

## SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad SIT Digital Collections

---

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

---

Spring 2013

# Out of this World: An Ethnographic Study of Mystics, Spirits, and Animist Practices in Senegal

Peter Balonon-Rosen  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Balonon-Rosen, Peter, "Out of this World: An Ethnographic Study of Mystics, Spirits, and Animist Practices in Senegal" (2013).  
*Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 1511.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1511](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1511)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

**Out of this World:**

**An Ethnographic Study of Mystics, Spirits, and Animist Practices in Senegal**

Balonon-Rosen, Peter

Academic Director: Diallo, Souleye

Project Advisor: Diakhaté, Djiby

Tufts University

American Studies Major

Africa, Senegal, Dakar

“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for National Identity and the

Arts: Senegal, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2013”

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Research Methods	5
Validating Findings	7
Ethical Issues	7
What is Animism?	8
Marabouts	9
Rabbs, Djinnes, and Ndepps	11
Sandiol and the Village of Ndiol	13
Gris-Gris	16
Animism in Dakar: An Examination of Taxis and Lutte	18
Taxis	18
Lutte	19
Relationship with Islam	21
Conclusion	22
Bibliogrpahy	24
Time Log	25

## **Abstract**

Although the overwhelming majority of Senegal's inhabitants consider themselves Muslim, there are still many customs and behaviors throughout the country that derive from traditional animism. In both the metropolitan regions and village settings, animist beliefs and practices are still present despite many influences including Islam and colonialism. Animist practices often work in conjunction with the very schools of thought that deem them forbidden. The purpose of this study is to explore surviving animist traditions in Senegal, their role in the present context, and animism's relationship with Islam in order to fully understand the Senegalese culture in which these traditions play an important role. My research looks at major surviving animist practices, their influence in daily life, and how they have lasted into the present context.

Codes:

Religion	403
Cultural Anthropology	504
Traditional Healing	702

\*All quotes transcribed in French are exact quotes. Quotes in English are approximations of what was said by the informant.

## **Introduction**

Throughout West African, and specifically Senegalese society, a number of ethnic groups live amongst each other in harmony. The country consists of Wolof, Pular, Serer, Jola, Mandinka, Bassari, Diakhanke, and other peoples living in shared spaces (“Africa: Senegal”) Despite differences in background, languages, and religions these groups live amicably amongst one another. Walking through crowded areas of Dakar, Senegal such as the bustling Marché Sandaga, Dakar’s main market, one can see, experience, and hear people from all backgrounds mixing interchangeably.

Accordingly, in Senegalese society, there are a number of religious groups that live next to one another with similar relationships. Throughout the country’s population 94% define themselves as Muslim, 5% as Christian, and 1% as followers of traditional animist practices (“Africa: Senegal”). Although only a small percentage of people actually consider themselves solely followers of animist traditions, there are still countless practices, habits, objects and common daily occurrences within Senegalese society that derive their root from animist traditions.

Interestingly, a majority of the people who participate in these practices also consider themselves devout and proper followers of Islam. When asked, it was revealed that Islam forbids many of the practices that people choose to take part in. Yet, animist items and customs remain a large part of this predominantly Muslim society.

Through my research, I set to find out what exactly animism is, where these practices come from, what are some of the several animist traditions and elements that can be found today, animism's accordance with Islam, and how and why these practices are still found today.

## **Research Methods**

Before beginning the project, I had little to no knowledge about animism's role in Senegalese life. I knew that these practices existed, and I was told that even the most pious of Muslims in Senegal were participants, but I had no formal experience with the subject aside from knowing the names of a few basic objects. I assumed that animism would be found more prevalently in a rural village location than within the bustling limits of Dakar's overwhelmingly Muslim population. I was pleasantly surprised to find animist traditions are still easily found in both the urban and rural settings. Therefore, I set out to learn about and categorize a number of the most common.

To conduct my anthropological research I worked through a qualitative research method, consisting of an ethnographic investigation of a cultural group in their standard setting. I collected primary observational and participant observational data. This strategy, applied to the study of Senegalese inhabitants in the cities of Dakar and St. Louis and the village of Mouit, effectively produced the necessary data about animist practices, their role in the modern context of everyday life, and animism's relationship with Islam.

