

Dance religious convers(at)ions: post-exotic ethnography of the circulation of sabar and *Baye Fall* aesthetics in France and Switzerland

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This article draws on an ethnography of the transmission of Senegalese sabar dancing in France and Switzerland to discuss how the religious pathways of sabar enthusiasts bear witness to many modes of adoption or rejection of Mouride and *Baye Fall* aesthetics. I focus on several portraits of students in order to highlight three modalities of the relationship with *Baye Fall* aesthetics, faith, and religious knowledge, ranging from the dissociation between dance and religious meaning to conversion and immersion into *Baye Fallism*. I defend the importance of elaborating post-exotic anthropological tools – such as the ideas of ethnophilia or religious conversations – in order to grasp the nexus of affects, embodied experiences, and intimate relationships that are conducive to and mediate the religious pathways of sabar enthusiasts.

In April 2020, I took part, as I did every week, in a sabar class organized in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Fewer than a dozen women gathered to attend Abdoulaye's¹ class to learn this Senegalese music and dance performance. Originally associated with Wolof women's associations and dance circles (Heath 1994; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Tang 2007), sabar has undergone numerous transformations in Senegalese cities over recent decades (Briant 2018; Seye 2014) and has spread globally through the circulation of Senegalese artists to be adopted by African dance enthusiasts in the Americas, Japan, Australia, and Europe (Bizas 2014; Tang 2008).

That day's class was devoted to *baara mbye*, a rhythm generally presented as rooted in sabar's ancient tradition and emblematic of an elegant style of dancing for older women.² Abdoulaye was accompanied by Babacar, a sabar drummer particularly appreciated among the sabar instructors who live in Europe and their students for his illuminating explanations of sabar rhythms and musical structures. While Abdoulaye warmed up with the students, together they sang a tribute to a holy city of the Muslim Mouride brotherhood, where a religious celebration had happened a few weeks prior. In the middle of the class, Babacar paused to share in confidence an explanation about *baara mbye* rhythm. He advised students on how to better adjust their steps to a rhythm

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they perceive as difficult, and he insisted on the transcendence of sabar music and dance over human beings: 'Music is not complicated; we are the ones who are complicated. Music is always here, always the same. Today, I am here, maybe tomorrow I will die. But *mom* [in Wolof, him; here referring to the rhythm of *baara mbaye*] he will always stay.'

After Babacar's explanation, students trained themselves to perform short improvised solos in the circle in front of their peers and the careful gaze of the musician. Babacar and Abdoulaye made sure to correct them when they got off rhythm, or when their steps became unclear, hesitant, and hard to capture on the drum. Babacar, in turn, adjusted his strikes to follow the soloist's moves. Students reproduced the left-side turns, wide arm movements, 'five-steps' sequences,³ breaks, and tricks learned over the classes and workshops they had attended thus far to create their own improvised arrangements. Carine, who was in her thirties and dressed in an ample shirt and loose, low-crotched *tchaya* trousers, performed a virtuoso solo, presenting one elegant series of moves after another. She played with Babacar by adding astute breaks, tricks, and facial expressions which added multiple layers of meaning to the performance. The drummer's wide-open eyes and hand strikes were bodily manifestations of his appreciation of the performance, and when the student finished her solo, exactly in time with the music break (*coupure*), he cried out and congratulated her with loud enthusiasm and a large smile: 'My *Yaye Fall*!'

Yaye Fall, the term used here by Babacar, is a reference to the female adepts of the *Baye Fall* brotherhood (a marginal movement within Senegalese Mouride Sufism). Over recent decades, *Baye Fallism* has become very popular among young Senegalese people and artists (Pézeril 2008). In their artistic activities in Senegalese cities or in their dance classes in Europe, sabar musicians and dancers often convey aesthetics and sounds stemming from *Baye Fallism*. Himself a faithful adept of this brotherhood, Babacar wears a leather necklace with the effigy of Sheikh Ibrahima Fall, founder of the *Baye Fall* brotherhood, and with other representations of Mouride figures such as Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké or later Kalifes of the Mouride order. He regularly releases videos of himself on his Facebook or YouTube channel singing praises to Mouride and *Baye Fall* religious leaders: in these clips, he stands in the streets of European cities or sings together with his sabar students in workshops, classes, and drum and dance camps. Often, Babacar calls some of his students and close friends *Baye Fall*/*Yaye Fall*, or invites them to strike up a song in tribute to Mouride and *Baye Fall* figures during classes (with or without explanations of the religious dimension of these pieces).

As a consequence, students like Carine are sometimes driven to loosely adopt the religious aesthetics of their instructors' attitudes and musical practices. It is not uncommon in sabar classes in France and Switzerland to see students chanting songs with their teachers in which they identify themselves as *Baye Fall* or *Yaye Fall*. Some of them wear *njaxass*⁴ outfits and *tchaya* trousers similar to their Senegalese teachers and friends; others go to visit Touba, the holy city of Mouridism, during their stays in Senegal, taking part in the religious celebrations of *Korité* (Eid al-Fitr) and *Tabaski* (Eid el-Kebir) with their Senegalese friends. A sabar student whom I met in several workshops and classes appeared in one of Babacar's music videos that pays tribute to Cheikh Ibrahim Fall (pioneering leader of *Baye Fallism*), dancing with other *Baye Fall* while sitting with her palms turned open turned to the sky in a gesture of devotion.

Nonetheless, only a few of the students I met throughout my research actually converted to Mouridism or adhered to a Muslim religious institution. For instance,

despite Babacar's words, Carine is not a *Yaye Fall*. Even if she developed an interest in this religious order as part of her journey in sabar and ended up adopting some religious signs and symbols owing to her proximity with *Baye Fall* adepts, she in fact never converted to *Baye Fallism* or Mouridism.

