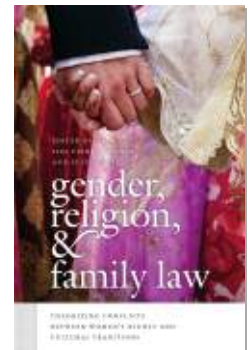# Gender, Religion, and Family Law

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Published by Brandeis University Press

Joffe, Fishbayn.
Gender, Religion, and Family Law: Theorizing Conflicts between Women's Rights and Cultural Traditions.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE., https://muse.jhu.edu/.

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FATOU KINÉ CAMARA

Chapter Ten The Temple for Women Initiates Project
A Framework for Culturally Meaningful Feminist Expression in Rural Areas

We can do something other than look to Saudi Arabia or the West,
we can look to the interior of Africa, its culture, its spirituality.

— *Sembene Ousmane, Senegalese writer and filmmaker*

Introduction

My paper is based on the realization I have made as a feminist activist in a country where 94 percent of the people are officially Muslims[1] that it is possible to improve people's understanding of each others' rights and responsibilities without embarking into a discourse challenging mainstream religious norms. In Senegal (as is the case in sub-Saharan Africa in general) the majority of people continue to believe in the taboos and prohibitions set up by their ancestral pre-Islamic and pre-Christian religion. Therefore when one speaks in a positive way about indigenous traditions, most people listen with interest and pride. The project of setting up a Temple for Women Initiates in Baback Sérères,[2] a Senegalese village where people follow different religions (Moslem, Catholic, Indigenous), was born from this idea that the revitalization of the pre-Islamic and pre-colonial Black African culture is the best way to circumvent religious fundamentalisms.

The young people of the village of Baback Sérères held a meeting on October 15, 2007, to discuss the project of a Temple for Women Initiates. In a letter summarizing the views expressed in that meeting, they wrote the following:

Culture, which can be defined as the ways of doing things, the way of life, the beliefs, in short the ways in which a group sees the world, occupies a major place in the life of people. However the phenomena of Westernization, combined with the attempts at Islamization, have caused the negation of the existence of Black-African cultures. Without culture it is impossible to reach development.[3]

Issa Laye Thiaw, the main promoter of the Temple for Women Initiates project, is the son of a high priest of the indigenous religion; he is also from an ethnic group, Seereer, with a long-standing tradition of resisting conversion to Islam and the Christian religion. He made the following statement:

Since Islamization and Christianization, Africans do not respect nature. Conversion starts with a change of mindsets, and as soon as that happens, any further change is accepted. Each religion has plundered the tradition of its community of birth. Where Islam was born, women had little if any rights; Islam has led us to the marginalization and inferiority of women.[4]

Senegal is, according to its constitution, a secular state. Nonetheless, Islam has been officially used as a way to deny women equal rights. The Family Law contains a section called *Des Successions de Droit Musulman* ("Muslim Inheritance Law"). However, there is no section for "Christian Inheritance Law" or "Indigenous Inheritance Law." Muslim Inheritance Law, as codified in Senegalese Family Law, consistently discriminates against women; women systematically get half of what their male counterparts are given, for no other reason than that they are females. For instance, when legitimate heirs are not all of the same gender, females receive only half of what the males get (Article 637, *Code de la Famille*).[5] On the other hand, when it comes to monetary duties, equality is granted to women regardless of Islamic laws: duty to give alimony to their siblings and parents in need (Article 263), duty to take part in home and family maintenance (Articles 151, 155, and 375, §2), and duty to pay damages to the spouse in the event of a divorce suit in which the woman is found guilty.[6] Doudou Ndoye (Senegalese barrister, former minister of justice, and leader of a political party) notes the following (in an article in which he nevertheless sings the Senegalese Family Law's praises):

The former president of the National Assembly, General Practitioner Amadou Cissé Dia, made a recent narrative of the position of President Leopold Sédar Senghor on the elaboration of the Family Law, specifying that President Senghor conveyed to him that it was necessary to secure the religious leaders' approval and leave the Islamic concepts undisturbed but that unilateral repudiation was to be banned from our ways. (Ndoye, 2001, 11)[7]

Lip service is paid to "modernity," while the greater concern for the Muslim leaders' support is unashamedly made clear. Most articles of the Family Law, which came into force in 1973, were copied out of the Napoleonic Civil Code (except, of course, the articles that refer to polygamy) (Pisier and Brimo, 2007). However, so far all the attempts of abrogating the gender-based discriminatory articles have been successfully opposed in the name of "our Muslim tradition." Article 152 of the Family Law elevates the husband to the status of lord and master of his wives and children. He is allowed up to four wives (Article 133), none of whom has a say in the matter. As the legally appointed head of the family (Article 152), the husband is given the exclusive right to choose the matrimonial home, and his wife/wives cannot live anywhere else without his permission or a decision of justice allowing it (Article 153). The father has exclusive parental authority (Article 277, §2). Children are legally bound to be given their father's family name (Article 3); the child bears its mother's family name only in cases of illegitimacy (Article 4). At the same time, paternity suits are prohibited (Article 191). Women do not have the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy (abortion is a criminal offense under Article 305 of the Penal Code; it is also a criminal offense under Article 306 to advocate freedom of choice). Whenever female rights organizations campaign for the abolition of these rules, Muslim lobbies defend them in the name of Islam.

