

Amadou Bamba Biography

Amadou Bamba

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Biography

The Senegalese religious leader Amadou Bamba (1850-1927) was the founder of the Mourides, the strongest and most influential African Islamic brotherhood in black Africa.

Amadou Bamba was born in M'Backe, Senegal, into a Wolof family of Toucouleur origins, the son of a minor Islamic holy man and teacher. A charismatic personality, Bamba aided in the mass conversion of the Wolof peoples from tribal paganism to Islam at the end of the 19th century, becoming the founder and marabout of the Mouride sect of Islam. Many Senegalese looked to the Mouride brotherhood for leadership and organization in the fight against the colonial invaders. Fearing a holy war against the Europeans under Bamba's inspired leadership, the French exiled him to Gabon from 1895 until November 1902, and again to Mauritania from June 1903 to 1907.

After 1911, however, fear of a popular uprising in Senegal declined, and the French began to regard Bamba in a new light. Upon his urging, thousands of his followers volunteered for the French army and worked to increase agricultural production during World War I. In 1919 Bamba was named a chevalier in the Legion of Honor. Until he died in 1927, however, he was never again allowed to return permanently to the holy village where he had become convinced of his calling, and he remained always under a cloud of suspicion. In Senegal, nationalists reassessed his historical role and now praise Bamba for his early resistance to the colonial regime.

Bamba was a legend in his own time because of his reputed mystical powers and saintly behavior. Two aspects of his credo powerfully affected the strength and devotion of his following. One was the belief that every Mouride who had worked for his marabout and had given him his tithe would go to heaven because of the marabout's personal intervention; there would be no need for the person to do anything more for his own salvation, even if he had sinned. The other aspect was the doctrine that work was like prayer and sanctified the individual. This belief resulted in a Calvinistic zeal for hard labor that made the Mouride brotherhood into a tremendous ally of the most powerful economic forces in West Africa.