The Murid Ethic and the Spirit of Entrepreneurship: Faith, Business and Mobility among Murid immigrants in Gabon.[1]

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Abstract

The Muridiyya order founded by the Senegalese Muslim cleric, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbakke, at the turn of the 20th century, has been the object of extensive scholarly investigation.[2] From its inception research on the Murid organization has focused primarily on the political and economic dimensions of the order. Scholars have investigated the role of the Muridiyya in Senegal's colonial economy they have also explored the relationships between the Murid leadership and the colonial and post-colonial Senegalese state. By reconstructing the history of Murid migration to Gabon, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on Murid international migration. It sheds light on aspects of this migration that have received little scholarly attention: the trajectories of Murid migrants, their occupations and religious lives in their host countries, and the relationship between the much discussed industriousness of Murid migrants and their beliefs.

[1] Field work for this paper was made possible by funds provided by the Development Research Institute of New York University. I am grateful to Professor Bill Easterly, director of the institute, for his support.
[2] See Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal* (Ohio University Press, 2007) for a comprehensive history of the origins and early development of the Muridiyya and a critical review of the literature on the Murid order.

Introduction

The Muridiyya order founded by the Senegalese Muslim cleric, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbakke, at the turn of the 20th century, has been the object of extensive scholarly investigation.[3] From its inception research on the Murid organization has focused primarily on the political and economic dimensions of the order. Political scientists have explored the relationships between the Muridiyya and the post-colonial Senegalese state, highlighting the order's role as key actor in a "social contract" that legitimized the successive governments that have ruled Senegal since 1960, contributing to enduring political stability.[4] Sociologists and anthropologists have investigated the master/disciple relationship in the Muridiyya, particularly insofar as touches upon the order's work ethic. They have suggested that Ahmadu Bamba's teachings, and particularly the sanctification of manual labor and the requirement of the disciple's strict submission to his *shaykh* (spiritual guide), were critical in fostering an ideology that facilitated

[3] See Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal* (Ohio University Press, 2007) for a comprehensive history of the origins and early development of the Muridiyya and a critical review of the literature on the Murid order.

[4] See for example Donal Cruise O'Brien, "Le contrat social sénégalais à l'épreuve *Politique Africaine* 45 (1992),20. See also from the same author *Symbolic Confrontations: Muslims Imagining the State in Africa* (New York, 2003). Leonardo Villalon I*slamic Society and State Power in Senegal: Disciples and Citizens in Fatick* (Cambridge Uk, 1995).

the adoption and expansion of the cash crop economy of peanuts in colonial Senegal.[5] Disciples trained in *daara tarbiyya* (Murid rural schools) were deemed more disciplined and more willing to accept the commodification of their labor; in doing so they provided a much needed labor force for the colonial economy. Murid investment in peanut farming in turn spearheaded the insertion of the French colony of Senegal into the world market economy.

The gradual transformation of the Muridiyya from a rural organization of peanut farmers to a transnational organization of city dwelling traders that began in the aftermath of World War II has inspired a new line of inquiry. This research pioneered by the French cultural geographer, Gerard Salem, and the American anthropologist, Victoria Ebin, focused on the foundation and development of transnational Murid trading networks that span Europe and the United States and which now include Asia and the Middle East.[6] They argued that Murid values and work ethic furnished the ideological basis and cultural flexibility that enabled disciples to successfully adjust to varying socio-economic environments.

By reconstructing the history of Murid migration to Gabon, this paper contributes to the growing scholarship on Murid international migration. It sheds light on aspects of this migration that have received little scholarly attention: the trajectories of Murid migrants, their occupations and religious lives in their host countries, and the relationship between the much discussed industriousness of Murid migrants and their beliefs.

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[5] Jean Copans, *Les Marabouts de l'Arachide* (Paris, le Sycomore 1980 ; l'Harmattan, 1988).
Cheikh Tidiane Sy *La confrérie sénégalaise des mourides* (Paris, 1969).

[6] Gérard Salem, 'De Dakar à Paris, des diasporas d'artisans et de commerçants. Etude socio-géographique du commerce sénégalais en France.'Thesis for a doctorat de Troisième cycle, EHESS, Paris, 1981.
Victoria Ebin, 'Camelots à New York, les pionniers de l'immigration sénégalaise' *Hommes et Migrations* 1160 (Décembre 1992a), 32-37. 'Les commerçants mourides à Marseille et à New York' In *Grands commerçants d'Afrique de l'Ouest* Emmanual Grégoire, et Pascal Labazée eds. (Paris, 1993).

Scholars of development agree that 'religious life is not separated off other parts of peoples' lives and influences economic and political behavior.'[7] Specialists of the Muridiyya embrace this view. Most scholars of Murid migration note the central role faith plays in the making of the Murid transnational trade diaspora. The *dahira*, the ubiquitous Murid prayer circle that emerged at Sandaga market in Dakar in the 1940s, and which is now found throughout the diaspora, is generally recognized as a powerful source of social and symbolic capital that helped channel thousands of Murid traders outside of Senegal.[8] *Dahira* also helped socialize Murids in their host countries and facilitated their inclusion into trade networks. It is even suggested that the power relations between Murid wholesalers and street peddlers in Senegal and in the diaspora replicate the unequal and vertical relationship between Murid *shaykhs* (religious guide) and disciples.[9] But while acknowledging the connection between religion and economic behavior, in general research on Murid trade networks subordinates the spiritual to the material. Belief is treated as instrumental to materialist aspirations. Little attention is paid to what Murid traders actually say when they emphasize the spiritual dimension of their labor. Most Murids see themselves as vessels of Ahmadu Bamba's *baraka* (gift of grace) and their labor as an extension of their Shaykh's mission. In this paper I use two case studies (the building of a Murid mosque and the establishment of a market in Libreville, Gabon) to investigate the entanglement between spiritual motives and economic achievements among the Murid trade diaspora. I am mostly

[7] Giles Mohan and A B Zack-Williams, 'Globalization from Below: Conceptualizing the role of the African Diaspora in Africa's Development', *Review of African Political Economy*, 92. (2002), 211-236, 228.
[8] For more on the *dahira* and its role on the expansion of the Muridiyya, see Cheikh Babou, 'Brotherhood Solidarity, Education and Migration: The role of the *dahiras* among the Murid Muslim Community of New York' *African Affairs* 403 (2002), 151-170"; Sophie Bava, 'Les dahiras urbains lieu de pouvoir du mouridisme' in *Annales des recherches urbaines,* 96 (2004), 135-143. For a thorough discussion of the origins and economic role of this Murid urban institution, see Momar C Diop'La confrérie mouride: organisation politique et mode d'implantation urbaine,' thèse de troisième cycle unité d'études et recherches de psychologie et des sciences sociales, Université de Lyon 2, 1980.
[9] Gérard Salem, De la brousse sénégalaise au Boul'Mich: le system commercial mouride en France, *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, 81-83, xx1-1-3, (1982): 267-288, 271. J. P Dozon *Saint-Louis du Sénégal, palimpseste d'une ville* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), P. 106.

interested in exploring the ways in which, along with other factors, beliefs might have contributed to shaping a Murid ethos of mobility. Furthermore, I want to examine the mechanism through which Murid migrants put their faith to work and how in turn beliefs are mobilized consciously or unconsciously to foster something that could be termed a Murid spirit of entrepreneurship.

Brief biography of Ahmadu Bamba

Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbakke was born in the early 1850s in west central Senegal. He originated in a family with a long tradition of Islamic learning. In the tradition of prominent Muslim family in Senegal, he started Qu'ranic school at age seven taught by his uncles, parents, and allies of the family. Ahmadu Bamba grew up at a time of rapid and radical political and economic changes in Senegal. The French, who were established in northern Senegal since the second half of the seventeenth century, had abolished the slave trade in 1848 and had started experimenting with the production of cash crops such as peanuts. Ahmadu Bamba was only one year old, when in 1854, Louis Faidherbe, the first governor of Senegal, had started to push southward and northward from his base of Saint Louis in northern Senegal, beginning a violent war of conquest that lasted until 1886 after the killing of the last Wolof king. This war profoundly disrupted established economic, political and social structures of Wolof society.

