

Mame Coumba Bang:
A Living Myth and Evolving Legend

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This paper is dedicated to the Camara family. Thank you for all of the late nights, helpful insight, and generosity. You will always be my Saint Louis family.
Khady.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discover the story of the goddess Mame Coumba Bang, to examine her origins, and to analyze it as myth or legend. Through interviews, surveys, and few written documents, it investigates various aspects of the story of Mame Coumba Bang, including descriptions of the goddess, rituals, encounters, and manifestations of her existence. It also looks at the origins of the story and the ways it corresponds with Muslim beliefs. In analyzing the findings, it is found that Mame Coumba Bang is both a legend that is varied and evolving, as well as a myth that remains a living belief throughout generations.

Anthropology, Sociology, Religion

Introduction

“Les jinnés enlevaient les enfants nouveau-nés, car ils avaient besoin d’êtres humains pour leur rappeler leur passé eux-mêmes privés de mémoire, et assurer ainsi la survie de leur espèce” “The *jinnés* would take the newborn babies, because they needed human beings to recount their past to them, themselves lacking memory, and to assure in this way the survival of their species” (Camara 2000). Although *jinnés* (spirits) and humans belong to different species, they have a special relationship with each other. Along the Senegal River, which begins in the Guinean mountains of Fouta Djallon, forms the eastern and northern borders of Senegal and then empties into the Atlantic Ocean, there are spirits and gods that interact with the inhabitants along the riverbank. At the source of the river in Guinea, Ninki-Nanka is the protective goddess and at the mouth, in Saint Louis, Senegal, a goddess named Mame Coumba Bang reigns (Diop 2007). The goddesses offer protection to the humans, but in exchange, they demand that the humans give them offerings. *“Si on ne le fait pas, c’est des malheurs, et des malheurs, et des malheurs tout le temps. Mais si on le fait, elle est contente, elle nous laisse la paix”* “If one does not do it, it is misfortunes, and misfortunes, and misfortunes all the time. But, if one does it, she is happy, she leaves us in peace” (Diop 2007). This research paper seeks to understand the story of Mame Coumba Bang, the acceptance of this belief in a predominantly Muslim country, the origins of the goddess, and whether this is a myth or a legend. To accomplish this, the offerings and rituals are explored, the different views of the goddess’s appearance, the ability to meet her, and the possible risks involved, and the different ideas about her origins are investigated, as well as the ways in which they balance the belief in her and the beliefs of Islam. In analyzing the findings, the distinction is made between Mame Coumba Bang as a legend and Mame Coumba Bang as a

myth, including examinations of changes of the story through generations and the justification with Islam.

The significance of Mame Coumba Bang in Saint Louis goes beyond just beliefs and offerings. Among the fishermen in the Guet-Ndar region of the Langue de Barbarie in Saint Louis, “the health of marine resources and fishermen’s security (insurance incomes and safety at sea) depend on the will of [...] Mame Coumba Bang. [...] The ascendancy of the goddess is crucial and dictates even now how to behave towards the sea as a whole entity, or a marine entity.” (A. Sall 2007, 160). This is illustrated in the 1999 hurricane that hit Saint Louis and flooded the river. Foreign observers connected to the Senegalese fishing industry through international networks were “surprised and disappointed by the passivity of the Senegalese fishing organizations vis-à-vis the government. Only the minimum of compensation guaranteed by the Senegalese government through the fisheries department was released, without any political action from fishworkers’ unions [...]” (A. Sall 2007, 161). The reason for the fishermen’s silence is their interpretation of the destructive storm as punishment for offending Mame Coumba Bang. To please her, Saint-Louisians threw curdled milk into the water as an offering the goddess.

Because the legend of Mame Coumba Bang is part of the oral tradition in Senegal, there is not much written on the topic. Recently, artists of all types have made attempts to preserve the story and rituals of Mame Coumba Bang. Saint Louisian writers have begun documenting the stories about Mame Coumba Bang and other mythology of Saint Louis, including Iba Gueye Issakha’s book, as well as Fatou Niang Siga’s book, and a fictive story by Louis Camara. Although these pieces of work include examples of stories and important rituals, they do not go as far as to give any extensive analyses of them. There have been two plays within the last six years that revolved around the river goddess and it is planned that she will be the theme for the 2008 spectacle. In the visual arts, Mame Coumba Bang is painted in

a mural on the wall of a local restaurant. This paper will not only serve to create a greater understanding of the belief in Mame Coumba Bang but also to help preserve the beliefs, stories, and practices that may be otherwise lost.

Methodology

In order to conduct my research, I lived in Saint Louis, a city in the northeastern corner of Senegal. Located at the mouth of the Senegal River, the city is composed of the island of Saint Louis, the area located on the continent named Sor, and the Langue de Barbarie, the long peninsula stretching from Mauritania and separating the river from the ocean (Appendix A, Chart 1). The site of the first French fort in 1659 and later the capital of colonial Senegal, it continues to have particularly strong European influences, as well as the traditional African and Islamic presences common to most areas of Senegal.

Because Saint Louis is very touristy and also commonly hosts students from other countries, I did not feel as though people acted especially strange around me because I am white. When I introduced myself to Saint Louisians and told them about my topic, most seemed surprised and pleased that an American student had chosen a topic that has such deep roots in their African culture. Although some people I asked seemed a little hesitant to discuss their beliefs with a student that was going to write a paper about it, they seemed to be more comfortable when I tried to introduce myself and explain my project in Wolof, showing my interest and dedication to learning the culture. I was able to meet new contacts through people I had already interviewed, as well as those met by chance.

Staying in the city of Saint Louis was crucial to my research, because it relied almost completely on interactions with its inhabitants. Interviews were the basis of my information, because of the small amount of written material on the story of Mame Coumba Bang. I interviewed Saint Louisians of all ages, including writers, a former teacher, a producer, and an

actor. Because this is a part of the oral tradition of Senegal, I focused on speaking with the elderly, who are said to know the most about the stories, beliefs, and practices associated with the river goddess. I received an abundance of stories, rituals, and rules from the older men and women, which I did not get from speaking with younger generations.

In addition to just single interviews, my advisor and I conducted a discussion on Mame Coumba Bang with a class of female high school students in their final year. This discussion session was difficult, because I was not able to hear many of the stories told by the girls due to the noise of side discussions and the echo of the room. Because of this, I had to rely on my advisor to help recall and fill holes in the notes I took. Through the many interviews and conversations with inhabitants ranging from young women in high school to elderly men of more than eighty years, I was able to collect a large range of opinions, recollections, and experiences.

Although the interviews were extremely valuable, they also proved to be rather difficult. Many of the people I had planned to interview were not able to meet with me at all. One elderly woman was in Dakar for the month and others did not keep our appointments. I also was not able to interview a very knowledgeable family on the Langue de Barbarie, because I was not able to get a contact with them, as relations with people are many times the only way to find and speak with Senegalese. While most men were willing and many times eager to discuss Mame Coumba Bang with me, most women, on the other hand, were very reserved and seemed nervous to share rituals and personal beliefs with me. Because of this, I was only able to interview a few women, which limited the information I was able to gather.

There were not very many instances of a language barrier between French and Wolof causing problems in the interviews, although they required that I use a translator. My advisor was able to translate into French an interview with one elderly lady who only spoke Wolof. Because my advisor knew my objectives and the type of information needed, he was able to

help rephrase questions when she did not understand the ones I had posed. I did encounter problems with this translation, however, because I could not tell if he was adding in new information or just rephrasing hers when I asked for a clarification on an idea expressed. He also helped translate in another interview with a middle-aged woman when she ran into a couple difficulties communicating with me in French, which presented no significant problems. All in all, the use of a translator was much more beneficial than problematic to my research.

