

# **THE TEMPLE FOR WOMEN INITIATES: AN ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTION**

Fatou K. CAMARA, Ph.D in Law,

Associate Law professor, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar (SENEGAL),

<http://fsjp.ucad.sn>

« We can do something other than look to Saudi Arabia or the West, we can look to the interior of Africa, its culture, its spirituality » SEMBENE

## ABSTRACT

The project of the Temple for Women Initiates (TWI) is an initiative of the women of the village of Baback Sereres, who have been assisted by the researcher, Issa Laye Thiaw (author of *La femme seereer*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2005), a native of the village. The idea of the creation of a TWI stems from the realization that ancestral practices do not inspire the local population as they used to in the past. That makes it necessary to create new infrastructures able to fulfil the requirements of modern times ; because the revitalization of black African culture, and its spiritual foundation, is the best way to circumvent religious fundamentalisms, and to strengthen a feminist message all the more effective because tightly wrapped in traditional clothing. The matriarchal nature of Seereer culture makes it possible to engage in culturally meaningful discourses and actions promoting human rights, and most specifically women's and children's rights, as well as concern for the environment.

The purpose of this article is to describe this project of a Temple for Women Initiates; a project carried by a whole village, men and women alike, regardless of religious affiliation (the village is composed of Catholics, Muslims and followers of the indigenous faith). The first part will focus on the content of the indigenous faith and the matriarchal system that the initiated women represent. The second part will be used to explain the objectives, the context and the stakes of the construction of such a Temple.

Key words:

Ancestors, Animism, Culture, God, Spirits, Indigenous, Maat, Matriarchal, Woman.

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## INTRODUCTION

The young people of the village of Baback Sereres held a meeting, October 15, 2007, to discuss the project of a Temple for Women Initiates. In a letter summarizing the views expressed in that meeting, they wrote the following in support of the project:

“Culture, which can be defined as the ways of doing things, the way of life, the beliefs, in short the ways in which a group sees the world, occupies a major place in the life of people. However the phenomena of Westernization, combined with the attempts at Islamization, have caused the negation of the existence of Black-African cultures. Without culture it is impossible to reach development.”<sup>1</sup>

Modernists consider indigenous culture and anything related to it as something of the past, something that is furthermore totally irrelevant in today's world. On the other hand, Muslim and Christian religious leaders are keen to dismiss indigenous sacred rituals as satanic or pagan practices. But in spite of these concerted efforts to erase indigenous faith (usually called animism) from the minds of Senegalese men and women, it is still there. Officially Senegal is a country where 94% of the people are Muslim,<sup>2</sup> but those statistics overlook the fact that the majority of people continue to believe in the taboos and prohibitions established by their ancestral pre-Islamic and pre-Christian faith. Senegal's first President, famed poet L. S. Senghor, who was a Catholic raised by missionaries and who belonged to the Seereer ethnic group<sup>3</sup>, wrote the following:

« If today a Muslim Head of State consults the “sacred wood,” offers in sacrifice an ox or a bull, I have seen a Christian woman, a practising medical doctor, consult the Seereer “Pangool” (the snakes of the sacred

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<sup>1</sup> See the full letter at the end of the paper, annexe 1.

<sup>2</sup>Muslim 94%, indigenous beliefs 1%, Christian 5% (mostly Roman Catholic) *CIA – The world Factbook – Senegal* (March 2008). Retrieved 1st March 2008 from [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA\\_World\\_Fact\\_Book\\_2004/Senegal](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA_World_Fact_Book_2004/Senegal)

<sup>3</sup> Ethnic groups in Senegal are as follows: Wolof 43.3%, Pulaar 23.8%, Seereer 14.7%, Joola 3.7%, Mandinka 3%, Soninke 1.1%, European and Lebanese 1%, other 9.4%. *CIA – The world Factbook – Senegal* (March 2008). Retrieved 1st March 2008 from [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA\\_World\\_Fact\\_Book\\_2004/Senegal](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA_World_Fact_Book_2004/Senegal)

wood). In truth, everywhere in Black Africa, the “revealed religions” are rooted in the animism which still inspires poets and artists, I am well placed to know it and to say it....”<sup>4</sup>

Animism is based on the belief that everything that exists has a life of its own, and the ability to feel and suffer like you and me. Animals, plants, soil, "inanimate objects" feel. We must therefore respect and love all those with whom we share the earth. The following examples were given me by Issa Laye Thiaw<sup>5</sup>:

“-When you eat under a tree you want to give it its share, which you deposit at the foot of the tree.