If not conversion, what is at play in these women's adoption of aesthetics and fragments of Senegalese *Baye Fallism*? Are we dealing with a detachment of these aesthetic signs from their religious groundings, or with similar forms of appropriation of eclectic spiritualities for the purpose of individual 'bricolage' and patchwork, as described by prior research in the sociology and anthropology of religion (Altglas 2014; Gez, Droz, Soares & Rey 2017; Mary 1993)? What can an ethnography of these encounters, exchanges, and borrowings teach us about the situational selection and disjunction of religious and non-religious meanings generated by the transmission of foreign dance and body practices among French and Swiss audiences?

This article examines the circulation and appropriation of *Baye Fall* aesthetics at play around the transmission of sabar in Europe and the encounters it creates with the aim to produce novel elements of discussion about the religious experiences and conversations conveyed by the passion for African music and dance in some European cities.⁵ As I will demonstrate in this article, both for Senegalese artists and for their students, the body techniques transmitted in sabar classes represent varied forms of 'techniques of believing' (Luca, Polo de Beaulieu, Bigg, Capone & Wanono 2019) that add grist to the mill of discussions on religious beliefs and spirituality as developed through dance performances and non-Western body practices in Europe. Indeed, activities involving the body have raised a growing interest among the European middle classes as a lever of development of a new eclectic 'spirituality' (Cook and Cassaniti 2022; Plancke 2020). The global success of yoga, meditation, mindfulness, Tantrism, or diverse forms of New Age dances has been discussed by the social sciences as examples of new developing markets among European and other Global North countries around well-being and spirituality (Houseman, Mazzella di Bosco & Thibault 2016; Jain 2020). Their popularity echoes a context of increasing religious individualism, commodification of religious objects (Gauthier 2017; Obadia 2013), and 'religious exoticism', an idea coined by Véronique Altglas to analyse how 'foreign religious practices and beliefs ... are disseminated and appropriated in contemporary practices of bricolage' (2014: 14). Stemming from her long-term research on religious movements that teach Hinduism and Kabbalah in European and Northern American countries, Altglas characterized religious exoticism as 'a way to simultaneously think about and ignore others' (2014: 18). In keeping with prior critical conceptualizations of exoticism, it reflects asymmetrical relations, involves an idealization and subjugation of other people, and leads to an 'aesthetics of decontextualization' (Appadurai 1986: 28). Meanwhile, she insisted on the fact that religious exoticism represents only 'one way of engaging with foreign religions, among others', and must not be considered as a normative or a static relation (Altglas 2014: 15).

The religious transfers observed in sabar complement these discussions by shedding light on other types of circulation, fragmented adoption, and appropriation of religious contents that unsettle the representation of overarching power and subjugation induced by the notion of exoticism. Drawing on an ethnography of sabar adepts' engagement with *Baye Fall* religious beliefs and conversion, this article argues that the adoption of an interactional and processual perspective on sabar enthusiasts' religious pathways forces us to go beyond exoticism if we aim to apprehend with more depth the social worlds,

power relationships, and multidimensional transactions in which these religious exchanges take part. I coin the idea of ‘religious conversations’ as both a methodological and conceptual perspective to access the interactional, situational, and processual appropriation of religious knowledge, practices, and aesthetic by sabar students, while apprehending the broader context that infuses and influences these conversations. This approach builds on previous scholarship that underlined the presence of religion in everyday life (McGuire 2008) and the need to look for the social processes and sites ‘where conversation produces and is produced by the spiritual and religious realities taken to be present by those who are participating in these conversations’ (Ammerman 2014: 196). As I use it in this work, the idea of religious conversation makes it possible to access the social, sensory, and embodied creation of religious meanings, and to account for multiple actors and interlocutors participating in doing religion: namely sabar Senegalese artists and their students, who often have divergent visions of what religion, devotion, and belief must be. Owing to its interactional groundings, the idea of conversations maintains an eye for these discrepancies, without predetermining the results of these encounters (or reducing one to the other).

My discussion of sabar religious conversations draws on participant observation conducted from February 2017 to January 2021 within the field of mobility developed around the circulation of sabar between Senegal and Europe (France and Switzerland). I devote the first part of this article to addressing the methods and positionality used to conduct this research. I then trace how *Baye Fall* aesthetics which meld in the experience of sabar in Senegal were put into circulation by sabar migrant artists in Europe, who shared and partially translated this practice for certain enthusiasts of Senegalese dances and cultures. I then present several portraits of students to analyse the main modalities of the relationship with these objects and religious knowledge, ranging from the dissociation between dance and religious meaning, to conversion and immersion into *Baye Fallism*. I defend the importance of elaborating post-exotic anthropological tools – such as the ideas of ethnophilia (Belleau 2015) or religious conversations – to grasp the nexus of affects, embodied experiences, and intimate relationships that are conducive to and mediate the religious pathways of these enthusiasts, and the combination of or dissociation between dance and religious conversion.

One student among others: methods and positionality in the field

The materials presented in this article are part of a four-year research project on the circuits and encounters built through the transmission of sabar between Senegal (Dakar) and Europe (France and Switzerland). For this project, I carried out over four hundred hours of participant observation in sabar dance workshops and activities, and conducted seventy-one semi-structured interviews with sabar instructors, musicians, students, and promoters. My research was largely conducted in French-speaking Switzerland and France, but I also undertook several fieldwork trips in Dakar, and attended activities in Germany and the Netherlands. I then followed the transnational dance circuit (Menet 2020) traced by the mobilities and encounters of sabar artists and enthusiasts across Europe and Senegal. My ethnographic relationships were woven over the years through weekly encounters during dance classes, parties, dinners, drinks, and informal moments of gathering after classes, travels to dance camps in Senegal, participation in festivals and workshops in Europe, the establishment of teacher-student relationships with some instructors, and the making of a documentary film with and about a dancer (Aterianus-Owanga 2021*b*).