In order to use the information my informants gave me in my study, I needed to obtain their consent. Although I was able to receive written consent from four people who seemed to be accustomed to using official documents, I relied on verbal consent for the rest of them. I hesitated to use written consent because of the oral tradition and generally relaxed nature of the culture. With most of my informants, I determined that a formal written agreement would make him or her uncomfortable and hesitant to participate, so I verbally explained everything included in the written form and offered to change their name if they wanted.

In addition to interviews, I acquired information from the inhabitants of Saint Louis through the use of a survey. I created a questionnaire with fourteen multiple-choice questions asking about one's belief in the existence of the river goddess, one's knowledge of the story and rituals, one's experiences with practicing giving offerings (Appendix B, Document 1), and distributed it to eighty-one inhabitants on the island, Sor, and the Langue de Barbarie. These were originally created with the intention of giving me a general idea of the beliefs and actions of the population of Saint Louis in order to create more informative and relevant interview questions. The surveys ended up being much more useful to my research than I had expected; by asking people to fill out my questionnaire, it seemed to act as an icebreaker, as people would begin telling me their beliefs and many stories or would bring me to another more knowledgeable person. While analyzing the surveys through four age groups, I found

that they also expressed some possible changes that are occurring with the story of Mame Coumba Bang, which seem to support my findings in the interviews.

There were some challenges I faced while conducting research with the surveys. The biggest difficulty was overcoming the language barrier. In order to get an accurate representation of the population of Saint Louis, some people who only spoke Wolof (mainly females) needed to fill out my French questionnaire. Although there were instances where a person nearby helped me translate the questions for them, I think this language barrier caused my surveys reflect a slightly skewed picture of the inhabitants. In one case with a woman of about thirty-five years, my little knowledge of Wolof and her modest understanding of French were enough to communicate at least the basic understanding of the questions, although there may have been some misunderstandings between the two of us and she might not have been able to articulate the complete idea she wanted to convey. Another challenge was getting people from the Langue de Barbarie to fill out the surveys, because there are not many establishments where I could meet people as there were on the island and on Sor. Because of this, I have a very weak representation of the inhabitants of the peninsula.

Another method of research I used was archival research. Although there are very few written documents on Mame Coumba Bang, I was able to find some sources to augment my findings from interviews and surveys. Before leaving for Saint Louis, I was able to research at the National Archives in Dakar where I found two lengthy newspaper articles interviewing inhabitants. Once in Saint Louis, I found a small book of the goddess at the *Institut Linguistique et Culturel* and another with a couple pages addressing the belief and some stories at the *Centre de Recherche et de Documentation du Senegal*. I also was able to find a fictive story and a couple articles that touch on some aspects of my project through research in internet databases and search engines.

For visual aid, I created a map of the city and photographed key places and objects. I decided that a map of the area with key locations helps the reader fully understand the stories and the geography of the region. The pictures are of locations indicated in stories and of certain areas where Mame Coumba Bang is believed to reside, an example of an offering, and a painting. I used these merely as a way to help present certain aspects of my findings.

Findings

The story of Mame Coumba Bang

In Saint Louis, Mame Coumba Bang is the goddess of the river. She watches over the city and protects the inhabitants from harm, such as sickness, death, drowning, and troubles during pregnancy and giving birth. She is said to bring good luck and to accompany the inhabitants in times of trouble or hardship, but she does not cure. “*Elle te protège contre le mauvais oeil [...] et la mauvaise langue*” “She protects you from people looking negatively on you and from people speaking badly about you” (M. Niang 2007). In order to ensure one’s safety, however, one has to please the goddess by giving sacrifices. People have to give “*lait caillé bien sucré, du couscous, de la cola [...] pour que la ville soit heureuse, pour contenter le génie, et pour avoir la paix*” “curdled milk will sugared, some couscous, some cola [...] so that the city is happy, to make the goddess happy, and to have peace” (Diop 2007). If one doesn’t do this, she becomes angry and punishes the city.

Among Saint Louisians, Mame Coumba Bang is real – she is “*une vraie réalité*” “a true reality” (Dieng 2007). The *doomu ndar*, Saint Louisians by descent, are said to almost all believe in her, or at least know about her. “*Doomu ndar dëgg dëgg mooy xam Mame Coumba Bang*” “The real child of Saint Louis, it is he who knows Mame Coumba Bang” (A. K. Sall 2007). Of Saint Louisians surveyed, 72% believed the story of her to be true, 6% saying it was completely imaginary, and the rest saying that it was partially true and partially false.

When one looks at only the *doomu ndar*, 76% believe the story of Mame Coumba Bang to be true, 23% believe some of it to be true, and only 1% claim that it is imaginary. Almost everyone interviewed said “elle est vraie et elle nous protège” “she is true and she protects us” (Diallo 2007).

The story of Mame Coumba Bang is passed down from generation to generation. Usually it is a family member of an older generation that tells their grandchildren about the goddess, what she does, and what one has to do to ensure protection. Adjaratou Khady Sall, an elderly woman living on the northern side of the island, said that it was her aunt who originally told her the story and who continued to teach her the rituals associated with the goddess (2007). Pape Laye Fall said that he not only learned about Mame Coumba Bang from his grandmother, but also other elderly ladies to whom he was close (2007). During a discussion with a class of girls at the Lycée Ameth Fall, a high school on the northern part of the island, many of them said that their grandmothers told them the story, and they affirmed that amongst themselves, “*nous parlons d’elle*” “we talk about her,” sharing stories and experiences (2007). The story seems to be mainly handed down from older generations to younger generations, but also shared and recounted in casual conversations.

Although Mame Coumba Bang inhabits the entire river surrounding Saint Louis, there are certain places in particular where she is said to reside. It is said that her “*neeg*” “domain” (Camara 2007) is just along the edge of the river on the area on the north end of the island from the Pont Faidherbe to the crane made in colonial times (Appendix C, Photo 1). The area next to the bridge is considered “*waxande Mame Coumba Bang*” “Mame Coumba Bang’s armoire” and the small groove in the island next to the crane is “*son salon*” “her living room” (Camara 2007). One man referred to her *neeg* and said, “C’est l’endroit de Mame Coumba Bang. On ne va jamais dans le fleuve là-bas. C’est dangereux...on peut noyer” “It is the place of Mame Coumba Bang. One never goes in to the river there. It is dangerous...one can

drown” (S. Ndiaye 2007). He explained that one should not go in there, because that is where the goddess resides and she may get angry if one intrudes.

Mame Coumba Bang is not alone in protecting the city, however. It is said that Mame Coumba Bang has a large family of gods and goddesses that live in the river with her. Her sister, Mame Cantaye, is the guardian of the Langue de Barbarie and helps watch over and protect the inhabitants of the entire city. “*Elles sont au courant de tout ce qui se passe à Saint-Louis où rien ne peut se passer sans leur consentement*” “They know everything that happens in Saint Louis, where nothing can happen without their consent” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 9).

The goddess of the river is also said to have many children. Diaw Singuelti Diop affirms that the Mame Coumba Bang is “*la mère d’une grande famille: ancêtre des esprits du fleuve, elle coiffe tous les génies*” “the mother of a large family; ancestor of all of the river spirits, she is the head of all the goddesses,” (Aïdara 2004, 30). Her family is often described as like a senegalese family, meaning very large and not necessarily including only related members. The family includes siblings, children, and friends; it has a structure “*comme la société*” “like society” (A. K. Sall 2007).

