

PROPHETIC CRITIQUES OF COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL SCHEMES: THE CASE OF
ALINESITOUÉ DIATTA IN VICHY SENEGAL

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“Prophetic Critiques of Colonial Agricultural Schemes: The Case of Alinesitoué Diatta in Vichy Senegal”

This paper grows out of a strong sense that religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems and agricultural practices are less likely to be incorporated into local models for agricultural development than other sources which are identified as more secular and more rooted in praxis. This may reflect the Abrahamic religious orientation of both local nationals involved in rural development and foreign aid specialists or a secular/scientific orientation that remains skeptical of claims to authoritative knowledge based on revelation from a supreme being, lesser spirits or divinities, and/or from dreams. They demonstrate a strong preference for empirical sources, overlooking the fact that in many African societies, religious authorities have extensive, direct experience of local agricultural practices from growing up in rural communities where almost everyone farms. In this paper I hope to broaden the discussion of indigenous knowledge of agriculture to include insights that come from prophetic figures who claim that their authority comes from revelation from a supreme being. Throughout my academic career, I have been interested in the innovative capacities of what are often labeled as “traditional” societies. Despite deeply rooted Western images of static, brittle, and change-resistant societies, I have been made keenly aware, over the course of field research in the same community periodically since 1974, of the dramatic changes that have occurred in Diola society over the last four centuries, and the ways in which these changes have been understood and guided through systems of thought and practice closely associated with what Westerners consider to be “religion.” My first book examined the types of changes that a single Diola sub-group experienced in the pre-colonial era, looking

particularly at the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, but also environmental and political changes.¹ In the course of my studies I found that the need to justify the Atlantic slave trade and European colonization of Africa, the lack of linguistic competence or extended field research by many scholars in the field, have led them to underestimate the ability of ‘traditional’ societies to adapt to rapidly changing environmental, political, economic, and religious circumstances. This has been reinforced by local interlocutors who emphasize continuity of traditions in the midst of massive disruption associated with colonization and the transition to independent African states. Thus, the contrast between the change-oriented, open, hot or cooked nature of Western societies may be more a product of the celebration of change and the down-playing of continuities that characterize contemporary Western societies than it is a product of resistance to innovation, the raw, cold, or closed nature of “traditional” societies that celebrate their ability to remain within a sense of continuity over time.²

Ideas of open societies, that is our own societies, to challenge prevailing beliefs, values and ideas; or ideas of oral cultures that are unable to engage in critical reflection continue to inform some of the scholarly reflection on indigenous communities. Although it is true that spokespersons for “traditional” societies often claim that what they are doing, thinking, or performing has existed unchanged since the time of the first ancestors, this is often not the case.

¹Robert M. Baum, Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

²For a particularly informative discussion of the enduring Western images of Africa, see Valentin Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. In the process, one could argue, they also overstate the readiness of people in Western societies to critically examine their own practices and ideas. Walter Ong is one of the most influential scholars who questions whether people in oral cultures can engage in the types of critical reflection associated with written texts. Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, London: Methuen, 1982.

The desire to claim authority by seizing the mantle of the founders of a tradition, is not all that different than the claims of religious authorities to represent the “primitive” or early church. Claims of continuity counter charges of innovation when such actions are equated with heresy or deviance. As Marilyn Waldman and I noted in an essay comparing the prophets Muhammad and Alinesitoué, “Innovation as Renovation,” profound innovations are often disguised as returns to a past that never existed.³ Outsiders come away with an image of “change resistant” societies precisely because that is the image that local spokespersons wish to convey. This neglect of the religious underpinnings of “traditional” agriculture, however, is not limited to social scientists. Religious studies scholars interested in farming or in food shortages have often limited themselves to theological reflection on what it means to live in precarious circumstances rather than looking at the ways in which religious beliefs and practices inform specific aspects of agricultural production. Thus, religious studies scholars have marginalized themselves from scholarly debates about the capacity of indigenous societies to embrace innovative practices in the sphere of agriculture.

One encounters similar problems in the study of “traditional” agriculture. In his pioneering work, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, James Scott has criticized this focus on change-resistant societies, demonstrating instead that different economic and moral imperatives operate in peasant societies than those of market economies. In peasant societies innovation must support the central goal of physical survival. He describes the distinctive perspectives that inform a moral economy of peasant producers.

