

Visual Citizenship in Senegal : Contemporary Contests of Cultural Heritage

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Visual Citizenship in Senegal: Contemporary Contests of Cultural Heritage¹⁾

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1. Introduction

“Visual citizenship” is to belong by the eye.³⁾ National flags, portraits of saints, and historical monuments help define the cultural heritage of communities the world around (see Morgan 2005: 220–255). Such rallying images can long endure or be lost in the vagaries of faith, fortune, or fad. Visual citizenship is inexorably adaptive, as are all aspects of collective identity and purpose, and new ways of seeing the world assist people to cope with misfortune even as they celebrate life’s triumphs, however ephemeral they may be. Visual, narrative, and performative contributions to heritage converge in social processes fruitfully understood as *refabulation*.

Urban Senegal has been undergoing radical refabulation since the late 1980s, as memories suppressed or neglected during the French colonial period (1885–1960) are summoned to produce new celebrated faces and places.⁴⁾ “Refabulation” refers to the choosing of myths and allusions suited to the needs of those *seeing* to such transformations. Through youth-instigated changes, many French monuments and street names in Dakar have been altered to recognize African heroes and illustrious events; if vestiges of the colonial project remain, it is because Senegalese themselves have *decided* to include such fragments of an updated past in present-day stories of their own telling (see Diouf 1992a). Refabulation need not be homegrown or “bottom-up,” however, for special and foreign interests may elbow their ways into prominence, transforming landscapes as they seek to shape mindscapes to their financial or political advantage. Consider the following scene, for example:

Toward the tip of the Cap-Vert peninsula upon which Dakar sprawls with rhizomatic intensity, Léopold Sedar Senghor Airport long welcomed domestic travelers, international visitors, and those coming home from abroad.⁵⁾ Planes descended to the oceanside view marked by the Mamelles—two steep “breast-like” hills (hence *mamelle* in French). One Mamelle has long been topped by a lighthouse beaming out to sea, while the other is now adorned with a monstrous monument called “African Renaissance,” begun in 2006 and dedicated in 2010 in celebration of Senegal’s fiftieth anniversary of independence from French colonial rule (Photo 1). The sculpture was conceived by former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade (2000–2012) and constructed by a North Korean company.



Photo 1 “African Renaissance” monument in Dakar, Senegal. (Photograph by the author in 2011)

The firm’s fees are said to have been exchanged for a huge grant of land once constituting a portion of Senghor Airport (see De Jong 2010).

At a foot or so taller than New York’s Statue of Liberty, “African Renaissance” is reputedly the grandest sculpture outside of Asia and Eastern Europe. It echoes Soviet Realism in its depiction of a naked-to-the-waist African man, his right arm around a voluptuous African woman whose right breast and legs are provocatively exposed, and his left arm holding aloft an African child pointing westward out to sea. Most features and circumstances of the monument have been protested as inappropriate by local people, with outrage typically matched by wit. How can such a waste of funding be tolerated in such a poor country? The nudity is an affront to many Muslims, as is the woman’s revealing garb to Senegalese feminists. Moreover, is the child not pointing overseas, where unemployed Senegalese might rather be these days? Special derision was reserved for President Wade’s early claim—later abandoned—to income generated from souvenirs and other commercial ventures as his intellectual property right.

To be fair, many of those invited to celebrate the monument’s dedication saw it as a triumph of *Négritude*, and President Wade hoped that critics would understand the achievement to be consistent with the broad-based philosophy of the much-esteemed Léopold Sedar Senghor (1906–2001), first President of the Republic. The monument also refers to the New Partnership for Africa’s Development or NEPAD, the initiative of the African Union adopted in 2001 that integrated President Wade’s own Omega Plan for

Africa to garner substantial international exposure for Senegal. Ambitious plans for a NEPAD-driven African renaissance included eradicating poverty, sustainable growth, and accelerated empowerment of women. Sadly, little has come of such good intentions, and most blogged responses to the “African Renaissance” monument have been scornful of the empty statements and unrealized actions deemed typical of the elderly former president.⁶⁾

Attending the inaugural festivities, Malawian President Bingu wa Mutharika (now deceased) seemed to echo the opinion of many skeptics when he said that “this monument does not belong to Senegal.”⁷⁾ President Mutharika was referring to pan-African solidarity, of course. Yet with its Soviet Realist design, its flaunting of stereotypical “Africans,” and its construction by North Koreans in exchange for some of Dakar’s choicest real estate, to whom *does* “African Renaissance” belong? Whose cultural heritage does the monument make manifest and promote? This chapter contrasts two case studies from contemporary Senegal to help readers understand how visual citizenship recognized for its inspiration is contested by external forces, as reflected in ongoing debates about “African Renaissance.”

2. The Mystical Graffiti of Pape Samb

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Dakar was bursting with vibrant visual culture, affirming a sense of citizenship and heritage. Images ranged from locally focused advertisements, slogans for political candidates and factions, and public health messages to inspirational images of the saints of Senegal’s four Sufi movements. Of the latter, portraits of Sheikh Amadu Bamba (1853–1927), the *Senegalese* holy man from whose prolific writings and miracles the Mouride Sufi Way (Muridiyya in Arabic) has been created, were by far the most prevalent. This study focuses on such imagery.⁸⁾

Bamba is a “saint,” as the Arabic phrase *wali Allah* is often translated in English and French by Mourides and writers on the topic. The phrase refers to an “intimate” or “friend” of God, and Bamba explained how this divine relationship was established during his exile from Senegal between 1895 and 1902. Despite his avowed pacifism, French colonial authorities found Bamba’s charisma to be subversive and kept him under close surveillance from the mid-1890s until his death more than 30 years later. In transcending his persecution, the Saint wrote that he had “been able to come into proximity with my Lord” (Bamba n.d.; see also Mbacke 2009; Ngom 2016), with a more literal than figurative assertion intended.