Due to the constant reference to "our Muslim tradition" and to the official statistics as to the number of Muslims in Senegal, it is important to give a brief historical perspective of "our tradition" concerning Islam. Islamic movements did not have a strong hold in West Africa until the nineteenth century. Islam spread in West Africa along the trans-Saharan trade routes. Members of the aristocracy and of the merchant elite converted to Islam, but the people in their overwhelming majority retained their indigenous

African religion. The series of *jihad* (holy war) that led to Muslim states in several parts of West Africa in the early nineteenth century did not foster mass voluntary conversions to Islam. In Senegal, the military defeat of the "pagan"[8] aristocracy and their troops (the *ceddo* warriors), followed by the destruction of the indigenous political structures that empowered women to the point of making them heads of state (the *lingeer* of the Seereer and Wolof kingdoms),[9] is what paved the way to the Muslim brotherhoods' emergence as the sole guiding lights and refuge for the people now under a brutal foreign rule (Gellar, 1982, 6–9; Cruise O'Brien, 1977, 47–71 ; Dia et al., 2005, 17–21; Camara and Seck). The marabouts (Muslim leaders) and the French colonial authorities had no interest in keeping alive the memory of the female leaders who used to rule the country.[10] They were equally indifferent, if not hostile, to indigenous law. As for the indigenous religion, it was rejected on both sides (Muslim and French) as satanic, pagan, primitive. In spite of these persisting labels, indigenous law and the indigenous religion are still very much alive in Senegal, particularly in the Seereer and Joola communities. Senegal's first president, famed poet L. S. Senghor (1906–2001), who was a Catholic raised by missionaries and who belonged to the Seereer ethnic group,[11] wrote the following:

> As today a Muslim Head of State will consult the "sacred wood," and offer in sacrifice an ox or a bull, I have seen a Christian woman, a practising medical doctor, consult the Sereer "*Pangool*" (the snakes of the sacred wood). In truth, everywhere in Black Africa, the "revealed religions" are rooted in the animism which still inspires poets and artists, I am well placed to know it and to say it. . . .[12]

Commentators on Senegalese politics and post-independence history regularly marvel at the fact that the Catholic president Leopold Sédar Senghor's strongest allies were the prominent Muslim leaders in Senegal. In fact, it was an alliance of mutual interest that dates back to colonial times (and that alliance is still on). While religious leaders preached obedience to the authorities, they could develop their respective religious brotherhoods without trouble from the state's authorities, who even lent a hand when needed.[13] Christian missionaries were allowed to settle in places peopled in majority by those who had not yet converted to Islam (Dia et al., 2005, 55–59). It is said that during colonial times, some of the holy places that were open indigenous sanctuaries

were turned into Christian places of worship. Consequently, churches and mosques, the spiritual strongholds of patriarchal ideology, are all over the country, but there is not one brick and stone edifice built to call attention to, and muster respect for, the religion of the land. Those that existed of old are now desecrated ruins that hold the interest of only a limited number of scholars and archaeologists. The same can be said about cemeteries. With the exception of Ziguinchor (in Southern Senegal), the cities that were created, implanted, or developed by the French, during colonial times, do not have cemeteries reserved for the indigenous religion followers. Land has been earmarked for Christian cemeteries and graveyards for Muslims. This has forced many Senegalese men and women to convert to one of these two religions in order to have a decent burial at their death. Cemeteries play an important role in religious propaganda, as do mosques, churches, and temples, hence the importance of building a temple for the women initiates as a way to promote respect for them and the spiritual values they stand for. Women initiates are female elders who have gone through the various stages of traditional education, which is called initiation. The purpose of the temple is to be a place of learning (a philosophical college) as well as a cultural center open to visitors and researchers. It is to the description of this project, carried by a whole village, men and women alike, without reference to religious faith, that I will devote the second part of this chapter. In the first part I will give an overview of the indigenous religion and of the matriarchal system it stems from.

Insights on the Indigenous African Religion: The Matriarchal and Spiritual Foundations

Matriarchy is one prominent trait of the indigenous African culture (C. A. Diop, 1959). It was at the roots of the sociopolitical system, it ruled the economy and the family, and it also shaped Africans' religious beliefs prior to the introduction of Islam and the Christian faith on the continent. Matriarchy does not mean dictatorship of women over men. It is a system where women are valued for their practical experience, their spiritual knowledge, and their body's sole ability to host and give birth to life and then produce life-sustaining nourishment (milk). That was just one way among many others to express love for femininity. The feminization of spirituality was another facet of matriarchy.

Literally "matriarchy" means "Mother power"; politically it means a system that promotes gender equity, female heads of state, and female community leaders.

The Literal Meaning of Matriarchy

The term "matriarchy" is composed of the Latin word *mater* (meaning "mother") and of the Greek suffix *arkhè* (which means "power"). Thus, *mater arkhè* means literally "Mother power." Accordingly, a matriarchal society is a society where the maternal values of caring, courage, compassion, nurturance, well-being, and fertility (prosperity) are predominant. In matriarchal societies, woman is the seat of power, the provider of riches, the giver of life, the healer, the embodiment of justice (e.g., the goddess Maât in Egypt, the sacred principle of Truth and Fairness). Historical evidence proves that empowering women, as was the case in ancient Egypt, ancient Nubia, and other African empires (Ghana, Mali, Jolof, Kongo), never meant the cruel rule of women over victimized men. As a matter of fact, matriarchy cannot be defined as the opposite of patriarchy, in terms of it being a system where one gender (here the female one) oppresses the other. Ifi Amadiume accurately points out the following facts about the matriarchal system:

> It is not the direct opposite of patriarchy, or an equivalent to patriarchy, as it is not based on appropriation and violence. The culture and rituals of matriarchy did not celebrate violence; rather, they had a lot to do with fecundity, exchange and redistribution. (Amadiume, 2001, 196)

In order to know how a matriarchal system functions, it is best to study it instead of just assuming that a system based on empowering women will be no different than a system that is based on male power. For instance, the matriarchal system that ruled ancient Egypt meant a gender-sensitive governing system, family laws respectful of women's, mothers', and children's rights, economic empowerment of women, and freedom of beliefs. Ifi Amadiume summarizes the essential features of a matriarchal society:

