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**A look at cowry shell divination and a spirit possession ritual within a Muslim
community in Dakar**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Master of Philosophy
in Ethnographic Documentary in the Faculty of Humanities

2015

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Abstract

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Ethnographic Documentary in the Faculty of Humanities.

Title: A look at cowry shell divination and a spirit possession ritual within a Muslim community in Dakar.

Emilie K. Chappatte

This research is the result of an investigation into local cultural practices and beliefs in the urban setting that is Dakar, capital of the West African country of Senegal. It has culminated into the production of a documentary and accompanying thesis. This companion text serves to offer a detailed ethnographic account of the fieldwork conducted and an analytical framework to some of the questions raised in the film. Cowry shell divination and ndop healing rituals in Dakar are two traditional practices that are proscribed by orthodox Islam but that have adapted to a modern urban environment. With a particular focus on both these customs, this research seeks to explore the meeting of Sufi Islam and what we might call *animism* as evident in the quotidian life of religious Dakarois. The city presents itself as a setting where one can affirm one's Muslim identity while maintaining a traditional African heritage that has been adapted to a modern environment. Rather than considering animist practices in the city as subversive to Islamic faith, the fieldwork focuses on the function of two distinct esoteric practices in the city and their interrelation with Sufi mysticism, in an attempt to understand the dual belonging of individuals, to both local traditional practices and to the monotheist religion that is Islam.

The 40-minute documentary can be viewed through the link below:

<http://vimeo.com/107555114>

Password: Dakar

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Text:

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Introduction

This thesis serves as a companion text to the documentary, which is a visual exploration of instances of different religious and occult events and customs in the city of Dakar, with a particular focus on cowry shell divination sessions and a trance ritual within a Muslim community. The film can be viewed through the following link:

<http://vimeo.com/107555114>, using the password: 'Dakar'. The purpose of the documentary is to provide an audio-visual insight into the function and practice of two distinct occult practices in a religious urban setting, as a way to begin exploring the function of religion and the occult in the daily lives of modern Senegalese men and women. The research took place in and around the Ouakam neighbourhood of Dakar that had an estimated population of just over 48,000 in 2007. This companion text serves to complement the film by providing historical context, ethnographic descriptions and an analysis of the filmed events. The ethnographic descriptions given are those of the events filmed in the documentary. Both the film and the text are stand-alone works that inform one another.

Although certain academics refrain from using the word *animism* due to its pejorative association with the colonial epoch, the term was frequently employed in the settings that I frequented in Dakar by academics and non-academics alike, as it suitably encompasses the multiplicity of culturally specific traditional African belief systems and customs. I will consequently use the term in this thesis to refer to the set of traditional local customs that encompass divination and traditional rituals. As Gérard Buakassa observes in referring to these phenomena: “Today, African religion exists nowhere, but it is present everywhere, in consciences, in spiritual or empirical operations, in representations, in myths’ ...”¹ (Tabard, 2012: 194). Through a close look at divination sessions and a healing ritual in the city, we can begin to witness the role that such customs play in a modern urban environment and to understand their continued relevance in the everyday lives of Muslim Senegalese.

¹All translations are author’s own.

The coexistence of Sufism and the occult in a modern urban setting

My fieldwork in Dakar began with my interest in meeting marabout women who practice Islamic divination – an esoteric field typically reserved to men, requiring an extensive knowledge of the Qur’an with the aim to manipulate Qur’anic verses for occult purposes (see Amber Gemmeke (2008) for more on this). I was largely confronted with surprised responses, as people conceded never having before heard of any *female* marabouts in the city that use the Qu’ran in their work. It would be much more logical to focus on men, I was told, or to search outside of the city, where more ‘unusual’ esoteric experts could be found. When somebody seemed to point me in a direction, the women thought to be involved in the esoteric practice turned out to be diviners who make use of panoply of other methods that do not require the use of the Holy Book. After three weeks of searching, it became evident that my focus would have to change in order to have enough time to film a documentary before the expiration of my three-month visa. It is then that I turned my attention to women diviners who use cowry shells – the most popular form of divination in the city, and to a spirit possession ritual happening in the same neighbourhood where I spend most of my time filming. Exploring the city of Dakar, I repeatedly witnessed the practice of such customs alongside Islamic evocations and gestures both inside and outside the home. Since the people I met were all of Muslim faith, I hoped, through the time spent with locals, to begin to apprehend the ways in which average Dakarais negotiate their religious faith with their practice of what are often locally described as ‘animist’ customs. I also strove to investigate this seemingly syncretic phenomenon by noting the value of occult practices in an urban environment where Sufi Islam is a dominant cultural phenomenon.

Throughout my fieldwork, it has been interesting to note that the ways in which men and women live and talk about their traditional customs alongside their religious commitments tend to be as often in agreement as they are at odds. On one level, Sufism and ‘animist’ customs both appear to respond to distinct needs and to serve different purposes, yet both present worldviews that at times exist simultaneously in the sentient and spiritual realm of esoteric practices in the city. For many informants, an understanding of a mystical interpretation of certain Islamic beliefs sheds light on the relationship between animist practices and Sufism in Dakar. By focusing particularly on the occult practices of cowry shell divination and spirit possession rituals in an Islamic urban setting, the film and this accompanying text also seek to explore some of the social realities of Senegalese men and

women in the city through their practice of different historical traditions. Through this text, I aim not to provide definite answers to the question of cultural or religious hybridity in Dakar but rather to give an insight, as I do through the film, of events witnessed and discussions had during my fieldwork. Since this voyage was my first trip to Senegal, what was important for me through the film was to begin illustrating the practice of local customs in a contemporary religious context in a way that acknowledges my standpoint as a novice in the field. The film thus presents itself to the audience just as the field unveiled itself to me over the course of three months of fieldwork. Encounters were made each day that allowed me to further understand the diversity of viewpoints that shape the ways Senegalese relate to Sufism and traditional practices. Of interest were the multitude of ways Muslim individuals interact with traditional ‘animist’ customs in a less obvious way than the local *marabout* occult experts do, and particularly how religious individuals accommodate divination and spirit possession rituals to suit urban needs. Letting informants narrate such a significant portion of my footage was a decision taken due to the fact that I arrived in the field for the first time having never before encountered what I was hoping to capture through film. The way the film is structured directly reflects my filmmaking process as I made sense of what I witnessed through conversations and time spent with the people who shared their time with me. By being receptive to the ways in which informants mediated and reinterpreted the boundaries of their practice of different historical traditions, the ultimate aim of the documentary was to find equilibrium between discursive representation and observed action. Having completed my fieldwork, this accompanying text serves to go beyond the surface of the local practices filmed by contextualizing them within their broader historical context and within some of the literature around Islam, divination, spirit possession and religious change in Senegal and Sub-Saharan Africa. Due to the restricted length of this text, I will not attempt to provide a complete and exhaustive analysis of these phenomena in Dakar but rather confine myself to the particular cases of the cowry shell divination sessions and exorcism ritual filmed among Muslim communities in the city.

Senegal is the Westernmost African country, with an estimated population of 13.6 million, of which a majority of individuals are religious. 90% of the population is estimated to be Muslim while 5 to 10% are Christian. As I would find out in the field, it is generally agreed that the vast majority of the population upholds animistic beliefs regardless of whether they adhere to Islam or Christianity. Seeing as global religions have been adapted to the local cultural scene, Islam is consequently often practiced according to cultural norms and rituals and, as one Senegalese academic describes it, animism in this setting presents itself as

Islam's 'irreducible antagonist' (Dia, 1980: 46). The introduction of Islam in Senegal dates back to the 8th and 9th centuries. Although the country is Islamized in the 11th century, the monotheist religion is reserved to a social elite during the pre-colonial era (D'Angelo, 2013). As Islamic faith gradually gained in popularity through the trans-Saharan commerce that brought on the influence of many northern Africans from the Maghreb, *Grand Marabouts* emerged as religious leaders and teachers of Sufi Islam throughout the country, becoming the heads of various brotherhoods. Contrarily to the marabouts of North Africa, these religious leaders gained significant political influence and maintain very strong ties with disciples throughout the country up until today (Rosander, 1997: 4). Sufi orders include the Tijjanes, the Layennes, the Murides, and the Khadrs, of which the Tidjiane are to-date the largest group and the Murides the most influential and well known. Locally, many individuals in Dakar today are also referred to as *marabouts*, in reference to a greater extent to their occult knowledge rather than their religious expertise. Despite the strong influence of Islam, animistic beliefs retained a stronghold in Senegalese quotidian life through traditional rites, possession cults and mystical beliefs that remained strongly rooted among the many ethnic groups that populate the city. The principal ethnic groups present in Dakar are the Wolofs, the Lebu, the Serers, and the Diolas. While a plurality of mystical practices is a part of the identity of each ethnic group, a religious backdrop is never far from the daily life activities that Dakarois engage in, whether these are of a sacred or a secular nature. The act of belonging in society is thus strongly tied to one's allegiance to a religious and cultural group. When asked whether I was Christian or Muslim by two young girls, my answering that I was neither did not seem to satisfy them. After multiple 'but then what are you?' questions, I finally had to concede that my mother's family was Christian as it seemed inconceivable to them that I did not have a religious belonging. Although Islam has its place within most activities that take place in the city, many of the Senegalese that I met are equally committed to cultural traditions that have their roots outside of 'orthodox' Islam. Professor Tamba of the Dakar university of Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) argues that this residual attachment to more traditional customs despite the influence of Islam is linked to the limited understanding of Arabic as Islam's first language, thus implying a partially superficial assimilation of Islamic faith: "to truly grasp a religion, one must know how to write it. However, the majority of Senegalese do not understand the Arabic language, the sense of words, concepts, and notions. Thus, Islam was tolerated and accepted but, in the backdrop, an animist base remained" (Tamba).

