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The Spirits are My Neighbors: Women and the Rab Cult in Dakar, Senegal

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Macalester College
Honors Project in Anthropology
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The spirit world is alive and real in Senegal. From jealous lover spirits to benevolent protector spirits, these otherworldly beings have a direct impact on the daily lives of many Senegalese. In this study, I focus on the rab spirit. I argue that the spirit world is a tangible reality in Senegal. Focusing on the Lébou ethnic group, I examine the rab cult as one dimension of the spirit world, and look specifically at its relationship to gender. Analysis of the cult establishes the continued significance of this traditional African religion in the face of a globalizing society. Additionally, it reveals how the cult acts as a complementary sphere of social power for women, in contrast to the sphere of male-dominated Islam. In this way, the rab cult fills a space in society that Islam cannot. By examining the disunity between the rab cult and Islam, it is possible to see how these conflicts fundamentally serve to affirm Senegalese identity through the creation of social cohesion.

Cover photo: sabar drums at the xoy ceremony in Fatick
Acknowledgements

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I would like to dedicate this work to the Sane family. Your home became my home and you are the reason I continued.
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The woman’s bare feet pounded the rough concrete. Her dark silhouette danced on the cinderblock walls, thrown into sharp relief from the light of a single florescent bulb outside a neighbor’s doorstep. Grey-specked hair escaped from her foulard head-wrap in stiff wisps. She gathered her ankle-length skirts in her left hand and threw her right hand straight up, palm flat against the sky. The raspy chants sung through the megaphone mixed with the powerful rhythms of the drums and reverberated through the crowd. As the sabar drummer pounded the slender instrument slung across his body with mounting intensity, the woman flung herself into the movements with impossible fervor. It lasted only moments, until her eyes rolled loosely in her head. Her aged body was suspended motionless before her arms abruptly fell to her sides and she began to slump sideways. Before she could collapse to the ground, the other priestesses surrounded her. They carefully supported her weight as they carried her out of the circle of onlookers, drummers, and singers. Asu¹ had fallen into trance. A spirit, her rab, had called her into the circle to dance. The rab too, had been called to the circle with the rhythm of the drums and possessed Asu when his bakk was sung. Asu danced to please him, to entertain him, while the other priestesses sang and sang.

* * *

¹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals described, except where indicated.
The spirit world is alive and very real for many Senegalese. To understand what it means to be human in Senegal necessitates an understanding of the spirit world, and the relationships that exist between humans and spirits. These human-spirit relationships must also be viewed contextually within a society deeply rooted in Islam. In this paper, I look at the ways rab spirits influence Senegalese life, focusing on the role of gender in these relationships.

Rab spirits are invisible beings that live in a parallel world to humans. They have personalities, professions, religions, and genders. While many rab are indifferent to human life, some rab desire an alliance with the human world. These alliances are built upon relationships of reciprocity.

The relationships of reciprocity between rab and humans manifest in several ways. If humans disrespect the rab, by crossing through his or her territory improperly, or failing to maintain the rab's altar, the rab may seek retribution and the human is obliged to deal with the spirit. In other cases, the rab may fall in love with a human and require the same attention a lover would. Depending on the relationship between the rab and the human(s) he or she is linked to, an ndepp exorcism ceremony may be conducted to appease the rab and/or break the link between the rab and the human. Alternatively, select powerful healers establish relationships with rab that are mutually beneficial. The rab provides the healer with information and other forms of guidance in exchange for offerings and respect.

Although rab are widely known throughout Senegal, they are most present and salient for the Lébou people. The Lébou are a small sub-group of the Wolof

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2 The term ‘rab’ is used to describe both the singular spirit and a group of spirits.
ethnic group and are geographically located in Dakar. The Lébou are matrilineal and participate in Islam through the Layenne brotherhood, a sect almost exclusively composed of the Lébou. Additionally, the Lébou are the only ethnic group that is fully immersed in the *rab* cult, managing the relationships with *rab* through specific rituals. Lébou women are the most involved in the cult. Women hold the most powerful positions within the belief system and are targeted most frequently by the spirits.

The spirit world of *rab* is one articulation of many parallels that make up Senegalese society: the parallel worlds of the spirits and human beings, the parallel religious practices of the *rab* belief system and Islam, and the parallel domains of power between men and women. All of these are separate, but not mutually exclusive, domains of distinctive norms, hierarchies, and systems of power.

In this study, I argue that the spirit world is a tangible reality in Senegal. Focusing on the Lébou ethnic group, I examine the *rab* cult as one dimension of this spirit world and look specifically at its relationship to gender. Analysis of the cult establishes the continued significance of this traditional African religion in the face of a globalizing society. Additionally, it reveals how the cult acts as a complementary sphere of social power for women, in contrast to the sphere of male-dominated Islam. In this way, the *rab* cult fills a space in society that Islam cannot. By examining the disunity between the *rab* cult and Islam, it is possible to see how the conflicts created from this disunity fundamentally serve to affirm Senegalese identity through the creation of social cohesion.
Situating the *Rab* Cult in the Literature

It is crucial to understand the meaning of the concept ‘spirit’ in order to understand the invisible world *rab* inhabit. I use the word ‘spirit’ very specifically following E. Bolaji Idowu’s definition.

Spirits are those apparitional entities which form separate categories of beings from divinities and ancestors...divinities and ancestors could be described as ‘domesticated’ spirits – the ancestors have always been a part of the human family, and the divinities are intimately a tutelary part of the personal or community establishments... [spirits] are more often then not thought of as powers which are almost abstract (Idowu 1973:173-174).

*Rab* are not ancestors or divinities. They are more human-like in their actions and flaws. This distinction establishes the foundations of the complex relationship these spirits have with the human world. The following section situates the *rab* belief system, which I call a cult, within broader understandings of religion and spirit possession.

**African Religions**

How does one begin to study religion? Are religious beliefs and practices unrelated and mutually exclusive? I. M. Lewis (1986:i) argues that “...to understand the nature of spiritual power we need to appreciate how these apparently contradictory mystical manifestations are in fact part of a single complex of mutually defining and sustaining elements”. In this way, the study of religion can offer significant insight into the interworking of specific cultures as critical elements of analysis. Analysis of religion has the ability to uncover deep meaning because of the way it engages with the unexplainable, the strange, and the fantastic.
Building off of E. Evans-Pritchards’s work on the Nuer of Sudan, Benjamin Ray was one of the first scholars to deeply and systematically investigate African religions. The question of perspective is central to his 1976 work, *African Religions*. He writes that African religions are “part and parcel of the whole fabric of African cultural life. Religious phenomena are thus closely interwoven with social, psychological, and moral dimensions” (Ray 1976:16). In this way, not only is religion a foundational element of African culture, but analyzing African religions can also illuminate significant trends that appear throughout social life.

It is crucial to have an operational definition of ‘religion’ to engage deeply with the concept. Religion, as defined by Melford Spiro, is “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Spiro 1987:197, his emphasis). Religion, as broadly defined here, works as an umbrella term under which the *rab* belief system falls. The belief in *rab* is a patterned system with prescribed ways for dealing with the supernatural world. It functions as an institution through established hierarchies and particular rules.

The *rab* belief system concerns the lives of individuals, involving both their quotidian experiences along with more rare moments of possession. In this work, I focus on the *rab* institution as a lived whole, concurrent with Boddy’s (1994:427) assertion that “…possession has been shown to be about morality, kinship, ethnicity, history, and social memory – the touchstones of social existence”. I adopt the convention established by many scholars who have studied spirit possession groups in Africa (Boddy 1994, Bop 2005, Lewis 1986, Zemplini 1966), and refer to the *rab* belief system as a spirit possession cult. While possession itself is not the
defining relationship between humans and *rab*, possession acts as the most exemplary connection between these beings, lending additional support to the classification of the *rab* cult as a spirit possession cult. Moreover, the majority of the literature concerning the *rab* cult has focused on spirit possession. Spirit possession is a useful entry into the literature concerning this traditional religion.

Defining this belief as a cult emphasizes its peripheral and parallel nature in relation to Islam, the central moral code for people’s daily lives in Senegal. While aspects of the *rab* cult influence people’s behavior, the *rab* belief system does not offer people an explanation for life, death, or the afterlife. Contrastingly, Islam gives counsel on ways to please God and attain a place in Paradise. Islam determines the fate of one’s soul. The *rab* cult is a religious institution that is a part of life on earth that has no bearing on the afterlife or salvation.

Despite functioning outside of Islam, the *rab* cult continues to hold deep significance in Senegal. In fact, ‘African traditional religions’ continue to persist throughout the continent despite the modern era of globalization (van Binsbergen 2004). This is in direct contrast to trends in the global North where, as scholar Wim van Binsbergen (2004:88) notes, “the decline of organized religion in the North Atlantic goes hand in hand with the destruction of socially underpinned, collectively shared meaning”. The persistence of these traditional religions illustrates the contrasts between the African continent and the global North, contributing to a greater sense of African identity.

As Africa lies in the periphery of global systems, African people have developed reasoning that explains their economic, political, and social
marginalization (van Binsbergen 2004:89). An important element of the persistence of traditional African religions it the way it helps establish African identity in contrast to the global North.

Religious forms, in Africa and elsewhere, have lent themselves to the production of contrastive identities within the socio-political arenas at all levels [...] They have [...] either reinforced existing ethnic, linguistic, regional and class boundaries, or offered alternative (usually more universal) identities in the light of which non-religious identity boundaries can be crossed or rendered irrelevant (van Binsbergen 2004:89-90).

He argues that the resilience of traditional African religions can be attributed in part to the broad ways people have developed to deal with the changes of globalization, changes to which more globalized religions such as Christianity and Islam cannot speak.

Van Binsbergen argues that ‘traditional African religions’ persist for several reasons. First, these belief systems have remained dynamic entities that have adjusted to new formal organizations. In this case, the leaders within the rab cult continue to adapt to new trends in technology, globalization, and urbanization. Secondly, traditional belief systems are institutions of proven effectiveness. They help people manage the perpetual issues of local societies, including authority, order, conflict management, gender and generational difference, and the acquisition of an effective social identity (van Binsbergen 2004:92). Thirdly, these institutions “draw on sources of cosmological meaning and self-identity whose continued relevance may have been eroded by recent globalization, yet are far from destroyed by it” (van Binsbergen 2004:92).
Building upon this idea, the *rab* cult contributes to the formation of Senegalese identity as a whole.

Local cults are classified officially as ‘survivals’ and so contribute to the dynamic process of adjustment by which universal religions define and redefine metropolitan orthodoxy by contrasting it to ‘primitive superstition.’

The price centrality pays to marginality for providing this service is, in effect, the ambiguous power it cedes to the latter (Lewis 1986:xiii).

In this way, as a cult, the *rab* belief system works to solidify Senegalese Islam, a crucial aspect of Senegalese national identity. As it defines Islam in its contrasting societal functions, the cult also gains power and significance. However, contrary to Lewis’ argument, the *rab* cult in Senegal is not regarded as a ‘primitive superstition’ practiced only in rural or traditional settings; rather, it is a salient reality in the modern city of Dakar. Therefore, the contrasts that arise between Islam and the *rab* cult are not viewed as contradictory, but complementary domains of dealing with spirituality. Senegalese sociologist Djiby Diakhaté states,

> Il faut comprendre que le Sénégal est composé de 95 % musulmans, 5 % de chrétiens et autres croyances, mais aussi de 100% d’animistes.3 Malgré l’adhésion à des religions, ils gardent un substrat spirituel articulé autour de l’animisme et du paganisme (païens). Voilà qui fait que nous continuons à effectuer des offrandes et des sacrifices, à aller dans des sanctuaires lignagers (Diakhaté 2009).4

In this way, the *rab* cult operates in a parallel system to Islam, maintaining its significance through the unique ways it manages social problems, as I will discuss throughout the paper.

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3 It is important to note that this term is Diakhaté’s, not my own. Animism often refers to the religious worldview that natural physical entities have spirits of their own. The *rab* cult does not fit this definition.

4 *It is necessary to understand that Senegal is 95% Muslim, 5% Christian and other beliefs, but also 100% animist. Despite the adhesion to these religions, Senegalese keep a spiritual layer articulated around animism and paganism. This is shown by the fact that we continue to make offerings and sacrifices that go into lineage sanctuaries.*
Women in the Rab Cult

The rab cult functions in an analogous domain to Islam and as a result, it provides a parallel social space for women. As I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4, the rab cult is primarily a female domain. Women hold the greatest positions of power and are the most frequently disturbed by rab. The gendered dynamics of spirit possession are noted throughout the literature, illustrating possession as “women’s indirect claim for redress” (Boddy 1994:415). Many of these scholars (Boddy 1989; Lewis 1978, 1989; Sharp 1990; Spring 1978; Wilson 1967) use a gendered perspective to explore why women are generally the most involved in spirit possession globally. In Islamic societies specifically, Lewis put forth the idea that possession might be the “gender complementary domain of religious responsibility” (Boddy 1994:415; see also Boddy 1989; and Kenyon 1991).

Possession directly influences communities, identities, cohesion, and self-respect in ways that threaten the reproduction and continuation of static bodies, gender dynamics and power relationships (Boddy 1994; Brown 1991; Harvey 1980; Last 1991; Stoller 1989). Scholarly literature has examined power in relation to spirit possession in terms of gender, religion, capitalism, and colonialism. “Indeed a view now widely held is that possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies whose abrasions are deeply, but not exclusively, held by women” (Boddy 1994:419). I expand upon these ideas in this study, asserting that these lines of logic include the rab cult as a larger entity that contributes to the formation of national identity. Possession is simply a contributing factor in how the rab cult influences broader hegemonies.
The *rab* cult is a female domain through which women maintain the social 
order of the spirit world.

...we find [women] working in the spiritual realm on behalf of themselves, 
their families, households, or communities, channeling spirits’ assistance or 
heading off their wrath, protecting future generations, even protesting 
injustice. Here so-called peripheral possession is concerned with social 
domains for which women are typically assigned primary responsibility: the 
maintenance of kin ties and family health, the social reproduction of their 
communities, often in the face of radical social change and erosion of prior 
supports. It is about morality and social identity (Boddy 1994:416).

Women are responsible for all of the ceremonies, rituals, and practices within the 
*rab* cult ensuring the continuity of social life, particularly within the private sphere. 
Men, on the other hand, have public responsibilities outside of the compound and 
the village. They are concerned with larger groups, institutions, and the afterlife. In 
this way the relationship between genders is both “complementary and politically 
asymmetrical” (Boddy 1994:417). Similar to the function of the Hausa *bori* cult in 
which Hausa women cannot participate adequately in the ceremonial and public life 
of Islam (Boddy 1994), the *rab* cult responds to Islam by providing women with a 
space in which they control and dominate the outcomes of specific situations 
pertaining to the social life and wellbeing of the community.

It is important to note however, that even as the *rab* cult occupies a parallel 
space, it remains a contested area. Though the *rab* cult is widely accepted as reality 
by most Senegalese, only the Lébou view intentional involvement with the cult as 
acceptable. Islam specifically forbids communicating with spirits and thererfore 
many of practices associated with the cult are not allowed. Because of this, the *rab* 
cult and women’s involvement in it create societal conflicts in which Lébou
individuals must navigate the necessity of maintaining relationships with rab, while also respecting Islam’s provisions.

However, as demonstrated by the parallel function of the cult, these conflicts ultimately serve to foster a stronger sense of Senegalese identity.

This peace arises from the existence of many kinds of relationships, and the values attached to them all by custom. These ties divide men at one point; but this division in a wider group and over a longer period of time leads to the establishment of social order (Gluckman 1955:13).

Even though involvement in the rab cult defies Islam, its continued existence illustrates its relevance because it fills a space in society that Islam cannot (van Binsbergen 2004). The acceptance of this belief system by the Senegalese sets Senegal apart from other Muslim countries and works to create a cohesive national identity.

How cult religion functions on a national and international scale acts as backdrop for further discussion. In order to contribute to the scholarly conversation, finding an access point is necessary. For this discussion, spirit possession acts as this point of entry.

**Spirit Possession as Context**

The literature on spirit possession falls into several categories, and follows a general shift of thought over time. Recently, the literature on spirit possession has moved away from being an autonomous subject of investigation and is now approached more contextually and phenomenologically (Boddy 1994:410).

Early models such as those proposed by Lewis (1986), and Ward (1989), looked at possession through a behavioral and psychological rationalization lens.
They attempt to render the strange more familiar. These types of investigations focus variously on possession within religion or focused on the medical and health aspects of possession (Boddy 1989; Crapanzano 1977; Lambek 1981). Soon after, Crapanzano (1977) argued that possession is about meaning, and that cultural symbols are crucial to understanding possession as a phenomenon. In these studies, possession becomes a part of people's daily experiences, not just dramatic ritual, and speaks to one's relationship to the world through personal, ethnic, political, and moral identity.

A final body of literature to which I attend has explored spirit possession through selfhood and identity, complicated by aesthetics, mimesis and embodiment (Boddy 1989; Bourguignon 2004; Brown 1994; Crapanzano 1977; Lambek 1993; Obeyesekere 1969; Stoller 1989). Specific to this discussion is how the body is culturally conceptualized and the various ways it is objectified by scholars and the individuals involved in possession.

Although possession is an important element of the rab cult, by focusing exclusively on an analysis of possession, much of the texture, nuance, and everyday significance of the belief system is lost. Following Janice Boddy’s work on the zar cult, I have chosen to focus on the rab cult as it is experienced in the minutia of daily life, and thus a deep analysis of possession, particularly concerning its relationship to the body, becomes secondary.

*Rab in the Literature*

Religious beliefs are not static; they are tied to the social life of society. As Lébou society and Senegalese society have changed, so has the rab cult. This work
updates and elaborates upon research conducted on similar topics over the last fifty years, therefore contributing to our understanding of the different ways religion, spirituality, and the supernatural are experienced.

The appearance of the spirit cult of *rab* was first documented in the literature in the mid-19th century by Boilat in *Esquisses Senegalaises* (1853). Shortly thereafter, Gaden and Aujas discussed specific cases of spirit possession that occurred in 1912 and 1931 respectively. Balandier and Mercier conducted the first in-depth study of *rab* in 1946. They noted that “la vie traditionnelle [sic] est le propre des femmes” (Zemplini 1966:301). This observation is still relevant today, as the *rab* cult is the concern primarily of women.