³Marilyn Waldman with Robert M. Baum, “Innovation as Renovation: The ‘Prophet’ as an Agent of Change,” in Michael A. Williams, et. al. eds. Innovation in Religious Traditions, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1002.

Living close to the subsistence margin and subject to the varagries of weather and the claims of outsiders, the peasant household has little scope for the profit maximization calculus of traditional neoclassical economics. Typically, the peasant cultivatoer seeks to avoid the failure that will ruin him rather than attempting a big, but risky, killing. In decision making parlance, his behavior is risk aversive; he minimizes the subjective probability of the maximum loss.⁴

In Barrington Moore's comparative work, he described the role of "religious sanctions" in ensuring community adherence to this "subsistence ethic" and to the cooperative activities that sustain it.⁵ I am not sure that I would be able to engage in what follows, a prophetic critique of local agricultural practices, without the insights of their pioneering studies.

Although more than sixty people have claimed that the supreme being revealed Itself to them, over the course of Diola history, from accounts of creation to the present day, I will limit my discussion here to the first prophet to direct much of her teachings to resistance to French colonial agricultural schemes. Alinesitoué Diatta was born in 1920 or 1921, in Kabrousse, the southernmost township in the French colony of Senegal, whose rice paddies extended southwards into the neighboring colony of Portuguese Guinea. Some of her successors, active since the independence of Senegal in 1960, have criticized post-colonial agricultural development programs

⁴James Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 4.

⁵Ibid., p. 6 and Barrington Moore Jr., Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, pp. 497-498.

or urged a return to long-forgotten crops. In this paper, however, I will limit my comments to Alinesitoué who began her prophetic career in 1941; was arrested by the French in January, 1943; tried and convicted under a legal code only applied to Africans, the Indigénat, later that year; and died in exile at Timbuctou less than a year later. Her fate was kept secret from her husband, her daughter, her followers among the Diola and neighboring ethnic groups, and from the Senegalese nation until 1983, when President Abdou Diouf sent a delegation to find out what had happened to her. It was in the Senegalese archives all along, though those particular documents were only declassified in 1983. She died of scurvy at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three.⁶

The Diola number approximately 650,000 people. The wisdom of the European partition of Africa left the Diola as a minority community in three different colonies: British Gambia, French Senegal, and Portuguese Guinea. Anthropologists have usually classified them as “acephalous” or “stateless,” describing the Diola as having had little in the way of specialized political institutions or centralized authority during most of their known history. Despite four hundred years of attempts to convert them, the Diola include the largest number of adherents of an indigenous religious tradition in the Senegambia region, which has been predominantly Muslim

⁶I have recently completed a book manuscript, submitted to a publisher, entitled: Messengers of God: Alinesitoué and the History of a Diola Women’s Prophetic Tradition I have seen the relevant documents about her death. See Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS), Dossier “Aline Sitoué Diatta et Revolt des Floupes,” special file without code numbers. I am including Bainouk prophets within the list of prophets, since they represent the earliest prophetic accounts in what is now a shared religious tradition. Research for this book was conducted with the support of the University of Missouri, Iowa State University, The Ohio State University, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, the Social Science Research Council, Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowships, The Institute for Advanced Study in the African Humanities at Northwestern University, and the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. Support for writing this work was provided by the same institutions and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University.

for over one hundred years. Rural Diola continue to rely on wet rice production for their staple crop, though peanuts have become an increasingly important crop, especially among northern Diola, since the late nineteenth century. Southern Diola resisted the spread of peanut farming until after the Second World War. Since the sixteenth century, travelers along the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa have admired Diola rice paddies and the system of dikes that protected them from salt water encroachment. Agronomists like Paul Pélissier and anthropologists like Olga Linares have lauded the Diola as the best wet rice farmers in West Africa.⁷ At the height of the Sahel drought of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Diola farmers continued to have rice reserves in their granaries.⁸

Diola religious traditions incorporate the idea of a supreme being, Emitai who is closely associated with the sky (*emit*), rain (*emitai ehlahl*) and the calendar year (*emit*) that extends from rainy season to rainy season. Central to the Diola religious tradition (*awasena*) is the idea that Emitai created a variety of lesser spirits (known as *ukine*), many of whom serve as intermediaries between humans and the supreme being. Within the context of a multiplicity of spirit shrines, there is a complex system of checks and balances that prevent the consolidation of authority in any one particular cult or its ritual specialists. Shrines are associated with virtually every form of