As an entire religion and set of beliefs is an exceptionally large topic, I decided to focus my research on key concepts and practices in order to understand a general context. In order to narrow the research to fit within the limits of the time constraints, I limited my interviews to seven, with a wide range of informants. I spoke with two *marabouts* from different backgrounds about their practices in differing rural and urban settings, whom I found incredibly useful to interview, as they each were articulate with vast sources of knowledge on the topic. One of them was the grandfather in the family that I stayed with in the village of Mouit. He became a primary informant and when I went back to visit the village to speak with him, he provided a number of people to speak with including the chief of a neighboring village. I also interviewed a man of *Lébou* background in Dakar who had intimate knowledge of *Ndëpp* ceremonies and proved incredibly useful. Interviews consisted the bulk of my research, and I conducted loose interviews with planned topics where questions were asked in response to the conversation.

Participant observation consisted of attending and taking part in events of my study. I attended a *lutte* match with an SIT staff member and other students. There, I was able to conduct a first-hand examination of animist elements to the national sport. With my grandfather *marabout* in Mouit, I had my fortune read using *petaw shells*, and attended the readings of others. I went to the home of a *marabout* in Dakar and was able to collect first-hand information and observations in the settings that ceremonies and rituals take place.

I struggled to find up-to-date and relevant books relating to the topic of traditional animism at libraries, but was able to conduct secondary research with a number of articles given to me by my advisor.

### ***Validating Findings***

In order to validate my research and the analysis of my findings I employed a variety of strategies. The triangulation of data, which consists of consulting assorted sources so that information received from one source would be corroborated by others, helped to create an all-inclusive picture. At each interview, I would insert themes and ideas from earlier interviews in order to discuss them and ascertain their precision.

In order to work around and clarify research biases, as completely objective research without any cultural biases in an anthropological study of this type is impossible, I often tried to address why I interpreted my data in the manner in which I did. If I encountered American values judging the information I gathered, I would try and analyze from a different perspective.

### ***Ethical Issues***

With the rights and consent of participants in mind, I clearly expressed the nature of my questioning and the research project that I was working on. I explained the goals of my research project and the possibilities that their information would be used in the publication. I took efforts to obtain verbal consent from each of my informants to use information.



## **What is Animism?**

Animism has a number of elements that define it in the Senegalese context. Generally, it is the religious view that natural physical objects of the earth hold a spiritual power and that two worlds exist: the physical one of man and earth, and the invisible one of spirits and god. The customs and traditions of animism do not come in the form of organized religion and are passed along as habits and rituals from generation to generation. Animism is polytheistic in nature and contains a number of gods that are found in the physical environment. They can be found in “les arbres, animaux, et la terre”<sup>1</sup> (Diakhaté 2013).

A large facet of Senegalese society relies on the existing tradition that those with age have privilege and power to be intermediaries between the earthen and spiritual worlds. They are the mediators between spirits, gods, and men (Diakhaté 2013). Max Weber views this custom as a form of socialization that creates a lasting set of behaviors between generations, as the cohesion of individuals occurs based on their awareness of belonging to the same common ancestor and respecting elders (Diakhaté, 5). Thus, the entire extended family is then attached to the religion, the worship of ancestors, and sanctity of lineage, allowing these customs to be passed between generations. These ancestors can communicate with the spiritual world through earthen things.

---

<sup>1</sup> The trees, the animals, and the earth.

As animism is not an organized religion, it is left open to interpretation and I found that many people had their own set of codes of what was acceptable to perform and what was not depending on their specific spirituality.

## ***Marabouts***

*Marabouts* are traditionally Muslim religious leaders and teachers in Senegal, but may take the form of Koranic scholar, leaders of religious communities, or fortune tellers. *Marabouts* proved to be one of the greatest mélanges of animist traditions and Islamic practices. *Marabouts* have the position of being intermediary between the spiritual world and the earthen one. The *marabouts* that I spoke with were Muslim *marabouts* and devout followers of the religion, but practiced many animist habits that they declared forbidden in Islam.

