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Visual Tactics of Contemporary Senegal

Avenue Félix Eboué is a major artery that skirts industrial parks clustered close to the great harbour of Dakar, Senegal. Because of heavy vehicular and human traffic, it can take an automobile more than an hour to navigate the avenue's several kilometres. All along the way, cranes, machinery, and towering chimneys rise above factory walls topped by razor wire and iron spikes. Just across from a crowded roundabout, an unexpected wall mural portrays a man robed in white, praying on ocean waters. The avenue proceeds north-eastward towards a large military base on the Point of Bel-Air, and soon a street branches to the right between a lumberyard and a fish-processing plant. Here portraits and complex painted scenes unfurl along more than two hundred metres of cement-block wall.

The same figure robed in white appears in this mural (Figure 35). He is Amadou Bamba, a Senegalese Sufi saint (Wali Allah, or ‘Friend of God’) who lived from 1853 till 1927 and around whose teachings the Mouride Way has been created. Avenue Félix Eboué was given its name toward the end of the colonial period. Eboué (1884-1944) was born in French Guiana of African heritage. He served in a number of important French colonial posts, and as administrator of Chad, he was the first colonial governor to join the Free French forces. For his heroism, Eboué was named governor of French Equatorial Africa, and his remains are enshrined in the Pantheon.

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montage depicts Bamba’s sons and pious followers presiding over African heroes of resistance to oppression. Some are from earlier times (Lat Dior, Almami Samory), some from struggles for African independence (Léopold Sédar Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah), and others from more recent history (Che Guevara, Thomas Sankara, Nelson Mandela). Global dignitaries range from Jimmy Carter to Yassir Arafat. Pope John Paul II and Jesus find places on the wall, as do Pasteur and Pythagoras, Malcolm and Martin. The vocalists Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Baba Maal, Cheikh Lô, Fatou Guewel and Coumba Gawlo are given prominence as “messengers” of dignity. The Archangel Gabriel (in the form of a dove) is shown bringing God’s inspirational words and blessings to many of these celebrated individuals. Some subjects are featured in narrative vignettes (Figure 36). Analogies between others are suggested by repeated motifs and shared details. Surreal visions and snippets of poetry swirl among the portraits, sometimes offering didactic commentary on the tribulations of contemporary Africa, sometimes conveying millenarian angst.

What sort of museum – or, rather, ‘museum’ – is this? Senegal possesses a number of museums that were created during the colonial period for colonial purposes and colonial audiences. Senegalese were unwelcome in such institutions that spoke about rather than to them; and even now, more than forty years after Independence, few Senegalese visit their nation’s museums. Indeed, museums created more recently, such as those of Gorée Island that present aspects of the transatlantic slave trade or Senegalese women’s history, mostly cater to non-Senegalese audiences. But although they may ignore established museums, people in Senegal do manifest active interest in their histories, arts, and cultures, especially as they refabulate their cities – that is, as they reconceive the very nature of urban space, endowing places with the names, memories, and spirits of their own heroes to reflect post-colonial goals and concerns.