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Peanuts & Marabouts: II, Marabouts

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Collioure, France

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

"Follow your marabout as a dog follows its master," Amadou Bamba, founder of the Moslem sect of the Murids, told his disciples. Half a million Senegalese Murids follow their marabouts (Moslem clerics) like dogs; under their masters' control, they produce half the peanut crop on which the economy of Senegal depends.

Muridism combines some of the worst (to Western eyes) features of medieval Catholicism, Stalinist communism and 19th Century capitalism. In the Murid world, a tiny, self-recruiting and largely hereditary ruling class holds absolute spiritual, economic and political power. The means of production, the land, is owned collectively, but its use is directed by the ruling class for its own ends. The rulers in most cases appropriate all that the land produces and return to the producer only the bare minimum he needs to exist. The rulers devote their profits to conspicuous consumption rather than to productive investment. In the most literal sense, the Murid disciple is owned body and soul by his marabout.

The Murid sect was founded by Amadou Bamba on the ruins of pre-colonial African society. Bamba's life spanned the transition: as a young man, around 1880, he was a Moslem notable at the court of Lat Dior, last of the Wolof kings of Senegal; when Bamba died, in 1927, France was firmly in control of the country, and Bamba was running his state-within-a-state on the basis of a tacit agreement with the French authorities. Before Bamba, the marabout was more a spiritual than temporal authority. But Bamba's first disciples were Wolof soldiers seeking leadership after the collapse of the order they had known. In the spiritual void left by that collapse, the Murid disciples were willing, as they are today, to trade the goods of this world for security in the next. From the first days, the Murids concentrated on growing peanuts, which by then had become the country's dominant cash crop.

Bamba's descendants, the Mbake family, run the sect from their headquarters in Touba, the holy city where the founder is buried. The present Caliph, Falilou Mbake, appoints the two hundred-odd marabouts who, with their agents, rule the peanut-farming villages where most Murids live. A marabout will take a band of young men, students for full initiation into the sect, out into the bush to found a new village. The men build huts for themselves and a solid home for the marabout, clear the land and plant the peanuts; the marabout markets the crop and gives the young men as much as he sees fit (more likely in food than in cash). The bargain in theory is that the young men work the four or five months of the peanut season for the marabout, and the marabout in return teaches them during the idle months of the dry season. The bargain changes after the young men are initiated into the sect. They continue to work the marabout's

large field one day a week (the "champ du mercredi", from the day it is worked) and they give him one-tenth of their earnings, the zakat, or tithe, which is required by Islam. The zakat is supposed to go to the poor, and sometimes in practice it does. Among the Murids, the marabout usually continues to market the peanut crop for his people. The marabout typically lives in a compound with his wives and his koranic school. He receives visitors in his bedroom, seated (in pyjamas, like Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran) on an iron bed; a radio and a refrigerator are often the only other items of furniture in the room. Outside the visitor is likely to see that ubiquitous status symbol - a shiny American car. The car, the refrigerator, the radio, the bed are likely to be the only ones in the village, and a source of pride to the villagers: one sees fading photographs of the marabout's car tacked up in tiny village stores. A Murid marabout with one hundred working disciples may clear around \$4,000 a year on their work.

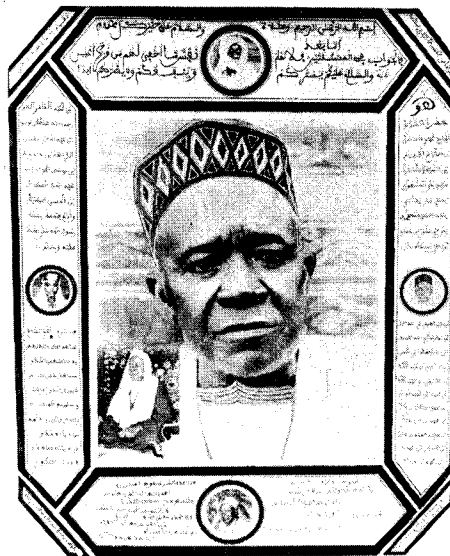
That is a small marabout. The "grands marabouts" of the Mbake family are, by Senegalese standards, wheeler-dealers. Each grand marabout has his own fields, worked by his personal followers, and the Caliph gets a share of all the money collected by the marabouts below him in the heirarchy. Every August the Mbakes stage a giant pilgrimage: up to 200,000 Murids come to Touba to visit the tomb of Amadou Bamba, and they leave an estimated \$800,000 in the hands of the Mbakes as contributions for completing the mosque of Touba. The government, in tribute to the Murids' political power, occasionally gives funds for the mosque, and the "cooperatives" through which the Murids market their disciples' peanuts (virtually without accounting) can get government loans without difficulty. In 1950, Sheikh Mbake, nephew of Falilou, carried out a speculation on the peanut market that required \$120,000 in ready cash; last year he set up a corporation to build a chain of hotels throughout Africa. When (according to an unconfirmed story) a Senegalese government official unsuccessfully approached a French businessman with an offer to put him in touch with the Mbakes for a peanut deal, the deal was large enough for the official to ask \$20,000 as his commission. On the lower levels of the heirarchy, the Murid marabouts organize religious songfests in Dakar during the fast month of Ramadan. All night long, the marabout chants - alternately in Wolof and Arabic - and collects money; on a good night he may collect as much as \$4,000.