My first experience with a Senegalese *marabout* came through a particularly Senegalese institution: the family. The role of a large, communal family is one of the foremost staples of Senegalese society. Thanks to an unexpected stroke of luck, during a stay in the village of Mouit with SIT, my current Senegalese institute, I was assigned to live with family where my grandfather, Demba Niang, was a *marabout*. I was invited to have my fortune read by him. This took place on a *natte*<sup>2</sup> in my family's salon.

The *marabout*, dressed in a green, traditional boubou spent some time preparing himself and from a sack withdrew a set of petaw shells<sup>3</sup>. These, I was told

---

<sup>2</sup> traditional Senegalese woven mat

<sup>3</sup> small shells with mystical nature, used to read fortunes

would tell my fortune based on the way that they fell when thrown. Only a *marabout* with knowledge of the practice could read them. The fortunes that he declared had to do with luck, protection, love, fame, education, and travel. *Marabout* is the term that he went by, although the term *settekat* is also used.

I attended the readings of others and he also offered a powder-like substance to wash with in order to ward off bad spirits and bad luck. Earlier that day, I had seen the substance being created as he directed his granddaughter in crushing up wood with a *mortier et pilon*.<sup>4</sup>

This turned out to be a typical item that *marabouts* create for individuals. Another *marabout*, Souleyemane Samb, whom I visited in Dakar, had a number of different powders, incense, charms, and amulets to ward off bad spirits. The room in Samb's house that we met in, at first glance, appeared to be a storage room or place to dispose refuse. There were bags and boxes filled to the brims with papers, seemingly throwaway objects, sand, leaves, and more. It was exposed that each of the items I originally mistook for garbage had their own special mystical purpose, many to communicate with spirits.

Spirit communication and warding off evil spirits were demonstrated to be a large part of the duties of the *marabout*. Fortune telling can be done through a number of methods, utilizing either elements of sand, water, glass, *petaw shells*, or the Koran depending on the specific *marabout*. The *marabout* communicates with spirits who help him interpret the meaning of the employed objects.

---

<sup>4</sup> device usually used to crush vegetables

With the *marabouts* that I spoke with, it was revealed that the knowledge of how to be a *marabout* was within the family and both had learned from their fathers. Through speaking with spirits that wish to aid the family, the *marabout* can communicate with the spiritual world. The belief exists that the elderly are able to communicate with the spirits, while younger generations cannot. Someone must be between 40 and 50 years old to commence becoming a *marabout*. Younger than 40 years old is too young to learn the ways of the *marabouts* and one will not be able to learn after they have passed 50 years old.

### ***Rabbs, Djinnes, and Ndepps***

Within Senegal, the belief in supernatural beings exists across all ethnicities, although the *Lébou* people remain the most predominant followers of supernatural traditions (McKinley, 7). A most predominant type of spirit in the Senegalese context that exists in the spiritual world is a *rabb*. The *rabb* is a Senegalese spirit “with which ancestors of modern families made pacts for protection, health, etc.” and lasts generation to generation (McKinley, 8). *Rabbs* may then come back to affect those in the family lineage in the present. When this occurs, the *rabb* will inhabit an individual, usually in a wicked manner and needs to be exorcised from the carrier.

However, each *rabb* in the current context is not evil and often takes the form of a protective spirit. Many areas in Senegal have their own *rabb* that protect the region (Ndiaye, B 2013). In St. Louis the *rabb* Mame Coumba Bang guards the area. In the *Lébou* region of Dakar, Ouakam, the *rabb* Mame Diarra exists. Accordingly,

many other areas throughout Senegal have their own similar *rabb*, such as Coumba Castel for l'Île de Gorée. In other places throughout Senegal, a *rabb* may assume the form of an animal totem. Below, I go into detail about this. The *rabb* grants protection to the region and the region's inhabitants. *Rabb* are not accepted by Islam (Ndiaye, B 2013).

The second variety of spirit, almost used interchangeably with *rabb*, is a *djinne*. The key difference is that a *djinne* has no dependence or ties to a family and stems from Islamic tradition (McKinley, 9).