> Patriarchy and matriarchy are social and political ideologies which directly decide the role and status of women in society; how society is to be orga-

nized; and how social subjects are to relate to one another. They are also ide-
ologies which decide the degree of violence and abuse of human rights that is
permissible in society. Matriarchy as was constructed by African women, had
a very clear message about social and economic justice. It was couched in a
very powerful goddess-based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood, and
a general moral principle of love. (Amadiume, 2001, 101)

In the African agriculturist communities, women were the ones who
were entrusted with seed selection, the actual planting of crops, and pro-
cessing raw material into edible food; men would be in charge of clearing
a field and helping at harvest (Ki Zerbo, 2003, 121). Matriarchy is therefore
a tribute to the capacity of women to ensure food security, proper health
care, and spiritual protection to the entire community. Whereas the pa-
triarchal regime has its origin in harsh nomadic life where women's eco-
nomic contribution is fairly inexistent, the matriarchal regime is tied to
agricultural and sedentary life (C. A. Diop, 1996, 130). In his paper "Rural
Women in the Socio-political Transformations," Gidbon Mutiso from
Kenya supports that thesis by outlining the weight put on women's spiritual
knowledge:

> There is enough oral history from the old people to suggest that the
> agriculturalist peoples who migrated from area to area gave women extremely
> significant places in the rituals connected with the settling of new areas.
> The woman was the one to appease the Gods so as to seek favour for the
> productivity of the new area. By extension following this line of logic, one
> can hypothesise that since women were the intermediaries with the Gods and
> furthermore since self-sufficiency in crops was necessary, it is possible that
> they utilised this structural position to acquire more socio-political rights
> (and duties) than has been suggested by colonialism research. (Mutiso,
> 1975, 528)

The Social and Political Meaning of Matriarchy

In many Black African states and communities, women used to be the land
managers and the ones who would take food surpluses and the manufactured
goods to the various markets. In Black Africa, marketplaces were essentially run
by women. And women were the major traders, travelling sometimes very long

distances to sell their goods.[14] Because they were essential in the food production chain, in the distribution circuits, and in the accumulation of household wealth, women (old, young, single, married) were greatly respected. Initiation, the indigenous African way of imparting precious knowledge, relayed the importance of the matriarchal system. Although matriarchal societies are not segregated societies, at some point girls and boys undergo separate initiation rites. In the Seereer communities, *kumax yaay no juul* presides over the training of men initiates, and *jooj maad no gulook* takes over the training of women. Men's initiation training is called *ndut*, meaning "bird's nest," (Dione, 2004, 12), and women's initiation training is called *ngulook*, "marriage ceremony" (B. S. Diouf, 2004, 215; Faye, 2006, 110). This organization along gender lines existed at all levels. In the pre-colonial Wolof and Seereer kingdoms for instance, national coordination was ensured at the top by the *lingeer* (elected queen / female head of state) for the women, and for the men, by the elected king (called *maad* or *buur* in the Seereer kingdoms; *buurba*, *brak*, *dàmmeel*, or *teeñ* in the Wolof kingdoms). Thus, from the base to the top, the gender duality was acknowledged in a way that guaranteed both sexes equal rights and opportunities. Indigenous African theology made sure to entrench the gendered organization of the society and the preeminence of the female element in initiatory teachings.

Education based on the method of initiation uses the ambiguity of words to deliver a multilayered message. Hence the first meaning will be clear, simple, and immediately accessible. The second meaning will only be accessible to those with specific background knowledge. The third meaning will be so enshrouded in symbolism that only insiders will be able to get it. The same word could therefore lead to different directions. The following example explains how initiates fashioned sentences with double or triple meaning, in this case relating to the Seereer take on "Mother power":

> "*O loq O yaay füsu saax it*"
>   — Simple translation: literally, "The borders of the country are traced using a branch of *yaay*" (shrub whose scientific name is *Combretum glunosicum*).
>   — Legal translation: "The country is governed by the rules of the maternal lineage" Playing on the ambivalence of the term *yaay* (which also means "mother"), it is declared simply that the matrilineal system governs the country (B. S. Diouf, 2004, 210).

— Esoteric translation: "Sorcery is transmitted by the mother" (because in a matrilineal system everything you inherit, be it goods or titles, you inherit from your mother, including spiritual superpowers).

Drums also conveyed coded messages. In the Seereer kingdoms, a drummed message opening all public celebrations reminds all that Siga Bajaan, a woman, was the first head of state:[15] "'*Siga Bacal, ten eetu maat, maat a guutin a roof*' 'Siga wide hips[16] has founded the state, the state improved after her'" (B. S. Diouf, 2011, 21).

Given the fact that one sentence could carry more than one meaning, it is interesting to note how the word *maat* in Seereer takes its full meaning when one compares it with the meaning of the same word in ancient Egyptian. In Seereer, *maat* means "(state) power" (B. S. Diouf, 2011, 23).[17] In ancient Egypt, *Maât* is the sacred power of Justice (Truth and Fairness), which is symbolized by a female figure, the "Goddess" named Maât. The land of the Pharaohs also attributed the origin of state power to a woman, the Great Mother Isis, whose Egyptian name Ast means "throne, seat, or abode" (Redd, 2002, 162). Isis is also credited for giving men the laws they need to govern themselves in peace and fairness (Diodorus Siculus, first century BCE).[18] Thus it appears that the drummed message about Siga Bajaan is more than a simple reminder that there was once a queen bearing that name. The drummed message recalls and summarizes the matriarchal roots of the Seereer political system. The idea that women deserve respect because they are the ones who organized the community and designed the concept of a state based on *Maât* (Truth and Fairness) is quite literally drummed into people's minds. It is a known fact that in many African kingdoms the female chief of state (usually, but not always, the queen mother) enjoyed a higher respect and had more political power than the king. In the family circle also, the female elements (older sisters, mothers, first wives) wielded more authority than the male ones (Camara and Kandji, 2000).

