

Animating the archive: the trial and testimony of a Sufi saint

In 1895 the colonial administration of Senegal sentenced Sheikh Amadu Bamba to exile for stirring anti-colonial disobedience. At his trial, Bamba allegedly recited a prayer in defiance of the French authorities. Although there is no archival record to prove that the prayer was recited, since the 1970s Bamba's disciples have flocked to the former seat of colonial power to commemorate his act of resistance; their testimony has displaced the authority of the colonial archive and imagines a decolonial utopia in archival absence. This article examines how their prayer subverts the colonial archive, while it remains entangled in its substrate.

Key words archive, testimony, prayer, decolonial utopia, Senegal

Introduction

In the figure of the witness of a postcolonial modernity we have another wisdom: it comes from those who have seen the nightmare of racism and oppression in the banal daylight of the everyday. They represent an idea of action and agency more complex than either the nihilism of despair or the Utopia of progress. (Bhabha 1994: 365)

My research on the commemoration of a Sufi Saint in Saint-Louis had already taken me into some surprising directions, when someone told me to look out for a Frenchman who presumably knew a thing or two about the Saint. Conversations on Sheikh Amadu Bamba had already led me to a cell in the Governor's Palace, and now I was meeting a Frenchman in a grand hotel at the city's central square. Courteously received by the hotel manager, I was directed to a room situated in the back of the courtyard. After a knock on the door, a white man opened it, introduced himself and let me into his room, which was rather small and without windows. When my eyes got used to the darkness, I discerned a single bed, a desk and chair, a few books and some tools. Although not quite a cell, this was a far cry from a French *salon*. Jean, who did not disclose his surname, told me that he had been employed by the hotel management to oversee the hotel's refurbishment and had been housed in this room for the duration of the works. He explained that the hotel had been built as a military barrack to house the French army in Saint-Louis. The imposing building had always been known by the name of Hôtel Rogniat Nord. Its conversion into a tourist hotel was part of the policy to preserve Saint-Louis's cityscape as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

After I had explained the purpose of my visit, Jean gave me his romantic vision of the Saint, which chimed in with the hagiographies I was used to hearing. He also informed me that the Saint had spent a night in this room prior to his trial by the Privy Council in 1895. I was suitably impressed with this precious knowledge, and Jean went on to tell me about several 'experiences' he had had in this room. In fact, he told me, on

two occasions he had seen the Saint come through the wall, pointing at what seemed to me an impenetrable wall. I did not question Jean's account. But through further research, I soon learned that the spirituality of places looms large in the Saint-Louis imaginary of the Saint.

Jean told me to go and visit Colonel Abdou Seck, a retired Customs officer, in his house in one of Saint-Louis's leafy suburbs. The Colonel informed me that after his retirement, he had meditated on the life of the Saint Sheikh Amadu Bamba. One day, while running an errand in the city, his car broke down right in front of the Hôtel Rogniat Nord, then still a military barrack. Looking for assistance, the Colonel entered a room occupied by military recruits, whom he asked for help, and while the recruits repaired his car he had a vision of the Saint. Only after this vision did he find out that this was the room where, in 1895, the Saint had been held prisoner prior to this trial. Once he had learned this, the Colonel arranged for the army to clean the room and preserve it to the memory of the Saint. As the first person to identify Bamba's 'presence' in this room, Colonel Seck kept the room's keys.

During the annual commemoration of the Saint's sojourn in Saint-Louis, pilgrims go to this room to pray and meditate. The cell is one of several sites designated by the Saint's disciples as a place of worship. At present, the organising committee acknowledges the existence of such sites in the former military training grounds (Jardin des tirs), the colonial laboratory (Laboratoire de Sor), the first secondary school for African students (École des otages) and in the Governor's Palace (Gouvernance). Authorised by stories of miracles, the authenticity of these sites is established through testimonies of the Saint's disciples. In contrast with the bureaucratic process that authorises Saint-Louis as a UNESCO World Heritage site, this alternative archive of sites is authenticated through visions and legends (De Jong 2014). It is no coincidence, of course, that this alternative archive 'doubles' the UNESCO archive, honouring not the grand facades of colonial palaces, but the hot, oppressive cells in which the Saint was detained. The alternative archive not only provides an inventory of the Saint's stations, but by tracing the regime of incarceration that he was subjected to remembers the colonial policy and exposes it to the public at large.