Despite a strong religious presence, Senegal has always remained a secular state. This secular identity seems to be best attributed to the fact that Senegal's political leaders have historically managed to maintain control over the influence of Sufi grand marabouts as well as over Islamic reform groups who adopt a more 'orthodox' view of what constitutes Islam. I refer here to Roman Loimeier's analysis of Islamic reform movements in Africa. The most important early development of Muslim reform movements in the country is documented to have occurred in the context of resistance to the French colonial influence during the early 50s after which, about a decade later, reformists were integrated into the political sphere through Leopold Senghor's influence as head of state (Loimeier, 2000: 169). By attributing specific functions to reform groups within the state, Senghor was able to keep their influence under his supervision (Loimeier, 2000: 177), an approach that would set an example for the future leaders of the country, notably President Diouf who adopted similar assimilative strategies with the later main reformist movements. Loimeier notes that the reformists' fragile economic and social influence account for their inclination to collaborate with the state and adds that "[b]y tolerating the social, educational and propaganda activities of the reformers and the Islamic opposition groups, the social influence of the marabouts could be cut back without forcing the state to intervene directly in the marabouts' spheres of influence" (Loimeier, 2000: 185). Indeed, through the development of the Islamic Cultural Union or ITI reformist movement under the leadership of Cheikh Touré, a division initially grew between a majority of the local Sufi religious marabouts leaders and the ITI that outwardly spoke out against the beliefs and practices advocated by the marabouts, particularly regarding superstitious beliefs and the production and use of *gris-gris* amulets (Loimeier, 2000: 174-176). This condemnatory attitude against Sufi groups did not persist significantly, however, as reformists did not see their popularity grow as a result, and thus shifted their critical gaze towards the secular nature of the state in the 80s and 90s, which eventually pushed them toward a politicization of their ideas (Loimeier, 2000: 183). Regardless, the reform groups never truly managed to extricate themselves from state influence as they consistently lacked both the social backing and the financial means to do so (Loimeier, 2003: 238). Certain reformist factions are known to have collaborated with Sufi groups during certain time periods and it thus appears noteworthy that a clear division between reformists and Sufis cannot be established in Senegal. This history seems to account for the range of perspectives that surface when it comes to defining the boundaries of Islam in daily life here, since many are the product of both Sufi and reformist influences. Interestingly, Rosander stresses that the reformist

approach to Islam, which we might also call 'Islamism', is not necessarily a return to conservatism, but can in fact be viewed as being the manifestation of a locally *unorthodox* interpretation of Islam: "For 'ordinary' people, used to more popular and decentralized forms of Islam, with holy men of their local Sufi brotherhoods to help them in many matters, Islamism is hardly a return to tradition but in fact expresses a rupture in the established social and religious order" (Rosander, 1997: 5). An interpretation of the nature of Islam here thus strongly depends on one's vantage point. What seems pivotal in this setting is to consider Islam as being culturally heterogeneous or, as Rosander puts it, as being "both one and many" (1997: 2). As the different case studies in Rosander's book (2007: 20) further demonstrate, the division between Sufi and reformist or traditional and modern is often blurred and shifting.

Dakar is a dynamic city that is at once occidentalized and deeply rooted in tradition, making it a setting where contradictions are commonplace (Boccella & Billi, 2005). Tradition and religion often regulate social dynamics and weight considerably on one's position in society. In the city, many routine daily activities or incidents are considered beyond their secular nature, like in the act of sharing a meal, greeting someone or almsgiving; religious undertones are often present. Professor Tamba of the University of Cheick Anta Diop notes this singularity by referring to the sacred: "The sacred is a driving force in Senegalese ethnic culture. It is around this element that the ensemble of relations that people have with their peers and their milieu gravitate" (1995: 37). Since rural-urban migration is an important phenomenon, Dakar's occult experts have become numerous and polyvalent, often self-taught to cater across ethnic groups and social strata regarding any number of miscellaneous matters and needs. Geschiere (2013) rationalizes this deep-rooted consummation of occult practices in urban environments by noting their ambiguous nature – since they can be used both for evil and for good, they are employed as solutions to almost any contemporary situation (75). The constantly changing faces of social, political, economic and religious state-of-affairs in the city gives the urban dweller many opportunities to make a profit. In 2003, a study estimated the unemployment rate to be at 30% with as much as 40% of employment in informal sectors; "about 13% of the population was estimated to be living below the country's poverty line" (Cisse, 2003: 1). Making profit often demands creative means, and religion and culture are occasionally tailored to reap financial benefit. Divination has consequently become a source of livelihood for an important number of people working in the informal sector. Still, its function in the city is wide-ranging; many individuals might consult the urban diviner in

search of efficient and immediate solutions to financial, political, health, familial and/or relationship related matters. Alternative experts are thus countless in the city and one only has to ask to seek out a range of informal experts that are tuned in to the cultural specificities of the many social and cultural identities that populate Dakar. Their social approach appears to offer a worldview that acknowledges man with all his obscurities and contradictions. While Islam is sought for a peaceful after-life, certain divinatory practices proclaim to provide the rapid resolution of the predicaments of daily life and incite men and women alike to seek solutions to urban problems through them. Even if one does not believe in the legitimacy of such practices, he or she is likely to be compelled to take part in them in order to be protected from other individuals who might use such practices to malefic ends. Of those who choose not to associate with these practices, most still believe in the powers of marabouts, diviners and tradi-practitioners and in the effectiveness of their esoteric work. The refusal to have recourse to esoteric experts is often a question of principle linked to religious beliefs, since one should put his faith in God and not a diviner. Considering this, many individuals will choose to clearly state their non-belief in divinatory practices, in favour of a more devout Islamic lifestyle. Throughout my research, however,, not believing in these practices did not imply that an individual did not believe in the powers and effectiveness of these esoteric practices, but rather that he or she did not take part in them and did not believe in having recourse to such practices. This suggests that the occult is strongly anchored in the mind-sets of average Senegalese whether they adopt a more orthodox view of the practice of the monotheist religion or not. Regardless, the majority of Senegalese that I met during my time in Dakar would recite their prayers daily and occasionally consult their marabout or diviner when the necessity arose. If one chooses not to engage in certain cultural practices, he seems to set himself apart from the set of realities that make up the world of his peers. What's more, one's identity as a Lebu, Serer, Layenne or other may be put into question if one does not adhere to the cultural norms of his community. This should not, however, undermine the importance of Islam in everyday life. Walking through the streets of Dakar, religious signs and symbolism abound, on wall facades, attires, objects, and through verbal exchanges. The city is consequently a particularly interesting setting in which various systems of representation converge, as culture and religion are moulded to respond to the modern needs of city dwellers. Animism attributes significance to the acts, exchanges, thoughts and customs of daily life. Islam as it is practiced locally thus incorporates a traditional system of representation. The meeting of Sufi and animist systems of representation in customs such as cowry shell divination and

ndop healing rituals reveal the complementary nature of both belief systems in this particular environment. The ways that such traditional customs and beliefs operate and influence religious faith, however, is reminiscent of the derogatory dichotomy between a *black* Islam and what was perceived as a purer and more orthodox Arab Islam during the colonial period.

“Thus, it is common to hear, in the context of contemporary events in the Sahara, reference to a specific sub-Saharan Islam, a black Islam characterized by membership in Sufi orders, by saint worship, by certain proximity with animist practices, and a generally tolerant attitude. This age-old and constantly recycled stereotype, which emphasizes local idiosyncrasy (whether real, exaggerated, or imagined) and which moreover draws together extremely varied situations, still influences the popular perception of Islam to the south of the Sahara” (Triaud, 2014: 10).

In order to avoid reproducing this very notion of polarity, many academics consider Islam in Senegal today as one predominant cultural element amongst numerous others that include a range of traditional practices (Zewde, 2008). We might note here the existence of an ‘Islamic religious culture’, a term which Louis Brenner defines as encompassing “*all* cultural manifestations and social or political institutions that are defined as Islamic by Muslims themselves in any given social context” (2000: 144). Regardless of ethnic belonging, Senegalese Muslims thus oftentimes take part in or are subject to traditional customs, and whether this is achieved in a direct or indirect manner, one is eventually forced to acknowledge the importance of esotericism in their environment. Superstitions, premonitions and rites that will serve to guide the average individual through daily life often accompany such customs. Referring to the influence of these local cultures onto the institution of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, Amadou Hampaté Bâ resumes that “in Africa Islam has no more colour than does water; this is what explains its’ success: it is tinged with the hues of the surrounding earth and stone’...” (Sané and Grandhomme in Zewde, 2008: 105). As a result of the heterogeneity of religious identities, languages and ethnic groups, Senegalese identity appears to be constantly shifting and evolving, emerging out of the convergence of many different and often seemingly contradictory customs and beliefs. Accordingly, part of being a Senegalese at times involves assimilating a multitude of beliefs systems and practices that stem from different cultural and religious belongings. One’s urban inclusion is facilitated through social events such as religious gatherings, divination consultations and traditional rituals as can be seen in the documentary. The multi-ethnic

setting takes an ambiguous stance on all these different practices and accommodates each one. At once striving towards modernity while preserving its traditional cultures, the city is a cocoon of hybridity. Divination is an esoteric cultural phenomenon that is exceptionally popular in the city, a practice from which numerous individuals benefit, either by making a living out of the practice or by having recourse to its experts. In the particular case of cowry shell divination, I find a practice strongly influenced by women that has found ways to be an integral part of the modern state that is Dakar.

