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Robert Launay

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/14379>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.14379

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2012

Number of pages: 687-688

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2349-5

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Robert Launay, "Babou, Cheikh Anta. — *Fighting the Greater Jihad*", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 206-207 | 2012, Online since 04 June 2012, connection on 21 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/14379> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.14379>

This text was automatically generated on 21 September 2021.

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BABOU, Cheikh Anta. — *Fighting the Greater Jihad : Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913*. Athens, Ohio University Press (“New African Histories Series”), 2007, 294 p., bibl.

- 1 It is a paradox, as Cheikh Babou points out in *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, that there are a plethora of studies of the Muridiyya, the Sufi Brotherhood founded by Amadu Bamba Mbacke in Senegal, but there is a paucity of biographical studies of the founder himself. Analyses of the Muridiyya have by and large adopted a sociological approach to the Brotherhood, focusing on its rapid and phenomenal growth in the early twentieth century, its association with peanut cultivation, and the political connections of its contemporary leaders in post-Independence Senegal. What is missing from all these accounts, Cheikh Babou suggests, is the properly religious dimension at the heart of the Muridiyya, the spiritual message of Amadu Bamba’s thought. Rather than deny the relevance of, much less refute, sociological approaches, Cheikh Babou has sought in his book to complement them by focusing on the life and thought of Amadu Bamba himself.
- 2 However sympathetic Cheikh Babou may be to his subject, it is important to point out that this is not by any means a hagiography, but indeed an extremely thoughtful and serious attempt to place Amadu Bamba within the context of his time and place, but also his origins. If much has been written about the Mbacke family after the death of the Shaykh—especially in terms of internal rivalry over the Khalifate of the Brotherhood, succession to the Shaykh’s mantle—Cheikh Babou is perhaps the first scholar to delve in detail into the history of the Mbacke family before and during the Shaykh’s lifetime, relying on extensive oral interviews he conducted with members of

different branches of the family. Several generations before his birth, Amadu Bamba's ancestor had migrated from the Fuuta Tooro to the Wolof kingdom of Jolof. It was only after this migration that the Mbacke came to specialize in Islamic learning, working their way into the hierarchy of established clerical families through a policy of strategic marriages which integrated them as affines to the ranks of the clerical elite. Even before the birth of Amadu Bamba, this provided a framework for competition between various branches of the Mbacke family, not all of whom rallied by any means to Amadu Bamba's cause during the early years of his career.

- 3 The turbulent years preceding the definitive imposition of French colonial rule provided the context for the formation of Amadu Bamba's attitude towards politics as well as his pedagogical approach. Cheikh Babou portrays Bamba's father, Momar Anta Sali, as something of an anti-model. Bamba apparently disapproved his father's close links to Lat Joor, the ruler of Kajoor, and subsequently attempted to maintain as much distance as possible from holders of power. This attitude was ultimately to lead to such mistrust on the part of French colonial authorities that he was exiled, first to Gabon and later to Mauritania. Cheikh Babou suggests that this French mistrust was systematically fueled by insinuations spread by Wolof chiefs working with the administration, and who saw Amadu Bamba's growing following as a direct threat to their authority when he refused to court their favor. Indeed Cheikh Babou's frank, subtle, and detailed portrayal of factional conflict within the Wolof community between adversaries as well as advocates of Amadu Bamba is one of the many strengths of the book. Such an approach complicates any simplistic opposition between Bamba on one hand, French colonialists on the other, by reinserting the Shaykh's career within the context of Wolof, and not simply colonial, politics.
- 4 Cheikh Babou takes considerable pains to refute the caricatural depiction of Amadu Bamba's teachings as virtually heterodox, stressing submission to the Shaykh and work on his behalf over and above knowledge of religious texts and even observance of ordinary ritual practice, prayer and fasting. He minimizes the importance of Bamba's unruly disciple, Ibra Fall. He also places the significance of submission (*tarbiyya*) and work (*khidma*) within the context of Amadu Bamba's broader pedagogical aims of disciplining the soul alongside—but not instead of—the mind. Cheikh Babou quite rightly rejects a colonial tradition of attempts to use Amadu Bamba's teachings as well as his career as the prime example of African exceptionalism in the Islamic domain.
- 5 The book succeeds remarkably well in furnishing a rich and complex portrait of Amadu Bamba's life and thought within the context of contemporary Wolof society as well as French colonial rule. However, Cheikh Babou's insistence on Amadu Bamba's systematic and adamant avoidance of political engagement casts the attitude of his successors, whose involvement in contemporary Senegalese politics is a matter of public notoriety, in an even more paradoxical light. It would seem that there are aspects of the Muridiyya that an account of Amadu Bamba's life and thought—even one as rich and subtle as Cheikh Babou's—cannot quite explain.