The Cultural Commission's report (Abidjan Colloquium) underlined the fact that social changes due to external factors took place within the African traditional society and led to various transformations. In a paper entitled "The Matriarchal System as a Proof of the Social Role Played by the Woman in African Traditional Society," Senegalese jurist Siga Sow says, "First colonization, then Islam and Christianity have modified the pattern of matriarchy. Add to these factors the new forms of trade, the cash economy and the modern school which tend to destroy the former image of the woman in Senegal."[19]

One must stress the influence of colonialism and foreign religions (Islam and Christianity). It led to serious misrepresentations of Africa's indigenous religion. It is currently being called everything (paganism, idolatry, polytheism) but what it really is: the religion of the all-loving Mother God, unique Creator and universal life and love giver.

GOD IS A MOTHER: THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF MATRIARCHY

Although God is not given a gender and is defined as the inaccessible one, indigenous African theology relies on the mother figure to convey the idea of a caring, compassionate, generous, all-loving, and all-powerful God. Amateurs of African art are quite familiar with sculptures portraying a Black woman, totally naked or bare breasted, holding on her knees a suckling infant (in ancient Egypt's art that image is famous as Isis and infant son Horus). Those sculptures emphasize on purpose the role of mothers as the prime nurturers who lavish on their children a love that is similar, as much as such a comparison can go, to the love God has for the whole Creation. It is in that sense that the indigenous African Creator-God is a Mother.[20] However, the male part of the Creator is not put aside, but every time it is outlined, a woman figure appears to serve as counterpart. The female element is what makes the male element come to life, and it is that duality working together that creates life. Therefore, woman is essential in the indigenous religious discourse as both Mother God and God's counterpart. The Divinity is thus made inseparable from the Woman. Such a theology explained and justified women holding the highest offices in the indigenous religion's "clergy" or performing the most crucial rituals. They are priestesses, high priestesses, and prophets. That fact has been documented all over Africa and the Caribbean and as far back as ancient Egypt.

In its conclusions, the colloquium on "The Civilization of the Woman in African Tradition" states that according to ancient myths, the creation of the woman is linked to the origin of death. It is when death appeared in the world that God created the woman so that life would not die forever. Since this time, says the legend, men die but life still goes on. The African woman appears therefore as the giver of life, the savior, and the nurse. The Egyptian legend of Isis and Osiris relates the same myth of Woman being the Savior and the one to guarantee resurrection from the dead and protection from the evil forces of Chaos, Disorder, and Sickness. Accordingly, the African indig-

enous religion is totally and unequivocally non-misogynistic. Furthermore, indigenous African theology relies on the mother figure to convey the idea of Creation and of the parentage of all God's creatures because "in the beginning was Mother" (Mutiso, 1975, 527).

God is the One who gave birth to Earth, Moon, and Sky. In ancient Egypt theology Nuut is the Universal Mother who swallows the Sun each night and gives birth to it each morning. Nuut is the Primordial Mother; she gave birth to the first human couples, who acquired godlike status as the First Ancestors (Isis, Osiris, Nephtys, and Seth). For Babacar Sédikh Diouf, a Seereer who specialized in researching data linking the Seereer ethnic group to the ancient Egyptians,[21] the strategy used by the woman to impose herself appears clearly: imaginations had to be struck. And that is why in Egyptian antiquity, the goddess NT (NuuT) was given the title "Mother of the Universe," while Roog, the name that Seereer give to God, reveals itself as meaning "Mother" This femininity of God is confirmed in the everyday language when the Seereer say, speaking about men, "*Nqoox paal, yaay um Roog*" ("The black bull's mother [is] God"). In order to tighten his demonstration that for the Seereer "*Roog* is a She,"[22] Diouf gives as further proof the following prayer little boys murmur when they go to bed at night (B. S. Diouf, 2004, 210–11):

Danaas	I am going into sleep
Nqoox paal	(Me) black bull
Yaay um Roog	My mother is Roog
Daapaam lanq	Earth is my bed
Hakandu bil	Rock is my pillow
Hulwa Roog	Sky is my blanket
Dingoor juwaam	Ocean is my fence
Wegoor njelem	Strong iron is my door

In the religion of the Mother God, women are not stigmatized through an emblematic Fallen Naked Woman who is the cause of all evil. The patriarchal tales of Genesis are the total opposite of the African ones. African sacred stories do not bring the woman out of any man's or god's body part, be it its head (like the Greek goddess Athena)[23] or its ribs (like the biblical Eve, created for and named by Adam). In the African Creation stories, man and woman are created by the Primordial Mother. They are the First Twins, hence the special status of twins and of twins' mothers in many Black African communities.

The ancient Egyptian genesis even goes so far as to state that man was created for woman, and for love:

> In a papyrus dating from the time of the Ramesside dynasty (13–12th century BC) God proclaims: "I am the one who has made the primeval waters in order for the Celestial Cow to come into existence. I am the one who has made the Bull for the Cow in order for the joy of love to come into the world." (Al Assiouty, 1989, 239–40)

Respect for woman is not linked to her being veiled; the African religion unashamedly uses the sexual organs of the human body to celebrate, emphasize, and explain different aspects of theology. Indigenous African religion spirituality does not separate the body from the soul, nor does it set one higher than the other. The human body is flaunted and revered as a temple. It is a temple of the spirit that gives it life, and as such one has a duty to keep it clean, beautiful (with ornaments, ointments, tattoos), and healthy. A healthy body hosts a healthy soul and vice versa. That is why a sickness is always seen as a sign of something being wrong in the realm of the spirits. Traditional healers cannot conceive limiting their treatment to the body; the soul also has to be cured of what ails it. Even after death the body has to be treated with love and care; cremation is not documented as an indigenous African practice. Love and respect for the body also explains the fact that total or partial nudity was accepted in many African communities, up until colonization; Christian missionaries and Muslim religious leaders put an end to it. They brought to Africa the ideology of the sinful body and of the sinful women who lead men to their ruin if they are not put under tight male control. They also misrepresented the indigenous religion, labelling it as pagan, superstitious, or satanic practices, conveniently forgetting in the process that the African religion is based on the belief of a one God Creator.

