Senegal

SUPERSTITIONS & FOLKLORE

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Superstitions & Folklore (2nd ed.)

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General

More than 90 percent of the Senegalese population consists of Muslim believers, and a small minority consists of Christians. Despite these demographics, many Senegalese integrate animistic beliefs inherited from their ancestors with their religion.

Distinct to the Senegalese Islam is their affiliation with brotherhoods. These groups blend mysticism with the Islamic faith. Senegalese brotherhoods are characterized by their devotion to appointed marabouts, which are mediators between the people and the spirit world. They are firm believers of the existence of supernatural beings, exorcism, and magical objects like amulets.

Selected Superstitions

Marabouts

Unlike most Islamic countries, Senegal practices Islam in a nontraditional way. The Senegalese have a mystical aspect to Islam, much like the Sufism (a variation of Islam that stresses reverence to spirits) practiced in other Islamic countries. In Senegal, Islamic practice usually requires membership in religious brotherhoods that are dedicated to the marabouts of these groups. Marabouts are believed to be the mediators between Allah and the people. The people seek the help of marabouts for protection from the evil spirits, to improve one's status (in terms of career, love or relationship, finances etc.), to obtain a cure or remedy for sickness, or even to curse an enemy.

Marabouts are believed to have the ability to deal with the spirit world and seek the spirits' help in things impossible for humans. The spirits' help is sought since they are considered to be much baraka or divine grace. It is said that some marabouts derive their power from Satan while some derive theirs from God. The latter type refuses to take part in evil things such as cursing or harming another person.

The marabouts are considered to be stewards and inheritors of the baraka, or divine grace of their brotherhood's founder. Through the supernatural power of their personal baraka, marabouts are believed to have the ability to heal sick people and even grant spiritual salvation for their disciples. Most marabouts inherit their status and their followers from their fathers. Marabouts of any brotherhood are expected to teach and counsel their disciples.

There are three main sects in Senegal: The Xaadir (Qadriyya) which is a brotherhood founded in Mauritania. It is the smallest and oldest brotherhood in Senegal. The Tijaan (Tijaniyya) brotherhood is founded in Algeria and is practiced all over West Africa. The Mouride brotherhood is founded in Senegal by the Senegalese saint Amadou Bamba.

Marabouts of the Mouride brotherhood devote less time to study and teaching than other brotherhoods. They devote most of their time to ordering their disciples' work and making amulets for their followers. This brotherhood was founded by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (also known as Ahmed Ben Mohammed Ben Abib Allah or Khadimou Rassoul). Bamba was born in the village of Mbacké-Baol and lived from 1850 to 1927. Bamba was the son of a marabout from the Xaadir brotherhood. He was a mystic and ascetic and it is said that he gave more importance to meditation and Koranic study rather than in building a theocratic empire. He did not concern himself with wars as some other brotherhoods did. In the first few years of his position, Amadou Bamba had simply performed the standard maraboutic functions like teaching the Koran and making amulet for his disciples.

Bamba did not claim to be a prophet but rather, he considered himself a messenger of God. This is so because one of the basic tenets of Islam is that there can be no other prophets after Muhammad. The Senegalese members of these brotherhoods quote a certain passage in the Koran which qualifies the founders of the brotherhoods as messengers. The Koran states that God will send messengers every 100 years. Having extraordinary charisma and wisdom, Bamba's followers were coming to him to partake of his baraka and to serve him instead of desiring to learn the Koran. The focus of his teachings was that salvation was gained through submission to the marabout and hard work.

The French colonial government feared the power and influence of Bamba. Although he did not signify any intent to wage war, they have placed him in exile. Instead of controlling his influence and followers, the exile produced an opposite effect. A number of legends about Bamba's supernatural survival of torture, deprivation, and attempted executions spread throughout Senegal. Because of this more disciples flocked to his community during his execution. Up to this time, Mourides still tell these legends of Bamba's exile. One of the legends tells a story of a time when the French forbade Bamba from praying while on a ship. Since praying was a law that he could not break, it is said that Bamba broke his shackles, leaped overboard and prayed on a prayer rug that magically materialized on the water. When he lifted his head after his prostrations, the French authorities were astonished to see sand on his forehead. Other legends say that when the French put him in a furnace, he was seen sitting down in the furnace while drinking tea with Muhammad. When they put him in a den of hungry lions, they saw the lions just sleeping beside him without harming him.