⁷Paul Pélissier, “Les Diola: Etude sur l’habitat des riz cultures de Basse Casamance,” Travaux du Département de Géographie, University of Dakar, 1958, p. 7 Olga Linares, Power, Prayer, and Production: The Jola of Casamance (Senegal), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁸This is no longer the case. The frequent droughts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as well as the growing urban Diola communities has led to labor shortages and declining harvests, though, as Joanne Davidson has so effectively shown, it has not led to a decline in the values attached to hard work in the Diola townships. Joanne Davidson, “We Work Hard: Customary Imperatives of the Diola Work Regime in the Context of Environmental and Economic Change,” African Studies Review, V. 52, #2, 2009, pp. 120-121.

economic activity ranging from blacksmithing, to palm wine tapping, to fishing, and of course to rice agriculture. There is even a town council shrine that sets wages and prices and enforces communal work obligations, such as work on the fences that keep livestock out of the rice paddies.⁹

The ability of Diola religion to continue to command the adherence of a substantial community of participants, particularly among the southern Diola, suggests that the religious system has continued to be able to offer compelling explanations and modes of understanding such diverse phenomena as drought, war, the raiding for captives associated with the Atlantic slave trade, the spiritual crisis of conquest, and the varied challenges of colonial rule and integration into a post-colonial state. In Shrines of the Slave Trade, focusing on the pre-colonial era, I link this ability of Diola religion to interpret these phenomena to many factors, including the existence of a Diola prophetic tradition that included at least fifteen men, claiming direct revelation from the supreme being.¹⁰ Since the colonial conquest there have been at least forty-five, two thirds of whom are women.¹¹ The term that I translate as prophet or messenger of God is an epithet, Emitai dabognol, literally “Emitai sent him/her” or “whom Emitai has sent.” Each of these prophets have provided specific teachings analyzing the problems confronting their communities and means of resolving them. Many of these concerns have focused on the procurement of rain, in an area where rainfall can vary by as much as fifty per cent per year and drought is common. It is only with

⁹Baum, Shrines. Francis G. Snyder, “Legal Innovations and Social Organization in a Peasant Community: A Senegalese Village Police,” Africa, Vol. 48, 1978, pp. 231-247.

¹⁰Robert M. Baum, Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹¹Baum, Messengers

the prophetic career of Alinesitoué, however, that these revelations are turned to the specific ways in which Diola communities should farm and how they should respond to French agricultural initiatives.

In this paper I hope to broaden the discussion of indigenous knowledge of agriculture to include insights that come from prophetic figures who claim that their authority comes from revelation from a supreme being. Alinesitoué, like other Diola prophets and community leaders, worked in the rice paddies as a child and as a young adult, until her revelations began. Although she claimed the authority of privileged communication from the Diola supreme being, Emitai, she also possessed a keen knowledge of Diola rice farming techniques that came from years of direct experience of every aspect in which women participated and observation of the work performed by men. Thus, I am suggesting that her teachings were empirically grounded as well as divinely inspired. Her prophetic authority buttressed what seemed to be reasonable and sound advice within a Diola society in which the procurement of rain and the assurance of an adequate harvest were economic, moral, and spiritual imperatives.

In the remainder of this paper, I will outline the broad parameters of Diola agricultural practices as I encountered them in the last quarter of the twentieth century and as described by scholars and colonial administrators since the First World War. Then I will discuss French colonial agricultural initiatives of the 1930s and early 1940s, and Alinesitoué's critique of these policies. I will conclude with a discussion of the importance of these prophetic critiques for the understanding of agricultural development, traditions of religious innovation amidst the disruptive forces of colonial rule, and the role of religious teachings and insights in understanding indigenous knowledge systems and their responses to external pressures for change in light of the needs of a colonial or national economic system.

DIOLA AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AMONG THE SOUTHERN DIOLA

(ESULALU)

According to archaeological sources, wet rice cultivation has been an important source of agricultural production for over two millennia. Roland Portères identifies the lower Casamance, the Gambia, and the Niger river valleys as the places where African species of rice, *oryza glaberrima* were first domesticated. The ethnic group that has been identified as Diola since the nineteenth century, as well as their Bainouk and Floup ancestors, have regarded wet rice farming as their primary source of grain since at least the early sixteenth century.¹² Husbands and wives and their children farm together. I would describe this as a family mode of production. Most rice paddies were individually owned, mostly by men, but some by women, and subject to sharp limits on their sale or how they were inherited. In order to understand the impact of French policies and Alinesitoué's teaching about agriculture, I briefly describe the many steps in the rice cultivation cycle and its relationship to other areas of community life. It is based both on ethnographic research of others and my own participation in and interviewing about Diola rice production.