- After a busy morning of toil, when the farmer sits in the shade, he must also put his hoe in the shade and not let it lie in the sun. If he forgets to do that he will be reminded with these words (he told me in Wolof because I don't understand Seereer): "*Da fa am bàkkan ni you.*" (‘It has life – the ability to feel- just like you’)

- When the hoe falls from your hands, we say: “Do not pick it up immediately. It is tired. Let it rest.” "

Issa Laye Thiaw is the son of a high priest of the indigenous faith, he is also from an ethnic group, Seereer, with a long-standing tradition of resisting conversion to Islam and the Christian faith. He made the following statement<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> « *Si aujourd'hui tel chef d'Etat musulman consulte le « bois sacré », offre en sacrifice un bœuf ou un taureau, j'ai vu telle chrétienne, docteur en médecine et pratiquante, aller consulter les « Pangool » (les serpents du bois sacré) seereer. En vérité, partout en Afrique noire, les « religions révélées » sont enracinées dans l'animisme qui inspire encore aujourd'hui, poètes et artistes, je suis bien placé pour le savoir et le dire....* » Preface, *Les Africains*, Pierre Alexandre, Lidis, Paris, 1982, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Conversation on animism at my home, Dakar, March 26, 2008. From childhood Issa Laye Thiaw was instructed in black African values and the secrets of the initiates through his father who was a High Priest of the indigenous faith. He then trained at the École Franco-Arabe of Dakar, at the Ecole Normale of Tunis, at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes of la Sorbonne, Paris. He was Senior researcher at the Centre d'études des civilisations, Dakar. He is a retired teacher of classical Arabic. He spent many years in the Arab and Islamic countries where he studied the Muslim religion. He is the author of *La femme Seereer*, (L'Harmattan, Paris 2005, p. 282).

<sup>6</sup> Conversation on animism at my home, Dakar, March 26, 2008.

“Since Islamization and Christianization, Africans do not respect nature. Conversion starts with a change of mindsets and as soon as that happens any further change is accepted. Each religion has plundered the tradition of its community of birth. Where Islam was born women had little if any rights, Islam has led us to the marginalization and inferiority of women.”

As a matter of fact, in Senegal, Islam in particular, has been officially used as a way to deny women equal rights (Camara, 2007).

Fortunately, the matriarchal nature of Seereer culture makes it possible to engage into culturally meaningful discourses and actions promoting human, and most specifically, women rights. Indeed, Seereer cultural values preach gender equity, respect for the environment, education of all children in the values of self-respect, respect for others and care for the community's interests. Hence, the temple will be established as a place where these ancient principles will be taught. It will be a temple of learning as well as a cultural centre open to visitors and researchers, because the revitalization of black African culture, moral values and spiritual foundation, is the best way to circumvent religious fundamentalisms in Africa. Consequently the TWI will be a shelter for indigenous African culture, and the promotion of its matriarchal values through the Temple will help strengthen a feminist message all the more effective because tightly wrapped in traditional clothing.

The popular songs, the folk tales, the legends, the ancestral faith are the elements that constitute the base of Seereer culture and traditional values. All these elements have the women as their principal agents. In the tradition of the Seereer, as is the case of many black African communities, women are the guardians of ancestral knowledge, and have the responsibility of transmitting it from generation to generation. Traditional knowledge forms an integral part of the education, the well-being and the thriving of families and the community, particularly in rural areas. Building a temple to the initiated women will serve as a way to ensure a larger respect for, and a greater protection of, this knowledge and its holders.

The first part of the paper will focus on the content of the indigenous faith and the matriarchal system that the women initiates represent. The second part will be used to explain the objectives, the context, and the stakes of the construction of a Temple for the women initiates.

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## **I. Insights on the Indigenous African Faith and Initiation's Knowledge**

Initiation as a way of imparting important knowledge is one prominent trait of indigenous African culture. Matriarchy is another cultural characteristic of ancient Africa. It was at the roots of the socio-political system, it ruled the economy, the family, and it also shaped Africans' religious beliefs prior to the introduction of Islam and the Christian faith on the continent.

### **1.1. Matriarchy and the feminisation of spirituality**

Matriarchy does not mean dictatorship of women over men. It is a system where women are valued for their practical experience, their spiritual knowledge, and their body's sole ability to host and give birth to life, and then produce life sustaining nourishment (milk). Amateurs of African art are quite familiar with sculptures portraying a black woman, totally naked or bare breasted, holding on her knees a suckling infant (in Ancient Egypt's art that image is famous as Isis and infant son Horus)<sup>7</sup>. That was just one way among many others to express love for femininity.