Bamba’s extraordinary relationship to Allah is confirmed for Mourides by the only known photograph of the Saint, taken around 1913 and published in a colonial work four years later.⁹⁾ Although it is difficult to determine when the photograph became available to Mourides, books published in France but of local relevance were likely available to Senegalese readers shortly after they appeared in print in the remarkably cosmopolitan cities of Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Rufisque. Bamba’s image became widely known to Mourides, and the Saint was “produced” in new ways as an object of knowledge and devotion, as Michel Foucault (1980: 97) might have posited. Indeed, “a process of

reflexive objectification of the observer” was underway, as Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo (2002: 47) would undoubtedly add.

The portrait of Amadu Bamba is no ordinary picture (Photo 2). On a sultry sunny day in 1913, a frontal, full-length photograph of Bamba was taken as an instrument of colonial surveillance. The slight man is wrapped in a voluminous white robe with long sleeves, completely hiding his hands. His head is swathed in a loose white wrap, of which one end conceals the lower portion of his face. Because his shoulders are slightly turned, the robe continues the uninterrupted lines of the turban to present a nearly formless body in silhouette. The intense sun of that day in 1913 is palpable, for Bamba’s dark skin absorbs and reflects light. The result is an image of high contrast comprising a collection of black and white shapes that is more reminiscent of Arabic letters than a finely articulated, “realistic” depiction denoting personality or emotion (Photo 3). Indeed, the photograph is nearly devoid of the individualistic particularity one would associate with surveillance photography, except insofar as this very peculiarity is what is recognized as the Saint’s countenance and no one else’s.¹⁰

Sufis have long referred to the “calligraphy” of the Prophet Muhammad’s face as “a marvelously written manuscript of the Qur’an” (Schimmel 1975: 413). His nose is said to have been like an *alif*, the sweeping stroke with which one begins the Holy Name of Allah, and His eyebrows, the *Basmala* formula “In the name of Allah” with which one begins prayers or blesses other endeavors. The Prophet’s eyes and mouth also suggested letters, as derived from ancient Arabic notions of physiognomy (cf. Courtine and Haroche



Photo 2 C.1913 photograph of Sheikh Amadu Bamba, from Marty (1917: 222), public domain.



Photo 3 Portrait painting of Amadu Bamba by Assane Dione, private collection. (Photograph by Don Cole in 2003, of the UCLA Fowler Museum, with permission)



Photo 4 Calligram of Amadu Bamba's based upon Assane Dione's portrait. The Shahada proclamation of Islamic faith is written in Arabic script. UCLA Fowler Museum x99.56.30. (Photograph by Don Cole in 2003, with permission)

2007: 39–40). Following such revelations, Sufis possessing deeply arcane knowledge can “read” Bamba’s countenance as revealed in the 1913 photograph (Photo 4). The image emphasizes the potentiality of *batin*—the profound signification that stands dialectically between visible and invisible realms. Indeed, in such a mystical image, “certain parts are visible, while others are not; visible parts render the others invisible, and a rhythm of emergence and secrecy sets in, a kind of watermark of the imaginary” (to redirect Baudrillard 1988: 33). Such an assertion recalls Seyyed Nasr’s (1987: 128–129) paraphrase of Rumi, that “no reality is exhausted by its appearance,” for one must “penetrate into the *ma’na* [essential meaning] of things” to partake of their “inebriating interiority.” Indeed, “the great paradox of Islamic art” is its quest to “represent a reality that cannot be seen” (Laibi 1998: 14). The portrait of Amadu Bamba provides opportunities to reflect upon such profundities.

The bright sunlight of that day in 1913 produced other noteworthy results when considered through a Mouride visual epistemology. As Bamba’s left ankle and foot emerge from the stark white of his robe, the man’s deep shadow obscures his right foot so that it appears to be missing. If the Saint’s foot is “not there,” where can it be? For many Mourides, this is an instance of what Mark Taylor might call “the non-absent absence of the holy” (cited in Berry 1992: 4), in that the Saint is seen to step into the plane of observation from another dimension where his right foot must still be located. Having written of how he came into proximity with Allah, such features of the 1913 photograph demonstrate that Bamba *is* a saint, able to traverse between heavenly and human realms. Such a realization brings an immediate boon, for in returning to humanity

from his divine encounter, Bamba bears with him Allah's active blessing known as *baraka*. It may be noted that the present tense of this last sentence is appropriate and necessary, for the image inhabits a moment defined by each viewing, and those seeing Bamba's iconic portrait are blessed every time they do, today as in the past.

Rationalist arguments about how any such feature as a "missing" foot may be because of the nature of the photographic event or subsequent darkroom manipulations are irrelevant. What need not be noticed in a photograph can and often will be, and there always exists the possibility that signs of Allah (*aya*) will be discovered. As such understandings are shared, "visual piety" is developed as "practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images... structure the experience of the sacred." David Morgan's surprising verb—"to structure"—suggests that images may possess active agency rather than remaining passive illustrations. As he asserts, "what the image depicts and what the devout viewer thinks it means merge seamlessly into a compelling *presence*" (Morgan 1998: 2–3, 9; Roberts and Roberts 2022).