Cowry Shell Divination in the city

Typically affordable and familiar customs like divination, *maraboutage*, and ethnic rites have multiple functions in the lives of average modern Dakarois inhabitants. As Rabeyron (2004) notes, many authors have sustained the notion that consumers of divinatory practices are part of an uneducated and naïve faction of people who are compelled to understand the world in a non-scientific manner. Yet beyond the reality that many who live in lower socioeconomic conditions fall prey to the lot of charlatans and impostors that choose an unscrupulous lifestyle to make a living in the city, one is compelled to acknowledge the unflinching popularity of divinatory practices across social, economic and professional strata in Senegal. Gaining an insight into the traditional practice of cowry shell divination in particular has allowed for a partial understanding of the ways that men and women alike deal with some of the socioeconomic realities they are faced with. The metaphysical questions that disconcert man are partly answered through the esoteric realm of divination through the belief in a parallel occult world where spirits reign and onto which man may have an influence through rites, sacrifices and offerings, rendering him proactive in the face of obstacles - whether these be of a visible or an invisible nature.

In my fieldwork I endeavoured to look at the realities that are fuelling the popularity of the esoteric practice of divination with cowry shells. Divination is a practice that most Senegalese, regardless of their religious and ethnic belonging or socio-professional status, take part in from time to time. It is practiced using sand, water, the Koran, prayer beads, or most commonly cowry seashells that were originally imported to Africa from the Maldives in the 13th century (Kyeyune, 2012). Used as currency in the 17th and 18th century, they were also believed to have mystical qualities and their use in divination was first practiced in Egypt before spreading to other parts of the continent (Kyeyune, 2012). As one informant would describe it: “A real divination session predicts the future, tells you things

that you will live. We usually say that cowries don't lie." (Diouf). Being the most popular of divination forms in Dakar, cowry shell divination involves the prediction of one's destiny through the reading and interpretation of a number of shells. From the position of the cowry shells, an insight is gained into the client's world and future, as the shells can shed light on people and relationships, difficulties and positive omens.

Ethical concerns arose throughout the research during the recording of divination sessions. Seeing as the sessions between diviner and clients consist of issues of a private nature, the anonymity of most clients needed to be preserved. By filming a mock divination session with a participant through different angles and showing it to each client, I was able to demonstrate the ways in which filming could be done without revealing the identity of the client. Having made this clear prior to filming, I was allowed to record a few private sessions between clients and their diviner although many would refuse or show reticence about being recorded. Sound recordings were used without film to record some of the sessions, with consent and when appropriate. Since the prevalent language used in such contexts is typically Wolof and certain participants did not read or speak French or English fluently, an interpreter accompanied me to these sessions. Consent was recorded with sound equipment and certain sessions were paid for by myself to avoid out-of-pocket expenses for participants who agreed to visit the seer in my presence.

The client-diviner relationship: the diviner as a therapist

Divination is used daily by a significant number of Senegalese as a means of orientation in a modern urban environment. It is my impression that by accessing the occult world of individuals, one can have an insight into their intimacy since the mundane is often linked to the occult when it falls outside of the individual's willpower, and an individual will openly discuss personal matters at the diviner's table. Sessions typically take place in homes and cowry shell diviners tend to be women. Consulting the diviner may be an occasion to discuss difficulties or important decisions, to find out about what lies ahead and be guided towards solutions, as well as an opportunity to socialize. "The quests are different; you will do it so that your tomorrow is a bit brighter, because you want your studies to go well. The next person will do it with a political motive, because we are in Senegal and we are in an electoral context" (Wane). On television stations, in local newspapers and online journals such as *Le Soleil* and *Seneweb*, marabouts, tradi-practitioners and divination experts are a recurrent news topic and at the source of polarizing debates. Many do not hesitate to

promote their work by making use of the media. As can be seen in the film, divination has surpassed its place in the home and gained an important role on television shows and in radio stations like *Saphir* FM, becoming a popular and lucrative social item of consumption. Owner of *Saphir* FM radio network, Ndella Diouf is a doctor and politician who initially started *Saphir* FM to advise and sensitize listeners on health related issues and modern medicine. To the demands of listeners, however, she rapidly found herself changing her approach by incorporating seers onto her show.

“Listeners call solely for divination, the majority. We take a doctor and a seer and they tell you instantly: ‘we want to speak to the seer’. They prefer speaking with a seer and a traditional practitioner who will take much more time with them ... We can say that our seers are practically psychologists that are there to listen to the callers, accompany them, to calm them ... The radio has contributed to demystify divination because in general people are ashamed of going to see a diviner. It’s become a visible phenomenon in Senegal because of *Saphir* but people have their cowries and do divination in homes and neighbourhoods everywhere” (Diouf).

Here, Knut Graw’s characterization of Senegambian divination as a ‘technology of hope’ seems particularly fitting: “(it) is characterized by a prospective dimension that allows the subject to develop a more positive sense of his or her personal future. It is this prospective and empowering dimension of divinatory praxis that shows the relation between the necessity of hope and the possibilities of divination” (Graw, 2006: 115). The commodification of cowry shell divination through live radio sessions furthermore brings the practice at the forefront of the social sphere and out of the home where it has traditionally been practiced until now. What’s more, women, who constitute the majority of diviners, are also positioned in the vanguard of public life and their identity as experts and figures of authority – which is arguably not a new phenomenon albeit occurring outside of the public eye – is expanded and reinforced.

Owing to women’s important involvement in this esoteric domain, both as leaders and as consumers of the practice, nearly all the cowry shell diviners that I encountered during my research were women. Ngone Ba is a 44-year-old cowry shell diviner. She is Wolof and lives in the Ouakam neighbourhood with her husband. With the income she earns as a diviner, she is able to live comfortably while providing for her three children. Ngone’s waiting area always has a few clients, most of whom are middle-aged men and women who at times wait for hours before being seen by the diviner. Her gift for divination has been

passed on from her grandmother and mother who were able to look at someone without using cowry shells or other apparatus, and to reveal things about the individual. She did not find an interest in the practice until one day a stranger would hand her a bag saying 'here are your cowries, I am returning them'. She would start by looking for people for a 30 pence fee and, hoping to discourage them from returning, she raised her price to 70 pence but found her clientele growing instead. As she gained in renown and experience, her initial 30 pence per consultation gradually increased to the £5 that she charges today. Unlike her mother who would do this as a past time, Ngone chose to make it her living and has been practicing for over ten years. Ranging from a few pennies to hundreds of pounds, divination in the city has been fashioned to cater to all social groups, and the monetary prices that diviners charge vary and depend on their reputation.

The diviner's room is reputedly a place where clients are able to address the personal details of their lives without the fear of being judged by cultural standards or heard by malevolent ears. A woman might for instance share meals with her co-wife daily, while also consulting a marabout or diviner to find ways to alienate her from their common spouse. There is a recurrent but silent worry that relatives or acquaintances might secretly be concocting curses against someone to estrange them from the family, from a job placement or other. When accompanying Fatima, a young woman, to consult Ngone, the diviner surprisingly made us wait lengthily in her living room although she did not have anymore clients that day. When Fatima and I had finally decided to leave after having been left waiting a long time, she would confide: 'I think my co-wife comes here to visit Ngone, that's why she refused to see me'. Courtesy in Senegalese society is such that many things will not be expressed directly to another person, as one must always remain courteous and welcoming to others in their home. Decoding such hidden motivations and intentions is thus considered to be a difficult feat without the occasional help of a diviner who should quickly be able to determine whether an individual or a situation is a danger to someone or not. After attending numerous divination sessions, it became clear that the diviner is not solely a seer of the future, but also, and perhaps most importantly, a trusted advisor who will at times attempt to give advice and guide a client towards certain decisions, and usually towards a positive outlook, putting him at ease by agreeing with him and giving a maximum of positive feedback. This testimony is of a 31-year-old female client of diviner Ngone Ba, who chose to remain anonymous and whose private session with the diviner features in the film:

“Divination, as they say, tells you things of the past and things of the future, but does not reveal the present ... Personally I believe in it because she (Ngone) has become an advisor, a therapist ... so I consider her to be someone who can listen to me, who allows me to believe in myself, to have faith in the future ... I didn't frequent her before because I did not really believe in these things, but with age, we tend to become aware of the difficulties that surround us, so I naturally tried to find solutions” (Female participant).

Cowry shell reading supposes that a future is already partly in place and that the diviner is needed to reveal it through his or her esoteric knowledge. To safeguard a favourable destiny over a less auspicious one, a price will be asked in the form of offerings or sacrifices, thus rendering a certain destiny conditional on an individual's responsibility. Professor Ibrahima Sow, director of the IFAN lab in Dakar, likens the diviner to a doctor as well as to an artist :

“There is an ambiguity there. It is as though diviners are at once finders of destiny and makers of destiny. Since man is always a bit worried about the future and very much about death, he seeks to rid himself or project his guilt or responsibility on something else so that he is not himself responsible. Such so, that diviners here have a preponderant place. Divination is like medical art. The doctor diagnoses a fact, prescribes a medication and makes a prognostic. The diviner does roughly the same thing” (Sow).