Decolonial *an-arkhē*

The *archons*, Derrida lectures, are those entrusted with the documents. They are given the formal responsibility to care for these documents, but are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence: 'They have the right to interpret the archives' (Derrida 1996: 2). The citizens in command of the Greek polis filed their documents at their own house. In Saint-Louis, we have a different kind of *archons*: they have taken the keys of rooms they do not own and the rooms of which they have taken the keys are empty of 'documents' but filled with the Saint's presence. This suggests that these *archons* have successfully appropriated the right to archive but what they preserve is a memory, not a document. As Achille Mbembe states, the archive is 'not a piece of data, but a status' (2002: 20).

If the archive is not a piece of data, but the authority that gives documents their credibility, then the crumbling ruins of colonial archives should have our attention. In his article on the archives of The Gambia, Buckley (2005) signals the decay the colonial archive is subject to in the postcolony. At pains to point out that archival decay

is not restricted to African countries, Buckley suggests that the ruination of archives is in fact a hallmark of modernity. He states that *our* archival malaise signals our mourning for the passing of the colonial, which may well be true. But this raises an urgent question: do these archives still command the authority they once exerted over colonial subjects? And if they do not command any authority, what will replace the ruined colonial archives?

In his exploration of the origins of archives, Derrida posits that the archive inscribes the law and authorises it (1996: 4). But while Derrida associates the archive with the privilege of patriarchy, postcolonial authors have instead drawn attention to the archive's transitional quality in processes of political transformation. In thinking about the constitution of archives, the postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall once remarked: 'No archive arises out of thin air' (2001: 89), emphasising that every archive has its 'prehistory'. Assuming that the decolonial archive must recognise its predecessor, the challenge is to think the decolonial archive as an institution in transition. If we agree that mere decay cannot constitute an alternative archive, how then can the colonial archive be transformed into a decolonial archive? In her reflections on imperial debris, Stoler suggests that the ruination of imperial formations needs to be attended to, not to revive the colonial infrastructures, but to study how 'imperial formations persist in their material debris' (2013: 10). Here, the focus is on ruination as a process through which postcolonial subjects remain entangled with the imperial project. Acknowledging the duration of empire, Stoler also allows for a process of re-appropriation: 'Instead we might turn to ruins as epicentres of renewed claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects' (2013: 14). It is this kind of appropriation, this animation of the colonial archive, that this article aspires to explore.

Decolonisation of the archive requires a refiguring of the colonial archive (Hamilton *et al.* 2002). Yet, this may be a process that involves a violent engagement with the colonial archive amounting to its disfiguring.¹ Archival appropriations constitute a process aptly captured with the term *an-arkhē*. The suffix 'an' designates that what is simultaneously 'above' and 'against'. *An-arkhē* is a force that opposes the institution, but is integral to it (Derrida 1996: 10–11). This destructive force is at work in the archive in its self-professed aim to preserve, for instance, when the 'original' is destroyed in the process of archiving. The application of this *archontic* principle is particularly apt in a postcolonial context. Decolonial memory often attaches itself to colonial heritage (De Jong and Rowlands 2007). The decaying colonial archive might be a most suitable site on which such attachments grow, like ivy rampaging on the decrepit ramparts of former rulers.

In this article, I explore how this theory could be applied to the colonial archive of Saint-Louis. Starting from the assumption that interventions decolonise the colonial archive, such interventions take place 'on' the colonial archive, yet paradoxically require its prolonged existence, as ivy too requires its infrastructure. The paradox cannot be resolved: as postcolonial interventions critique the colonial archive and negate its law (*an-arkhē*), they simultaneously draw on its authority and animate it through postcolonial anarchy.

1 Elsewhere, I have suggested that the process of archiving pursued by UNESCO needs to be distinguished from archival appropriations 'from below' (De Jong 2014).

Historical précis

In the year in which Sheikh Amadu Bamba was summoned by the colonial authorities, the French army had almost completed its conquest of Senegal, but still feared revolts led by Muslim leaders. Bamba had just established the *tariqa* (path) of the Muridiyya, the first Sufi brotherhood founded by a Black African. In a context in which many Senegalese converted to Islam and became disciples of Bamba, fear of an uprising led the colonial government to summon him to stand before the Privy Council in Saint-Louis.² This trial is not well documented, yet among historians of the Muslim brotherhood it is agreed that its outcome was known from the start. Bamba was found guilty of the allegations and condemned to seven years of exile in Gabon. At the trial, Bamba allegedly said a prayer of two *raka* to signal the ‘impurity’ of the meeting.³