#### **1. 1.1. The Meaning of Matriarchy: "Mother Power"**

The term "matriarchy" is composed of the Latin word *mater* (meaning "mother") and of the Greek suffix *arkhè* (which means "power"). Thus, *mater arkhè* means literally "Mother power". Accordingly, a matriarchal society is a

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<sup>7</sup> The place of women in African traditional religion and in Ancient Africa's religious art is particularly well documented in these papers which titles say it all: "Egypt's Isis : The Original Black Madonna" by Eloise McKinney-Johnson ; "African Goddesses : Mothers of civilization" by Runoko Rashidi, "The image of woman in African cave art" by Rosalind Jeffries, "Black Madonnas of Europe : diffusion of the African Isis" by Danita Reed. All four papers are published in *Black women in Antiquity*, edited by Ivan Van Sertima, Transaction publishers 2002.

society where the maternal values of caring, courage, compassion, nurturance, well-being, and fertility (prosperity) are predominant. In matriarchal societies, woman is the seat of power, the provider of riches, the giver of life, the healer, the embodiment of justice (the goddess Maât in Egypt, the sacred principle of Truth and Fairness). Historical evidence proves that empowering women, as was the case in ancient Egypt, ancient Nubia and in other African empires (Ghana, Mali, Jolof, Kongo) never meant the cruel rule of women over victimized men. Therefore, matriarchy is not the opposite of patriarchy, in terms of it being a system where one gender (here the female one) oppresses the other.

Matriarchy stems from respect shown to the female half of the human species due mainly to their knowledge of plants (medicinal or poisonous), and to the dominant part they played in agriculture. Women were the ones who were entrusted with seed selection, the actual planting of crops and then processing raw material into edible food; men would help at clearing a field and then at harvest (Ki Zerbo, 2003, p. 121). Matriarchy is therefore a tribute to the capacity of women to ensure food security and proper health care for people. Whereas the patriarchal regime has its origin in harsh nomadic life where women's economic contribution is fairly inexistent, the matriarchal regime is tied to agricultural and sedentary life (C. A. Diop, 1996, 130). In his paper «Rural women in the socio-political transformations », Gidbon Mutiso from Kenya supports that thesis by outlining the weight put on woman's spiritual knowledge (while patriarchy embodies the supremacy of pure brutal strength):

“There is enough oral history from the old people to suggest that the agriculturalist peoples who migrated from area to area gave women extremely significant places in the rituals connected with the settling of new areas. The woman was the one to appease the Gods so as to seek favour for the productivity of the new area. By extension following this line of logic, one can hypothesise that since women were the intermediaries with the Gods and furthermore since self-sufficiency in crops was necessary, it is possible that they utilised this structural

position to acquire more socio-political rights (and duties) than has been suggested by colonialism research.” (Mutiso, 1975, p. 528)

Sacred myths and legends emphasize, and keep in everyone's mind, the pre-eminence of women.

### **1.1.2. The Feminisation of Spirituality**

God is a Mother, the First Man is a Woman and so are the Land's Main Guardian Spirits.

#### **1.1.2.1. God is a Mother**

“In the beginning was Mother” (Mutiso, 1975, 527).

Indigenous African theology relies on the mother figure to convey the idea of Creation and of the parentage of all God's creatures. God is the One who gave birth to Earth, Moon and Sky. In Ancient Egypt theology *Nuut* is the Universal Mother who swallows the Sun each night and give birth to it each morning. *Nuut* is the Primordial Mother, She gave birth to the first human couples who acquired godlike status as the First Ancestors (Isis, Osiris, Nephtys and Seth). For Babacar Sédikh Diouf, a Seereer who specialised in researching data linking the Seereer ethnic group to the ancient Egyptians<sup>8</sup>, the strategy used by the woman to impose herself appears clearly: imaginations had to be struck. And that is why in Egyptian antiquity, the goddess NT (NuuT) was given the title of “Mother of the Universe” while, Roog, the name which Seereer gives to God reveals itself as meaning “Blessed Virgin”, for the etymology of “Roog” is “Toog” (the virgin). (B. S. Diouf, Master 2006/2007). This femininity of God is confirmed in the everyday language when the Seereer say speaking about men: « *Nqoox Paal, Yaay um Roog* » (“The black bull's mother (is) God”). In order to tighten his demonstration that for the Seereer “Roog is a She”<sup>9</sup>, B. S. Diouf gives as further proof the following prayer little boys murmur when they go to bed at night (B. S. Diouf, 2004, 210-211):

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<sup>8</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop has established facts that confirm his thesis that Seereer originate from ancient Egypt (1979, pp. 392-401).

<sup>9</sup> Seereer as many African languages does not have gender indicators such as “he, she, her, his”.

