ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF
AMERICAN
FOLKLIFE

Volume 4

SIMON J. BRONNER, editor

M.E.Sharpe
Armonk, New York
London, England
SENEGALESE COMMUNITIES

Frequently with the assistance of relief agencies, the United States since the 1980s has been a haven for thousands of Senegalese immigrants from West Africa. From 1990 to 2005 alone, more than seven thousand Senegalese entered the United States. Many were classified by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as refugees because they had been displaced by a civil war raging since 1982 between the people of the Casamance (southern region of Senegal) and the government in Dakar. The nation’s natural resources had also been adversely affected by drought and desertification, forcing many Senegalese to seek economic opportunities outside the country. Once a colony of France, Senegal gained independence in 1960, and still to the present day, most Senegalese are French-speaking Muslims, with a small minority being Roman Catholics. Many Senegalese also speak a tribal language and have an indigenous identity— Wolof (43.3 percent), Serer (14.7 percent), Pulaar (8 percent), Jola (3.7 percent), and Mandinka (1.1 percent).

The most common destinations for Senegalese emigrants are the states of New York and California; sizable communities have formed in cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. New York City’s community is the largest, with more than two thousand residents having been born in Senegal. The Senegalese foreign-born population of America is estimated at more than ten thousand, with strong social networks that help them preserve traditions from the West African homeland. Often connected to West African communities as a folk group, the Senegalese have linguistic (commonly speaking French, Wolof, and tribal languages) and religious (Mouride) differences, and cultural expressions of drumming, dance, and food that give them a sense of ethnic identity in America.

Mourides

Many of the Senegalese in America are followers of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba. In 1886, Bamba founded a community called Muridiyya, the most powerful Islamic brotherhood in Senegal. The disciples of Bamba are called Mourides (murid), a type of brotherhood well known in the world of Islam, a Sufi tarīqa organized by the descendants of a holy man, where the followers hope to attain paradise through the special holiness and redeeming power of their religious guides. Bamba encouraged his adherents to guarantee their community’s success by submitting to a religious leader (shaikh) and cultivating the spiritual virtues of hard work.

The shaikh’s special role is to transmit spiritual baraka (redeeming gifts), a form of blessings, from Bamba, who has mystical powers. In Mouride belief, to eat food the shaikh has left or to touch his clothes is to benefit from this form of grace, which not only has benefits for the next life but is thought to bring success in worldly enterprise. The shaikh also commands respect and has power over supernatural powers that allow him to extend protection against the evil eye, witches, and various malevolent spirits. This is done through the preparation of amulets or talismans, the use of magic formulas and magical procedures of Islamic origin. The spirits and divinities of Senegalese animism have been adapted to the Islamic jinn (supernatural invisible beings, often raising evil, who have a status below angels) and angels.

Mouride expatriates rely on a system of social and economic organization created by Bamba. The system is centered on the Da’ira, a religious school that trains its members in spiritual, administrative, and financial matters. It offers followers a chance to study the texts and chants of the founder, collect funds, organize members for job recruitment, and stay in contact with the central organization of the khilafate. The Da’iras in America fulfill similar functions, especially in New York City, where Mourtada Mbacke, the son of Bamba, visits once a year to bless his disciples and encourage them to continue working.
Many of the Mouride women work in street vending, "summer markets" and small businesses (such as driving cabs, braiding hair, and cooking in restaurants) similar to those of their husbands. These markets are at African street festivals where they sell African-styled clothing, jewelry, woodcarvings, and drums. Many of the men have skills in goldsmithing, leatherworking, and woodcarving. The men wear long cotton sheaths, called *boubous*, in blue or green, while the women wear long peach or purple gowns and a rising headwrap that accentuates their head, unlike the scarf worn by many Americans. Mouride women also have their own Da'ira, in which they fulfill expectations similar to those of the men. Some of the Mouride artisans compose a subgroup of the Senegalese called *gnegnos* and have formed an organization called the United Gnegnos of America that organizes social gatherings and mutual aid. In Senegal, the *gnegnos* held a low status as an artisan class, but have been attracted to the United States because of opportunities to prosper economically and socially, especially in African American areas where their traditional African hair braiding, headwrap and dressmaking, and wood and metal craft skills are in demand.