When he returned to Senegal, Bamba was still very popular but his exile nonetheless seems to have triggered a change in his stance towards the coloniser, as he was increasingly willing to collaborate with the French. During the First World War, for example, he played a pivotal role in enrolling his followers as conscripts in the French army, for which he received the French Legion of Honour. Indeed, already during his exile his followers had sought to collaborate with the French.⁴ As one of several Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal, the Muridiyya owed their rapid growth during the early colonial period partly to the fact that they integrated liberated slaves into the brotherhood and successfully mobilised their work force in the production of groundnuts as cash crops. The expansion of the Muridiyya was beneficial to the emergence of a groundnut economy and enjoyed considerable support from the colonial government (Cruise O’Brien 1971).

Functioning as voting banks in the years after independence the disciples of the Murid brotherhood proved an electoral force to reckon with. For their sheer electoral weight directed and manipulated by the *marabouts*, the Muridiyya have been understood as an expression of civil society that has significantly contributed to the political stability and climate of religious tolerance in Senegal. But it should be noted that the brotherhood has often functioned as a theocracy, in particular in the sacred city of Touba founded by Sheikh Amadu Bamba himself, whose body is buried in a mausoleum in the city’s central mosque (Guèye 2002).

As the second largest city of Senegal, situated in what formerly constituted the heartland of Senegal’s groundnut economy, Touba hosts an annual commemoration of Bamba’s return from exile known as the *Maggal* of Touba, a festival that attracts millions as all of the Saint’s disciples consider it their duty to attend this holy day (Coulon 1999; Bava and Guèye 2001). A calendar of annual commemorations held in

2 Originally created in the 1820s to support the colony’s Governor, this council functioned as advisory council to the Governor. The members of the council were named by the Governor to inform him about local affairs and economic questions. See Jones (2013: 126).

3 A *ruku’* (plural: *raka*) is a single prostration performed during the Muslim prayer. Rather than kneeling all the way to the ground, a *ruku’* consists of half a prostration. Muslims can say a prayer of two *raka* in a situation of emergency.

4 The history of the Murid brotherhood and its implication in the colonial project has been the subject of a vast body of research, which I shall not attempt to review within the context of this article. Recent contributions to the canon by Senegalese historians Babou (2007a) and Guèye (2002) and American anthropologists Roberts and Roberts (2003) contain full bibliographies.

different cities throughout the national territory ensures the continued commemoration of the Saint's stations of life and the mobilisation of the Murid disciples in a way that merges their allegiance to the founding Saint with their sense of national identity (De Jong 2010). The annual commemoration of the Prayer of Saint-Louis is one such commemoration. It was founded in 1976 by Madické Wade, a communist and anti-colonialist who seized the moment of political liberalisation to establish the Prayer as an Afro-nationalist performance (Babou 2007b). Every year the city of Saint-Louis welcomes the disciples who come to pay homage to the founder of their brotherhood as they gather at the central square of this colonial city. Flocking to the former seat of colonial power, the pilgrims come to remember the prayer said by Bamba in defiance of the colonial authorities. The event is known as *la prière des deux rakhas* or, *Maggal de Saint-Louis* (and is here referred to as the Prayer).

History paintings

But what exactly is commemorated by the Murids when they congregate on the Square Faidherbe on the 5 September? In 2004, I met the Senegalese painter Tapha Seck who was selling his paintings on the pavement of the Square Faidherbe. As a former secondary school teacher who had decided to dedicate his life to Bamba, Seck made a living as a painter of history paintings. As soon as I made inquiries about his paintings, he recounted his version of what had happened in 1895, assuring me that he had conducted extensive research. Providing a commentary on a painting of his displayed at the Governor's Palace (Figure 1) – just above the cell where Bamba had been incarcerated – he gave the following testimony:



Figure 1 (Bamba praying his prayer of two *raka*) by Tapha Seck. Oil on cardboard, date unknown

Senegal was ruled by the Whites. Their government was in Saint-Louis. Their Governor convoked all 84 *marabouts* of Senegal. When they arrived, the Governor wanted them to renounce their Muslim faith. He wanted them to sign an agreement to abscond their faith. Eighty-three *marabouts* signed. But Bamba, on his turn, refused to sign. He signalled the impurity of the meeting and ordered his follower Sheikh Ibra Fall to cleanse the room. After Ibra Fall had cleansed the room, Sheikh Amadu Bamba prayed two *raka*. This prayer saved us. Had Bamba not said his prayer, we would still have lived under colonial rule and Islam would have been forbidden. Through his prayer of the two *raka*, Bamba has saved Islam and our purity. (Tapha Seck, Saint-Louis, September 2004)