Interestingly, although Islam does not accept them, most of the dealings with the spiritual world in Senegal consist of interactions with *rabb*. As the *rabbs* bestow protection on regions of the country, it is important that people in each region appropriately honor the *rabb* in order to continue receiving the protection. For example, to honor Mame Coumba Bang in St. Louis, people make sacrifices of curdled milk and cous cous by pouring them into the river where the spirit of Mame Coumba Bang lives (Niang, D 2013). When an infant is going to be born, the parents take curdled milk and throw it into the river to prevent the woman from dying in childbirth and to have Mame Coumba Bang's protection provided to their child.

When a person is visited by an angry and ill-willed *rabb* in a dream and then possessed, an *ndep<sup>5</sup>* ceremony is held. The goal is to remove the spirit as well as introduce the possessed person back into the community (Ndiaye, B 2013). The ceremony, which usually last three to four days, but sometimes as many as eight, consists of incredible amounts of dancing in order to identify the rhythm that will

---

<sup>5</sup> exorcism

set the *rabb* in motion to leave the body of the possessor, as each *rabb* has its own particular rhythm it will respond to. Through communication with the *rabb*, the *ndeppkat*<sup>6</sup> can hear its demands and work with it to leave the human body and return to the spiritual world. The demands often consist of sacrifices and money.

*Ndepp* ceremonies are not the only way to remove ill-intentioned spirits and *marabouts* can often have a role in this. In both the rural and urban settings, *marabouts* create powders to be used when showering to wash oneself of spirits. There are powders and incense to burn that will attract the spirits out of the human body and certain red tissue and red objects that one can wear to entice the spirit to leave (Samb 2013). This, I was told, was because *rabbs* are scared of the color red along with lion fur.

### ***Sandiol and the Village of Ndiol***

An animist tradition that is still evident is the role of totems. I have earlier discussed *rabbs* and *jinnes*, but another animist characteristic of Senegalese society that can be found are protective totems that serve a similar purpose. These totems range from specific animals to elements of water, air, and earth. Keeping with the element of animism that honors and has ties to the earthen elements, totems can be found throughout Senegalese society and often in village settings.

Specifically in villages, elements of “primary groups” can be found. A primary group is a collection of individuals who originate from the same soil and are aware of the kinship between them” (Diakhaté, 5). The solidarity that emerges from this

---

<sup>6</sup> person who performs *ndepp* ceremony

awareness encourages a cooperation to create objectives that will benefit the entire community, and discourages, and in some cases nullifies, individualism. French anthropologist Marcel Griaule primarily known for his studies in West Africa, wrote in *Dieu d'eau* that in this type of primary group setting, the uniform respect of elders and ancestors and the worshiping of totems in animal, plant, or environmental form serve to provide consistency and stability to the society (Diakhaté, 5).

A discernible form of totems being a part of normal life takes place in the village of Ndiol in northern Senegal. The village has a totem named Sandiol that lives in the trees adjacent to the village and provides protection to the village and villagers. Sandiol is a large black snake that visits the villagers' rooms and provides protection in a number of manners. Accordingly with Griaule, when I arrived in the village to talk with someone about their totem, I was told that I would need to speak to an elder there. This demonstrated the respect and knowledge that was attributed to the older generations. I talked with the chief of the village to find out information about Sandiol and the snake's role in villagers lives.

The main role of the snake is to protect the village. Sandiol donates good luck and protection to the villagers and the village itself. When anyone tries to "do bad to the village" the snake will protect the villagers and the village. The snake has been a part of village life for many generations and remains a source of protection to all in the village. The snake originally chose to come to the village on its free accord and offer its protection, so the villagers are bound to it to this day. It protects from both human would be do-wrongers as well as other snakes that come and wish to give bad luck to the village.

One of the main aspects of the snake's protection is to protect the villagers from bad luck and ill-wishers. It gives this protection by being in the presence of the villagers. In order to bestow new luck to infants when they are born to the village, the snake appears without being called to bless pregnant women. It arrives and encircles the pregnant women without biting and through this act bequeaths the unborn child with the protection that it gives to the village.

On average, the snake materializes in the village and makes appearances fifteen days apart from one another. It may come to visit but the inhabitants do not always see it each time. As it enters their homes, Sandiol may take a variety of forms. It is normally a large black snake, but may appear with a different size or color to each villager if they are scared of the black snake in its natural form. Correspondingly, if someone wishes to do the snake harm because they are scared, it can take a different form, such as a garden snake, so that one will not recognize it as something to be afraid of.