Despite the Mbakes' ventures into capitalism, the Murid economy is still based on agriculture, and as farmers they do not have a very good record. They are known as "devourers of the soil": they plant an area to peanuts, without rotation, until it is worn out, then move on, leaving a desert behind. In an area where Wolof Murids farm near the non-Murid Serers, the Serers produce 30 percent more peanuts per acre. But, being highly disciplined, the Murids are highly adaptable, and recently some Murid marabouts have gone in for less destructive methods of farming.

In the early days of Muridism, rival marabouts and foreign Mos-

lems accused the sect of heresy. They would quote the Murid remark that "God does nothing without the agreement of Amadou Bamba". But according to Professor Vincent Monteil of the University of Dakar - a student of Muridism to whom I am indebted for much of the information in this newsletter - there is nothing greatly unorthodox in the writings of Bamba himself. The creed of salvation through work is not stated in his writings, though he is said to have told his visitors: "Work is part of religion." Of course, the marabout as intermediary between man and God is a perversion of Islam, but it is not unique to the Murids. In any case, Muridism has now achieved the orthodoxy of success, and the other marabouts of Senegal have paid it the ultimate tribute of imitation. Other sects now stage pilgrimages to whatever shrines they have; other marabouts have formed "cooperatives" to market what their followers produce. Since 80 percent of the Senegalese are Moslem, and since almost all Moslems in Senegal follow a marabout, it is obvious that the rural economy of the country is largely directed by the marabouts.

With the commercialization of the marabouts, Murid and non-Murid, the original bargain of work for instruction has become increasingly one-sided. A far-out group within the Murids, the Bay Fals, who serve as police for the sect, receive no instruction and say no prayers: their single duty is obedience. Instead of teaching his disciples during the dry season, the Murid marabout is likely to send them to work in Dakar and take a cut of their earnings. Bassirou Mbaque, brother of the Caliph and known as a "hard" marabout, trains disciples as truck drivers and takes their entire earnings. The boys you see on the streets of Dakar, begging or offering to watch your car, are usually under the control of a marabout to whom they were handed over in some remote bush village by parents who wanted them to have koranic instruction. All too often they get no instruction at all - the marabout simply sends them out to beg. One boy we questioned willingly told us the name of his village, that the marabout brought him to Dakar, that whatever we gave him he would give to the marabout - but he looked at his feet and refused to answer when we asked him when he received his koranic instruction. This boy had started in the French school before he was given to the marabout. At times the marabout sells the boy in his care into slavery. Across the street from our home in Dakar there was a tiny shack in which a man from the north of Senegal operated a store. One evening he told us the story of his life in halting French and English. Ten years ago he was taken away from his village, with several other boys, by a marabout. For years they worked their way down the



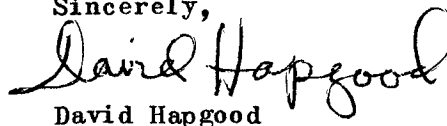
FALILOU MBAQUE
(From a Murid Pamphlet)

coast of West Africa and eventually to Mecca, so that the marabout could become El Hadj. The marabout sent them out to beg, beat them when they did not collect enough, and taught them not at all. Once the boy tried to run away, but the colonial authorities returned him to the marabout. Sweat streamed on the man's face and tears came to his eyes as he tried to convey his experience to us. One day we saw that shack and man had vanished. Perhaps he had achieved his ambition: to make enough from his store to go home to the village from which he had been taken ten years before.

Even when the marabout does play his role as a teacher, what he teaches is perverted from the Islamic ideal to an empty ritual. The boy who memorizes large chunks of the Koran is only learning meaningless sounds, for he does not understand Arabic - neither in many cases does his marabout. Obviously the ethical and social content of the Koran (including the prohibition on marabouts) is completely lost, for the marabout does not understand the Koran in any language. According to one anti-marabout Moslem, the sons of Falilou Mbake himself are illiterate in both Arabic and French. There are exceptions: erudite, scholarly, progressive marabouts. In Casamance, in the south of Senegal, the marabout Mamadou Seydou has increased production, diversified crops, and raised the income of his 10,000 people well above the average for the area. In Dakar I know a marabout who acts as a judge in Islamic law for his neighborhood, gave his daughters a European education, exploits nobody, and is in every sense a force for progress in his community. But such men are a minority. The general rule is greed, ignorance and obscurantism.

The marabout, holding the people of the bush in his thrall, stands massive in the path of any attempt to reshape Senegal's peanut-dominated rural economy, of any effort to make of "African Socialism" more than a slogan. "Either agrarian reform will be carried out through the marabouts, or we will break them," Valdiodio Ndiaye, the Minister of the Interior who passes for the "tough, leftist" man in the government, is reported to have said. Brave words. In the next newsletter in this series we will look at current attitudes and policies on rural reform and the marabout.

Sincerely,



David Hapgood

Received in New York August 13, 1962.