As discussed earlier, *rab* are invisible beings that occupy the same spaces as humans. They have independent lives, careers, families, and religions. Most Senegalese people confirm that *rab* exist and that they have a significant impact on people’s lives. Given this, it is interesting that very little has been written about the *rab* cult. Of these texts, most date from the 1960s (Zemplini and Rabain 1965; Zemplini 1966; Collomb 1967). While these texts are very useful (particularly Zemplini’s 1966 detailed study of *rab*, *ndepp*, *tuuru*, and *samp*) for providing a comprehensive rendering of this aspect of Lébou culture during the 1960s, over fifty years have passed between his study and my own.

*Rab* are most frequently mentioned in relation to the *ndepp* exorcism ceremony (Abbey 2001; Chase 2001; Collomb 1967; Diop-Ben-Geloune 1997; Diop 1996; Dorès 2000; Griffin 1999; Zemplini 1966). The most comprehensive of these works include research done by Zemplini, Rabain, and Collomb who have focused on
the ndepp ceremony as a site for spirit possession, collective healing, and psychiatric studies of mental health. In these studies, rab are identified as the chief cause for health issues and relationship problems. Related to the ndepp ceremony, rab are mentioned in studies specific to mental health (Collomb 1967; Epelboin 2001; Fassin 1992; Gemmeke 2009). More recently the ndepp ceremony has been looked at from an ethnomusicology perspective (Griffin 1999; Chase 2001), analyzing the drumming and singing during the ndepp as a musical expression.

Although rab influence women’s lives the most, the scholarship has only recently discussed rab specifically in relation to women's experiences. Seybold (2002) looks at rab as a possible reason for women's infertility. Deborah Heath (1990) mentions rab in her articles about space, verbal performance, and women's dance. Fatou Sow (2003) briefly mentions rab as ancestral spirits in her article, "Fundamentalisms, globalisation, and women's human rights in Senegal".

Gemmeke's (2009) ethnography of female marabout deals with the experience of women as religious leaders, and nods towards the influence of rab on their lives.

Interestingly, popular media deals with rab in a completely different fashion. In on-line sources, rab are mentioned most frequently in the context of faru rab, or lover spirits (see Senegalaisement.com; Sambamara.com; leral.net). Some of these websites are on-going forums where people post individual concerns and calls for assistance in dealing with faru rab. Sambamara.com is a personal website for a healer who deals specifically with faru rab, and the other sources are online news

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5 Seybold uses the term djinn, instead of rab, however the processes she describes are characteristic of rab. The contestation of these terms will be looked at in a later section.
articles discussing the possibility of faru rab existing. These sources suggest that rab influence the daily lives of Senegalese most frequently as dangerous lovers. Studies done by Ibrahima Sow (2006, 2009) are the only scholarly works I have found that deal with faru rab and coro rab (girlfriend spirits). This discrepancy between the concerns of popular Senegalese culture and academic research is an avenue worth pursuing in future research.

One possible reason for the small amount of research concerning rab is the confusion surrounding the different Senegalese spirits. Many different types of spirits are mentioned in relation to the Wolof and Lébou people. The spirits cited most frequently include djinn, rab, seytaane, and tuur. Djinn (or alternatively djinne, jinn, or jinne) are spirits explicitly mentioned in the Quran and can be found in many Muslim communities. Only in a few scholarly works, however, are more than one of these spirits mentioned (Sow 2009; Zemplini 1966; Laborde 1995; Fassin 1992). Within the rest of the literature concerning Senegalese spirits, there are substantial discontinuities about what types of spirits exist and what behaviors they exhibit.

Sow and Laborde are the only authors who attempt to explain these discrepancies in their works. In contrast to other sources, these scholars strive to deeply engage with esoteric ideas of religion, belief, and the specific ways these ideas manifest themselves in Senegal. While Fassin and Zemplini mention the confusion surrounding rab and djinn, they make no attempt to explain these differences. Laborde acknowledges the confused use of terms by most people: "rab and jinn are more or less consciously assimilated" (Laborde 1995:105). Later he uses
the terms interchangeably, seemingly dismissing the importance of distinguishing
the terms he identifies as distinct.

More important than the difference between *rab* and *djinn* is the fact that
they are contested terms. Sow argues that this confusion comes from a deeply
historical syncretism between Islamic *djinn* and Senegalese traditional beliefs.
"Cette confusion des termes qui est un aspect de la sédimentation des
représentations collectives illustre bien le syncrétisme et les contaminations des
différent legs et héritages culturels et leur plasticité, leur dynamique" (Sow
2009:214). Sow highlights the dynamic nature of religion and culture, which is key
to understanding how the *rab* cult is practiced today. This syncretism also shows
the ways in which those practicing the *rab* cult have attempted to legitimize their
practices by combining *rab* with *djinn*, a spirit explicitly referenced by the Quran.
This distinction focuses my research (a study of *djinn* would be entirely different),
and allows the Lébou experience to take precedence.

Based upon the breadth and depth of research conducted by Sow (2003,
2009), the on-line and popular media focuses, and my own field work, exploring the
female experience with *rab* is a conversation requiring attention. *Rab* play an
influential role on the daily lives of women that goes beyond sickness and healing,
and that is distinct from the experiences with *djinn*. While my own research is not
solely focused on women, it gives voice to the previously unexplored avenue of

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6 This confusion of terms, an aspect of the sedimentations of collective representations, illustrates the syncretism and contamination of different legacies and cultural heritages. It illustrates the beliefs’ plasticity, their dynamism.
women’s experiences with the *rab* cult. Additionally, the function of the cult has significant implications for the crafting of a national Senegalese identity.

**Methodology**

I have always been interested in fantasy. Growing up I read books about magic almost exclusively. The idea that magic existed, that there are powers beyond what the human eye can see, that the supernatural holds sway over our lives, enchanted me. As I have grown older, this fascination with the mystical has flourished into an interest into the occult. However, I didn’t realize the extent of my curiosity until I discovered *rab* and the tangible ways they create disorder in Senegal.

The scope of my study investigates the questions of how the cult functions in Senegalese society in general and for the Lébou people specifically and how/if gender becomes explanatory in relation to the cult. To carry out the research, I immersed myself as fully as possible in Lébou communities, while simultaneously exploring the perceptions of other Senegalese in order to situate the belief system within a wider context.

The majority of the ethnographic material for this study was gathered in Senegal over two, four-week periods. I spend the first period in November of 2011 primarily in the city of Dakar and surrounding neighborhoods of Guediawaye and Ouakam, investigating the spirit *rab* and the institutions that are a part of the belief in this spirit. I spent an additional four weeks in June 2012 looking at the *rab* cult and the unique ways women interact with this realm. The second fieldwork period took place in Dakar, Rufisque, and Fatick.
Secondary research methods I used included investigating popular media items, such as newspapers and on-line forums, published works by Senegalese authors, and many other scholarly works concerning broader themes and theoretical frameworks. I started my research in the National Archives and the University Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD). Resources at the University gave me access to the works of Senegalese scholars’ that are published in Senegal and difficult to obtain elsewhere. I also used textual analysis of postings on the Internet in various on-line forums.

The vast majority of my research was done through interviews. Interviews were the most useful methodology because they helped me understand how Senegalese conceptualize the world of rab and how these spirits influence their daily lives. I was able to speak with both men and women, young and old, believers and non-believers in the rab cult about their opinions and perspectives. Although all of my informants were Muslim and the majority of them were Lébou, they came from a variety of education backgrounds. I tried to gain a wide range of perspectives from people with differing levels of involvement in this belief. I conducted twenty-two formal audio-recorded interviews with fifteen different people. In addition, I had many other conversations and interviews with eight additional Senegalese. Most often these were not recorded because it was inappropriate in the situation. I obtained consent for all the interviews, both audio-recorded and more casual.
All of my informants provided invaluable information, and I quote many throughout this paper. However, three Senegalese were particularly crucial to helping me understand the cult. I worked with Aida Gueye during both periods of fieldwork. Aida is a Lèbou woman in her late twenties. She has three children and currently lives with her father and three of her siblings. Her warmth shines through her smile and is especially evident when she ‘spoils’ her youngest, Mohamed, with sweets and fried dough balls bought from a neighbor. She agreed to help me in my research and involved me in every process of her home situation.

Through a network of haphazard encounters, I was fortunate enough to spend one week living with the family of a highly regarded ndeppkat, or priestess within the rab cult. Her family referred to her as La Grande Mère, the Grand Mother, and she embodied every ounce of this title. When I first met her, she was sitting on a mat on the floor of her bedroom, a large painting of her mother commanding the wall space behind her. As the daughter of one of the most powerful ndeppkat in recent Senegalese history, La Grande Mère is a welcoming mixture of regal wisdom and gentle empathy. Her purple, faux crocodile-skin purse was with her at all times, spilling over with strings of beads, the tail of a cow, and an ever-present container of sour milk (in the case that a rab would need to be appeased at any given moment). Over the course of the week, she invited me to several different healing ceremonies she conducted and took me as a guest to the annual Serer xoy in

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7 Quotes in French are directly transcribed from audio-recordings. Quotes in English are paraphrased from written notes.
Fatick. Her stories as an elderly healer unraveled themselves slowly in quiet moments when the old women gathered.

Another particularly helpful character was La Grande Mère’s self-described ‘secretary’, Ali Dieng. A man in his early fifties, he and his family of six lived in the compound with La Grande Mère. His wife, Kharija, was La Grande Mère’s niece and apprentie (apprentice). Ali took it upon himself to be my personal care provider. His position in the compound was an interesting one, as the only man with decision-making power. Because La Grande Mère is getting older, he acts as the contact person between her and all other people. He organized all ceremonies, transportation, and sometimes participated in smaller ceremonies. At the tuuru we attended, his job was to slit the throat of the goat, skin it, and cut its head into seven pieces as an offering to the rab. Ali described to me once, “I felt a duty to be a part of the family. I worked another job before, but left it because I was called to help La Grande”. His assistance, though sometimes frustrating, as will be described below, was vital.

Language was the most immediate barrier I faced when conducting research. French is the official language of Senegal, although only those who have had some form of education speak it. Wolof is the most widely spoken language. As in many African contexts, in Senegal men are educated before women, for more years, and generally receive a better quality of education. Although many women in Dakar speak comfortably in French, if not fluently, many women do not speak French at all. Aida was fluent in French, having attended high school and we were able to converse easily. In Rufisque at La Grande Mère’s compound however, most of the
woman spoke nearly no French. This was very frustrating as the translators were most often men. I was often worried the women weren’t speaking candidly with me because the male translator was present. The majority of the time, Ali appointed himself as my guide and translated many conversations for me. Because of his position in the compound, it appeared as if most women felt comfortable in front of him.

While having a male translator was sometimes a disadvantage, the conversation styles of men and women also differ and as my research continued I discovered the ethnographic method was much more effective with men than with women. For example, men’s lives are concerned with the public sphere and a significant part of this is wuxtan, or discussing. They sit for hours drinking ataaya and wuxtan while women cook, clean, etc. Because of this, men easily engaged with the classic interview style and provided me with rich amounts of detail. Because they also speak higher levels of French, communicating this way was easy and natural.

Interviewing women was much different. For those I interviewed without a translator, many of my questions were answered with sweeping statements and absolutes. I was often viewed skeptically as a confusing and too-curious child. In addition to this, in more rural settings, women are constantly engaged in activities and all conversations take place over boiling pots and dirty laundry. As soon as I forcibly included myself in these activities, however, their skepticism lessened, and the realities of their involvement with rab began to be told. I believe my position as
a woman gave me access to some of these women of high status that a male researcher would not have had.

I also gathered information through participant observation. Because my research focuses on the lived experiences of Senegalese, it was important that I, too, had similar lived experiences. When visiting one marabout, I took a sacred bath with special water he concocted. I was able to attend two separate nyepp ceremonies, a *turru*, the *xoy*, and had my future predicted by three different *voyantes*. During the *tuuru*, I participated in various parts of the ceremony.

Afterward Ali remarked fondly, “Ah! Now you are an apprentie!” I went with Aida when she visited diviners and sat in university dorm rooms discussing the world of *rab*. I ate and slept with the elder *n deepcopy* between parts of the *n deepcopy* ceremonies and watched their giggling antics.

Being an outsider always raises certain questions. Why have these people chosen to share things with me? What information was I able to gather because of my positionality and what information was kept from me as a result of this? What were people’s motivations for working with me, and what effect did this have on our interactions? I do not know the answers to these questions and others like them, but they were important for me to reflect upon during my fieldwork and in writing this thesis.

**Telling the Stories, Directing the Paper**

Analyzing the *rab* cult is one lens through which to view Senegalese society. As a female-dominated, cult religion, various threads of history, power, and conflict
come together in unique ways. The significance of such cults is illuminated by Boddy:

Possession cults are embedded in local contexts that are never only local and are always complex. With other spiritual philosophies, they provide ways of understanding, trying out, coming to terms with, and contesting modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and religious and other hegemonies. They allow the implicit synthesis of the foreign with the local and historically relevant while reshaping all in the process (Boddy 1994:422).

As this study continues, the concrete reality of the spirit world emerges, illuminating the different ways the rab cult continues to be relevant in modern Senegalese society. It becomes clear that the spirit world of rab is a parallel social order in which women have the power to make influential social decisions. Although the conflicts that arise from such parallel domains can be seen as destructive, they largely contribute to the formation of a cohesive Senegalese identity. This argument is established through three chapters.

Chapter 2 situates the rab cult and the Lébou people within a larger historical context. I introduce the history of Senegal from 1000 B.C.E. to modern times in acknowledgement of the threads that connect ancient history to contemporary society. I then examine the changing influence of Islam from its introduction into the region to its current expression. The myth of origin for the Wolof people acts as a social history that informs the historical study from a local perspective. Building on of this myth, I focus on the Lébou people specifically. The chapter focuses particularly on women throughout Senegal’s history in order to highlight the changing forms of gender power that impact Senegalese society.
Chapter 3 establishes the foundation of the *rab* belief system. Because very little scholarly research concerning *rab* has been conducted within the last sixty years, it is crucial to update and expand upon this foundation. This chapter focuses on current expressions of the *rab* cult, and illustrates how the cult has remained dynamic, changing with new trends. To illustrate these points, I examine the different types of *rab* and observe the relationships they have with humans. I focus on the *xamb*, or altars, as physical sites of cult expression. Following this, I investigate the ways *rab* continue to play a crucial role in Senegalese society, using *faru rab*, or lover spirits as an example. The chapter concludes by looking at how the expressions of belief in *rab* are changing.

Chapter 4 illustrates how the *rab* cult acts as a parallel social space for Lébou women. First I look at roles of *ndeppkat* within the cult. As the leaders of this domain, they are examples of the ways women hold power within the cult. The chapter moves into a description of the *ndepp* ceremony. The *ndepp* ceremony acts as a nexus for community creation that is critical to the social order of the cult. The following section examines the ways in which divination contributes to the community through network building and group consultation. Finally, I examine various conflicts that arise within the cult. Specific attention is given to the ways *ndeppkat* strive for legitimacy in the Muslim context of Senegal. The chapter concludes by illustrating how these conflicts work to affirm women’s power.

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The *rab* cult is a spiritual domain that holds a unique power in modern Senegalese society. Although widely known, it is not widely practiced outside the Lébou ethnic group. Despite this, the cult continues to hold a significant place in Senegalese society. As a traditional African religion, the cult contributes to a broader Senegalese identity. Religious beliefs continue to carry significant weight, traditional and otherwise, and the cult is a clear example of such a trend. Women are tasked with the maintenance of the spirit world, and have a distinct relationship with the cult. The *rab* cult provides a complementary social order in contrast to Islam. Finally, the conflicts created through this parallel relationship work to establish a cohesive national identity.
CHAPTER 2:
Establishing Histories

This chapter situates the study within a historical framework. First I provide a thumbnail sketch of Senegalese history from 1000 B.C. to present, following historical threads that have roots in early history through to their effects in the present. Next, I focus on the origins of the Wolof and Lébou people. In order to unpack the layers that shape contemporary Senegalese society and its relationship to gender, I emphasize women throughout this history.

Senegal since 1000 B.C.

The area that is known today as Senegal straddles the boundaries of several pre-colonial kingdoms. Leaders of the Serer, Wolof, Mandinka, and Toucouleur ethnic groups ruled each of these kingdoms (Callaway and Creevey 1994:16). Trade into the area occurred between the years 1000 - 2000 B. C. (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008:64), and it was along these trade routes that Islam made its first appearance coming from North Africa down the coast. Although the spread of Islam into the African continent began around 642 C.E. (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008:97), the religion did not reach Senegal until 1100 C.E. during the Almoravid Empire (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008:101).
Within the Wolof and some of the Serer states, two distinct political positions were held exclusively by women. These included the lingueer, the mother or mother’s sister of the king, and the awa, the first wife of the king. These women controlled some of the king’s land, provided food, maintained relationships with other nobles, and directed captive labor (Callaway and Creevey 1994:18-19). They were integral to the political system and had a decisive role in choosing future politicians (Barry 1998). Women continued to have considerable power after the introduction of Islam. The new religion intermingled with preexisting values and religious customs, leaving women with considerably more power than in other Islamic states of the time (Callaway and Creevey 1994:20).

The Senegambia region was the confluence of many major migratory paths of West Africa. It became the main access point for trade routes to penetrate into the interior empires (Barry 1998:4). The Senegambia region was also dependent on western Sudan and the trade routes through the Sahara until the 15th century when the first Europeans arrived (Barry 1998:3). As a central point of access for Europeans, the Senegambia region gained unprecedented significance that brought about influential transformations for the economy, politics and society (Barry 1998:35). During the 15th century, the region slowly started abandoning its dependence on western Sudan and the Sahara as its ties to the Atlantic Ocean trade steadily increased.