However, Sandiol while being a protector has a key factor that he does not protect from: himself. He comes to the village to safeguard the villagers, but does so from a distance. He encircles the pregnant women, enters the villager's rooms, and traverses the village, but does not touch or harm the villagers. Sandiol will protect the villagers or visitors to the village for more than fifteen days as long as they do not touch him. If one touches the snake, they risk death within fifteen days from that time. The chief of the village revealed that a young girl had once touched the snake and is now dead. So while being a source of protection, it still must be honored with the correct precautions.



## ***Gris-Gris***

A feature of animist traditions that is still very predominant in the current context is the use of talismans and charms in everyday life. These objects are used in a variety of manners, predominantly to bring the wearer good luck or protection. While found in a variety of manners, one of the most prevalent and well-known talismans that I encountered throughout Senegal were *gris-gris*.

The origin of the word *gris-gris* is believed to come from the word *juju*, which means fetish and refers to something with supernatural powers (“Gri-Gri”, 265). *Gris-gris* generally appear as small leather pouches, with varying contents within to generate different natures of fortune. While typically wrapped in leather, it is not required that the contents of the *gris-gris* take this appearance and *gris-gris* can be found wrapped in string or other materials to keep the contents together.

The *gris-gris* contain different contents depending on their use. There are generally two types of *gris-gris*. The first variety is created for Muslims and contains verses of the Koran. Depending on the exact nature of the *gris-gris* and its desired effect, differing Koranic verses are used. The second type of *gris-gris* created derives its roots from a more traditional animist background. It was explained extracts or pieces of animal horns and plant roots can be contained in these. The difference between the people who carry each type derives from their religious beliefs.

Qualified *marabouts* with knowledge of the creation process construct both types of *gris-gris*. A *gris-gris* containing Koranic verses can have different writings and inscriptions used. Specific scripts are used to aid with love, luck, education,

protection, and *lutte*<sup>7</sup>. The *marabout* picks particular verses that he has ordained for the type of aid the *gris-gris* is to serve. For example, in a 1982 survey, *gris-gris* were one of the top three methods of contraception used by women in Senegal (Goldberg, 265).

One of the most common demographics found carrying *gris-gris* are young children. A major purpose of the *gris-gris* is to protect people who cannot read the Koran themselves. Before the time that they can do so, in order to be protected by Allah, the Muslim god, children wear the talismans. Parents bring their children to a *marabout* and he creates *gris-gris* specifically for their protection. They are generally wrapped around the bearer's arms, legs, or waist and hidden beneath clothing. However, it is not solely children who wear them and, as a *marabout* explained, any and all people may carry them.

A major example of this can be found in the setting of Senegal's national sport—*lutte*. *Lutters* are almost always found wearing multiple *gris-gris* wrapped around their bodies. These *gris-gris* are fashioned by *marabouts* for the specific purpose of aiding *lutters* and are one of the most recognizable aspects of a *lutter's* appearance.

Yet, it is not just people that wear *gris-gris*. In the village of Mouit, on a large tree I found a *gris-gris* hanging from one of its branches. When asked, villagers explained that it was there because the tree was a totem for the village and that the *gris-gris* was designed to protect it (Niang, M 2013). People can adorn totems with *gris-gris* in order to safeguard them from bad luck and harm.

---

<sup>7</sup> Senegalese wrestling

The construction of the *gris-gris* is not identical across Senegal and there is no uniform code for *gris-gris* making. Each *marabout* adds different elements and verses that they deem to be the most appropriate. The specific *gris-gris* that one receives depends on the *marabout* that they visit. Each *marabout* fashions *gris-gris* in an individual style and adds engravings and markings tailored to each carrier.

Across history, there have been changes in the nature of *gris-gris* as well. While not gaining information on the specificity of the changes, I was given a metaphor in which to compare to. “It is like two students receiving the same degree at different schools at different times, things will change and improve” (Niang, D 2013). So like an evolution in schooling, new elements are added by each generation so that a better final product will result.