The painting by Tapha Seck is exemplary for a genre of history painting that documents the life of the Saint in images by representing the stations in the life of the Saint. The painting is authorised by historical research as all the names of the officials participating in the Privy Council are given in cartouches that appear above their heads, identifying each and every one of them (apart from the Senegalese ‘interpreter’). However, even though authorised by the archive, the painting is not inspired by it. In Tapha Seck’s testimony of the trial, Bamba was one of 84 *marabouts* summoned by the administration to be heard in the Privy Council. This testimony is not supported by the historical documents, according to which only Bamba was summoned to Saint-Louis. Tapha’s allusion to 84 *marabouts* can only be understood as a surreptitious attempt to magnify the stance taken by Bamba. This suggests that the painting appropriates the authority of the archive in order to support claims that go against it. In fact, there are several historical inaccuracies in the painting. Accounts of the trial do not mention that Sheikh Ibra Fall was in attendance. Allegedly the most dedicated disciple of the Muslim leader, he is here depicted sprinkling the room from a watering can that many Senegalese Muslims today use for their ritual cleansings.⁵ Moreover, the inclusion of the praying Saint too might have been inspired by a widely dispersed popular memory of the trial for which no evidence is found in the archive. Thus the painting blends historical evidence and the testimonies of Bamba’s disciples in a representation that documents an anti-colonial legend.

A comparable act of ‘documentation’ inspired by submission to the Saint rather than historical research can be found in another painting by Tapha Seck that he offered for sale on the Saint-Louis pavement (Figure 2). In this painting he has commemorated yet another station in the life of the Saint while sojourning under colonial tutelage in Saint-Louis. According to this legend, when Bamba was held at the military training grounds in Saint-Louis, the colonisers incarcerated him in the company of a hungry lion. Surprisingly, the lion refused to attack Bamba and peacefully reclined next to him. The story repeats a trope encountered in Sufi legends that recount how Sufi saints tame wild animals, legends that echo the story of the Old Testament prophet Daniel who reportedly tamed a lion. Such legends are widely distributed across the Muslim world and convey that Sufi saints wield superior spiritual powers. Ruling over nature, the saints are portrayed as being elevated above the trappings of the natural world. Through visual ‘documents’ of this kind the Murids insinuate their Saint’s spiritual

5 As a disciple of Sheikh Ibra Fall, Tapha’s inclusion of Fall in the picture should be understood as an attempt to boost his *marabout*’s presence. Tapha Seck was a Baye Fall himself. His work is included in *Saint in the City* (Roberts and Roberts 2003). Recently, he passed away. An obituary by Allen Roberts appeared on H-AfriArts.



Figure 2 (Bamba incarcerated with a hungry lion in the Jardin d'essais) by Tapha Seck. Oil on cardboard, date unknown

victory over the colonial administration by appropriating a Sufi repertoire of legends that span the Muslim world.⁶ Legends that have existed since time immemorial are incorporated in a Murid repertoire mobilised for the purpose of postcolonial memory work. The aura of local saints is enhanced through Muslim technologies of authentication that have circulated in the context of empire. These paintings are comparable to forms of genre painting that found such a ready audience among the middle class in Zaïre, commemorating colonial injustices in a postcolonial present reminiscent precisely of such injustices (Fabian 1996). Recently, Chinese producers have taken on the production of such visual art in a bid to compete with local artisans, effectively dislocating the local market with cheap, plastic reproductions. As the reproduction of 'local' legends is subjected to a neo-liberal market, any suggestion that such legends should be considered more 'authentic' than the colonial archive should be dismissed as a romanticising of resistance. But it is important to establish that these representations are part of a visual hagiography that references the colonial archive, but is *not* supported by it. This visual hagiography surreptitiously appropriates the authority of the colonial archive to produce an alternative, anti-colonial history.