Although they live in the river, Mame Coumba Bang and the other spirits do not stay in the water the entire time. The story states that she likes to leave the river and sit at its edge. “[C]haque matin, bien avant le lever du soleil, elle venait s’asseoir au bord du fleuve pour profiter du bon air. Quand le soleil commençait à se lever, elle rentrait chez elle” “Every morning, well before the sunrise, she would come to sit at the edge of the river to take advantage of the fresh air. When the sun would start to rise, she would go back to her home” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 8). Saint Louisians would see her out every morning, in the same spot with the same bench, and say “*Mame Coumba [Nga] Nee ak [bangam]*” “There is Mame

Coumba with her bench” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 8). This explains how she got her last name, *Bang*, which is Wolof for bench.

There are other times during the day where it is considered dangerous to be outside, because Mame Coumba Bang and the other gods and goddesses living in the river come out and roam the island. Adjaratou Khady Sall explained that during *njolor*, about noon to three o’clock in the afternoon and during *timis*, twilight to about two o’clock in the morning, “*personne ne va dans la rue parce que les génies sortent*” “no one goes out in the street because the spirits come out” (2007). Mame Coumba Bang leaves the river during these times, because it is quiet and “*les génies ne sortent pas dans un milieu où il y a beaucoup de bruit...comme le bruit des voitures*” “The gods do not come out at times when there is a lot of noise...like the noise of cars” (M. Niang 2007). This, however, was observed more during the period of colonization than it is today. Now, not many people follow this tradition during the *njolor* time period, but many people, including Adjaratou Khady Sall, still stay inside during *timis*. She explained that this is because many people now work during the afternoon and can not be inside (A. K. Sall 2007).

Adjaratou Khady Sall also maintains that Mame Coumba Bang does not leave the water every day. “*Elle sort seulement par période. En général, c’est à la fin de la saison de pluie*” “She comes out only periodically. In general, it is at the end of the rainy season” (A. K. Sall 2007). She continued to say that the goddess only leaves the water on Wednesdays and Fridays, but the other spirits come out on the other days of the week, as well.

It is generally agreed that Mame Coumba Bang and the other spirits come out during the night (the time of *timis*). Pape Laye Fall asserted that Mame Coumba Bang has a family here that lives in the water and comes out every night to roam the streets (2007). He has not seen them himself, but was told by other people who had witnessed it. Another woman said, “*Ma bisaïeule a vu Coumba Bang se promener le soir avec de très nombreux enfants*” “My

great-grandmother saw Coumba Bang walking at night with numerous children” (*Le Soleil*, 30 August 1999, 7). Marietou sees the risk in being outside at the same time as these spirits, because “*il y a aussi des génies méchants*” “there are also mean gods” (M. Niang 2007) that like to make people crazy.

Another common citing of Mame Coumba Bang is at the market. “*Certains Saint-Louisiens n’hésitent pas à affirmer que Mame Coumba Bang [...] va au marché comme toutes les femmes*” “Certain Saint Louisians do not hesitate to affirm that Mame Coumba Bang [...] goes to the market like all women” (Aïdara 2004, 30). A guard at Sonatel on the south side of the island recounted that the goddess goes to the market to buy vegetables, which is why from time to time one will see “*une grande calabasse pleine des légumes*” “a large calabash full of vegetables” floating in the water, which belongs to Mame Coumba Bang (Diagne 2007).

Pleasing the goddess

In order to please Mame Coumba Bang and to receive her protection, one must give her offerings. The *sarax* (offerings) given to the goddess all having one common trait: they are all white (Sow 2007). Among the Wolof, the color white, “*on croit que cela porte bonheur*” “one believes that it brings good luck” (Camara 2007). There are several offerings often used in sacrifices, including: *soow* or *lait caillé* (curdled milk), *bouillie de mil* (crushed millet), sugar, cola nuts, sheep or goat meat, silver coins, but the most common is *laax* (a mixture of curdled milk and crushed millet) (Appendix C, Photo 2). The more elaborate and bigger the sacrifice, the better protected one will be (Camara 2007). If one does not have *laax* or *lait caillé* to give, it suffices to give just milk from a bottle.

If the *sarax* does not please her for some reason, however, it is not accepted by the goddess. “*C’est le génie qui décide si elle veut l’accepter*” “It is the goddess who decides if she will accept it” (A. K. Sall 2007). One girl told about one time when her aunt tried to

make a sacrifice of *laax*, but it was too hot. When she poured it in the river, it splashed back up and burned the side of her face (Class at Lycée Ameth Fall 2007). Mame Coumba Bang was angry because it was too hot, so she refused it.

When going to the edge of the river to make an offering, you have to pay attention and follow a very important rule. “*Boy yobbu sarax, boy dem do wax, boy dellusi do wax*” “When bringing an offering, while going do not talk, while coming back do not talk” (A. K. Sall 2007). Fatou Diop adds that the tradition says that “*Quand on va vers Mame Coumba Bang, elle veut qu’on ne salue personne, qu’on ne donne pas la main aux gens en route, qu’on ne se retourne pas, qu’on marche comme un robot, comme une statue, directement jusqu’au fleuve*” “When one goes to Mame Coumba Bang, she wants that one does not salute anyone, that one does not wave at any people on the way, that one does not turn back, that one walks like a robot, like a statue, directly to the river” (2007). One is not supposed to pay attention to anyone or anything else on the way to and from giving an offering, because it is a very important ritual and, according to Adjaratou Khady Sall, you can not perform it and talk at the same time; one has to concentrate (2007).

Specialists

There are families of specialists who know the traditions and who perform them for the entire city. With these experts, “*c’est une connaissance qui est transmise dans les liens des générations*” “it is a knowledge which is handed down through generational ties,” (A. K. Sall 2007), meaning that these people have to be born into a family in order to be endowed with these gifts. “*Le culte de Mame Coumba Bang est régi par les grands maîtres de l’ordre des Tuurs. Ils indiquent les actes à ne pas commettre, les offrandes et les sacrifices à faire*” “The religion of Mame Coumba Bang is administered by the great leaders of the order of

Tuurs. They indicate the acts not to commit, the offerings and sacrifices to do” (Aïdara 2004, 30).

People in this lineage are sometimes given certain powers by Mame Coumba Bang. One is chosen if one is *doomu ndar*, if “*on croit vraiment en génie du fleuve*” “one truly believes in the goddess of the river” and regularly gives sacrifices (Sow 2007). They may be given the ability to walk on water, the ability to breathe underwater, or the ability to be in two places at once. One woman, explains Adjaratou Khady Sall, “*elle avait un pouvoir guérir*” “she had the power to cure” (2007), which was given to her by Mame Coumba Bang. According to Adjaratou Khady Sall, all of these specialists that are part of this generational tradition are the only ones who have the ability to recognize Mame Coumba Bang (2007). One elderly lady used to put “*tus ngël, une poudre rouge, autour des yeux pour voir le génie*” “*tus ngël*, a red powder, around her eyes in order to see the goddess” (Camara 2007).

To make an offering, traditionally one needs to have a specialist perform it, because ordinary Saint Louisians do not have the knowledge to do it themselves; however, that was generations ago. “*Maintenant, on verse directement le lait dans le fleuve*” “now, one empties the milk directly into the river” (A. K. Sall 2007), without consulting a specialist. Foreigners are allowed to give offerings themselves, but it is better to have a specialist do it, because with someone knowledgeable of the rituals and traditions, it may be accepted more readily by Mame Coumba Bang (A. K. Sall 2007). Although Adjaratou Khady Sall was able to list off two or three specialists who still perform sacrifices for people, Fatou Diop and Marie Madeleine Diallo knew of some that possibly still gave offerings, but did not know where one could find them (2007). From what these three women expressed, it seemed as though specialists were rare these days and it is much more common to give one’s own sacrifice.