THE AFRICAN RELIGION: A NONTOTALITARIAN GENDER-SENSITIVE MONOTHEISM

The African indigenous monotheism is not only non-misogynistic, it is also nontotalitarian. Whatever name it is given (voodoo, fetishism, animism), the indigenous African religion, as illustrated by the ancient Egyptians' religion, is a true monotheism, because it is founded on the belief of a one God Creator

(Obenga, 2004, 60–73; Thiaw, 1992, 59–68; B. S. Diouf, 2004, 205–21; Sylla, 1978, 45–46). However, the belief in one God Creator does not entail an interdiction to give prayers and offerings to the spirits of one's ancestors and to the guardian spirits of the land. While God's uniqueness is unquestioned, its remoteness from humans is strongly outlined, hence the need for enlightened humans to address their prayers, wishes, and woes to intermediaries who will help them control their destiny. There are different kinds of intermediaries: some are human (priests, prophets, medicine men and women, sightseers), others are the dead ancestors' spirits and the invisible forces present in nature — animals, trees, rocks, rivers (Dia et al., 2005, 84–86, 90–93; Diatta, 2005, 87–89). Because such intermediaries (and their place of residence) are countless, the African religion developed into a nontotalitarian monotheism: for God is unique but God's emissaries and intermediaries are plenty. Consequently every community, every individual is free to choose their path and their messenger to the divine. Such theological principles quite effectively preclude the use of religion as a way of justifying wars against "nonbelievers," "hypocrites," or "infidels."'

Spirits being essentially invisible to the naked eye, it takes a special kind of knowledge (which can be enhanced through initiation) to be able to locate them and interact with them. But as they are potentially everywhere, it is best to treat everyone and everything with respect. This is particularly illustrated in old fairy tales that tell the stories of discarded objects, powerless-looking people, or apparently harmless animals who eventually reveal themselves as powerful spirits in disguise out to test humans' kindness, honesty, or prudence.

The African religion is also based on the belief that everything that exists has a life of its own and the ability to feel and suffer like you and me. Animals, plants, soil, "inanimate objects" feel. We must therefore respect and love all those with whom we share the earth. These kinds of beliefs prompt those who hold them to treat nature and their environment with care and respect. The following examples were given me by Issa Laye Thiaw:

- When you eat under a tree, you want to give it its share, which you deposit at the foot of the tree.
- After a busy morning of toil, when the farmer sits in the shade, he must also put his hoe in the shade and not let it lie in the sun. If he forgets to do that he will be reminded with these words [he told me in Wolof, Senegal's

most widely spoken local language]: "Da fa am bàkkan ni yow." ("It has life — the ability to feel — just like you.")

- When the hoe falls from your hands, we say: "Do not pick it up immediately. It is tired. Let it rest."[24]

The African religion promotes a deep-rooted respect for nature and its inhabitants. Large trees are elevated to the status of sacred trees (e.g., the baobab). Gratitude and respect for animals, and for what each of them can teach us or help us with, are ingrained with the totem system: each clan has an animal it honors and protects (i.e., ancient Egypt's sacred animals; Camara, 2004, 162–93). It is all these rules, entrenched in the indigenous African spiritual beliefs, that the project of a Temple for Women Initiates aims to shelter. Building a temple will serve as a way to ensure a larger respect for and a greater protection of this knowledge and its holders.

The Objectives of the Construction of a Temple for Women Initiates

The project of the Temple for Women Initiates aims at developing the culture and the spiritual values of the Seereer. For the project's initiators, learning the moral values and spiritual knowledge that have been bequeathed by the ancestors will help promote the emancipation of Senegalese women. The temple will constitute a step toward a better life for women, and particularly rural women, at various levels: symbolic, legal, practical.

SHOWCASING WOMEN AS SPIRITUAL LEADERS AND EXTENDING RESPECT TO THE INDIGENOUS RELIGION

Women occupy the most predominant places in the indigenous religion's "clergy." Initiated women perform the most important rituals and prayers for prosperity, fertility, and protection from disasters (Société Africaine de Culture, 1975, 597). Such is not the case in the "revealed religions." Up to this day, in Senegal, there is not one female imam in any mosque or one female priest in any Catholic church, nor is there any female pastor of a Protestant temple. All prayers in churches, temples, and mosques are led by males, a fact

that is not lost on those who are quick to deny women a leadership role in the public arena. They use that factor as God-given proof that women cannot claim equal rights with men, who have been appointed their leaders by God Himself. Consequently, from a feminist point of view, it is quite significant to put forward the fact that the indigenous religion, far from denying women equal standing in the spiritual leadership hierarchy, rests principally on female spiritual leaders. Seeing women in the role of spiritual leaders of their community enhances respect for them and for women in general.

There used to be in each Seereer village a queen, the *maad No ngulook* (the ruler of young brides). She had the privilege to keep the bowl, *roon*, or calabash, *saxal*, that contained the objects symbolizing femininity. The temple will thus have a *maad No ngulook*, or "mother superior," who will be charged to chair all the activities of the center and to act as the legal representative of the temple in legal matters and official ceremonies and gatherings. Besides showcasing women in a leadership role, the temple's aim is also to enforce respect for the indigenous religion, in conformity with the constitutional principle of respect for all religions.

The Temple for Women Initiates will give the constitutional principle of freedom of religion and state's respect for all religions effective meaning and substance. The Constitution of Senegal proclaims in its preamble the principles of philosophical and religious freedom. Article 1 of the Constitution specifies that the Republic of Senegal is secular and democratic and that it respects all beliefs. Article 17 recognizes the religious institutions as means of education, and subparagraph 2 of Article 19 states the following: "The religious institutions and communities have the right to develop without obstacle. They are released from the supervision of the State. They regulate and manage their business in an autonomous way." Thus respect for all religions is a constitutional principle, but nothing is done to enforce respect for the indigenous religion. Respect for everyone's religious beliefs does not seem to extend to the indigenous religion.