**Foodways, Customs, and Cultural Conservation**

Many Senegalese women besides the Mourides have become business owners, especially of restaurants featuring foods from their African homeland. The restaurants often feature traditional Senegalese food such as *thiebu djeun*, a rich fish stew cooked with rice that is the national dish of Senegal. In Philadelphia, the Senegalese community strengthens its identity through activities such as *tan-ber* or *soirée dansantes*, lavish parties in which music and dance figure prominently. As is the custom in Senegal, dances often do not begin until after midnight. Senegalese Muslims often join other Africans in celebrations of Eid el-Fitr, Eid el-Adha, and Mawlad el-Nabi. Eid el-Fitr occurs at the end of the month of fasting known as Ramadan and often involves a ritual meal of chicken bought from *halal* (ritually pure) butchers and social occasions with relatives and friends. Two months and ten days after Eid el-Fitr, Eid el-Adha celebrates Abraham's offer to sacrifice his son to God and also involves prayer followed by social visits and meals. Lamb symbolic of a ritual sacrifice is usually offered at meals. Mawlad el-Nabi involves singing of poems known as *gasidas*, including texts linked to venerated poets such as Shaykh Alhaji Malick Sy of Senegal.

Assisting the Senegalese community in America is the Association of Senegalese in America (ASA), based in New York. Founded in 1988, the ASA seeks to protect the rights of Senegalese immigrants and provide assistance on issues such as cultural adjustment, English-language training, and reunification of families. The association maintains an Internet Web site and a radio station. The Senegalese communities in New York City, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and other American cities have weekly radio shows in which they update their compatriots on immigration laws and news from the homeland. These shows provide listeners with information on food, travel, accessories, and entertainment businesses owned by Senegalese and other immigrants. They report news and information in Senegalese languages such as Pulaar, Wolof, Serer, and French.

With a new generation of American-born children of Senegalese parents, efforts are being made in Senegalese communities to perpetuate folklore, particularly in music and dance. In Washington, D.C., American-born children learn dance and drumming at a school directed by Senegalese-born Assane Konte. The most common drum is the *sabar*, which is larger at the top than in the middle and tapers out at the base. A *ndere*, longer and higher-pitched than the others, usually takes the lead. *Sabar* players are traditionally male and get a chance in performances to improvise on basic patterns established by the *ndere*. Traditional rhythms performed in new American contexts include the *gajarde*, a victory rhythm played for victorious wrestlers, referring to the national sport of Senegal.

The *griot* tradition (called a *jali* in Mandinka) of relating stories of the past through songs
is important for linking Senegal folklife in America to African heritage. In Washington, D.C., Senegal-born Djimo Kouyate plays the kora (Mandinka harp-lute) and performs songs to remind countrymen of their heritage at baptisms, weddings, and religious holidays. He is touted as the 149th jali in his family and a descendant of the first griot and diplomat in the court of the thirteenth-century king of the Mali Empire, Kan Khanouss. Kouyate is one of many traditional performers included in the African Immigrant Folklife Study Project by the Smithsonian Institution and featured at the 1997 Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In Philadelphia, the Senegalese community was one of the African groups featured in 2001 in an ethnographic exhibition called “Extended Lives,” which has inspired other African drumming and dance performances sponsored by the Philadelphia Folklore Project.

_**Babacar M'Baye and Simon J. Bronner**_

See also: African American Communities; New York City; Religion; West African Communities.

**Sources**


**SEPTEMBER 11TH**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have generated a number of cultural responses that have become part of American folklife. Folklorists first took notice of spontaneous shrines and memorials arising quickly after the event that followed patterns of other tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the Texas A&M University bonfire deaths of 1999. A second form of folk response was in home and community assemblages of displays of patriotism, often involving uses of red, white, and blue bows and ribbons for victims and presentations of the American flag, frequently accompanied by sayings of unity such as “God Bless America.” A third response that drew folkloristic interest was the circulation of rumors and legends, including narratives with anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic content, and those that expressed unresolved anxieties about the event. Fourth, folk humor, much of it visual in nature and disseminated over the Internet, emerged shortly after the events. The events of September 11, 2001, entered folk speech as “Nine.Eleven,” rendered in writing as “9/11,” with symbolic implications of a national tragedy of mass proportions. Although much of the folklore of September 11 was short-lived and based on topical references, it illustrated several deeply rooted traditions of response to disaster.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists associated with al-Qaeda, an extreme Islamic movement, simultaneously hijacked four American jetliners, crashing two of them into the towers of New York City’s World Trade Center. A horrified television audience watched broadcasts of the second plane hitting the center and the devastating collapse of both towers soon afterward. Meanwhile, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., while a fourth plunged into farmland in Pennsylvania, apparently after a group of passengers attempted to regain control of the cockpit. The events, which together cost thousands of lives, were the most successful act of sabotage committed in the United States and created a shock that penetrated American society to all levels. Many observers noted the psychological need to express grief or release anger through folklore. The tragedy had a wide impact, many commentators thought, not only because of the vivid television broadcast of the destruction of the World Trade Center, but also because the towers were American symbols of success in what many people thought of as America’s most prominent city.