Beginning soon after the harvest was completed, in early February, Diola men repaired the dikes that kept salt water, from the marshes, from encroaching on the deepest rice paddies. They also repaired the sluices and other irrigation devices utilized in maintaining proper water levels in the paddies throughout the growing season. While the men made these repairs, women prepared a fertilizer mixture of cow manure, ashes from the hearth, and burnt vegetation from the homestead. By April, these preparations were largely completed and women turned to one of the

¹²Olga Linares d'y Sapir, "Shell Middens of the Lower Casamance and Problems of Diola Protohistory," West African Journal of Archaeology, Vol 1, 1970, pp. 23-54. Roland Portères "Berceaux Agricoles primaires sur le Continent Africain," Journal of African History, vol. 3, 1962, pp. 195-211. Baum, Shrines, pp. 28-31.

most arduous tasks of the agricultural year, carrying by head portage hundreds of pounds of fertilizer, as many as a dozen kilometers, where they would be scattered in the rice paddies. In May and June, both men and women made sure that their farm implements were in proper working order. Men checked their *cadyendos*, a typically Diola long handled shovel or hand plow, carved from wood, with an iron cutting edge forged and attached by local blacksmiths.¹³ Women made sure that the baskets used for carrying rice seed, transplanted rice, and harvested rice, were all in good repair. The first rains in Casamance and Guinea-Bissau come in late May; in early June among the northern Diola, close to or within the Gambia. As the rains begin, women try to discern what type of rainy season is most likely and therefore which varieties of seed would be most successful. According to Olga Linares, a typical woman farmer has a working knowledge of about twenty-five different varieties of rice, each with its own demands for water, differing abilities to withstand salt encroachment or the sudden and unexpected cessation of rain, and which varieties mature rapidly for an early harvest. Women keep a number of different varieties, trading knowledge and surplus seed back and forth with other women in the townships or in adjacent area.¹⁴ Women decide which seed should be planted in each type of rice paddy, taking into account the pattern of rainfall that seems to be developing early in the season.

Beginning in late June or July, families head out to the edge of the rice paddies closest to

¹³This description is based on my participation and observation of agricultural practices from 1974-1975, 1976, 1977-1978, and 1996, as well as Louis Vincent Thomas, Les Diola: Essai d'analyse fonctionnelle sur une population du Basse Casamance, Dakar: IFAN, 1959-1960. Olga Linares, Power, Prayer, and Production. Yasmine Marzouk-Schmitz has written an excellent article on the *cadyendo*, including unsuccessful French attempts to manufacture a replacement for sale in the area. Yasmine Marzouk-Schmitz, "Instruments Aratoires, Système de Culture, et Différentiation Ethnique," Cahiers ORSTROM, ser. Sciences Humaines, 1984, vol. 28, pp. 399-425.

¹⁴Baum, Shrines, p. 30.

the forest or to the villages, to higher ground to prepare rice nurseries, where rice seed is sown and allowed to mature for approximately the first month. They may also use fenced areas of their own backyards. Men plow the furrows with their *cadyendos*. Women follow them sowing the seed and covering it with a little topsoil. At this time, fences that keep livestock out of the rice paddies and adjacent rice nurseries, are inspected. People who fail to maintain their portion of the livestock fence are fined. Livestock that find their way into the rice paddies once the rice nurseries are planted, are caught and confiscated by a local police force, known as *Amachala*.¹⁵ Assuming that the rains remain consistent, by late July women begin the process of gathering young rice plants from the nurseries in preparation for transplanting into the rice paddies. Men begin the most arduous part of their agricultural work, the plowing of the flooded rice paddies, lifting water-logged soil into furrows, while standing in water that can be more than waist deep. Women engage in the back-breaking labor of bending down and putting the young rice into the recently plowed furrows. Both men and women's labor during this phase continues until the work is done, perhaps as late as early October. Girls and boys help with age and strength appropriate tasks, usually following the gender division of labor outlined above. They also watch over the crops to keep birds and livestock away. The *kumachala* maintain their patrols to keep livestock out of the paddies as well. By early December, the harvest can begin. Early maturing varieties ripen first and are harvested first. Although this is seen as women's work, if there is a shortage of women's labor, men pitch in, given the imperative to bring in the harvest and protect it

