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The Baye Fall of Gueule Tapée

A New Religious Path towards Adulthood?

In the residential areas in Senegal's capital Dakar, certain groups of young men are particularly visible in the afternoons; particularly audible in the darkness of the night, and particularly active in social events in the neighbourhoods. These young men present themselves proudly as *Baye Fall*; a sub-grouping of the Mouride brotherhood – and a self-ascribed identity of numerous and quite different groups of young men throughout Senegal, and beyond.

In Gueule Tapée – a quiet residential neighbourhood facing the sea on the northern fringes of Dakar – most of the neighbourhood's *Baye Fall* meet in front of an old house in a street they have named "Rue Argentine" following the 1986 football World Cup. The woman who owns the house is a widow and all the Baye Fall call her *maman*, or mother. Her two sons and two daughters live there with her, as well as an ever-changing number of young Baye Fall. The youngest son, Matare, works at a stall at the Marché HLM, one of Dakar's main street markets, selling music CDs, illicitly copied DVDs, and a colourful assortment of computer gadgets. In the evenings he sits with the others on the side walk, talking to passers by and drinking *café Touba*, a sweet, spicy coffee that is a trademark of the Baye Fall. He lives in an annex to the house and shares the single room with his childhood friends Abdou and Cire. The small grocery shop around the corner where Cire works is decorated with pictures of his *marabout*, or spiritual leader. Cire tells me that they joined the marabout when they were very young, and since then they have become quite well-known in the neighbourhood. They are the ones who arrange *chants* – singing and dancing ceremonies where the Baye Fall sing praise songs to the Mouride saints – at funerals,

name-givings, weddings, and other celebrations in Gueule Tapée. Sometimes their services as musicians in the ritual *chants* are wanted as far away as Thiès or Rufisque. The money they receive for these jobs are shared among the musicians.

The older generation shake their heads and snap their tongue at these self-righteous hoodlums who speak of Islamic purity and elegance while flicking the ashes of a joint in the gutter. What are we to make of these young men and their interpretations of Mouride religious praxis? Evoking an emerging literature on the anthropology of African youth, this paper reflects on the Baye Fall identity and its promises and contradictions for these young men, many of whom are approaching thirty years of age and struggling to find a path towards adulthood in a socio-economic context where the expected paths through (secular or religious) education or through the steady income of wage employment are blocked to the majority.

This paper is based on a five-month ethnographic fieldwork in Dakar, in the first half of 2006. In the following, I discuss the Baye Fall in Gueule Tapée as a group of young men who challenge their marginality in the local, national and even global social order, by taking on a religious identity that explicitly appeals to them as young, urbanised and marginalised youth. After a brief discussion of the origin and ideals of the Baye Fall identity, I show how one particular marabout has succeeded in defining a religious movement – and a political party – that appeals to the marginalised urban youth in Senegal. Finally, I discuss the practices and perceptions of a group of the same marabout's followers in Gueule Tapée who illustrate the ambiguities of asserting a youth identity in an attempt to claim social recognition in the wider neighbourhood[1] of Gueule Tapée. Relating the case to recent writings on the anthropology of youth, I argue that while the Baye Fall are able to create a certain degree of social recognition, and while they are able to

[1] Here I am alluding to, Appadurai's understanding of a neighbourhood as 'the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized' (1995:102).

progress from a junior to a senior position within the group, conventional paths towards adulthood are generally blocked to these young men. The internal seniority of the Baye Fall does not translate easily to the social spheres beyond the group and while the young men aspire to a conventional life with a family and a steady occupation, they remain condemned to a position as youth, without the possibilities for realising the expected social maturation.

Islam and Mouridism in Senegal

Fatou Sow has recently argued that the style of leadership of Senegal's current president Abdoulaye Wade has been an important factor in shaping the dynamics between religion and politics in the country since his 2000 electoral victory over Abdou Diouf's *Partie Socialiste*. Soon after his election, Wade surprised everyone by announcing himself not only a Muslim but a *taalibe* (disciple) of the Mourides. According to Sow, Wade's pledge of allegiance marked the starting point of 'the progression of a fundamentalist discourse' (Sow 2003:74) in Senegal, by which she means a radicalisation of religious identities, as the competition for political power among the country's religious groups has become more explicit.