Enchanted documents

In their quest to authorise the commemoration of the prayer, members of the organising committee of the Prayer have researched the archives to authenticate their

6 Visual arts that have travelled from the Middle East in a long history of Muslim propaganda are thus used to support the commemoration of the Sufi Saint Sheikh Amadu Bamba (Roberts and Roberts 2003; cf. Frembgen 2006).

claim to the Prayer's historicity – but no documents have been found that support that claim. For the Murids, the colonial archive shows a gap, a missing trace of the prayer they *know* their Saint performed in 1895. Considering the conviction with which Murids commemorate the Saint's prayer, one can only conclude that historical referentiality does not really matter to them, or, at least, not in the way that a European historical epistemology requires it. As the colonial archive is not required to justify the commemoration of an 'undocumented' event, this raises some interesting questions about the status of the colonial archive in the postcolony. But in the absence of historical documentation, how *do* the Murids authenticate the Prayer? Here I examine the proliferation of alternative forms of authentication.

During my first attendance of the Prayer in Saint-Louis in 2003, the organising committee had staged an exhibition at the Chamber of Commerce in the centre of Saint-Louis. In a very large room, ten panels displayed texts and photographs on various aspects of the life and works of Sheikh Amadu Bamba. Some displayed the texts of some of his sacred songs (*khassaïds*), alongside extracts of his other writings. Other panels were dedicated to his mother Mame Diarra Bousso, and to the sponsor (*parrain*) of that year's *Maggal*, Sheikh Awa Balla. If anything, this exhibition seemed to archive the Saint's life in a visual biography. Panels entitled 'In the Steps of Sheikh Amadu Bamba' displayed photographs of the places the Saint had visited in his lifetime. As the photographs demonstrated, in each of these sites a mosque was now established. It became clear to me that the Murids do not seek to preserve the places of prayer in their original form, but transform them into places of worship (De Jong 2014). Likewise, the documents on display in the exhibition were not meant to *historicise* the Saint's life – by contextualising his life in a documented past – but to enhance his presence in the present. For the Murids, the authentication of the Saint's life through historical documents is of secondary importance to his efficacy in the here and now.

The exhibition was visited by a wide variety of people, including youths, students and farmers. Wandering through the exhibition they fully immersed themselves in the teachings of Bamba and reminded themselves of the people and places pivotal to the Murid brotherhood. A massive sheet approximately 10 metres wide covered an entire wall, representing the whole ascendancy of Sheikh Amadu Bamba in a genealogy of the Mbacké family. But apart from this impenetrable genealogy, the dominant mode of representation in the exhibition consisted of photography. Walking through the exhibition one encountered all the important members of the brotherhood, an experience not dissimilar to leafing through a family photo album. Photographs displayed the members of the Mbacké family, while text panels established their relationship to the founder of the brotherhood. For many visitors, looking at the pictures while listening to the spiritual songs (*khassaïds*) transmitted through loudspeakers was a way of renewing their own relationship to the Saint. Small wonder, then, that the visual and aural experience of the exhibit elicited embodied reactions from quite a few visitors. Many visitors touched the photographs of the Saint and his descendants with their fingertips to receive the *baraka* (blessing, divine grace) transmitted through their material reproductions. The disciples entertained a tactile relationship with the exhibited photographs (cf. Wright 2013). Far from encouraging a detached relationship to the documents on display, the exhibition stimulated a multi-sensory immersion in Bamba's sacred realm. To the Murid disciples the photographs on display were not so much historical 'evidence' but embodiments of Bamba's enduring presence. Visiting the exhibition was a way of receiving his *baraka*. In fact, following Taussig's (1993)

argument, the Murids seem to attribute to the photographs the power of the original. Beyond acknowledging their historical facticity, they attribute to these photographs a far superior power, that of divine mediation. The exhibition was not so much a historical narration but a site of commemoration that projected the life of the Saint in a temporality other than the secular time of the nation.

This draws our attention to a particular quality of the document in the time of the nation: for the document to be read as 'evidence' for a secular history, it needs to have been decontextualised and divested of its religious connotations. Such a decontextualisation of the document had clearly not happened at this exhibition. This also invokes the problem of the circulation of documents required for the production of history, as it occurred in 19th-century Europe. In order to make them available for academic scrutiny, documents had to be wrested out of private ownership and divested from their political and religious potencies. Chakrabarty (2010) refers to these processes as the reification and commodification of documents, processes that made them available for the writing of history by placing them in archives. Indeed, the accumulation of documents was central to the utopian desire of producing a public sphere that enabled the production of national histories in 19th-century Europe: 'The discipline of history has the story and the *telos* of the public sphere built into it' (Chakrabarty 2010: 73). The rise of History as an academic discipline – and of Europe as Subject of the world – depended on and presumed the public accessibility of archives. Chakrabarty demonstrates that the processes of reification and commodification that were to lead to the creation of public archives were not achieved in colonial India and that Indian historians were effectively excluded from the Public Record Office. In Senegal, the making of a Murid archive in Saint-Louis also complicates the assumptions of Habermas's theory of a secular, public sphere. In the Murid exhibition the documents were not so much understood as historical evidence but as channels for the transmission of Bamba's *baraka*.