This violent episode in the history of Senegal deeply affected the young Ahmadu Bamba and had a major impact in shaping his thought, teachings and practices. Although known for its reluctance to engage temporal power holders, the Mbakke family was caught in the turmoil. Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba lost his paternal grandfather, his uncle, and younger sister in the violence. His family was forced to leave its heartland of Bawol to migrate to the province of

Saalum and subsequently to Kajoor, where Bamba's father advised kings and served as *qadi* or Muslim judge. His mother died in the course of the migration. He was then about 12 to 13 years old. This tumultuous episode in his life had a profound influence on Bamba's attitude toward the state of affairs in Wolof country and furthermore it shaped his thoughts about entanglement with government. This attitude was marked by the rejection of deliberate involvement with rulers, an aspiration to separate the politics of Islam from the politics of kings, and an increasing attraction to Sufism or mystical Islam.

By the time of his father's death in 1883, Ahmadu Bamba had started to gain some recognition as a new kind of Muslim cleric. He became the de facto head of his father's school and family and was increasingly drawn to mystical Islam. He spent a lot of time alone, reading, writing, and meditating. He gradually moved away from classical method of Qur'anic schooling and devised a new system of education. This system provided the building blocks for the Muridiyya. He proposed a holistic approach to education that went beyond mere transmission of knowledge to seek the transformation of the whole being by touching the body, the mind, and the soul. This system of education that came to be known among the Murids as *Tarbiyya* relied both on the transmission of scriptural knowledge and on taming the carnal soul of disciples by keeping the body perpetually occupied through the performance of *khidma* (service, good work). This education was dispensed in the so-called Murid rural working school or *daara tarbiyya* and in Shaykh's villages and it enabled the development of a new form of faith-based community and identity. These communities were particularly attractive in the context of the disruptions brought about by the colonial conquest and rule. The originality of the method of education that Ahmadu Bamba initiated resided in its emphasis on physical labor as a form of service to God. Scholars single out the *daara tarbiyya* and the Shaykh/disciples relationship as the foundations

of the Murid work ethic.[10] However it is the emphasis on the spiritual significance of work that constitutes one of the most salient characteristic of the Muridiyya. Beyond a work ethic, the new method of education also contributed to forging new loyalties, new values, and a new worldview, in sum a counterculture that presented great challenge to the French so-called civilizing mission in Senegal.

It was precisely because of the perceived threat the Muridiyya represented to the colonial socio-political order and to the French policy of cultural assimilation that Ahmadu Bamba became a target of the colonial administration. Despite his rejection of violence and call for peaceful accommodation of colonial rule, he was arrested in 1895 and exiled to Gabon for over seven years, then sent to Mauritania for four years. Subsequently he was kept under house arrest in Senegal until his death in 1927. But Bamba's tribulations at the hands of the French only stoked his popularity. He became a magnet for Muslims disenchanted with a classical system of Islamic education that had proven unequal to responding to the spiritual and existential demands generated by colonial circumstances. Some segments of the defeated Wolof aristocracy also took refuge in the Muridiyya as a site of passive resistance to French rule. The Muridiyya has continued to prosper through the colonial and post-colonial era even when the structural factors that were believed to have contributed to its emergence are no longer operative. Today the Muridiyya claims over four million disciples in Senegal and in the diaspora.

Murid, mobility, and work.

The Murids make up only one third of the population of Senegal, yet they are disproportionately represented among Senegalese emigrants. According to varying estimates they account for over

[10] See Donal Cruise O.Brien, 'Le contrat Social..' and Symbolic confrontations, op cit, Jean Copans, *les marabouts*, op cit

half of Senegalese living abroad.[11] The migration of Murid disciples cannot be sufficiently explained using traditional arguments about international migration alone. In contrast to the push/pull model and other classical theories of migration, Murid migration does not concern the poor alone; it involves disciples of all class status, and especially the well off, including *Shaykhs*. Many among those who pioneered the migration were skilled artisans or experienced traders. It took decades before the poor peasants in the Murid heartland of west central Senegal followed in their footsteps. Murid disciples do not migrate to fill niches made available by the international division of labor imposed by the neoliberal global economy. Murid migration intensified in the late 1970s and early 1980s at a time that coincided with economic contraction in the countries where they settled. Moreover, migrants are mostly self-employed and therefore cannot be counted as part of the "post-industrial migration" that has replaced labor and family reunion. In sum, the Murid migratory experience seems to escape the supply/demand based labor migration model that informs most theories on international migration.

Without neglecting the role of global economic, political, and other factors, I suggest that Murid migration and industriousness are better understood by exploring murid cultural and religious values and some of the historical transformations that have marked the Murid order since its founding in the late 19th century. I am contending that these values and historical circumstances have fostered an ethic of mobility and a spirit of entrepreneurship, which, combined together, create among Murid disciples greater incentive toward international migration.[12] This is particularly true when one takes a closer look at the profiles of Murid

[11] Senegal, Minister of Economy and Finances, Recencement de la population et de l'habitat de 1988, Rapport National of June 1993.

[12] The existence of this potential for success does not, of course, mean that every Murid emigrant is a success story. Although it is impossible to provide an accurate balance sheet of Murid migration, it is safe to say that despite popular perception, it is likely that the majority of Murid migrants like the majority of non-Murid migrants are likely to fail to attain their goals.

emigrants. It is remarkable that the most successful among these emigrants are those trained in the rural working schools or originating from the Murid heartland of Bawol, Kajoor and Njambuur where Murid values hold greater sway. Murid themselves agree that the values of discipline and hard work, optimism, humility, and frugality, all things they have learned during their education in the *daara* or in their families helped them deal effectively with the challenges of life away from home and earn a decent living.[13]

Islam is a religion founded by long distance traders and nomads, a people constantly on the move. Important traditions such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, a canonical Islamic prescription, the prophetic injunction of migration from hostile land for the sake of protecting the faith, and the encouragement of travel for the sake of acquiring knowledge, helped further enshrine an ethic of mobility among Muslims. Among the Murids, the trajectory of Ahmadu Bamba's life and his role as an exemplar re-enforces this ethic. During his many relocations and confinements, at least from 1886, Bamba was followed by young and older disciples who flocked around him, leaving their villages behind, and triggering migratory waves that upset the colonial administration and disrupted traditional household power structures that bound people to the land.

But it was Bamba's trip to Gabon that captured the imagination of Murid disciples and ingrained an ethos of mobility symbolized by many of his trunks and suit cases kept as sacred relics in Murid holy places in Tuubaa, the holy city of the Muridiyya, and Diourbel. Murid hagiographers' depiction of Bamba's journey to Gabon popularized the Shaykh's sacred journey, touting the spiritual rewards he garnered by braving strange and dangerous lands. The most popular version of this narrative reads like a vernacular geography of French West and Equatorial Africa that later served as

[13] This is a shared opinion among Murid disciples that I have interviewed during over two decades of field research in Senegal and abroad.

travel guide to faithful Murid pilgrims following their Shaykh's footprints.[14] It narrates Bamba's transfer from Saint Louis, the capital of French West Africa (AOF, French acronym), to the port of Dakar where he boarded a ship. In its journey from Senegal to Gabon, the ship first stopped in Conakry, then Free Town, Grand Bassam, Lome, Cotonou, Douala, Matadi, and finally Libreville, all now large cities along the Atlantic coast of Africa. Today, Murid disciples flying Senegal Airlines to Libreville make some of these stops and they remain mindful of the historical connection. From Libreville, Bamba was transported to the towns of Lambarene then Mayumba. Many of these cities are now home to large communities of Murid emigrants who started to migrate there in the aftermath of World War II to seek a better life but who also remain conscious of the historical links with Ahmadu Bamba, a history they try to memorialize through the production and reproduction of sacred space and sacred discourse, and the organization of pilgrimages.