<i>Danaas</i>	I am going into sleep
<i>Nqoox paal</i>	(me) black bull
<i>Yaay um Roog</i>	My mother is Roog
<i>Daapaam lanq</i>	Earth is my bed
<i>Hakandu bil</i>	Roc is my pillow
<i>Hulwa Roog</i>	Sky is my blanket
<i>Dingoor juwaam</i>	Ocean is my fence
<i>Wegoor njelem</i>	Strong iron is my door

Sacred myths play an important part in conveying the values of the people who created the myths. Accordingly African myths convey respect for women and their role in society. A colloquium on “The civilization of the woman in African tradition” was organized, from July 3 to 8, 1972, by the Society of African Culture under the patronage of the government of the republic of Ivory Coast. In its conclusions, the following summary was made of the place of women in ancient African myths:

“According to ancient myths, the creation of the woman is linked to the origin of death. It is when death appeared in the world that God created woman so that life would not die for ever. Since this time, says the legend, men die but life still goes on. The African woman appears as the giver of life, the saviour, the nurse, and she alone gives mankind its possibility to survive in history.” (Société africaine de culture, 1975, p. 597)

In the religion of the Mother God, women are not stigmatised through an emblematic Fallen Woman who is the cause of all evil (the Judeo-Christian Eve). Furthermore, the African faith unashamedly uses the sexual organs of the human body to celebrate, emphasize, and explain different aspects of theology. Indigenous African faith spirituality does not separate the body from the soul, nor does it set one higher than the other. The human body is revered as a temple: it hosts a parcel of the divine and as such one has a duty to keep it clean, beautiful (with ornaments, ointments, tattoos) and healthy. A healthy body hosts a healthy soul and vice versa. That is why a

sickness is always seen as a sign of something being wrong in the realm of the spirits. Traditional healers cannot conceive limiting their treatment to the body, the soul also has to be cured of what ails it. Even after death the body has to be treated with love and care, cremation is not documented as an indigenous African practice. Love and respect for the body also explains the fact that total or partial nudity was accepted in many African communities, up until colonisation, Christian missionaries and Muslim religious leaders put an end to it. They brought in Africa the ideology of the sinful body and of the sinful women who lead men to their ruin, if they are not put under tight male control.

The patriarchal tales of Genesis are the total opposite of the African ones. African sacred stories do not bring the woman out of any man's or god's body part, be it its head (like the Greek Goddess Athena)<sup>10</sup> or its ribs (like the Biblical Eve, created for and named by Adam). In the African Creation stories man and woman are created by the Primordial Mother. They are the First Twins, hence the special status of twins and of twin's mothers in many black African communities. The ancient Egyptian genesis even goes as far as to state that man was created for woman, and for love:

“In a papyrus dating from the time of the Ramesside dynasty (13-12<sup>th</sup> century BC) God proclaims: ‘I am the one who has made the primeval waters in order for the Celestial Cow to come into existence. I am the one who has made the Bull for the Cow in order for the joy of love to come into the world.’” (Al Assiouty, 1989, p. 239-240).

God is a female entity, and so is the earth that the Seereer call *Adna Kumba Njaay*: *Adna* means earth in a global sense, *Kumba* is a very popular female name in Senegal, and *Njaay* is one of the most common Senegalese surname (in Senegal the name *Kumba Njaay* is, respectively, the equivalent of Mary Smith in Great Britain). All the guardian spirits of Wolof and Seereer

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<sup>10</sup> Greek mythology describes the Goddess Athena as being the daughter of Zeus, and only by him, Athena was not generated by any woman. She leaped from the head of Zeus, already adult, dressed with her armor.

territories are also female<sup>11</sup>. Most of them live in rivers. By giving the earth the gender of a female spirit, and by housing in rivers the communities' guardian spirits, the two most important elements in agrarian societies, water and earth, are explicitly entrusted to the care of women. That explains the predominant place of women in the indigenous faith's "clergy". They usually perform the most important rituals and prayers for prosperity, fertility and protection from disasters. "Mixed types of cult exist, but there are some essentially female cults. The woman presides over fetish convents, initiation rites, agricultural rites for fertility. She orders the moon, the sun and the rain." (Société africaine de culture, 1975, p. 597). Animism is based on the belief that all God's creatures, including the cosmic forces are interrelated, hence the mutual influences. The role of the Initiates of the highest level was to control the cosmic forces so as to keep Earth and Sky in order and harmony, for animism did not blame God for natural disasters but human actions. God is given credit for the Creation but keeping it in Order and Harmony is up to the human beings and their ancestors.

### **1.2. Animism: An open, life loving, nature friendly monotheism**

Whatever the name it is given (voodoo, fetishism, animism), the indigenous African faith, as illustrated by the ancient Egyptians' faith, is a true monotheism, because it is founded on the belief of a One God Creator (Obenga, 2004, pp. 60-73; Thiaw, 1992, pp. 59-68; B. S. Diouf, 2004, 205-221). However, the belief in one God Creator does not entail an interdiction to give prayers and offerings to the spirits of one's ancestors and to the guardian spirits of the land.