Donal Cruise O'Brien has shown how the Mouride Caliphate has had a significant influence on Senegal's social dynamics for generations. He argues that the shift of the Caliphate in 1986 has promoted a different stance towards French language and education, which in turn has occasioned

> … the emergence of an assertive Mouride presence in the university, in the form of militant Mouride students with an active association, a programme of proselytism among the young, and an ideological restatement of Mouride faith. Amadu Bamba here becomes not only a source of textual authority for the disciples: he is an example

> to Islam and to the Senegalese nation, as pioneer of the struggle against Western decadence (Cruise O'Brien 2003:84)

Cruise O'Brien shows how Young Mouride associations were organised across the principal towns of Senegal and were further institutionalised in a National Federation in 1978, with its president declaring its anti-Western and anti-establishment stance in the call, "We must rescue our Muslim youth from the darkness of cultural alienation" (Cruise O'Brien 2003:89). While Mouridism as an urban youth culture emphasised the potential for expressing opposition towards the established political order – both nationally and globally – the reinvigorated Mouride Puritanism described by Cruise O'Brien illustrates a central contradiction between the ideals and practices of young Senegalese Muslims, since the puritanist rhetoric was rarely matched by religious piety regarding the observance of the five pillars of faith. Benjamin Soares observes that such discrepancies may be seen as part of certain cultural idioms of religious praxis. He argues that:

> … the assertion of a [West African] Muslim identity relates in part to the life course and the transition to adulthood. Among many West African Muslims in the Sahel, youth is thought to extend, especially for men, well into one's thirties. Before reaching adulthood, it is not uncommon for many young men not to perform their ritual daily prayers (Soares 2004:920)

Soares' analysis of Halpulareen immigrants in France illustrates the implicit expectation of a progression in terms of spiritual commitment, as expressed through the public confirmation of the Muslim faith (through the five pillars of faith). This progression, Soares argues, is seen by his informants as an affirmation of the progression from youth to adulthood, implying not only that spiritual vigour is expected from a Muslim adult, but that a certain degree of laxity is equally expected from a Muslim youth. As a *youth identity*,

then, Mouridism may be seen as emphasising Puritanism mainly at a principal level, expressed in an oppositional relation to the national and global political order, reproducing the cultural idioms of the relatively lax youth and the relatively disciplined adult.

An Anthropology of Youth

A recent literature on the anthropology of youth (e.g. Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006; Honwana & De Boeck 2005; Durham 2002, 2004; Bucholtz 2002) argues that most studies of youth culture present only part of the picture when considering African youth, since they focus on the internal values and practices of a group of young people, while more or less disregarding the social and structural context of such identifications. The anthropology of youth literature thereby advocates a combined attention to expressions of youth culture on the one hand, and to the social idioms of adulthood and the structural limitations posed by the surrounding society on the other, as Soares' approach does above. In this understanding, a 'path towards adulthood' (cf. Barrett 2004) implies an individual journey through a social terrain (cf. Vigh 2006), towards a socially recognised position as a mature person – a position that is partly modelled on the paths walked by previous generations, but is also changed by the individual 'walker' (de Certeau 1984), as well as in response to changes in the social terrain. In social terrains where the conventional paths towards adulthood are blocked because of radical social and/or economic changes, young people's negotiations of alternative paths may be at the centre of generational tensions or conflicts.

The Baye Fall

In this sense, the urban Mouride youth movement also marked an emerging generational division within the brotherhood, whereby the young intellectuals, through their emphasis on spiritual principles rather than practices challenged the concerns of the new Khalifa-General, Abdou Lahatte, with improving the image of the Mouride brotherhood vis-à-vis the other Sufi orders. A particularly worrying segment of the young Mourides in this regard were the Baye Fall, described by Cruise O'Brien as '… that heterodox Mouride segment … for whom an obdurate refusal to pray or fast was still a matter of honour, and for whom exhortations to observe canonic obligations would be held an insult' (Cruise O'Brien 2003:46).

The Baye Fall trace their allegiance back to the closest disciple of Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the legendary Cheikh Ibra Fall, who is described by Cruise O'Brien (1975) as the *knight* of the Mouride brotherhood, by way of his reputation as being more concerned with secular considerations of politics and expansion of the early brotherhood's influence than with the spiritual rigorousness of his master. The Baye Fall are popularly known for their unconventional appearance, with their dreadlocks and the multi-coloured patchwork gowns, evoking the laboriousness and humility of their founder who allegedly worked so hard that he wore out his white gown, remaining humble enough to merely patch up the tear rather than acquiring a new (Villalón 1995:167-69). The best known characteristic of the Baye Fall, however, is their insistence that hard labour is as divine a practice as the five pillars of Islam (see also Audrain 2004:113). Although the reverence of work – particularly agricultural labour (cf. Cruise O'Brien 1975:78-79) – is a part of the general Mouride ethos, Cheikh Ibra Fall's decision to eventually replace the five pillars with hard physical labour remains controversial with both other Mourides and other Muslims in Senegal, and beyond (Villalón 1995:69).