After returning to Senegal in 1902, Ahmadu Bamba's mobility was severely curtailed by colonial restrictions. But his forced immobility combined with his growing aura as a saint who overcame French machinations, turned Bamba into a magnet for disciples. Faithful Murids from all over Senegal converged to his places of detention in Mauritania and Senegal. I suggest that the waves of short term and long term devotional migration unleashed by Ahmadu Bamba's return to Senegal and which lasted until his death in 1927, along with the centrality of mobility in his biography, were instrumental in fostering a culture of migration among Murid disciples. By culture of migration I mean an ethos of mobility based on predisposition to migrate that is positively sanctioned by society and supported by communal belief in ultimate success.

This culture of migration was wedded to a work ethic. Much has been written about the sanctifying virtue of work among the Murids. Ahmadu Bamba's writings and sayings are often quoted to support this idea. Bamba has, for example, written 'Science and work are the surest paths to happiness.'

[14] Musa Ka, *Jazaau shakuur*, audio cassette sung by Mama Njaay; Diâo Faye, 'L'œuvre poétique wolofal de Moussa Ka ou l'épopée de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba,' thesis for a doctorat de Troisième Cycle, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 1999.

Two of his most referred quotes read, 'Work is a means of worshipping God', and 'Work as if you will never leave this world and pray as if you knew that you will die tomorrow.' But when referring to work in his writings, Bamba often uses the Arabic word *khidma* (service), alongside the words *amal*, which means 'labor' or 'action' and *kasb*, which means 'earning,', 'gain' or 'profit'. In the two sayings just quoted, work should be understood as *khidma* that is the performance of service for the sake of godly rewards in the hereafter. The concepts of *amal* and *kasb*, in contrast, refer more directly to earthly life.

Building on Max Weber, some scholars have found similarities between the Murid conception of work and the Protestant work ethic. Abdoulaye Wade, has, for example, asserted that the Muridiyya is with Protestantism the only religion to believe in the redeeming power of work.[15] Reviewing Wade and other scholars, Philippe Couty criticized materialist interpretations of the Murid conception of work and proposed a new approach that stressed theological elements. For Couty what is important for the Murid is not the production of wealth or the substitution of labor for prayer as some commentators have suggested, but the fact that work gives an empirical significance to the ideology binding disciples and *shaykhs*. Work, he argues, is the instrument through which unsophisticated Murid disciples express the complex Sufi concept of love and submission to one's spiritual master.[16] While more attentive to Murid beliefs, Couty's interpretation does not however capture the whole significance of Murid's conception of work. In reality, work was not an exclusive duty of the disciples, and as I have demonstrated elsewhere, it was not solely expressed in the form of physical labor (*amal* or *kasb*) of the disciples for the benefit of the shaykh. Shaykhs performed work (*khidma*) as well.

From the Murid perspective, work (*khidma*) is not a sanctifying action, nor is it mere expression of the submission of the disciple to the spiritual master; rather, it is a manifestation of the common attachment to the Muridiyya, a way of perpetuating and participating in Ahmadu Bamba's mission or, as Murid disciples put it 'working for Ahmadu Bamba.' For the Murids, prayers and other forms of worship

[15] Abdoulaye Wade, *La doctrine économique du mouridisme* (Dakar, 1970).
[16] Philipe Couty, 'La doctrine du travail chez les mourides' [brochure] (Dakar, ORSTOM, 1969).

are duties common to all Muslims; work (*khidma*) constitutes their distinctive way of expressing love and fidelity to their Shaykh, by perpetuating his mission. The economic implications of *khidma* are important, as it results in the accumulation of wealth and prestige within the Murid organization. Economic prosperity, in turn, reveals the potency of the gift of grace that God has bestowed on Ahmadu Bamba.

But for the disciples what is even more important is their ability to contribute through their wealth, investments, and donations to the continuing manifestation of this potency. In other words, Murid disciples see it as their utmost duty to reveal through their labor and economic achievements the continuing efficacy of Ahmadu Bamba's prayers. Trust in Bamba's gift of grace and in the power of his prayers creates, in turn, a predisposition for risk taking. This predisposition along with a sense of communal solidarity and the impulse to improve their material life can be construed as the driving force behind the mobility of Murid disciples and their industriousness. Both Jean P. Platteau and Marcel Fafchamps have noted the role of moral norms in fostering relations of trust which are crucial in a market based economy.[17] The Sandaga market in Dakar and the *dahira* (prayer circle) were central in the diffusion of Murid moral norms and they played a crucial role in the expansion of the Murid trade diaspora across Africa and beyond.

Sandaga, *dahira,* and the globalization of the Muridiyya.

The mass migration of Senegalese across Africa and out of the continent was pioneered by Soninke and Haalpulaar migrants from the Senegal River valley who have been involved in transnational migration since the early years of the colonial era.[18] Geographical location along a

[17] Writing about the role of moral norms in a market economy Jean Philippe Platteau insists on the ability of moral norms (here religious norms) to sustain honest behavior by generating 'the right kind of preferences and establishing trust.' See Jean Philippe Platteau, 'Behind the Market Stage Where Real Societies Exist: Part II: the role of Moral Norms'. *Journal: Journal of development studies* Vol: 30 Year (1994): 753-815, 753. Marcel Fafchamps makes the same argument about the ethical basis of trust in *Market Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa: Theory and evidence* (The MIT Press, 2004), 14.

[18] The compound word *Haal Pulaar*, those who speak Pulaar (also Fulbe, Peul or Fula) refers to the variety of ethnic groups across Africa that speak more or less mutually intelligibleversions of the Fulbe language. Here I refer particularly to the sub-group known as Toucouleur who originated from the Senegal River valley.

strategic waterway, a harsh environment on the edge of the Sahara, and a long tradition of interactions with North Africans and Europeans stimulated the mobility of these two communities. Following in the footsteps of these pioneers, the Murids have engaged in seasonal migration to the cities of Senegal since the eve of the Great War. As early as 1912, the colonial administration deplored the invasion of the *escales* of Senegal by wandering Murid disciples.[19] These were Murids who grew millet and peanuts in their farms in West and East central Senegal and who moved to the cities to seek work during the idle season. In his book on Islam in Senegal completed in 1917, Paul Marty identified Murid disciples sojourning in the cities of Saint Louis, Dakar and Rufisque as "tailors, butchers, leatherworkers, porters, shepherds, mattress makers, charcoal sellers" and craftsmen in general.[20] These were seasonal migrants but the permanent city dwellers that moved to the cities decades later also exerted similar professions, at least initially.

The pace of Murid migration to town quickened after WWII. The census of 1955 indicated that 11 percent of the population of Dakar was Murid.[21] This movement followed a general trend that marked the demographics of Senegal in the 1950s. The increasing urbanization was prompted by the transformation of the colonial economy, fueled by the Fonds d'Investissement pour le Développement Economique et Social (FIDES) initiated from Paris.[22]

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[19] Mamadou Fall relates the trial in the village of Ndiagne of four Murid disciples accused of disorderly conduct and vagrancy. See Laurence Marfaing and Boubacar Barry, eds., *Commerce et commerçants au Sénégal* (Paris, 1992). During the colonial era, an *escale* designated a location near a railway station, major road, or river that functioned as a center for economic transactions in rural or semi-rural areas.

[20] Archives Nationales du Senegal, 13G67. Politique Musulmane. Activites des marabouts.