The circuits of migration and circulations of sabar Senegalese artists and productions across France and Switzerland was my initial interest when I started this research. Yet my own position in the field and proximities with other sabar students soon made me pay closer attention to my classmates' pathways, and their role in the shaping of sabar contents, meanings, and networks. The sabar students I met in my fieldwork were mostly women. They started dancing in different periods (between the 1980s and the present), they generally belonged to the middle classes, and they possessed secondary or post-secondary levels of education. The gendered dimension of these practices and the predominance of female participants is partly a consequence of the association of dance with feminine leisure amongst the French and Swiss middle classes (Marquié 2011), and has also been observed in other courses of non-Western practices engaging the body in Europe (such as yoga or Tantrism, often seen as feminine activities [Plancke 2020]). Yet this gendered demographic happens to be of crucial importance for sabar networks: owing to the higher number of women who practise African dances in Europe and who travel to Senegal for dance workshops where they meet Senegalese artists, it is more likely to be male dancers who travel to and settle in Europe, often after a marriage to a European citizen.⁶ Students, friends, wives, or partners generally become strongly involved in the development of their husband's careers and activities, as has also been described in the context of other African dancers' migrations (Despres 2015). Ultimately, the proximity with *Baye Fall* religion experienced by these women through dance is often entangled with their intimate relationship with Senegalese artists, as we will see later.

As French anthropologist Gérard Althabe noted, 'one does not decide alone on the distance to the object, but jointly with the actors, in a process of negotiation which, if it is not always verbal, is no less effective' (1990: 129). Thus, by slipping into the folds of the observed group, 'the researcher is "produced" as an actor through the internal processes that he or she has defined as the object of analysis' (Broqua 2009: 110). In this universe of dance classes where boundaries between Senegalese teachers and European students are often marked (in terms of language, gender, and class, but also to the advantage of sabar artists in terms of symbolic capital or dance experience), the negotiated function for my investigation has most often been located on the students' side. This position greatly assisted me in navigating the spheres of sabar, as I was able to enrol in workshops, meet with students and dancers, and weave ethnographic relationships. At the same time, in my case as well as that of many students, a demanding and respectful investment in the apprenticeship of sabar was expected by my instructors. Personal experience of the emotional stakes of this practice and of the teacher-student hierarchical relationship was a prerequisite for certain ethnographic relationships, and it became the lever for understanding the experiences and relationships described in the following pages.

Thanks to this immersion, my research progressively turned into an ethnography of the encounters, identifications, and representations played out through interactions and exchanges between Senegalese artists and their students.⁷ The symbolic and religious/spiritual dimension attributed more or less explicitly to some moments, sounds, things, and activities soon led me to develop questions regarding the intricacies between sabar enthusiasts' engagement in dance and attendant religious pathways. Before describing it in more depth, it is necessary to briefly make visible the entanglements between sabar and *Baye Fallism* in the Dakar landscape, which constitutes the point of origin, reference, and regular return for the sabar scene developed in Europe.

***Baye Fall* aesthetics: entanglements between dance and Mouridism in Dakar**

The vast majority of sabar dancers I met in Dakar or in Europe during my ethnographic fieldwork belong to the Mouride brotherhood (*Muridiyya*), and many of them claimed their identification to *Baye Fallism*. Mouridism is a brotherhood of Sufi Islam, created at the end of the nineteenth century by Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké (also called Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba or Serigne Touba by his disciples), with the aim of revitalizing Muslim faith in a colonial context (Babou 2011). After the French administration exiled him to Gabon, Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké became an iconic figure in Senegal (De Jong 2016). The *Muridiyya* brotherhood gradually became a national phenomenon rooted in various areas of social, economic, political, agricultural, cultural, migratory, and artistic life. It overcame the sole domain of the brotherhood to infuse the institutions, public space, and political spheres of the entire Wolof world (Dozon 2010).

Baye Fallism is defined as a specific branch within Mouridism (Salzbrunn 2011) which, in addition to worshipping Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, worships his disciple, right-hand man, and most devoted servant, Sheikh Ibrahima Fall. More than an institution, *Baye Fallism* is often presented as a mystical 'way' (in Wolof *yoon*) aiming at the purity of religious commitment through work (Audrain 2004; Pézeril 2008). Following the example of Sheikh Ibrahima Fall, *Baye Fall* adepts are distinguished from ordinary Mourides by their dedication to work, their total subjection to a marabout (religious leader), and their looseness regarding religious duties such as the five daily prayers and Ramadan fasting. *Baye Fall* has thus built a path that is both heterodox in its dress habits, rules, and ritual constraints, and structured around normative religious principles (Audrain 2004).

For a long time, the *Baye Fall* movement was surrounded by ambivalent representations, and decried by some of the other disciples of Mouridism because of its freedom from religious duties, the dreadlocks worn by some of its followers, and their permissiveness with regard to drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana. However, it has undergone major transformations since the beginning of the twentieth century and it has been normalized among young citizens of Dakar, particularly in the artistic milieu (Pézeril 2008).

Today, Mouridism and *Baye Fallism* permeate Dakar's public life in various ways through the iconography lining the walls of the city (Paoletti 2018), but also through the relay of music and dance (McLaughlin 2000; Morris 2014). The sounds of *Baye Fall* drums called *xiins*, and the dance movements of the *Baye Fall* and *Yaye Fall*, are primary vehicles of religious fervour during the gatherings of *dahiras* (religious associations) that take place every weekend in the streets of Dakar. As Julia Morris describes it, music and dance are consubstantial to *Baye Fall* ritual experience, and '*Baye Fall* ceremonies held in urban space both produce and perpetuate, through their songs, rhythms and dances, a *Baye Fall* acoustic community' (2014: 44). Symmetrically, the field of popular music and dance is imbued with religious influences and references to Mouridism: praise for Mourid and *Baye Fall* icons and values represent a favourite theme of *mbalax* and hip-hop artists' songs, and the boundaries between religious performance and popular music are often porous (McLaughlin 2000).

Baye Fall dress, song, and dance have also been infiltrating the repertoires of sabar dancers for several years, and some sabar troupes perform ballets specifically dedicated to praising Sheikh Ibrahima Fall, intermingling their choreographic activities with the expression of their religious fervour. In these troupes, we observe the emergence of a *Baye Fall* style of dance, characterized by more prominent knee lifts and firmer foot

strikes on the ground. These *Baye Fall* dancers are also defined by their clothing, which includes *njaxass* fabrics, black-and-white checked outfits, and necklaces bearing the effigy of Sheikh Ibrahima Fall. *Baye Fall* aesthetics are not reserved for male artists, and some female dancers have also incorporated them and identify themselves as *Yaye Fall*.