Bamba conveys *baraka* blessing through such a presence. As the dynamism of grace, *baraka* "bestows physical superabundance and prosperity and psychological happiness" (Triaud 1988: 53) inherited by descendants of Amadu Bamba and other saints. Above all else, *baraka* is an active energy that heals, protects, and promotes people in countless ways. However, what may be unusual to Senegalese Sufis is the degree to which they know that *baraka* is available through pictures that help define their identities—not just spiritually, but nationally as an important element of visual citizenship.¹¹⁾

Portraits of Sheikh Amadu Bamba have been produced in a staggering array of media. Some are silkscreened, lithographed, or otherwise produced by (semi-) industrial means, and seemingly infinite generations of photographic prints are struck from the 1913 photograph along with studio shots of the Saint's sons and daughters. Until recently, most images were made by hand through tiny cottage industries. They might be carved in coconut shell or wood, and sometimes into the trunks of living trees; cast in silver, plastic, recycled aluminum, plaster of Paris, or cement; stenciled on cloth and T-shirts; painted on canvas, wood, or the back of window glass; and, in one case, even inked onto a calcareous cuttlefish "bone." Mourides hold that such variation of hands and media stems from divine gifts rather than triumphs of individual initiative: To have a "good idea" as to how to produce an image and then sell it to feed, clothe, and shelter one's family is due to the intervention of the Saint himself (A. Roberts 1996; 2022). Regarding the spiritual value of the works, no matter how "well-achieved" they may or may not be according to (usually extraneous) aesthetic criteria, all portrayals of the Saint are "authentic" insofar as they are efficacious in providing *baraka* blessing energy (M. N. Roberts 2008).

Through the *baraka* communicated by images of Amadu Bamba, artists actively transform urban Senegal spiritually and materially. In the early 2000s, a street artist named Pape Diop produced images of Amadu Bamba that were so iterative that they verged on fractal composition (Roberts and Roberts 2008; 2010). Diop's designs were of many sizes, but the smallest ones caught the eye first, for they were the most intense in

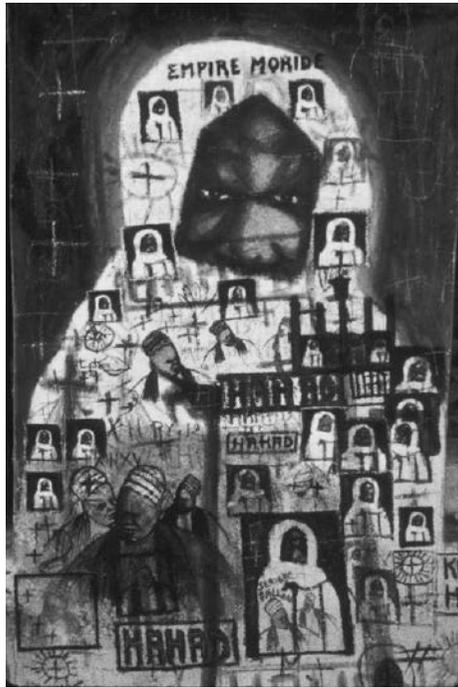


Photo 5 “Empire Moride” vignette of mystical graffiti by Pape Diop on a wall near Soubédioune fish market in Dakar. (Photograph by the author in 2004)

density and contrast (Photo 5). On closer inspection, one soon realized that they telescoped to larger and larger pictures, offering a distinct sense of depth despite their two-dimensionality. Diop made his pigments from the pulverized carbon plates of cast-off automobile batteries mixed with battery acid. As a paintbrush, he used a frayed chewing stick of the sort many Senegalese use to clean their teeth. As Diop’s earlier graffiti faded and flaked, their ephemeral nature made them all the more poignant; but in the earlier years of his street-based practice, he often refreshed or painted over his designs, creating palimpsests of pious purpose and presence.

Pape Diop limned Bamba’s portrait over and over and over again. Occasionally he added portraits of Bamba’s sons and Mouride caliphs, and words and phrases were interspersed in the artist’s complex compositions (Photo 6). “Hahad” was the most frequently repeated term as a local spelling for one of the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah that means “The Unique.” Given the proximity of the word to Bamba’s images, one can speculate that Diop was broadening the sense of Allah’s Name to characterize the Saint’s divine singularity. Sadly, *speculate* is all one can do regarding the artist’s oeuvre, for it was said that he could no longer speak after being struck by a car while he crossed a road. Not even members of his own family knew how to locate him, for the man lived on the street and was always on the move. Nonetheless, even if his intentions could not



Photo 6 Vignette of mystical graffiti by Pape Diop in the Médina neighborhood of Dakar, with “Confiance à personne — do not trust anyone” as someone else’s superimposed graffiti. (Photograph by the author in 2004)

be ascertained as he might have wished to articulate them, one *could* describe the impact of Diop’s work on those living in the neighborhoods he refabulated with such fervor.¹²⁾

Repetition can be an end unto itself, as Gilles Deleuze (1994: 70) has explained. Pape Samb’s iterative murals resonated with aural arts, and especially the half-sung, half-chanted *zīkr* (or *dhikr*) that characterize Mouride devotion. As the graphic artist Yelimane Fall noted of Diop’s work, “for us [Mourides], the image of the Saint is engraved in us, it is everywhere in us, in our arms, in our heads, everywhere; but [look at] how many times this guy [Pape Diop] has wanted to bring forth the image from within himself as an interior *zīkr*, a *zīkr* within himself!”¹³⁾ The Qur’an exhorts Muslims to “Remember Allah often and glorify Him morning and evening,” for “in remembering Allah the hearts find comfort.”¹⁴⁾ Many Mourides sing or listen to recorded *zīkr* to cadence everyday activities and devotions, making it difficult to distinguish work from worship. Indeed, given Bamba’s phenomenology of work as prayer, it is irrelevant to do so (see Roberts and Roberts 2003).

Zīkr revive and soothe the parched soul, but only if inspired by and learned from a Sufi master. As *zīkr* are chanted, the adept “should keep the image of his sheikh before his eyes for spiritual help during the recollection” (Schimmel 1975: 169–170). For many

Sufis, such an assertion refers to remembrance rather than to any actual depiction of the sheikh. However, Mourides make this a literal practice through images of Amadu Bamba like those of Pape Diop, based upon the 1913 photograph of the Saint.