Annual Sacrifices

Mame Coumba Bang requires annual offerings to be given at the end of the rainy season, just before the strong heat comes and people begin to swim in the river. This offering is given to protect all of the inhabitants and the foreigners that come to bathe in the water of Saint Louis. “*Seydou [Diallo][...][faisait] le tour de toute la ville pour récupérer les sacrifices et les familles de s’exécuter*” “Seydou [Diallo][...] [walked] around the whole city in order to collect the sacrifices and the families oblige” (*Le Soleil* 22 August 1990, 8). Souleymane Ndiaye affirms this, remembering the old man passing by his house. “*On a donné ce qu’on voulait...comme les pièces ou du laax*” “One gave what one wanted...like coins or *laax*” (S. Ndiaye 2007). But this man has passed away and no one makes the rounds for the city anymore.

Seydou described the annual offering: “*Auparavant, [...] les notables de Saint-Louis se réunissaient pour offrir chaque année soit une vache soit un mouton. On engorgeait l’animal au bord du fleuve ou de la mer. La premier partie était divisée en 30 tas dont 15 pour le fleuve et 15 autres pour la mer*” “Before, [...] the distinguished of Saint Louis would meet each year to offer either a cow or a sheep. One butchers the animal at the edge of the river or the sea. The first part is divided into 30 piles, 15 for the river and 15 for the sea” (*Le Soleil* 22 August 1990, 8). The second half was prepared and then offered to the impoverished. This rite, however, is not respected anymore.

Marietou Camara Niang provided another version of the annual offerings that people give to Mame Coumba Bang. The families that know the traditions sacrifice a white ox, sing, and dance for her. “*On tue le bœuf. On donne une partie au fleuve et on mange une partie*” “One kills the ox. One gives a part to the river and one eats a part” (M. Niang 2007).

Louis Camara recounted a third description of the offerings, which an elderly woman on the north side of the island told to him. “*Chaque année, une jeune fille nubile fait*

l'offrande annuelle avant la saison de pluie” “Every year, a young, inexperienced girl makes the annual offering before the rainy season” (Camara 2007). The girl gets into a pirogue, goes to the middle of the river, and gives many things as *sarax*. A group of women stand on the island and sing the entire time she is on the water.

Other people spoke of the songs and dances that the specialists perform for Mame Coumba Bang during the annual offering. “*On dit que Mame Coumba Bang aime bien le tam-tam et les chansons des gens qui habitent au bord du fleuve ou de la mer. [...] Ma grand-mère chantait et chaque fois qu'on chantait, elle manifestait sa joie en laissant tranquilles les gens qui se lavent, les gens qui lavent leurs vêtements, les pirogues qui traversent*” “One says that Mame Coumba Bang loves the *tam-tam* and the songs of the people who live at the edge of the river or of the sea. [...] My grandmother sang and each time one sang, she manifested her joy by leaving alone the people who bathe, the people who wash their clothes, the pirogues that go across” (Diop 2007). An elderly lady who lived on the river in Guinea chanted for Papa Samba Sow several years ago that was incorporated into his play, “L’Odyssée des Origines,” performed in Saint Louis in 2001 (Appendix D, Chant 1). He described it as “un chant rituel [...] dédié à Mame Coumba Bang quand on a fait des offrandes” “a ritual chant [...] dedicated to Mame Coumba Bang when one made offerings” (Sow 2007). He uses the past tense here, because he said that not many people sing this song anymore in Saint Louis.

If one does not give these offerings every year, the goddess gets angry with the Saint Louisians. One will see the water moving and destroying objects on the river bank. “*Reub reub est le bruit qu'elle fait dans l'eau. [...] L'eau bouge trop*” “*Reub reub* is the noise she makes in the water. [...] The water moves a lot” (Diop 2007). With this movement of water, she shows her anger with the inhabitants. “*Elle le manifeste en reversant les pirogues. Les gens meurent. Ils meurent par dizaine. [...] Elle se fâche comment? En noyant tous les*

baigneurs, les enfants qui se baignent au fleuve” “She manifests it in overturning the pirogues. People die. They die by tens. [...] She becomes angry how? In drowning all of the swimmers, the children who swim in the river” (Diop 2007).

When Saint Louisians see these manifestations of Mame Coumba Bang, they start giving offerings and singing and dancing for her. After the inundation of 1999, as described above, when many boats were destroyed, people were seen throwing *lait caillé* into the river (A. Sall 2007, 161). Aside from giving sacrifices, they also traditionally sing and dance for her when these manifestations occur. The *Ndiaguabar*, a traditional dance that Saint Louisians perform to ask for Mame Coumba Bang to forgive them, is also traditionally performed by the specialists when Mame Coumba Bang becomes angry and begins to overturn pirogues and drown the people who swim in the river. “*Cette pratique consiste à entonner des chansons, battre les tam-tams, esquisser toutes sortes de pas de danse pendant plusieurs heures. [...] C’est des grandes familles traditionalistes, des griots de pure souche qui font le ‘Ndiaguabar.’ [...] Pour qu’un ‘Ndiaguabar’ soit accepté, il faut qu’il soit bien pensé, bien élaboré, et savamment exécuté*” “This practice consists of striking up songs, drumming *tam-tams*, sketching all sorts of dance steps for many hours. [...] It is the large traditional families of griots of pure origin that do the ‘*Ndiaguabar*.’ [...] In order for a ‘*Ndiaguabar*’ to be accepted, it is necessary for it to be well thought out, very elaborated, and skillfully executed” (*Le Soleil* 22 August 1990, 8). Once accepted, the water calms and Mame Coumba Bang leaves the city in peace again.

Offerings during pregnancy and after a birth

According to tradition, offerings have to be made to Mame Coumba Bang at three points during the pregnancy and birth of a child: when the mother is about three months pregnant, the day the baby is born, and just before the baptism. Offerings for babies are

“*seulement pour l’aîné*” “only for the first born” (A. K. Sall 2007), although some do it for each child.

For the first three months of the pregnancy, “*tu n’as pas le droit de traverser le fleuve*” “you do not have the right to cross the river” (Diallo 2007). After the first trimester, the woman has to make the sacrifice called *soow*, literally meaning *lait caillé*, before she can go across the river. The sacrifice gets its name because the woman sees a specialist who prepares it: “*Nu togg laaxu soow ak dugub*” “One prepares *laax* of *lait caillé* and millet” (A. K. Sall 2007). When giving this *sarax*, “*C’est la protection de Mame Coumba Bang que tu demande*” “It is the Mame Coumba Bang’s protection which you ask for” (Diallo 2007).

According to Adjaratou Khady Sall, the specialist “[*va*] au point nord et [*pose*] le *calebasse* au bord du fleuve” “[goes] to the northern point and [sets] the *calebasse* at the edge of the river” (2007). The specialist then sits there and waits for Mame Coumba Bang to come and take the offering and replace the *laax* with all forms of *garab*, or medicine “*contre tout*” “against everything” (Camara 2007). The specialist never sees the goddess take the *sarax*; he or she notices when the *calebasse* is gone and then when it is back on the edge of the island. The *garap* is in a liquid form for drinking, a liquid form for bathing, and a solid form for wearing. If there is a problem with the birth, it is because the woman did not make an offering (A. K. Sall 2007).

According to Marie Madeleine Diallo, there is a special family living on Sor that has a woman who retrieves the *garap*. When the specialist goes to give the *soow* offering, she goes to “*une place dans le fleuve qui est vraiment mystique*” “a place in the river that is truly mystical” (Diallo 2007). She enters the water with the offering and retrieves a potion. “*Elle dit que c’est Mame Coumba Bang qui lui donne ça*” “She says that it is Mame Coumba Bang who gives this to her” (Diallo 2007). The potion is made up of river water, but one cannot drink it, because it is considered to be too dangerous (Sow 2007). “*Pour la protection, elle*

doit se laver pour huit jours [avec ce potion], et le mari se lave aussi” “For protection, she must wash herself for eight days [with the potion], and the husband washes himself also” (Diallo 2007). The potion protects the woman and the baby for the entire pregnancy.