Later on, the French realized that Bamba was not a threat after all and his discipleship in Senegal grew phenomenally. The French also allowed him to found his holy city of Touba and start the mosque in which he is currently buried. It is said that Bamba received the vision of a great city one time in the wilderness and that vision materialized in the form of the holy city of Touba. This vision is believed to have told him of his prophetic mission and the need to build a holy city at a particular site.
Amadou Bamba lived a modest life, but the Mourides today view him almost equally as they do Muhammad. This actually stirs up concern among other Muslims who would consider this much reverence to Bamba as blasphemous. The male descendants of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba are considered great marabouts in the country of Senegal. Devout Mourides homes and workplaces are covered with pictures and sayings of their marabout, and they wear numerous amulets prepared by them. These acts are believed to bring them a better life and solve their problems as well. Even taxi and bus drivers fill their vehicles with stickers, paintings and photos of the marabouts of their particular brotherhoods. The Baay Fal which are the most devout group of Mouride disciples go to the extent of giving up the pillars of Islam, including prayer and fasting, to devote themselves exclusively to service to their marabout.

Many Mourides consider Touba as equally or even more important than Mecca. Pilgrims regularly come to Touba all year round, but the peak of the year is a mass pilgrimage called the Grand Magal (celebrated 48 days after the Islamic New Year), which celebrates Bamba's return from exile. During this time, around half a million Mouride disciples flock into Touba from all over Senegal and Gambia. The mother of Amadou Bamba named Mam Diarra Bousso is also considered a holy character by Mourides and her burial shrine is located in the city of Porokhane. Twice each year, on a date determined by the Bousso family, thousands of Senegalese women visit the shrine for a two-day pilgrimage.

**Gris-gris (Amulets)**

Many Senegalese people wear amulets which they call gris-gris. They are often worn close to the body— around the waist, neck, arms, or legs. Gris-gris are leather objects which contain writings from the Quran. Since marabouts are considered to have a special baraka (divine grace), they are the only ones who have the authority to prepare and prescribe these amulets. Gris-gris prescribed by marabouts have a special potency to ward off evil and bad luck and to invite good fortune as well.

The practice of amulet keeping must be a part of the animistic beliefs of the pre-Islamic Senegal which was then incorporated to Islam.

**Ndepp (Exorcism)**

The Lébou people are a small group of Wolof-speaking natives in Senegal. When the Lébou people came to the Cape Vert peninsula, it is believed that there existed many local protector spirits. Upon their settlement, each family and even each individual was dedicated to these protector spirits. The spirits are believed to have the power to bless or to curse individuals, families, or entire villages. Family and village altars are significant in the daily lives of the Lébou people. Every day, libations must be poured on these altars and to these protector spirits. The spirits are believed to have the power to bless or to curse individuals, families, or entire villages. Family and village altars are significant in the daily lives of the Lébou people. Every day, libations must be poured on these altars and sacrifices are occasionally made.

When a Lébou becomes very sick or mentally deranged, it is believed that the ill person has done something to create an imbalance in his relationship with the protector spirits. An Ndepp ceremony, led by Ndeppkats (spiritual exorcists), is performed to restore this balance. These ceremonies sometimes last for days. It is characterized by much dancing, drumming, and sacrifices. Ndepp also embodies community solidarity because all people come together to bring healing to the afflicted person.