The Portuguese were the first to set up a trading system in the area around 1445, establishing the Senegalese coast as the primary port for West African trade routes. Slaving, along with trade in gold, ivory, and spices, began immediately. As a
result of the slave trade, the previous political states began to disintegrate, the most significant being the break of the powerful Wolof Empire. Until the end of the 16th century, the Atlantic trade of goods and slaves restructured the development of Senegal as all areas of life became dominated by this economic system. For example, the slave trade necessitated intense manhunts into the interior, which brought about inter-state violence, the militarization of regimes, and the advancement of militant Islam (Barry 1998:46).

With the rise of violence, many marabout, or Islamic holy men, began unifying the states in the region as a way to combat the negative effects of the slave trade (Barry 1998:46). As Barry notes, the opposition to the slave trade did not mean the abolishment of domestic or petty slavery, which had been practiced for centuries. Rather, the slave trade was greatly influenced by the revival of Islam as reaction of resistance against the rule of outsiders, combating the negative effects of the Trans-Atlantic trade system in general (Barry 1998:51).

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade intensified in the 17th century, and, in February of 1763, France gained official control over the key ports of the country, Gorée and St. Louis (Barry 1998). Although the French had fully established themselves in Dakar, Gorée, St. Louis and Rufisque, they did not expand their hold into the mainland until governor Louis Faidherbe’s conquests in the 1850s.

Distinctive from other gender narratives is the unusual role of select Senegalese women during the time of slaving. There were three types of slave owners: Senegalese male traders, female entrepreneurs called signares, and pileuses who prepared food. French officials and Senegalese women made temporary
alliances called *mariages à la mode* that helped the *signares* gain power. The French officials were not allowed to own slaves themselves, so used their ‘wives’ to continue the practice, giving their wives boats, trade goods, and property to manage (Klein 1993:199). Through these ‘marriages’, Senegalese women were able to maintain control over a small range of economic systems even after slavery withered away. The French officially abolished slavery in 1848; although slaving continued in Senegal until the very beginning of the 1900s (Klein 1993).

In 1959, the French colonies of Senegal and French Sudan merged. They were granted independence in 1960 as the Mali Federation. However, this union only lasted a few months. The Gambia and Senegal were joined in 1982, yet this alliance of the former French and British colonies dissolved in 1989 when Senegal gained its official independence (*CIA World Factbook* 2012). Since this date, Senegal has boasted one of the most stable governments on the African continent (*CIA World Factbook* 2012).

After independence in 1960, while many West African nations rallied behind nationalism, in Senegal the Islamic brotherhoods continued to thrive (Bop 2005:1105). Currently, Senegal is a democratic republic that uses French as its official language. Although the Senegalese government employs a secular constitution, the Tijaniyya and Murridiya Sufi brotherhoods hold considerable sway over most political parties, their leaders, and the brotherhood disciples (Bop 2005:1105). The influence of these brotherhoods is important to understand the continued meaning Islam has on modern Senegal.
Islam in Senegal

Islam has played an influential role in Senegalese history and continues to be relevant today. 94% of the population in Senegal is Muslim, 5% is Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and 1% practice exclusively traditional beliefs (CIA World Factbook 2012), yet some scholars argue that the majority of the population practices some sort of traditional belief concurrently with Islam or Christianity (Diakhaté 2009).

A large contributing factor to the development of Islam in Senegal is the Sufi order. The conversion of the Wolof people began in the 14th century, and yet Islam was not widely practiced until the start of the twentieth century with colonialism (Diop 1996:41). The Islam practiced in Senegal is distinct and focused on brotherhoods and marabout, while also accommodating traditional practices and beliefs, such as the rab cult (Diop 1996:46). Gilbert and Reynolds argue that Islamic Sufism was a powerful influence on the “Africanization” of Islam. Sufism takes a more mystical approach to Islam than Sunnism. For Sufis, it is possible “for individuals to experience God's love in this life” (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008:115). Attaining this kind of enlightenment involves intense study, prayer, and often, physical deprivation. Men who reach this state of enlightenment are referred to as Walis (friends of God) and are the founders of the brotherhoods (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008).

The missionaries of Islam that came into the Senegalese region were from the highly organized and hierarchical Sufi brotherhoods. The orthodox teachings of Islam were presented in more manageable ways to the average uneducated people
through the Sufi order (Creevey 1991) and were easily spread through trade and independent Sufi scholars (Gilbert and Reynolds 2008:102). “This leavening was accomplished by greater emphasis on magic, mysticism, and the power of the brotherhoods’ leader to intercede on behalf of his followers, who were blindly obedient to his commands and teachings” (Creevey 1991:358). The Sufi order is one of the key reasons the rab cult persists today.

Brotherhoods, or tariqas, are central components of Senegalese Islam. There are four main tariqas: The Tijaniyya, the Murridiyya, the Qadiriyya, and the Layenne (the smallest). Leaders, who are believed to have achieved union with God, founded these brotherhoods separately around the beginning of the twentieth century. The descendants of these spiritual leaders inherit baraka, or divine grace. The hierarchy of the brotherhoods is strict and built upon the caliph at the top, followed by the marabout. The marabout leads one branch of the brotherhood and is a descendant of either the founder or one of his close relatives. At the bottom are the disciples (Bop 2005). “The relationship between the religious leaders and his followers is one of devotion and strict obedience on the part of the disciple, and guidance, protection, an intercession on the part of the marabout” (Bop 2005:1104).

It is important to note, however, that the term ‘marabout’ in Senegal is also loosely applied to men (and rarely women) who use a combination of traditional medicine and traditional spiritual knowledge to counsel and heal people.

The hierarchy established by Islam was a part of the changing landscape during colonialism. Colonialism had a significant impact in shaping Senegalese Islam, and both Islam and the success of the colonial administration were
influenced by Senegalese brotherhoods. These brotherhoods took on social and political roles as opponents to colonial domination (Bop 2005:1103). The colonial conquest and civil wars of the 19th century were incredibly violent time periods. However, “charismatic brotherhood leaders stood up for the people and led them through this painful crisis” (Bop 2005:1105). Eventually, however, the French aligned themselves with the brotherhood marabout, pitting some against others in a divide and conquer tactic. The close relationship between marabout and political entities continued long after colonialism ended. “Postcolonial politics were dominated by a group of government politicians who carefully courted the Muslim leaders in the countryside to ensure their support and their help in organizing the rural population” (Creevey 1991:359). The brotherhood leaders’ continued wealth and power are rooted in this colonial context.

The brotherhood’s influence is still strong today. After independence in 1960, the new governing bodies continued to work closely with the brotherhoods for their mutual benefit. In rural areas, political parties use the brotherhood leaders to reach voting audiences and in return give the brotherhood leaders land, technology, and loans. Economically, brotherhood disciples are expected to support their leaders and then make decisions based upon their leaders’ desires. Socially, the brotherhoods proliferate both in rural and urban areas, and they have disciples in government administration, high schools and universities. These leaders even have their own media networks and are active internationally (Bop 2005). Finally, “brotherhood leaders have played an important role in alleviating feelings of humiliation and
oppression that flowed from colonization” (Bop 2005:1106). Interesting, the brotherhoods’ historic collaboration with the French is largely ignored (Bop 2005).

Although more recently there has been government support for secular reform, the success and infiltration of the brotherhoods in politics continues. For example, during Abou Diouf’s presidency from 1981 to 2000, the president attempted to take small steps to disengage government politics from Islam. However, Islam in Senegal was deepening and moving towards more orthodox ways of practicing, as aid from the Middle East supported the construction of new mosques and more standardized Quranic school systems. Women have been particularly sensitive to the increased desire for orthodoxy, but have not yet seen any drastic changes (Creevey 1991). Additionally, the large numbers of marabout in rural areas, who are often without any systematic training in the Quran or Arabic, are essential resources for local communities. Their continued importance will be demonstrated throughout the paper.

**Women in Senegal**

In her study of women’s status within the Sufi brotherhoods of Senegal, Bop (2005:1102) argues, “African women...are faced with a very dire situation marked by poverty, strong gender and class inequalities...”. Women have held various positions of power in Senegalese society throughout history, particularly in relation to Islam. These positions have variably been influenced by slavery, as described above, colonialism, and reinvigorated attempts to Islamicize Senegal. Islam has been one of the most influential factors shaping women’s status in society.
The scholars Creevey and Bop both argue that, within Senegal, men hold the most dominant positions in politics. Despite discourse on women’s empowerment in the 1970s, by 1985, women only formed 11 percent of the national legislature (Creevey 1991:352). However with the most recent elections in 2012, Senegal’s National Assembly is currently one of the most gender-balanced assemblies in the world, with women holding 43% of the seats and men 57% (World Bank 2012). Women receive substantially less schooling than men (Creevey 1991:349), with the literacy rate of women as a percentage of men at 63% from 2005-2010 (UNICEF 2012). At the village level, women are politically active within women’s groups, which offer a major system of support since they are almost completely excluded from formal governance (Of 14,000 villages in Senegal as of 2007, only three were headed by women (Social Institutions and Gender Index 2013)). These groups have a long history based in the matriarchal societies of the Wolof, Serer, and Lébou where women held significant political and social power (Bop 2005:1107). However today, these groups have little sway in, or access to, larger institutions and organizations (Creevey 1991:353).

Women’s economic status varies considerably based upon geography. In rural areas, women are able to use the income they receive because of a family economic system in which each adult member of the household maintains his or her own budget. Rural women often have private plots where they grow peanuts and other food crops (Creevey 1991:350). However, women rarely inherit land and therefore face many difficulties gaining economic equality with men. In urban settings, women are mostly relegated to the informal economy, selling in markets.
The most influential historical shifts that have led to changes in women’s societal status have been the spread of Islam and contact with the West through the slave trade and colonialism. The slave trade drastically altered local economies and changed values about traditional customs. This invasion destroyed the existing political and economic structures that were specifically the domains of women.

“Monetization of the economy, following the economic stimuli and the tax-gathering system instituted by colonists penetrated everywhere” (Creevey 1991:355).

Additionally, French values and attitudes towards women were incidentally brought into colonial law making and economics, leading to increased female marginalization. For example, the programs the French offered that were designed to improve women’s lives were “in the traditional roles that French officials had recognized for [women] —in health, sanitation, child care, and crafts” (Creevey 1991:357).

Although the rise of French power prompted rejection of the West through Islam, recent Islamic trends have played a specific influence on women’s status. Today, while women are not able to hold the same positions of power as men in society, this is the product of not a French colonial framework, but rather is a consequence of Islam’s long history in the region (Bop 2005:1107). For example, notions of baraka8 (divine grace) and purity impede women’s ability to access religious knowledge and positions of power within Islam. Additionally, Islam plays a

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8 Bop states that baraka is an, “ideological construction that legitimizes the maintenance and permanence of a group of persons at the head of the system and the exclusion of others who, by their spiritual qualities, might claim to possess such grace” (Bop 2005:1113).
central role in legal contexts, and local interpretations of Islam’s doctrines are quite conservative (Bop 2005:1102). Shari’a law deeply influences the Family Code, legitimizing women’s lower status within the family and accepting polygyny as common law. Under this code, the father is granted all parental authority; women are unable to take responsibility for their children (Social Institutions and Gender Index 2013). Additionally, although civil law is favorable to widows and daughters, allowing them the same rights of inheritance as sons, under Shari’a law women’s inheritance is limited from one eighth to one half of what the son inherits (Social Institutions and Gender Index 2013). State Shari’a law legalizes assumptions of inferiority of women. While Islamic doctrines do not advocate for these assumptions, interpretations of these doctrines claim women’s inferiority. In this way, “…the spread of Islam within all ethnic groups and…the colonization of Senegal and its aftermath, patriarchal Arabic and European values have eroded women’s social power” (Bop 2005:1107).

Despite the prevalence of Shari’a law, not all areas of life are limited for Senegalese women. For example, veils are rarely seen and women move around in the public sphere with ease. They express their opinions and are increasingly found in positions of government power (UNICEF 2012). While women do not have the same opportunities for advancement and power as men, they are able to assert agency through other avenues.

Beyond political and academic histories, the depth and breath of social histories, myths, and legends are immense in an African context. These social histories illuminate local understandings of the past and peoples’ place in the
present. The following section examines a specific myth that describes the origins of the Wolof people.

**Social Histories: the Wolof myth of origin**

Myths of origin can be enlightening windows through which to view an ethnic group. Benjamin Ray states that “the creation myth thus answers not only the speculative question of how the world came into being; it also answers the more practical question about nature and the purpose of human existence” (Ray 1976:29). By analyzing myths, it is possible to gain insight into deep questions of what it means to be Wolof in Senegal through local interpretations of history. Because of the close links between the Lébou and Wolof people, Wolof myths of origin can be a useful tool through which to analyze various aspects of Lébou life. The following myth is widely known throughout Senegal with only slight variation.

According to Wolof history, the Wolof people came into being with Njaajaan Njaay, the son of Abu-Bekri bin Amer⁹ who came from Arabia and brought Islam with him. Abu-Berki bin Amer brought a servant and wife with him and settled on the lands by the Senegal River. After his wife gave birth to the son Njaajaan Njaay, the father decided to return to Arabia. Before leaving he advised his wife that if he should not return, she should choose a new husband based upon his cleanliness.

Abu-Berki bin Amer left and died on the journey. Following her late husband’s advice, the wife chose to marry her husband’s servant, who was the most pure concerning his ablutions. Njaajaan Njaay was so angered that his mother would

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⁹ Or alternatively, Abu Derday.
remarry, and marry a servant, that he threw himself into the river, where he stayed for seven years.

During this time, he floated far downstream and only surfaced when he noticed a quarrel between children concerning the fish they had caught. He left the river and showed them how to tie up the fish each child had caught, therefore distinguishing whose fish was whose. There were no further disputes of ownership among the children. When the adults heard about this man who came out of the river and so wisely counseled the children, they schemed to catch him to have him as their ruler. They eventually trapped Njaajaan Njaay in their fishing nets and brought him to the village. He refused to say anything, until a clever young woman began to cook in a pot over a fire using only two stones, as an attempt to make Njaajaan Njaay speak. The pot kept slipping and spilling until finally he spoke and told her to use three stones. He realized he had spoken at this moment and finally agreed to speak to the village. They made him their king, the first king of the Jolof in the land of the Wolof. His stepbrother (from his mother's second marriage) became the first king of Waalo (Belcher 2005:433-435).

There are several important characteristics to note about this myth of origin. First, the king and leader of the Wolof people came from foreign origins, and it was this foreigner who was the bringer of wisdom and justice. The references to purification and the father’s desire to return to Arabia are reminiscent of aspects of Islam. Of the five pillars of Islam (the Islamic creed, daily prayers and ablutions, almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca), two of these, ritual purification and a pilgrimage to Mecca, appear in the myth. This indicates the
value of Islam in Wolof life and shows the futility in attempting to extricate rab cult beliefs from that of Islam.

The importance of water is also highlighted in this myth. Water plays a significant role for the Wolof fishermen people and it is also significant in the rab cult. Altars (or xamb) for rab connected to large cities and villages are often located on the coast. Libations are poured into the sea, as the grand rab are known to reside there. The water acts as a vessel for spiritual and powerful bodies. During the ndepp ceremony, seawater is poured over the individuals who have fallen into trance as a way of bringing them slowly back to the community’s reality.

Another important aspect of the myth is that women are given an unusual freedom, in the choice to remarry, although within the confines of the husband’s recommendations. The clever insight of the cooking woman who tricks Njaajaan Njaay illustrates female ingenuity, and the manipulation of men through a woman’s perceived weakness. Finally, through Njaajaan Njaay’s wisdom, we observe different ways to end conflict (fairness, innovation, and individual achievement).

Ray’s (1976) work emphasizes binaries, which help interpret myths. How is order made from disorder? In his view, the world oscillates between order and disorder, and creation myths, “posit an original situation against which the world develops. An opposition or division arises between order and disorder, divinity and humanity, sky and earth. The ‘problem’ of religion is to overcome this divine/human polarity through ritual action” (Ray 1976:32). Addressing the divine/human polarity is reflected in the rab cult as it is used to acknowledge the connections between humans and the spirit world. For example, the ndepp exorcism ceremony works as a
ritual space through which to reestablish balance between an upset in the spiritual world. Order is created from disorder. The creation myth illustrates how balance (using three cooking stones) and justice (dividing the caught fish fairly) are two values that resonate with Wolof culture. An example of this can be seen during the ndepp ceremony when balance is brought to individuals who, for some reason, have unbalanced relationships with their rab. This ceremony will be described in depth in Chapter 4.

The Wolof and Lébou people

The Wolof people are an ethnic group found in Mauritania, Senegal, and the Gambia. They make up 45% of the Senegalese population (about 2,700,000 of the estimated 5,850,000 Senegalese population) and are geographically centered on the Cap-Vert peninsula. According to the Ministère des Sénégalais de l'Extérieur, in 2003-2004 the number of Senegalese living abroad equaled 648,600 individuals, or 12.0% of the total resident population in 2004 (di Bartolomeo et al. 2010). The significance of this figure can be seen in the various ways the Lébou use the rab cult as a way to connect with the diaspora population. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

The earliest mention of the Wolof people in the literature appears in political descriptions of Wolof social organization, by Cada Mosto in 1455-57 (Gamble 1957:16). The Empire is associated with social upheavals and migration as a result of the fall of the Empire of Ghana around 1240 (Gamble 1957:16). The Wolof have remained numerically dominant in Senegal, with most Wolof living in city areas.
The Wolof language is generally considered the lingua franca in most informal and formal spheres (CIA World Factbook 2012).

The Wolof have one sub-group, the Lébou (Diop 1996; Gamble 1957; Nurul Mahdi 2007) that is made up of an estimated 180,000 people (the Joshua Project 2012). They share a common language (Wolof) and are fishermen by occupation. They are distinguished from other Wolof through their association with the Layenne brotherhood, matrilineal inheritance (Gamble 1957:94), and their dedication to the rab cult.

For the Lébou, matrilineal inheritance is one of the defining factors of their identity. The ways in which children’s identities are established is directly through the mother. For example, although children can live in their father’s village, they are always considered to be from their mother’s village. Names and rights are inherited maternally, and children and their mothers handle their own affairs and property without the intervention of their fathers (Gamble 1957:30-33). Additionally, the powers to manage rab are inherited through the mother’s side by daughters. Both of these characteristics are directly contrary to the primary ways other Senegalese ethnicities function.

