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Women Reconfiguring Esoteric Economies

AMBER GEMMEKE

Meissa Ndiaye and Coumba Keita, two female marabouts, live in the northern suburbs of Dakar. For their practice they use Quranic verses in amulets and *eaux bénites* [potions], and employ Arabic geomancy (*ramalu*), astrology, and numerology. They conduct divination sessions (of the *khatt ar-raml* type), perform interpretation of dreams (*istikhara*), and arrange prayer sessions (*khalwah*). The women have a large clientele of both men and women. Meissa and Coumba's success is a surprising exception: Islamic esoteric knowledge is a domain dominated by men. Marabout women are considered a rare exception at best and a contradiction in terms at worst.¹ This paper discusses the ways in which women can gain, nonetheless, authority in this domain and—in doing so—answers to the call for research on women's activities within West African Islam.

Meissa

Meissa is Wolof. She is a small, slim lady of about fifty-five years old. She lives in a villa containing seven bedrooms, an office, and a salon with several of her brother's and sister's children and some of their children. Her only daughter is married elsewhere. Meissa offers *khatt ar-raml* divination sessions, *khalwah* and *istikhara* sessions, and prepares amulets and potions in which she combines Quranic verses with ground plants.

On the day that Meissa tells me about her arrival in Dakar, she sits on the floor of her office, working during the entire interview. She folds pages with *turabu* and green powder into small bundles that she wraps in white cotton.² Meissa explained that she had learned this technique from her father, a marabout. In most marabout families, Meissa said, girls receive less education than their brothers. In her family, however, things were different:

"My father taught me the Quran until I was about fifteen years and then, until I was thirty years, I learned the mystical secrets of the Quran. I left Dokhoba when I was about forty years old and had divorced my husband.³ My father told me to go to Dakar, because Dakar is where money can be found. He blessed me and gave me a big silver ring with a *turabu* that I always wear. He also gave me one of his jinni. Because of this ring and because of my inherited jinn, all that I do for clients works. I first lived in Yarakh [a suburb of Dakar] with a family member of mine. The difference between the first days that I worked as a marabout and now, fifteen years later, is enormous. In the beginning, I had no clients at all. But the first people that came brought along other people, and that is how my clientele grew. It is like a chain reaction. After a while, I had many clients, especially in Cambéréne, so the caliph of the Layenne brotherhood gave me a piece of land [to construct the villa on]."

Besides her activities in Dakar, Meissa says she travels internationally: she visits clients in the Gambia and in Mauritania. Furthermore, Meissa's clients who immigrated to Europe and the United States regularly call her for consultation.

Coumba

Coumba is a Bamana, Dakar-born woman of forty-four years old. With her light skin, her round face, and curvaceous body, she is an attractive woman. Coumba started to work as a marabout after she had had visions of Seydina Issa Laye.⁴ She said:

This article examines the ways in which women construct expert status and gain authority as marabouts among a largely sceptical suburban population. The experiences of two female marabouts in suburban Dakar highlight how expertise is negotiated, legitimated, and publicly recognized. The author suggests that the women's success can be explained by migration and urbanization: the suburban environment, filled with migrants looking for their livelihood in an insecure place, creates opportunities for women to engage actively in esoteric Islamic practices.

through a group of students that wanted to immigrate to Spain. That worked."

Like Meissa, Coumba is popular: whenever I visited her, up to five clients, both men and women, would be waiting for her in her living room. She also has several clients who migrated to Europe and the United States, who continue to call her for advice.

Being a successful female marabout

The situations of Meissa and Coumba differ considerably, but they also show striking parallels. The most apparent difference is how they acquired knowledge: lessons in a teacher-student setting versus dreams and visions. However, their physical and verbal presence (dress, attitude), their start in suburban Dakar, the way they built up their clientele, and their affiliation with the Layenne brotherhood are all remarkably alike. The differences between Meissa and Coumba show that there is room for variation to legitimate Islamic knowledge for women in Dakar. The similarities, discussed below, illustrate how Meissa and Coumba adapt themselves to the same dominant, male, discourse.

Meissa and Coumba both frequently wear a white scarf around their head and a *grand boubou*. They speak in remarkably soft voices and often wear glasses. This dress and use of voice and gestures underline their wisdom and self-control, as well as their attachment to Islamic values. Most other middle aged Dakaraises take fashion seriously and wear vibrant colours, sometimes in tight-fitting *taille basses* outfits or synthetic fabric, and headscarves in a turban-type way. Meissa's and Coumba's attitude certainly adds to their image as charismatic, stable, wise and mature ladies, who do not have time to keep up with the trivial fashions of the day. Rather, their dress imitates the style of the leading ladies of the Islamic brotherhoods in Senegal.

While Meissa and Coumba thus emphasize an "Islamic" femininity in dress and posture, they downplay other aspects of femininity. Menstruation is an important factor in this de-feminization. Meissa and Coumba explained that their "secret" for using the Quran is their lack of menstruation, thus indicating purity, and, as this state is generally associated with older women, wisdom. Meissa indicated: "The problem with women is their impurity. How can a woman do *khalwah*, which sometimes lasts a month, when she dirties herself? But in my case, the time that my only child was born was the only time I saw blood." Coumba similarly explained how it was possible to retain her purity even though she gave birth to children while working as a marabout: "Before I got pregnant with the first child of my second husband, I bled for forty days. I went to a doctor. He said that I had all my bleeding in one period, and that after these forty days I would never menstruate again." Meissa and Coumba thus explained how they, as women, *can* use the Quran in a pure way at all times.