The methods employed to supplant African religion and the values it carried were (and still are) intimidation and negation of or contempt for the indigenous religion. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell are powerful tools used to move converts away from their ancestral beliefs, which are depicted as satanic practices. These facts have a negative impact on the holders of the oral tradition, who no longer dare to express openly the lessons of old times.

Building a temple for these holders of the oral tradition will give them that courage. In his exposé justifying the building of a Temple for Women Initiates, Issa Laye Thiaw points out the fact that the Seereer are a classic victim of this situation. Not only have they lost their ancestral religion, but in so doing they have contracted an inferiority complex, which has robbed them of the courage to face the apostles of the "revealed religions." Rejuvenating and modernizing initiatory teachings will go a long way to restore respect for the positive ways and values of old.

COLLECTING AND SHARING ANCIENT ESOTERIC TEACHINGS

> The temple is thought of as a shelter for Seereer culture and oral knowledge where holders of ancient knowledge will gather and share their knowledge among themselves and with others.

Stepping past the temple threshold should mean stepping into a very ancient culture. Consequently the temple will be built in accordance with the typical model of the old Seereer habitat. It will be composed of twenty-two houses and a large general-purpose unit, which will be used as conference room. Each house will bear the name of an old village. The people of each one of these villages will be solicited to name a delegate to the philosophical college that will be housed at the temple. The members of the philosophical college will be the women of knowledge from the village of Baback Sérères and neighbourhood villages. Women from other places and men of knowledge will be asked to join as honorary members. The college will be a place where ancient knowledge will be discussed and recorded by the members themselves, who will have ownership rights on all the written, filmed, or recorded material they produce. Researchers and scholars coming to them for information will have to sign agreements protecting their ownership rights. Thus, while making available their knowledge to outsiders, the guardians of the ancient oral tradition will be protected from plunder by unscrupulous researchers who do not share with their informants the royalties they get from the books they write or the health product they market thanks to the valuable information they were given.

The goal of the procedure asking villages to name delegates to the college is to collect the esoteric teachings inherited from the ancestors. That will en-

able the members of the philosophical college to store, in books, films, and recordings, the initiatory secrets of the targeted zone. Setting up alongside the philosophical college an Academy of Old Tales serves the same purpose. The creation of such an academy, located at the temple, will make it possible to collect and preserve this invaluable cultural inheritance. That will be done by organizing meetings where tales will be told and recorded (with the agreement of the storyteller), which will enable the managers of the temple to collect and store the old tales, which tend to disappear. Tales contain useful information and hold the spiritual and literary heritage bequeathed by the ancestors. The existence of such an academy of the storytellers will make it possible to penetrate the heart of Seereer culture. To encourage the narrators, gifts will be allotted to those who tell the best legends.

Storytelling plays an important part in the moral and intellectual training of young people. This popular literature belongs to the Seereer spiritual heritage, whose conservation is a peremptory necessity. Issa Laye Thiaw, the main initiator of the project, specifies that telling tales was a field mostly reserved for old women. The researcher believes that is why women have a positive image in the Seereer tales.

Building the temple following the model of the ancestral habitat will also serve as an illustration of the "course" on Seereer habitat and traditions, which will be delivered to the visitors of the temple. The temples of old were not only places of worship, they were also places of healing and learning. Accordingly, the objective of the Temple for Women Initiates is to offer the community a variety of services, some of which are lucrative, in order to make it possible for the temple to be self-sustaining. Hence, in order to improve the quality of health care offered to rural women, joint consultations by traditional healers and doctors will be held as a regular activity of the temple. Visits from environmentalists, veterinarians, and so on will be encouraged. Human rights associations and jurists will devise with the members of the temple the ways and means to most efficiently address issues of gender violence, child abuse, and equal rights and opportunities.

In order to make enough money to keep the project self-sustaining, some of the rooms of the temple will be rented to participants at the seminars and conferences held in the temple. Rooms for tourists will also be made available. A showroom will be set up where CDs, DVDs, books, and artefacts produced at the temple or in collaboration with the initiated women will be sold.

The initiators of the project plan to rejuvenate the initiation rites that were the base of the moral and spiritual formation of the children of the community. In the Seereer *Kaamee* or *Seh-seh* language, the place where those rites took place is called *ndut*, "the bird's nest." The initiatory enclosure was seen as the most favorable place to impart to the neophytes the literary and spiritual heritage bequeathed by the old ones.

The transformation of the temple into a summer camp during a few weeks each year will be used to supplement the education of children with the teaching of gender equality, children's rights, and respect for nature through initiatory tales, legends, role plays, traditional songs, and ritual dances. Children from different areas will meet and learn about each other under the supervision of the women of the temple, who will teach them the rudiments of Seereer culture in a festive way. They will also be taught to read and write in their own language.

Conclusion

The existence of the Convention on Cultural Diversity (CDD) represents a new and important platform for promoting culture in the wider context of sustainable development.[25] However, the principles the CDD stands for need to be acted upon in order to give them a meaning that goes beyond the moral stance. The Temple for Women Initiates project gives the CDD such a meaning.

For the promoters of the Temple for Women Initiates project, the first challenge is to successfully lobby national authorities into assuming responsibility on the matter by taking practical steps to ensure that Africa's specific cultural heritage holds its own in the face of the Middle Eastern and Western civilizations' rival attempts to pose themselves as the unique conveyors of a universal message. M. André Youm, the head of the village of Baback Sérères, has officially written to the president of the rural council (*conseil rural*) of Notto Diobass, a letter dated October 18, 2007, to inform him of his decision to allot one hectare of land to the project. So the Association of the Women of Baback have the support of the village's chief and the land on which to build the temple. All they need now is the money to build it. The project has been

sent to several government agencies and a few nongovernmental organizations, but the best answers the promoters of the project have received so far are messages of encouragement. However, perseverance being at the heart of all successful endeavours, the promoters of the project are in the process of identifying ways to bring private donors as well as funding agencies to show a true interest in building a Temple for Women Initiates in the Senegalese village of Baback Sérères.