In the following section I discuss a Mouride marabout who has gained considerable influence by promoting his own understanding of the Baye Fall's Mouride youth culture, targeting not the intellectual minorities in the university but rather the overwhelming majority of young Senegalese men without such opportunities.

The Leadership of Cheikh Modou Kara Mbacké

Known popularly as the Marabout of the Youth (*le marabout des jeunes*), Cheikh Modou Kara Mbacké Noreyni[2] has launched his own political party – the Parti de la Verité pour le Développement (PVD) – and his religious movement (MMUD) is believed to have the support of up to two million[3] (mainly) young Senegalese, making him a politico-religious force to be reckoned with. Xavier Audrain has studied the career of the Marabout of the Youth, and argues that Kara's redefinition of the relationship between, on the one hand religion and politics in Senegal and, on the other, the marabout and his *taalibe*, has successfully addressed the frustration of a whole generation of young Senegalese with the national political order, and has refashioned the marabout as a morally superior political leader or, indeed, a more politically aware spiritual guide. This position has carved out a new space for Kara, challenging at the same time the secular political order of the President and the traditional spiritual hierarchy of the Khalifa-General. As the leader of an army of marginalized youth, Kara has refashioned his image as the "General of Serigne Touba"[4] (Audrain 2004:114). Remebering Fatou Sow's analysis of the consequences of Abdoulaye Wade's proclamation of spiritual allegiance to the Mourides (above), we may then see the success of General Kara as an example of the progression of a *fundamentalist*

[2] Cheikh Modou Kara is the grandson of Cheikh Amadou Bamba's youngest brother, Mame Thierno Birahim Fati Mbacké, and a representative of a new generation of '*marabouts mondains*' (Audrain 2004:99); the third generation of descendants to the Mouride Caliphate, which – according to Villalón – may become involved in an unprecedented succession struggle that 'could compromise the unity of the order, with significant ramifications for Senegal as a whole' (Villalón 1999:140-41).

[3] According to Audrain, the MMUD has approximately 500.000 registered members, but the actual number of supporters may be five times that (Audrain 2004:102).

[4] As Audrain notes, it is significant for understanding the current generational struggle in the Mouride order, discussed by Villalón, that Kara has positioned himself as the General of Amadou Bamba – *not* of his representative on earth, the Khalifa-General.

discourse in Senegal, in the sense that his claims to both religious and political influence have made explicit, and refashioned, the symbiosis of religion and politics in Senegal to an unprecedented extent[5]. In this refashioning he has contributed to the making of a new socio-political position for his followers; a position that is formulated within the existing political order but which challenges conventions in an attempt to carve out a socially recognised position in Senegalese society – what Audrain calls a position as 'citizen-*taalibe*' (Audrain 2004).

In the following section I discuss the ways in which a group of General Kara's followers in Gueule Tapée expressed their Baye Fall identity, and particularly how Kara's refashioning of the relationship between religion and politics provided these marginalised young men with a social position that, although controversial, ensured their continued ability to remain socially mobile. Finally, by analysing their social praxis in the neighbourhood of Gueule Tapée, I demonstrate ways in which the Baye Fall navigate an unsympathetic social terrain by combining elements of a global youth culture with a refashioned Mouride ethos, illustrating the Baye Fall identity's complexity in practice, and the dilemmas involved in adhering to a youth identity while aspiring towards adulthood.

The Baye Fall of Gueule Tapée

Typical for all of Dakar, and probably most other Senegalese cities, Gueule Tapée is inhabited by people from most of the country's ethnic and religious groups. As I implied above, the non-Baye Fall residents of Gueule Tapée are generally sceptical towards these young men, who are either seen as religious hypocrites, naïve followers of a greedy politician posing as a religious leader, as simple street thugs, or all of the above.

[5] While Cruise O'Brien and others have traditionally argued that the Sufi brotherhoods of Senegal are responsible for the country's relative political stability, perhaps Villalón's concerns over the increasing politicisation of faith are confirmed by the tensions between this new Mouride sub-group and other Muslims in Gueule Tapée. Although the Sufi brotherhoods have always been important to Senegal's politicians, General Kara, being both the leader of a religious movement – the MMUD – *and* a political party – the PVD – is as controversial to his critics as he is enlightened to his followers.