¹⁵I was initiated into this village police. Running after pigs, goats, chickens, and cattle through the rice paddies is difficult work, well rewarded by a community where livestock are rarely consumed. The animals are sacrificed at the town council shrine of *Hutendookai*, and the meat is eaten by elders and the *kumachala* (plural of *amachala*). See Baum, *Shrines*, pp. 26-27, 31-32. . Snyder, "Legal."

from birds and other predators, as quickly as possible. Men and women each have a section of the granary and draw on their own reserves to meet family needs.

Wet rice farming has been central to a wide variety of other practices in Diola society. Marriages take place at the beginning of the rainy season so that new family units are ready for the planting season. Girls or boys who are seen as shirkers from rice farming will find it hard to find a suitable marriage partner. One's ability to perform agricultural tasks is also celebrated at one's funeral. Divorces, which are readily and frequently available in predominantly indigenous Diola communities are explicitly forbidden during the planting season and during the harvest. Whatever domestic troubles you might be having, you need to put them aside until the essential work of rice planting and harvesting is complete. Rice farming also organizes the ritual calendar of Diola society. The new year, *emit*, begins with the first rains of late May or early June, and is accompanied by a round of rain rituals at both men's and women's spirit shrines (*ukine*). Most religious rituals, however, are not held during the rainy season due to a lack of time away from farming and a lack of the palm wine essential for ritual libations. The ritual season begins after the planting is done. A harvest festival, accompanied by girls and boys wrestling matches, is held in early February, after the rice harvest is in. Historically, other crops were grown in backyard gardens only during people's leisure time, especially on the Diola day of rest, *Huyaye*, when only work in the rice paddies was forbidden. The rice paddies were entitled to a day of rest, not Diola farmers. A Diola proverb collected by Francis Snyder captures the importance of Diola rice farming: "The Diola was created in order that he farm (rice)."¹⁶

According to Olga Linares, Diola forms of rice cultivation could yield about kilos of

¹⁶Francis G. Snyder, "L'Evolution du droit foncier Diola de Basse Casamance (République du Sénégal)," Ph.D. Dissertation, Sorbonne, Paris, 1973, p. 170.

unthreshed rice per hectare, as long as there was adequate rainfall, an average of over 1600 millimeters of rain per year in Esulalu, which included one of the townships where Linares worked. Based on rice consumption rates, she estimated that the rice harvest in years without natural calamities were capable of producing large surpluses.¹⁷ This allowed local farmers to use some of their crop to buy essential goods at the local shops and to send some food to relatives in urban areas.

FRENCH AGRICULTURAL SCHEMES IN CASAMANCE

Since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, French officials have sought to make their first, major West African colony become a profitable economic venture. Their initial interests focused on slaves, gum Arabic, ivory and gold. By the 1830s French officials began to encourage peanut cultivation in central Senegal and in the middle Casamance. Only with the apparent pacification of the lower Casamance in the late nineteenth century did French officials begin to encourage this cash crop in Diola areas. Peanuts spread rapidly in areas where there was a shortage of suitable land for rice paddies and where rainfall, even in good years was barely sufficient for wet rice agriculture. Among the northern Diola, peanut cultivation became associated with the Mandinka of middle Casamance and the Gambia, who had adopted the crop nearly a half century earlier. Among the Mandinka and the Diola who became associated with them, men abandoned rice farming to concentrate on what appeared to be a more lucrative cash crop. This left women with all of the tasks associated with rice farming, a fifty per cent reduction in the rice cultivation work

¹⁷Linares, p. 168.