One might therefore argue that the organising committee appropriated the format of the exhibition to promote a Sufi spirituality, but during visits in subsequent years I noticed that it was forbidden to touch the photographs. The organising committee had adopted a more 'secular' approach to the objects on display to counter the deeply spiritual relationship many visitors had previously adopted. The curators of the exhibition had taken on the role of *archons*, prioritising the preservation of the documents on display over the promotion of their spiritual efficacy. Yet, in other ways the modernist assumption of an increasingly disenchanting, secular public sphere remains problematic in Saint-Louis.

More than any other public space in Senegal, the Square Faidherbe epitomises the colonial, public sphere. It is here that we find the statue of Louis Faidherbe, the general who conquered Senegal and founded its administration. During several commemorations of the Prayer, militant Murids have in vain tried to topple his statue. In the days leading up to the Prayer, the organisers also cover the historic military barracks on the square, including Hôtel Rogniat Nord, with large paintings of Sheikh Amadu Bamba and Sheikh Ibra Fall, literally covering up the colonial legacy with effigies of their Saints. On the pavements Murid pedlars offer photographic representations of the Saint and his disciples for sale. During the Prayer of 2011 even the Mayor of Saint-Louis established a stall selling historical magazines of the Sufi brotherhood. Indeed, the Prayer is an occasion to bring out the files. During the five days preceding the Prayer, the exhibition and stalls display numerous photographs and documents relating to the life of the Saint and there is a lively commoditisation of these 'documents'

at work. But this appropriation of the public space is received with ambivalence by the non-Murid inhabitants of Saint-Louis who experience the occupation of the square as a 'privatisation' of the public space.⁷ Indeed, rather than creating a space for public debate, the commemoration seems directed *against* the public sphere (cf. Rowlands and De Jong 2007). In this respect, the proliferation of documents in the public space of the city does not corroborate the Euro-centric theory of a linear, progressive establishment of a public sphere, but its re-appropriation by a Sufi brotherhood to assert its public presence.

Although the exhibition presents historical documents as media of the Saint's *baraka*, some documents on display do have the function of providing historical evidence. One exhibition panel lists several testimonials to the Saint's spirituality as given by important Senegalese *marabouts*. In the French translations of these testimonials the *marabouts* are quoted as stating that they have seen the irrefutable evidence ('*preuves irréfutables*') of Bamba's sanctity. While these testimonies constitute a confirmation of Bamba's sanctity – provided by other Muslim authorities – the panel also includes testimonials by French colonials. Thus an unidentified 'administrator of Diourbel' is quoted as saying: 'The Sheikh is remarkably well-instructed in Arab (language and literature) and has surprising knowledge of the works by Arab authors. He is very charitable, most pious, an incarnation of God'. These observations affirm the Saint's spiritual power as recognised by French colonial administrators. Removed from their original context and documentary substrate, these quotations, presumably taken from the colonial archive, are presented as testimonies to the Saint's spirituality. Their appropriation demonstrates how, in spite of their distrust of the colonial archive, the Murids have adopted archival documents as 'evidence' of their Saint's sanctity. This attitude points to the fundamental ambivalence Murids feel about the colonial archive.

By appropriating the colonial archive through a mimetic proliferation of documents and testimonies, the members of the organising committee establish postcolonial memory through a critique of the colonial archive. By ignoring the demands of historical methodology, the Murids offer a critique of the epistemology of the colonial archive. While acknowledging its authority they simultaneously question it. In their quest for archival authority the Murids perform the colonial mimicry that Homi Bhabha (1994) considers typical for the postcolonial subject.

Trauma and prayer

Among the documents on display as historical evidence, one records a *marabout's* statements on the question of historical evidence. He comments that the event of the trial has given rise to an abundant literature in which 'the real is entangled with the imaginary, the truth with invention, and history with legend'. To ascertain the truth about the event, the *marabout* proposes research in 'authentic', 'primary' documents, notably the writings of the Saint himself. While his privileging of the Saint's writings should not surprise us, the *marabout* goes on to draw our attention to the significance of the year 1895 to Bamba. One year before this death, Bamba referred to 1895 as the

7 Although Saint-Louis has always been a cosmopolitan crossroads where dialogues occurred between different creeds of Islam, the majority of Saint-Louis's Muslim population has historically adhered to the Tijaniyya brotherhood, who have always viewed the Murids as Islamic upstarts, without the required knowledge of the Qur'an that the Tijaniyya themselves study with so much devotion. See Robinson (2000) for a historical account of Islam in Saint-Louis.