Another day to make an offering during the birthing process is the day the baby is born. “*Après l’accouchement, la première bouillie de mil que la maman mange*” “After the birth, the first cereal of millet that the mom eats” in order to breastfeed the baby has to be offered to Mame Coumba Bang (Diallo 2007). One prepares the cereal of millet and splits it into two parts. Marietou Camara Niang declared that she has been told to give just cereal of millet to the baby (2007), while Marie Madeleine Diallo stated that one must add milk and sugar to the cereal. “*On en prend un peu, [et] on le donne à Mame Coumba Bang avant que l’accouché ne prenne son premier repas*” “One takes a little of it, [and] one gives it to Mame Coumba Bang before the newborn takes its first meal” (Diop 2007). Marie Madeleine Diallo asserted that when someone makes the offering for the woman and the baby, one holds up the *calebasse* filled with the goddess’s half of the cereal with milk and sugar at the edge of the river and says, “*Maangi fas yene dioteli la sarax si bi jóge ci* [name of the woman who gave birth] *doomu* [name of the woman’s mother] *ak* [name of the woman’s father]” “I have the intention to give you this sacrifice which comes from [name of the woman’s mother] daughter of [name of the woman’s mother] and [name of the woman’s father]” (Diallo 2007).

The third time you are supposed to give a *sarax* to Mame Coumba Bang is the day of the baptism. Adjaratou Khady Sall stated that the offering one gives before the baptism is decided by a specialist (2007), but usually sheep meat is given. Fatou Diop declares, “*Ce mouton, en général, personne n’en goûte avant qu’on adopte un morceau du foie et un morceau de viande au fleuve*” “This sheep, in general, no one tastes it before one passes a piece of liver and a piece of meat to the river” (2007). This offering at the baptism is so that the baby has good health and the mother has good breastfeeding. If a family does not give the

offering to the goddess, “*le bébé sera toujours malade ou il va mourir*” “the baby will always be sick or he will die” (Diop 2007).

Offerings of foreigners

“*Bu fekke ni gan ga ci dëkk bi, bo sango ci dèx bi, bo sagganee lab*” “If one is a stranger in the city, if one bathes in the river, one risks drowning” (A. K. Sall 2007). Foreigners are supposed to make offerings to Mame Coumba Bang before they swim in the water. Seydou Diallo explains this through an analogy: “*Est-ce qu’un responsable de famille, quel qu’il soit, voudrait quelqu’un vienne chez lui sans le saluer ni au moins savoir les raisons de sa visite[?] [...] Eh bien, c’est exactement la même chose avec Mame Coumba Bang*” “Would a head of a family, whatever he may be, like someone coming to his house without either greeting him or at least knowing the reasons of the visit [?] [...] Well, it is exactly the same thing with Mame Coumba Bang” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 8). In this case, her home is the river, meaning that foreigners cannot set foot in it without giving her an offering to say hello. If they fail to do so, they risk drowning. Seydou adds that “*les exemples d’étrangers noyés à [Saint-Louis] sont innombrables*” “the examples of drowned strangers in St. Louis are innumerable” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 8). Most of all it is the young foreigners that come to the city and drown in the river or the ocean; when they go bathing in the river water without giving a sacrifice first, they drown... “*C’est automatique!*” “It is automatic!” (Dieng 2007).

Offerings of travelers

It is not just foreign travelers that have to make offerings, but also Saint Louisians who travel to another city. “*Chaque fois que tu traverses l’eau pour aller à une autre ville*” “Each time you cross the water to go to another city” you have to make an offering to Mame

Coumba Bang (A. K. Sall 2007). Marie Madeleine Diallo adds that every time one travels to a city of water, one must make a sacrifice to the river goddess of Saint Louis, because the inhabitants of all cities on the ocean, rivers, and lakes are all *doomu ndox*, or children of water (2007). This can be *laax*, silver coins, or whatever else is available to give as a proper offering.

When one travels over seas, like to the United States, “*on doit prendre du sable des États-Unis et du sable de Saint-Louis et se laver avec ça*” “one must take some sand from the United States and some sand from Saint Louis and wash oneself with it” (Diallo 2007). Papa Samba Sow confirmed this and said “*J’ai amené du sable de Saint-Louis aux États-Unis pour faire ça*” “I brought some sand from Saint Louis to the United States to do it” (2007). To wash oneself, one mixes the two sands together with some water and rub it over one’s body. When one returns to Saint Louis, one must give a sacrifice of *lait caillé* to Mame Coumba Bang in the river (Diallo 2007).

Offerings during Tabaski

The annual Muslim holiday of Tabaski, a day remembering the biblical story of Abraham sacrificing a sheep instead of his son, is also a day where one is supposed to give offerings. “*Quand on tue le mouton, on prend un peu et jette ça au fleuve. [...] C’est la partie de Mame Coumba Bang*” “When one kills the sheep, one takes a little and throws it in the river. [...] It is Mame Coumba Bang’s part” (M. Niang 2007). One gives to the goddess, because one gives meat to everyone that day (friends, family, talibés), and she cannot be left out. Uniquely for this holiday, as a girl explained, “*Si tu donnes un peu, ça devient beaucoup pour les génies*” “If you give a little, it becomes a lot for the gods” (Class at Lycée Ameth Fall 2007).

Offerings for good luck and protection during hard times

When one needs help with a difficult situation or needs luck on a test, one can give an offering to ask for her help. “*Chaque fois qu’il y a quelque chose que tu dois faire ou que tu dois réussir*” “Each time there is something that you must do your that you must succeed at,” you can give an offering to Mame Coumba Bang (Diallo 2007). One man described that when he was studying in Europe for a year and he wanted to do well on something, he asked his mother in Saint Louis to make a sacrifice for him (Faye 2007). Adjaratou Khady Sall says that in these cases, one makes *lait caillé*, says the desired wish in one’s head, and then puts some of one’s own saliva in the *calebasse* before pouring it into the river. The saliva is the “*élément concret*” “the concrete element” in the sacrifice, as it is a part of the person giving the offering (A. K. Sall 2007).

Appearance

There are many different ways in which the people of Saint Louis describe Mame Coumba Bang’s appearance. The survey shows that out of six choices (old, young, beautiful, ugly, light-skinned, and dark-skinned), she is most commonly described as old and beautiful, but this is a view shared by only less than 50% of the participants. One woman described the goddess as “*une vieille femme*” “an old woman” (*Le Soleil*, 30 August 1999, 7), while a young man interviewed depicted her as “*une jeune femme...jeune et très belle*” “a young woman...young and very beautiful” (B. Niang 2007). Many young women and men encountered shared this vision; 73% of the people surveyed twenty-five years old or younger agreed that she was beautiful, whereas only 9% of those over sixty-five agreed.

People also recounted what the goddess wears. In a book by Abdoul Hadir Aïdara, Diaw Singuelti Diop does not comment on the age of Mame Coumba Bang, but she describes here as “*vêtue d’un pagne blanc rayé d’une bande noire, portant une chevelure très*

abondante qui lui descend jusqu'à la hanche" "dressed in a white skirt with one black stripe, with thick hair that goes down to her hips" (2004, 30). Adjaratou Khady Sall recounted that in a dream, the goddess was depicted as a woman with pieces of gold across her forehead (2007). There is a mural of the goddess on the wall of the restaurant "L'Harmattan" on the north side of the island (Appendix C, Photo 3). This depicts Mame Coumba Bang as a traditionally dressed Senegalese woman, wearing brightly colored clothing, bracelets and earrings, traditional hair tress, and a head wrap as worn by most women.