force, which caused a sharp decline in rice production.¹⁸

Among the southern Diola, who resisted both European colonization and the spread of Islam, peanuts only spread slowly, both as a result of the larger, better watered rice paddies characteristic of the southern Diola domains and because of southern Diola's deep suspicion of the Mandinka, Islam, and French colonial rule. Initially, French officials hoped that the Diola would supplement any decline in rice production in the same way that northern Senegalese fulfilled their growing demand for rice over millet, by purchasing rice from French colonies in Indochina and Madagascar, allowing French merchants to earn profits both from the peanut and rice trade. Under the Vichy French, agricultural officials distributed sacks of peanut seed and demanded that their "loan" of seed be paid back with two sacks of harvested peanuts, which was not an unfair proposition if people actually wanted to get established growing peanuts. In some cases, given the distribution of peanut seed during the "hungry season" when food supplies often ran short and people relied on mango fruit as an important food supplement, people ate the one sack of peanuts and then with the proceeds of their rice harvest purchased two sacks of peanuts at harvest time, when prices were at the lowest. So this resulted in little increase in peanut production among the southern Diola.

French agricultural initiatives in the lower Casamance, the Cercle of Ziguinchor, also included new rice varieties imported from South, Southeast, and East Asia. These were varieties of *oryza sativa*, or Asian rice, though they were referred to in Casamance and Portuguese Guinea as European rice. Generally, they offered higher crop yields and larger kernels, offering the

¹⁸ We do not have reliable statistics on rice production in these areas, particularly given local farmers' suspicions of government intentions and a general reluctance to allow anyone but immediate family members in their granaries.

possibility of larger harvests. In general, however, they were more subject to drought, less resistant to local plant diseases, and their larger seeds were often offset by thinner husks, making them more vulnerable to animal and insect pests.¹⁹

Within the colony of Senegal, French officials found that the most tenacious resistance came from the Diola and related groups in the lower Casamance, where each township had to be subdued separately and where, even after military defeat, passive resistance obstructed the collection of taxes, the provision of forced labor, and the meeting of quotas for military conscription (beginning in WWI).²⁰ Since the late nineteenth century, local French officials attributed Diola shrine priests and women as leaders of the opposition to colonial initiatives. In a political report from 1918, a colonial official noted the connections between women, shrine elders, and food requisitions by French authorities.

For the food for the detachment to be furnished, one must first stop, mercilessly, the influential fetishist leaders and some women, who by their advice and their actions push the inhabitants to refuse to carry out our orders. The arrest of women could seem to people who are not familiar with the Diola mentality, excessive and useless.

However, whether we want to or not, we must deal with these women and we will be certain to have them against us. One must remember that in 1915, the women of Karouate were able to block the recruitment in the Circle of Kamobeul and

¹⁹Vandana Shiva has noted a similar problem with the high yield crop varieties associated with the Green Revolution. Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development, London: Zed Books, 1989, pp. 123, 133.

²⁰Christian Roche, Conquête et Résistance des peuples de Casamance (1850-1920), Dakar: Nouvelle Editions Africaines, 1978 .

obligated Administrator de Coppet to let all of the recruits that he had taken go free.²¹

The Great Depression exposed the fragility of French agricultural plans as prices for peanuts plummeted, providing a vivid reminder of the failure of earlier French initiatives involving the harvesting of wild rubber.²² With the fall of France, in 1940, and the cutting off of Indochinese supplies of rice, the Senegalese staple food, Vichy administrators in Senegal needed Diola rice and livestock even more than Diola conscripts, forced payment, or taxes in money. As one colonial report noted: “The interruption of maritime relations with the French colonies that had habitually furnished the necessary rice for Senegal (Indochina, Madagascar) put Senegal under the obligation to subsist entirely on his own resources..”²³ Seeing the Casamance as a granary for a hungry colony, they shifted the payment of taxes from money to rice and cattle. However, this came during a period of intense drought and severe crops failures from 1940 to 1942. According to one Diola elder, it was so bad that “no one harvested rice. Everything was dry.”²⁴ The year 1941 experienced the lowest rainfall in over twenty years; Diola areas received only 60% of the mean rainfall. As the Catholic priests stationed at Ziguinchor noted: “A rainy season with exceptionally little rain. With the war which has deprived us of imported rice from the Far eEaast, famine is not

²¹Political Report, 1918, ANS 11 D 1/37. See also Direction Generale des Affaires Politiques, April 4, 1941, ANS 13 G 13.

²²Peter Mark, “Urban Migration, Cash-Cropping and Calamity: The Spread of Islam among the Diola of Boulouf (Senegal), 1900-1940,” The African Studies Review, 1978, Vol. 21, pp. 1-12.