Other aspects of Diop's repetition of images underscored their impact as visual *zīkr*. The contrast of saturated black and white shapes of his smallest pictures induced visual and spiritual directness, for their strongly delineated shapes served as "chromatic poles" that produced powerful kinesthetic effects. When crisp black and white shapes are juxtaposed, "each becomes more intense and saturated" through "simultaneous contrast" (Saint-Martin 1990: 33–35; 45–47). The white sets off the black and vice versa, emblazoning the image in one's perception. In the dazzling sunlight of Sub-Saharan cities like Dakar, retinal fatigue from such contrastive play can produce "flickering flashes," colored after-effects, and haloing (Saint-Martin 1990: 33–35; 45–47). Indeed, many Mourides attest that after long contemplation of Bamba's image, they see the Saint when they close their eyes and in their dreams.

An even more startling characteristic of human vision known as auto-stereopsis may have been triggered by Pape Diop's repeated images and the contrast between the brightest, most clear-cut small ones and those behind them. Through the welter of Pape Diop's murals, such a response could leave a viewer with a sense of three-dimensionality that reached outward or beckoned a person into labyrinthine spiritual intricacies. Further, as per Yelimane Fall, Diop's "small images [of the Saint] are like little doors: they come out toward you as though projected to invite you into them." Thus, in pondering Pape Diop's works, a Mouride might gain the impression of being "in the picture" with Amadu Bamba to be readily embraced and blessed by his *baraka*. A further outcome was that such an entrancing experience must have enhanced a sense of *place* in the otherwise anonymous, often anomic streets of Senegal's inner cities. Those drawn into the wealth of detail available through the three-dimensional experience Diop provided were engaging in discovery of a particularly Senegalese sort, for one "entered" the image in an almost tangible way, and the *place* so determined must have been of great spiritual import.

By covering walls with sacred portraits, Pape Diop was transforming and defining the streets of inner-city Dakar, making them apotropaic and talismanic in healing and protecting those who dwelt near or passed by (Photo 7). Pape Diop's fractal compositions defined and consecrated the places where he painted his murals, and their iteration compounded the *baraka* of Bamba's images. The Saint's beneficence was conveyed through the artist's hand to assuage the everyday difficulties that denizens of Dakar suffer all too often. In covering walls with images of Amadu Bamba, Senegalese Sufi artists like Diop offer those who see their work the *baraka* conveyed by the Saint and all the hope, dignity, and protection so implied.

The sense of collective identity that results from such visual achievements transcends association with Mouridism as a specific Sufi way among the four mystical movements found in Senegal, for Amadu Bamba is understood above all to be a *local* pacifist mystic. He is among the most important historical figures of the republic, and Bamba's iconic images have become a gauge of collective heritage and citizenship, even for non-Mourides to a significant degree. A narrative portrait of the Saint purchased in



Photo 7 Mystical graffiti by Pape Diop on the walls of a vacant lot near the Soubédioune fish market of Dakar. (Photograph by the author in 2004)

Dakar in 2011 bears a caption highlighting this relationship: “basic cultural values.” A local artist originally produced the image as a reverse-glass painting; however, the representation is now photoshopped in and imported from China.¹⁵ Such a tectonic shift to expropriate—and expatriate—production of what is still considered a basis for social identity stands as a most ironic assertion of what may constitute Senegalese visual citizenship in the age of Abdoulaye Wade’s “African Renaissance.” In “rebirth” (*renaissance* in French), Senegal may be losing rather than confirming its Africanity.

3. Recolonizing an Image Economy

As a second case study, picture this, if you will: In a full-color image purchased in Dakar in 2011, Amadu Bamba is shown performing his most compelling miracle (Photo 8). In 1895, as he was being sent into exile by French colonial authorities, the holy man was denied the opportunity to fulfill his Muslim devotions by the Christian captain of the ship transporting him to Gabon. The Archangel Gabriel intervened, stopping the ship and helping the Saint to pray upon the waters. Many Senegalese artists have captured this transcendent moment, and one often sees such an image in Mouride homes and shops, inspiring people with the courage to overcome the most burdensome of daily realities (Photo 9). Indeed, it is this very scene that bears the caption “basic cultural values” mentioned above. In the picture purchased in 2011, however, a Chinese junk with dusky-red battened sails halts in the sea behind the Saint, replacing the late-nineteenth-century French steamships of other accounts and depictions of the miracle.¹⁶

Apart from the banalities of photoshopping, what is going on in this picture? Nothing short of a recolonization of the Senegalese visual economy by foreign interests, in my estimation (see A. Roberts 2010). Indeed, the odd image of Amadu Bamba is a manifestation of far greater political forces than may meet the eye, suggesting challenges to and perhaps changes in “basic cultural values”—and, thus, cultural heritage and senses of visual citizenship—among contemporary Senegalese.



Photo 8 Image of the miracle of Amadu Bamba praying upon the waters with a Chinese junk (sailing ship) in the background. Montage photoshopped in the PRC and purchased by the author in Dakar in 2011, scanned to produce this image.



Photo 9 The miracle of Amadu Bamba praying upon the waters, reverse-glass painting by Mor Gueye purchased 1998, private collection. (Photograph by the author in 1999)

Deborah Poole (1997: 9–10) explicates the phrase “visual economy” in her important study of a late-nineteenth-century Andean image world. Like other economies, those concerning visual culture are characterized by three features: “an organization of production encompassing both the individuals and the technologies that produce images,” “the circulation of goods or, in this case, images and image-objects,” and “the cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images are appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical, scientific, and aesthetic worth.” “How images accrue value” is of special significance to these latter reckonings. We would add that all economies, including visual ones, are fluid as to relationships that they imply, create, and strengthen, for actors, ideas, and means come and go constantly, making it impossible to define the boundaries of any given transactional field.