Appendix: The Letter of the Young People of the Village of Baback Sérères

The project called the Temple for Women Initiates falls under a particular context. Threatened by modernization, the Seereer culture is one of the pillars of African civilization, which today tends to disappear. At the current hour, the need for revalorization of this culture, in particular in Jobaas, is posed with acuity. The project is born out of this point of view. Its aim is to make tradition known through the image of the Seereer woman.

Culture, which can be defined as the ways of doing things, the way of life, the beliefs, in short the ways in which a group sees the world, occupies a major place in the life of people. However the phenomena of Westernization combined with attempts at islamization have caused the negation of the existence of Black-African cultures. Without culture it is impossible to reach development. This is an idea that has the support of many researchers, such as those who have pondered the question of African unity, and also of humanitarians interested in what guarantees wellbeing.

Thus to concretize or materialize this idea, various ethnic groups feel the need to act. The values that characterize the Seereer culture, especially its matriarchal side, are enough to give us the model of society we all wish for. The pilot project (TWI) suggested by the AFI, the Association of the Women of Joobas, relates to the importance of culture and its development. The study of the project was the framework of a dialogue between Issa Laye Thiaw and a restricted group of students. According to the participants, the realization of this project could allow the rebirth of certain values and open up new life-style opportunities to women as suggested by the reference document. The participants proposed that dwellings be built to shelter the initiates. These infrastructures could be implemented in each village centre. Knowing that tradition requires a house with two doors, these new infrastructures can be built according to this traditional model. For the success of this project, participants in the debate pro-

pose the adoption of a participatory step in the phase of formulation and realization of the project, the women having to be integrated into the decision-making processes and in the planning. The site of the granaries and choosing the tree that would serve as palaver tree were among the questions that were raised. According to certain points of view, the orientation towards the east was favoured for the site of the granaries. The latter were always placed in front of the houses. For certain questions such as the ones about the palaver tree, or the appropriate site for the temple, the participants suggested the matter be investigated with old folks.

With regard to the implication of women, let us note that a process of elimination of illiteracy will have to be set up for better conveying certain messages. As to the place of men within the temple, the debate was focused on two types of status. One is the "yimbir" whose role is to guard the women's privacy during the initiatory phases. The other is the "bidjo" who protects the girls against intruders at the time of ceremonies such as the "minams," the "riiti," etc

Sereer who have jealously guarded culture are now the victims of a phenomenon of alienation which is depriving posterity of its sources, and of its reference marks.

In way of conclusion, the participants salute the initiative and declare their readiness to take an active part in the project. For them, the realization of this project could play a major role in promoting Seereer culture throughout the world.

The youth of the village
Done at Baback, the 15-10-2007

Notes

1. Muslim, 94 percent; indigenous beliefs, 1 percent; Christian, 5 percent (mostly Roman Catholic). "CIA World Factbook 2004/Senegal," accessed March 1, 2008, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA_World_Fact_Book,_2004/Senegal.

2. Baback Sérères is located in the region of Thiès. For a map of Senegal, see "CIA World Factbook 2004/Senegal," accessed October 3, 2011, http://en.wikisource .org/wiki/CIA_World_Fact_Book,_2004/Senegal.

3. See the full letter in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

4. Conversation on African religion at my home, Dakar, March 26, 2008.

5. The case of the heir of indeterminate gender, the hermaphrodite, is naturally examined in great detail, under Article 597. An expert will be called to determine which is the predominant gender, and if that cannot be established, "the hermaphrodite will receive half of what he would have been entitled to had he been

of the male sex added to half of what he would have been entitled to had he been of the female sex."

6. See Fatou K. Camara, "Women and the Law: A Critique of the Senegalese Family Law," *Social Identities Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 13, no. 6 (November 2007): 787–800.

7. "*L'ancien président de l'Assemblée nationale, le docteur Amadou Cissé Dia, a fait une narration récente de la position du Président Léopold Sédar Senghor à l'occasion de l'élaboration du Code de la famille, précisant que le Président Senghor lui avait fait savoir qu'il est nécessaire d'obtenir l'approbation des chefs religieux et ne pas toucher aux concepts de l'Islam, mais la répudiation unilatérale doit être bannie de nos usages.*" He cites as a source the *Sud quotidien* newspaper edition of June 23, 2001.

8. "Pagan" was the term used by the French and by the Muslim warriors who declared holy wars on the territories they wanted to conquer. Actually some of the kings and people they declared pagans were Muslims, only they were Muslims who did not care for Sharia and kept on indigenous practices and beliefs.

9. In the Wolof and Seereer pre-colonial kingdoms, a female head of state, the *lingeer*, was designated each time a new king was elected (Dieng, 1993, 15). Her political power was greater than that of the king (Bamba M'Bakhane Diop, *Lat Dior et l'Islam*, 24; Samb, *Cadior ak Amary Ngoné Sobel*, 36–37; Barry, 1985, 263, 275). Women were also made governors (i.e., a provincial chief appointed by the king). Women governors bore the title of *jee* (Dieng, 1993, 381, 451).

10. In 1855 the kingdom of Waalo, then headed by the *lingeer* (title of the female head of state) Ndatte Yàlla, was the first kingdom to be annexed by the French. Direct rule over most of Senegal was achieved in 1886, with the defeat of the armies of the last Wolof kingdom, Kajoor, and the death of its *dàmmeel* (title of the male head of state) Lat Joor. For the story of Lingeer Ndatte Yàlla (in French), visit "Ndatté Yalla et la stratégie de conquête du pouvoir," accessed October 3, 2011, http://www.sengenre-ucad.org/TexteNdate.htm.