Besides dress, behaviour, and an overt claim to continual purity, another remarkable resemblance between Meissa and Coumba is the



PHOTO BY AMBER GEMMEKE, 2006

**Meissa's villa
in Cambéréne,
a Dakarais
outskirt**

two women's affiliation with the Layenne brotherhood. Both Meissa and Coumba were born as members of the Tijaniyya brotherhood, but changed to the Layenne brotherhood at the start of their career as marabouts. The visible proof of Meissa's and Coumba's affiliation with the Layenne is apparent in both of their homes. An enormous portrait of Seydina Issa Laye is painted on the outer wall of Meissa's house. On the inner wall of the patio, a smaller copy of the same portrait is painted. As another visible sign of support, besides the portraits of her Layenne tutor, Meissa frequently draws attention to her father's huge silver ring.

Coumba, for her part, has placed pictures of Seydina Issa Laye in every room of her house. In the hallway, a composition photo of Seydina Issa Laye and Coumba decorates the entrance. In her office a portrait of Issa and a calendar portraying all the important figures within the Layenne brotherhood are placed. In the living room, a huge portrait of Seydina Issa Laye hangs over the sofa. Coumba explains her abundant use of these portraits, and, in fact, her work as a marabout, by the visions she had of Seydina Issa Laye and the Virgin Mary. She told me she had, when she was thirty-three years old, a vision in which Mary put her hand in the right hand of Jesus. The next night, she dreamt of Seydina Issa Laye who said: "It is me, Jesus, but in Issa's form." Coumba said she recognized Seydina Issa Laye because he looked exactly like his picture, which is widely distributed in Senegal. The following night, Seydina Issa Laye told her in another dream to go back to Senegal and work as a marabout. Still today, Coumba says, Issa tells her in dreams how she can best treat her clients.

Coumba is not unique in having had visions of Seydina Issa Laye. Followers of various backgrounds, especially women, have converted to the Layenne order after having seen Issa in dreams or visions. Coumba, however, seems to be unique in attributing her knowledge of esoteric Islamic knowledge to visions of Issa. None of the male marabouts I met in suburban Dakar laid such (visible) emphasis on the support of the leaders of their brotherhood or on the support of their fathers. Apparently, marabout women use male authoritarian figures to legitimate their work.

Gendered authority

Yet another resemblance in the two women's behaviour is apparent. Meissa and Coumba clearly have different strategies in attracting a clientele than their male colleagues. Most male marabouts I met in suburban Dakar talk openly about the downsides of their profession. One openly admitted he is not very good in his work, others told me that they go regularly to other marabouts for advice on how to help their clients, and some marabouts say they would rather have had a French education and start a business instead of working according to family

traditions. The two women are not that open. Meissa is very reluctant to give any answers and Coumba often tells incredible stories in which she frequently contradicts herself. In my experience, this elusiveness can be related to the relative isolation in which these women work. Meissa and Coumba built up their clientele individually. They both started to work as a marabout after they had divorced and moved to suburban Dakar. To attract clients, they could not rely on a family network, as their male colleagues do. Instead, they used other weapons: inapproachability and self-glorification. Meissa referred to the Prophet Mohammed by emphasizing that she started to work as a marabout at the age of forty years. Coumba refers even more abundantly to influential people and events. Perhaps her lack of a marabout family inspired her to do so. Coumba is certainly not unique in telling fantastic stories—for example that she traded gold and diamonds in Central Africa or that her youngest son is born with Quranic verses on his leg. "Words louder than actions," to paraphrase Villalón (1995), form an unalienable part of the profession of a marabout.

As a result of their exceptional position, Meissa and Coumba face specific problems in legitimating their work. They not only need to convince their sceptical clients that they are powerful, well educated, gifted, pious, and reliable—challenges every marabout faces in suburban Dakar—but also that they, as women, possess qualities associated with men. This paper showed the careful image building with which Meissa and Coumba negotiate their position towards their different clients. The women claim authority, visually and verbally, mainly by dressing like leading female religious figures, by stressing their ritual and moral purity, their cosmopolitan travels, and by emphasizing their relationship with male authoritative figures.

Interestingly, once female marabouts have established a reputation, their exceptional position actually seems to work in their favour. Once female marabouts are successful, they are far more remarkable than most of their male colleagues, and thus ensured of a clientele. As an inhabitant of a Dakarais suburb said: "A successful female marabout must have both an exceptionally strong character as well as strong powers."

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Notes

1. Among others Geert Mommersteeg, *Het domein van de marabout: koranleraren en religieus-magische specialisten in Djenné, Mali* (Amsterdam, 1996), and Donal Cruise O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal: the Political and Economic organization of an Islamic Brotherhood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).
2. *Turabu*: quadrants with Arabic texts and numbers, based upon classic Arabic geomancy.
3. The idea that the Prophet Mohammed started to preach at the age of forty is commonly held in Senegal.
4. Seydina Issa Laye is the son of the founder of the Layenne brotherhood, Seydina Limamou Laye. Limamou, born Libasse Thiaw, was a forty-year old fisherman when he declared he was the reincarnation of the Prophet Mohammed, in 1883. After his death in 1909, his son Issa succeeded him until he died in 1949. Layenne believe that Issa is the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.