Colonization of a visual economy suggests co-optation by foreign interests. The prefix “re-” in recolonization implies that something like this has happened before, although not necessarily in the same ways or for the same reasons for which it is happening now.

A vibrant visual economy was created by and among Senegalese Muslims in the late nineteenth century as colonial forces asserted hegemonic control of the vast expanses of what would become French West Africa. For a while, greater Senegambia was convulsed by resistance. In reaction, French authorities took an increasingly militaristic approach to enlarging their sphere of interest. Transition from political economies influenced by

transatlantic, regional, and domestic slave trades to domination by colonial capitalism was hugely fraught, and the French felt obliged to play a wary game, promoting certain Muslim authorities while suppressing any movement they deemed subversive to their colonial aspirations. Although desisting from further violence, Senegalese Muslim leaders were anything but passive in building social structures counter to French colonial models. Hence, they “turned increasingly to the production of devotional literature which served to reinforce their authority in an arena independent of the colonial state.”¹⁷ Significantly, the “literature” in question was both written and visual.

Devotional chromolithographs were imported from northern Africa in increasing numbers, and those portraying “heroes of the Faith” proved especially popular among Senegalese Muslims (Renaudeau and Strobel 1984: 57). For instance, the Imam Ali was portrayed as severing the leg of the infidel Meccan general Amr ibn ul Wudd, and the famed Battle of Badr of 624 CE was depicted in frantic glory, with a host of angels leading the Prophet’s far-outnumbered forces to victory. That these exhilarating pictures might foster resistance was recognized in 1908 by William Ponty, then Governor-General of French West Africa and headquartered in Dakar. He prohibited further importation of Islamic chromolithographs, noting that

Syrians and Moroccans are flooding the country with unusual numbers of Arabic publications of all sorts as well as crude color engravings representing scenes from Muslim life.... Journals, brochures, and diverse images are destined for holy men and their literate followers or those who pretend to be, which assures sale of the engravings.... All these publications and engravings that present a hostile character or one that is simply susceptible to promoting Muslim resistance activities must be destroyed.... One cannot deny what a marvelous instrument of propaganda these thousands of coarse engravings constitute here, [that are so] vivid in color and that present the defenders of the only true religion in the most favorable light. (author’s translation from a citation in Renaudeau and Strobel 1984: 50)

The Governor-General’s reference to “the only true religion” reflected local sensitivities rather than Ponty’s own. In a letter to the French minister of colonies, he suggested that the prints were especially effective “among people who are not only ignorant but—it is important not to forget—naïve, impressionable, and still impregnated with old fetishistic superstitions.” Presumably, Ponty’s high-handed, Eurocentric dismissal concerned African practices following indigenous and mystical Islamic sources. Such chromolithographs addressed “imagination rather than intelligence, and [were] accompanied moreover by comments appropriate to the needs of the cause” of colonial resistance. The Governor-General also complained that money spent to acquire such images was lost to colonial taxation and absurdly suggested that depictions of French heroes be made available in their stead (William Ponty cited in Bouttiaux-Ndiaye 1994: 14).

Censorship never fails to pique people’s interest, and one can guess that the banning of such affective images reinforced their impact rather than diminishing it. As David

Robinson (1991: 150) has suggested, French authorities may have done as much to foment Islamic resistance in Senegal as Muslims themselves. Still, an outcome that French authorities could not have anticipated was the rise of reverse-glass painting by Senegalese artists through which chromolithographs that had escaped French confiscation could be reproduced to meet local devotional purposes (Diouf 1992b, Roberts and Roberts 2001). Of significance here is French recognition of the importance of a local visual economy and the authorities' conscious attempt to control the circulation and "worth" of images. Moreover, of interest is the resilience of Senegalese artists and the constituencies they served in finding ways to overcome any such colonization of their visual citizenship.

Returning to contemporary Dakar, first effects of a latter-day *recolonization* of the visual economy can now be assessed. Rather than the formal powers held by French colonizers prior to Senegalese independence, informal networks of Chinese commerce are impacting visual culture in Senegal as a secondary feature of the grand politics of the Chinese government.¹⁸⁾ Increasing numbers of humble Chinese traders have ridden the coattails of the huge infrastructural schemes the People's Republic of China is financing in Senegal and other Sub-Saharan African countries in a bid for greater access to natural resources to supply the PRC's booming industrial economy (see French 2015). By one estimate, Dakar had approximately three hundred Chinese businesses by 2004, a number which more than tripled by 2008 (Michel and Beuret 2009: 119). Recolonization also fosters a new Chinese middle class in Dakar (Barraud 2009), and with well over a million Chinese immigrants settling in Africa since 2005 (French 2015: 5), such processes will surely accelerate.

Senegalese cottage production of visual materials has been curtailed in recent years. During visits to Dakar in 2009 and 2011, I saw no hand-made pictures of Amadu Bamba for sale on the street in places where I had encountered a plethora of them in the past. This does not mean that artists are no longer making sacred images, for one can assume they must be, not only to sell but because the very act of producing the portrait of Amadu Bamba permits the artist to share in the Saint's *baraka*. Clearly, though, great changes in the Senegalese visual economy have occurred in recent years. Image production and circulation are the most obvious, but "how images accrue value" (Poole 1997: 10) seems to have been somewhat transformed as well.

