Self-Identification and Othering Among the Senegalese Fulfulde Speaking People and Others

Gina Gertrud Smith

Introduction and Theory

Un peuple – un but – une foi has been the official motto of the Senegalese State since its independence. It hammers out a monolithic national community, but the reality hiding behind this motto is rather like a mosaic. The constitution declares that the Senegalese State is secular, guarantees equality without distinction as to origin, race, sex or religion, specifies the national languages, which include Jola, Fulfulde or Pulaar, Serer and Wolof, pronounces ethnic and religious discrimination punishable and guarantees religious and cultural liberties.¹ Thus to itself and to others Senegal presents itself as a land of tolerance with equal rights to different social segments.

Une foi (one faith) expresses the belief in the new nation built on the French political ideals and on Négritude which was a central ideal around 1960. Une foi covers not only beliefs but also religious faiths. The official statistics give the following information: 1% belong to local religions, in the statistics named animisme, 5% are Christians and 94% Muslims.² If you consult the homepage of the Catholic Church in Senegal these numbers vary significantly: around 5% adhere to local religions, 15% are Christians and 80% are Muslims.³ The differences are due to the way censuses are constructed. This gives room for interpretations of who is a Muslim, a Christian or an adherent of a local religion, depending on the interests of the ‘interpreters’. Never mind how they play the numbers’ game, Muslims are the dominant majority and Christians a (very?) small minority in Senegal.⁴

As in many other former colonies the monolithic un peuple (one people) is a recent historical construct and ‘the Senegalese people’ consists of several

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³ The numbers come from a webpage that ceased to exist but can be calculated from: http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/ddaka.html#info, accessed 22 February 2014.
⁴ Most of the Muslims adhere to shaykhs that follow a Sufi movement, tariqa. The dominant turuq (pl.) are the Muridiyya and the Tijaniyya. Most Christians are Catholics, but there are also a variety of Protestant churches.
peoples or ethnicities. The Wolof are by far the largest ethnic group (43%) and historically they dominated the hinterland of the present capital Dakar and the former capital Saint-Louis. Along the coast south of Dakar and further inland there is the base of the Serer (15%). The Jola (4%) live around the lower Casamance River south of the Gambia from the Atlantic and further inland. The Fulbe (24%), speaking the Fulfulde language, live along the middle stretch of the Senegal River, in the thinly populated area south of this river basin and again south of the Gambia in the fertile lands watered by the upper Casamance River. The last 14% of the population is split between several even smaller ethnic groups. The number of Christians is significantly higher among the Jola and the Serer, and almost zero among the Fulbe. The idea of ‘the Senegalese people’ is not clear-cut since the underlying ethnicities spill over into the neighbouring states. Within Senegal, the borders of these ethnicities are also perforated due to the new patterns of urbanisation and the growth of