Another view is that she does not only take one form. "*Mën na neek jigéen ju makk walla jeeg bundaw*" "She can be an old woman or a young lady" (A. K. Sall 2007). In an interview with Omar Touré, he laughingly pointed to a woman sitting at the table about fifty feet away and said it was possible that she is Mame Coumba Bang, but one would never know (2007). Although he was joking, he made the point that because she can take any form she wants, one does not have the ability to recognize her.

According to Oumar Sarr, "*Un esprit peut prendre n'importe quelle apparence*" "A spirit can take any appearance," not just that of a human (Issakha 1995, 11). One girl described one time when the goddess transformed into a large snake (Class at Lycée Ameth Fall 2007). Almost everyone interviewed had a different view of the form Mame Coumba Bang takes, whether it is human or not.

Meeting Mame Coumba Bang

Encounters

One aspect of the story that is disputed is the possibility of meeting Mame Coumba Bang. The most famous story of someone meeting the goddess is that of Adja Ndèye Fatma Samb. At the age of twenty, in 1939, she was working as a cook for a French army captain on the edge of the island. She saw "*une dame assise sur un long pieu qui se dressait dans le*

fleuve. Elle avait l'air de rêver” “a woman sitting on a long bench standing in the river. She seemed like a dream” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990). The woman then turned and looked in all directions. By these movements of her head, Adja Fatma Samb said that she surveyed everything that was happening on the island of Saint Louis. She described the woman as having “*la face d'un singe tout en conservant sa forme humaine*” “the face of a monkey, while maintaining her human form” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990). Adja Fatma Samb said she felt scared, so she went to see her aunt, who told her about Mame Coumba Bang. Her aunt told her to give an offering of milk, because “*elle n'était venue que pour me protéger, elle apparaît à toutes les cuisinières qui ont déjà travaillé là-bas où j'étais employée*” “she had only come to protect me, she has appeared to all of the cooks who already worked where I was employed” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990). After she poured the milk into the river, Mame Coumba Bang stood up and disappeared into the water.

Another young man, Babacar Niang, tells a story about when he and two of his friends encountered Mame Coumba Bang. He said that it was a Sunday morning in 1992, between one-thirty and two o'clock in the afternoon. He and two of his friends, a girl and a boy, were walking along the river bank on the south side of the island, when they saw “*un être bizarre. [...] Elle était jeune et belle*” “a strange being. [...] She was young and beautiful” (B. Niang 2007). Standing in a doorway, the bizarre woman then told the young girl to come to her. After a couple of moments of hesitation, the girl walked toward the woman. Babacar said at that moment he noticed a plate of rice and fish and “*elle nous a dit de manger et on était un peu effrayé*” “she told us to eat and we were a little scared” (2007). They then sat down in front of the doorway and ate, but he said that he only took two handfuls, because he was a little apprehensive. She told them to return the next day at the same hour and then she descended into the river and disappeared. They returned the next day, but she was not there.

Some people say that they do not think it is possible to meet Mame Coumba Bang, because they do not know of anybody who has. One elderly man interviewed said, “*Je n’ai jamais rencontré une personne qui l’a vue*” “I have never met a person who has seen her” (Dieng 2007). He said that even though he knew Adja Fatma Samb, he did not believe her story. “*Je la connaissais bien. [...] Elle n’a pas dit la vérité... Elle n’a jamais vu Mame Coumba Bang*” “I knew her well. [...] She didn’t tell the truth... She never saw Mame Coumba Bang” (Dieng 2007). Even though he knew her, he does not believe it possible to meet the goddess and still says that he has never met anyone who has met and Mame Coumba Bang..

Does it bring luck or danger?

People seem to be split on whether meeting Mame Coumba Bang would bring good luck or bad luck. The surveys illustrate this divide, where 49.5% said they would like to meet her and 49.5% said that they would not. In their reasons for choosing, they were split even more, with all four answers carrying twenty-some percent of the survey population.

Of those who would not want to meet the Mame Coumba Bang, there is an element of danger involved. Adjaratou Khady Sall said that midnight to two o’clock in the morning is “*très dangereux*” “very dangerous” because if you go out and meet Mame Coumba Bang or any of the other spirits, “*Cela peut faire mal. On peut rendre fou ou mourir*” “It could do harm. One could go mad or die” (2007). Pape Laye Fall agrees, saying that it is dangerous to be out at night and in the evening because Mame Coumba Bang and her children walk around (2007).

In the class discussion at Lycée Ameth Fall, one student said that she would like to meet Mame Coumba Bang because “*ça porte bonheur*” “it brings good luck,” but as soon as she said that, another girl blurted out that it brings bad luck (2007). Marietou Camara Niang

makes a distinction between meeting Mame Coumba Bang and meeting other spirits that can do harm; she explains that one does not have to worry about running into Mame Coumba Bang, because “*elle n’est pas méchante*” “she is not mean” (2007). She affirmed that going out at night was dangerous, not because of the goddess, but because of evil spirits that roam the streets as well.

Manifestations

Discussions about Mame Coumba Bang are always full of stories of ways in which she manifests herself. It has already been discussed above that she flips over pirogues and takes lives through drowning when she is angry, but it is the stories about miraculous occurrences that shows her strength and that she protects and cares for the inhabitants of Saint Louis. The most common stories told are those about Seydou Diallo and the two bridges.

Stories of Seydou Diallo

Seydou Diallo maintained throughout his life that he was the great-grandson of Mame Coumba Bang. “*C’était mon aïeul!*” “She was my ancestor!” (*Le Soleil*, 22 August 1990, 8). Every time a person drowned in the river Seydou would throw his silver ring, which he says the goddess herself gave him, and then dive into the water. Sometimes he would recover the body within minutes, whereas other times he said the Mame Coumba Bang told him to be patient for a few days.

One elderly man stressed that “*il portait pas de masque*” “he did not wear a mask” when he dove like the divers do today and he found the body every time (Mbaye 2007). It is also said that he would stay under water for about thirty minutes at a time (Dieng 2007). Fatou Diop explains the incredible ways that he would always get the silver ring back and find each and every drowned person. “*Là où la bague tombe, si on y va, si on plonge dedans,*

on trouve le noyé, la personne qui est morte [...] même si la personne était à un kilomètre, la bague volait à un kilomètre. On suivait la bague” “Where the ring falls, if one goes there, if one dives in, one finds the drowned person, the person who is dead [...] even if the person was a kilometer away, the ring flew a kilometer. One followed the ring” (Diop 2007).

Papa Samba Sow insisted that he walked on water (2007), although he did not witness this himself. Souleymane Ndiaye said, “*J’ai vu un homme qui a sorti du fleuve une calebasse du maïs bien préparé avec du lait*” “I saw one man who brought out of the water a *calebasse* of corn prepared with milk,” referring to Seydou (2007). He gave it as an offering to Mame Coumba Bang and when he pulled it back out of the water, some of the dish was still there, but “*il n’y avait pas d’eau et c’était chaud. C’est bizarre*” “there was not any water and it was hot. It was strange” (S. Ndiaye 2007). Seydou Diallo and the rest of the population affirms that Mame Coumba Bang gave him these abilities.

The bridges that never were

There are two stories of bridges that the city or the military tried to build, but Mame Coumba Bang became upset and stopped their construction. One was attempted in the north, across the small arm of the river by the French military base (Appendix C, Photo 4). The French army wanted to be able to get to the other military site in Ndar Tout, just across the river, more quickly, instead of going to the other side of the island. Just before the independence of Senegal in 1960, they decided to build a small bridge across the water. “*Mais quand ils ont commencé le travail, le premier mètre, ou deux mètres, ou trois mètres de travail le premier jour, Mame Coumba Bang n’était pas contente et elle l’a manifesté*” “But when they began the work, the first meter, or two meters, or three meters the first day, Mame Coumba Bang was not happy and she showed it” (Diop 2007). That night, she put a stick on the construction site. “*Un bâton: ça symbolise des coups qu’on donne à un enfant qui a fait*

un tort” “A stick: this symbolizes the hits one gives to a child that has done something wrong” (Diop 2007).