Although some dancers come from other Muslim brotherhoods (Tidjane and Laye) or – more rarely – from Christian families, the world of *sabar* is thus closely linked to *Baye Fallism* and impregnated with its religious aesthetics. *Sabar* dancers and musicians who settle in Europe recompose, and more or less consciously transmit, sensory and aesthetic fragments of *Baye Fall* religiosity encapsulated in their routines, which are then adopted strategically and selectively by their students.

The circulation of *Baye Fall* aesthetics in the transnational worlds of *sabar*

Mouride *dahiras* constitute an important crucible for the circulation of religious messages and the shaping of solidarity among Senegalese migrants (Bava 2017; Riccio 2004). For their part, *sabar* artists' mobility mainly takes place within the networks forged around music and dance – or through kinship – rather than through Mouride associations, in which they only occasionally participate. Furthermore, *sabar* dancers and musicians teaching in Europe generally make a clear distinction between their 'work' activities (in other words, teaching and performing dance) and their involvement in the religious sphere. Nonetheless, they perpetuate practices in Europe that are imbued with Mouridism, and their encounters with their students prove to represent a parallel and discrete channel for the dissemination of religious aesthetics.

First of all, according to the conventions structuring the practice of *sabar*, they systematically introduce and end their musical and dance activities with a *bakk* (musical phrase) in homage to Ahmadou Bamba (*Ya Nū Moom*),⁸ during which they and their students kneel and/or place their hands as a sign of recollection. These moments are never explained by *sabar* teachers as ritual sequences in the strict sense of the word, and many students rather see them as occasions of collective meditation following intense physical activity. Dancers sometimes formulate explanations about the meaning of these musical 'prayers' aimed at blessing and protecting the participants, and they translate these embodied conventions into spiritual devices for their students by describing them as moments of introspection. In other cases, some advanced students I met in class explained to newcomers that this prayer was an expression of gratitude to the ancestors, sharing their own approximate translation of the musicians' ritualized routines.

In addition to the omnipresence of this musical invocation, dancers sometimes organize meals, parties, or meetings with their students on the occasion of *Tabaski* or *Korité*, with the aim of re-creating the convivial and sharing atmosphere that prevails during these religious celebrations; others occasionally teach dance moves from the *Baye Fall* repertoire during workshops. Finally, whether they come from *Baye Fall dahiras*, classic Mouride education, or other Tidjane or Laye brotherhoods, most of these dancers refer to each other as *Baye Fall*, and this appellation takes on an almost rhetorical dimension between dancers and musicians.

Consequently, European students and followers of *sabar* often find themselves subtly familiarized with this religious aesthetics, perceived as part of a culture shared by these Senegalese artists in diaspora. This familiarization occurs through material and kinaesthetic mediations (the sale of *Baye Fall* outfits, the teaching of dance movements, songs mentioning *Baye Fallism*), rather than through an in-depth explanation of

religious precepts, stories, and references. Although they do not have any proselytizing projects, sabar artists sometimes engage in exchanges with some of their students, friends, or partners about their religion, in which they present *Baye Fallism* as a religion of respect and universality, as this dancer did in an interview:

Baye Fallism is a philosophy that is open to everyone. And that doesn't mean that you have to put on stuff or wear boots, and you are a *Baye Fall*. No, you can wear nothing *Baye Fall*, and you are a *Baye Fall* ... Every person who works, who forgives, who forgets, who is brave, who has a lot of personality and determination, everything that is positive, you are a *Yaye Fall* or a *Baye Fall*. Because the *Baye Fall* doesn't have negative criteria (interview with B., Geneva, March 2018).

Following these conceptions, sabar artists and teachers frequently assign a discursive identification as *Baye Fall* or *Yaye Fall* to the students whom they are close to, as a proof of their inclusion in the sabar artistic community.

Baye Fall symbols, identification, and devices have thus become part of a strategic market where Senegalese identity markers are valued and merchandised by these art intermediaries as part of their transmission of a dance culture. A man who is a student of sabar and frequently travels to Senegal (where he stays with artists) explained to me how he perceives this religious order:

From what I have understood of this culture, of all the Muslims in Senegal, *Baye Fall* are more or less the smoothest, who don't necessarily need to pray, who can smoke, who can drink; they can do whatever they want. And often, when you hear about someone being a good guy, '*Borom bak*', 'he's good' and all that, the next thing you hear is '*ki, Baye Fall la*' [he's a *Baye Fall*]. So that made me think that *Baye Fall* is a compliment. You see, those who have a real heart (interview with F., Dakar, January 2019).

Like this student, who perceives (and receives) the identification as *Baye Fall* as a compliment, other sabar students who do not initially feel the slightest affinity with *Baye Fallism* or with a religious institution end up approaching it and being assimilated into it due to their proximity to *Baye Fall* artists, and the apparent permissiveness of this order as presented to these foreign students.

For several dance students, the familiarization with these artists and the discovery of sabar sometimes include a game of identification and identity conversion, as can be found in other participative experiences during tourist encounters (Raout & Chabloz 2009). Within these paths of dance apprenticeship, passion for Senegalese culture, and socialization with sabar artists, different scales of adoption of aspects of the *Baye Fall* religion are played out. Each of these modalities builds on a different arrangement of the relationship between the passion for sabar and Senegalese cultures, socialization in Senegalese networks, and religious belief. In the following sections, I examine three levels of the adoption of *Baye Fall* religion, ranging from dissociation to conversion, and from a partial and selective appropriation of some cultural fragments, to a deep dive into Senegalese culture and its religious components.