According to Douglas (1969), matriliney flourishes in societies where economic flexibility is necessary (Douglas 1969). Matrilineal groups are able to bring in men from outside the formally prescribed lineage, thus remaining flexible. Because of this, “matriliney, by its ambiguities, gives scope to the enterprising individual to override ascribed roles” (Douglas 1969:130). This characteristic of matriliny is one
reason Lébou women are able to hold the highest positions of power within the rab cult.

According to Gamble (1957) and Nurul Mahdi (2007), the Lébou people became a separate entity after the revolt of the Wolof Cayor Empire between 1790 and 1810. The revolt was a violent secession from the Cayor king’s rule based upon his somewhat indifferent attitude towards the Lébou’s Quranic practices (Nurul Mahdi 2007). After this revolt, “les Lébous vécurent ainsi, jouissant d’une pleine autonomie dans la gestion de leurs affaires et de leur territoire, maîtres de leur destin pendant plus d’un demi-siècle (1790-1857), période riche de tensions internes et externes qui mirent en évidence l’héroïsme et la capacité des Lébous à se gouverner” (Nurul Mahdi 2007). Although the Lébou have since been reincorporated into Senegal, they remained a recognized theocratic kingdom (Nurul Mahdi 2007). Even as the Lébou have remained a distinct group, with the introduction of the Layenne brotherhood the Lébou have slowly lost their distinct political power.

Au total, la communauté lébou a progressivement perdu ce qui faisait l'essentiel de son originalité [...] La collectivité de Dakar constitue un pouvoir

10 The Lébou lived well, enjoying full autonomy in managing their businesses and their territory, masters of their destiny for more than half a century (1790-1857), a rich period of internal and external pressures that obviously illustrate the Lébou’s heroism and ability to govern themselves.

11 While this general history is the most common, Tadeusz Gotynski and Cheikh Anta Diop argue that the Lébou people of today’s Cap-Vert are descendants of the Lébou who lived in ancient Cyrenaica during the first millennium B.C., the eastern area of today’s Libya (Gostynski 1976:223). Based upon language similarities, rock carvings, and Egyptian writings, Gostynski details how the Lébou moved from Libya during the invasion of Persians, and migrated south. From their analysis, the ethnic group ‘Walaf’ likely had the same origins as the Lébou, and at some point in history the term ‘Wolof’ became more widely accepted (Gostynski 1976:230). Whatever the exact origins of the Lébou people, all scholars acknowledge their links with the Wolof people.
réel avec lequel doivent composer les jeux de la politique locale (Laborde 1995:67).  

Several things distinguish the Lébou people from the Wolof. Firstly, they are a matrilineal people, and while it is posited that the Wolof were also matrilineal at one point, they currently practice patrilineal inheritance (Gamble 1957:94). One unique distinction of the Lébou people is the Muslim brotherhood of the Layenne. The Layenne brotherhood is almost exclusively Lébou and its teachings are particular to this sect. Of the five pillars of Islam (the *shahabad* (Islamic creed), daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime), the Layenne teach that the pilgrimage to Mecca is not required (Gamble 1957:95). Additionally, the Layenne brotherhood is the only brotherhood that has an explicit base in the *Mahdi*\(^\text{13}\), and expresses nationalism (Laborde 1995:14).

Women have a unique role in the Layenne brotherhood. They are allowed to enter mosques (though they must remain separate from men) and are encouraged to pray on Fridays (Gamble 1957; Gemmeke 2009). The allowance to enter mosques is exceptional where women are generally denied access to mosques, especially before menopause. While this points to the importance of women in Lébou life, this view of women must be nuanced. Although Lébou women are integrated into religious ceremonies, great emphasis is placed on discipline for women. They are expected to be married, occupied with domestic tasks, dutiful, and conservatively dressed

\(^{12}\) In total, the Lebu community gradually lost the essentials that made it original[...]. The community of Dakar is a real power which must deal with the games of local politics.

\(^{13}\) In Sufi Islam, the *Mahdi* is the prophesized savior who will remain on earth for a period of time, ridding the world of evil, cruelty, and injustice before the Day of Resurrection.
In this way, similar to women’s status within Senegal at large, Lébou women have specific freedoms within a specified framework.

A focused historical grounding in some of the critical threads that create Senegalese history is necessary in order to fully explore current expressions of the rab cult. This chapter looks specifically at the development of Islam throughout Senegalese history and zooms in on the changing roles of women. Modern day Senegal is examined through the Wolof and the Lébou ethnic groups. All of these threads are critical as a foundation for understanding the rab cult. The following chapter discussed the cult in detail and illustrates how the cult continues to play a crucial role in Senegalese society.
CHAPTER 3:
Current Expressions of the Rab Cult

Khady is a large woman. She takes up most of the bench, swathed in soft fabric printed with purple flowers. We sit in a room together with three teen girls. The T.V. in the corner displays image after image of wrestling matches, music videos, and news stories. The girls are braiding each other’s hair in tight cornrows. The walls are Pepto Bismol pink and oppressive in the heat.

Sitting on the bench together, Khady begins to tell me how she speaks with rab. Abruptly though, she stops mid-sentence and stares hard out the window. I follow her gaze and see a withered beggar woman standing outside and mumbling incoherently. Her hands tremble as they stretch in through the window, begging for alms. Khady doesn’t move. Her eyes are calculating and intense. After what seems like forever, she turns away from the beggar woman and pointedly starts speaking to me again in a loud, overbearing voice.

Later that evening, Khady tells me that the beggar woman was possessed by a rab. “She resembled a human being, but it was not a human. Not totally a human. I did not respond because if you bother it, he can do something to you” she tells me gravely.

*   *   *
Rab spirits are everywhere, as evidenced by my experience with Khady. As a traditional African religion, the rab cult continues to exist, particularly for the Lébou. Rab are unique spirits that have specific ways of relating to human beings. The system of reciprocity that exists between the human and the spirit must be maintained for a peaceful life. Rab can cause problems that impact an individual’s mental and physical health. However they also have the ability to provide protection against other spirits.

Because nothing substantial has been written concerning the rab cult since the 1960s, one contribution of this study is to provide a thorough grounding in how the cult is experienced today. This chapter outlines current expressions of the rab cult, illustrating how the cult has remained dynamic. First I examine what rab are and describe the relationships they have with humans. Next, I investigate the roles rab continue to play in Senegalese society, using faru rab, or lover spirits, as an example. I conclude by looking at how the expressions of belief in rab are changing.

In order to understand the significance of rab currently, it is important to identify how the Senegalese speak about rab’s origins. The following section looks at different explanations for the appearance of rab and situates the belief system within a historical conceptualization of the belief. As mentioned in Chapter 2, stories of origin have the potential to illuminate specific aspects of cultures and societies. The following origin myths of rab are used to highlight such ideas.
Origins of rab: a Senegalese perspective

According to the Senegalese, rab originated with the beginning of the world and the birth of the first children. Zemplini and Rabain (1965) recount the following myth.

L’aïeule a mis au monde un enfant de sexe male ou femelle. Le placenta s’est transformé en serpent. Celui-ci s’est introduire dans le creux d’un arbre [...] Une calamite s’est abattue sur le village et le serpent a offert eau, fécondité, bonheur, chance en contrepartie de la nourriture rituelle. Les hommes ont accepté le pacte et le rab s’est attaché au lieu (Zemplini and Rabain 1965:340).

As this story illustrates, rab and humans were linked through relationships of exchange from the beginning of time. The myth shows the vibrant role rab have on human life; they offer protection but must also be cared for. As I will discuss shortly, the maintenance of the altars becomes central for harmony between the humans and the spirits.

According to Chase (2009), rab are revealed as having lived on the earth long before humans. In this myth, the trees in which the rab lived were cut down as human communities expanded, clearing land for cultivation. The rab were left to wander in the forests and the paths, finding new homes wherever they pleased. “After the trees were cut down, everywhere you traveled your chances of meeting a rab were great” (Ndoye, interviewed by Chase 2009:42). This myth highlights another aspect of the relationship between humans and rab. Because rab were disadvantaged by human action, they have reason to create conflicts for humans.

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14 The grandmother [of the earth] brought a child into the world, the sex unknown. The placenta transformed into a serpent and was put into the hollow of a tree [...] A catastrophe came to the village. The serpent offered water, fertility, happiness, and luck in exchange for ritual food offerings. The people accepted the pact, and the rab created an alliance with them.
These conflicts create tensions for both individuals and families who must deal with *rab*. Ultimately, these conflicts contribute to a cohesive Senegalese identity. Conflict works to create alliances between many types of relationships, in this case between the human world and the spirit world, and thus leads to the establishment of social order (Gluckman 1955), as will be demonstrated throughout the chapter. Finally, the wandering trait of *rab* is established in the myth. Evidenced by these myths, Senegalese, and more specifically the Lébou, have considered *rab* to be a significant part of their history from the very beginning.

**Kinds of rab**

Several different kinds of *rab* exist and each interacts with humans in a different way. *Grand rab*, *tuur*, and *rab errant* (wandering *rab*), are three kinds of *rab* that exist in a subtle hierarchy that dictates the degree to which the individual *rab* is invested with humans. *Grand rab* are the least likely to involve themselves directly with individual humans, while *rab errant* are the most likely. *Tuur* exist in the middle of this continuum.

**Grand Rab**

Each *grand rab* has a specific personality and way in which it interacts with humans. Most large villages, cities, and some neighborhoods have a *grand rab* that is known by name and has a specific sex (see Figure 1 below). Most of the *grand rab* shown below are female. One possible reason for this is that, just as women hold the highest positions of power in the *rab* cult, female *grand rab* are the highest in the
hierarchy of *rab*, mirroring the Lébou stratification of power. However, I was unable to find a source that commented on such a trend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Rab</em> Name</th>
<th>City/Neighborhood of Senegal</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luk Daour</td>
<td>Dakar</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mame Kumba Bang</td>
<td>Saint-Louis</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mame Kumba Castel</td>
<td>Gorée</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mame Kumba Lamb</td>
<td>Rufisque</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbay Diop</td>
<td>Diorbel</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mboose</td>
<td>Kaolak</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mame Diarré</td>
<td>Yoff</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madgejuenne</td>
<td>Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée, coastal areas</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uyoumouyata</td>
<td>Ouakam</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Table of *Grand Rab***

Generally, all *grand rab* are protectors of their respective geographic areas. Villages conduct annual *ndepp* ceremonies to honor their *grand rab* and ensure protection for the next year. For example, in the center of the neighborhood Ouakam, Uyoumouyata is honored each year. All of the *saltigué* (local neighborhood leaders) gather. The *ndeppkat* (priests and priestesses of the *rab* cult) lead the ceremony, sacrificing goats and cows over the course of several weeks. A wide variety of people attend, including journalists for newspapers and television stations. The *ndepp* ceremony will be described in more detail later in the paper.

Beyond the annual *ndepp*, the personalities of *grand rab* influence the interactions they have with humans. For example, Madgejuenne is a benevolent *rab*, known for giving good luck, money, and protection. However, she rarely interacts with humans. Ndaiye, an older man who was very familiar with the *rab* families and their characteristics described to me, “*les gens la cherche, mais ils la...*”
Contrastingly, Mame Diarré of Yoff often has relationships with humans. Because Mame Diarré has a vast family, it is easy to ‘meet’ one of her children. “Dans la famille, tu peut tomber sur un membre qui est gentil, qui est méchant, qui aime trop les femmes, ou même les hommes. Tous ça, ça existe. Souvent les maladies des rab, les rab qu’on rencontre, ils sont des rab de Mame Diarré parce-que ils sont partout” (Ndiaye 2011).

The grand rab Uyoumouyata is always malicious and the people who cross his path or the path of his rab children must quickly find ways to appease the spirit. “Il faut tout fait de lui satisfait. Si tu ne satisfis pas, ah! Là, tu as la malchance de n’est pas guérir” (Ndiaye 2011).

**Tuur**

Another kind of rab is called tuur. Tuur are rab that are linked to familial lineages, villages, animals, or geographic features (Zemplini 1965; Diop 1996). They have an alliance with these features and require offerings and careful tending in order for humans to obtain protection and favors from them. Tuur are sometimes considered familial ancestors (Diop 1996) because of the generations that must maintain the tuur’s xamb (altar). However, neither tuur nor rab were ever human beings and therefore should not be confused with ancestors. Rab live much longer

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15 *People look for her, but it is rare that they find her.*
16 *In the family [of rab], you can run into a member that is nice, that is mean, that likes women too much, or men too much. All this exists. Often the sicknesses of rab, the rab that you meet, they are the rab of Mame Diarré because they are everywhere.*
17 *You must do everything you can to satisfy him. If you don’t, ah! You will have the bad luck to not be healed.*
than humans\(^{18}\) and create spirit families of their own. Fatou Ndoye, a university student studying the *ndepp* for her thesis described the relationship between humans and *tuur*.

Le rab\(^{\ast}\) [meaning *tuur*] en général protège la famille contre les dangers de la vie, contre les mauvaises esprits. Contre…il ne protège contre des autres rab qui sont méchants. En retour, nous devrons les offrir les offrandes régulières. Les offrandes de lait, de naq, de sacrifices de coq, d'autre. Ça se passe chaque jeudi. On verse du lait. Chaque jeudi et lundi, et ça ne coute pas chère. Verser du lait, que subit les mauvais esprits quoi! (Ndoye 2012)\(^{19}\)

Other rab can become *tuur* when a *rab errant* who has been linked to a family for several generations already demands a ceremony (an *ndepp* or a *tuuru*) to be conducted in his or her honor. The culmination of these ceremonies is when the *xamb* is built. After this moment, the spirit is now a *tuur* and the *xamb* must be tended consistently. Because of the dedication and time length of the alliance between the *rab errant* and the family, it is very difficult for *rab errant* to be “elevated” by *ndeppkat* to the level of *tuur* (Laborde 1995:52). The differences between *rab* and *tuur* are very specific and subtle. Generally only those with expert knowledge of the *rab* cult are able to differentiate the two.

**Rab errant**

*Rab errant* are the final type of *rab* and the most likely to cause disruption in an individual’s life. ‘Wandering’ *rab* are most commonly referred to simply as *rab*,

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\(^{18}\) Neither the literature nor my own fieldwork reveal whether or not *rab* die, or are born. Nor is it known how long *rab* live. I have only learned that they live at least several hundred years.

\(^{19}\) *Rab* [meaning *tuur*] en général protège les familles contre les dangers de la vie, contre les mauvaises esprits. Contre...ils protègent contre les autres rab qui sont méchants. En retour, nous devrons les offrir les offrandes régulières. Les offrandes de lait, de naq, de sacrifices de coq, d'autre. Ça se passe chaque jeudi. On verse du lait. Chaque jeudi et lundi, et ça ne coute pas chère. Verser du lait, que subit les mauvais esprits quoi! (Ndoye 2012)
and, in the rest of the paper, I will refer to them as such because they are rarely distinguished. However, their behaviors are different from that of grand rab and tuur. Rab errant are not linked to xamb, to a geographic location, or to a family. They wander the earth and, when provoked, cause problems for humans. The specific problems they cause will be discussed later in the paper.

I was told in nearly every interview I conducted, “Everyone has a rab. Even you, you have a rab.” According to the rab cult, every human being has the potential to be linked to a rab errant. For most people, their rab is ‘far’ from them, and therefore there is little to no interaction between them. “Il n’y a pas une relation entre toi et le rab encore. Tu ne le connais pas. Il ne te connaît pas,” stated Bane Wade, a male custodian working at the University. While an individual’s rab is considered a rab errant, this rab can become a tuur if she continually causes problems for a person, and therefore requires a tuuru or ndepp ceremony to be appeased, as discussed earlier. Rab errant cause the most problems for humans and offer few (if any) reciprocal benefits.

There are specific ways to gain the attention of a rab errant. These include dressing too sexily (for women), sleeping nude, crossing a rab’s path without paying respect, and neglecting to take the proper precautionary measures (which involve wearing gris-gris, saying protective verses, avoiding wandering in the streets during dusk and at night, and using maraboutage, a sort of witchcraft). The list above consists of personal actions that can grab a rab’s attention; however, another person

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20 There isn’t a relationship between you and the rab yet. You don’t know him. He doesn’t know you.
can send a malicious rab to attack individuals. Most relationships between individuals and rab errant are not established by choice.

Gender becomes an interesting facet of the rab cult when considering the above ways to attract a rab. A specific type of rab errant, called a lover spirit or faru rab, is the most typical type of rab to cause problems. In this case, these spirits cause problems primarily for women. During my fieldwork, everyone made it very clear to me that, if a woman dressed in a revealing way she was asking for the attention of a rab. “Ce sont les femmes qui sont malade plus souvent. Rarement ce sont les hommes. Je ne sais pas pourquoi. Peut-être c'est à cause des habilles, qui ne sont pas, des simples pour nous,” Ndoye described.21 Men have no such behavioral guidelines of which I am aware. While rab could be viewed as only limiting to women, women use the cult in creative ways as a complementary domain of social power.

**Relationships of exchange**

According to Zemplini and Rabain (1965), there are seven types of exchanges that link rab and humans. Three of these links describe rab’s involvement with children, which usually result in intense personality disorders, or early death from sickness. They include ‘complete identity’ in which the child is born with a severe illness or mental disability (Zemplini 1965:311), the child nit ku bon (possessed child), and the child diviner. During my fieldwork, I did not encounter any of these

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21 It’s women that are sick most often. Rarely is men. I don’t know why. Maybe because of clothing, that aren’t, simple for us.
links to children; therefore, I leave that study up to someone else. The four other links, however, I found to be particularly relevant.

The most common link is “surveillance protectrice et imperceptible”, in which a spirit is linked to a matrilineal lineage and thus to the individuals of the lineage, exemplifying the relationship between families and their tuur. These relationships are generally balanced and require very little involvement from the tuur, the family, or the individuals (Zemplini and Rabain 340-341:1965). In these cases, even family members who do not tend to their tuur can benefit from the protection of the relationship because of rituals that ensure protection for the entire family. These rituals includes regular offerings and sacrifices given in the xamb in the form of millet, cola nuts, animal blood, curdled milk, etc. in exchange for good health, happiness and protection.

