

Teen in hijab aims to be TikTok 'Afro-influencer'

by [Trisha Thomas](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue



Rising TikTok star Aida Diouf Mbengue stands in front of the Duomo in Milan on March 16. (AP Photo / Antonio Calanni)

In Milan's chic Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, a spacious mall that would be jammed with shoppers were it not for the pandemic, a young Black woman wearing a violet hijab and matching lipstick propped up her phone and moved her hips to a tinny-sounding beat coming from the device.

Aida Diouf Mbengue, 19, was recording a TikTok video to share with her 345,000 followers. She is making a name for herself as a self-styled "Afro-influencer," one of a group of young people of African origin who have come together in Italy to try to increase their social media clout.

Their campaign is not just about views and followers, Mbengue said. With her posts, she is trying to destroy stereotypes.

“I am representing girls with the veil,” Mbengue said in an interview. “I have a large Italian following, and this makes me happy because most Italians do not have anything in common with me.”

As to her own identity, she is clear: “I am Muslim, I wear a veil, and I am also Black.”

Some three decades ago, immigration was a new phenomenon in Italy, a predominantly White Catholic nation with a long history of emigration. Today, about 9 percent of Italy’s 60 million people are foreign nationals, according to the country’s national statistics agency, ISTAT.

Nearly one-fifth of those foreigners come from African countries. Mbengue came to Italy from Kaolack, Senegal, with her family at age three.

Mbengue, who is in high school, said she didn’t feel discriminated against as a student. But she said she started receiving racist messages once she started posting videos of herself in a hijab.

“The discriminatory phrases included the N-word, or ‘monkey,’ ‘Go back to your country,’ ‘I will throw a banana in your face,’” she said. “But then you realize it is just the usual people who want to make you feel bad, so you laugh about it or you just let it go, and that’s it.”

A quick glance through Mbengue’s TikTok and Instagram posts reveals that she also receives supportive comments and hundreds of red hearts and heart-eyed emojis every day.

Mbengue started making TikTok videos on a whim in 2019. The comments on her first video indicated there was much ignorance about women who wear hijabs, with many assuming that a woman with a headscarf could not be funny, lighthearted, or likable, she said.

“I realized I could use TikTok to open some minds,” she said.

Mbengue, who started wearing a hijab when she was seven years old, said she is bothered by comments from other hijab-wearers who have accused her of using the headscarf to attract attention on social media.

She lives with her mother, her father, and four of her eight siblings in a small apartment in the Milan suburb of Romano di Lombardia and uses her phone to churn out dozens of posts a day.

Her mother, Die Mbaye, said people think that a “girl with a veil is not capable of doing exceptional things.” Speaking in Wolof with Mbengue translating, Mbaye described her daughter as a “reference point for many girls who want to wear the veil but fear being judged.”

Stella Jean, an Italian fashion designer and Black Lives Matter activist, said Mbengue represents Italy’s irreversible path toward multiculturalism.

“Seeing someone doing TikTok might seem like something frivolous and superficial. She had to fight and push herself to get to this point,” the designer said in an interview in Rome. “Fortunately, this is the new face of Italy, and we are not going back.” —Associated Press