'I will never be a Muslim': tasting sabar culture without religion

For the first group of students I met, socialization within the world of sabar led to a selective appropriation of ways of life associated with Senegal – in terms of dressing, hospitality, and food – while maintaining a distance from the religious domain. In the words of several of the women I met, the relationship with *Baye Fallism* and Mouridism was tinged with incomprehension and rejection, owing to several factors. When asked

about her vision of Mouridism, a student of sabar who had been travelling frequently in Senegal for years explained:

For me, this is science fiction: the fact that people who have no money like that manage to bleed themselves to give money to a marabout is a trick ... I was in Senegal at that time [during the Magal⁹ celebration]; I don't understand this system, these guys live in incredible villas, full of cars; but you have nothing, and you go and bleed yourself ... That's one aspect of religion that I don't understand at all. It's something that is outside my conception (interview with P, Geneva, June 2018).

This lack of understanding of Mouride precepts often results, as in this case, from a disagreement with the idea of religious institutions, the hierarchies they erect, financial contributions to the religious order, or the principle of submission and total self-surrender required by Mouridism. Without referring directly to *Baye Fall* institutions or brotherhood, this disinterest is also sometimes shown towards the type of dance taught by the *Baye Fall* instructors. For example, several of the women with whom I spoke during workshops expressed their discomfort at seeing young male *Baye Fall* dancers taking over the teaching of sabar in Europe. They would not teach the style of ancient women's dances that these women appreciate and that female teachers would master better. Conversely, *Baye Fall* dancers would give preference to 'new' dances and more abrupt movements. For this reason, several of the women interviewed made a point of clearly differentiating their practice of sabar – and their interest in Senegalese culture – from any adherence to the artists' beliefs.

This desire to dissociate the practice of sabar (or the discovery of Senegalese culture) from an interest in *Baye Fallism* is also perceptible in the testimonies of some students who were in relationships with sabar artists: for them, the question of conversion became more pressing in the event of marriage. The couple's relationship could contribute to learning more about the daily experience of religion, but in most of the cases I observed it was not the primary lever for an entry into a career of conversion (as we will see below). For instance, Lauriane was married to a Senegalese musician, and said she was very interested in the 'animist' side of Senegal. Owing to her passion for sabar and frequent travels to Senegal, she adopted various aesthetics related to *Baye Fallism* (e.g. in her outfits and interactions with sabar artists), but she refused to convert to Islam, as this religion had never attracted her. As in this example, the privilege accorded to animism can be interpreted as the consequence of the attraction for 'indigenous' religions prior to monotheisms, and of the broad context of suspicion and fear of Islam in French and Swiss public discourses (Direnberger, Banfi & Eskandari 2022; Silverstein 2008). Caught up in contradictory injunctions – between their immersion in this art world steeped with Mouride symbols and public discourses tinged with wariness of Islam – these students tend to escape the double-bind (Bateson 1999 [1972]) by appropriating sabar experiences, aesthetics, and sociabilities while rejecting the religious contents that accompany them. They play and respect the game without adhering to all its rules, nor believing all its underlying constituents.

A dissociated posture and the lack of interest in any involvement in a religious institution do not prevent the adoption of certain *Baye Fall* aesthetics, nor the use of sabar as a means of developing spirituality by these students. On the contrary, the practice of sabar is almost always presented as a way of reconnecting with one's body, liberating oneself, or even – for women of African heritage – of returning to one's origins.

Furthermore, in another example of dissociation between cultural appropriation and religious devotion, other students adopt signs of *Baye Fall* religiosity for the purpose of strategic imitation and artistic projects, but without any religious belief. A musician and comedian known as Harold Gazèau has, for example, become famous in Dakar and in the transnational network of sabar in Europe for his humorous performances, where he mimics wrestlers' attitudes and *Baye Fall* references. This artist/comedian living in France frequently intervenes in sabar and Senegalese wrestling ceremonies, where he plays with the surprise and exoticism surrounding the sabar performances of 'toubabs' (White people) in Dakar's festive spaces.¹⁰ In one of these videos, he proclaims himself in Wolof as the new Siteu *Baye Fall* (a popular wrestler from the Dakar region), dressed in the breeches and clothing of wrestlers, and as a 'real *Baye Fall*', who 'only drinks *touba* coffee'.¹¹ Yet Harold is estranged from any interest in Mouridism. It is purely as part of his artistic creations, his interactions with Senegalese friends, and his passion for Senegalese culture that he strategically and selectively imitates signs of *Baye Fallism*.

Unlike this first set of students, who experience their passion for sabar at a distance from *Baye Fallism*, or only strategically and selectively display its signs, other sabar adepts experience the discovery of this dance as a plunge into a transformative experience where dance, religious beliefs, and the social immersion in Senegalese sociability intertwine. As we will see from two portraits below, this immersion can be lasting or momentary, conceived under the sign of selective bricolage or of a more exclusive commitment; but in each case, it always testifies to a greater degree of adoption of *Baye Fall* religiosities as both a 'technique of the self' (Foucault 1988) and a mark of an immersion into a diasporic community.

Unfinished conversions: religious shifts and bifurcations

When the sabar class ends, Carine asks the teacher – who is in a hurry that day to finish class in order to break the Ramadan fasting – 'Can you do a little *Ya Ñu Moom* for us? He and the musician do so, and then play the traditional rhythmic phrase of devotion to Ahmadou Bamba, while we – the students – are kneeling. I ask Carine why it is important for her to end with *Ya Ñu Moom*, and she explains: 'For me, sabar is sacred. And every time we dance it, we have to thank the ancestors for giving us this'.

Field notes, May 2019

In contrast to the people marking their wish to appropriate the aesthetics and body techniques of sabar independent of any interest in *Baye Fallism* or the religious belongings of its instructors, several women I met in these dance classes connected their dance apprenticeship to their spiritual and religious journeys. Rather than dissociating the choreographic experience from the rest of the practices and knowledges which accompany it, or using *Baye Fall* symbols as mere decontextualized aesthetics, these students engaged in experiences of conversion in which religion held a place in the numerous aspects of their socialization. The example of Carine offers a first detailed entry into the tensions that punctuated these trajectories of immersion into an artistic world steeped in religiosity.

