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The Mouride Dahira between Marseille and Touba

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Production of Knowledge
SOPHIE BAVA

Mouridism is a contemporary Sufi religious movement originating in Senegal at the end of the 19th century. Its founder, Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, was exiled several times by the colonizers, who saw the movement as a danger to their enterprise. Initially trained in prayer and in working in the fields in the *daara*¹ and pioneers in the cultivation and sale of groundnuts in Senegal, the Mouride *taalib s* (disciples) became great merchants. The drought of the 1970s led them to organize new economic activities, notably those related to commerce, initially in Dakar and later in the cities to which they migrated.

Today Mouride migrants, found all over the world, lead a transnational commercial network that is linked to the brotherhood network (Mouridiyya) they transport to each city of migration. The latter is executed by the founding of *dahira*.² Circulating amongst several territories, these migrants transport knowledge and religious experience. A vital question to be dealt with is how this knowledge actually circulates and how it is recomposed between the local societies of the places of migration and the holy city of Touba.

The birth of an economic Mouride territory

The history of Marseille and the Senegalese migrants is a very old one, dating back to the Senegalese infantrymen and seamen who were generally recruited by maritime companies during World War II. The central quarters of Marseille were where the Mouride Senegalese merchants were to settle in the 1960s and 1970s. Here they joined the retired seaman and infantrymen, and the recently arrived African labourers, a situation that offered the merchants a base for their commerce.

The majority of the Senegalese migrants arriving in Marseille during this period were merchants who alternated between ambulating sales during the tourist season and labouring in the textile factories of Marseille during the low season. These merchants, living between a mobile and sedentary existence, comprised the great majority. During the 1980s some of them became wholesalers or (immobile) merchants, furnishing their more mobile colleagues with merchandise. It is thus that a network was organized amongst cities in Europe, Africa, and later America and Asia. Within these economic networks, in addition to the common affiliation to the brotherhood, a logic can be deciphered in the circulation, the inter-relational and transnational network, and the relationship between territories, juridical systems, and other non-Mouride individuals.

Taalib s awaiting S rigne Mourtada at the train station in Marseille.

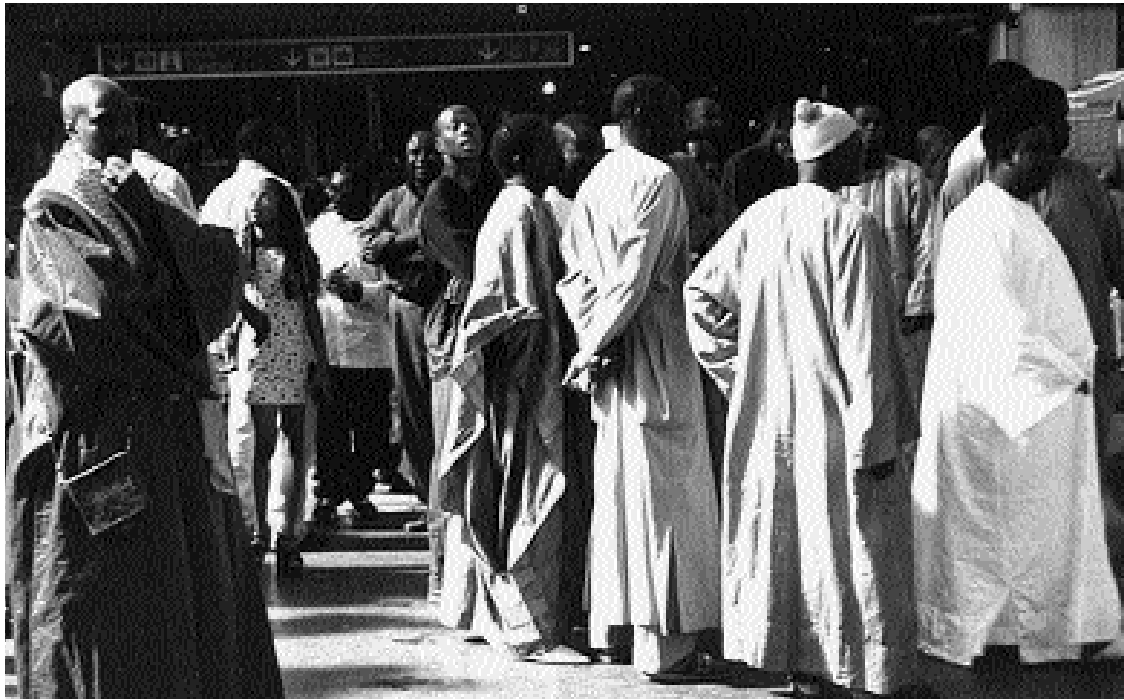


PHOTO: SOPHIE BAVA

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The Mouride religious enterprise

The Mouride economic enterprise that was organized in various countries is the point of departure of yet another enterprise – a religious one – which de-localized and recomposed itself according to the fluidity of migrants and their migratory routes. These Mouride merchants in migration stimulated both the constitution of places of worship abroad and the elaboration of decentralized (i.e. with respect to Touba) rituals. While the central authority of the brotherhood is constantly called upon, the initial initiative came from the migrants themselves and from their need to maintain a bond (spiritual and material) with the holy city of Touba. Today the migrants readily transmit the religious and social knowledge proper to Mouride migrants in Marseille to their children and to the new *taalibés*.