11. Ethnic groups in Senegal are as follows: Wolof, 43.3 percent; Pulaar, 23.8 percent; Seereer, 14.7 percent; Joola, 3.7 percent; Mandinka, 3 percent; Soninke, 1.1 percent; European and Lebanese, 1 percent; other, 9.4 percent. "CIA World Factbook 2004/Senegal," accessed March 1, 2008, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki /CIA_World_Fact_Book,_2004/Senegal.

12. "*Si aujourd'hui tel chef d'Etat musulman consulte le 'bois sacré,' offre en sacrifice un bœuf ou un taureau, j'ai vu telle chrétienne, docteur en médecine et pratiquante, aller consulter les 'Pangool' (les serpents du bois sacré) sereer. En vérité, partout en Afrique noire, les 'religions révélées' sont enracinées dans l'animisme qui inspire encore*

aujourd'hui, poètes et artistes, je suis bien placé pour le savoir et le dire . . ." (Pierre Alexandre, *Les Africains* [Paris: Lidis, 1982], 6).

13. "Although the marabouts resisted cultural assimilation, they were very much involved in Senegalese colonial politics, offering their support and that of their following to Senegalese citizen politicians in exchange for certain favors — e.g. government subsidies for building mosques, jobs and trading licenses for their faithful followers, and redress against abuses perpetuated by the colonial administration. . . . [I]n addition to preaching obedience to the colonial authorities, the marabouts urged their *talibés* (disciples) to grow peanuts for the market in the new areas where they were settling. The French were delighted with this practice, as it promoted the expansion of peanut production, the foundation of the colonial economy. Because of its interest in extending peanut production, the colonial administration granted many prominent Mouride and Tijani marabouts large tracts of land that became peanut estates and often supported the marabouts in their disputes with Fulbe herders, who were fighting to retain control over their traditional grazing lands that were being taken over by the peanut farmers" (Gellar, 1982, 13).

14. See in Société africaine de culture, *The Civilization of the Woman in African Tradition* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1975): Awe Bolanwe, "The Economic Role of Women in a Traditional African Society: The Yoruba Example"; Aïcha N'doye, "Initiative and Creative Powers of the Woman in a Traditional Economic Life: The Senegal Example"; Jeanne Nzaou-Mabika, "Initiative and Creative Ability of the Woman: The Gabon Example"; and Anastasie Beugré and Djama Séry, "The Woman in the Economy of the Traditional Societies of the Ivory Coast." All four papers put forward the major role of women in production of goods (from agriculture, crafts, and industries) and distribution of the surplus products by trade.

15. A long-standing Seereer tradition traces the origins of centralized political power to a woman called Siga Bajaan (Bajaal or Bacal). Her legend is summarized in this popular Seereer sentence: "*Siga Bajaan fertu maat né*," "Power started with Siga Bajaan" (Gravrand, 1983, 267).

16. According to Babacar Sedikh Diouf, "Bacal" was not the queen's surname but an alias meaning "wide hips," a criterion of beauty (B. S. Diouf, 2011, 20).

17. "Ce même terme 'maât' fossilisé dans le message tambouriné de Siga Bacal, reste encore actif dans la langue seereer avec le même sens de gouvernance de participation sur la base des quatre principes indispensables au 'vivre ensemble': Amour, Vérité, Justice et Paix, enfants de la responsabilité et de la liberté" (B. S. Diouf, 2011, 23). My translation: "The same word 'maât,' fossilized in the drummed

message about Siga Bacal, is still active in the Seereer language with the same sense of participative governance on the basis of the four principles essential to 'living together': Love, Truth, Justice and Peace, the children of responsibility and freedom."

18. Diodorus Siculus gives the following testimony: "Isis also established laws, they say, in accordance with which the people regularly dispense justice to one another and are led to refrain through fear of punishment from illegal violence and insolence" (*Library of History*, Book1, Section 1, VIII: http//:remacle.org /bloodwolf/historiens/diodore/livre1.htm [accessed February 28, 2011]).

19. Siga Sow, "The Matriarchal System as a Proof of the Social Role Played by the Woman in African Traditional Society," in *The Civilization of the Woman in African Tradition*, Société africaine de culture, 337.

20. The place of women in African traditional religion and in ancient Africa's religious art is particularly well documented in these papers, the titles of which say it all: "Egypt's Isis: The Original Black Madonna," by Eloise McKinney-Johnson; "African Goddesses: Mothers of Civilization," by Runoko Rashidi; "The Image of Woman in African Cave Art," by Rosalind Jeffries; "Black Madonnas of Europe: Diffusion of the African Isis," by Danita Reed. All four papers are published in Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *Black Women in Antiquity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002).

21. Cheikh Anta Diop has established facts that confirm his thesis that Seereer originate from ancient Egypt (*Nations nègres et culture* [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1979]), 392–401).

22. Seereer, as many African languages, does not have gender indicators such as "he, she, her, his."

23. Greek mythology describes the goddess Athena as being the daughter of Zeus, and only by him; Athena was not generated by any woman. She leaped from the head of Zeus, already adult, dressed with her armor.

24. Conversation on African religion at my home, Dakar, March 26, 2008. From childhood Issa Laye Thiaw was instructed in Black African values and the secrets of the initiates through his father, who was a high priest of the indigenous faith. He then trained at the École Franco-Arabe of Dakar, at the École Normale of Tunis, at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes of la Sorbonne, Paris. He was senior researcher at the Centre d'études des civilisations, Dakar. He is a retired teacher of classical Arabic. He spent many years in the Arab and Islamic countries, where he studied the Muslim religion. He is the author of *La femme Seereer* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

25. The CDD was adopted on October 20, 2005, by the UNESCO General Conference (148 countries approved it, while 2 countries — the United States and Israel — voted against it and 4 abstained). The CDD entered into force in March 2007, following its ratification by a sufficient number of countries.

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