Carine grew up in a French family. She worked in the cultural field, and had been involved in the African dance scene of her city since she was 20 years old, first by learning to play the djembe, then by learning African dances. She had participated in several troupes, performed in festivals and events in her region, and helped with the management and artistic accompaniment of some Senegalese dancers and musicians. She explained that, initially, this immersion in the world of African dances was a way of differentiating herself from her 'European' culture by displaying signs of distinction.

She wore *tchaya* trousers, was often referred to as ‘*Yaye Fall*’ by sabar artists, and she admitted to having immersed herself in this religious universe for a period:

In fact, *Baye Fallism* was in its style, in what emerged and in the community I observed, what suited me best at the time. But in fact, it’s a whole. If you find yourself in Senegal at the time of the Magal [see note 9] in Touba and ... you arrive, you don’t expect anything, you say: ‘I’m going to observe, I’m going to visit the mosque, I’m going to put on my tourist glasses and everything.’ Then, in fact, you find yourself in a religious community where there’s a fucking vibration, where everyone is together, where you don’t take out your wallet or your identity card, where you’re just there, a human being with other human beings who advocate life. That’s it (interview with Carine, July 2020).¹²

As with the American Sufi converts described by Marcia Hermansen, the power of the emotions experienced in these ritual moments relies partly on the reverse mirror effect of escaping ‘an alienating and disenchanting world afflicted by consumerism and meaninglessness’ (2019: 151). For Carine, *Baye Fallism* attracted her at that moment as an answer to her quest for spiritual meaning, human communion, and extraction from an oppressive society. This powerful ritual experience came to epitomize this search. Yet for Carine, in addition to her discovery of this key event in the Mouride community, her attraction to *Baye Fallism* is above all rooted in the community of relatives with whom she associates, including her best friend and her partner at that time, both of whom were Senegalese, dancers, and *Baye Fall*:

When you hang out with Senegalese people, that they are more or less all *Baye Fall* – or whether they pretend to be – you also want to please the other person, by playing along. You see ... I think I would never have really touched *Baye Fallism* if I wasn’t in a relationship with a *Baye Fall* (interview with Carine, July 2020).

Carine was therefore caught up in the desire to immerse herself in this new community where the signs of belonging and adherence to the features of Senegalese culture were positively appreciated. Although she did not carry out in-depth research into Mouride theology, her interactions with her Senegalese friends led her to become familiar with certain rudimentary aspects of knowledge and to adopt elements of language related to the Muslim world. This experience of momentary proximity with *Baye Fallism* combined and superimposed personal and external factors, in which the influence of her romantic relationships, the sensory and kinaesthetic power of the ritual experience, and her own spiritual quest were conflated.

However, as for the Muslim-converted women described by Juliette Galonnier (2017), this adoption of religious codes quickly created a double shift: on the one hand, because of the discomfort felt towards her French relatives, who did not understand her transformation and adoption of Muslim precepts or markers; and, on the other hand, towards the Senegalese community, where her ignorance of religious rules often led to misunderstandings. The progressive discovery of the codes, institutions, and structures of *Baye Fallism* gradually made her aware of the extent of the gaps between her quest for a free spirituality, following her personal project of self-development, and the normative realities of loyalty to Mouridism. As an example, she was embarrassed to wear necklaces bearing the effigy of a religious leader, or to put herself in the hands of an intermediary (marabout) to express her faith. Similarly, the expectations of conformity to religious rules expressed by her partner made her feel uncomfortable and caused her to distance herself:

Belonging to a religious community, in fact, I tell myself that it's not for me, because it's exclusive. And having tasted other things like meditation, things in India, global Islam, having travelled quite a bit as well, I say to myself that in fact, there is not one right religion (interview with Carine, July 2020).

At the time of our discussion, Carine explained that she was in a phase of 'coming out' of this immersion, and of appropriating her European identity again by returning to the cultural tastes with which this can be synonymous (learning to play the guitar, eating cheese, affirming her regional origins). In retrospect, she came away from this experience feeling that she had 'picked up the right flavours,' but had never completely blended into this other culture. Her withdrawal from religious commitment and from her proximities with Senegalese networks found an echo with her breaking up with her partners, and the romantic disappointments with Senegalese partners she experienced or observed among her friends in the community. She still thought of sabar dance as a way to weekly liberate herself from an alienating way of life and work routine, to connect herself to something wider and to the 'ancestors,' but no longer tried to align her personal spiritual experience of sabar with the religious adhesion of her Senegalese friends and partners.

Carine's journey provides an interesting example of how socialization can lead to a momentary embrace of certain aesthetic, ritual, and religious norms, without resulting in a conversion or a full adherence to accompanying religious institutions. As an amateur practice accompanied by a tendency to imitate the attitudes, dress, or language of Senegalese instructors, the experience of sabar as observed among students like Carine is partly related to what anthropologist Jean-Philippe Belleau (2015) has described as 'mimetic ethnophilia'. Drawing on the analysis of a wide range of cases of passion for and appropriation of other cultures – particularly between societies of the Global South – Belleau proposes the notion of ethnophilia to refer to 'an ontological valorization of cultural otherness: an affinity for the ethnic thing, an identification with a cultural identity, the desire to appropriate all or part of it, the project of preserving it as it is'. With this concept, Belleau goes against approaches conceived in terms of exoticism, 'which tends to make power, functionalism, and instrumentality the paradigm of the mode of relation to cultural otherness'. Conversely, he proposes the concept of ethnophilia to account for the diversity of exits from the self, and to describe this 'identification with a cultural other that is both beyond calculation and inhabited by the affective' (Belleau 2015: 14). Among the different modalities of configuration of this ethnophilia, he speaks of 'mimetic ethnophilia' to designate a 'process which can go from the appropriation, temporary or permanent, of specific identity markers, to the project of metamorphosis of personal identity via the grasp of the totality of a cultural identity' (Belleau 2015: 12). Although the exchanges observed around sabar do not correspond to the context of South-South appropriation that Belleau addresses, his notion of ethnophilia still offers an interesting lens through which to apprehend the range of processes at play in impassioned engagement with other cultures at the micro-ethnographic and inter-individual level, without prefiguring the results of these encounters under the prism of exoticism and hegemonic power. While Carine's journey shows a form of temporary and partial ethnophilia, which eventually leads to a withdrawal from religious affiliation and a disjunction between her expectations and her interlocutors' normative perceptions of religious belief, the examination of another sabar enthusiast's journey allows us to explore a third modality of appropriation of Mouridism, which

gets even closer to a type of 'ethnophilia' which leads to a deep conversion and transformation.