A second link is sickness and possession. The rab will have been dormant until the moment it penetrates the individual’s body. The catalyst for this penetration is often dissatisfaction with the actions of the human individual, caused either by neglect of the family xamb, or careless behavior. This link concerns both tuur and rab errant in this respect. The rab’s goal is to obtain an alliance with the human. Even though the rab inhabits the person, the individual’s identity remains separate from that of the rab (Zemplini 1966:312). This person, called ku rab japp (Zemplini and Raban 1965:341), will act completely crazy. “Tu insultes les gens. Tu frappes les gens. Tu déshabilles. Tu marches nu. Tu fais comme un fou, hein?!”
(Wade 2011). The only way to rid the body of the rab is through an ndepp or tuuru ceremony (Zemplini and Rabain 1965:341). In this case, the relationship established with the rab is the most demanding and requires the ku rab japp to create a xamb that he will tend to regularly, or risk further problems caused by the rab.

Another link, “modus vivendi” exists between the individual and the rab, which is founded on a circuit of exchange that is strict and individual (Zemplini and Rabain 1965:341). While this is similar to the relationship families have with tuur, “modus vivendi” occurs only with individuals, rather than lineages, and, therefore, concerns rab errant. Once the rab targets the human, she must make weekly offerings, sacrifices, or libations to remain within the rab’s goodwill. Relationships with lover spirits are examples of this. If this exchange is neglected, additional ceremonies must be conducted, including tuuru and ndepp, in order to reconcile the relationship. For example, I attended a tuuru ceremony of an elderly man who hadn’t tended his xamb for nearly forty years. He had gotten very sick, and, although he tried to be healed by modern medicine in Senegal and in Italy (where one of his children lived), they found nothing wrong with him. After seven months of various unsuccessful treatments, he finally consulted La Grande Mère. She realized that, because he had neglected his xamb, his canary (pottery vessel that houses the remains of sacrifices given to the rab) was broken. I attended the tuuru ceremony that was conducted to remake the canary in an attempt to heal him. The success of

\[22\] You insult people. You hit people. You take off your clothes. You walk around nude. You act like a mad man, eh?!
the ceremony would be determined in the weeks that followed, evidenced by his either deteriorating or improving health.

The last link between humans and *rab* is called “contrôle et utilization.” In this relationship, the *rab* can be controlled and dominated by the powers of specific individuals called *borom-rab*. These individuals include *guérisseurs* (healers), *saltigué* (male neighborhood leaders), *ndeppkat*, marabout, and *voyantes* (diviners), all people with the ability to use *rab* for their own purposes. This sort of sorcery can be achieved through feigned humility and flattering words (*jat* for magic words and *laya* for Quranic words) or through force (Zemplini and Rabain 1965:341). However, forcing a *rab* to do anything is exceedingly rare, and I never encountered an example of this type of relationship in my research. The absence of the “contrôle et utilisation” relationship is indicative of the power *rab* hold over humans and the ways they dictate human lives. Additionally, these relationships of power are significant because they give certain individuals status within the cult based upon their ability to talk with, manage, and otherwise utilize *rab* to the benefit of their clients.

**Maintaining the Xamb**

An essential element in understanding *rab* is the *xamb*, or altar. The physical site of the *xamb* is the location where most rituals, offerings and sacrifices take place. As mentioned above, failure to maintain these locations results in severe consequences. The physical location of the *xamb* acts as a link between the spirit world and the human world. Because *xamb* are material, their physical presence demands attention in a way invisible spirits do not. *Xamb* that are built for an
entire village are built in public places and are constant reminders of the spirit world.

Aida took me to the xamb of her neighborhood. It was a large enclosed space built from cinderblocks with a massive tree inside, towering over the walls. It stood on the outskirts of the neighborhood next to the garbage dump. Although people walked past the xamb everyday, Aida became visibly anxious when we approached the area. She wanted me to look over walls but watched nervously around the corners to make sure no one came while I was looking. “It’s because you might take videos and send them someplace,” she said. “That’s why people get worried about white people watching the ndepp”. 23

Xamb are key elements in maintaining healthy relationships with rab. They can be connected to tuur of familial lineages, or to the grand rab of a village. An entire extended family can share one xamb, or smaller family units can have their own xamb. While grand rab have large territories and areas to roam, tuur are based at particular xamb, which are tended by family individuals. No one is allowed to enter these walled sections of the compound unless given express permission by the xamb’s tender.

The tuur chooses which individual of the family or village will tend to the xamb. In my research, it was typically the eldest female of the household who was the primary tender, but the tender could be anyone. “Il peut même choisir une

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23 Many involved with the cult share her worries, and although the only representations of the ndepp that I have seen have been documentaries, I wonder if these are not problematic in their own ways.
personne le moins âgé de la famille” (Ndoye 2012). This relationship exemplifies Zemplini’s “surveillance protectrice et imperceptible.”

I had the opportunity to visit the familial xamb of the head priestess and her extended family. It was large walled section of land behind the compound filled with pottery canaries and small stone pillars. I was invited into her family’s xamb after making a ‘donation’ and sending my prayers into a container of lait-caillé, or sour milk. We entered the xamb together and Ali pointed out canaries that were for specific rab, or for specific people. One was for a French woman who led trance-dances in France. La Grande Mère spooned the sour milk over canaries, muttering as she walked around. She was giving offerings for me to Mame Kumba Lamb, the grande rab of Rufisque. Before we left the xamb, we all tasted the lait-caillé in a fashion similar to the ways the community eats the sacrificial animal after an ndepp.

The xamb have such a substantial presence that even those who do not practice rituals associated with rab believe in the power of the xamb. For example, the objects within the xamb have a special significance. The xamb in Wade’s the home is visited by people who don’t necessarily believe in rab.

Même ceux qui n’ont pas le rab peuvent se laver avec. Pour se protéger...Si on y croit, même si on n’a pas de rab on peut venir s’y tremper les mains et se les passer sur le corps pour se protéger éventuellement [...] Souvent les gens, quand on les informe que ceci est l’eau des xamb, refusent de l’utiliser. Mais une fois qu’on tombe malade, on ne la rejette plus (Wade 2011).

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24 It could even choose the youngest person in the family.

25 Even those that don’t have a rab can wash with [the water]. To protect themselves...If you believe in it, even if you don’t have a rab, you can come and dip your hands and pass them over your body to protect yourself. Often people, when you tell them water is in the xamb, they refuse to use it. But as soon as they fall sick, they won’t reject it anymore.
Although not all Lébou individuals believe in the cult, the cult is an “institution of proved effectiveness” (van Binsbergen 2004) and therefore most people are not opposed to using the cult to assuage problems they have. The university student Fatou Ndoye described to me how she became a believer in the cult:


This experience eventually pushed her to write her thesis about the ndepp ceremony.

Grand rab have xamb in known locations. In Dakar, there are two locations where offerings are given to determine whether an ndepp ceremony will be successful. Other key xamb include Sumpegga of Ouakam and the beaches outside of Rufisque. An annual ndepp takes place at each of these xamb. The annual ndepp in Rufisque is a very important affair. For the male photographer Moustapha Ndour the annuel ndepp is a significant event that he documents each year.

Toute la population y va avec ces ndeppkat y passe la journée [...] pour faire plaisir au rab pour qu’il continue à protéger la ville et les populations de tout ce qu’il peut y avoir comme calamités ou catastrophes. Ils font donc ces sacrifices pour que l’esprit continue à bien veiller sur la ville et les populations.

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26 I had to take my exam class again. I didn’t know why, sometimes I was in class but I was lost. I couldn’t even understand the explanations of the professor. I didn’t know, I couldn’t even explain it. Sometimes I became absent. I didn’t know. But finally, when I went to visit a marabout he affirmed that I must go to the house of my ancestral spirits [tuur], and bizarrely everything changed. Mm hm.

27 All the population goes here with the ndeppkat and they spend the day there [...] to give pleasure to the rab so they continue to protect the village and the population from
Other xamb have different functions. The xamb of tuur are built and maintained so the tuur will continue to protect the family. Xamb are also built when someone falls sick to a rab errant and function as physical representations of the link between humans and spirits. These altars will be maintained indefinitely and the responsibilities of maintaining them are passed down from family member to family member.

Individual families can also have a xamb when one of their family members has been through an ndepp ceremony. Once the ceremony is finished, all of the objects used in the ceremony to heal the sick person will be placed in the xamb within an individual canary. The family must continue to tend the xamb from this point on. These objects include “des cornes de bouf, beaucoup de trucs mystiques […] des têtes d’animal, des pierres” (Wade 2011). The rab visit the xamb on Thursdays, and, for this reason, every week, water and curdled milk must be left there. Because the rab are in the xamb on Thursdays, ndepp ceremonies cannot take place during these days.

Ndour the photographer related a story of a woman who moved to Côte d’Ivoire and got very sick because she stopped making offerings in the family xamb. She became so unmanageably violent and unresponsive to communication her family had to restrain her with a strait jacket. To her family, it was clear she had angered the family tuur. The spirit was making her insane, so they brought her back to the family xamb in Rufisque, where the tuur resided. After a successful everything it can, like calamities or catastrophes. They make sacrifices so the spirit continues to watch over the village and the population.

28 …horns of cows, lots of mystical things […], the heads of animals, stones
ndepp ceremony, she returned to Côte d'Ivoire but continued to send money to her family in Rufisque to buy goats, chickens, milk, millet, or whatever else the tuur required to put into the xamb.

Senegalese family members depend on each other in order to survive. In this way, obligations to the xamb are a way to maintain family linkages, despite distance. Married couples may live in the husband's family's house their entire lives, and every individual is expected to contribute to the household. With new migration trends that draw people far away from their original homes, the xamb is one way these family members are obligated to continue to contribute to the household, despite geographic distance. The dedication of Senegalese individuals in the diaspora to the cult is indicative of its the enduring nature.

As Dakar continues to develop, the locations of xamb become formative in determining how this growth occurs. For example, before a building is constructed, an ndeppkat or marabout will often be invited to assure the contractor that a xamb did not previously occupy the site. As Dakar becomes more cosmopolitan, “on détruit ces lieus [xamb] pour construire des bâtiments, des routes. Finalement les djinns qui habitent dans ces lieus sont furieux a l'intérieur de la maison” (Ndoye 2012).29 In November 2011, 170 villas burned in the village of Saly outside of Mbour. It was not the first fire in the vicinity and several local news sources suggested the fires were cause by spirits who were angered by the buildings on their living space.

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29 They destroy these places [xamb] to construct buildings, roads. Finally, the djinn that live in these places are furious inside the house.
Xamb are critical elements of the rab cult. They act as a physical domain for the spirits, demanding attention by virtue of their tangible presence and the powerful spirits that inhabit them. However, not all rab are linked with a xamb, and it is these rab that have the most potential to cause harm. The following section looks specifically at the lover spirits and uses them as an example of how the network of healers in the rab cult functions.

The Problem of the Lover Spirit

Rab, as I have argued, play a crucial role in Lébou society. The above section detailed how dealing with rab creates obligations that must be carried out in order to maintain a peaceful life. Through the necessary maintenance of the xamb, rab are kept appeased. When the xamb of tuur and grand rab are not maintained properly, or when the behavioral guidelines are not followed, rab can become anywhere from a nuisance to a life-threat. Rab-errant need even less provocation before attacking humans. While all types of rab can cause problems, this section looks specifically at faru rab and coro rab, types of rab errant that are often cited as the most troublesome spirits.

By looking closely at these rab amants (lover spirits) (Sow 2009:204), we see an example of the different problems rab can cause, identify the different people who treat these issues, and see the different kinds of treatment employed. I will demonstrate how an entire system of consultation and healing has arisen as a result of the difficulties caused by rab. The conflicts caused by rab have wider repercussions for Senegalese society. Gluckman argues, “Conflicts are a part of social life and custom appears to exacerbate these conflicts, but in doing so custom
also restrains the conflicts from destroying the wider social order” (Gluckman 1955:1). I will show in the following section that the conflicts rab cause can be viewed as social controls that contribute towards a larger unity.

While coro rab are the female equivalent of faru rab, I did not encounter them in my field work or secondary research. All of my informants and most of the literature speak solely about faru rab. However, a conference held in 2005 at Université Cheikh Anta Diop discussed the existence of both faru rab and coro rab, therefore confirming the existence of coro rab. This discrepancy is indicative of the unbalanced way in which women are more often afflicted by rab than men.

Faru rab (boyfriend spirits) and coro rab (girlfriend spirits) are rab errant that have fallen in love with human beings. Although these rab can fall in love with anyone, faru rab are generally attracted to women who wear revealing clothing. For this reason, women and girls are advised to dress conservatively at all times, even whilst sleeping. However, following these guidelines is not necessarily easy. As a young Wolof woman explained to me,

You know the women these days, we don't know how to dress ourselves in boubous.\textsuperscript{30} Even men can see you a little bit, because you made yourself a little sexy. You understand? If you wear clothes like this (motions above the knee and shakes her head) Men that see you in the street, they can love you! If you dress sexy, you won't be with your boyfriend any longer. Now it's the case of faru rab. Often people dress like that (Naboo 2012).

There are many different signs that indicate the presence of a faru rab. Aida listed the various symptoms women exhibit when troubled by a lover spirit:

\textsuperscript{30} A traditional style of clothing that is generally loose and covers all of the body except the arms and head.
You will always have problems with boyfriends, husbands. On Fridays and Saturdays you won’t be able to talk to people. You are always calm. If you are pregnant, you will miscarry. If you are married, you will get divorced or [your husband] will die. He [the rab] can make you do things you wouldn’t do normally.

Strange behavior towards men, sexual dreams, infertility, and a strange, bad odor that won’t go away are other symptoms women experience when having a faru rab.

One young university woman, Laye Fatou, told a story of her dormitory neighbor.

She [my neighbor] was so beautiful she only had to leave the house to make everyone start talking. Well, her boyfriend came over one day and she said, ‘I’m coming, just watch T.V.’ and she left, boiled water, and came back and threw it on him. Just like that! She had a jealous faru rab (Fatou 2012).

In the online forum on the website Senegalaisement.com, one patron posts, “salut à tous. j’ai 32 ans bientôt 33 ni mari , ni travail on m’a dit que c'est un farou rab très mauvais qui le fait. J'ai besoin de votre aide si vous connaissait des personnes qui peuvent m'aider s’il vous plait je suis très fatiguée AIDEZ-MOI SVP” (Feuz 2010).31

There are twenty-eight posts that follow this entry, the majority of which counsel the author to work hard to find what he wants and if the situation persists, find a marabout.

Laye Fatou, the young woman who attends the university, was plagued by a faru rab when she was a young teen. She went to visit a marabout after a year of not being able to speak with men and being plagued by troubling dreams where her faru rab had a sexual relationship with her, “sometimes as my brother, a friend, my father”. She explained, “[The marabout] told me I picked it up at the beach, because there you go all nude”. The marabout prescribed months of taking sacred baths in

31 Hello to all. I am 32 soon to be 33, have no husband or work they tell me that it’s a very bad faru rab that’s doing it. I need your help if you know some people that can help me please I am so tired HELP ME PLEASE
Le Bois Sacré to cleanse her of the spirit, in addition to making offerings and sacrificing two chickens. These rituals were aimed at cutting off the relationship between Laye Fatou and her *rab*, by convincing the *rab* to leave her alone. These rituals took over Laye Fatou's life for close to a year. “I didn’t even go to school I was too busy with him [the *faru rab*]”. Many years have passed since she was last bothered by the *rab*, but she makes sure to dress conservatively (though very fashionably, in skinny jeans, big sunglasses, and a t-shirt covered in rhinestones).

Laye Fatou’s experience highlights an important element of understanding *rab*, the ways to deal with unwanted behavior and solve problems caused by *rab*. As Laye Fatou described, she visited a marabout. Marabout, *guérisseurs* (healers), *voyants* (diviners), *ndéppkat* (priestesses), *salitgué* (male village leaders), and often Western-trained doctors, are the primary people a ‘sick’ person will visit to consult about a problem. In general, a person experiencing unwanted symptoms will use divination as a first step towards determining the extent of the problem. Marabout, *voyants*, *ndéppkat*, and *salitgué* often all have the ability to divine and are consulted first. *Voyants* deal specifically with divination. Depending on the diagnosis, the individual may visit a Western doctor (for explicitly physical problems). For example, in a study conducted by Dara Seybold, her informant Haby explains,

[...] for the past three years, I have been trying to get pregnant. I have gone to many modern doctors. They have given me medication but it has caused abdominal pain. The doctors say that I can have a baby. They found nothing wrong. I have also gone to fifteen healers. They gave me plants with which to drink and bathe, and *gris-gris*. You have seen my basket of *gris-gris*. It is full and I have no child. I have tried everything, but I will still keep trying (Seybold 2002:542).
At the same time, the other healers listed above are usually consulted either in concert with or in opposition to, Western medicine. Marabout are the most commonly consulted. They use divination to speak with rab to determine the problem (rab-related or otherwise), and then prescribe various methods of healing. These can include different types of baths (with a mixture of specially prepared waters, or smoke), making gris-gris (amulets), using holy water, visiting sacred locations (e.g. Le Bois Sacré), using Quranic verses or other types of language, making offerings to rab, mosques, neighborhood beggars or children, or using various plants and herbs (Seybold 2002, Sow 2009, Gemmeke 2009). These techniques differ based on the marabout’s level of involvement in Islam, but are common for all of the practitioners above. The most extreme cases of rab related illnesses are relegated to ndeppkat who are the most powerful healers concerning rab.

The healers listed above utilize many different methods for targeting the problem-causing rab. These methods are determined by the rab’s specific preferences and dislikes, but also through common knowledge of wider trends within the spirit world. The marabout consulted Laye Fatou’s faru rab often to figure out what he wanted in exchange for leaving her alone. For example, Laye Fatou often wore red and placed red things around her bed because “rab don’t like the color red”. Indeed, Sow posits that, “la symbolique du rouge exprime le paradoxe de l’entrelacs de la vie et de la mort sous toutes ses formes” (Sow
2009:323). Rab find the ambiguity surrounding this color intolerable.