The approach of the diviner as both a counsellor and a problem solver has allowed the occult experts to enjoy an unwavering popularity in the city. Beyond their function as seers of destiny, they are social experts who speak the language of their clients in that they have a thorough understanding of the mystical and symbolic dimension of the lives of Senegalese men and women. As much as they respond to secular and material issues, divination experts also attend to matters of a psychological and spiritual nature. Accordingly, Carvalho (2012) in speaking of occult experts likens them to therapists, as did many other participants in this research including clients of Ngone Ba. Gemmeke (2008) substantiates that these traditional healers are besought as much as modern-day doctors, and it is estimated that a majority of women constitute their clientele (Gueye, 2009). “The social reality is that more and more women are the heads of households, raise their children alone and/or provide the main income for the family (Sow 2002: 436). Two developments can be named for this change: the migration of (young) men, and unemployment in the formal

sector” (Gemmeke, 2008: 22). In a milieu where women are often attributed secondary positions in religious contexts, divination gives women potency and agency both as occult experts and as consumers of the practice. As Knut Graw advances, the decision itself of consulting a diviner is one that gives the individual agency. By taking the decision to consult an expert in occult matters, the individual is necessarily no longer passive in the face of whatever obstacles, needs or desires inspire his or her visit (2006: 86). Accordingly, Ngone Ba perceives divination as giving agency to women in an environment where they may otherwise fall prey to a myriad of harsh realities:

“The majority of Senegalese women like cowries because they are married, they have their job, sometimes they have a good job, but with these jobs, if they are not careful, if they do not watch out, do not protect themselves, it will not work out. Because there are many struggles, you see? They are married but if they do not protect themselves, their husband will go find another wife. Or their mother-in-law will do things to alienate them. Or they have children who have started their studies and, if they have co-wives, they can bewitch their children. That is why we women are tired. Sometimes you are in a marriage, your husband does not give you anything to eat, he hits you at any time, he leaves you here, goes out with girls, to the hotel, to restaurants. This is why women are tired in the home. When women come here at any time to ‘look’, to make sacrifices, it’s to defend themselves” (Ba).

As Rabeyron (2004) further explains, divination is tinged by elements that are of a psychological and sociological nature and the diviner is skilful in establishing a therapeutic relationship with the client. This leads one to wonder whether the accuracy of the divination itself is of importance or whether it is instead the relationship between diviner and client that is of primordial significance. The efficacy of the divination session might thus be attributed to the rapport that the diviner is able to establish between him/herself and the client rather than the actual effectiveness of the readings and sacrifices, rites or offerings prescribed. In any case, the practice has manifestly become popular amongst men as well as women. *Maraboutage* is often cited as one of the threats that people are faced with. It pejoratively refers to the deliberate infliction of harm through mystical means and is also seen as a means to be protected from others’ evil intentions and a way of giving oneself an advantage over others in a changeable environment, thus ensuring one’s place in society. Just as it can be used for good and protection, it is also used for malevolent and dangerous means, to harm others or to provoke dangerous situations into being. Although maraboutage, bribery, infidelity, or other distasteful realities are likely to ostracize an

individual if s/he admits to them in public, such issues are freely discussed on the diviner's chair. By consulting the diviner, one is thus freed from the potentially harsh judgment of the community. The diviner is expected to keep the client's identity and personal life private and to give advice and guidance, notably by suggesting which sacrifices should be made for a situation to be resolved. "These are things we come back to in moments of distress", observes Professor Tamba. An animist conception of the world makes it such that many Senegalese live in an environment where certain threats to their wellbeing are likely to be interpreted as arising from occult forces. Thus, one individual's success and survival might involve an extensive knowledge of the occult and a good marabout or diviner for guidance through difficult situations or decisions. Man here is thus typically not seen as being the sole cause of what happens to him, particularly for his misfortunes, although he is able to regulate certain outcomes through rites and sacrifices. This determinist view stipulates that invisible forces are constantly at play in the human world and that they are able to affect one's destiny either in a favourable way or in a nefarious manner. By sacrificing or performing rituals, one ensures that such forces are turned into positive omens and that the path is cleared for successful enterprises in the combative environment of the city.

A typical session with a woman client who wished to remain anonymous began with the client placing her money on the placemat, then grabbing a few cowry shells and whispering to them what she wished them to reveal while the diviner arranged her basket. One might articulate desires, inquiries or important concerns and, whether these are of a personal or professional nature, the diviner's role will initially be to identify them. Knut Graw (2006) notes the decisive significance of this moment in the divination process in his research on Senegalese and Gambian divination consultations, during which the intention of the client is referred to as *nganiyo*. After blowing on the cowry shells, the client then threw them back onto the diviner's basket tray, opening the way for Ngone to begin interpreting the position of the shells in order to unveil her client's *nganiyo*. This would ultimately lead to a dialogue between the two women, as the client would find herself confronted with very personal matters through the diviner's cowry readings. "From the perspective of the divinatory process, one could say that the moment of the articulation of the *nganiyo* becomes phenomenologically transformative in so far as it actively brings the subject into a consultative situation that can no longer be approached neutrally" (Graw, 2006: 86). Looking at the shells, Ngone instantly began to identify unanswered questions and worries she reckoned the woman had, and to determine whether they augured positive or negative

outcomes for the future: “You have doubts regarding your job but don’t worry, you have a lucky star. Nothing bad will happen to you. The job you occupy now was coveted by other women but, *hamdoulilab*, you can thank God because everything is going well for you right now” (Ba). In order to gather more information throughout the session, Ngone frequently mixed the cowries together with one hand, occasionally multiple times, and re-examined their position. As well as interpreting cowry shells, another phase of the divinatory process would involve the diviner giving advice regarding necessary offerings or making tactful suggestions. Shaking her head disapprovingly, Ngone would reveal: “If it was up to this man, he would get married right away, but he is not what he appears to be. If you choose to marry him, the beginning will bring you happiness but problems will arise sooner or later. This man is bad news”. In this way, Ngone not only predicts and foresees into a client’s fate but also, perhaps more importantly, orients the client towards interpretations and towards solutions that she considers to be propitious.

Ngone uses a basket tray similar to the ones used in older times but would tell me that any surface is appropriate for the throwing of cowry shells. A set of artefacts and amulets were always present on her diviner’s tray. These symbolic elements each pointed to the mystical powers that Ngone is endowed with. By taking a close look at the symbolic implications of the material used during Chaga divination sessions in Kilimanjaro, Knut Christian Myhre (2006) convincingly argues that the physical objects used during a given session are the key to understanding how the diviner acquires her insight vis-à-vis the client: “Since they already partake in everyday sociality, these objects can ‘show’ the ‘truth’. It is hence the objects that enable the diviner to ‘see’, and establish the epistemic relationships between her and the client” (10). Owing to this, he further suggests that the diviner should not be seen as being on the ‘margins’ of society, but rather as making use of divinatory material that has its place ‘at the heart of social life’ and subsequently allows for ‘truth’ to be uncovered during divination sessions (327). It is believed that the more one is involved in a mystical realm, the more s/he is susceptible to becoming the target of other occult experts such as marabouts and sorcerers who might seek to eliminate or harm other fellow specialists. As Ngone would explain, there is much talk about her after people have consulted her and it is inauspicious to have people talk behind one’s back, since ill omens are likely to be pronounced. What’s more, predicting occasionally involves revealing information that displeases a client, potentially making the diviner a target. Spirits, jinn, and other esoteric forces are consequently called upon to harm the diviner by making her ill or even by killing her. Much of the elaborate apparatus present around her diviner’s table

during the session thus served to protect her from the many ills that she might be exposed to as an occult practitioner. These included an inedible black bean, a cola nut, leather talismans crowned with cowry shells, sacs of powdered yellow and brown roots, and two stacks of short wooden sticks tied together as a symbol for a large clientele that would keep coming back and contribute to her notoriety. When I asked Ngone to look for me, the words did not take long to flow out of her mouth as if she were reciting a text learnt by heart. Just like the seers from Ndella Diouf's radio station, she did not hesitate and only looked at the cowry placement for a few seconds before revealing a past and future that I would have to interpret. She would see a little girl whom she assumed was my daughter or sister, which eventually led me to assume that it might be a girl from the house where I was staying, who would often follow me around, since I had no daughter or sister. I was told my future would be bright and that I should not stress, as I would succeed in my studies. Although I found this reassuring, I wondered whether these motivational words were really already written in some distant future, or if they would simply help guide me towards such an outcome. Many clients would talk about the effect that the positive words of the seer would have on them, as if these were just as important as whether she was really seeing into a future or not. Interestingly, both Ngone and Aida Ba, another seer who she does not know, would 'look' for me at different times and would talk specifically about a wealthy man in uniform that I would meet and who would ask my hand in marriage. They would both advise me specifically not to accept this offer. They would also both mention my anger towards someone close to me and Ngone would suggest that I not stay angry for too long. When asking seer Aida Ba who this person was, she would tell me that I knew very well who. As Ngone would explain to me, a specific time period is usually not defined, and one might have to wait several years before seeing something that the diviner has predicted, just as certain predictions could very well happen in the next week or in the following few hours.

Although Ngone proclaims to have an intuitive knowledge of cowry shell reading, many diviners will simply learn how to interpret cowry shell placements and come up with predictions based on their learnt knowledge. Ngone tells me that this works as a means of making profit but results in inaccurate readings since the same cowry placement can result in different interpretations that only an intuitive diviner could decipher. Ngone explains that the interpretation of the cowry placements is crucial since a false interpretation might for example turn a sign of a pregnant woman into a sign of a day that will be 'pregnant' with news – both corresponding to the same cowry placement. Without an innate

knowledge, the diviner is likely to wrongly interpret this reading. Here lies the difficulty in judging whether cowry shell divination is a viable practice or not, a debate which feeds media outlets with endless discourse surrounding the practice. Many self-proclaimed diviners in the city are thus perpetrating the image of the diviner as a charlatan who hoaxes people for a living. Ngone would notably tell me that some such diviners would visit her to ask her to ‘see’ for a client who they would meet the next day. They would then repeat Ngone’s predictions to the client as though they were ‘seeing’ themselves. Divination has gradually become a lucrative means of making a living in the competitive environment of the city; a phenomenon perhaps best exemplified by Ndella Diouf’s success in transforming the in-house business of divination into a lucrative enterprise by proposing telephone divination sessions through the radio. Regardless of whether diviners reveal a future that is true or false, the popularity of their work is undeniable amongst Dakarais. When I question Ndella Diouf, she tells me the reason that diviners are so popular is that doctors do not take the time to communicate with patients, like diviners will. The diviner here thus seems to serve the needs of the city dweller in ways that modern doctors do not, thanks to their sociable approach. Consulting a diviner is at least as much about resolving issues as it is about talking about them in a way that is usually not possible on a day-to-day basis.