[21] The census found that Dakar had 230,887 inhabitants and that Murids living in the city numbered 25,781. See Momar Coumba Diop, "La confrérie mouride: Organization politique et mode d'implantation urbaine," (Thèse de troisième cycle UER de psychologie et sciences sociales (Ph.D), Lyon 1980), 32; for a discussion of the demographic growth of Dakar and an analysis of the activities of Muslim organizations in the city, see Adriana Piga, *Dakar et les ordres soufis* (Paris, 2002).

[22] In the aftermath of the Second World War, France, like Britain, initiated an ambitious program aimed at improving the economy of its African colonies; this was part of what some historians call the "second colonization." The Fonds d'Investissement Economique et Sociale (FIDES) was created as part of this effort to foster a new

Sandaga market, now the heartbeat of informal businesses in Senegal, soon became the hub of Murid businesses in Senegal. Sandaga was inaugurated in 1933 as a modern African market in the center of Dakar to accommodate the growing non-European population of the capital of French West Africa. It was intended to be a meat and vegetable market catering to middle class Africans who were to be discouraged from shopping at the upscale European market of Kermel built in 1910.[23] Before long Sandaga's intended vocation was subverted, to the chagrin of colonial urban planners. Sandaga soon turned into a thriving market for the selling of watches, eye glasses, garment, cosmetics, and other merchandise imported by Murid businessmen from Europe and later Asia. Already in the 1950s, Murid street peddlers had started selling their wares around the market playing a game of cat and mouse with the police as they will do in Paris and New York City decades later. By the 1960s under independent Senegal, Murid traders had succeeded with the help of the political muscle of the Murid leadership to secure shops in the market. Today, Sandaga is dotted by shops mostly owned by Murid disciples easily recognizable by the names given to these shops that reproduce the names of Murid holy cities such as Tuubaa or Daaru Salaam, the display of pictures of the mosque of Tuubaa or of prominent Murid shaykhs. These same names and pictures grace the façade of Murid businesses around the world. They function both as identity markers and as talismans believed to bring good fortune.

From the late 1960s, Sandaga became a hub of the Murid transnational trade as shown by Gerard Salem's research on the expansion of Murid trade networks in France from 1960 to

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legitimacy for colonial rule. This program particularly benefited the urban areas that received substantial funding for the building of economic infrastructures.

[23] Ousseynou Faye, les pratiques des talibés de la transaction au marché Sandaga, in *Les économies reélles en Afrique, Real Economies in Africa*, Georges Kobou, ed. (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2003), 270-281

1980.[24] Salem, a geographer, was primarily interested in describing the trade networks connecting Murid businessmen and craftmen operating from the Sandaga market in Dakar with wholesaders and street peddlers in the cities of France. He was not interested in religious spirituality and did not fully understand the entanglement between religion, ethnicity, and trade networks. However, his research offers a helpful description of the historical trajectories of the entrepreneurs involved in the trade and the role that common belonging to the Muridiyya played in stimulating and expanding the trade. Victoria Ebin's studies developed along the same vein, documenting Murid migratory processes through Europe and the United States.[25]

Sandaga was also the place where the first Murid *dahira* was formed in the 1940's.[26] And it is significant that the first dahira was formed in a market because, as we shall see in the following pages, *dahira* played a pivotal role in the formation and expansion of the Murid trade diaspora. Traders at Sandaga, including Murids, were organized around geographical affinities (hometown associations), shared ethnicity, and other socio cultural criteria, but the *dahira*, because of its ability to bridge discreet cultural and class differences emerged as the most powerful and influential organization in the lives of Murid international traders. As shown by Susan E. Eckstein and Adil Najam, 'People move where they have networks to draw on to find work and housing, to ease their adjustments to a foreign land.' The dahira provided those networks to Murid migrants.[27]

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[24] Gérard Salem, 'De Dakar à Paris, des diasporas d'artisans et de commerçants. Etude socio-géographique du commerce sénégalais en France.'Thesis for a doctorat de Troisième cycle, Paris, EHESS, 1981.

[25] See, Ebin, 'Camelots' op cit., 'Commercants,' op cit.

[26] See my interview with Elhaj Bamba Jaw, one of the founders of the first Murid dahira in Sandaga. Jaw led Murid dahira of Guy Senghor for several decades. Interview Dakar, 8 April 2000.

[27] Susan, E. Eckstein and Adil Najam, ed.s *How Immigrants Impact their Homelands* (Duke U Press, 2010), p. 10.

Dahira was an invention of the shaykhs and disciples of the chapter of the Tijaniyya order founded by Elhaj Malick Sy in Senegal.[28] Among the Murids, *dahira* was first conceived as a prayer circle where disciples from the same town or neighborhood would meet on a weekly basis to read Qur'an, chant Ahmadu Bamba's devotional poems, collect financial contributions, and socialize.[29] The *dahira* helped define the Muridiyya as a 'ritually delineated community.' This ritual distinctiveness and the beliefs on which it was based were instrumental for the establishment then expansion of Murid trade networks. Abner Cohen has noted the centrality of ritual as a means to stabilize a mobile community.[30] Specialists of the Murid order emphasize the role of the *dahira* as the critical institution in the establishment of a Murid trading diaspora in the cities of Senegal and abroad.[31] *Dahira* facilitate the exchange of ideas, commodities, and people. In the city the *dahira* played a role similar to that of the rural *daara* (rural working school) that was at the forefront of Murid "conquest" of the forest of east-central Senegal.[32] For many Murid urban dwellers it replaced the *toolu alarba* (Wednesday farm) where once a week rural disciples donated their labor to support the local Murid *shaykh*. Many of my Murid informants living in cities in Africa and abroad indicate that their *dahira* contributions were indeed an institutionalization in monetary form of the labor they donated every Wednesday to their *Shaykh*'s farm when living in the countryside in Senegal. Today the tradition of collecting *dahira* dues on Wednesday continues in the markets of Senegal and in the diaspora. In the urban context, the *dahira* helped develop, preserve, and reproduce the values that shaped Murid identity. It fostered links of solidarity and provided

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[28] This dahira was founded in the 1920s in the context of the competition between Ababacar Sy and his younger brother Mansour Sy for the leadership of the Tijaniiya. Babacar founded the first dahira in Dakar to consolidate his power and authority over the organization founded by his father who died in 1922. For more on the origin of the dahira in the Tijaniyya in Senegal, see Ibrahima Marone, 'Le Tidjanism', *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, serie B, 32(1970), 136-215.

[29] The first Murid dahira was also founded in circumstances similar to the situation in the Tijaniyya. Shaykh Mbacke, the elder grandson of Ahmadu Bamba and initiator of this dahira, launched his initiative in the 1940s when he was locked in a competition with his uncle Falilu for the control of the Murid order

[30] Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (U of California Press, 1969), p. 9

[31] See Diop,' la confrérie mouride', op cit., Babou, 'Brotherhood solidarity', op cit and Bava 'les dahiras'

[32] For more on Murid expansion in rural Senegal, see Paul Pelissier, *Les Paysans du Senegal*: *les civilisations agraires du Cayor a la casamance* (Saint Yrieix, 1966), and Jean Copans, *les marabouts de l'arachide*, op cit.

new emigrants a familiar and supportive environment. In an interview at the Sandaga Market, Ngan Caam, an elderly Murid trader, explains the role of *dahira* among the Murid urban community:

> The *dahira* is above all a self-help organization. In Dakar, we were dispersed in different neighborhoods. The *dahira* allowed us to bond and know each other's problems and concerns. The money we collected also served to help the needy among us; support those of us who would run in trouble with the police; contribute to naming ceremonies and funerals; help transport the deceased to the cemetery of Tuubaa for burial.[33]

Dahira also helped disciples leverage power to influence governmental action. Elhaj Ndiaga Gey, a longtime leader of the *dahira* of Sandaga Murid traders, for example explains, how when faced with the threat of eviction from downtown Dakar, the *dahira* with the support of the Murid caliph, was able to convince the government to abandon the initiative. More recently, the *dahira* was able to stop the project initiated by a businessman to destroy dozens of shops for the construction of seven story building at Sadanga market which, according to Gey, would have cost four hundred heads of families their livelihoods.[34] The moral norms generated by *dahira* also fostered trust and self-policing mechanism that benefited Murid businesses. But despite its positive role in the Murid community, *dahira* can also be a source of strife as it is a site of competition for power and authority where tensions and rivalries between clerical lineages are magnified. These tensions are so intense in the diaspora that they have prompted Shaykh Maam Mor, grandson of Ahmadu Bamba and representative of the Murid caliph in the diaspora, to write a pamphlet lamenting the situation.[35]

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[33] Ngagne Caam, Dakar12 September1999

[34] Interview with Njaga Gey Dakar 11 June 2004

[35] See Cheikh Mame Mor Mb. Mourtada, *Le phénomène de la désunion au sein de certaines organisations religieuses.* Personal publication translated from the Arabic by Cheikh Gueye, (Touba May, 2006.)