The more jealous and malicious the rab, the more difficult it is to persuade it to leave the person. If initial methods don’t work, a final solution is either a tuuru or an ndepp ceremony, conducted by an ndeppkat. The rab are entertained by drumming, dancing, and singing, and fed with sacrifices (chickens, roosters, goats, sheep, or cows) and coerced into leaving the person.

Faru rab are common spirits that many Lébou women have dealt with during their lives. Although the belief system of the rab cult is changing, as I will demonstrate in the following section, faru rab remain one of the most salient and difficult spirits that affect women’s lived experience. By examining some of the ways this belief system is changing, it is possible to see the degree to which rab play crucial roles in Senegalese society.

**The Changing, Yet Constant Rab**

Rab have been around for as long as anyone can remember. However, the rab cult is not static. This section looks at some of the ways the rab cult has remained dynamic. Despite the drastic changes of the modern era, the rab cult has remained important for Lébou women. Like the possession cult of the Zambian Tonga, the rab cult, “mirror[s] the changing interests and desires of those who succumb to possession. These ambitions and longings are no longer static, if they ever truly were, and thus cannot be completely contained or explained in the repetitive idiom of ritual rebellion. Equally, the changing character and imagery of the possessing

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32 The symbolism of the color red expresses the paradox of the intertwining of life and death in all its forms.
spirits mirrors changing circumstances” (Lewis 1986:64).

Within recent years, migration out of Senegal has become increasingly more common. In 2012 it was estimated that nearly 2 of every 1,000 Senegalese lived abroad (CIA World Factbook 2012). While this is not a particularly large number (in the United States, 3.82/1,000 Americans live outside the U.S.), the impact of the Senegalese diaspora directly affects Lébou families and the ways they interact with rab. For example, living abroad does not exempt individuals from the duties of the cult.

Si un membre de notre famille habite aux États-Unis, et le rab le choisit, il devrait toute suite offre le maximum possible pour revenir. Mais s’il pense de rester là-bas, il aura des problèmes, soit des difficultés au niveau de son travaille, de sa santé, de sa famille. Il est oblige de revenir (Ndoye 2012).

In this situation, the rab has persuasive power over individuals. This system of exchange becomes crucial for maintaining health, financial stability, and safety.

While some Senegalese are required to return to Senegal because of conflicts with the spirits (such as the woman mentioned earlier from Côte d’Ivoire), others request a visit from an ndeppkat. La Grande Mère spoke about a time when she traveled to the United States in order to hold ndepp ceremonies for Senegalese immigrants. Sometimes these ceremonies were performed at the request of a sick individual, but other ndepp ceremonies were conducted to honor familial tuur or grand rab. In this way, Senegalese in the diaspora remain connected to the cult and to their families, and ndeppkat are flexible to the demands of those that need their

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33 If a member of your family lives in the United States, and the rab chooses him, it becomes necessary to do maximum possible return right away. But if he thinks of staying there, he will have problems. These could be problems at the level of work, of health, of the family. He is obligated to return.
services. Despite the migration of Senegalese to other countries, the cult remains a critical link between the diaspora and Senegal.

As of result of the diaspora, new opportunities and challenges present themselves. Specifically, tensions have developed between attempts to gain legitimacy within a wider international audience and fear of those who would take the cult and use it improperly in other contexts. Months after my return to the United States, Ali called me asking if I would arrange visas for them to come to the United States. La Grande Mère wanted to do an educational version of the ndepp at universities, as well as perform the annual ndepp for some of her Senegalese-American patients. In this case, the ndeppkat desired for the ceremony to be understood widely. At the same time, when I attended ndepp ceremonies, I was told not to film or take photos because the ndeppkat were worried I would post them on YouTube and let others learn their secrets. Both the diaspora and increased access to media has brought about these fears of improper use. In this way, new technology has a duel impact on traditional belief systems. Van Binsbergen states, “recent technologies make it possible for local African religious and artistic expressions to assume a new global and commodified format; this offers them a new lease of life albeit that in the process they have become greatly transformed, shedding much of their original local symbolic frame of reference” (van Binsbergen 2004:88).

Access to media is one marker of modern society, and Senegal is no different. Televisions are one of the most common household items in Dakar. Senegalese T.V. stations that broadcast music videos, politics, sitcoms, etc. are very popular. One common event that is broadcast is the annual ndepp. Other ceremonies such as the
xoy (a large annual divination ceremony) and smaller divination rituals are also filmed. Occasionally, diviners will have live consultations that air throughout Senegal. Viewers can call or text the station to speak to the diviners on air.

*Rab* are often discussed in newspapers. A recent example of this can be seen concerning the villa fires in Saly. Three newspapers mentioned that the fire could have been caused by *rab*. “Avec la recrudescence des incendies, on se pose même la question de savoir si le lieu n’est pas habité par des *djínns*” (Badara 2011). Advertisements for divination (both Muslim and secular versions) are very common. “**VOYANCE: Voyance sur votre – avenir, vie professionnelle, travail TEL. xxx EMAIL. xxxx**” is one example of such advertisements. These cases illustrate how *rab* specifically and the spirit world more generally are present in ongoing conversations of popular media as common realities. Although the *rab* cult is most relevant for the Lébou people, its presence in the media means it is reaching a much larger audience.

Islam and the *rab* cult are used to oppose certain aspects of Western culture, similar to how Islam was used against French colonial culture. For example, Western clothing for women is generally considered lewd, and by choosing to wear anything revealing or ‘sexy’, women acknowledge the high likelihood of attracting a *rab*. This was one of the first things people mentioned to me when discussing *rab*. Although Senegalese women do not wear the veil, they are meticulous about covering their legs and torsos. These areas are considered particularly arousing and

34 With the increase in fires, we even pose the question of whether the place is inhabited by *djinn*.  
35 DIVINATION: Divination for your – future, professional life, work
even in rural areas women are fully clothed. Boddy posits that, “...possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies whose abrasions are deeply, but not exclusively, held by women” (Boddy 1994:419). In this way, the cult works to critique Western fashion and thus wider identities associated with the West. Islam also encourages dressing conservatively; thus this precaution fits into most modes of Senegalese life.

Western medicine has also impacted the cult that requires adjustments by those who practice. Many Senegalese with the financial means will visit a doctor of Western medicine at some point in their sickness. Western medicine is considered effective at treating some physical ailments but is unable to treat sicknesses caused by the spirit world. With the more ambiguous illnesses\(^\text{36}\) of the spirit world where the cause is initially unclear, individuals often consult Western doctors in concert with traditional healers. *Ndeppkat* and other healers that deal with *rab* continue to have a significant role in the health of the community. However, people consult *ndeppkat* as a last resort because dealing with *rab* often requires lengthy financial and emotional commitments. Because patients will have dispensed a large amount of resources on diviners and at hospitals, the *ndeppkat* are faced with the challenge of asking for more contributions.

They come to your house, you explain to them. For example, 'voila, you must make a sacrifice of a cow, a ceremony of two days or three days' and they say 'voila, I spent it all at the hospital. I don't have anything else' and that is a

\(^{36}\) The concept of illness for Senegalese extends beyond the physical body and encompasses the whole lifestyle of a person. For example, “in Senegal, there has historically been little differentiation between illness and affliction. Being healthy is the “good life,” just as having good relations with others is the “good life” (Seybold 2002:546). For this reason, afflictions such as infertility can be remedied by therapeutic treatments.
true difficulty.... So it's [La Grande Mère] that has to deal with all of that, to pay and find everything (Dieng 2012).

Western medicine becomes another treatment path that creates additional competition for patients’ funds.37

Another aspect that illustrates the rab cult’s dynamic nature is the syncretic position it has with Islam. It is nearly impossible to disentangle Islam from the rab cult. One of the clearest examples of this syncretism is that rab are often confused with the Islamic spirits, djinn. As discussed in Chapter 1, this confusion highlights the long historical impact Islam has had within Senegal. My own informants had difficulty distinguishing the two spirits. Only those who had had extensive training with the Quran could articulate the differences between the spirits;

C’est comme tu dis l’être humain. Tu dis le français, le Sénégalaise, les Africain […] ils sont tout les êtres humains […] les rab et djinn sont comme ça […] Les djinn, ils circulent. Ils ont leur liberté. Ils parlent. Le rab c’est un djinn qu’on maitrise. Il entre dans la personne […] [Si] tu le maitrise, il est ton protecteur. Il va te protéger et toi aussi, tu lui donnes (Dieng 2011).38

37 Interestingly, outside of monetary conflicts, Western medicine is widely accepted by ndeppkat and the Lébou. Le Centre Malango in Fatick is an example of more recent attempts to integrate the variety of medicinal practices in Senegal. Malango employs Western trained doctors, traditional herbalists, marabout, guerisseurs, voyants, and other healers who deal with different types of spirits. I attended the annual xoy divination ceremony that is common tradition for the ethnic group Serer’s healers, saltigué. The saltigué had invited all of the ndeppkat of the region to attend and dance at the ceremony as a sign of respect for their healing work. This specific ceremony was sponsored by PROMETRA (Promotions des Médecines Traditionnelles), “…un organisme de Recherche culturelle, de pratique médicale, de diffusion scientifique, qu’un instrument d’intégration africaine et de relations internationales à travers la revalorisation des médecines traditionnelles, des religions anciennes et de la spiritualité universelle” (PROMETRA website, 2010). Malango is often the meeting place for many different healing practices.

38 It’s like you say human being. You say French, Senegalese, African […] they are all human beings […] rab and djinn are like that […] Djinn circulate. They have their freedom. They speak. Rab is a djinn that you master. He enters into the person […] If you master him, he is your protector. He is going to protect you and you also much give to him.
The spirit world of the *rab* cult has become intertwined with that of Islam, maintaining a distinct, if murky, identity.

Beyond the confusion between the spirits, Islamic and cult practices are also carried out concurrently. Despite Islam’s firm stance against the practices that constitute the *rab* belief (Diop 1996), the Lébou continue to practice both, without a sense of contradiction. For example, in the suburb Guediawaye, the main mosque is situated next to the beach where the *rab* of Dakar, Luk Daour, is said to frequent. People pray to God at the mosque, asking for guidance in life and afterwards bathe in the ocean to ask Luk Daour for success in smaller life tasks. Both God and *rab* are important figures that must be attended to that have spiritual power over individuals. While I was interviewing a male marabout who dealt almost exclusively with *rab*, the imam\(^{39}\) of the neighboring mosque came into the room to greet us. “This man here [the marabout] will show you a lot of things. He is our professor. A kind man. He is someone fantastic to know,” the imam told me in English. The camaraderie that existed between the marabout and the imam was further evidenced when the marabout told me he uses the imam to make announcements to the community that involve predictions *rab* have told him. The *guérisseuse* Khady Samb tells the future with cowry shells, but she had just returned from a trip to Mecca and therefore refused to touch the cowry shells for two months. “Now is the time when I will pray for my family, my husband. I will just pray to God now. It’s time for God”, she explained.

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\(^{39}\) An imam is the holy Islamic leader of a mosque, or Muslim place of worship
As the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, rab are everywhere. Although they occupy an invisible space, it is a real space that is tangible to members of the cult. This chapter illustrated the concrete role of rab in Senegalese society generally and Lébou society specifically by providing an account of the rab cult as it exists today and demonstrating how the cult has remained dynamic.

A crucial facet of the cult today is the way it intersects with gender. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the rab cult creates a social space that is dominated by women.
CHAPTER 4:
Making a Parallel Social Order

Islam dominates religious life in Senegal. On a daily basis, one’s senses are constantly aware of this reality. The call to prayer echoes off buildings five times a day, competing for space in the listener’s ears as multiple mosques project the voices of their imams. The smell of heavy incense wafts out of doorways, reminding believers of the rewards of the afterlife. During prayer time, a delicate suspension takes over as most people cycle through prayer rituals; washing hands, feet, face, kneeling, standing, sitting, fingering lengths of prayer beads, praying softly. The prayer mats are discolored and faded with years of use. During Tamxarit, the Senegalese celebration of the Muslim New Year, families write verses from the Quran on slips of paper to be eaten with the first bite of the evening meal. Islam in Senegal can be heard, smelled, touched, seen, and tasted.

The *rab* cult occupies a more inconspicuous space. Women oversee this complementary domain of spiritual life. Lewis’ work, *Religion in Context* details various spirit possession cults throughout Africa, including the Hausa *bori* cult, the *sar* cult of Somalia, and the practices of the Tonga people of Zimbabwe. Through these examples, he highlights how “women in spirit-possession, [use these cults] as compensation for their exclusion and lack of authority in other spheres” (Lewis 1986:48). In a Senegalese context, more important than compensation for a lack of authority is the responsibility
women have for ensuring the continuity of social life through the maintenance of the *rab* cult. Through established hierarchies, modes of power inheritance, community creation and accountability, and conflict management, the *rab* cult acts as a parallel social order where women have the power to determine the health of the community.

Balandier et al. describe the gap between “la vie religieuse musulmane dont les hommes sont les tenants” and “la vie religieuse traditionnelle qui est le propre des femmes” (Balandier and Mercier 1952:120).

The *ndepp* ceremony is an exemplary ritual within the *rab* cult that illustrates various aspects of this female domain. As highlighted in this quote from the film *Sept Nuits et Sept Jours* describing the *ndepp* ceremony, “one notices there have been no men participating in the ceremony. No human strength surpasses that of a mother’s. In order to mask his fragility, man has organized a world in which he claims to exclude women. The existence of forces that they attempt to repress reveals itself in the *ndepp*” (Dorés et al. 2007). Analyzing ritual becomes key because “rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community” (Turner 1968:2). Not only do symbols reveal crucial social and religious values; they are also (because of their reference to the supernatural) transformative for human attitudes and behavior. The *ndepp* illustrates this by transforming a social illness (the sick person) into a healable individual and then into a reincorporated member of the community. In this way, women play a valuable role in the maintenance of the community.

This chapter begins by describing the role of *ndeppkat* within the cult. This discussion illuminates the ways hierarchy is established and the different ways the
power to manage rab is inherited. Following this, I describe the ndepp ceremony demonstrating how it exemplifies the necessity of community. A discussion of divination contributes to this conversation, highlighting the connections that are maintained through consultation. Finally the chapter concludes by looking at the various conflicts ndeppkat face, and examines how they work to affirm the cult as a parallel social order.

**Ndeppkat: Organizers of the cult institution**

*Ndeppkat* hold a unique place in Senegalese society generally, and in Lébou society specifically. The rough translation of *ndeppkat* is ‘priest/priestess.’ Their primary function is to direct and lead the ndepp ceremony. The suffix –*kat* indicates a profession. The ndepp ceremony is practiced chiefly by the Lébou, but also by the Wolof and Serer (Chase 2001:2), and is widely recognized throughout Dakar. The largest ndepp conducted for the grand rab are often televised, reaching a wide Senegalese audience. Because of this, most Senegalese recognize ndeppkat as leaders, to be both respected and feared.

Within the rab cult, ndeppkat hold the highest positions of power and act as the final consultants for problems that marabout, voyants, and guérisseurs cannot heal. One aspect of this power is a veiled privacy they inhabit, and an aura of respect they demand, particularly concerning those outside the rab cult. Their knowledge of the rab world is the most extensive and they are consulted as experts. That being said, ndeppkat are not involved exclusively in the ndepp. They are consulted in similar capacities to marabout. They act as diviners, use herbs for traditional healing, and prescribe different treatments for the problems brought before them.
While it is possible for men to become *ndeppkat*, it is much more common for women to hold this position. Chase argues that,

Lebu communities are members of the Layen sufi brotherhood which allows women to maintain their influential status in society. This fact may explain why Lebu women are more likely to be practitioners of Ndeup rather than the Wolof who switched from a matriarchal lineage when they adopted the male-dominated Mouride brotherhood (Chase 2001:53).

While she posits an interesting argument, I think there is more at play than an association with the Layenne brotherhood that explains women’s relative power in the *rab* cult. Firstly, while the Layenne brotherhood allows women relatively more freedom than other Senegalese brotherhoods, as described in Chapter 2, the brotherhood, “also lay[s] great emphasis on discipline for women. They stress the need for women to be married, occupied in the home, dutiful, dressed decently, and to refrain from the Lebu domain dominated by women: the spirit cult of the *rab*” (Laborde 1995:97). In this way, it would seem that the Layenne brotherhood very specifically rejects the *rab* cult.

Additionally, during my fieldwork, I did not encounter any women who identified their relationship to the Layenne brotherhood as being significant in any capacity.

Instead, I suggest that women hold the positions of power within the *rab* cult because the Lébou are a matrilineal descent group. One of the components of matrilineal descent groups as described by Douglas, is that the matrilineal structure does not provide a strong authority structure (Douglas 1969:129). However, “it is essential to note that weakly ascribed authority is not always a disadvantage. In so far as it gives scope for achievement, it can in certain circumstances have great adaptive value” (Douglas 1969:129). This inheritance system has allowed for the women to take on powerful roles that they might not have otherwise in a patrilineal group. They are
able to push their responsibilities as the tenders of the spirit world to the point where they hold the most respected positions in the cult.

In fact, the importance of matrilineal descent can be expanded further. For example, the matrilineal inheritance of the skills associated with the *rab* cult articulates social continuity across generations. These social ties to the women of the past create linkages that last even after death (Douglas 1969). Within the *rab* cult, the power of the *ndeppkat* is passed down these female lineages. For example, La Grande Mère is the daughter of the eminent priestess, Mame Fatou Seck, and she gains much of her social following from this reputation. La Grande Mère is the most revered and powerful *ndeppkat* in Rufisque, and many of her sisters and female cousins are also *ndeppkat*. Their daughters, in turn, often have the powers of the *ndeppkat*.

Within a family, the types of powers women inherit (if any) can differ considerably. One of La Grande Mère’s nieces spoke with me about how she is able to ‘read’ cowry shells and conduct other basic forms of *lisaxarr* (Muslim form of divination), but otherwise is not able to be involved in the world of *rab*. This is all based upon the choice of the *rab*. La Grande Mère’s niece talked about how the ability to communicate with *rab* has been inherited differently within the family:

Tu sais dans la vie, il y a des gens qui ne sont pas intelligents. Il y a des gens, qui dans la tête, il y a rien [...] Par exemple, la Grande Mère, c'est elle qui est notre premier ici, quoi. Après elle, nous sommes les autres [ndeppkat]. Mais sa petite sœur, s'appel Naboo, comme moi, elle n'est pas avec les tuur. Tu sais pourquoi? Elle est la fille de celle qui était là avec les tuur, mais elle n'est pas avec les tuur. Parce que les djinns ne sont pas venu sur lui [...] C'est moi c'est comme ca. C'est eux qui m'ont choisit (Naboo 2012).

