Sheikh Amadu Bâmba’s Mur?d Resistance to French Colonial Oppression

**Time period notes:** The heart of the movement took place between the killing of king Dammel Lat Joor Joop in 1886 and ended with Bâmba’s final return from exile in 1912, though it continued until he died in 1927 and vestiges of the movement remain alive in the 21st century.

1886
1927

**Country:** Senegal

**Location City/State/Province:** Bawol region

**Location Description:** Movement took place in a larger sense throughout Sénégal and other parts of French West Africa

**Goals:**
Bâmba sought to cast off the shackles of French colonial oppression by calling the Mur?ds to a singular devotion to God as manifest in the slogan, "God and Mu?ammad suffice me, I have no need of minor kings and auxiliaries."

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship › Disciplined Isl?mic practices including hard work and nonviolence
- 121. Refusal of public support › Refusal to recognize any authority besides God, the Prophet, and the Sheikh

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 066. Total personal noncooperation › While in exile in Mauritania, Bâmba refused acede to the French re-education tactic

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 040. Religious processions › Mur?ds hailed the returning Bâmba as the mujaddid (a reformer sent by God once every century to revive Isl?m)

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions › Refused to allow Western schools to be built in Bawol

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches › After returning from his final exile Bâmba was the unquestioned leader of the Mur?ds
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › Treatment of Bawol as d?r al-Mur?d rather than as part of French West Africa

**Methods in 6th segment:**
• 025. Displays of portraits  › Especially after Bàmba's death his image was used as a cultural symbol of Sénégalaise independence and nonviolence
• 084. Refusal of industrial assistance  › The Mur?d economy began to treat the French colonial machine as an equal partner rather than as an overlord
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials  › Bàmba functioned as the de facto governor of the Mur?ds

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• Wolof Sénégalaise Mur?d ??f?s

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Sheikh Amadu Bàmba Mbâcke

Partners:
Wolof religious leaders

Involvement of social elites:
After 1912 an entente existed between the Mur?ds and the French governors which maintained social peace and relative autonomy for native Sénégalaise.

Joining/ exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Bàmba
• proto-Mur?ds

Groups in 2nd Segment:

• Bàmba
• Mur?ds

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Bàmba
• French governors
• Mur?ds
Groups in 4th Segment:

- Bàmba
- French governors
- Mur?ds

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Bàmba
- French governors
- Mur?ds

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Bàmba
- French economic networks
- Mur?ds

Segment Length: 6 years

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
French colonizing profiteers, assimilating Wolof tribal leaders

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Shift from coercive to cooperative approach to indigenous Sénégalene

Campaigner violence:
Bàmba's encouragement of enlistment in the French army during World War I (Mur?ds were known to have been valiant in battle and to have withstood heavy losses; Bàmba received the French Legion of Merit for his war efforts)

Repressive Violence:
Exile / imprisonment / cruelty directed at Bàmba

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
2 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
As the campaign did not have a definitive ending, the last eight decades of Sénégalene history can be said to be in some sense the continued unfolding of Bàmba's movement. While a great degree of cooperation with the French may seem assimilationist, the dignity with which the Mur?ds maintained their relative autonomy and the relatively smooth transition into a democratic nation-state speak to the lasting success of the movement.

Born into a family of well-to-do ??f? marabouts (clerics), Sheikh Amadu Bàmba Mbâcke – whose Arabic name was A?mad Ibn Mu?ammad Ibn ?ab?b al-Lah – lived from roughly 1854 to 1927. Through his emphases on piety, hard work, singular devotion
to God, the corrupting potential of governmental power, mystical pedagogy, and principled nonviolence, Bàmba effectively (and of secondary interest if not unwittingly) led the black Sénégalaise population to de facto political and economic independence from French colonial rule more than three decades before de jure independence came about. Bàmba’s brotherhood, the Mur?ds ("novices" or "those who desire") are today the most influential and largest Isl?mic sect in Sénégal – constituting nearly 30% of the population – and Bàmba remains a national hero. The only known photograph of Bàmba has become perhaps the most iconic cultural symbol in Sénégal’s historiography and is especially ubiquitous in the capital of Dakar. The Mur?ds – Bàmba’s nonviolence and noncooperation with coercive power remains among their central tenants – have been credited as being integral to Sénégal’s relatively (by west African standards) peaceful transition to democracy, and since 2000 the Mur?d Abdoulaye Wade has served as Sénégal’s peacefully elected President. Bàmba’s pacifist ideal, which was disinterested in coercive power, ultimately transformed the political landscape of colonized Sénégal and led to a period of entente with the French overseers.