#### **1.1.2. An open monotheism: God leaves us free to address our prayers to whoever we want**

While God's uniqueness is unquestioned, its remoteness from humans is strongly outlined. The Cosmic Mother exists somewhere far above and out

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<sup>11</sup> The female spirits who are the original owners of the land (and therefore its guardians to whom offerings and respect are due) are *Kumba Bang* in the city of Saint-Louis, *Kumba Cupaam* in the coastal town of Popenguine, *Kumba Kastel* in Gorée island, *Kumba Lâmb* in Dakar (the capital city also has a male guardian spirit *Lëk Daawur*), *Maam Njare* ("grand-mother" Njare) in the town of Rufisque.

of reach of human beings. One does not address prayers directly to Her, as She is too high above to get involved in humans' concerns. God does not speak, nor does She give directions or commands to any human being. She does not preside over a Tribunal for the dead, and She is neither a judge nor a mediator. She does not mete out punishment or give reward according to one's behaviour. She does not get jealous, angry, happy or judgemental. Most of all, She does not need prayers or offerings. Therefore the indigenous faith followers' true guides and protectors are the spirits of the land, and the spirits of their ancestors. Those spirits will protect whoever shows them attention and respect. They will punish you if you antagonise them. They will take care of you if you take care of them. And once you die, if you have been a good person you will live on as a Blessed spirit among the other Blessed spirits. When a bad person dies, he/she lives on as a mean spirit. In all cases one has to be mindful of good and bad spirits. However, spirits being essentially invisible to the naked eye, it takes a special kind of initiatory knowledge to be able to locate them and interact with them. But as they are potentially everywhere it is best to treat everyone and everything with respect. This is particularly illustrated in old fairytales which tell the stories of discarded objects, powerless looking people, or apparently harmless animals who are in truth powerful spirits in disguise out to test human kindness, honesty or prudence. So one is trained from a very early age not to judge a book by its cover and consequently to offer to the poor old hag as well as to the wealthy man the same amount of respect and attentive care. The African faith promotes a deep rooted respect for nature and its inhabitants. Large trees are elevated to the status of sacred trees (ex. the baobab). Gratitude and respect for animals, and for what each of them can teach us or help us with, is ingrained with the totem system: each clan has an animal it honours and protects (i.e. ancient Egypt's sacred animals, Camara, 2004, p. 162-193).

Knowledge of the indigenous faith's taboos and prohibitions, as well as knowledge of all the other types of knowledge a society needs for a life of harmony, good health and prosperity are imparted through initiation.

### **1. 3. Initiation: A Traditional Teaching Technique**

There is a basic knowledge that is available to all, and then there is the more complex and specific knowledge that is given through initiation, the indigenous method of imparting valuable knowledge.

#### **1.3.1 Equal education along gender lines**

Although matriarchal societies are not segregated societies, at some point girls and boys undergo separate initiation rites. In the Seereer communities *Kumax yaay no juul* presides over the training of men initiates, and *Jooj maad no gulook* takes over the training of women. Men's initiation training is called *ndut* (meaning "bird's nest" according to I. L. Thiaw), and women's initiation training is called *ngulook*, marriage ceremony (B. S. Diouf, 2004, 215 ; Faye, 2006, 110). This organization along gender lines existed at all levels. In the pre-colonial Wolof and Seereer kingdoms for instance, national coordination was ensured at the top by the *lingeer* (elected queen/female head of state) for the women, and for the men, by the elected king (called *maad* or *buur* in the Seereer kingdoms ; *buurba*, *brak*, *dàmmeel* or *teen* in the Wolof kingdoms). Thus, from the base to the top, the gender duality was acknowledged in a way that guaranteed both sexes equal rights and opportunities. Indigenous African theology made sure to entrench the gendered organisation of the society, and the pre-eminence of the female element, in initiatory teachings.

#### **1.3.2. The language of the Initiates: Insider's Knowledge**

Education based on the method of initiation uses the ambiguity of words to deliver a multilayered message. Hence the first meaning will be clear, simple, and immediately accessible. The second meaning will only be accessible to those with specific background knowledge. The third meaning will be so enshrouded in symbolism that only insiders will be able to get it. The same word could therefore lead to different directions. The following example explains how initiates fashioned sentences with double or triple meaning:

« *O loq O yaay füsü saax it* »

- Simple translation: literally, “the borders of the country are traced using a branch of *Yaay* ” (shrub whose scientific name is *Combretum Glunosicum*).
- Legal translation: “the country is governed by the rules of the maternal lineage” Playing on the ambivalence of the term “*yaay*” (which also means mother), it is declared simply that the matrilineal system governs the country. (B. S. Diouf, 2004, p. 210)
- Esoteric translation: “Sorcery is transmitted by the mother”

Drums also conveyed coded messages. For instance, in the Seereer kingdoms, a drummed message opening all public celebrations reminds all that Siga Bajaan, a woman, was the first head of state<sup>12</sup>:

“*Siga Bacal, ten eetu maat, maat a guutin a roof*” “Siga wide hips<sup>13</sup> has founded the state, the state improved after her.” (B. S. Diouf, March 07).