Murid migration to Gabon

Although they are over two thousand miles apart, Senegal and Gabon have been connected for over a century. Until the 1960s, this connection was mostly emotional. Gabon was brought into the fold of imperial France in the late 19th century, centuries after France's acquisition of her colony of Senegal. It was mostly a penitentiary colony, sparsely populated, (currently one million and half, immigrants included) where recalcitrant colonial subjects were sent as punishment.[36] To control and administer the newly acquired territory, France relied on Senegalese and Beninese civil servants and soldiers, as it had done in the Ivory Coast and in other Central African colonies. There were very few if any Murid disciples among these civil servants who were French citizens originating mostly from the Four Communes or northern Senegal.[37] Murids, who were overwhelmingly French subjects living outside of the Communes, shunned French schools and culture because of the oppression to which their Shaykh had been subjected and as a result they were late to embrace Western education.

Gabon gradually became an important destination of Murid migration from the 1960s for a combination of reasons. Gabon was lightly populated and was less developed than most of the French colonies in West and Equal Africa. After independence it offered great opportunity for work because everything had to be built from the presidential palace, to roads, military barracks, hospitals and schools. In addition, Gabon lacked a skilled work force and the French and Lebanese entrepreneurs, who dominated the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economies of former French colonies, had a lighter footprint there. Finally, competition for work was less

[36] The CIA world fact book estimates the population of Gabon in 2014 at 1,672,197.
[37] As a result of the French policy of assimilation, Senegalese born in one of the Four Communes of Saint – Louis, Dakar, Rufisque or Gorée were citizens and benefitted, at least theoretically, from the same rights as French born in France. People outside the Communes were subjects subjected to indigenat rule.

intense in Gabon compared to countries such as the Ivory Coast or the two Congos which have been for a long time favored destinations of African and Senegalese migrants.

The first Murid disciples to settle in Gabon were artisans and traders educated in traditional Qur'anic schools and were attracted by the economic prospect that this French colony represented. They step migrated to Gabon from the Ivory Coast or former French colonies in central Africa. This was, for example, the case of the gold jewelers Elhaj Medun Gey and Elhaj Gey believed to be among the first Murid disciples to immigrate in Gabon. Medun Gey first migrated from his village in the Murid heartland of west central Senegal to Abidjan (capital city of the Ivory Coast) than left for Libreville in 1965, two years before Gabon became independent. He was the personal jeweler of President Omar Bongo who ruled Gabon from 1967 to 2009. Gey designed Bongo's watches and glasses and made for him the gifts of jewelry he gave to his family and important guests. Elhaj Gey worked in the Ivory Coast as a jeweler but he also owned Banana orchards there before moving to Gabon. He originated from Tuubaa and was considered one of the richest men in the Murid holy city in the 1970s and 80s. Balla Caam, Malick Jum, Talla Sekk and Elhaj Sekk were also part of this contingent of affluent Murid jewelers who made a fortune in Gabon in the 1960s and 1970s.[38] Caam, who returned to Senegal in the mid-1990s, owns a large multi-story building in downtown Dakar. All of these Murid jewelers invested in the real estate business in Senegal.

From the 1980s a new crop of Murid entrepreneurs emerged and soon established themselves as the most successful African and Murid businessmen in Gabon. They worked in a variety of sectors such as import/export, car dealership, transportation, and the funeral industry.

[38] For the history of the first Murid settlers in Gabon, I rely on information provided by Mass Njaay, interview in Libreville 19 Dec. 2014 and Elhaj Seck, phone interview 7 Nov. 2015. Both Njaay and Seck arrived in Libreville in the 1970s and were among the first Murids to migrate to Gabon.

Many of these entrepreneurs partnered with powerful Gabonese politicians and businessmen. This was the case of Ale Gey who opened the first industrial dry cleaning business in Libreville in 1976 in collaboration with the Gabonese minister of finances. He made a fortune providing services to hotels and hospitals. But contracting gradually became the most lucrative occupation of Murid migrants in Gabon. The richest Murid businessmen in Gabon today are contractors. Many of these contractors came to Gabon brought by French construction companies as workers and ended up creating their own businesses. This was the case of Cheikh Amar (more about him below) and Mbakke Kebe, who are among the richest Senegalese businessmen abroad. They are believed to be worth billions of CFA. Despite the economic downturn and tightening of immigration regulations, Murid disciples continue to see Gabon as a land of opportunity. The unskilled journeyman working in the construction business makes 7000 CFA Franc (1$= 500 CFA Franc) a day double of what he would earn in Senegal and a qualified mason can earn twice this amount.

But beyond the economic opportunity it represents, Gabon occupies a special place in Murid history and memory. Ahmadu Bamba spent seven years of his life there. It was the first foreign country to be visited by Murid *shaykhs*. From 1895 to 1902, the end of his deportation by the French, Bamba had received the visit of several Murid dignitaries. When Murid disciples had started to migrate to Gabon in large numbers in the 1970s, they reconnected with this memory and history. There are several sacred sites of the Muridiyya in Gabon and Murid immigrants have worked hard to claim and memorialize those sites (more on this below). As many of my interviewees in Libreville mentioned, they look upon Gabon as the backyard of Tuubaa. Today when we think of the compression of space and time, we relate this development to the impact of the new information technology, cheap airfares, and the revolution in the technology of

telephony. For the Murids the imagined proximity between Gabon and Tuubaa rests on shared memories connected by Ahmadu Bamba's journey to Central Africa**.**

Despite the similarity of Senegalese and Murid migration to Gabon with other migrations, the Gabon migration presents certain specificities. While migration to other African destinations (Ivory Coast, Congo) have started well before the 1960s, the Gabonese migration took place mostly during the postcolonial era and it was partly the result of initiatives by the Gabonese and Senegalese governments, at least at the beginning. In 1973, the government of Gabon was tasked by the African head of states to organize the 1977 summit of the Organization of African Union (OAU, currently the African Union). The country's capital, Libreville, was then a small town lacking the most basic infrastructures to host such an event. Albert Bernard Bongo (later Omar Bongo) then President of Gabon, asked the president of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, to help supply his country with the skilled construction workers it needed to build the necessary infrastructures for the event. Senegal was already sending teachers to Gabon in the framework of a cooperative agreement between the two nations. Gabon contracted the French construction company Société de Construction et Bâtiment (SOCOBA) to carry out President Bongo's projects.[39] Between 1973 and 1977, SOCOBA sent hundreds of Senegalese workers to to Libreville, Franceville, and other cities in Gabon. Many of these early laborers were masons, carpenters, electricians, plumbers and car drivers who did not come from from theMurid sections of Dakar. Nevertheless a few Murid disciples were included in the group. Assan Joob, the current leader of the Murid *dahira* of Batavia, a neighborhood in Libreville, was among those laborers. Joob was an electrician from downtown Dakar, now he is a contractor. He was hired by SOCOBA in 1975 and sent to Franceville. The memory of this migration is still preserved in the

[39] See interview with Pape Diagne, Imam of the mosque of Camp Senegalais who migrated to Gabon in the 1970s. Libreville, 20 December 2014. Diagne was my most important source for SOCOBA.

onomastic of Libreville's neighborhoods with names such as *La La La Dakar* and *Camp Senegalais* marking the places where these Senegalese workers once resided.