## **Animism in Dakar: An Examination of Taxis and Lutte**

### ***Taxis***

One of the most familiar characteristics of Dakar and all of Senegal’s cities are the numerous taxis that cover the streets of each metropolitan area. Their honking and searching for passengers is commonplace activity that one grows accustomed too after any stay, no matter how brief, in these Sengalese cities. Taximen are known for the bartering and the often brightly decorated interiors of their cabs. While a good source to utilize in order to move around Dakar and surrounding areas, the Dakar taxicabs also serve another purpose: they are often a great display of surviving commonplace animist traditions in a modern setting.

A common item seen on taxis are horsetails attached to the car's under part in the back near the exhaust pipe.. While not on all taxis, they are commonly displayed on a voluminous amount of the ones found throughout Dakar. These charms known serve several purposes for the taxi and come from a place rooted in tradition.

A main purpose of the horsetail is to give good luck. An informant explained that a taxi equipped with the horsetail allows the driver to become the best taximan around. It creates good luck for the driver and permits his car to go faster than it could otherwise. Like the horse that it came from, it empowers the car and taximan to move fast and without problem through the city.

This belief comes from the village traditions where horses were predominantly used as modes of transportation. The dedication to this tradition and belief is revealed by the price of the item. While not finding out an exact price, I was assured by multiple people that the horsetails are very expensive, yet completely worth their price in the protection and luck that they bring.

Another item derived from animist tradition that can be found in taxis are gris-gris. They can be found wrapped around a steering wheel, on a rearview mirror, or on the drivers themselves. As discussed earlier, the gris-gris can be created for protection, good luck, hopes for many clients, and more. A number of drivers have their *gris-gris*' displayed prominently, again revealing the taxi as a setting that contains animist aspects.

## ***Lutte***

Touched upon briefly earlier, another common arena where animist traces can be found in Dakar, is within the realm of Senegal's national sport: *lutte*. I was lucky enough to be invited to go to a *lutte* match with other classmates by Khalidou, the guard at our school. When we arrived outside of the stadium in Medina<sup>8</sup> one of the most striking things were the items being sold outside. There were *gris-gris*, powders of varying color, colorful amulets and talismans of many sizes, *petaw shells*, and more for sale. These were items I had rarely seen available outside of a *marabout's* presence my entire time in Senegal. These were being sold to people who were taking inspiration from the actions of lutters.

Once inside the stadium amongst the music, dance, raucous fans, and sport it was clear how big of an influence mysticism, luck, and superstition were on the Senegalese wrestling. Each lutter carried numerous *gris-gris* wrapped around their arms, legs, waists, and necks. These were each specifically designed to aid lutters. The success of the lutter, it was explained, relied as much upon the luck bestowed upon them by marabouts as their physical skill (Koundja, 2013).

I observed the lutters drenching themselves with water bottles filled with milk and odd colored liquids of gray, purple, and brown. The colored liquids, which I had seen before at the home of a *marabout*, were designed to ward off bad luck and bad spirits. The milk served a similar purpose. Another practice that I observed was a lutter taking a horsetail and sweeping the perimeter of the *lutte* ring. This was to ward off bad luck and spirits who wished harm to that lutter (Koundja, 2013).

---

<sup>8</sup> A neighborhood in Dakar

A memorable part of the experience was when a chicken got loose and was chased through the stadium. The presence of the chicken, it was explained, was because lutters performed sacrifices in order to honor spirits and attain luck that would allow them to win the match.

More importantly, something as average as a lutte and taxis containing these objects shows the prevalence of animism in daily Senegalese life. With modernization, African social traditions have undergone profound changes. The taxis and lutte arenas reveal a climate of adaptation that embraces the modern but still stays true to traditions of old, an aspect that is found throughout Senegalese society.

## **Relationship with Islam**

It is impossible to look at animism in the Senegalese context without analyzing its relationship with Islam. Most of the country defines itself as followers of the Muslim faith but a huge percentage of the people continue animist traditions, although forbidden by Islam. In the past, there have been conflicts between animists and Muslim marabouts. For example, the Muslim Serigne Touba, one of Senegal's most well known religious leaders, fought against animism and animism's presence in West Africa because it was not part of the Koran. In Mecca, where Islam requires a pilgrimage, followers are not allowed to worship elements of the earth or wear *gris-gris*, even the variety with koranic verses in them. This is because *gris-gris* are not universally accepted by all of Islam and one needs to only be thinking of Allah there.