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40 You know, in life there are those who, in their heads, there is nothing…for example la Grande Mère…she is the first [ndeppkat]. After her, we are the other [ndeppkat]. But her little sister, called Naboo, like me, isn’t with the tuur. Do you know why? She is the daughter of one that was with the tuur, but she isn’t with the tuur. Because the djinn didn’t come to her…It’s like that for me too. It’s them [the rab] that chose me.
An interesting tension exists between the inheritance of spiritual powers through the mother and the explicit choice of the rab. Becoming an ndeppkat is not a choice. Rather, it is the rab that chooses. As Ali described, “On parle de la initiation, en fait parce que c'est le génie qui a choisit. C'est pas elle qui a choisit.” While many ndeppkat like La Grande Mère were chosen by rab, and initiated by elder ndeppkat, other experience la transcendence and awaken to find they have all of the knowledge and power of an ndeppkat.

Tu voit, il y a ces qui, au coucher, on leur parle, on leur parle. Au réveiller il voit tout, il dit tout. Il y a ces qui fait la transcendance. En un moment il voit, 'moi, je suis prêtresse, je suis marabout' comme ça. C'est pourquoi la travaille diffère, le façon de faire c'est différent (Dieng 2012). In these situations, the individual will not be able to practice immediately as an ndeppkat, but will need to go through an apprenticeship to learn specifically the knowledge and skills of the ndeppkat. Concerning ndeppkat, the rab prefers to look within the family to find an alliance. This familial link is similar to that of the tuur, which passes from generation to generation. However, it is not the same rab that passes on the powers.

The hierarchy within the rab cult is built around the ndeppkat and their apprentices, or apprentices. All individuals who have been chosen by rab to be ndeppkat go through years of training. They live with their teacher and create closely knit, female-centered compounds, distinctly different from the patrilocal trends most people,

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41 We speak of the initiation, because it is the genie that has chosen. It is not [the individual]. It's not her [la Grand Mère] that chose the genie, it's the genie that chose her”.
42 There are those who, when sleeping [rab] speak to them. On waking they see everything. They say everything. There are those who do la transcendence in a moment. They will come to a person and say, 'me, I am a priestess. I am a marabout'. There are many ways. This is a way the works differ.
including the Lébou, follow in Senegal. Such was the case with La Grande Mère’s household. She was the head teacher, but lived with two other ndeppkat, her sister and cousin. Three younger women, the apprentices, lived in the compound as well. Ali’s wife was one of the apprentices and he and family lived with them in the compound. Within this hierarchy, the eldest, most experienced, and most powerful ndeppkat reign over other ndeppkat and apprentices. Anyone living in the compound without an ability to heal is responsible for taking care of those who do have the ability.

Beyond this, ndeppkat have obligations to the wider community that they fulfill through networks that stretch beyond their own villages. Ali explained, “[La Grande Mère] a dit que son rôle dans la communauté, c’est celle que porter sa maman, et qui est d’assister les personnes qui a besoin d’assistance; pour la paix dans ce pays, pour la paix des habitants de ce pays, la paix de ces qui gouverne le pays.” 43 This task is carried out by treating community members individually or as families, but also by maintaining positive relationships with the grand rab. “Ce qu'on fait, c'est un sacrifice pour le génie protecteur de son ville, qui s'appelle, Kumba Lamb Ndoye. Ce génie protecteur protège toute la population. C'est [pour] elle qu'on fait le grand sacrifice cette année. Toutes les prêtres du chaque coin viennent,” 44 Ali explained. Maintaining relationships with the national ndeppkat community becomes necessary to achieve these goals.

43 [The Grand Mother] said that her role in the community, is the same that her mother had, and that it is to help those that need assistance: for peace in the country, for peace for the inhabitants of the country, for peace for those that govern the country.

44 What they do is a sacrifice for the spirit protector of the village, called Kumba Lamb Ndoye. This spirit protector protects all the population. We make the sacrifice for her each year. All the priestesses from each corner come.
The hierarchy that is established through the inheritance of power is a part of the larger social order of the rab cult. Through specific types of inheritance, practices concerning the rab cult are assured to continue. Wide networks of ndeppkat and apprentices work together to maintain this parallel social order. The role of ndeppkat as mediators of health is most salient concerning the ndepp ceremony, which functions as a site for female-oriented community creation. The following section looks at the ndepp ceremony and how it illuminates the vital function of community.

**Ndepp: Necessity of community**

“La folie est une notion relative. On est fou par rapport au groupe. Le malade devient non pas un individu, mais un cas du groupe. Et pour son intégration (ou sa réintégration), le ndëppkat convoque la famille de l’intéressé”. Dr. Gbodossou’s quote in a local newspaper highlights perhaps the most important component of an ndepp ceremony: the emphasis placed on community. While rab may be unruly and cumbersome spirits, the different ways the Lébou people, and specifically ndeppkat, have approached them has created a distinct identity and place for the Lébou women within Senegalese society. Victor Turner discusses the function of ritual systems as “compensate[ing] to some extent [sic] the limited range of effective political control and for the instability of kinship and affinal ties to which political value is attached” (Turner 1957:291). Based upon this perspective, the ndepp is a ritual that acts as a space where community is created that enables women to deal with the conflicts caused

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45 *Madness is a relative idea. One is mad according to a group. The sick person becomes no longer an individual, but a case of the group. And for his own integration (or reintegration), the ndëppkat summons the family of the person involved.*
by *rab*. The following section looks at the *ndepp* as a locus for community creation for women.

The *ndepp* ceremony is a ritual that takes place in several different contexts, and involves a series of rituals that culminate in dancing, singing, drumming, and trance. The most common *ndepp* takes place when an individual is badly afflicted by a *rab* to the point where they no longer function normally in daily life. The *ndepp* ceremony is conducted to please the *rab* and exorcise the spirit from the individual.

It is important to nuance the idea of exorcism. Lewis suggests that societies deal with unwanted spirits in two ways. Exorcism, expelling a spirit from the body, is one aspect of the *ndepp* ceremony that aids in the individual’s healing. However, a second, more nuanced idea concerning spirit possession is also at play. Adorcism, or “the domestication of spirits in the course of the development of the shamanic career” (Lewis 1986:xii), is another relationship individuals have with *rab*. Lewis suggests that there is a gendered aspect to these differences, noting that women generally prefer adorcism as a method for dealing with the spirits. Adorcism is the most accurate way to describe the *ndeppkat’s* relationship with *rab* and the body. By learning how to manage *rab* throughout their training, *ndeppkat* use adorcism to navigate the problems caused by *rab* and ultimately domesticate the spirits. The difference between exorcism and adorsicm is important because it illuminates how, rather than being victims of a malicious spirit, women use these relationships to build their statuses with the *rab* cult as influential healers.

In the same vein, falling into trance is different from possession. Many people fall into trance during *ndepp* ceremonies, both *ndeppkat* and on-lookers alike. Although
their *rab* has called them to the circle and compels their bodies to dance, the possession only lasts as long as the *bakk*, or series of songs, is sung. In these cases, no type of exorcism or adorcism is necessary.

During my fieldwork, I was fortunate enough to attend three different *ndepp* ceremonies. One of these included the second day of an *ndepp* ceremony that was taking place in Ouakam. It was the third time an *ndepp* had been conducted for this sick woman. She had a particularly nasty *rab* that wouldn't leave her, despite previous *ndepp* ceremonies, and the *rab* was now troubling her children. The day before, a goat had been sacrificed at the sea as a part of the ritual called the *rey* and its drying intestines were tied around the sick woman’s waist. The meat that was not put into the woman’s *xamb* had fed the woman’s family, *ndeppkat, apprentices*, and other members of the community in attendance.

The crowd created a large circle, its edges touching the buildings on either side of the sand covered street. The crowd was seven or eight people deep, the inner circle seated, the rest standing on toes to see over the heads. The roofs of the surrounding houses were full to bursting with people. The sea of faces was made up of women and children.

A small altar made of various types of horns stood in the center of the circle in front of the *tam-tam* players. The *ndeppkat* danced around the altar, women frantically singing and clapping hands, encouraging the crowd to do the same. *La malade* (the sick individual) was dressed in a brown linen robe with a hood. She was seated at the edge of the circle and would occasionally stand to dance. However she was

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Drum (Wolof)
only able to dance for moments before falling in trance. Her body fell to the ground again and again with each dance, as if she had no bones. As the music continued, her body became rigid, and then started seizing. Several of the *apprenties* grabbed her under her arms and dragged her to the edge of the circle. That song (*bakk*) had spoken to her *rab*. The head *ndeppkat* (differentiated based upon the number of beads and *gris-gris* she wore) directed the drummers and the singing, overseeing every movement of *la malade*. The drums pounded louder and louder, the crowd clapped, sang, and cried out, watching her body shake.

During the course of the *ndepp* I watched as five different women fell into trance. One woman tried to escape the circle of people as the song changed. “She can feel that this song is the song of her *rab* and she doesn’t want to fall,” one young woman told me. Another woman came into the circle, parting the crowd with her flailing arms and legs, already in trance. She danced so quickly and with so much fervor it was clear that something beyond her own body propelled her.

Community members attend *ndepp* ceremonies for many reasons. Women and children often attend because of the entertainment value. The loud singing, intense dancing, and social space created by the *ndepp* atmosphere draws people to the circle. “Dans mon cas j'ai assisté pour avoir des informations que je voulais connaître; différents sacrifices, l'ambiance qui rengainait,” Ndoye explained. For her, not only is atmosphere of the *ndepp* attractive but also it provides her with information for her thesis.

More than this however, is a sense of responsibility community members have for *la malade*. A Senegalese sociologist explained to me, “quand une personne est
possédée, on considère que cette personne n’est pas coupable...c’est toute la communauté qui est responsable. Ça veut dire que la rab est mécontent avec la personne, mais aussi avec toute la communauté. C’est toute la communauté qui doit prendre en charge ça. C’est pourquoi le ndepp est collectif” (Diakhaté 2011). He goes on to describe how, if someone is not acting normally, it is the community’s responsibility to deal with this issue: therefore, if problems persist, “on sanctionne la communauté” (Diakhaté 2011). This unifying effect holds the entire community accountable for the grievances of individuals, encouraging community cohesion and support for the maintenance of all individuals’ wellbeing. The value of community participation and accountability for sickness might be operative within Senegal more generally as well.

Several key components of the ndepp ceremony illuminate how it works to create community: the role of the family, the symbol of the sacrificial animal, the public setting of the ndepp and community responsibility.

In the case described above, la malade was supported by her family for the production of the ndepp, but was additionally supported by the wider community in the final stage of the healing process. Because an ndepp is such a large undertaking, all members of the family are expected to contribute financially and through participation. Participation includes dancing and being present throughout the duration of the ceremony (Chase 2001). On a material level, the ndepp is very expensive, sometimes costing the family of la malade the equivalent of several years of salary (Chase

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47 When a person is possessed, that person isn’t considered guilty...it is all of the community that is responsible. That’s to say that the rab is displeased with the person, but also with the community. It’s the entire community that must take care of it. This is why the ndepp is collective.

48 The community is sanctioned.
Even though all members of la malade’s family are expected to contribute, the cost of the ndepp severely impacts the family. Costs include fabric and labor to make matching outfits for the ndeppkat and apprentices, food, lodging (at the family’s home, space permitting), small personal fees for all ndeppkat, apprentices, and drummers in attendance, one or many animals for sacrifice (chickens, goats, sheep, cows), and any other additional materials the rab or ndeppkat require (cola nuts, tree roots, soda, etc.). If the family has a tuur, it will help the family raise money to offset the costs (Chase 2001:52). In this way, family becomes essential and members are obliged to partake.

The symbol of the sacrificial animal reveals the way embodiment functions as a source of sickness (the rab inhabits the body), but also in healing (through the eating of the sacrificed animal). During the rey, la malade sits on top of the sacrificial animal, whose legs are bound. An ndeppkat or apprentices will slit the throat of the animal, capturing its blood in a large bowl. The purpose of this sacrifice is to transfer the rab from the body of the sick individual into that of the animal. When the animal is later cut apart, cooked, and shared with the community members, it symbolizes the community’s acceptance of the sick individual and their willingness to reincorporate the sick individual back into the society. By ingesting the flesh of the animal that contains the rab, and therefore sharing in the embodiment of this spirit, the community takes responsibility in the healing process. The community’s role is crucial in the post-liminal stage of the ndepp ritual as the healed individual is reincorporated into the community through song and dance. We see the value placed upon the community as the final judge of accepting the healed individual.
“Ndeup serves Wolof communities as a unifying agent. Ceremonies are held in the open rather than in secret settings,” states Chase (2001:54). Because the last stage of the ndepp is open to the entire community, the sickness of la malade is widely acknowledged, rather than kept private. In this way individuals are not ostracized, but rather are reintegrated into society through community wide acceptance. The ceremony also acts to acknowledge the community’s failure to properly deal with the problems of the individual. All of these dynamics demonstrate how cohesion is created through the ritual of the ndepp and the conflicts caused by rab. This follows Gluckman’s thoughts that, “at the widest range, cohesion is stated in ritual terms – supported by mystical retribution – where values are unquestioned and axiomatic. Hence ritual reconciliation and sacrifice often follow the settlement of a quarrel, and ritual methods are used to reach adjustment” (Gluckman 1955:14).

The close relationships that exist between ndeppkat and apprentices are necessarily expanded to include all other women who have fallen into trance during the ndepp. Ndeppkat draw specifically on community member’s participation in order for the ceremony to be successful. Once the song (bakk) of an individual’s rab is played and the person falls into trance, they have established a connection with their rab that will cause them to fall in every subsequent ndepp they attend. For this reason, women who have fallen are called upon to assist in other ndepp ceremonies by attending, falling into trance, and dancing for their rab. As La Grande Mère explained, “Begge giné?"49 Everything that gives pleasure to man can give pleasure to djinn: eating, seeing, sleeping, a big family, singing, dancing, and playing the tam tam. These will be

49 What do djinn like? (Wolof)
pleasurable. When you give [something to them] to eat, and to drink, you will be happy. That’s *teranga* Senegal! It’s not different for djinns” (Seck 2012). The more entertained and pleased the *rab* are, the easier it is to convince them to stop afflicting the sick person; therefore, the more women that fall during a ceremony the better. While most of these women do not become *apprenties*, they are a crucial element of support during the *ndepp*.

Because the community is so central to the *ndepp*, the body isn’t the boundary of an individual’s identity. Individuals are a part of the group, connected spiritually through *rab*, and literally through the ceremony. The community claims the possessed body and the individual is no longer in danger. The ways in which women care for each other during trance is evidence of how the community supports they individual. Once a woman falls, multiple people, *ndeppkat*, family, and/or friends immediately attend to her, supporting her body, watching as she moves. Depending on the intensity of her dancing, they tie a scarf around her waist to temper her movements. They cover her body in the event her clothes are torn, and hold her head in their lap as she recovers from dancing. These actions are carried out intentionally and thoughtfully, however without drama and fear. Trance becomes normalized in the context of the *ndepp* that pushes fear out of the minds of the observers and shows in a very literal fashion how the community supports the individuals within it. Because of the *ndeppkat*’s ability to manage the *rab* through adorcism, the spirit becomes a more domesticated presence.

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50 hospitality (Wolof)
**Divination as network building**

Divination is another area in which community is reinforced and solidified and conflicts are managed. Studies done by Turner (1957) have looked at divination’s significance “as a central and often decisive instrument in the direction of (micro- )political processes such as the formation, maintenance and transformation of economic, political, and parental power relations at local levels” (Graw 2009:92). In the context of the *rab* cult, divination involves consulting a *rab* or dealing with a problem caused by a *rab*. It acts as an instrument of community maintenance and conflict resolution that contributes to the *rab* cult as a social order.

Divination is used as one of the first methods for dealing with any difficulty in life. These difficulties can range from a child’s cough, a standoffish husband, fights with friends, to an upcoming exam or soccer game. Women are the most frequent clientele of diviners. Divination is an essential step in determining the source of the problem and possible solutions. Consultations act as a gateway and roadmap through which to navigate other possible treatments. As Graw describes, “divination...is subjectively significant primarily because it responds to the inquiry of the client or patient about his most urgent personal intentional concern or need and allows for the identification of the ritual remedies necessary for its solution” (Graw 2009:100).

Individual’s problems become widely shared by the community through divination. Women will often consult three to four different diviners about a specific problem. “You ask lots of different friends for advice about problems. That’s how you consult diviners, for different kinds of advice,” Aida told me. Divination sessions are not private and often friends will go to a diviner together. The divination process is
especially valuable as a space to offer community affirmation that life is full of challenges, yet there are things within an individual’s power (such as giving small offerings to beggars, etc.) that can alleviate some of the burden.

Women use divination as a way to inform their futures, thus managing difficulties that may arise. A young Senegalese woman told me, “people visit voyants to better prepare for the future. The voyant will tell you to do this or that, give something to talibé51, or something, to either prevent something from happening or to make something happen” (Keita 2012). Aida gravely told me one day, a glazed and unusually serious look in her eyes, “I won’t stay here forever. I’m going to leave. A lot of voyants have said I will leave. But when?! God only knows...I want to go and make a lot of money for my children. I have to think about the future. For my children”. Women seek the counsel of the spirit world in order to inform their decisions. Divination, specifically in relation to the rab cult, acts not only as an “institution of proved effectiveness” (van Binsbergen 2004:92), but it also reinforces the self-identity of the individual within the community.