Ndepp is said to be a foray into the spirit world, invoking the jinn or rab (spirits that could be both evil and benevolent). This ceremonial therapy plays a significant role not only in the mental and physical health of the person but also to create balance for that person in relation to the society of the Lébou. Ndepp ceremonies can last three, six, or twelve days. The length of the ceremony is prescribed by the rab which is consulted by the priestess or the Ndeppkats as a part of the ceremony. The Ndepp ceremony consists of eight stages of activity and contains six representations or symbols. The stages are as follows:

1. **Seet**

Seet (duration) is characterized by the visit or consultation of the patient’s family with the priestess. The priestess will then come into contact with the spirit world to decide the details of the illness and its remedy.

2. **Ngomar**

Ngomar takes place the day before the sacrifice. The patient should only wear a loincloth and he or lies down. The priestess will then ask for permission to proceed to the sacrifice with songs. The priestess blows on all over the body of the patient a mixture of millet and herbs. The patient’s body is held down as it trembles as if in a seizure and this is accompanied by cries. Through this practice, the spirits involved are identified. This phase usually ends in dances.

3. **Natt**

Natt (measurement) is the part where the priestess measures out a portion of millet in proportion to the body weight of the patient. This will be used for the preparation of pellets of millet that the family of the patient will eat. This act symbolizes the division of the disease among those family members which will eat these pellets of millet.

4. “Descent”

Descent is the next stage, where the priestess arranges on a mat the millet, animal horns, and roots. Her assistant would then tilt the body of the patient head downwards which is believed to reduce the jinn. A container is placed near the patient's head to collect whatever that will spill off of the patient. This jar will later be used in the healing of the patient.

5. The “Nomination”

The “Nomination” is the main phase of Ndepp. During this stage, the patient should announce his intent to maintain his presence within the Lébou society. The patient continues to scream and experience spasms.

6. **Beketu**
**Beketu** is the part where the animal sacrifice is bound and laid on a pallet similar to the patient’s, and both the sacrifice and the patient are entirely covered by a white shroud. This characterizes the symbolic transfer of the disease or illness of the patient towards the animal. Thus, this act symbolizes the death of the animal and the patient’s rebirth.

7. **The Sacrifice**

The Sacrifice is held next. The patient is asked to go around the animal seven times and then blow into the mouth of the animal. The blood from the animal will be collected in a jar and the priestess will coat the body of the patient with the collected blood. The patient should not wash himself until the next day. The death of the animal is believed to make the disease disappear.

8. **The Public Meeting**

The Public Meeting is the part where it is publicly proclaimed that the patient is healed. This ends ceremony of **Ndepp**. A crowd would surround the patient and people would dance to the beat of the drums under the direction of the priestess. The patient is asked to dance as well.

**Ndepp has six important representations:**

1. **Dance of Ndepp**

   The role of the ceremonial dance is to “resocialize” the patient, especially if he suffers from mental disorders. It is also believed to aid the patient in releasing energies he or she accumulated during the possession. The dance is often accompanied by songs as well.

2. **Song of Ndepp**

   The priestess chants songs belonging to the protective spirits of the various families and this element of **ndepp** allows her to determine the identity of the offended spirit. The song is believed to frighten the spirit which in turn causes the victim to tremble. This also determines the strength of the spirit and how determined it is to retain possession of the subject.

3. **Possession**

   The possession occurs when the spirit enters the body of another member of the family which offers worship directly to him through the priestess.

4. **Fright**

   The body is seized by tremors and spasms which becomes faster in a progressive manner. This is so because it is said that the spirit is moving through the veins of the patient’s head. Fright is backed up by the frantic rhythm drums in the back ground. The first manifestation of fright allows the priestess to determine the identity of the spirit.

5. **The Role of the Priestess**

   The role of the priestess is central to the ceremony of **Ndepp**. She makes sure that the other people are protected against malevolent spirits that may take advantage of the **ndepp** ceremony to possess and inflict another person. Special amulets worn on her body offers this protection.

6. **The Report**

   At the end of the ceremony of sacrifice, right after the dancing, the person is pronounced “cured” to the public.