Given the fact that one sentence could carry more than one meaning, it is interesting to note how the word “*maat*” in Seereer takes its full meaning when one compares it with the meaning of the same word in ancient Egyptian. In Seereer, *maat* means (state) power. In ancient Egypt, *Maât* is the sacred power of Justice (Truth and Fairness), which is symbolised by a female figure, the “Goddess” named *Maât*. The land of the Pharaohs also attributed the origin of state power to a woman, the Great Mother Isis, whose Egyptian name “*AST*” means “throne, seat, or abode (D. Redd, 2002, 162). Isis is also credited for giving men the laws they need to govern themselves in peace and fairness (Diodorus Siculus, 1<sup>st</sup> BC)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> A long standing Seereer tradition traces the origins of centralized political power to a woman called Siga Bajaan (Bajaal or Bacal). Her legend is summarized in this popular Seereer sentence: “*Siga Bajaan fertu maat né*” “Power started with Siga Bajaan”. (Gravrand, 1983, 267)

<sup>13</sup> According to Babacar Sedikh Diouf, “*Bacal*” was not the queen’s surname but an alias meaning “wide hips”, a criterium of beauty.

<sup>14</sup> Diodorus Siculus gives the following testimony: “Moreover one says that Isis gave men the first laws and taught them how to render justice for one another, and to ban violence among them for fear of retribution.” Translated from the French version : « *On dit de plus qu’Isis a donné les premières lois aux hommes et leur a enseigné à se rendre justice les uns aux autres,*

Thus it appears that the drummed message about Siga Bajaan is more than a simple reminder that there was once a queen bearing that name. The drummed message recalls and summarizes the matriarchal roots of the Seereer political system. The idea that women deserve respect because they are the ones who organised the community and designed the concept of a state based on Maât (Truth and Fairness) is quite literally drummed into people's minds. It is a known fact that in many African kingdoms the female chief of state (usually, but not always, the queen mother) enjoyed a higher respect and had more political power than the king. In the family circle also the female elements (older sisters, mothers, first wives<sup>15</sup>) wielded more authority than the male ones (Camara and Kandji, 2000).

It is all these rules, entrenched in the indigenous African spiritual beliefs, that the project of a Temple for women initiates aims to promote. Building a temple to the women initiates has therefore deep meaning at various levels: symbolic, legal, practical.

## **II. The objectives, stakes, and context of the construction of a Temple for Women Initiates**

The project of the Temple for Women Initiates (TWI) is an initiative of the women of the village of Baback Sereres, <sup>16</sup> assisted by the researcher, Issa Laye Thiaw, a native of the village. The project of the TWI aims at developing the culture and the spiritual values of the Seereer's native land. For the project's initiators, learning the moral values and spiritual knowledge that has been bequeathed by the ancestors will help promote the emancipation of Senegalese women. Besides, they have come to realise that ancestral practices do not inspire the general population as they used to in the past. In their eyes, that makes it necessary to create new infrastructures able to fulfil

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*et à bannir d'entre eux la violence par la crainte du châtement. »*  
<http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/diodore/livre1.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Contrary to popular belief polygamy was not as wide spread in pre-colonial Africa as it is now. Before Islam democratised it, polygamy was limited to the chiefs who used matrimony as a means to form political alliances. (in Senegal people have come to believe and convey the idea that polygamy is not only a right given to men by Allah and The Holy Book, it is also a duty for the good Muslim)

<sup>16</sup> Baback Sereres is located in the region of Thiès. For a map of Senegal, see: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA\\_World\\_Fact\\_Book,\\_2004/Senegal](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/CIA_World_Fact_Book,_2004/Senegal).

the requirements of modern times without forsaking indigenous rules and values.

### **2. 1. The Symbolic Meaning: Promoting Respect for Animism**

Churches and mosques, the spiritual strongholds of patriarchal ideology, are visible all over the country, but there is not one brick and stone edifice built to call attention to, and muster respect for, the matriarchal religion of the land. Those that existed of old are now desecrated ruins that hold the interest of only a limited number of scholars and archaeologists. It is said that during colonial time, some of the holy places which were open indigenous sanctuaries have been turned into Christian places of worship (example: the “sanctuaire marial” of Popenguine). The same can be said about cemeteries. With the exception of Ziguinchor (in Southern Senegal), the cities that have been created, implanted or developed by the French, during colonial time, do not have cemeteries reserved for the indigenous faith followers. Land has been earmarked for Christian cemeteries and graveyards for Muslims. This has forced many Africans to convert to one of these two religions in order to have a decent burial at their death<sup>17</sup>. Cemeteries play an important role in religious propaganda so do synagogues, mosques, churches and temples, hence the importance of building a Temple for the indigenous faith followers.