Much as Wim Van Binsbergen observes with the four-tablet divination system in South Africa, cowry shell divination in Dakar has become at once a standardized commodity that reflects the modern state it operates in and a source of constant innovation: “in the process we witness a constant oscillation between conversion on the one hand ... and on the other hand the improvisation and bricolage by individual healers, all struggling to catch the attention of their potential clients, in order to carve out a place for themselves in this lucrative but competitive market of prestige, power and financial gain” (1995: 132). Binsbergen also notes an advantageous duality to divination through it being at once in consonance with “the fundamental orientations and power relationships of that society as a whole”, as well as keeping in with a traditional worldview and framework that insert themselves outside of the dominant cosmopolitan religious and medical discourses (1995: 133). Similarly to his findings in South Africa, cowry shell divination in Dakar appears to have become a notable feature of the contemporary multi-ethnic culture of the city.

Sufi Islam and cowry shell divination

Comparably to what Soares observes in Mali, Islam plays a fundamental role in social life in Senegal, although what being Muslim entails can hardly be defined in rigorous terms considering the multitude of different Muslim identities that converge in the city. “It is of course a crucial question as to who gets to decide what is or is not Islam or Islamic – ‘orthodoxy’ if you will – and how such orthodoxy might change over time” (Soares, 2005: 80). Throughout my fieldwork, the many religious figures of authority I encountered, including a local Imam and Caliphate, would share dissimilar views of how one should practice Islam, respectively endorsing a more or less orthodox or Sufi interpretation of Islam as can be seen in the film. The Imam speaks in moralistic terms about the ways Senegalese Muslims should conduct themselves, particularly by keeping away from ‘un-Islamic’ traditions such as divination that attempt to legitimize themselves by accessing a realm reserved to God: that of predicting what is to come. The Caliphate, however, simply views the practice of divination as one that should be *avoided* and professes that ethnic traditions such as Lebu spirit possession rites occupy a separate role from that of Islam in daily life, hence making their continued existence legitimized and especially pivotal in dealing with occult matters.

Contrarily to customary Islamic practice, through which an individual has a direct rapport with God, the diviner acts as a moderator between the divine and the human world. From an orthodox Islamic standpoint, divination with cowry shells is of a dubious nature and those purporting to be intermediaries between men and God are considered to be impostors, since there should be no intercessor between a believer and his God. Regardless, many people whom I would speak with did not see a paradox in their consulting diviners and marabouts alongside their practice of Islam, instead viewing religion as distinct from such cultural practices. “We are used to hearing certain Muslims, not all; say that the Prophet does not like divination. Each his own interpretation! That’s what I want to respond. Because I have not read anywhere that the prophet forbids Muslims from practicing this custom” (Diouf). The esoteric ability of individuals like Ngone to divine is locally believed to derive from an innate sensibility that allows one to receive messages acquired from *jinn*. In pre-Islamic mythology, these jinn obtain knowledge of the future by climbing onto one another to reach the heavens in order to listen in on ‘heavenly information’ and to steal divine information (El-Zein, 2009: 56). These beliefs are still part of Islamic teachings today in Senegal, as I was given this exact explanation by a local Imam,

who would further explain to me that the sometimes-inaccurate nature of divinatory revelations is due to the fact that these messages are susceptible to being misinterpreted as they are passed down from the highest to the lowest jinn who will then convey the information to the diviner. Despite this belief in the ability of diviners to create relationships with jinn-entities, the practice was strictly condemned by local Imam Omar Sall whom I met with:

“As far as these practices are concerned; seers, divination and all, it is fundamentally forbidden in Islam, because they enter a domain that is reserved to Allah, to God. They are in the sphere of predicting what will happen, and the Prophet in one of his hadiths – hadiths are the words of the Prophet – he says that he who consults a seer or a diviner, and listens to him, forty days of his prayers will not be accepted ... Now if he believes in what the seer says, he becomes excommunicated, he is no longer considered a Muslim” (Sall).

For diviners like Ngone Ba, divination is perceived as a God given faculty and consequently inserts itself in a religious and spiritual framework. “It is said that if you use cowries, during forty or forty five days, if you pray, your prayers will not amount to anything. Yet I pray all the time. So only God knows. It’s the heart that will get you to paradise” (Ba). When asked further about her view on divination as being contrary to Islamic beliefs, Ngone explains that while some people consider the practice to be *haram* or sinful, others will claim that it is simply not liked or tolerated because of one of the Prophet Mohammed’s stories that features in the Koran. In this account, the Prophet is in a dangerous predicament and is forced to go into hiding in a cave onto which a spider then sows its web and a bird makes a nest. Seeing this cave as an improbable hiding place due to it being covered by the bird’s nest and spider’s web, the miscreants are ready to search elsewhere when a cowry shell diviner certifies that the Prophet is in fact hiding in the cave, thus putting his life in danger. Rather than denying the power of cowry divination, this story depicts the powers of cowry shell diviners as dangerous and nefarious powers to possess. The use of cowries to divine is thus generally seen as an un-Islamic occupation. “If religion refuses cowry shells, it’s because what the person who looks for you tells you can have such a influence on you that you end up forgetting God, as if that person were the one determining your tomorrow” (Wane). Other forms of divination are, however, tolerated by Islam. These include divination with the Koran, which involves the interpretation of Koranic text. The diviner, who is often a man in this case, will then dream of the person’s future and be able to reveal it to his client the next day. To Ngone, this

practice ultimately leads to the same results as cowry shell reading, except that, as a cowry diviner, she is able to predict things in the now rather than making the client wait. Her view is thus that her approach to divination is equally as legitimate as Koranic readings and dream interpretations since it does not prevent her from reciting her five daily prayers. Through this logic, she is able to pursue both her work and religious activities harmoniously.

The multitude of outlooks and debates that surround the ways that Islamic identity should be defined reflects the local diversity of the social groups, ethnic identities and cultural heritages that intersect in the city. “The presumably correct way of being Muslim involves a standardized set of ritual norms – regular ritual daily prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan and alms giving” (Soares, 2005: 81). By adopting Muslim values and moral codes and adhering to the founding pillars of Islam, notably the five daily prayers, individuals ascertain their Islamic belonging. This way, traditional customs such as sacrifices and offerings that are characteristic of animist rites can be attributed religious significance and likened to Islam. Sacrifices are regularly recommended during divination sessions, most often of animals like chicken or cows. Food offerings to members of the community or to strangers that are most often children or elderly individuals are also commonplace. Abdoul Wane, a man who occasionally consults Ngone, notes that these offerings are very much tied to an Islamic way of life:

“It’s like those who read their horoscope; each is keen about what he follows in his own manner. But in the case of divination, for me there is something very interesting that shouldn’t be occulted. It’s that when you go consult seers, they will always tell you to make offerings, to give things. And that is in the spirit of sharing ... and that is the fifth pillar of Islam ... the offering is perhaps also a question of drawing the eye of the Lord onto oneself, so that he may think: ‘so this guy thinks that he is more generous than me? I’ll show him!’ So he covers you with goodwill. Who knows? And ultimately it makes the world a bigger place, the fact that you take it upon yourself and decide to share. Even if you do not get the yield that you were seeking, you have the benefit of the happiness in your heart for having helped” (Wane).

Although few individuals have the same opinions regarding the place of such traditional customs in an Islamic context, most seem to find ways to reconcile their religious principles with animist practices. In divination, a strong belief in spirits is considered by many to be

consistent with Sufi Islamic faith. The cowry shells act as a channel through which spirits speak and reveal divine truths. These spirits, often referred to as *jinn*, are identified as perturbing elements in the human world but as vital beings to the diviner because of their ability to reveal things unknown to humans and even to protect them. Because Islam incorporates *jinn* in the Koran, the traditional belief of spirits is reconciled with this religious notion of *jinn* as invisible entities living alongside the sensorial world of men. Ultimately, although orthodox Islam does not tolerate cowry shell divination, the majority of clients who consult diviners in Dakar are of Islamic faith and seldom seem to forget that everything ultimately boils down to the will of God. The diviner herself would advise: “it is better to space out the consultations and not come too frequently unless there is a specific new problem that poses itself. If you come here every day, it is as if you no longer believe in God. One can come to find out what sacrifices need to be done so that God grants you certain wishes, but the ultimate outcome is always God’s will” (Ba).

Divination here looks to respond in a direct manner to the daily realities that Senegalese, in particular women, face every day, in a way that Islamic faith might not. Although one is aware that he or she must put his or her faith in the hands of God, a woman for instance might easily seek concrete ways of ensuring that a wicked family member will not harm her children, by having recourse to rites that might serve to protect them. Through sacrifices and rituals that are perceived as ways of turning God’s will in one’s favour in the uncertain environment of the city, individuals get a sense that they are guided towards solutions to problems; although one client would note: “I don’t think that cowries can give you the solutions. She (the diviner) is not a healer, she can give you advice when she sees a problem arising, she can orient you through sacrifices, but not give you immediate solutions” (Female participant). The power of God is never forgotten even in the midst of a divination session, and seers will often refer back to the ultimate will of God and occasionally to the grand *marabouts*, as did one of the Saphir FM radio seers: “If you solicit things that do not come, if you look for something and you cannot find it, you think that others are to blame, but it is God who attends to the needs of believers. A good Muslim must accept what happens to him. *Inchallah*, God willing, you will look past your difficulties, you will find yourself in good conditions and success will come your way. I swear it on Serigne Touba, it is taking a while but it will come” (Radio seer).