**Other Superstitions:**

**Actions**

- It is believed that pouring hot water on the ground burns the ancestors who are buried under the ground.
- Pouring cold water at the door of one’s house first thing in the morning and before ever talking to anyone brings good luck for the day.
- If a person puts on his or her shirt inside out, and he or she discovers it on his or /her own, the person will have good luck.
- Sweeping and throwing the trash out at night brings bad luck.
- If a man buys perfume for a girlfriend, the relationship will not last. Money should be given instead.
- When cutting someone's hair, one should not throw the hair away. If a bird finds the hair and makes a nest with it, the person who owns it will have a constant headache.
- **Wednesday is a day of bad luck and any important activities must be avoided on this day.**
- A person must not sit on the doorway because evil spirits will hit him and he will die.
- Calls at night should not be answered because one might be answering a devil.
- Buying or selling soap, needles, or charcoal, etc. at night is bad luck.
- A widow should not go out during her mourning period to avoid mishaps.
• People who put their heads in their hands bring bad luck to themselves.

• Whistling at night invites spirits/bad luck.

**Animals**
- If a monkey or pig crosses one’s way and nobody finds out, the person will have good luck.
- If a black cat crosses one’s path, he or she will have bad luck.
- If a praying mantis creeps over a person and he or she does not chase it away, that person will have good luck.
- Witches are said to transform into animals, especially hyenas, cats, and owls. Animals like rams and cocks must be kept as protection against these evil beings.
- Some clans or families refrain from killing or eating certain animals because they believe that they have ancestral connection with them.

**Babies and Children**
- It is said that children should not eat fish because it hampers their mental growth or worse, it makes them stupid.
- Cutting the fingernails of babies and young children is believed to cause the child to be a thief.
- People believe that if a newborn baby is left unattended, spirits will switch the baby with their own child. As a result, the child behaves in a strange manner. This is said to be the cause of mental retardation.

**Dreams**
- A dream about raw fish or snake means imminent pregnancy.
- A dream about a gun or a bullet not used means betrayal or disappointment.
- A dream about a horse or a car signifies a new wife for a man.
- A dream about white cloth means one will see a dead person.
- A dream about a monkey means downfall to the person.
- A dream where one laughs means the person will experience trouble.

**Death and funerals**
- Jars should always be filled with water to enable the dead to drink whenever they visit their families.

**Pregnancy**
- If a pregnant woman looks at a baboon, her child will be born resembling it.
- Pregnant women should not eat eggs, or their baby would be born deaf and dumb.

**Omens**
- A shooting star means death of a prominent or important person.
- If one’s left eye itches, he or she will see someone he or she longs to see.
- If a person’s right eye itches he or she will cry.
- If a very beautiful woman has difficulty finding a husband, or when her lover dies shortly after the wedding, she is believed to have a spirit lover.

**Supernatural Beings**
- It is better to stay at indoors around one in the afternoon and at dusk. These times are believed to be the time when evil spirits are most active and roaming around looking for people to trick or harm.
- One should avoid sitting under tamarind or kapok trees especially during this one in the afternoon because these trees are believed to be houses of spirits, and the person might disturb the spirits.
- Spirits are believed to dwell in trees like silk, cotton, baobab etc.
- Some plants, like the bitter tomato, are believed to have magical properties.
- Sitting on ant hills must be avoided also because it is believed that spirits dwell in them as well.
- Whirlwinds are said to be caused by spirits, dragons, or the devil, as they move from one place to another thus, they should be avoided.
Some ponds are believed to be sacred because spirits are said to dwell in them.

Dëmms (people who are believed to have the power to "eat" human beings) are said to lay their traps on certain street corners. Even the police never go to certain towns and regions because it will result in their downfall.

Senegalese people believe that some people die and come back in another generation. In cases when a woman loses her child again and again, it is said that the same child dies and comes back in different forms.

During circumcision witches are believed to become more active. People do a lot of preparation before circumcising to counter the witches. People say that if a witch succeeds in killing a circumcised child, she gets a “promotion” or attains more power.
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