From a feminist point of view, it is equally important to note that Indigenous faith rests principally on female spiritual leaders. Consequently, seeing women in the role of spiritual leaders of their community will enhance respect for them and for women in general. Up to this day, there is not one female imam, or one female priest. Prayers in churches and mosques are led by males, a fact that is not lost on those who are quick to deny women a

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<sup>17</sup> “In Dakar or elsewhere, in the cities, because there are only two cemeteries: a cemetery for Muslims and a cemetery for Christians, the follower of traditional religion will be Christian or Muslim. But once he/she is back in his/her hometown, he/she simply denies his/her baptism and gets back, without much a do, to his/her traditional practices, giving up Christianity or Islam.” (Diatta, 2005, 47). Translated from the French : “A Dakar ou ailleurs, dans les villes, parce qu’il n’y a que deux cimetières ; un cimetière pour les musulmans et un cimetière pour les chrétiens, l’adepte de la religion traditionnelle se fera chrétien ou musulman. Mais une fois dans son milieu de vie, il renie tout bonnement son baptême et repart, sans état d’âme, aux pratiques traditionnelles, abdiquant le christianisme ou la religion musulmane. »

leadership role in public arena, and use that factor as proof that they are unfit to lead a community where there is even one man.

## ***2. 2. The Legal Side: Enforcing Respect for the underlining principles of secularity***

In Senegal, respect for all faiths is a constitutional principle<sup>18</sup>, but nothing is being done to enforce respect for the indigenous faith. Worse, Muslim religion is openly used to justify legal discriminations against women (Camara, 2007).

In his exposé justifying the building of a Temple for Women Initiates, Issa Laye Thiaw points out the fact that currently most Africans are converted to one of the expansionist religions but are neither entirely Muslim nor Christian; their faith is a curious and contradictory hybrid. The Seereer are a classic victim of this situation. Not only have they lost their ancestral faith, but in so doing they have contracted an inferiority complex, which has robbed them of the courage to face the apostles of the “revealed religions.” However these imported religions have completely upset ancestral beliefs. Furthermore, the methods employed to supplant African faith and the values it carried were (and are still) intimidation, negation of, or contempt for, the indigenous faith. The promise of Heaven and the threat of Hell are powerful tools used to move converts away from their ancestral beliefs, which are depicted as satanic practices. These facts have a negative impact on the holders of the oral tradition who no longer dare to express openly the lessons of old times. Building a temple for these holders of the oral tradition will give them that courage.

The existence of the Convention on Cultural Diversity (CDD) represents a new and important platform for promoting culture in the wider context of

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<sup>18</sup> The Constitution of Senegal proclaims the principles of philosophical and religious freedom in its preamble. Article 1 of the Constitution specifies that the Republic of Senegal is secular, democratic and that it respects all beliefs. Article 17 recognizes religious institutions as a means of education, and subparagraph 2 of Article 19 lays out the following: “Religious institutions and communities have the right to develop without obstacles. They are released from the supervision of the State. They regulate and manage their business in an autonomous way.”

sustainable development<sup>19</sup>. However, the principles the CDD stands for need to be acted upon in order to give them a meaning that goes beyond the moral stance. The TWI project gives the CDD such a meaning.

### **2. 3. The Practical Aspects: A Cultural Research Centre**

The temple is designed as a place of teaching and a forum for meetings in a setting that will emphasize its cultural roots. Thus, the temple will be a shelter for Seereer culture and oral knowledge. Crossing over its threshold will literally mean taking a first step inside a very ancient culture. Consequently the temple will be built in accordance with the typical design of an original Seereer habitat. It will be composed of twenty-two (22) houses and a large general-purpose unit that will be used as conference room. Each house will bear the name of an original village. The people of each one of these villages will be solicited to name a delegate to the philosophical college that will be housed at the Temple. The goal of asking villages to name delegates is to collect the esoteric teachings inherited from the ancestors. That will enable the members of the philosophical college to store, in books, films and recordings, the initiatory secrets of the villages and areas they come from.

The temples of old were not only places of worship, they were also places of healing and learning. Accordingly, the objective of the TWI will be to offer the community a variety of services (conflict resolution, traditional therapy, summer camp for children, training in traditional art), some of which will have to be lucrative in order to make it possible for the temple to be self-sustaining.