Unlike Ngone, some diviners choose not to use their abilities as clairvoyants for monetary gains. Aida Ba is a cowry shell diviner who does readings for friends and family in her spare time. She claims not to officially declare herself a diviner because of her Islamic faith. In

her view, by not accepting money for divination sessions, she is not transgressing Islamic beliefs by profiting from her esoteric work. Having thus found her compromise between this occult expertise and her religion, she is able to be a part of Senegalese society without denying any part of her religious and cultural identity as a Senegalese woman.

Ngone would at times work continuously between 10 am to 3 pm and take a rapid lunch break before pursuing her sessions until 7 in the evening. Her home is filled with photos and large-scale images of religious leaders from different brotherhoods. As a Muslim diviner, Ngone seldom neglected to remind a client of the significance of religious prayers and protection. The diviner would at times even go as far as prescribing prayers to some clients as she did with Abdoul Wane: “Your real problem is that you never solicit prayers for your protection. That is the only problem that I see. You are a bit negligent with that but you must do it” (Ba). Since local marabouts are consulted both for their mystical knowledge and for their knowledge of the Koran, she would also direct clients towards such experts: “You must look for someone who is knowledgeable in that field, a good marabout who can give you prayers as well as magical formulas for your protection. If you do that, you will succeed” (Ba). Much like the Apostolic prophets in Richard Werbner’s film *Holy Hustlers* (2009) the diviner is not concerned by “the individual conscience or social reform but the sordid world of malice ... and their mission is to expose threat and, by interceding with the help of the Holy Spirit, to overcome it, at best temporarily, never absolutely” (Werbner, 2011: 183-184). In this local context, the diviner intervenes through the help of Islamic jinn spirits and employs sacrifices and offerings as means of countering maleficent matters. By mixing religious prayers with traditional mysticism, the client is ensured to have his good fortunes increased. Significantly, under Ngone’s basket tray is a small white gris-gris tied with string in which feature writings from the Koran as a protection from external esoteric forces, presumably malevolent jinn. It is believed that Koranic writings written and manipulated by experts in Koranic mysticism like local marabouts can be used as protection against any number of malevolent esoteric forces, as well as being used for good fortune.

For the intention of his research that focuses mainly on the way Islam is “understood, practised and expressed” in Sub-Saharan Africa (2000: 144), Louis Brenner defines religion as such: “the field of cultural expression that focuses specifically on communication and relationship between human beings and those (usually) unseen spiritual entities and/or forces that they believe affect their lives” (2000: 164). Using this definition, divination and spirit possession rituals can both be understood as part of a local religious culture. Here, we

might raise the question of religious hybridity, for instance by examining the extent to which Islam and local traditional customs intersect in daily life for modern Senegalese. Due to the limited scope of this research, however, I will not attempt to tackle this question in any exhaustive manner here. A few local informants, however, understood the practice of animist customs within local Muslim communities as being a clear syncretic phenomenon. As one Senegalese academic would put it:

“It’s syncretism, that is to say old habits, old animist customs that are grafted onto our religions, because man is eternally unsatisfied. Let’s say that whatever it is that religion cannot satisfy, he looks for it elsewhere, in his old customs. So the Lebu do exactly the same thing with the problematic of healing through the *ndop* right, where there is this knowledge of *rab* (spirits), blood sacrifices, all these things that are completely forbidden by Islam, and yet they are religious people who believe in the Islamic religion but who base themselves on these practices” (Sow).

For many of the individuals I met, a Muslim identity can be concordant with an animist identity and one does not necessarily negate the other. Rather, both are seen as necessary and at times as complementing each other. The particular healing rituals of the Lebu are an interesting manifestation of the meeting of Sufi mysticism and an animist worldview.

The *ndop* healing rituals of the Lebu

The Lebu are one of the many ethnic groups that populate Dakar and the main inhabitants of the district of Ouakam. The mystical realm of both the Lebu and Wolof are composed of sets of representations that place spirits at the centre of a parallel and occult world. As a fishing community, the Lebu most often live near the coast and are famed for performing these elaborate healing rituals called *ndop* within each family, with the participation of a whole community. The *ndop* is a congregational healing ritual, commonly organized and performed to cure non-physical diseases such as mental deficiencies. “Here illness is not an individual matter but rather a social matter, and medication or psychiatry is also devised by society” (Sow). The social nature of these rituals performed to heal a person, strikes as contradictory to the private and confidential approach of treatment in the West. The aim being to reintegrate the individual into his community and into society as a whole, the individual is put through a series of highly social and engaging rites during which the community acts as a witness to the healing process. Mental pathologies are understood as

curse that are afflicted by external forces; thus, an individual is never directly responsible for the ills that torment him. The cause of such illnesses is attributed to rabs or spirits that would have taken possession of the individual. In the case of ndop rituals, the spirit, or companion, is considered to have more or less integrated itself inside an ill individual depending on the severity of the person's affliction. Because these spirits can be malevolent as well as being good-natured, they were sometimes referred to as the 'devil' during the séances that I participated in.

"In the midst of the evolution of this syncretic cult, of which the key is the fierce battle that it lead to survive against Islam, the therapeutic dimension has become prevalent" (Zempleni, 1966: 308). The public procedures of the ndop involve many stages that have therapeutic qualities, as each is geared towards the exorcism of unwanted spirits that have taken hold of the individual in question. In this context, the spirit that is referred to as a rab is viewed as a perturbing and demanding entity that hassles the individual until his desires are satisfied. "The rab is this 'twin', this 'companion' that sometimes actualizes itself and sometimes remains a virtual facet of the individual" (Zempleni, 1966: 311). Once the rab is contended through sacrifices and offerings, he can then be purged out of the individual's body through an exorcism that will free the afflicted person of his or her malady.

"What is central here is the desire of persecution. Man is not himself responsible for what happens to him, there is always something behind what is happening to him. In reality, hell is other people or something else that inhabits the individual. So one must find out why the individual is affected in that way. Only from there does the therapy begin" (Sow).

The rabs are classified into different groups and carry distinct traits. They may be animist or Muslim, malevolent or good-natured, Lebu or foreign, and so on. They are even said to associate and to be able to have children together, thus forming rab families (Zempleni, 1966). By representing mental pathologies through rab-spirits, the Lebu are able to clearly identify and heal mental affects through the exorcism of malevolent spirits. Zempleni (1966) identifies a few of the most common afflictions that rabs are associated with. These include eating disorders, mobility disorders, speech disorders, social relations difficulties, somatic problems, issues related to fertility, and hallucinatory phenomenon such as dreams and visions. In reference to Victor Turner's analysis of different ritual forms, the ndop is a contingent ritual that is organized in response to an individual's manifestation of one or more of the afflictions cited above. Here, Turner's definition of the ritual appropriately

characterizes the nature of the ndop ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and activities performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (1973: 1).

The aim of the elaborate ndop ritual will thus be to liberate the individual from invisible entities in order to rid him of his illness. The ndop ritual takes place over a period of several weeks and is comprised of several different stages. This research focuses specifically on the end stages of the ritual, which involve public exorcism séances. Such organized rituals provide meaning in an otherwise unpredictable and chaotic milieu and present occasions where performance, healing and religion are each at play. The entire community will accompany the affected individual through public séances of dancing and drumming where many will fall into trance states, succumbing to the personalities of the rabs within them. The repetitive nature of the drumming rhythms awakens the rabs and provokes dancers into performances that range from controlled behaviour to agitated frenzies. The act of moving one’s body to the rhythm of the drumming and gradually falling into a state where one’s personality is effaced, is a sign that the jinn inside the individual has taken over and is expressing itself through the person’s body. These jinn have their own distinct personalities, as we spectators would all witness as people started falling into trance states. By means of these séances that culminate into highly engaging performances, the source of the illness is drawn out of the individual. Since a person’s rab is oft times embodied through eccentric behaviour and theatrical gestures, the individual is no longer recognizable. Certain types of outbursts invert the individual’s condition, turning, for instance, a case of anorexia into polyphagia (Zempleni, 1966). Individuals might cry out, gesticulate haphazardly, launch themselves on the floor, and throw sand or water at the audience and so on, as can be witnessed in the film. Having lost conscious control of cognitive processes during these dramatic trance states, the person is no longer able to recall what happened once the séance is over.

As the existence of spirits and supra-natural beings is not acknowledged by modern medicine, many patients do not find their realm of realities understood by modern doctors. Experts of the ndop further argue that since the ritual serves to exorcise malevolent spirits and ultimately heal those who have been affected by these unwanted jinn, it serves a purpose in society that cannot be attended to by modern medicine and thus should not be cast-off. “Here we have psychiatrists who are formed the occidental way, who do not always take into measure the affections of the patients. They understand them but do not adhere to their language” (Sow). Hence, although an illness such as depression might be

defined as such both by traditional healers and modern doctors, the source of the illness will be of a different nature. Similarly to cowry shell divination, ndop rituals are thus considered to provide a form of therapy to many individuals who instil a greater trust in traditional-practitioners than in modern medicine.

Public séances of a spirit possession ritual in Ouakam

“We have a social culture that is based on the existence of spirits. We are not alone, there are other beings that exist in our society that might be much more numerous than we are, that we do not see and that have 50 thousand times more power than we do. Who are capable of doing a whole lot of evil. So almost every neighbourhood, every region, has its protector spirit or evil spirit as well” (Wane).