The military did not understand, so the next day they continued their work, which angered Mame Coumba Bang even more. This time, she placed a horse whip on the bridge work. Once again, when the military found the whip the third day, they did not comprehend, so they went on with their work. That night, “*Mame Coumba Bang a pose un bâton, une cravache, et des [ordures] à côté pour dire: ‘Si vous continuez à travailler, je vous frapperai jusqu’à ce que vous [excrétiez des ordures]*” “Mame Coumba Bang placed a stick, a whip, and some feces next to it to say: ‘If you continue to work, I will hit you until you [excrete feces]. The military finally understood after seeing the three objects, and they abandoned the project.

The other bridge that was also attempted and abandoned was started on Sor (Appendix C, Photo 5). It was supposed to cross the large arm of the river to the south side of the island. The story says that the bridge was actually created and destroyed multiple times. Referring to Mame Coumba Bang, a young woman said, “*Elle a détruit trois fois le pont là-bas*” “She destroyed the bridge over there three times” (Class at Lycée Ameth Fall). One man, when asked who destroyed the bridge, shrugged his shoulders to say that he didn’t know, and then said “*On dit Mame Coumba Bang*” “One says Mame Coumba Bang” (Diagne 2007). He then went on to say that he thinks she was angry because the river is her home and she did not want another bridge in the middle of it. Speaking of Mame Coumba Bang and her children, he said “*Ça les derange*” “It disturbs them” (Diagne 2007).

Possible Origins

The origins of the story of Mame Coumba Bang are not known for sure. There are some speculations and some stories, but when asked, most people say that they do not know.

Fatou Diop says that she does not think anyone can say the origin of the story, but the belief has been around for a very long time. “*Elle était là avant la religion, avant l’islam, avant le christianisme. Elle était là*” “She was here before religion, before Islam, before Christianity. She was here” (Diop 2007).

Adja Fatma Samb attests that Mame Coumba Bang was originally a young woman that used to live on the site that later became the military base in the northern part of the island (Issakha 1995, 10). She says that one day a man appeared at the young woman’s door and came into the house, but never said a word. The mysterious man then stood up and left, and the young woman followed him, never to be seen again. “*Cet inconnu était un génie. Il avait fait de [Mame Coumba Bang] son épouse*” “This stranger was a god. He made [Mame Coumba Bang] his wife,” explains Adja Fatma Samb (Issakha 1995, 10).

Iba Guèye Issakha thinks that the creation of the story of Mame Coumba Bang may not be very old, and may have been aided by the French colonizers. He recounts that when the French first came to Senegal, “*L’islam était contre la colonisation. [...] La résistance était très, très forte*” “Islam was against colonization. [...] The resistance was very, very strong” (Issakha 2007). Because of this, the colonizers wanted to break the Islamic forces. One way they may have tried to do this is through a “*reprise des mythes et des légendes*” “resurrection of myths and legends” that had been suppressed by Islam over the years (Issakha 2007). The fact that Bang came from the French word, *banc*, as mentioned above, also suggests that the story is not very old and may have been influenced by the French colonizers.

Contradictions with Islam

The belief in a river goddess and the belief in Islam may completely contradict each other, but the population of Saint Louis, on the whole, believes in both. When interviewed and asked whether or not Mame Coumba Bang exists, Fatou Diop said “*Vous me posez une*

question très difficile” “You are asking me a very difficult question” (2007). She said that she used to believe in the goddess, pray to her, and give offerings to her, but she no longer does because it is forbidden by Islam to believe in a god other than God. “*On doit croire en Dieu, et seulement en Dieu*” “On must believe in God and only in God” (Diop 2007).

This does not mean, however, that she stopped believing entirely. She says that “*C’est Dieu qui peut-être a fabriqué Mame Coumba Bang*” “It is God who maybe made Mame Coumba Bang” (Diop 2007). Marietou Camara Niang says that she believes whole-heartedly that “*C’est Dieu qui a créé des êtres*” “It is God who created these beings” (M. Niang 2007). Because she believes that Mame Coumba Bang and the other gods and spirits exist in the river, she says that she knows that God must have created them, because God created everything. She said “*Dieu, il est dehors. [...] Les êtres font parties du monde*” “God, he is outside. [...] The beings are part of the world” (M. Niang 2007). He created them so that they could watch over the humans and the environment, because God has to survey the entire world.

Analysis

When analyzing Mame Coumba Bang in the city of Saint Louis, it is necessary to define which aspects are legends and which are myths. A legend can be defined as a “traditional story or group of stories told about a particular person or place. [...] [They] may include supernatural beings, elements of mythology, or explanations of natural phenomena, but they are associated with a particular locality or person and are told as a matter of history” (“legend,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*). In the case of Mame Coumba Bang, the legend is the stories, the specifics of rituals, her appearance, and other such details that people may give. A myth, however, is “a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious

belief” (“myth,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*). The belief in her existence in what she does for the city and its inhabitants and the idea that one has to please her by making offerings in exchange for protection make up the myth of Mame Coumba Bang. Because the story of Mame Coumba Bang is at once a legend and a myth, one has to analyze them separately.

The legends are many and evolving

Looking at the legend of Mame Coumba Bang, one can see that it is not just one story. As discussed above, there are many discrepancies in the legend, mostly visible in the way one makes an offering, the appearance of the goddess, and whether it is safe to meet her.

For the process in giving offerings, there are inconsistencies in who makes the offering and whether or not one talks. A couple women insisted that the traditional way of giving offerings is to have a specialist do it; however, that view seems to be changing now and most people say that one should give one’s own offering to the river (A. K. Sall 2007). One possible explanation for this change is that it may take less effort to give one’s own offering, especially because there are not many specialists left. Some informants also said that one is not supposed to talk while giving an offering (A. K. Sall 2007), while others said that one should ask the goddess for what one wants and vocalize the wish (Diallo 2007). This seems to be a change over time and not just people disagreeing.

The description of the appearance of Mame Coumba Bang was across the board. As the surveys showed, most people twenty-five years and under said she was beautiful, whereas in the elderly group, the answers were spread evenly among all six choices. Also, 27% of the elderly group did not respond and said that she could take any form. There were not many people who said she was ugly (only seven out of eighty-one), but in Adja Fatma Samb’s well-known origin story, she had the face of a monkey. From these findings, the story appears to be evolving to say that the goddess is beautiful. This could possibly be due to the importance

put on beauty and image for the young generation today, which can be seen in images of popular culture.

The differences in whether it is good luck or dangerous to meet Mame Coumba Bang does not suggest any generational change, but as the surveys and interviews had people of all ages arguing both sides, it is interesting because of the clear divide between the two. For example, in the classroom discussion, two girls began to bicker about whether it was dangerous or not to meet her (Class at Lycée Ameth Fall). Although the views vary significantly within the population, no interviewees seemed on the fence about the issue.

Instead of one legend of Mame Coumba Bang being passed on, there are many different legends being told and some aspects seem to be evolving to fit the needs of the new generation. Marietou Camara Niang explained, “Ils ont beaucoup oublié. [...] Chaque génération perd plus que l’autre. Il y a toujours une autre chose à adopter...des nouvelles choses.” “They forgot a lot. [...] Each generation loses more than the other. There is always another thing to adopt...new things” (M. Niang 2007). It is both a change of legends and a loss of legends that forms the legend of Mame Coumba Bang today.