‘year of his testimony’. Indeed, following Bamba’s own writings, it is not a historical coincidence that Murids attribute such significance to the Prayer Bamba allegedly recited at the Governor’s Palace. As we already heard from Tapha Seck, Bamba’s prayer is today attributed unprecedented historical weight:

This prayer saved us. Had Bamba not said his prayer, we would still have lived under colonial rule and Islam would have been forbidden. Through his prayer of the two *raka*, Bamba has saved Islam and our purity. (Tapha Seck, Saint-Louis, September 2004)

Bamba’s prayer as it is remembered today resisted the colonial authority and replaced it with the rule of Islam – at least, in the anachronistic understanding of Murid historical memory.

The commemoration of the Prayer of two *raka* was first organised in the late 1970s. The establishment of the Prayer should be situated in a particular historical context of a rising urban presence of the Murid brotherhood and a climate of political liberalisation (Babou 2007b; De Jong 2010).⁸ Although the Prayer can be interpreted as an invention of tradition in postcolonial Senegal, its establishment more than 70 years after the originating event may also be understood as a belated response to the traumatic experience of colonialism. It is in that direction that I would like to pursue an analysis of its fictive, but highly functional nature. Drawing on the unspeakable experience of the Holocaust, trauma theory has inspired an epistemology of history as trauma. According to psychoanalytic theory it is important to recognise that it is in the nature of traumatic experience that it remains repressed (Caruth 1996).⁹ As a result, the original experience cannot be properly known. Anthropologists have applied this theory to the historical experiences of the slave trade and colonialism, writing ethnographies of ritual that *belatedly* testify to traumatic historical episodes, without acknowledgment by the performers of the historical origins of the ritual’s significance (Shaw 2002; Argenti 2007). These rituals transmit a historical memory of the original event beyond the shock of the first moment. However, as the traumatised cannot come to terms with the original event, that event itself cannot be the historical referent for its narration. Consequently, the original event that caused the trauma can only be accessed through narrations that make the original event inaccessible.

Historically, after initial skirmishes between the colonisers and the Murids, their relations actually developed into productive collaborations. Sufi brotherhoods and the colonisers collaborated in what historian David Robinson (2000) has called ‘paths of accommodation’. While this historical collaboration is acknowledged by professional historians, the Murids remember Bamba’s trial as part of an ongoing history, or *longue durée* of white oppression, lasting from the slave trade to the current marginalisation of African immigrants in France (cf. Mbembe 2011). The Prayer is part of a narration on historical trauma, a fictive account of history that has the function of covering up the complicities of colonial collaboration that in reality never resulted in French citizenship.

8 Importantly, the foundation of the Prayer as annual commemoration also coincided with the rise of the status of the witness (cf. Wieviorka 2006).

9 To interpret the experience of the Shoah, a considerable literature has drawn on Freudian psychoanalysis to further our understanding of trauma and the possibilities of the recovery of suppressed memory.

The anachronistic historical testimonies that enable the Murids to imagine that Bamba resisted the colonial authorities, and brought about Senegal's independence, enable them to dissociate themselves from the historical struggle for French citizenship in which the Murids themselves were involved. Bamba himself recruited African soldiers for the defence of *la nation-patrie*. The doctrine of *assimilation* was powerfully effective in shaping the ambitions of the colonial subjects (Wilder 2015), especially at Saint-Louis where a class of Muslim Africans was granted French citizenship while the majority of Senegal's subjects were excluded from citizenship. The divisive effects of this assimilation policy were fully recognised by Fanon 1990 [1961], who analysed the colonial consciousness as a condition that could only be healed through a violent revolution against the coloniser. In many ways, this trauma of colonial racism and denied citizenship still haunts the postcolonial subjects of Senegal. Thus, I suggest, the Prayer should not be understood as the re-enactment of a historical event, but as an act of liberation that accomplishes in a 'spiritual' sense what was never accomplished through a violent revolution.