By the late 1970s, there were thriving Murid communities in Libreville and Port Gentil, two of the largest cities in Gabon, and very quickly most immigrants were self-employed. Elhaj Njaay, a Murid disciple and taxi driver now living in New York City who migrated to Libreville in 1980 after stints in Berlin and Paris, recalls a budding Murid community in this city at the time:

> I travelled to Libreville in 1980. I found many murid disciples in Gabon. They worked as masons and carpenters. Many were brought there by SOCOBA (Société de Construction et Bâtiment). I also found a large *dahira* where we met every Sunday after lunch at Leo Mbah. We would stay there until Maghreb prayer. At that time the community was large perhaps over 300 active dahira members. This was in Libreville. Medun Gey was the leader of the dahira he was assisted by Balla Caam and Elhaj Cheikh Mbow. The jewelers formed the majority. Bacc Njaay and Debeus Ngom where the preachers.[40]

Today, Libreville has three more *dahiras* in addition to the *dahira* founded by Medun Gey, in the 1970s, catering for seven hundred to a thousand active disciples.[41] Two of these *dahiras* have their own built up headquarters where they hold meetings, organize religious ceremonies, and maintain a shelter for needy disciples and visiting *shaykhs*.

The second largest Murid community in Gabon is found in Port Gentil, the economic capital of Gabon where the oil industry is based. Mbay Caam, a jeweler who migrated to Port Gentil in 1982, found there a thirty member strong *dahira*. There were also Murid disciples who were not active members of the dahira.[42] Port Gentil was the capital of colonial Gabon before losing its status to Libreville after independence.

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[40] Interview with Elhaj Njaay, New York City 2 May 2014
[41] Interview with Assan Murtala Joob, Libreville, 16 December 2014
[42] Interview with Mbay Caam, 13 March 2011, Memphis, TEN.

Gabon was one of the earliest and most popular destinations of travelling Murid *shaykhs*. The late Shaykh Murtalla, the youngest son of Ahmadu Bamba, began his visits to Libreville in the 1970s well before his annual tour across North America and Europe had become institutionalized in the 1990s. Serin Shaykh Mbakke, and Serin Modu Buso Jeng, both grandsons of Ahmadu Bamba, were also regular visitors. Abdulaay Jeey, another Murid *shaykh* who played a crucial role in the expansion of the Muridiyya in France and the United States, visited Gabon for the first time in 1980. He travelled with two disciples from France in an effort to reconstruct Ahmadu Bamba's exile itineraries.[43] The popularity of the Gabon destination among Murid *shaykhs* can be explained by the prosperity and generosity of Murid disciples there.

Murid disciples in Gabon soon overtook the Ivory Coast as the most prosperous Murid community abroad. The annual financial contribution (*hadiya*) of Gabon disciples to the Muridiyya always topped that of all other Murid diasporas in Africa and rivaled that of communities in Europe and the United States. The Gabonese *dahira* was first to contribute annually an amount of eighty million CFA to the Murid order.[44] In the 1980s and 1990s, disciples in Port Gentil alone could collect annually twenty million CFA. Despite the economic crisis disciples in Gabon still continue to lead in their financial contribution. In 2012, they delivered to the Murid caliph a sum of thirty five million as much as the Murid community in Spain and probably more than any other Africa based *dahiras*.[45]

It was the visit of Shaykh Murtalla in Libreville in 1993 that raised the profile of Gabon as an important node on the web of Murid immigrants' transnational networks. During this visit,

[43] Interview with Alassane Mbay, Paris 3 June 2010. Mbay was part of the journey to Gabon.
[44] Interview with Mbay Caam, Memphis TEN, 13 March 2011. I also refer to a phone interview with ELhaj Seck, a Murid disciple who migrated to Libreville in 1976 and still lives there. 7 November 2015.
[45] Interview with Serin Sy, Berlin 22 March 2014. Sy was then the leader of the Murid dahira of Berlin and he was present when representatives of the Gabon dahira handed the money to the Murid Caliph.

the Murid *shaykh* met with the president of Gabon, Elhaj Omar Bongo in his palace in Libreville. This was not the first time that Shaykh Murtalla had visited Gabon or had met with President Bongo. He had met with him during a visit in1986. But the visit of 1993 was particularly significant in that it gave greater visibility to the Muridiyya on the Gabonese public stage. Shaykh Murtalla had gathered all the Murids in Libreville and had told them about the celebrations that Murid disciples around the world hold every year to commemorate the life and work of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. He told them that, given the centrality of Gabon in Bamba's life, disciples in this country should have been at the forefront of those initiatives.[46] He ordered Murid disciples to begin an annual popular commemoration of the end of Ahmadu Bamba's exile in Gabon. The following year the event took place in the context of Murid cultural week that lasted between March 29 and April 4th and was presided over by the Shaykh in person. As stated on the flyer advertising the event, the goal pursued was to raise awareness about the historical links between Gabon and Senegal and to cultivate the fraternal relations between the two countries and second, to demonstrate the importance of Ahmadu Bamba's contribution to the expansion of Islam around the world. Murids all over the world were invited to attend.[47] The events included a tour of the different places in Gabon where Ahmadu had stayed during his deportation there. Pilgrims visited Montagne Sainte ("Sacred Mountain") in Libreville where Ahmadu Bamba is alleged to have prayed and survived the bullets of a French firing squad, as well as the cities of Lamberene and Mayumba, where he was kept under house arrest, and Cape Lopez where he….

During the celebration, Shaykh Murtalla laid the cornerstone for a building to host a branch of his network of Arabic school he named Al-Azhar. He urged disciples to build a house

[46] All my Murid interviewees in Libreville repeated this injunction.
[47] See flyer.

dedicated to Islam. Murid disciples also pledged to build a mosque at the location where Ahmadu Bamba is believed to have said his prayers on the "Sacred Mountain". While the whole community enthusiastically embraced these projects, their realization would prove to be a challenge because of leadership disputes that revealed deeply ingrained fissures between Murids of different social statuses and because of some disciples' resistance to the hegemony of lesser branches of the Mbakke family. Similar fissures are observed among Murid disciples across the diaspora.

Building a Murid mosque in Libreville

The mosque of Montagne Sainte ("Sacred Mountain") in Libreville constitutes the most important Murid investment outside of Senegal. The magnitude of the building and its cost demonstrate the centrality of Gabon in Murid imaginaries. While the building of the mosque was completed only in 2013, its history is rooted in the 19th century journey of Ahmadu Bamba in Gabon. Murid disciples now see the erection of this edifice on the same place where Bamba was confined against his will as manifestation of his ultimate triumph over the French and a sign of the continuing potency of his spiritual power. Murid disciples in Gabon see themselves as the vessels through which this potency is manifested. Ahmadu Bamba's exile to Gabon has become the signifier that gives meanings to their migratory experiences and to the different collective projects of the Murid community. The mosque's history illustrates the entanglement between migration, faith, and business in the Muridiyya.