A goal of my brief visit to Dakar in May 2009 was to locate and interview young men selling small photographs of saints and locally famous wrestlers, vocalists, and politicians. Among other uses, displays of such portraits often frame the windshields of minibuses and trucks, always placed such that they face outward so that the saints may bless the road ahead (Photo 10). To my surprise, not a vendor could be found for several days of searching what used to be highly likely places. In 2011, picture-peddlers were again rare, and images were far more readily available at colorful street-side displays in front of Chinese shops along the divided Boulevard du Centenaire leading to and beyond the Great Mosque of Dakar (Photo 11).¹⁹⁾ Included were well-known portraits of local Sufi saints, the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, Arabic calligraphy, sacrosanct scenes of Mecca, bland pictures of Western-style flower arrangements, and the



Photo 10 Windshield of a car rapid public-transport minivan in Dakar, displaying photos of Amadu Bamba, his family, and most ardent followers. (Photograph by Doran H. Ross in 1999, with permission)



Photo 11 Roadside display of Chinese-produced Senegalese devotional images and other pictures for sale. (Photograph by the author in 2009, with the shop-owner's permission)

occasional “I LOVE YOU” in a snappy plastic frame.

Sidewalk enterprises selling such popular pictures are supplied by two Chinese wholesalers importing images from the PRC. Credit and links to Chinese export businesses provide a distinct advantage over small-scale Senegalese ventures. Indeed, I was told in 2011 that in just the last three or four years, Chinese commerce had co-opted much of the clientele of Sandaga, the sprawling mid-town market that has long served the city's poorest citizens.²⁰ The Senegalese press suggested that competition from a “massive arrival” of Chinese shopkeepers had halved local people's sales at Sandaga. A common complaint has been that the Chinese earliest on the scene sent home samples of clothing and other locally produced goods selling well in Sandaga, and their knock-offs now flood Senegalese markets. One man said he tries to keep Chinese “spies” from visiting his shop, as he knows they will have his goods copied in China to undercut his business even more (Senghor 2009). Another bitterly complained that because these pirated products are shoddy relative to merchandise imported from Europe or the United States sold in Sandaga along with local products, many now refuse to visit the market because they assume the products there are of similarly poor quality to but more expensive than Chinese wares (Senghor 2009).

The xenophobia of such accounts can be blistering on blogs, but it is countered by more sober voices holding that many Senegalese merchants are also known to sell Chinese knock-off handbags, sunglasses, watches, and the like, and the issues are far

more complex than any calls to expel Chinese nationals from Senegal (Senghor 2009). Furthermore, since diplomatic relations were re-established between Senegal and the PRC in 2005, thousands of Chinese visas have been granted to Senegalese merchants eager to obtain inexpensive merchandise to sell worldwide (*Jeune Afrique* 2007). Such complications—including hypocrisies on all sides—suggest that visual and other economies are in dynamic relationships that are always in flux, impossible to pin down, and forever including some people and excluding others in their shifting determinations of “worth,” profit, and, in some sense, meaning itself.

Nonetheless, acrid anecdotes abound (e.g., Mbaye 2009) decrying flip-flop thongs that fall apart before one can wear them home, children’s school clothes that are almost immediately in tatters, and water faucets that never function. Fearful reports of milk products imported from China that might be tainted (as tragically reported in the PRC) were angrily said to have been ignored by Senegalese authorities who allegedly denied that Chinese milk was present in Senegal at all, despite obvious evidence to the contrary (Gomis 2008; Gueye 2008). Even Chinese merchants surveyed online have occasionally admitted that their goods are of poor quality. As one man asked, if they were to import high-end merchandise to Senegal, who would buy from *them* as opposed to more entrenched expatriates? (xibar.net 2011). Apparently, repeated street demonstrations by Senegalese merchants and dissatisfied customers have been to no avail. Indeed, the Chinese press celebrated that Sino-Senegalese business greatly intensified in 2010 (Xinhua 2010), as manifested by the inauguration of Dakar’s immense New National Theater in April 2011, financed, designed, and constructed by the PRC following Chinese architectural aesthetics. Theaters and related institutions created by President Senghor, central to his post-Independence politics of culture and meant to establish a sense of *Senegalese* citizenship, visual and otherwise, have been replaced as “African Renaissance” continues.

4. Pictures at an Exhibition

Brief interviews in 2009 with two young Senegalese men managing curbside picture displays in front of Chinese textile shops revealed that they purchase images and the plastic frames in which they are sold from Chinese middlemen (Photo 12). Several years ago, copies of the photos and hand-crafted portraits of Senegalese Sufi saints made and hawked on the streets of Dakar were sent to China for photoshopping, enlargement, and duplication. The young men noted that images imported from China and laminated at the wholesale shops of Dakar are cheaper, larger, and more plentiful than any produced locally.

Thus, regarding the recolonization of the Senegalese visual economy of devotional materials, local production has been hijacked, stifling circulation. Sales have been established in an area adjacent to the Great Mosque as a dramatic complement to mundane wares available in the boulevard’s growing number of Chinese shops. However, as Deborah Poole (1997: 10) might ask, what has become of “cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images are appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical,



Photo 12 Chinese shop in Dakar selling devotional images photoshopped in the PRC for the Senegalese market. (Photograph by the author in 2011)

scientific, and aesthetic worth”?

The photoshopped Chinese image of Amadu Bamba praying on the waters (Photo 8) remains puzzling. It is based on a lithograph derived from a painting by Ibou Ndoye, originally prepared for sale and gifting at the annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Touba in 1997 but still in wide circulation. The basic figure of Bamba has been roughly transferred from the Ndoye print without feathering or other photoshopping subtleties. Ndoye’s portrayal of the Saint’s face has been replaced by the widely circulated image of Assane Dione’s depiction of the Saint in Photo 3 (Roberts and Roberts 2003: 36; 63). Merged onto the Saint’s slightly turned, turbaned head as Ndoye presented it, Dione’s face of Bamba is at an odd angle and of a strangely different scale than the body. Also “sampled” from Ndoye’s litho is the Archangel Gabriel depicted with an African face and bird-like wings but with feathers clipped in clumsy *découpage*, carrying the Great Mosque of Touba as the pilgrimage site where Bamba lies buried. The rest of the picture is inspired by, but not the same as, Ndoye’s work. The sheepskin the Saint threw down to pray upon the waters is crudely replaced with a swatch of rug-like background design from the photoshopping menu, skewed to suggest perspective; but the “prayer rug” is oriented such that the Saint is praying toward the long side of the rectangle as no Muslim would ever do. Furthermore, if the junk (or other ship) were sailing along the west African coast toward Gabon, it would be heading roughly eastward. Thus, in this image, the Saint is praying toward the south, rather than east-by-northeast following the Qibla Line leading from all global points to Mecca.²¹⁾