A genie called Maambou nyata watches over the Ouakam neighbourhood, where the ndop ceremony is taking place. Those who tell me about him talk about a half man, half horse that fleetingly appears in the neighbourhood at nights, with his head flowing amongst the clouds. An altar is kept for him where sacrifices are regularly made, so that he continues to watch over the neighbourhood as guardian angel. Maambou nyata is also a rab, or jinn, like the ones that would surface through possessed bodies later on during the public dances, but his status and power as genie of Ouakam is of a much bigger renown, which earns him the title of *Tuur*. Most Lebu families have shrines in honour of their family’s ancestral spirits. These domestic altars set up just outside the house, are used to make sacrifices throughout the year. Once spirits are tamed and gratified, they can protect individuals from social or biological ills. The relation between a community and a *Tuur* or between an individual and a rab is based on exchange: by providing the spirit with food offerings, animal sacrifices and a show of recognition through altars, praises and public manifestations, it will in turn cease to torment the person, family or community and instead act as guardian angel.

The ndop is best understood when it is experienced through the senses. Thus, a cinematic approach was of value to capture the rich visual and audial dimension of the public séances of the ritual. The use of film here proved particularly decisive in the representation of the performative dimension of the ndop séances, notably to capture the embodiment of spirit possession and the interaction between musicians, dancers, audience members and individuals in trance. Using the exploration of theatricality and body language in Richard

Werbner's *Holy Hustlers* (2009) and Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres Fous* (1956) as inspiration, I endeavoured to film these séances in a way that would showcase the full physicality of the dancers, exploring the transformation of bodies from normal states to highly mannered and eccentric forms that manifested a loss of connection with the outer world. Both men and women would succumb to the chants and rhythms of the drums, although women more frequently fell into severe trance. Voice over narrative was purposefully not used over images of the ritual performances so as to avoid overshadowing their highly engaging and sensorial nature. The catalytic effect of the drumming and chanting gave way to intensely visceral performances during which sound individuals adopted unexpectedly outlandish behaviour. Many people like Abdoul would explain to me that these séances appear as chaotic and unnerving to individuals outside of the Lebu community. Because of their public nature, I was easily permitted to film the ndop without limitations. Documenting the invisible world that is at the source of such a ritual was achieved through a visual and audial consideration of performance, artefacts, signs, and symbols apparent through attire, body language and performed rites.

The ndop stages that I was able to participate in and film in Ouakam are the public séances that conclude the months of preparation and rituals that have already taken place. These public séances gather large crowds of spectators and participants who have assembled to witness the healing of those for whom the rituals are organised. Being the last stages of the ndop, they do not focus solely on the individuals for whom the ritual has been organized, but rather on family members and other members of the Lebu community who will accompany them through long performative séances in which many will fall into alternate states, provoked into being by their own jinn waken up by the sounds of drumming. In this case, the ndop had been organised over many months for two women who appeared to suffer from mental disorders. The only details I would be able to obtain regarding their illness was that rabs had taken a hold of them and demanded to be satisfied through sacrifices and rituals. Since the rabs have the power to be both good-natured and bad natured, they will perturb an individual if they desire something from him, which will force the family to organize an ndop ritual to relieve the individual of such disturbances. The public séances filmed would last for seven days from Monday to Sunday with the dances starting each day at 5pm until the late hours of the night. The whole family had come from different parts of the country to attend this event and a three-story house was emptied to accommodate family members who would be sleeping there until the end of the ritual. Women of the family were easily distinguishable through their matching colourful attire. A

different fabric had been chosen for each day of the ritual and each family member had gotten theirs sewn for the occasion. The two women for whom we were gathered were given different white and blue garments. The *saltige*, or *ndopkat*, who can be a man or a woman, has either inherited or developed alliances with community spirits or tuurs and, as such, s/he is the leader of the ceremonies.

As can be seen in the documentary, the first day involved a purging ceremony, during which the two women were washed in the sea to the sound of chanting and rhythmic drumming. Two bulls, one for each woman, were immersed in seawater as well, as an act of purification. Upon returning on dry land, the women and animals were laid down in the middle of a circle formed by family members. They were then buried in layers of colourful cloth, while men and women began chanting and dancing in a circular motion around them. The two women would emerge from under the sheets a few minutes later, having transferred their illness to the animals. As a show of this, they both danced while holding amulets high above their heads. The animals would later on be sacrificed, their blood fed to thirsty spirits. Filming the sacrifices was forbidden because it was said that secrets could be revealed. Later on, food and drinks were given to the women as offerings to their rab-spirits. Because the jinn were Muslim like the community, they did not ask for alcoholic drinks but demanded drinks such as coca cola or sweet milk, which seemed to be their preferred choice. Had they been Christian, I was told, they would have asked for champagne and whisky instead.

As the evening nears, the community prepares for the dancing séances that would last until the late hours of the night. Bullhorns are carefully placed in the middle of a court where the dancing takes place, so as to keep away any foreign or maleficent jinn that may be lurking around in search of bodies to possess. As we witness individuals entering trance states, we are no longer looking at the person whose body we see, but rather at the rab that has taken over to the beat of the drumming. It is through these trance states that we witness an individual accessing the invisible realm that is constantly influencing our palpable world and sometimes even perturbing our psychological state. The sequence was filmed from low angles in order to capture the full body movements of the dancers while also suggesting the power of the spirits that have taken possession of these bodies. As soon as the rhythms of the drums awaken the spirit hidden inside an individual, he or she takes on unnatural behaviour, as if an alter ego had taken possession of the body. Each rab is linked to a chant and drum rhythm that awakens him and once that rhythm is played, the individual is compelled to dance and ultimately reaching a climactic point when s/he literally falls into

an unrecognizable, agitated and uncontrollable state that is often accompanied by spastic body movements and outlandish facial expressions. As the drumming intensifies, the dances soon lead to a complete metamorphosis, from person to rab persona, as the cheering and clapping of audience members accompany the dancers and drummers. The dancing sometimes takes the form of dramatic theatrical performances. Some individuals take on distinct but controlled personalities, as did the *salige* who would suddenly turn the men and women around him into soldiers by making them march in line in a soldier-like fashion. Since one of the two women for whom the ritual was organized had a foreign jinn, she unexpectedly lunged towards me one day to drag me in the center of a circle and dance with me, putting her arms around my shoulders, her hat on my head and kissing me on the forehead while showcasing me to the crowd with a big smile on her face. ‘Her jinn likes foreigners’, I was told. Being an outsider to the community, I was reassured that I was not likely to fall into a trance state because it was improbable that the rhythm of my own spirit would be played in this environment. Still, I was given a protective necklace made of string to tie around my neck as protection against malevolent spirits. As a cognitive ritual, the ndop is a physical and mental experience that is lived through the senses and the body. The body is thus used as a manifestation of a mental affliction. The bodily and emotionally charged rites of the ndop provoke a mental shift that then allows for the recovery of the individual. Because the possession and trance state is an accentuation and at times an inverted form of the person’s malady, it is considered not to be nearly as grave as the illness itself: “The possessed does not lose his capacities of discernment, his knowledge, his social references. Contrarily to the ‘insane’ individual, he is not aggressive in a sustained fashion, disoriented in time and space, and does not undress himself or become neglectful of personal hygiene” (Zempleni, 1966: 315). Rabs form different types of relationships with people; the extreme form of rab-person association being the total identification of the person with the rab – this translates into the individual being born with severe mental disabilities or malformations. “Whatever the initial motive of the attack, a debt situation is established between the possessor and the possessed. By making someone ill, this ancestral instance that is the rab asks for something that it is believed should be given to him” (Zempleni, 1966: 312).

Illness is consequently exteriorized and personified through public performances that allow for a relationship to exist between the sick patients and their community. As members of the Lebu community, the social entourage is of primordial importance in the acknowledgment of the person’s healing process. Individuals are integrated into a

community via their allegiance to cultural values and customs, and rituals such as the ndop bring together members of one family and reinforce social ties. Social dynamics are at play in ndop rituals since the disturbance of one member of the family by an ancestral spirit concerns not only the individual but also the whole family. During these stages of the ritual, the collective monetary participation of the whole community will ensure the purchase of the animals and food, both as offerings and as meals for the family during their stay. They will continue to contribute sums of money as audience members of the dance séances to encourage both dancers and drummers. In exchange, some money is given back to the public and the money collected is ultimately returned to the family that has organized and financed the events. By participating in the healing process, the community strengthens its social bonds and becomes a first hand witness of the therapy. The extended family and community members will also take part in the healing process, accompanying the individual through the different stages of the ritual. The witnessing of the therapy by the public allows for the social reintegration of the individual into the community. It is through this final social gathering that the individual has officially been cured in the eyes of the community. It also provides an opportunity for community members to satisfy their own jinn through dances and trance possessions so as to avoid being tormented by them in the future. This approach to healing through social gathering is far from the private therapeutic approach we are more familiar with in the West. Although not all who become possessed during the ndop are ill, the patient's condition is thought to subsequently affect the whole family; just as the individual is 'followed' by the rab, family members are also followed by the affliction, one after the other (Zempleni, 1966). The healing of one individual through the ndop thus becomes a congregational ritual, as one member's affliction is seen as a whole community's responsibility. As young people take part in the same traditions as the senior members of the community do, they are united through their common participation in the cultural rites of their ethnic or religious congregation. Such cultural customs appear to provide meaning and order in otherwise disorienting predicaments. They seem to endow individuals in the city with a sense of security, in that they are certain to be looked after by a whole community if and when a problem or illness befalls upon them.