The "Sacred Mountain", now located in downtown Libreville, was the site of a Catholic monastery.[48] When Ahmadu Bamba was exiled by the French to Gabon in 1895, he had spent some time in Libreville kept in military barracks not far from the mountain. Murid oral traditions, reportedly collected from older residents of the city in the 1960s, indicate that the "Sacred Mountain" was Bamba's favored spot where he used to retire for prayers and meditations.[49]

The association between Bamba and the Mountain turned this former Catholic site into Murid sacred place and a coveted piece of real state for Murid disciples. As they have done in Dakar and other places where Ahmadu Bamba is believed to have stamped his footprints or bodily prints, Murid disciples started to nourish the project of buying the site (where a house was now standing) as soon as they arrived in Libreville: Shaykh Mbakke (d. 1975), Ahmadu Bamba's elder grandson, is said to have been the first Murid to try to purchase the property. A Murid disciple was later able to rent the house which by then had become a pilgrimage site for disciples and *shaykhs*. But, according to this tale, when the owner who was then living in France was informed that his house had been turned into a "mosque," he expelled the disciples and later put the property on the market with the asking price of 33 Million CFA.[50]

When in 1993, the Murid community learned that the house of "Sacred Mountain" was listed on the market for sale, they mobilized to purchase it. Fallu Buso, a well-connected Murid *shaykh* and merchant who has been living in Libreville since the late 1960s, was first to get the

[48] It is more appropriate to speak about a hill. The place is perhaps the highest point of Libreville but it is easily accessible by different means of transportation and does not have steep slopes.
[49] For information on the history of the Murid community of Libreville, I rely mostly on my interview with Massamba Njaay, an elder Murid disciple who settled in Libreville in the 1970s. Interview, Libreville 19 December 2014. I have collected many versions of the stories of Bamba's sojourn to Gabon, Njaay's was the most complete.
[50] My information about the Mosque of "sacred mountain" come from several sources and the most significant are Massamba Njaay, Libreville 19 Dec. 2014 and Fallu Buso, the then leader of the Murid dahira, public speech at the occasion of Ahmadu Bamba cultural week in Libreville, 25 October 2015.

information. He alerted Shaykh Amar, a Murid contractor, and one of the richest businessmen in Gabon, who purchased the property on behalf of Shaykh Murtalla. As soon as the deal was closed, Buso proceeded to build a temporary prayer room on the site. Another disciple volunteered to build a well to protect a water hole which Ahmadu Bamba is believed to have used to prepare for prayers. Shaykh Murtalla contributed seed money for the building of the mosque as he had done in Europe and the United States. This gesture is a means for challenging and encouraging disciples to donate but it is also understood as a blessing that would help bring the project to fruition. The Shaykh's money is believed to be endowed with certain sanctifying qualities that can help protect and fructify disciples' investments.

Shaykh Amar played a critical role in the building of the Murid mosque of the "Sacred Mountain." Amar is discreet and unassuming but he has become the most popular Murid disciple living in the diaspora because of the magnitude of his investment in the Murid order. He has earned the status of the late Njuga Kebe and Elhaj Jily Mbaye, two wealthy Murid businessmen and earliest known Senegalese billionaires, who also made their fortunes abroad before returning to invest at home. Amar is from the city of Diourbel in the heartland of the Muridiyya where Ahmadu Bamba was kept under house arrest from 1912 until his death in 1927. Unlike many of his fellow Murids of the time, he has attended French schools. According to my sources, he was trained at the technical high school Andre Peytavin in Saint – Louis (northern Senegal) where he graduated with an associate degree in iron carpentry.[51] Amar came to Gabon in the mid-1970s brought by a French entrepreneur working in the sector of aluminum and glass carpentry. He is now in his mid to late 60s.

[51] Interview with Amndi Moustapha Sadi, Dakar 4 August 2015.

Shaykh Amar has become one of the most important businessmen in Gabon. He is the owner of a prosperous contracting company specializing in road building and in the construction of infrastructure for the Gabonese government. This is an unusual occupation for Murid migrants, especially members of the early generations, who tended to work in the informal sector of the economy as self-employed traders or artisans. The large size of some of the warehouses that Amar owns in the suburb of Libreville that shelter heavy earth moving machinery and other construction equipment are an indication of the importance of his business.[52] Amar's company took off when he partnered with Gerome Okinda, the former Gabonese Minister of Finances. They soon fell out but Amar prevailed in court and was able to keep ownership of the business. His proximity with powerful Gabonese government officials probably benefitted his business. He has won important government contracts around the country to build roads, air strips, schools and hospitals.

Years after the acquisition of the house of "Sacred Mountain", the Murids were still unable to build the planned mosque. Controversy surrounding the leader of the initiative, who was criticized for his authoritarianism and bad temper, was a major obstacle in taking the project to fruition. The different *dahiras* preferred to invest in their own projects. To make good of the promise Murid disciples made to their *Shaykh* to build a mosque on the "Sacred Mountain", Amar took the lead and pledged to do the heavy lifting. He invited all the Murid disciples of Libreville at the site of the mosque and suggested that they open a bank account dedicated to financing the construction of the edifice. He also offered his company's assets. Leaders of *dahira* and ordinary disciples mobilized to raise funds. Volunteers fanned the city on a daily basis to encourage disciples to contribute. Millions were raised but Shaykh Amar made the most

[52] I visited the Murid mosque of Libreville on Dec. 16 and 19, 2014.

significant contribution estimated at least at one billion CFA F (two million dollars). He oversaw the construction of the mosque from beginning to finish. The edifice named Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mosque was officially inaugurated on 12 March 2013 with the presence of Senegalese and Gabonese government officials.[53] It is a two story building with a large prayer room for male worshippers on the first floor, a prayer place for women on the mezzanine, a library, a basement, additional rooms and a vast garden where people gather to break the fast during Ramadan. (see picture)

Murids have also built in Libreville two houses dedicated to Ahmadu Bamba that serve as headquarters for the different *dahiras*. Gabon is the single country outside of Senegal where Murids have been able to build infrastructures of such magnitude. The centrality of Gabon in Bamba's spiritual itinerary and Murid imaginary explains the commitment to etch the cultural and religious footprints of the Muridiyya on Gabonese soil and the willingness to bear the financial sacrifices that this required. But the increasingly large presence of the Muridiyya on Libreville's public square is not welcome by all. As I have witnessed recently during the celebration of Murid cultural weeks, some Gabonese are growing irritated by the Murid's display of power through their pilgrimages, parades, long motorcades of luxury vehicles, and noisy singings.[54] However, such resentment does not seem, at least for now, to affect Murid attitudes. The story of the art market of Libreville further illustrates how beliefs can prompt Murid disciples to act in ways that can have significant impact on their lives and on the Murid community as a whole.

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[53] The inauguration ceremony was broadcasted by the Senegalese public network Sen 2 on 12 Mars 2013.

[54] Ahmadu Bamba cultural week of Gabon was organized from October 22th to 29th 2015, and was presided by the second most powerful leader the Muridiyya who travelled to Libreville with a delegation of 50 Murid dignitaries. He was received by President Aly Bongo. The Murid community visited the different sites associated with Bamba's exile and organized a parade in downtown Libreville that mobilized around a thousand disciples. I overheard three times passersby cursing the marchers and drivers and security agents berated them.

In Bamba's name we will have our market

Senegalese merchants were first to set up shops in downtown Libreville, competing with French store owners. Gabonese, like most people in the forested areas of Equatorial and Central Africa, do not have an established tradition of trade in contrast to the Sahel and desert dwelling West Africans who have been for centuries involved in long distance and regional trade networks. Many of these merchants managed stalls or worked out of temporary shelters.[55] They sold a variety of goods, but particularly antique arts, African cloths, jewelry and other items targeting French nationals working in Gabon, European tourists, diplomats, and the Gabonese middle class. Elhaj Medun Gey, the goldsmith and pioneer of Murid migration to Gabon, opened the first jewelry shop in downtown Libreville in 1965. He named his store, which still standing today, SeneGabon (see picture). Soon other Murid jewelers, art dealers, tailors and wage laborers followed suit. Women opened restaurants to feed the growing Senegalese and West African communities. The cohabitation between these traders with established businesses in the prime real estate of downtown Libreville was contentious, especially, since many of these traders were undocumented immigrants who did not have proper government licenses.