Evolution of the Marseille-Touba dahira

The Marseille-Touba *dahira*,³ found at the centre of the small islet of Belsunce, was referred to by the Senegalese in the 1980s as the 'Darou Salam' of Marseille.⁴ This *dahira* was the result of one group of Mouride merchants anxious to have one central place for prayer,⁵ a place at which they could also gather to organize debates, meetings, and *dhikr* sessions,⁶ host passing marabouts, hold the *magal*,⁷ and exchange both material and spiritual goods. The *dahira*, a simple room in an apartment, was created in the early 1980s. Every Sunday evening the merchants ritually united for prayer. The young merchants who had initiated the project conferred the management of the *dahira*, after a few generation-conflicts but also because they were too mobile, to the eldest of the Mourides, who considered themselves the most legitimate for the task.

During the last 30 years in France, these structures of hosting *taalibés* (the *dahira*) have changed. Not only have the spaces been transformed, expanded, and modernized, their very functions have also evolved. While their services were originally directed towards perpetuating the Mouride religious

practices (recitations of the *khassaïdes*, *zikhr* sessions, organization of Mouride events such as the *magal* festival, receiving sheikhs, etc.), towards social monitoring of the Senegalese in France and towards the possibility of having a place to meet and exchange goods, the *dahira* today – while maintaining their original functions – are increasingly becoming cultural places: places where one can transmit the history of Mouridism and the translated texts of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba to younger generations born in France, to converts or to non-Mourides. In this framework, the youth (students in France) often take charge in debates on Mouridism and politics, Mouridism and secularism, the commentaries of the *khassaïdes* of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, Mouridism on the internet and other social issues, allowing for the transmission and popularization of Mouride religious thought.

In recent years, only the major events have remained a unifying force for the Mouride migrants in Marseille. The influx and number of Senegalese migrants have decreased, and a power struggle between generations and over social and religious status has begun to play a role. According to the initiators of the *dahira*, who are younger but more educated: 'The elders only dealt with the prayers and the readings of the *khassaïdes*,⁸ but the rest was not well organized.'

After an incident in the organization of a visit by Sérigne Mourtada Mbacké in September 2000, the members of the *dahira* found themselves mandated by the brotherhood to provide better organization. If this was not obeyed, the sheikh would never come again. Sérigne Mourtada is the son of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba and brother of the current caliph, and the fact that he circulates between the different cities of migration makes him a sort of guarantor of the continuity and legitimacy of the various spaces invested by members of the brotherhood.

From the dahira to the federation

Following these events, those who had created the *dahira* decided to take affairs back into their own hands and to found a federation of all the *dahira* in the south of France. This implied 24 *dahira*, which meant approximately 3000 people, the seat of which would be in Marseille. The setting up of the federation is very interesting to observe as we can witness negotiations between Mouride merchants and students, alone or with their families in France: in short, groups that have neither similar plans for the future nor the same understanding of the brotherhood.

The first are the oldest merchants, who live alone in Marseille and for whom the *dahira* is a place that above all should allow for the development of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba's work abroad and comprise a link with the holy city of Touba, but should also be a place worthy of hosting Mouride events. For them, leaving a legacy in France is of utmost importance, even if they focus strongly on Touba.

The others are those at the origin of the *dahira* who brought their families over, and who are preoccupied today with settling in

Marseille and with the future of their children. For them, the *dahira* must provide a means through which their children can remain informed about Mouridism and through which they can maintain ties with their culture – thus a simultaneously religious and cultural space that will remain should they (the parents) return to Touba. They know many people in the local society and have always maintained links between the Mouride *dahira* and the local authorities when the Mourides organize events. They reproached the 'old' Mourides for not having done so and for always speaking in Wolof. They feel that in the face of this new mission sent from Touba, the words of the future president of the federation best express their views: 'We should not fight against one another, that is what I told them [the 'old' Mourides]. Now we have to unite for an international cause and especially for the children who are their future'.

For the *taalibé* migrants of Marseille, even if they are capable of being here and there at the same time, those who have their families with them are more or less anchored in France, mainly because of their children. The question is one of adapting the Mouride religious system in such a way that the migrants are accepted as much by the Mouride hierarchy as by the mayor of Marseille. The current problem of the migrants is the difficulty in giving sense to their migration, that is, in integrating the global Mouride religious project with the migrant culture and their dynamic, mobile way of living their religion with their local reality.

Notes

1. A *daara* is a Maraboutic agricultural community in which one learns the Qu'ran in addition to working in the fields.
2. The *dahira* is an association that groups Mouride disciples either on the basis of Marabout allegiances or on the basis of the location at which they are found.
3. In Marseille there is a central *dahira*, the Marseille-Touba *dahira*, and other *dahira* formed on the basis of Marabout allegiances.
4. Considered the most important Mouride village (outside of Africa) after Touba. The very fact that this name is used indicates a way of expanding Mouride territory by conferring a sacred meaning to it.
5. In general, the Mourides prefer to pray amongst themselves at the *dahira* rather than at the mosque.
6. *Dhikr*: lit. recollection.
7. *Magal*: festival that celebrates an important event in the brotherhood. The most important *magal* commemorates the departure into exile of the brotherhood's founder, Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, and is accompanied annually by a pilgrimage.
8. *Khassaïdes*: poems authored by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba.

This article is an extract of a paper given at the ISIM in April 2000.

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