Parents I have talked to seem most concerned with the street-corner image and apathetic lifestyle of the Baye Fall in the neighbourhood. Cire told me that his father was against him becoming a Baye Fall, and that many parents felt the same way, but that his father had accepted Cire's choice when he was able to prove that it did not interfere with his work. Followers of other religious orders in the neighbourhood were generally more concerned about the Baye Fall's interpretation of Islam, and of the obvious discrepancies between their religious ideals and practice, such as their vow of abstinence from alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and sexual relationships, and their image of being particularly fond of these very vices (or pleasures). While Cheikh Ibra Fall's notion of 'work for pray' seemed to be a respected concept, the large number of unemployed Baye Fall hanging out on street corners for large portions of the day was attributed by other young people to laziness and a flawed character.

Among the Baye Fall, these criticisms were well known and consistently ignored. The Baye Fall were rarely confronted directly with such accusations but perhaps the awareness of their fragile social position was part of what urged, particularly the younger, Baye Fall to spend a great deal of time listing the virtues of the movement and its leader to each other – and especially to outsiders such as a European ethnographer.

A Young Man with a Bearded Chin

One of the many lectures I received as a newcomer in the circles of the Baye Fall in Gueule Tapée was particularly illustrative of how important the movement is to its followers in asserting themselves towards others, and of how being Baye Fall may also draw on other sources of authority than the ones listed by their marabout. I had been hanging out regularly with Cire, Matare and Abdou and a few other Baye Fall for about a month, and had been invited to an annual gathering at the old house in *Rue Argentine*, held two weeks

after the *Gamou*[6], where the leftovers from one of the year's most important religious feasts was shared among the Baye Fall. As we were waiting for the mutton soup to be prepared I was approached by Alioune, whom I had never spoken to but noticed in the group because of his Rastafarian hat, Bob Marley t-shirt, and unusually intense and intelligent eyes. On this evening he had apparently had enough of this intruder to their group and approached me by asking why I was always hanging around them and listening in? Why I never told them anything about myself; what I was hiding? I replied that I believed that I had told the Baye Fall that I knew well about myself, but that I was here to learn about being young in Dakar, and perhaps was more interested in listening than talking about myself on that account.

That did not satisfy Alioune at all. As he began asserting himself against the intruder, with an intense glare in his eyes contradicting his perpetual smile, he gathered a crowd of the others around us, and poked me in the chest, accusingly. The following passage is quoted from my fieldnotes – at some length, in order to fully illustrate the richness of his retort:

> Alioune told me that he was a revolutionary – did I know who Chè Guevara was? People started gathering around us to listen. Did I know who Cheikh Amadou Bamba was, Alioune continued – to the mumbled applause from the crowd. Pape [whom I knew well] said something in Wolof along the lines of "Hey, we've told him all that already" but Alioune continued poking my chest and telling me off. He said he wanted me to know that we should be grateful for every day that God gave us and that your number of breaths is accounted for on His throne: that when you have spent them the Angel of Death will come and collect you. He said that Serigne Touba had shown them the True Path (*le chemin de la Verité*) and that although other people went to other *marabouts* who

[6] This annual event is usually known as the Maouloud [Mawlûd] – the celebration of the Prophet Mohamed's birthday, http://www.mouride.com/evenements-maouloud.htm.

> said they followed his teachings, it was Cheikh Modou Kara Mbacké – again, the crowd mumbled in applause in response to the name of their leader – and the Baye Fall who had understood the True Path. Alioune was a citizen of the world, he went on, and he was used to speaking with all sorts of Europeans. He thought that we Europeans ought to come to Dakar and give money to schools like the art school he attended because even though they did not have the proper materials, it was all about talent – and they had plenty of that! Cire stood beside us through the entire speech and fluctuated between mumbling applause for Alioune's pronouncements about Cheikh Amadou Bamba and the True Path, and reassuring me by saying that Alioune was just being a bit crazy.

In this speech, Alioune draws not only on being a Baye Fall but on the globalised images of Chè Guevara and Bob Marley as young rebels[7] against an oppressive social order. What is remarkable about the way Alioune evokes the teachings of Amadou Bamba (and General Kara) is that they seem to be quite general and unrelated to his annoyance with my presence: these were not anecdotes to make a point about my intrusion or my lack of manners for not being open enough about myself, but evocations of religious authority by recitation. His superior position as a Baye Fall was then supplemented by a reference to being a cosmopolitan; a citizen of the world through his association with Europeans. This seemed convincing to me at the time but strikes me as peculiar now, since I, after all, can be said to represent that very source of authority. But from the position that Alioune created for himself by evoking the religious teachings of the Baye Fall, even the (developmentalist) plea for funding of his school was stated with pride and a patronising air of superiority, underscored by his continued poking at my chest. Although I

[7] The image of a revolutionary also fits well with the more traditional myths of rebel-hero characters in the region, such as the story of Sunjata Keita, who was able to reverse his position from that of a crippled, and therefore marginalised, child to that of a king (related in Utas 2003:140).

represented a materially superior part of the world, in his world I just did not know any better as to not donate my wealth to his talent.