## CONCLUSION

For the initiators of the Temple for Women Initiates project, the first challenge is to successfully lobby national authorities into assuming responsibility on the matter by taking practical steps to ensure that African's

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<sup>19</sup> The CDD was adopted on 20 October 2005 by the UNESCO General Conference (148 countries approved it, while two countries -the United States and Israel- voted against it and four abstained). The Convention entered into force in March 2007, following its ratification by a sufficient number of countries.

specific cultural heritage holds its own in the face of the Middle-Eastern and Western civilisations rival attempts to pose themselves as the unique conveyors of a universal message. M. André Youm, the head of the village of Baback Sérères has officially written to the President of the rural council (Conseil rural) of Notto Diobass, a letter dated October 18, 2007, to inform him of his decision to allot one hectare of land to the project. So the Association of the women of Baback have the support of the village's chief, and the land on which to build the Temple. All they need now is the money to build it<sup>20</sup>. The project has been sent to several government agencies and a few non governmental organisations, but the best answers the initiators of the project have received so far are messages of encouragement. However perseverance being at the heart of all successful endeavours, the promoters of the project are in the process of identifying ways to bring private donors, as well as funding agencies to show a true interest in building a “pilot” Temple for Women Initiates in the small, but meaningful - in terms of still holding a large piece of Indigenous African culture, Senegalese village of Baback Sereres.

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<sup>20</sup> See the project's budget in annexe 2.

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### Annexe 1

The letter of the Young people of the village of Baback Sérères:

*The project called the Temple for Women Initiates falls under a particular context. Threatened by modernization, the Seereer culture is one of the pillars of African civilization, which today tends to disappear. At the current hour, the need for revalorization of this culture, in particular in Jobaas, is posed with acuity. The project is born out of this point of view. Its aim is to make tradition known through the image of the Seereer woman.*

*Culture, which can be defined as the ways of doing things, the way of life, the beliefs, in short the ways in which a group sees the world, occupies a major place in the life of people. However the phenomena of Westernization combined with attempts at islamization have caused the negation of the existence of Black-African cultures. Without culture it is impossible to reach development. This is an idea that has the support of many researchers, such as those who have pondered the question of African unity, and also of humanitarians interested in what guarantees wellbeing.*

*Thus to concretize or materialize this idea, various ethnic groups feel the need to act. The values that characterize the Seereer culture, especially its matriarchal side, are enough to give us the model of society we all wish for. The pilot project (TWI) suggested by the AFI, the Association of the Women of Joobas, relates to the importance of culture and its development. The study of the project was the framework of a dialogue between Issa Laye Thiaw and a restricted group of students. According to the participants, the realization of this project could allow the rebirth of certain values and open up new life-style opportunities to women as suggested by the reference document. The participants proposed that dwellings be built to shelter the initiates. These infrastructures could be implemented in each village centre. Knowing that tradition requires a house with two doors, these new infrastructures can be built according to this traditional model. For the success of this project,*

*participants in the debate propose the adoption of a participatory step in the phase of formulation and realization of the project, the women having to be integrated into the decision-making processes and in the planning. The site of the granaries and choosing the tree that would serve as palaver tree were among the questions that were raised. According to certain points of view, the orientation towards the east was favoured for the site of the granaries. The latter were always placed in front of the houses. For certain questions such as the ones about the palaver tree, or the appropriate site for the Temple, the participants suggested the matter be investigated with old folks.*

*With regard to the implication of women, let us note that a process of elimination of illiteracy will have to be set up for better conveying certain messages. As to the place of men within the temple, the debate was focused on two types of status. One is the “yimbir” whose role is to guard the women’s privacy during the initiatory phases. The other is the “bidjo” who protects the girls against intruders at the time of ceremonies such as the “minams”, the “riiti”, etc*

*Sereer who have jealously guarded culture are now the victims of a phenomenon of alienation which is depriving posterity of its sources, and of its reference marks.*

*In way of conclusion, the participants salute the initiative and declare their readiness to take an active part in the project. For them, the realization of this project could play a major role in promoting Seereer culture throughout the world.*

*The youth of the village*

*Done at Baback, the 15 - 10 – 2007*

Annexe 2

## BUDGET OF THE PROJET OF A TEMPLE FOR WOMEN INITIATES

BUDGETARY	BASIS OF ASSESSMENT	AMOUNT IN US \$	AMOUNT IN Euros	CHANGE RATE	VALUE IN CFA
Construction of the Temple		306 191	209 880	1 euro = 656, 5 CFA	137 786 000
Production of a 26-minute film on the Temple		41 014	28 178	1US\$ = 450 FCFA	18 456 600
Creation and administration of a website		1 600	1 097		720 000
Administration Staff Training	10 pers. 35 000 FCFA/pers.	533	778		350 000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>349 338</b>	<b>239 933</b>		<b>157 312 600</b>

