

FILM REVIEW

Gino Canella and Brian Valente-Quinn, directors. *Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge*. 2018. 21.55 minutes. Wolof and French (with English subtitles). Senegal. Graduate Committee on the Arts and Humanities/University of Colorado Boulder/The Eugene M. Kayden Fund. No price reported.

Although it is among the most important cultural productions on the African continent, theater has received very little attention in the vast and rich scholarship on Islam in West Africa. The reason for such a lacuna can probably be found in the reluctance some Muslim scholars have developed toward arts and human portrayal. In Islam, human representation is often perceived as *shirk*, or idolatry, which is considered to be among the religion's biggest sins. Islam has undergone various accommodation processes in the course of its expansion. Through Sufism, which is often glossed as Islamic mysticism, Muslims have incorporated some of the cultural and artistic traditions of their newly conquered lands into their own. It is within this context that we can envision Gino Canella and Brian Valente-Quinn's film *Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge*, which retraces the interesting and yet largely unknown story of the theater group *Bamba Mos Xam*. The film portrays a historical and religious play, *Bamba Mos Xam*, which sheds light on the role of theater in disseminating knowledge about Islam and the Mouride Sufi order (born in Senegal at the end of the nineteenth century).

The play *Bamba Mos Xam* was first performed by professional actors from a theater group that was named after Colette Senghor, the wife of the country's first president, Leopold Sedar Senghor. While touring Senegal to perform the piece, the group decided to first make a stop at Touba, the Mourides' holy city, in order to present the play to the marabout Al Hajji Fallilou Mbacke (1888–1968), son of the Mourides' founding figure, Amadou Bamba (1853–1927) and second Caliph of their order. In the words of the group's director, Cheikh Ibrahima Fall, the actors changed their group's name to *Bamba Mos Xam* after being acclaimed by Al Hajji Fallilou, who welcomed the idea of promoting the Mouride ideology through theater. *Bamba Mos Xam* is a Wolof term, which implies certain mystical considerations involved in embodying Amadou Bamba's image and being Mouride.

According to the Senegalese visual artist Elimane Fall, this name means, “When you taste Bamba, you know for certain.”

The play memorializes some episodes from the life of the Senegalese Sufi saint, Amadou Bamba. These episodes include his conflictual relationships with the French colonial administration that earned him a deportation and repatriation, leading to the popularization of his order. As they took the stage to enact and embody the image of Bamba, artists of the group *Bamba Mos Xam* had to deal with the challenge surrounding Islam and human representation. This dilemma begged the question: how to represent a religious leader such as Amadou Bamba, whom his disciples regard as their primary intermediary for gaining access to God? Throughout the film, the actors emphasized the mixed reactions they received from Mouride audiences. While many Mourides questioned the use of theater to spread knowledge about their order, others rushed to see the play to better appreciate the life and teachings of their spiritual leader. Clearly, the portrayal of a religious guide of this stature shows how easily a certain audience might confuse the difference between theater and religion.

The film’s strength lies in the exchange among different generations of Senegalese artists who have been involved in this form of representation. The passage dealing with the young artists from the theater group *Sant Yalla* captures the heart of the film. It reveals the acute sensitivity that young artists have developed to efficiently represent a revered religious figure using visual arts such as theater. The passing of knowledge between members of the historical theater group *Bamba Mos Xam* and the young artists of *Sant Yalla* is quite telling, as the latter continue the legacy of the first group by spreading knowledge about the *Baay Faal* spiritual leader Cheikh Ibrahima Fall, Cheikh Amadou Bamba’s foremost disciple. However, certain continuities and changes binding the Mourides’ everyday religiosity and other forms of artistic productions are not easily perceptible in the film. A thorough review of artistic developments in West Africa, as well as their impact on the historical traditions and culture of West African Muslims and Mourides in particular, would have also been very welcome, especially for non-Senegalese viewers. It is therefore noteworthy that with this film, Gino Canella and Brian Valente-Quinn have carved out a niche that builds upon the early work of scholars such as Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts. This work engages readers with the imagorium of the Mourides, a neologism that is applied to spaces in which Mouride disciples surround themselves with images of their Sufi master.

Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge would have greatly benefited from a more diligent producer. The visual quality of the film is somewhat lacking, compared to contemporary filmmaking standards. Although the artists of the group *Bamba Mos Xam* highlighted their early success in popularizing the Mouride faith, the pushback they later received from some Mouride audiences may also imply a lack of consideration and understanding of certain religious sensitivities. Taking this into consideration, it would have been interesting for the film to reproduce the scenes that created dissensions

between the theater group and the Mourides. Yet, these are details that do not detract from the film's contribution, which is considerable in its portrayal of theater as a means of spreading knowledge about Islam.

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