop member Moussa Thiam struggled with a worrisome decision: should he abandon a successful but frenetic 25-year career as a chef, or set aside his lifelong dream of building a successful film production company that created and promoted new films from Africa?

Moussa, father of three, decided to get out of the restaurant business and try to secure a job as a Receiving Coordinator at the Park Slope Food Coop. While the Receiving Coordinator position is a complex, mentally and physically demanding job—which

entails facilitating the storage and stocking of items for the shelves of the Coop, guiding and supervising work squad members, and maintaining the physical plant—it is also a job with a set schedule and benefits, offering more time for his family.

Another priority for Moussa was the completion of a film project he has been developing for years with his production company: a documentary about the life of Aline Sitoe Diatta, a remarkable woman with healing and visionary powers, who led a people's movement in Moussa's native Senegal in the 1940s.

Moussa applied for the open Receiving Coordinator job in September, but did not hear back until January. When he accepted the job, it was agreed that he would not start until March. At that moment, Moussa felt that he would realize his dream—he would be able to leave the restaurant business, have a rewarding and meaningful job at the Coop, and re-apply himself to his production company. “I was so excited to start my job at the Coop,” Moussa said recently, “and to get out of the restaurant business. Things were really looking up. What could possibly go wrong?”

On-the-Job Training: the Coop in March 2020

Moussa's first day on the job at the Coop coincided with the early-March panic-buying that swept through Brooklyn just before the quarantine. “On my first day we were already in crisis mode, with huge demand on the shopping floor, and truck after truck unloading into the basement,” Moussa remembers. “It was all hands on deck, from day one.” Moussa remembers the remarkable calm and competency of the seasoned Coop staff members, even while he struggled to find direction in the frenetic atmosphere.

“There was a strong sense of purpose, even when it seemed so chaotic,” he says. “But I never had the time to train properly about where everything comes from, and where everything goes, and how things are done.” Moussa remembers one particular experience, in his early days when people on the shopping floor still had fear in their eyes. “I was going upstairs with a box of yeast, and one member, and then another,

asking, 'Is that the yeast? Do you mind if I take some?' and the first person took half the box, and the other took the other half—and the yeast never made it to the shelves."

In his first weeks on the job, the Coop went through its remarkable transformation—first, in dealing with lines wrapping up Union Street, down Seventh Avenue and around the corner; next, Covid-19 protocols and safety measures; then part-time staff replacing member labor; and finally, shopping restrictions on the floor.

#### 20 Years of Training in the Restaurant Business

The crisis-mode Coop proved to operate at a much faster pace than Moussa had originally anticipated, but he credits his background in restaurant management as a strong credential that prepared him for this new work environment. "In the restaurant business, I was the first one in, in the morning, and the last one out at night. I opened up, planned the day's specials, purchased all of the food, made sure the staff were on track, and managed the business end of the operation," Moussa remembers. "So, I brought a strong understanding of the food business to my new job. Managing restaurants was a 14- to 16-hours-a-day commitment, seven days a week, with a day off here and there, only for special occasions. When I wasn't at the restaurant, I was worried about the restaurant. But my wife and I were also raising three children in the city. I wanted to go to their soccer games and their school events. And, at the same time, I wanted to commit myself to my film production work."

#### Remembering Another Crisis

Moussa remembered another crisis-management experience, 20 years ago, in lower Manhattan. "On 9/11, our café was located between St. Vincent's Hospital, and a building at the New School that served, in the first few weeks, as a makeshift community center for people seeking information about missing loved ones," Moussa says. "It was below 14th Street, but we were allowed to stay open, serving and providing a space for the hospital medical staff and family members waiting for news about loved ones. We kept the restaurant open around the clock. We sent baked goods and coffee

to the first responders at Ground Zero.”

“That was one of my early impressions of New York. Back then, everybody did what they had to do to take care of each other,” Moussa says. “I see a lot of that same spirit at the Coop today.”

#### A New Chance to Produce and Promote African Film

When things settle down at the Coop, Moussa looks forward to re-committing himself to his film production work, with a focus on producing independent films from his native Senegal. The Aline Sitoe documentary mentioned above is his current project. The young Senegalese woman who led a people’s movement during World War II eventually surrendered to the French colonial army to prevent the massacre of her people. She later died in jail at the age of 24. “Aline’s story keeps developing; the more we learn of her, the more there is to learn,” says Moussa. She was widely recognized as a healer. She was believed to have the power of making the rain come and go. And she became the center of a grassroots movement to resist the French colonial army’s efforts to conscript all the men of Senegal. She is a legend and a folk hero in Senegal today. The documentary Moussa is producing tries to separate the myths from the realities, but also tells a strong story of resistance in a colonized nation, he explains.

In the months ahead, Moussa’s work with the film will include fundraising, completing the final scenes onsite and post-production work. At the same time, Moussa is committed to contributing as much as he can to his position of Receiving Coordinator at the Coop. “I’ve learned a lot in my three months on the job, and things have definitely calmed down. I am starting to learn how the Coop operates,” Moussa adds. “But yesterday, somebody asked me to bring up some cookies and I couldn’t remember where to find them! I’ve been here three months and I still don’t know where they store the cookies.” ■