As the Gabonese government was taking advantage of soaring oil prices to develop and modernize the city, Murid traders were increasingly seen as a nuisance. They were forced many times to move their businesses to make room for the construction of government offices and other buildings to accommodate banks and private sector ventures. In 1998, Murid art traders were forced to evacuate one of the scarce vacant lots on which they had been squatting for some years. They set their sight on one of the few remaining open spaces in downtown Libreville that

[55] Interview with Farha Mohamed, Libreville 21 December 2014

could accommodate their trade.[56] This space that belonged to an old family of Senegalese immigrants was an empty lot where peopled dumped their waste. When the Murid traders proposed the owners to use the place for their trade, the latter agreed on condition that the Murids bear the cost of cleaning the place and accept to pay a rent of 1,200,000 CFA ($1 = 500 CFA) a month. For the Murid traders, the mere fact that the owners of the land had accepted to rent it to them was a miracle.

For the traders, the attraction of the market was not solely due to its convenient location in downtown Libreville or the fact that it was a familiar stop on the tourist circuit and therefore good for business. They coveted the place because it is believed to be located in the vicinity of the military barracks where Ahmadu Bamba was once held and where he used to bury the monthly stipend that the French allocated him and which he did not want to spend.[57] Murid disciples see a connection between this story and the fact that this area of Libreville has become the financial district of the city where the Ministry of Finances, but also the office of the treasurer and a number of banks and other financial institutions are located. To put it metaphorically, the money that Bamba has sown in the soil of Libreville over a century ago is now germinating and having the art market in this neighborhood was critical because it put Murid traders in a position to harvest the rewards of their Shaykh's sacrifice.

But the initial excitement soon gave way to anxiety. The family that owned the land was divided. The portion of the family living in Senegal, which also happened to be members of the Muridiyya, wanted to sell the propriety. In 2003 they gave the Murid traders a delay of six months to raise the necessary money to purchase the land or to vacate the place. They later

[56] For information related to the history of the Murid market of Libreville, I rely on my interview with Njaga Jaw, the chief of the market who led the effort to buy the place. Libreville, 19 December 2014
[57] See interview with Njaga Jaw, Libreville 19 December 2014

changed their mind about selling but decided to raise the monthly rent at 1,500,000 CFA. Five years later they opted to sell at the price of five hundred million CFA (1 million dollars).

The murid shopkeepers that have been operating from the market for ten years were now under the threat of eviction if they could not come up with the money to buy the plot. But a million dollars was an immense sum of money for these small business owners. In fact many among the merchants did not have bank accounts and if they did it was just for saving purposes. For most of them taking a bank loan was never part of their business model, but there was no other alternative if they wanted to keep the place. And keeping the place was of paramount importance to all of them.

Elhaj Njaga Jaw, the chief of the market, and his fellow traders were determined to raise the money necessary to acquire the land. On the advice of local leaders of the Murid community they approached the Senegalese ambassador to Gabon who suggested that they form an association that would allow them to secure a license from the state. Having this license was indispensable to open a bank account and apply for a loan. One month after founding the association they opened an account with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of Gabon (BICG French acronym). This bank is a branch of the French bank BNP Paris Bas that has branches throughout former French West Africa. But time was running out. Soon after opening the account with very little money deposited, Jaw applied for a loan of four hundred million CFA. By then the merchants had raised a hundred million for down payment on the loan and to cover transaction and closing cost fees.

The bankers' reaction to the Murid traders' loan application was a mixture of amazement and admiration. The director of the bank wondered how somebody without banking history and without collateral should dare borrowing such a large sum of money. Jaw replied

[speaking in Wolof, a language the director did not understand] that he "put his trust in Ahmadu Bamba and that he was confident that he will get the loan."[58] One of the loan officers, a Guinean woman, had a more sympathetic attitude. She advised the traders to reduce the sum they wanted to borrow to three hundred fifty millions to facilitate the negotiations. A larger sum would require approval from the bank's headquarters in Paris which, it was believed, would automatically deny the application because of the traders' weak dossier.

A few days after the initial meeting at the bank, the loan officer called Jaw and asked him to bring all the receipts he has accumulated during the ten years that they have rented the market. The receipts documented the payment of one hundred and sixty two million CFA, nearly half the loan that the traders were applying for. Later on the loan officer informed Jaw that she needed the receipts to convince her colleagues to grant the loan. She used the receipts to persuade them that the Murid traders were serious and trustworthy clients and that they would not default on the loan.

The loan officer was finally successful in convincing the bank to extend the loan of three hundred fifty million CFA payable in eight years. Her calculations based on the credit worthiness of the traders backed by the strong record of their rental payment were correct. Since closing the deal in 2008 the traders have not missed a payment. The market hosts 102 shops, all of them but a few are occupied by Murid disciples. Each shop owner contributes seventy thousand CFA a month towards payment of the loan.

While the bankers' decision to extend the loan was based on rational economic calculations that make perfect economic sense, for Jaw and his fellow traders the outcome was nothing short of a miracle. They could not imagine how in normal circumstances a bank could

[58] Interview with Elhaj Njaga Jaw, Libreville, 19 December 2014

loan that amount of money to people like them. For Jaw "this was clearly the work of Serin Tuubaa" (another name for Ahmadu Bamba).[59] As soon as the owners of the land were paid and the deed issued in the name of the traders' association, Jaw flew to Tuubaa to present the document to the caliph of the Murids. He was also invited by the Murid owned TV network, Lamp Fall, to tell the story of the market and show the deed to their Senegalese audience. For Jaw and for his fellow disciples in Senegal, the acquisition of this coveted piece of real state in the country where their leader was exiled and denied all his rights was evidence of the continuing potency of Ahmadu Bamba spiritual grace. They see themselves as the agents who made manifest God's positive answer to Bamba's prayers through their hard work and economic achievements. The aspiration to be the witnesses and evidence of the potency of Bamba's gift of grace in turn feed their drive for economic success.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the study of Murid migration by documenting the links between faith, mobility, and economic achievement among the Murid trade diaspora. It shows how beyond material preoccupations history and beliefs can be important incentives for migration and industriousness. The impact of beliefs is particularly significant when sedentarity and family reunion provoke the fusion between the 'secular sphere of the life of employment' located abroad and that of 'belief and piety' located at home. When these two spheres merge abroad as is now the case with Murid migration to Gabon, the diaspora becomes a site for the expression of intense religious spirituality, innovation, and experimentation.

[59] Interview with Elhaj Njaga Jaw, manager of the merchants of the art market of Libreville, 19 December 2014

But the religious creativity of Murid traders in Gabon should not be conceived as mere cultural dimension of their trade traditions, a side effect of their economic activities. It is true that geographical distance of a community from its roots often gives space for resourceful religious entrepreneurs to experiment with ideas and new practices which would have been unthinkable at home. But as Mercer et al have shown the shared commitment to maintain a place called 'home' whether home is conceived as a geographical space or a 'culture' that expresses this space is central to forging diaspora identity.[60] The cultural 'innovations' or more appropriately, the cultural refabulations of Murid traders in Gabon is best understood as the expression of a commitment to maintain the connection with home even as home is imagined differently.

Among the Murid trade diaspora, religion, mobility and business practices remain entangled in a dialogical relationship. Beliefs supply psychological incentive, an ethic of behavior, and networks that facilitate mobility. On the other hand, life in the diaspora, away from the control of the Murid leadership, and the resources that accrue there create space for cultural innovations and the legitimacy to impact the culture at home. The visibility of the diaspora's influence in turn increases its prestige and becomes an incentive for migration.

The paper also sheds light on an important but neglected dimension of African migration, namely regional migration within the continent that mobilizes by far the largest number of African migrants. It calls for an approach to migration that challenges conventional models inspired by theories often dissociated from empirical research and suggests an approach to migration from within that put forward the migrants' own values and perception of their migratory experience.

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[60] Claire Mercer, Ben Page and Martin Evans, *Development and the African Diaspora: Place and the Politics of Home* (Zed Books, London and New York, 2008), 7.