Remembering an unreferenced historical event, the annual commemoration enables healing through the imagination of an anti-colonial history. The Prayer can be seen as a belated response to the former coloniser. In the absence of the coloniser, words are still hurled at him, prayers still said to prove him wrong, more than 50 years after he left (cf. Melas 2009). In a context in which Europe's travel restrictions frustrate access to *papiers* ('documents') and access to French citizenship is *still* a battle field, the Prayer should be understood as a way in which Murids seek to protest against the post-colonial dystopia of unfulfilled dreams of citizenship. As metropolitan France remains indifferent, its relationship to the former colonies characterised by colonial aphasia (Stoler 2011), the Prayer continues to have political relevance today. As a testimony against colonial and postcolonial injustice, the Prayer brings the case to the ultimate judge. The Sufi disciples thus decolonialise the colonial archive by asserting their authority over the secular archive and appropriating it against the colonial *arkhons*. By conducting a prayer against the colonial archive (*an-arkhē*), the Murids animate it through appropriation.

Decolonial utopia

The Murids conduct the Prayer in front of the Governor's Palace at the Square Faidherbe – the very site of the Saint's conviction – kneeling for Allah, facing the Palace. The Prayer is performed in the heart of the colonial city 'archived' precisely for its role in Senegal's colonial history as a UNESCO World Heritage site (De Jong 2014). Un-archived, the Prayer opposes the colonial archive. Yet the Prayer cannot quite extricate itself from the archive: as a testimony *on* the colonial archive, it depends on its substrate and derives its efficacy precisely from that location (Figure 3). This dependence on the colonial archive perpetuates the colonial ambivalence among the Saint's disciples, which they desperately attempt to remove by presenting the trial as the Saint's spiritual victory over the coloniser. The Prayer reconfigures the trial as a historical injustice and the defendant as a martyr of Islam.

The testimony of the Prayer reveals an anachronistic intention to read into history what *should* have happened, rather than what actually happened. But even if the Prayer lacks historical referentiality, we established that it is not arbitrary. As suggested by



Figure 3 Poster purchased at the Prayer in 2005. Collage representing a praying Bamba against an image of the Privy Council overlooked by two *Tirailleurs sénégalais*. The background photographs are of the Faidherbe Bridge, the façade of the Governor's Palace and the Lamp Fall minaret of the mosque founded by Bamba. Several aspects of the Prayer are brought together in this decolonial montage that suggests a central role for Bamba

trauma theory, historical references may not be the most reliable index for what happened, *off the record*. For sure, Bamba's performance at the trial has left no archival trace and there are no reasons to assume that the Prayer did happen, historically. Yet might the invented Prayer grasp a historical reality that is not articulated in the archive? Might it point to the conditions of possibility of an alternative history?

Some Murids do not so much remember their Saint's trial as a consequence of the oppressive politics of the coloniser but as a test Bamba chose to overcome in his quest for divine grace. Multiple legends claim that the trials and tribulations Bamba was subjected to were in fact sought by him as ways of testifying his faith to Allah. The Sufi

disciples thus invert the Saint's apparent impotence in the face of the coloniser into positive 'evidence' of his devotion to Allah.¹⁰ Their participation in the Prayer should be seen as an act that recognises the Saint's spiritual agency as an act of devotion that de-centres the secular account of the event and restores the dignity of the colonised. It is essential to this 'miracle' that it is not documented because, as de Certeau argues, the stories of miracles 'provide the possible with a site that is impregnable, because it is a nowhere, a utopia' (de Certeau 1984: 17). Undocumented, the Prayer provides the Sufi disciples with a site for a decolonial utopia.

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10 Indeed, in their cosmology Murids often trade the world of appearances for a secret world, a world that requires careful reading of its hidden truths through training in esoteric knowledge (Roberts and Roberts 2000).

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Animer l'archive: le procès et le témoignage d'un saint soufi

En 1895, l'administration coloniale du Sénégal a condamné l'exil de Cheikh Amadou Bamba pour avoir remué la désobéissance anti-coloniale. Lors de son procès, Bamba aurait récité une prière au mépris des autorités françaises. Bien qu'il n'y ait pas de document d'archives pour prouver que la prière a été récitée, depuis les années 1970 les disciples de Bamba ont afflué vers l'ancien siège du pouvoir colonial pour commémorer son acte de résistance; leur témoignage a déplacé l'autorité de l'archive coloniale et imagine une utopie décoloniale en l'absence d'archives. Cet article examine comment leur prière est subversif envers l'archive coloniale, tandis qu'il reste empêtré dans son substrat.

Mots-clés archives, témoignage, prière, l'utopie décoloniale, Sénégal