The composition seems careless and oblivious to narrative details essential to Senegalese renderings. What is one to think? Is this a callous statement of disregard, a dismissive “whatever” to devotional particularities? The means and motives of hegemonic bullying differ greatly, but colonization is (re)colonization, nonetheless. The French may have sought to eliminate Islamic imagery, and the Chinese may be substituting their own “Senegalese” pictures for local ones, but in both cases, Senegalese artists lose out.²²⁾

Furthermore, Senegalese “basic cultural values” and, thus, visual citizenship are challenged, as locally holy persons are portrayed so peculiarly.

When I showed the photoshopped image of Bamba and the Chinese junk to friends in Dakar in 2011, responses ranged from the pointed dismissal that “these Chinese merchants only sniff out (*flairer*) profit” and pay no attention to anything else, to angry ripostes that such pictures are “lies.” Despite such complaints, to dismiss the picture as a simple insult to local sensitivities would be to overlook the visual epistemology that Senegalese Sufis may bring to such images, as demonstrated so brilliantly by the talismanic creations of the street artist Pape Diop. With irony in the eye of the beholder, it is difficult not to see something other than expediency in the any-boat-will-do paradigmatic shift from steamship to junk as Bamba’s ship of exile. Might these features be considered “proof” of what is being felt on the street by local shopkeepers “exiled” from their own markets and nationalist identities? Might the presence of a Chinese junk reveal other “signs of Allah” (*aya*) suggesting Bamba’s currency in global affairs?

Artistic responses to these circumstances have begun. For an “off” exhibition called “We Are Numerous and So Are Our Problems” at Dakar’s *Galerie Arte* during the 2008 Dak’Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art, Viyé Diba prepared a montage called “The Faucets” (Photo 13).²³ The artist explained that

this work concerns the relationship between demography and space. Unbridled consumerism figures among our problems, insofar as the materials that we consume are made in such a way that one is obliged to buy them repeatedly and so participate in the global economy. Chinese products in this game are always very competitive because of their affordable prices; but [because it never functions for long, if at all] my water faucet submits me to a regular ritual of changing parts, and so to consumerism. Through its

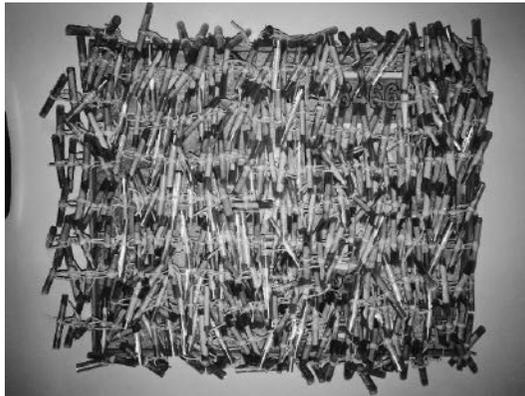


Photo 13 Untitled collage of paper cut-outs of water faucets rolled up and inserted in recycled plastic tubes attached to a canvas. Viyé Diba, collection of the artist. (Photograph by the author in 2011, with the artist’s permission)

quantity of images of faucets, my work shows the new dependence of countries like ours.

In more recent work in the same series, Diba mounted 421 cut-outs of “water faucets” on a canvas and covered them with black gauze that makes it challenging to distinguish one from the next in a very different sort of repetition from that of Pape Diop. The number “421” appears in a small window among the “water faucets” to underscore the abject absurdity of today’s hyper-consumption of Chinese products that simply do not work no matter how many a buyer may purchase, seemingly *ad infinitum*. Even as production and circulation are recolonized, “cultural and discursive systems” through which arts “are appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical, scientific, and aesthetic worth” (Poole 1997: 10) possess their resilience in the hands of expressive activist-intellectuals like Diba. One can expect that with the blessings (*baraka*) of Senegalese saints, new ways to thrive economically, live in dignity, and participate in inexorable changes to visual citizenship will emerge even as Chinese recolonization intensifies. Here, a Senegalese interlocutor would surely exclaim *insha’Allah*—“God willing.”

Notes

- 1) “Visual citizenship” as a reflection of cultural heritage through art was independently coined by Allen Roberts for a paper at the “Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal” conference organized in 2008 by the Institute of African Studies and the Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life of Columbia University. This last work was translated into French (see A. Roberts 2013a), and a revised version is produced here with permission from Drs. Mamadu Diouf and Rosalind Fredericks as editors of that volume, to whom I am most grateful. A version of this paper was also presented at a symposium in 2014 called “Spirited Topographies: Urban Refabulation, Underscapes, and Mobilities” convened by Drs. Smriti Srinivas and Mary Hancock at the University of California, Davis, through a Multi-Campus Research Group funded by the University of California. Insights from these colleagues also contribute to this chapter, but I alone am responsible for all assertions made here.
- 2) My late spouse, Dr. Mary “Polly” Nooter Roberts (d. 2018), was a full participant in all research, writing, teaching, and museum exhibitions to which allusion is made in this chapter, which is lovingly dedicated to her memory.
- 3) A Google search (September 2013) suggested that the phrase “visual citizenship,” as developed through a conference in 2010 and ongoing activities organized and taught at New York University, has had human rights activism as its focus; see Telesca (2013), and <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/153804/arielle-azoulay-what-is-visual-citizenship> (viewed August 2021) Ideas from the NYU conference led Georgia Erger to curate an exhibition called “Visual Citizenship” presented at Michigan State University’s Broad Museum of Art in 2020; <https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibitions/visual-citizenship> (viewed August 2021)
- 4) This chapter is based on ongoing research in Senegal by Mary Nooter Roberts and the author that began in 1994 and led to a major book and exhibition called “A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal” funded by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities and seen

