



# A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal

*Allen F. Roberts, Mary Nooter Roberts, Gassia Armenian, Ousmane Gueye*

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"A Saint in the City" examines the elaborate visual culture of the Mourides, a Senegalese Sufi movement based upon the mystical teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1953-1927). In the boldly visual city of Dakar, images abound despite the fact that Senegal is largely a Muslim country. Vibrant street murals, calligraphy and calligrams, didactic posters, drawings that protect and heal, advertising images, colourful clothing, Web sites, intricate glass paintings, and innovative architecture all attest to the transformative potency that expressive culture has for Mourides. One image is ubiquitous throughout urban Senegal: the portrait of Sheikh Amadou Bamba, based upon a colonial photograph from 1913. Sacred images "work" for Mourides, and as Bamba is a saint (Wali Allah, or "Friend of God" in Arabic), his portrait actively conveys powerful blessings called baraka that help people to address everyday difficulties, challenges, and goals. The Mouride Way is observed by over four million Senegalese and thousands more around the globe including increasing numbers of African Americans and others converting to this most African of Islamic paths. Amadou Bamba's pacifism, dignity, and self-reliance, as well as his emphasis on the sanctity of work, offer a view of Islam quite different from those currently suggested by Western media. Indeed, "A Saint in the City" reminds us that there are many faces of Islam in Africa and throughout the world. It also assists readers to reconsider misconceptions concerning the prohibition of images in Islam in light of the explosion of visual culture derived from a single photograph of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. "A Saint in the City" grows from a decade of interdisciplinary research and focuses upon nine contemporary artists who base their works upon the spiritual teachings of Amadou Bamba, regardless of their particular backgrounds, training, or styles. The book boldly transgresses the boundaries normally enforced between local and global, fine and popular arts, gallery and streets, historical and contemporary circumstances. An emphasis upon Mouride artists' own voices further decenters the narrative. Allen F. Roberts is professor of world arts and cultures and director of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center at UCLA. Mary Nooter Roberts is deputy director and chief curator of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

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