A living myth

As a part of the myth of Mame Coumba Bang, the belief in a goddess of the river appears to have been in the area since before organized religion came. Cities all along the river, even in Guinea, have protective goddesses much like the one in Saint Louis. Because of its long history with the people, it seems that “*c’est une croyance bien enracinée, profondément enracinée, dans les têtes des habitants du fleuve*” “it is a belief well ingrained, profoundly ingrained, in the heads of the inhabitants of the river” (Diop 2007). Because it has been around for this long and been passed from generation to generation, it is extremely difficult to

undo. The surveys help to show that every generation believes in the goddess about as much as the one before it, so the myth remains a constant, living belief.

The myth of Mame Coumba Bang appears to play a large role in how they view events that occur on the island. “In fact, myth and symbol are fundamental needs of human beings through which they express both their imaginary world and their symbolic thought. They help us to face up to the major issues of Life, Death, Afterlife [...]” (Bouguerra 2005, 6). Mame Coumba Bang explains why bad things occur, such as a baby dying, pirogues being overturned, someone drowning in the river. “*A cause de ces manifestations là, [...] il est très difficile de ne pas y croire*” “Because of these manifestations, [...] it is very difficult not to believe” (Diop 2007).

Even in a country that is 95% Muslim (Bureau of African Affairs, October 2007), this animist belief in a river goddess holds. The survey indicates that almost everyone thinks that it is at least somewhat true, as only 1% of the survey population said that it was completely imaginary. As Fatou Diop described above, it goes against the religion of Islam to pray to another god or to believe in one that is on the same level as God. It seems that Saint Louisians justify believing in both gods by putting Mame Coumba Bang on a level below God. By saying that God created the gods and goddesses (M. Niang 2007), one can continue to believe in both without violating the rules of Islam.

As for the reason for which God made the other spiritual beings, these secondary gods seem to function a tangible explanation of events that occur. “*C’est Mame Coumba Bang qui nous protège,*” “It is Mame Coumba Bang who protects us,” because god is too far away (M. Niang 2007). Even for the Muslim holiday, Tabaski, they acknowledge Mame Coumba Bang by giving her a share of the sheep meat. As the tradition is to share with one’s friends and family, they share with her and the other spirits, treating them more as humans than as gods. One can see the difference in which one envisions God and the other spirits such as Mame

Coumba Bang. It is difficult to see god helping them, but they witness Mame Coumba Bang's protection with each manifestation.

Conclusion

The story of Mame Coumba Bang is both myth and legend. The legend is made up of many first-hand accounts and infamous stories, some of which seem to be changing over time with each generation. The myth, however, is a constant conviction, proven with every manifestation, and even has a place in their Muslim beliefs. The objectives of the paper were to understand the legend of Mame Coumba Bang, the relationship with Islam, and the origins of the goddess. Although the first two have been achieved and the origins of the myth have been investigated, due to time constraints, the origins of the legend were only brushed over. Other than these origins of Mame Coumba Bang, one could also further explore the effects of Islamic beliefs and the beliefs in spirits on each other. Because of the little written material about Mame Coumba Bang, this paper helps to preserve the legend (or legends) of the goddess; the myth, however, is living and breathing, and does not need any help in conservation.

Appendices

Appendix B

Document 1: Survey example

Enquête sur la Légende de Mame Coumba Bang

- 1) Etes vous : Un homme Une femme
- 2) Quel âge avez-vous ?
 - 25 ans ou moins
 - 26 à 40 ans
 - 41 à 65 ans
 - Plus de 65 ans
- 3) Dans quel quartier habitez-vous ? Sur l'île A Sor La Langue de Barbarie
- 4) Etes vous Saint-Louisien : De souche D'adoption
- 5) Connaissez vous l'histoire de Mame Coumba Bang : Bien Un peu Pas du tout
- 6) Que pensez-vous de cette histoire ?
 - Elle est vraie
 - Elle est plus ou moins vraie
 - Elle est complètement imaginaire
- 7) Avez-vous déjà fait une offrande à Mame Coumba Bang ? Oui Non
- 8) Pourquoi fait-on des offrandes à Mame Coumba Bang ?
 - Pour l'apaiser
 - Pour être protégé
 - Parce que c'est la tradition
 - A l'occasion d'un baptême
 - Pour avoir de la chance
- 9) Aimerez vous rencontrer Mame Coumba Bang ? Oui Non
- 10) Pourquoi ?
 - Cela porte bonheur
 - On peut demander une faveur
 - C'est peut-être dangereux
 - On peut devenir fou ou mourir
- 11) Selon vous, comment est Mame Coumba Bang :
 - A. Belle ou Laide
 - B. Jeune ou Vieille
 - C. Claire ou Noire
- 12) Avez vous déjà vu Mame Coumba Bang en rêve ? Oui Non
- 13) Pensez vous que Mame Coumba Bang joue un rôle important dans la culture Saint-Louisien ?
 - Oui Non
- 14) Pourquoi ?
 - C'est un symbole de Saint-Louis
 - C'est un lien avec le passé
 - C'est de la superstition
 - Elle n'a aucune importance

Appendix C

Figure 1. *Le Salon de Mame Coumba Bang* (Living room of Mame Coumba Bang).



Figure 2. Example offering of *laax* in a *calebasse*.



Figure 3. Mural on wall of restaurant L'Harmattan on north side of island. Artists Masta et Marcel, 2001.



Figure 4. Remnants of French military bridge on the north side of the island.



Figure 5. Remnants of the bridge on Sor. Picture taken from south side of island.



Appendix D

Chant 1: Traditional chant for giving offerings

Mani wouli tambaalo
Mani wouli Seyni Dioboo
Mani wouli ni wala
Nima kani
Mani wouli tembe tembe
Sigil ndama tembe ôô

Known translation:
Supreme mother, I greet you
Mani wouli Seyni Dioboo
Mani wouli ni wala
Nima kani
Mani wouli tembe tembe
Stand up quickly short person

Note: One finds words that are of many languages, including Wolof, Bambara, Toucouleur, and Peulh. This is because there are many ethnicities in Senegal, and many ethnicities in Saint Louis that feel protected by Mame Coumba Bang. It is very difficult to find people who will sing it, because either they can not remember it or they are afraid that if they call the goddess when she is not needed, she will be angry and punish them. This song is a traditional song with no known author. It was sung and written for the researcher by Papa Samba Sow (2007).

Glossaries

Glossary of French Terms

le bouillie de mil: crushed millet

la calebasse: calabash or gourd

le génie: god or goddess,

le lait caillé: curdled milk

le salon: the living room

Glossary of Wolof Terms

bang: bench

doomu ndar: literally, “child of Saint Louis;” used to refer to a Saint Louisian of original descent.

doomu ndox: literally, “child of water;” used to refer to inhabitants of cities on bodies of water.

garab: medicine used for protection against everything; comes in liquid form for bathing, liquid form for drinking, and solid form for wearing.

jinnés: spirits, gods

laax: a mixture of curdled milk and crushed millet

Ndiaguabar: a traditional dance that Saint Louisians perform to ask for Mame Coumba Bang to forgive them when she is angry.

neeg: one’s domain

njooloor: the siesta; the period of time between about noon and three o’clock in the afternoon

rab: god or spirit

reub reub: the noise and movement Mame Coumba Bang makes with the river water

sarax: an offering

soow: literally “curdled milk;” also refers to the specific offering made when a woman is three months pregnant.

tam-tam: a small drum native to Senegal, played under the arm

timis: the period of time between twilight and about two o’clock in the morning

tus ngël: a red powder put around eyes to help see Mame Coumba Bang

tuurs: fetishes that protect people and cure certain sicknesses

waxade: an armoire

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