'I found God through dance': embracing sabar body and soul

Jennifer's life story offers a second example of a form of mimetic ethnophilia in which a passion for alterity leads to an almost complete metamorphosis, and a further step in the conversion career. A professional dancer specializing in urban dance, Jennifer started ballet at a very young age and trained professionally as a performer, but soon became bored with the classical European dance routine. She was then introduced to hip-hop and to the Western African dances known as 'djembe', before discovering sabar during a stay in New York, where she met her sabar master. She wholeheartedly fell in love with this dance and plunged herself into training, which required relentless work for several hours a day. She moved to New York for four years to perfect her skills, travelled all over Europe for training courses, and made several trips to Senegal. She finally started to teach sabar herself, after receiving the approval of her master.

For Jennifer, learning sabar was much more than a body technique; it played a major role in her spiritual journey. Her training in this choreographic repertoire was combined with the discovery of a set of cultural knowledge about Senegal, ranging from culinary arts to clothing, body techniques, and religion, which was pivotal in her relationship to sabar:

Sabar has elevated me in many ways. It has made me a better human, because there is sabar, but you know there is religion inside culture and there is culture inside religion ... There is another dimension that is not part of ordinary sabar; there is also the spiritual side of sabar, which is *Baye Fallism*, the *Baye Fall thiant* and Ahmadou Bamba. Ahmadou Bamba is the greatest source of inspiration for the Senegalese, whatever their religion. They all celebrate Ahmadou Bamba on the day of Magal every year, and I, too, converted to Islam four years ago. The teachings of Ahmadou Bamba, who is a Sufi Mouride Muslim, really spoke to me (interview with Jennifer, November 2020).

Rather than a break, Jennifer presented her conversion as a gradual and 'natural' process. Like other students mentioned above, she initially held the belief that she would never convert to Islam, and especially not because of the prompting of her Senegalese partner of that time. However, she said that she already felt a great benefit from listening to *Baye Fall zikr* and *thiant* (praise songs), which soothed her when she was feeling unwell.

Her conversion came later, when she was going through a bout of heavy depression, a destructive relationship, and an unfortunate experience with a marabout: after visiting him in Senegal, she was plagued by visions and felt attacked by demonic entities. On the advice of a Senegalese artist friend, she managed to free herself by reading the *fatiha* (the opening sura of the Qur'an) and performing ablutions. Following this deliverance session, Jennifer's interest in religious practice and the five daily prayers increased, until she decided to convert at her local mosque with the help of a Turkish friend and her friend's parents. Following her conversion, she developed a passion for the figure of Ahmadou Bamba, about whom she learned through exchanges with Senegalese friends and specialized books. Since then, Jennifer has reconfigured her dance teaching by combining it with explanations of the religious dimensions of Senegalese culture, by performing *Baye Fall* choreography on the occasion of Magal with her students, by organizing celebrations in tribute to Ahmadou Bamba, and by integrating certain elements of the history and philosophy of Mouridism into her dance classes.

For this dancer, identification with Mouridism and *Baye Fallism* was not synonymous with conversion in the sense of the *Baye Fall ndigël* (submission), nor with total submission to a marabout. Jennifer had gone one step further than other sabar students who did not identify with a religious institution, and she had converted to Islam. Nevertheless, she was still selective in the arrangements she made to express her Mouride faith within a freer and more personal journey with God. Thus, rather than submission to a marabout and financial contributions to him, she favoured financial support to associations, and she conceived of her journey with God as an essentially personal undertaking.

Beyond exoticism: religious conversations

Jennifer and Carine's life stories confirm the model of selective extraction and consumption of fragments of religion in a spiritual market shaped by values of personal development, as described by prior studies in the critical sociology and anthropology of religions. Both women's journeys are, for instance, similar to those described by Véronique Altglas in her research on explorers of neo-Hinduism and Kabbalah, where she notes that 'exotic religious resources are ... constructed and disseminated on the terms of those who appropriate them – that is, as universal and flexible techniques for the realization of the self' (2014: 17). Here as well, the religious journey within Mouridism is interpreted through the prism of a personal spiritual path and a form of psychologization.

Yet in many ways, the model of religious exoticism and individual bricolage appears as inadequate to capture the multidimensional relations and pathways that support these partial, unachieved, or complete conversions. Exoticism – as defined by prior critical studies (Huggan 2001; Todorov 1993) – focuses largely on the expectations and clichés of a Western gaze, and often leads to an overestimation of its power to freeze other cultural practices and transform them according to people's desires. This can reinforce the apprehension of social interactions through the prism of generic and reified meta-entities (North/South, dominants/dominees), while denying exoticized peoples' agency and ability to divert, criticize, or reinterpret these clichés.

In my previous publications about sabar teaching in Europe (Aterianus-Owanga 2019; 2021a), I described the entangled and contradicting lines of power connecting the different actors of this art world in terms of gender, class, race, symbolic capital, and dance knowledge, and how the web of (intimate, cultural, religious, and economic) transactions that sabar (male) artists and their (female) students share complicates the dichotomic prism that would oppose European dominant consumers to African dominated producers. I showed how postcolonial inequalities were often reversed by artists, who play on the dependence of these women for their longed-for knowledge of sabar and inclusion into Senegalese culture,¹³ and how many sabar enthusiasts have negotiated their involvement and engagement in sabar through an array of transactions with their instructors' values and conceptions of dance (Aterianus-Owanga 2019). I have proposed the idea of post-exoticism as a better lens through which to grasp the metamorphosis and critiques of exoticism at stake in the contemporary passion for Senegalese dances, and the multiple layers of power relations and representations of alterity which are involved and transformed through these encounters (Aterianus-Owanga 2021a).