Eventually I was able to appease Alioune by saying that I would try to be more open about myself in the future but that he had to appreciate that not knowing Wolof made it difficult for me to take part in spontaneous conversations. As we shared a meal with a few of the others, and our conversation turned more amiable, Alioune asked me my age. I told him that I was 28 years old, and he responded by saying pensively to himself that, there you have it; although he was only 24, he still had so much wisdom and experience – which he underscored by pointing to his bearded chin. As I walked away from the others after the meal, Cire repeated that Alioune was a junior (*un petit*) and was a little crazy – but added that what he had said about Amadou Bamba and the True Path and all that was very wise and that I should be sure to write it down on my computer in the morning. In this way, Cire was marking himself as an elder in relation to Alioune, while acknowledging his ability to express himself and recite the teachings of their marabout. Conversely, the incident showed how Alioune asserted himself as an 'elder' in relation to me, supported by the crowd's recognition of his words. In this way, Alioune was able to establish himself as morally and spiritually superior to me, in fact causing him to reflect on the relativity of maturity; although I was older than him, in terms of biological age, he saw himself as the 'elder', because of his *social* maturity.

We were now on our way to a small stall where Cire and his friends meet after dark to share a hot cup of *café Touba* and meet with other Baye Fall and he pointed out a small wooden shack on the side of the road. He told me that this was where he and Matare had gone to Quran school when they were children. Their teacher had been a kind old man who had passed away but Cire had fond memories of that time, although serving as a young *taalibe* was hard work. Seeing his nostalgia over this shabby setting made me realise

at once how Cire's life had always been set on the margins of society and how his current position as a respected 'elder' within the Baye Fall in fact was a source of pride and confidence, despite the disapproving looks of the sceptics in Gueule Tapée.

A New Path[8] towards Adulthood?

In this atmosphere of intense competition over limited resources and social acceptance, the public performances at funerals and other ceremonies provide, mainly the older, Baye Fall with a socially meaningful role in the neighbourhood, and with an income that is crucial to the unemployed among them. On a brief visit to Dakar in January 2007 I found Cire, Matare, and Abdou along with a select group of musicians preparing for a trip to Rufisque where someone had booked them for a *chant*. Cire told me with a proud smile that their popularity had expanded geographically since my last visit, and that they were busy almost every weekend at the moment. In this way, the controversial Baye Fall of Gueule Tapée may be achieving social recognition and self-esteem as performers in and around Dakar.

What remains an open question is for how long the childhood friends will be able to uphold their Baye Fall identity which seems intimately tied to a youth identity. During my fieldwork, Cire often spoke to me secretively about his savings account. He was able to put half of what he earned in his job at the grocery shop aside and was planning to invest in an apartment building that he would rent out and make a living from. Cire aspires to more than rising in the internal hierarchy of the Baye Fall in Gueule Tapée – as most Baye Fall I met do. They dream of a more conventional place in society with a steady job, a wife, and a house of their own. While the Baye Fall identity may to some extent provide a social space for the most marginalised urban youth in Gueule Tapée, and a platform from where

[8] The notion of 'path' is here related to the analytical framework of the anthropology of youth, while the Arabic concept of *tariqa*, which is used in Gueule Tapée (and in Senegalese Sufism in general) to denote a Sufi order, interestingly also means "path" (Rosander 1997:3) but connotes a strictly spiritual understanding of progression.

to position oneself in relation to local and global social orders, then, it seems an uncertain strategy as a path towards social adulthood.

Young people – in Africa and elsewhere – sometimes challenge the paths walked by the parent generation. For the Baye Fall in Gueule Tapée, considering their identifications in relation to the anthropology of youth, I would argue that this is not the case. Although General Kara has gained considerable influence representing young men like Cire, Matare, and Abdou as the spiritually reinvigorated future of Senegal, the urban youth identity as 'citizen-*taalibe* serves as a temporary way out of what Henrik Vigh has called 'the social moratorium of youth', that is, a sense of social stagnation experienced by young people across the African continent in the face of blocked paths towards adulthood. Being Baye Fall – especially for the 'elders' within the group, such as Cire, provides some measure of social recognition but only within a limited social space. The Baye Fall may be a political force to be reckoned with at the level of national politics – in other words, for the politico-religious elite – but in the everyday lives of my interlocutors in Gueule Tapée, General Kara's authority is more or less restricted to the sphere of the Baye Fall themselves.

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