French involvement in Sénégal dates to the fourteenth century, though the economic link only translated into imperial colonialism in the mid-1800s. For centuries Sénégal had been an important market for European purchase of African slaves, but with the steady decline in the trans-Atlantic slave trade throughout the nineteenth century peanut cultivation became increasingly integral to Sénégalaise economics. Because the center of peanut production was inland while the hubs of commerce were along the Atlantic coast, the French constructed a railway linking the ports of Dakar and Saint-Louis with the fertile agricultural region between the Gambia and Sénégal rivers, effectively consolidating the region into one economic-political unit. The predominantly Muslim indigenous population, including Bàmba’s own Wolof ethnic group, did not assimilate easily to their new colonial status because submission to Christian coercive power was an affront to both tribal and religious sensibilities. Nonetheless, Sénégalaise political attempts in the mid-1800s to resist the French were largely unsuccessful. One of the most celebrated figures in the opposition to colonialism, the Wolof-Kajoor King Dammel Lat Joor Joop, was killed by French soldiers in 1886 – a year after the railroad began running. France would go unchallenged militarily, but in their clumsy handling of Amadu Bàmba the colonizers would ultimately be stripped of their monopoly on economic and political dominance of the Sénégalaise.

A popular legend relates a “passing the torch” moment between King Lat Joor and Amadu Bàmba. Bàmba, whose father had been a well-paid cleric in the king’s court and who himself was already a learned and popular cleric in 1887, is imagined to have met with the king the night before the latter’s death. King Lat Joor asked Bàmba for a blessing of support for his religious and military ambitions, but Bàmba in reply offered only a blessing for the king’s soul. The military option would no longer be the mode of resistance, and the Sheikh’s way of nonviolence would thenceforth characterize the Sénégalaise struggle.

Bàmba was, above all else, a devoted follower of Isl?m. During his thirty-three years of exile and imprisonment he devoted himself to developing his marabout pedagogy, and he was an avid pursuer of knowledge in the sciences of traditions of the Prophet Mu?ammad, Qur’an, Arabic grammar, jurisprudence, poetry, and didactics. A pseudo-humanist love for life and justice informed his ethic of nonviolence (Bàmba once said, “My religion is the love of God”). Two traditions of the Prophet grounded both his own Isl?mic character and that of his Mur?d followers. First, over-and-against the Tij?n (another sect) declaration of military jih?d against the French in the mid-1880s, the Bàmba invoked the famous marfu? in which the Prophet, on greeting a group of Muslims returning from battle, implored the warriors, “You have come from the lesser jih?d [war] to the greater jih?d – the striving of a servant against his desires.” From this tradition, and from his own witness to failed military resistance, Bàmba came to the conclusion that the pursuits of righteousness and power were incompatible and that it was incumbent upon all Muslims to live nonviolent lives. The second Prophetic tradition upon which Bàmba constructed his moral vision was the saying, “Work as if you were going to live forever, and pray as if you were going to die tomorrow.” Industriousness thus became – and remains – a hallmark of Mur?d society. The Isl?mic virtue of charity is incorporated into Bàmba’s doctrine of hard work, so that Mur?ds tend toward philanthropy: they work so tirelessly that they frequently amass great fortunes, but they share what they earn communally and give liberally to the underclasses in society (across religious and ethnic lines). Salvation, according to Bàmba, comes through a combination of hard work and submission to God, the latter manifest in absolute obedience to the marabout and in giving oneself into the welfare of the community.
By the 1890s Bàmba had become the preeminent sheikh in Sénégal, his influence deriving from a combination of his noble character and his ties to the peanut trade. As the French struggled to consolidate their imperial power they targeted the Mur?ds (and Bàmba in particular) for coercion. In 1895 the government trumped up charges of sedition against Bàmba (ironically, he was charged with subtly encouraging militant Isl?mist jih?d against the French) and he was exiled to Gabon. This sentence backfired on the French, however, as Bàmba went from being a popular cleric to a legendary hero. One popular tale claims that while on the ship taking him to exile, Bàmba asked permission to say his obligatory prayers onboard. When the French refused, Bàmba took his prayer rug overboard; the rug floated on the surface of the ocean and Bàmba performed his prayers to the amazement of the Christian onlookers. To this day pilgrims to Bàmba’s tomb say a special prayer while facing the Atlantic Ocean in remembrance of this miracle.

While in exile and detained in a cell strewn with barbed metal objects (to prevent his sitting or lying), Bàmba felt a brief temptation to resort to the force of arms in his opposition to French rule. In his Jaza’u Shakur, Bàmba writes, “Each time I recall this night, this Governor and the ignominy (of the conditions of this detention), I felt like having recourse to arms, but Al-Mahi, the Eraser (of sins and pains), the Prophet (peace be upon him) forbade me.” Bàmba spent seven years (1895-1902) in Gabon; while there he developed his pedagogy, deepened his piety, and developed his understanding of his special calling.