The process of divination also contributes to the networks of support in the Lébou community in a larger sense, connecting history and current lived experiences. Graw argues that divination is “part of a larger and shared cultural repository of experience, meaning, reflection, and insight of often great historical depths, informing and structuring the way life is experienced in a specific socio-cultural setting (as well as the way these experiences can be articulated) from the outset” (Graw 2009:105). In this

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51 Talibé are young boys who are educated in the Quran through a marabout. They solicit people for money in the streets as compensation for their Quranic training.
way, divination becomes a way to connect to the knowledge and communities of the past, a process mediated by the diviner and subsequently the rab informant.

The Dual Role of Conflicts

Ndeppkat have obligations to the community and to individuals within the community based upon their ability to communicate and negotiate with rab. Despite their revered social status, they face critical problems that determine their ability to carry out these responsibilities. Gluckman describes that with smaller social circles comes an increase in conflict. At the same time balance is created through these conflicts.

The smaller the area, the more numerous the social ties. But as the area narrows the occasions which breed quarrels between men multiply; and here it is that their conflicting ties both draw them apart, and bring them into relationship with other people who see that settlement is achieved. In this way custom unites where it divides, co-operations and conflict balancing each other (Gluckman 1955:13-14).

The struggle for legitimacy is a critical variable in the conflicts ndeppkat face. However even as it creates conflict, the rab cult affirms women’s power.

Although ndeppkat are well respected, Islam has specific regulations for interacting with the spirit world. For example, exorcism of malicious spirits should only happen using the name of Allah. Ndeppkat use many different methods to exorcise a rab from an individual including complicated use of roots, horns, animal parts, and cola nuts, and consultations with their own rab informants. Using adorcism to manage rab is also against Islamic values as this is considered to be taking the spirits as lords besides Allah. Finally, although divination is widely practiced by Islamic marabout and ndeppkat alike, consulting a diviner can be perceived as disbelieving the Prophet Muhammad. One young Senegalese man expressed to me, “visiting a seer? Eh!
Tomorrow is not interesting. Why know the future? I live here today. It’s like you don’t believe in God” (Diarra 2012). Ndeppkat and their practices exist on the fringes of what is acceptable according to Islam.

Women are able to hold spiritual leadership positions only in realms outside of Islam. For example, the mother of La Grande Mère was one of the most famous ndeppkat of her time. Her ability to navigate the spirit world was inherited by her children, La Grande Mère being one of them. La Grande Mère’s brothers are imams of mosques in her village. Although La Grande Mère and her siblings hold positions of power, she did not have the option of becoming involved in Islam in the same way her brothers did. However, her powerful position is parallel to that of leaders in Islam.

The implications of differing forms of gender power within and around the rab cult are central to understanding how and why ndeppkat strive for legitimacy. Because of their gender, women do not have the same opportunities as men. The direct result of these gender imbalances is struggles in other areas of life, including financial stability and legitimacy.

The accumulation of money is one example of how the parallel function of cult proves challenging for women. The ndepp and other ceremonies provide ndeppkat their only income. This funding source is highly unstable because it is based upon the ability of families and individuals to pay. As Ali explained, this puts the ndeppkat in a very uncomfortable situation.

Often you see people who come and have dispensed all of their money at the hospital and they didn't find anything positive [...] the ndeppkat has to do the ceremony [...] She calls her disciples. She calls her drummers, and everyone that needs to be there for three days. There are three meals, and their small needs, and after the ceremony [the family] have to give something [like a small fee]. And the [sick] person doesn't have all of that [but] she is obliged to heal you.
While there are some *ndeppkat* who are fairly wealthy, many struggle to obtain full payment for their services. The implications of this trend are rooted in the belief that Western medicine holds more value than the *ndeppkat’s* style of healing, even though most Senegalese acknowledge problems with the spirit cannot be solved by Western medicine. Such was the case for the old man described earlier who had spent seven months in Italy with Italian doctors attempting to heal him. By the time La Grande Mère conducted the ceremony, he could only afford a *tuuru*\(^52\) even though his *rab* required an *ndepp*. La Grande Mère and Ali were both skeptical his health would improve because he had not followed the *rab’s* wishes.

The legitimacy of *ndeppkat’s* work is further undermined by *le charlatanisme*, or fraud. The spirit world is characterized by its inaccessibility and intangibility, reasons lay people visit diviners and spirit world specialist to deal with problems they themselves have no ability to manage. Ndour the photographer explained,

> Il y a beaucoup de gens qui se disent guérisseurs animistes alors que ce ne sont que des faussaires qui ne cherchent que l’argent. Ils savent qu’ils ne peuvent rien faire mais ils demandent des sommes exorbitantes. Quand une personne est malade, quand elle a besoin de guérir, quelque soit le montant qu’on lui demande pour sa santé, elle est prête à céder (Ndour 2011).\(^53\)

Not only do these ‘fakes’ take business away from the real practitioners by claiming they can solve every problem (which incidentally is a marker of *charlatans* (Gemmeke 2009)), but they also deplete the funds of individuals seeking help before they visit

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\(^52\) *Tuuru* have a similar purpose to the *ndepp*, however they are private affairs lasting only one day. Because of this, the costs of the ceremony are dramatically cheaper than of the *ndepp*.

\(^53\) *There are a lot of people that say they are animist healers even though they are frauds that only search for money. They know that they cannot do anything but they still demand exorbitant sums of money. When someone is sick and she needs to be healed, she is willing to pay whatever amount is asked.*
ndeppkat. Most critically, it is not always easy to distinguish frauds from legitimate practitioners so ndeppkat are viewed warily until proven otherwise.

More than any other healers, marabout are considered throughout Senegal as the most respectable and valid healers because of their association with Islam. Additionally, marabout are most often men. Female marabout are exceedingly rare because they are considered impure (due to menstruation) and are not educated to engage with the Quran at an esoteric level (Seybold 2002). As a result, marabout men act as gateways to the healing community of ndeppkat and Western medicine alike.

“The marabout] can see if you need to visit the ndeppkat, or the norañu (secular/animist) marabout, and then sometimes the hospital” (Dieng 2012). The sick individual will be directed to another healer based on the marabout’s discretion. Because the Islamic marabout, sometimes known as sulmañu, is the first to be consulted, he has the ability to charge the most money. One marabout I visited had a four-door SUV outside his house and a flat screen T.V., all gifts from people he counseled. For La Grande Mère, finances were a constant problem. In this way, although men do not hold the most highly regarded positions of power within the rab cult, they are able to gain the most financially because of their positions as liaisons.

Ali and I had an illuminating conversation one night, standing on the ocean’s edge. He was frustrated, throwing bits of wood into the ocean absentmindedly. “Why do they condemn us? The marabout, they heal with the Quran. And what is the Quran written with?” he asks me. I shrug, uncertain of where he is going with this conversation. “With charcoal. With ash from trees. It comes from trees. We, too, use
trees to heal. We use the roots. How can they condemn us for healing those who are sick when we use the same tools?” he exclaimed, shaking his head in irritation.

_Ndeppkat_ struggle to gain legitimacy because of their peripheral position to Islam, the specific ways they interact with spirits, and _le charlatanisme_. These conflicts are expressed in their struggle for financial stability and their secondary position to marabout. The consequences of these conflicts endanger the _ndeppkats’_ ability to fully carry out their roles.

At the same time, these conflicts fundamentally work in a balance with cooperation to create a larger social cohesion. As van Binsbergen states, “there is remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms are allowed to be voiced in a context where the globally mediated religious forms are clearly dominant” (van Binsbergen 2004:90). The conflicts that are problematic on one scale, for example between Laye Fatou and her faru rab, are resolved and through the action of resolution, the identity of the community is reinforced. For example, the Lébou community is initially responsible for the sick individual, and is tasked with their healing. When the sick person is healed, the community's is validated as a valuable entity. More broadly, the rab cult, as many traditional belief systems in Senegal, works outside of Islam. However, nearly all Senegalese, regardless of their ethnicity, acknowledge these spiritual worlds. They are accepted as a part of Senegalese life. In this way, traditional beliefs systems work to validate Senegalese identity in contrast to the global North and other Islamic nations. This is a historical trend that began with using Islam as a counter to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.
Marabout and ndeppkat, and thus Islam and the rab cult, work together to heal the Senegalese population. The cooperation between these groups contributes to the creation of a Senegalese identity that draws from a deep belief in the spirit realm and the value of a healthy community.

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This chapter focused on several different aspects of the rab cult: ndeppkat, the ndepp ceremony, divination, and conflict. Through an exploration of these realms, I illustrate how the rab cult works as a complementary sphere where women have an established social order. This social order is created and maintained through the hierarchies, modes of inheritance, community involvement, and conflict management. Theses various facets of the rab cult work together to create a cohesive Senegalese identity.
CHAPTER 5:  
Tying up the Threads

When Asu fell into trance and danced for her *rab*, she was participating in the long history that has arisen between the human world and the spirit world. She danced to please the spirit, as so many women have done before, in order to maintain a healthy and peaceful life as a part of a community. The drummers, singers, and watchers all contributed to the entertainment. Their actions persuaded the *rab* to loosen his hold on this sick individual.

The two months of fieldwork I conducted revealed a world that is invisible, but no less concrete than the human realm. Through personal relationships and profound participant observation opportunities, I became involved in a domain where one must step lightly because our invisible neighbors are easily provoked. The beliefs and practices that exist in order to manage the relationships with these neighbors come together to form a community of dedicated believers.

This study focuses on the *rab* cult as it is practiced in Dakar, Senegal. Through this study, it is evident that the spirit world has a very real impact on daily Senegalese life. The *rab* cult is widely known and most people are wary of *rab* spirits. However, the Lébou people maintain the rituals and practices associated with these spirits almost exclusively. As Senegal becomes more integrated into global systems of technology, economy, and migration, the *rab* cult remains relevant and dynamic. The role of gender
within the cult establishes how it functions as a parallel social domain where Lébou women hold positions of power and prestige. In this way, the rab cult fills a space that Islam cannot. Islam and the rab cult are both religious systems that engage people with the spirit world. Inherent between these institutions are conflicts that create disunity that ultimately contributes to Senegalese identity.

Understanding the rab cult requires a historical foundation. History is a tapestry that is woven with countless threads. Following certain threads reveals different patterns and illuminates how certain threads weave together in complementary relationships.

Islam remains one of the most influential threads in Senegal’s history. From early history to the present, Islam has had varying impacts on conceptualizations of identity, gender, nationalism, and belief. Through colonial times it functioned as a tool of rebellion, crafting a distinct Senegalese identity in the face of various colonial powers and slavery. After Senegal’s independence, Islam continued to play a critical role in the formation of political parties and the development of Shari’a law. Today, Senegalese navigate between different articulations of national identity, redefining this identity in relation to Islam. Women specifically must negotiate between opportunities to gain status in the secular world (politics, education, etc.), and the revival of Shari’a law and its gendered implications.

The changing role of women over time is another thread woven throughout this account. From pre-Islamic times, through slavery and colonialism, and up until today women have held various positions of power. Examples of the continued significance of
historical female power include the indirect ownership of slaves, property, and trade goods through *mariages à la mode* and women’s increasing presence in politics.

The Lébou ethnic group acts as a final thread that contributes to this study’s focus. Using the social history of the origin myth offers a local perspective on how order and disorder are managed. The myth establishes the importance of women and values of justice and balance. The Layenne brotherhood distinguishes the Lébou from the Wolof people, which is further emphasized through the Lébou’s matrilineal inheritance. As a matrilineal group, the Lébou place significance on inheritance and female domains of power. All of these threads are critical as a foundation for understanding the *rab* cult.

Because of the scant scholarship on the *rab* cult, I have devoted considerable space to explanations of how the *rab* cult is currently practiced. Chapter 3 illustrates the concrete role of *rab* in Senegalese society generally, and Lébou society specifically, by providing an updated account of the *rab* cult and demonstrating how the cult has remained a dynamic entity. Here, it is possible to see how gender begins to intersect with the cult, as women are more consistently the objects of *rab*’s whims.

Different kinds of *rab* enter into different relationships with humans. *Rab* are both revered and feared spirits that require attention. From formal occasions that venerate *grand rab*, to small everyday offerings to *tuur*, *rab* are present in a variety of life situations. *Xamb* act as physical representations of this spirit world that demand attention. At the same time, random encounters with troublesome lover spirits cannot be anticipated and are a critical component of daily life. Dealing with these troublesome *rab* requires a host of healers that compete for patients’ resources.
All of these relationships continue to exist even as Senegal becomes a part of the globalizing world. New technologies, economies, migration patterns, and gender dynamics all influence the ways the cult is practiced. However, the cult persists and responds to these new trends by incorporating media and technology and establishing relationships with Western medicine.

In order to best manage this spirit realm, individuals must take precautionary measures. In this context, the rab cult acts as a form of social control, dictating the behavior of many individuals. However, women use this realm to assert power. In this way, the conflicts that are caused by rab and the various ways the Lébou have created systems to manage them, work together to create a cohesive identity for Lébou communities.

Islam is a dominant force in Senegal. However, its influence is tempered by the existence of the rab cult. Women use the cult as a social space that runs parallel to that of male-dominated Islamic realm. This social order is maintained through hierarchies, specific inheritance patterns, community creation and responsibility, and conflict management. Ndeppkat work as the leaders of this realm, serving the community as spiritual health experts. Using the ndepp ceremony as a powerful tool, they are able to create a community atmosphere that works to maintain the health of the population.

The ndepp is the most salient example of how community creation in the rab cult functions. It highlights the importance of the family as a support network, illustrates how the sacrificial animal acts a symbolic reincorporation of a sick individual back into the community, and demonstrates the critical responsibility the community has towards the health of individuals. Divination is another example of the ways different
networks within the cult work to unite the community. Through consolatory relationships between the client and the diviner, and the ties this creates with the past and present, diviners draw on the wisdom of shared experiences. As a photographer, Ndour documents culture and over the years has observed the shifts within the *rab* cult.

Il n'y a que cette communauté, cette culture qui peut apporter la guérison. Le retour à cette communauté est donc obligé. Après l'expérience de la possession, des problèmes, des troubles, le retour à l'état normal oblige aussi à un retour à la communauté et à la culture. On continue alors à pratiquer cette culture, parce que ça ne coûte rien de faire des sacrifices. C'est juste des sacrifices qu'il faut faire... (Ndour 2011).

These central characters, settings, and rituals of the *rab* cult have inherent conflicts that, on a micro-level cause disunity and mistrust between community members. The impact of Islam on the cult contributes to these problems. However, this disunity works to create a larger whole, balanced between male and female domains of power. More broadly, belief in the cult contributes to the formation of a national Senegalese identity.

* * *

Ali and I were seated on plastic lawn chairs under the mango tree in the middle of the compound. The children had been put to bed and a humid silence was settling in the courtyard. He poured me a second cup of *ataaya*, sweet minty tea that would keep me awake for hours. “Mame Fatou Seck was an extraordinary woman,” he said to me. “Marabout told her that what she did was wrong. Against the Quran. She went to her

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54 *There is only this community, this culture that is able to bring healing. Returning to the community therefore is an obligation. After the experience of possession, of problems, of troubles, to return to a normal state requires returning to the community and the culture. We continue to practice this culture because it costs nothing to make sacrifices. It is only sacrifices that one must do...*
[brotherhood] guide and said she was going to leave it all [the rab cult] because she wanted to follow the Quran, the Tijaniyya brotherhood. The guide asked what she did. She said heal. ‘Who?’ he asked. ‘People who are sick, who have lost their heads, who are disconnected from their families.’ ‘Ok’, he said, ‘then you can continue your work. Just do it in the best way’

The stillness of the night swallowed his words. I recalled a conversation I had with an older Lébou man. “Malgré tout,” he said, “on reste africain. On a encore certaines croyances qui dorment encore en nous” (Ndour 2011).55

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55 Despite everything, we are African. There are still certain beliefs that sleep in us.
**GLOSSARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apprentie</td>
<td>apprentice, typically female, who trains under the guidance of one or more priestesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>bakk</td>
<td>specific song that calls specific rab to the presence of the singer</td>
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<tr>
<td>baraka</td>
<td>divine grace, inherited patrilineally through the lineage of the founders of the brotherhoods</td>
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<tr>
<td>borom-rab</td>
<td>individuals who can control and communicate with rab</td>
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<tr>
<td>caliph</td>
<td>the leader, and sometimes founder, of a brotherhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>canaries</td>
<td>pottery vessels that house the offerings given to rab</td>
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<tr>
<td>coru rab</td>
<td>female lover spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td>djinn</td>
<td>type of spirit mentioned in the Quran</td>
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<tr>
<td>faru rab</td>
<td>male lover spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td>foulard</td>
<td>traditional head covering worn by women</td>
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<tr>
<td>grand rab</td>
<td>protector spirit of a specified geographic region</td>
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<tr>
<td>gris-gris</td>
<td>amulets worn for protection against evil spirits and spells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guérisseur</td>
<td>traditional healer, may or may not have the ability to communicate with the spirit world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imam</td>
<td>leader of a mosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>jat</td>
<td>magic words used to flatter rab</td>
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<tr>
<td>ku rab japp</td>
<td>human possessed by a rab</td>
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<tr>
<td>lait-caillé</td>
<td>sour milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laya</td>
<td>words from the Quran used to flatter rab</td>
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<tr>
<td>le charlatanisme</td>
<td>fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le/la malade</td>
<td>the sick person in the ndepp ceremony</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
marabout: Islamic holy man, although he may/may not communicate with rab

maraboutage: a type of witchcraft performed by marabout

ndepp: exorcism ceremony in the rab cult

ndeppkat: priests/priestesses that lead the ndepp ceremony and have the ability to communicate with rab

Quran: holy book of Islam

rab: specific spirits

rab amants: lover spirits

rab errant: wandering spirits

rey: portion of the ndepp ceremony when animal sacrifice occurs

sabar: style of drum and a traditional style of music

saltigué: male leader of Serer neighborhoods, often have the ability to speak with spirits

sulmañu: marabout who only works with the Quran and Islam

talibé: young boys who are educated in the Quran through a marabout

tam-tam: Wolof word for drums

tariqa: Islamic brotherhood, including the Tijaniyya, the Murridiyya, the Qadiriyya, and the Layenne

tuур: rab spirit that is linked to a family or lineage

tuuru: healing ceremony similar to ndepp, but shorter, smaller, and cheaper

voyant: seer, diviner

xamb: altar where offerings to the rab are placed
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