The impact of mystical Islam as manifest through *jinn*

Islamic identities in the city fluctuate across different groups and individuals. As is evident in the film, the local Imam, community Caliphate and cowry shell diviner that I

encountered in the Ouakam neighbourhood each had different perceptions of what is considered to be acceptable in Islam and what is not, although none regarded their own practice of Islam as being any less legitimate than others'. Since it proved difficult to gather a number of participants together, film footage was used throughout the fieldwork to provoke reactions from participants by showing them conversations and events with other individuals. Part of these elicited discussions, notably with Caliphate of Mohamed Seyni Gueye and diviner Ngone Ba, were used in the film as commentary. Like many religious leaders, the current Caliphate of the Ouakam neighbourhood and son of the celebrated 'Caliphate of God' Mohammed Seyni Gueye, chooses not to embrace cowry shell divination and judges it to be a proscribed practice in the eyes of Islam. His views are, however, less orthodox than those of the local Imam regarding certain customs. As a Lebu, the Caliphate sees no reason to repudiate ancestral rites and has himself recourse to ndop healing rituals, justifying their use when one is faced with maladies that are of an esoteric nature.

“Among us Lebu, we have parents that have been the subjects of ndop. When they are affected by a curse, by jinn, modern medicine cannot treat the jinn. They often have recourse to the ndop, to the ancestors, to try to treat this person who is affected. But Islam says, during this period, limit yourself to the healing, limit yourself to the remedies, but do not do this as if you adore it” (Caliphate).

Because of her reputation as a diviner, Ngone had refused to take the risk of attending the Lebu ndop rituals with me, for fear of being cursed through other people's jinn that are believed to be freely roaming around at the time of the rituals. According to her, Islam is just as strict on such rituals as it is on divination, and partaking in ndop rituals is no less a sin in the eyes of Islam as is cowry divination. Abdoul, Ngone's client, would also categorically refuse to accompany me to the rituals. As ndop are specific to the Lebu and Wolof communities, rare are those outside of these ethnic groups who will attend the séances. Reasons that were given to me included the fear of becoming possessed by one's own or someone else's jinn and succumbing to a turbulent trance state that could potentially drive one insane in perpetuity. For many who did not attend or participate in such events, religious rationale was oft brought forward, as Islam was perceived to be clearly against exorcism rituals such as this one.

Where Sufism and tradition collide, age-old practices such as the ndop are able to survive in a modern and religious context. The average Senegalese is born into a cultural milieu that

brings forward invisible entities as instigators of good and evil in the palpable world of humans. Following this line of reasoning, it is perceived that external forces are at the source of psychiatric disorders and other forms of mental illnesses. Rab genies as well as jinn spirits are cited as being at the source of such deficiencies and the traditional healing process encompasses a series of rites and symbols that serve to free an afflicted individual of their disturbing interference. The Oxford dictionary describes 'jinn' in Muslim mythology as "an order of spirits lower than the angels, said to have the power of appearing in human and animal forms, and to exercise supernatural influence over men".

"The Arabs before Islam had similar beliefs to their neighbours regarding magic, spirits and healing. Like them, they were preoccupied with how to ward off disease and ill-fortune ... Pre-Islamic Arabs believed evil jinn bring madness upon people as well. In fact, the term *majnun* (possessed/mad/insane in Arabic) literally means 'to be possessed by a jinni.'" (El-Zein, 2009: 74).

El-Zein further explains that jinn were believed to possess humans and render them mad through sounds and music that could be likened to certain natural sounds or to 'the pounding of a drum' (74). Much like the Lebu approach, exorcist rites were practiced as means of protection from jinn. A similar perception of jinn spirits as entities that could be evil as well as being good-natured subsisted. As a consequence, this cultural heritage markedly influenced the Sufi branch of Islam in which mysticism is a central component, and the belief in an invisible realm harbouring jinn entities persisted. "There is no totally autonomous religion, independent of what occurred before it, as Dutch historian of religion and Christian theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw (d. 1950) maintains: 'Every religion, therefore, has its own previous history and is to a certain extent a 'syncretism'" (El-Zein, 2009: 75). In the context of ndop rituals, the titles *jinn* and *rab* are used interchangeably, as they both refer to the same spirits (Zempleni, 1966). The ndop ceremony leader or *saltige*, described himself as the 'interior defence minister' of the ceremony, in reference to his role in protecting individuals possessed by jinn spirits. He explained: "God made us, and he said: *minal-jinnati wan-nâs* (whether he be a jinn or a man: Koranic surah). It is God who put us in relation with jinn. We cannot escape that. There are good jinn and bad ones, and the treatments are not the same" (Ngom). Amongst the Lebu, it is believed that each individual is inhabited by a jinn, that will manifest itself if and when it is unsatisfied. One client of diviner Ngone Ba explains the phenomenon of jinn or 'inherited companions' as such:

“In our communities we say that you have a companion who protects you. This companion is immaterial. If he asks you to do something that you do not do, you will reap the consequences right away. There are people who become crazy ... It is from ancestors that these people have inherited the companions who protect them and ask them to do certain things once a year, or once every ten years etc.” (Male participant).

Within the Lebu population of Ouakam, it is argued that this belief in spirits is linked with Islamic ideology because the Koran alludes to a world in which humans and jinn live side by side – one being visible, the other invisible. In consideration of Islamic customs, the ndop does not take place during the rainy season or during the month of Ramadan (Zempleni, 1966). “With the advent of Islam, jinn were transformed from kings of the unseen to servants of the new religion. Islam retained their power but made it subservient to the One God” (El-Zein, 2009: 53). The association of Lebu spirit possession rites to Sufi Islam is manifest through this common belief in the impact of spirits on the human world. Islam is thus absorbed into traditional culture and the ndop ritual is viewed as an acceptable practice in an Islamic context by many Lebu and Wolof like the Caliphate, since its usage is justified through a Sufi worldview.

Conclusion

Cowry shell divination and ndop as practiced here in Dakar are highly personalized customs; both resorted to as intervention techniques that are characterized by their adaptableness to a defined environment and concrete situations. They furthermore appear to be instrumental to keeping alive a traditional African worldview that finds meaning outside of the dominant political and economic spheres of the contemporary setting they prevail in. Cowry shell divination in particular, manages to be at once traditional and modern, through its use of media outlets. In contrast to the role of Islam in personal development and inner growth, it looks to be distinctly designed to provide efficient and applicable solutions to daily realities (Dia, 1980: 28-36). Through performed rituals, sets of realities are manipulated into desired outcomes. Yet contrary to those inclined towards a more reformist interpretation of Islam, many Dakarais consider that the multitude of phenomena that make up what we might call a traditional African belief system, are not consistently in contradiction with Islamic beliefs, and that both schools of thought converge when it comes to an understanding of the world that incorporates the existence

of supra-natural beings, namely jinn, that have the power to influence and act on the human world. In divination, jinn bestow onto the diviner the divination powers that will help him or her read and interpret signs in the throwing of cowry shells. Since jinn are understood as entities created by God, the ability to see in divination is interpreted as a God-given gift by diviners. In the spirit possession rituals of the Lebu, jinn are also at the source of an invisible dimension that is accessed through esoteric rituals in order to rid individuals of certain illnesses. Both divination and ndop are consequently reconciled with Sufism in the eyes of many local Muslims through this common understanding of the human world through an occult viewpoint. The belief in the power of mystical practices is strongly anchored in the mind-sets of the average Dakarois that I met during this research, and who are deeply versed in a mystical understanding of Sufi Islam. According to Dia (1980), in the midst of this cultural polytheism, the monotheist religion provides a unifying base for all believers and ultimately strengthens fraternity ties:

“In a universe where morbid fear reigns, it introduces more rationality within belief systems; restores dignity to man by tearing him away from the humiliation of local tyrannies. It does not, however, destroy myths, it exorcises them it expands their horizons and, thanks to its firmly established dogma on the unity of God, produces a dialectic of strengthened spirituality. It enriches the African belief system with themes and new concepts, thus opening it to a universal culture (34-35).

Considered from this point of view, Sufism in Senegal has provided local customs with a unified ideological and theoretical backdrop instead of uprooting them. Comparably to what Thomas Kirsch describes in his research on members of prophetic churches in Zambia, the importance in this setting seems not to be one's allegiance to a single religious group but rather one's belief in the efficacy of the rituals practiced:

“[B]elieving' in my research area ... did not denote seeking conclusive certainty in an unconditioned truth with the assistance of perpetually legitimate religious institutions or practitioners. Rather, one had to remain flexible and strive for spiritual mediation in potentially diverse religious settings” (Kirsch, 2004: 700).

Belief here is expressed through local performances such as the ceremonious commemoration of a local religious leader and the trance rites that serve to conjure up jinn spirits. Belief in the potency of the diviner's words and belief in the spirits evoked during trance rituals for instance is what seems to give potency to the rituals in daily life. Here, I would like to apply Kirsch's definition of belief as “the practice of cyclically regenerating a

condition of internalized ‘believing’” rather than as “a stable and perpetual interior state of religious practitioners” (2004: 700). From this viewpoint, such an internalized approach to the significance of belief establishes a logic continuum between the belief in a supreme God and the simultaneous belief in spiritual entities during divination sessions and trance rituals. This particular approach to belief perhaps resonates with the urban context within which this research is situated. It is perhaps an ability to remain receptive to different ways of approaching the world that allows one to be *modern* and to better apprehend the changing and sometimes unpredictable socioeconomic setting of the capitalist urban environment that is Dakar. What seems above all pivotal here is to acknowledge the heterogeneity of viewpoints and approaches that local Muslim Senegalese have vis-à-vis the practice of divinatory and ethnic customs within an urban setting - a phenomenon that this text and accompanying film only begin to point to and explore.

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