However, in the present in Senegal, this conflict seems to have receded. There are cemeteries where followers of all faiths are buried and animist practices are found commonly throughout the Muslim Senegalese society. Practices such as *gris-gris*, *ndepp* ceremonies, communication with *rabbs*, and totems are all forbidden by Islam, yet survive to this day. All of the individuals I spoke with, including religious leaders, laughed off this inconsistency and simply explained it as the way of life in Senegal and that it does not impose on their standing as good Muslims.

That is because Islam consists of two codes: things that one must do, and things that are forbidden. How one applies these codes to their own life is left up to interpretation. Animism, as an unorganized religion without such codes, can fit into the space that is left between the codes that Islam consists of. In Senegal, it seems to be more about preserving tradition because of the importance of ancestors, rather than following a strict set of religious rules.

## **Conclusion**

Senegal is known as the country of *teranga*<sup>9</sup> for its culture of friendship, charity, and sharing. It is not uncommon for a journey down the street to take over double the time one would expect because of unexpected conversations with strangers, invites to drink *ataaya*<sup>10</sup>, and prolonged earnest greetings. Within this culture of warmth a tolerance exists as well. In order to understand the role of religion in Senegalese society it is necessary to understand the basics of the *teranga*

---

<sup>9</sup> Senegalese all-encompassing hospitality

<sup>10</sup> Senegalese tea

that shapes daily life: love, tolerance, and giving. The traditions and customs of animism have survived to this day in part because of the tolerance that is imbedded in society through *teranga*. Traces of these practices can be found throughout society and it is essential to understand the basics of spirits and supernatural beliefs in order to fully grasp a holistic view of of the culture of Senegal.



## Bibliography

"Africa: Senegal." *CIA- The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency, n.d. Web. 11 May 2013.

Diakhaté, Djiby "Anthropologie Africaine." *Support De Cours Propose Par Dr. Djiby Diakhaté*. 2013. Print.

Diakhaté, Djiby "Islam au Senegal" Arts and Culture Seminar. SIT. Dakar, 12 March 2013.

Goldberg, Howard I.; Fara G. M'Bodji and Jay S. Friedman "Fertility and Family Planning In One Region of Senegal". *International Family Planning Perspectives*. December 1986. 119–120. Print.

"Gri-gri". *The Element Encyclopedia of the Psychic World*. Harper Element. 2006. p. 265. Print.

Koundja, Khalidou interviewed by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Guardien* (27 April, 2013)

Ndiaye, Bane, interview by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Electrician* (22 April, 2013)

Ndiaye, Moudou interviewed by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Chief of Ndiol* (30 April, 2013)

Niang, Demba interviewed by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Marabout* (29 April, 2013)

Niang, Moussa interviewed by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Ecoguard* (29 April, 2013)

Samb, Souleymane, interview by Peter Balonon-Rosen *Marabout* (22 April, 2013)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b># of hrs</b>	<b>Activity</b>
15-April	12-1pm	1	advisor meeting
17-April	1-3:30pm	2.5	secondary research
18- April	3-7pm	4	secondary research
21- April	5-8pm	3	study questions created
22- April	10am-3pm	5	interviews
23- April	12-4pm	4	secondary research
25- April	12-3pm	3	transcribing
26- April	1-5pm	4	secondary research
27- April	3-8pm	5	lutte match
28- April	1-3pm	2	typing notes
29- April	8-2pm	6	travel to St. Louis/Mouit
	7-8:30pm	1.5	interviews
30- April	9am-9pm	12	participant observation/interview
1-May	9am-9pm	12	participant observation, notes
2-May	9am-9pm	12	participant observation
3-May	10am-8pm	10	travel to Dakar
5-May	12-4pm	4	transcription
6-May	10-11am	1	advisor meeting
7-May	12-4pm	4	note consolidation/transcriptions
8-May	12-6pm	6	writing ISP
9-May	2-7pm	5	transcribing/writing ISP
10-May	11am-6pm	7	writing ISP
11-May	9am-12pm	3	writing ISP
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>120.5</b>	