in six U.S. museums from 2003 to 2008. Warm thanks are extended to the many friends who have made this work possible, and especially to the late Serigne Saliou Mbacké, then General Caliph of the Mourides, who blessed our project from the start, and to El Haji Ousmane Gueye, and the late Cheikhou Camara for their many years of excellent assistance, wisdom, and fellowship.

- 5) Blaise Diagne International Airport, located 43km east of downtown Dakar, replaced the earlier facility in 2017.
- 6) On Négritude, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Négritude>. On Senghor's cultural politics as a Senegalese poet and president, see Harney 2004. On the Omega Plan, see Wade (2003). For blogged responses to the monument, see *Le Soleil*, 11 December 2010, via Seneweb.com.
- 7) <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/Africa/04/03/Senegal.statue>.
- 8) On Mouride visual culture, see Roberts and Roberts (2003) and many of the author's other publications for ample bibliographies of relevant source materials. The French "Mouride" is used here because it is the most common spelling in the literature and among Mourides.
- 9) (Marty 1917; cf. Paoletti 2018). The authenticity of other photographs purported to portray Bamba has been challenged by most observers. In May, 2020, however, four snapshots from the 1918 album of a minor French colonial officer were brought to an online auction in France that specializes in old postcards. Many feel that these pictures depict Bamba, and one wonders if they will lead to revelations vis-à-vis the photograph of c.1913.
- 10) The 1913 photograph of Sheikh Bamba has been the subject of much theoretical writing by the author and his late spouse; see Roberts and Roberts (1998; 2003; 2008; 2019; 2022), among other works.
- 11) On visual practices of other Senegalese Sufi movements than the Mourides, see A. Roberts (2013b; 2016).
- 12) Pape Diop's work was documented during my visits to Dakar in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2011. See Roberts and Roberts (2008; 2010). I was not been able to locate the artist despite repeated attempts, and in 2011, his production seemed to be waning, with very few new or renewed graffiti to be found.
- 13) The late Yelimane Fall was trained in graphic arts and was an extraordinary calligrapher whose work is now in the permanent collections of several U.S. museums and illustrated in Roberts and Roberts (2003) and Becker and Zito (2014). He was also an activist, using art-making to reach out to street children in greater Dakar.
- 14) Suras 33:40 and 13:28, as translated in Fakhry (1998: 152; 265).
- 15) Photoshop™ is a licensed product of Adobe Systems Incorporated. It is unknown whether Chinese manipulation of these images was achieved through use of this particular computer program; here, the term is rendered generic as a verb. It should be noted that photoshopped images are not photographs, per se; yet in the cases to follow, Senegalese people attribute to them the indexical authenticity they associate with photography; see Roberts and Roberts (2003).
- 16) "Junk" is the anglicized name, perhaps derived from the Javanese term *jong*, long given to certain Chinese and other East-Asian sailing ships like the one in Photo 8; see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junk_\(ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junk_(ship)).
- 17) (Stewart 1997: 54; cf. Barry 1998; Baum 1999; Robinson 1991, 2000). These matters are

discussed in greater detail in Roberts and Roberts (2003: 88–92) and my other publications cited here.

- 18) See *Agence France Presse* of 24 June 2009, “L’Afrique risque de préférer bientôt la Chine et l’Inde à l’Europe” (Africa risks preferring China and India to Europe) via <https://www.seneweb.com/news/article/23642.php>, taken from a speech in Brussels by then-President Abdoulaye Wade to the executive branch of the European Union; cf. Barraud (2009). On the astounding growth of Africa as China’s “second continent,” see French (2015). For a more positive view of Chinese commercial ventures in Africa, see Michel and Beuret (2009); note that their discussion of Senegal is largely in a chapter entitled “An Invasion of Junk”—with this last word a reference to shoddy goods rather than to Chinese sailing vessels, mentioned above in Photo 8. For a more recent view of “China’s ‘Soft Power’ in Senegal” as reported by Al Jazeera (English), see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VnQONVxWdQ>, posted in 2018 and viewed in 2021. The PRC’s “charm campaign” is discussed there as a reaction to growing antipathy to vastly expanding Chinese cooptation of national and local-level Senegalese economies.
- 19) The website <http://www.xibar.net> (viewed in 2011) offered a pungent view of how Chinese merchants are “disfiguring” the once-bourgeois Boulevard du Centenaire they increasingly occupy. I hasten to state that by no means have I studied these politico-economic phenomena extensively, nor have I systematically consulted relevant literatures. Instead, my assertions here are meant to call attention to issues hotly discussed during my visits to Dakar in 2009 and 2011.
- 20) See Ebin (1992) for an excellent account of the informal economy of Sandaga in the past.
- 21) These observations were provided by audience members of a talk the author presented at Ohio University in 2011 at the invitation of Professor Andrea Frohne.
- 22) Thanks to Steven Nelson for discussion of this point, 2010.
- 23) Pers. comm. 2009. Viyé Diba is an internationally acclaimed contemporary artist whose paintings and sculptures are in the permanent collections of several international museums. He holds a doctorate in Urban Geography and teaches at the National School of Fine Arts of Dakar; see Harney (2000), Pommier (2003), Aronson and Weber (2012), and Roberts and Roberts (2012).

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