The French, impressed by the hardworking Mur?ds and hopeful of tapping them as a resource through a show of benevolence toward their leader, allowed Bàmba to return. Their plan was unsuccessful – rather than shore up Mur?d servility, releasing Bàmba actually weakened French control over Sénégal’s economics. Bàmba’s return was widely celebrated, and he was hailed as the mujaddid (a reformer sent by God once every century to revive Isl?m) of the thirteenth Isl?mic century. His fame eroded the power of the tribal chiefs (many of whom had sworn fealty to the French governors), thus weakening the French vice-grip on Sénégal’s economics. At the request of these chiefs, the French re-exiled Bàmba in 1903. This time they deported him to Mauritania and placed him under the supervision of an ally, the Moorish Sheikh Sadiyya. The French hoped that this would convert Bàmba to imperial loyalty, but again they were to be disappointed. While in Mauritania Bàmba had a vision after which he declared the Mur?ds a separate ??f? sect and began to think in terms of political accommodation to French rule. The colonizers, realizing that Bàmba was not a military threat, gradually let him return closer to his home until finally, in 1912, he was allowed back into his home region of Bawol. While there he maintained a cordial relationship with the French government, but from then until his death in 1927 that relationship was always on his terms.

Bàmba’s response to colonialism became a significant third way to the traditional Isl?mic alternatives of taqiya (practicing Isl?m in secret) and hijra (migration away from the colony). For Bàmba and the Mur?ds, the nonviolent choice was largely to ignore the French. They would not be swayed by coercion or threats, for they knew that it was in the best interests of the colonizers for the peace to be kept. Bawol became effectively autonomous: if traditional Isl?mic typology divides the world into d?r al-Isl?m (the abode of Isl?m) and d’arb (the abode of war), then it might be said (following Sheikh Anta Babou’s model) that Sénégal became d?r al-Mur?d (the abode of the Mur?ds) located concentrically within d?r al-kufr (the abode of apostasy). For Babou, “Daar al-Murid did not contest French political and administrative domination; rather, it endeavored to achieve symbolic and cultural and, when possible, geographic autonomy from the colonial realm. [The Murids stripped] daar al-Islam of its political content [and infused] it with cultural meanings.”

Bàmba’s vision of Mur?d society was permanently incarnated when he founded the city of Touba (Arabic: ??b?, “felicity”), which remains the center of Mur?d piety and Sénégal’s second-largest city. He established this settlement with French backing – the French were both impressed by Bàmba’s seeming patriotism in his support for volunteerism during World War I (he even received the French Legion of Honor for his efforts in encouraging Mur?d enlistment) and hopeful that the industrious Mur?ds, if properly incentivized, would prove an enormous asset in the pursuit of French economic aspirations.

Unlike many twentieth-century nonviolent resistance movements, Bàmba’s Mur?d society focused on principled living (specifically on the Isl?mic virtues of nonviolence and industriousness) and did not have political power as its objectified telos. By reframing the notions of success, power, and autonomy, the Mur?ds radically subverted French ambitions toward dominance and permanently ended attempts to rule Sénégal by coercion. Bàmba’s legacy of nonviolence and disinterest in political power facilitated the peaceful transition to national independence and democratic stability, rarities among African nation-states –
especially those which have to manage the cohabitation of sizeable Muslim and Christian populations. Bamba’s nonviolent resistance might be seen as a failure when measured in the terms of the colonizer – the political and military shackles were not cast off and the French continued their economic profiteering for decades – but the genius of Bamba’s nonviolence is that it refused those very terms for measuring success. Bamba created a society-within-a-society in which colonized Africans were endowed with dignity, relative autonomy, the freedom to dictate the terms of their relationship to their colonizers, and socio-cultural prosperity. The movement was an overwhelming success in terms of its fidelity to Amadu Bamba’s vision for an Islamic society which could effectively bypass the authority of the colonial government in sole allegiance to God. Bamba declared at his father’s funeral that, “God is sufficient for me; I am content in Him, and nothing satisfies me except the Religion and the Islamic sciences. I fear none but God and put my hope in none but Him – How could I also put my destiny in the hands of those who are unable to determine their [eternal] fate?” Together he and the Murids who followed him declared, “God and Muhammad suffice me, I have no need of minor kings and auxiliaries.”

Research Notes

Influences:
Bamba’s focus on divine love was influenced by previous West African and pan-Islamic saints including Ibn Arabi and al-Ghazzali. (1)

Sources:
(author’s translation from French or Arabic where appropriate in citations)


Roberts, Allen F. and Mary Nooter Roberts . A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal (Hong Kong: South Sea International Press, Ltd., 2003)


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Tasi Perkins (05/11/2011)

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