The elements discussed in this article about sabar students' religious conversations with Senegalese artists help to further this post-exotic approach and propose

complementary notions to religious exoticism, in order to better grasp the multiple forms of interactions, transactions, and boundaries that lead to the adoption or rejection of religious signs and aesthetics imbued with new meanings. In each of the three types of religious career and relationships to the fragments of *Baye Fall* religion described above, the religious experience is not an element that can be isolated from the rest of the encounter with an often-imagined culture, a kinaesthetic experience, an intimate love story, and a socialization within the world of African dances. For some sabar enthusiasts, 'doing' sabar is clearly dissociated from believing: the practice of songs, the wearing of clothes, and the participation in religious moments are totally dissociated from a belief or adherence to the institution. For others, sabar nourishes an eclectic spirituality, and leads to a deeper immersion in Mouridism. However, whether they are experienced in a mode of adherence to or distancing from *Baye Fallism*, these religious practices are inseparable from the stories of bodies, artistic experiences, and intimate conversations that these students engage in with the actors of these art worlds. The practice of sabar, then, constitutes a holistic experience in which dance and religious experience interpenetrate in various ways, depending on the religious project and paths of the people who engage in it, as well as the broader environment of Islamophobia or rejection of the religious institutions surrounding them.

Obviously, these entanglements are not visible when the initial lens of problematization is limited solely to the question of religious conversions. To perceive the religious, cultural, intimate, and social conversations at play in this dance world, as well as the situational negotiation of power they convey, it finally appears necessary to develop an interactional *and* post-exotic anthropological perspective on these religious conversations. Beyond conversion, it is through conversations (discursive, affective, and kinaesthetic) among actors of the sabar world and their broader environment that these symbolic resources become accessible and effective in some students' life paths, and kept away in others'. From (social) conversations to (cultural and religious) conversions, sabar encounters mediate heterodox spiritual beliefs that neither meld in new eclectic rituals nor lead to the creation of transcultural *Baye Fall* communities. Notwithstanding the number of misunderstandings and discrepancies they raise, these religious fragments contribute to the intensity of transformative experiences lived in sabar, and to the transnational field built across Senegal and Europe through its circulation. Finally, the examples observed in this article perhaps prove that it is precisely because of the non-omnipotence of exoticism, and of its complication by other contradicting dynamics, that most women I met in this field did not end up converting to *Baye Fallism*. Its institutions and actors kept resisting their expectations, and contradicted any simple idea of the commodification of a southern culture for the pleasure of Western consumers.

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NOTES

¹ All names used in this article were changed in order to protect my interlocutors' personal data and anonymity. Owing to the tightly knit networks of sabar, I do not provide any specific location information

in this article, and I have deliberately blurred elements that would have made it possible to recognize the individuals who inspired these portraits.

² For the different rhythms of sabar, see Tang (2007); for the dances related to those rhythms, see Aterianus-Owanga (2020), Penna-Diaw (2005), and Seye (2016).

³ The five steps (generally called in French 'cinq temps') is a sequence that appears in several dances of the sabar repertoire, and one of the first to be taught in sabar classes.

⁴ *Ndjaxass* are colourful assemblies of pieces of fabric, which have become an emblematic sign of the *Baye Fall* and are popular among young Senegalese people.

⁵ Since the end of the 1970s, the anthropology of dance has demonstrated the ethnocentrism of the boundaries created around the idea of 'dance', a notion that does not exist in many societies (Kaepler 2000; Wulff 2001), and the irrelevance of distinguishing it from the domain of religion, as beliefs and faith are often enacted and embodied in performances (Sklar 2001).

⁶ Marriage migration to Europe of dance artists from the Global South has been described by other studies of the global salsa circuit (Menet 2020) or African contemporary dancers (Despres 2015).

⁷ The sample of my interviewees provides a glimpse into the demographic composition of this network: sabar is taught by a majority of Senegalese men (thirty men out of forty-nine sabar and African dance teachers interviewed), to an almost exclusively female student audience (nineteen women out of twenty-two students interviewed). The instructors are most often Senegalese, but some European women also engage in teaching after several years of training. The majority of sabar students are white women, although a few black people also attend these classes, including second-generation Senegalese women (whom I actually met mostly in Paris), or Afro-descendant women who grew up in France or Switzerland.

⁸ For a musical analysis of this Mouride invocation, see Tang (2007: 103).

⁹ The word *magal* refers to Mouride religious celebrations, the most important of which (the 'Grand Magal') is held annually in Touba to commemorate the departure of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba into exile.

¹⁰ During wrestling competitions or sabar festivities, this dancer often keeps the audience amused by performing sabar creations based on famous *bakks* (musical phrases) used by wrestlers as distinctive marks.

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_xkdsovrhwc&ab_channel=AlphaBa.

¹² Here and below, the location is omitted to preserve anonymity.

¹³ This reversal of postcolonial inequalities has also been observed in other situations of transnational intimate encounters (Groes & Fernandez 2018) or dance mobilities (Ana 2022).

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Convers(at)ions religieuses par la danse : ethnographie post-exotique de la circulation du *sabar* et de l'esthétique *Baye Fall* en France et en Suisse

Résumé

Le présent article s'appuie sur une ethnographie de la transmission de la danse sénégalaise *sabar* en France et en Suisse pour discuter de la manière dont les parcours religieux des passionnées de *sabar* témoignent de nombreux modes d'adoption ou de rejet de l'esthétique mouride ou *Baye Fall*. L'auteur se concentre sur plusieurs portraits d'élèves pour mettre en évidence trois modalités de relation avec l'esthétique, la foi et le savoir religieux *Baye Fall*, allant de la dissociation entre danse et signification religieuse à la conversion et à l'immersion dans le *Baye Fallisme*. Elle défend l'importance du développement d'outils anthropologiques post-exotiques, tels que les idées d'ethnophilie ou de conversations religieuses, pour appréhender le nœud d'affects, d'expériences incorporées et de relations intimes qui accompagnent et conduisent le cheminement religieux des passionnés de *sabar*.

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