²³Colonie du Sénégal, “Rapport sur la situation economique (Année 1942), Archives Nationales du France- Section Outre Mer (ANFOM) 14 MI 1838.

²⁴Interview with Sinyendikaw Diatta, Kadjinol-Kafone, 1978. ANS 2 G 79, ANS 13 G 13.

just a theoretical possibility.”²⁵

THE PROPHETIC CAREER OF ALINESITOUÉ DIATTA

It was in this context that a teen-age girl named Alinesitoué Diatta became one of the first women to seek dry season employment in the capital of French West Africa, Dakar. For several years she worked as a maid, One day, early in 1941, while walking in the crowded Sandaga Market, she felt the presence of Emitai. Compelled by an auditory vision, Alinesitoué left the market and walked the few blocks down to the Atlantic shoreline. There “she dug a hole in the sand and water entered at the bottom. Thus the object of her mission was revealed to her, to obtain rain.”²⁶ Initially, her primary response was fear, fear of the enormity of her experience and of the task that she was being called on to perform. Finally, fearing for her life, she accepted Emitai’s directives and returned to her home township of Kabrousse, astride the border with Portuguese Guinea.²⁷ There, she summoned the elders of her township and revealed the nature of her visions. She told them that Emitai had given her two spirit shrines that would help them to obtain rain and that Emitai was continuing to speak to her directly through dreams and visions.

²⁵Sénégal: Serie Meterologique: Rapports Mensuel et Annuel de la Station principale de Ziguinchor, 1944,” [1920-1944], 2G 44 89 ANS. Interview with Alololi Bassène, Kadjinol-Ebankine, 9/2/96. Boite 803, Sénégal, Ziguinchor, Mission St. Antoine de Padoue de Ziguinchor, Journal, 1931-1966, September, 1941. Archives des Pères du Saint-Esprit (PSE).

²⁶Jean Girard, Genèse du pouvoir charismatique en Basse Casamance (Sénégal), Dakar: IFAN, 1969, p. 251. Interview with Papo;nah Diatta, Mlomp-Etebemaye, 3/21/78. Waldman and Baum, pp. 248-253.

²⁷Interview with Goolai Diatta, Kabrousse-Mossor, 4/29/78. Girard, p. 240.

In the midst of an ecological crisis caused by severe drought; in the wake of a renewed threat of conversion to Christianity, symbolized by the creation of a new Apostolic Prefecture in the Casamance region, complete with locally born bishop; and in the midst of increasing demands by the French for rice, labor, and soldiers, as well as changes in their agricultural production, Alinesitoué was able to create a religious movement that united northern and southern Diola, neighboring ethnic groups, and people from the Gambia and Portuguese Guinea. She drew connections between apparently independent phenomena which contributed to a deeper understanding of the crises besetting her people. By demonstrating such linkages, she both intensified their perceived effects and rendered them more comprehensible and therefore resistable. In direct response to Catholic claims to privileged access to the supreme being through a holy book, she emphasized Emitai's direct revelations. She introduced two new spirit shrines which stressed the role of Emitai as their source. She revived the southern Diola market and religious day of *Huyaye*, a Diola Sabbath, every sixth day, which gave the rice paddies, not the people, a day of rest. Ony work in the rice paddies was prohibited; other labor was not affected.

Although she received two spirit shrines from Emitai, she only shared one of them with the pilgrims who came to visit her at her home in Kabrousse. This involved the sacrifice of a black bull and other livestock and a communal celebration lasting six days and six nights. No material of foreign origin could be used in the ritual; no clothes in foreign styles, no bowls or kitchen utensils of foreign manufacture, and no spices or foods that were seen as having foreign origins. The week long celebration reaffirmed the collective basis of Diola life, which had been disrupted by rural migration to urban areas, military service, and growing religious divisions. At each site of a *Kasila* ritual, the entire neighborhood took their meals together in the public meeting place. After meals they performed dances in honor of ancestors and lesser spirits. People slept in the

meeting place, for the entire six days of the ritual. There were no distinctions of social rank and relatively few on age or gender.²⁸ In its mode of selecting priests of *Kasila* through divination, they left the choice of priests to Emitai. This marked a decisive break with prior practices, of choosing those most able to afford the elaborate sacrifices that had become so important during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.²⁹ In the selection process for *Kasila*, there was no distinction between female and male, rich and poor, child or adult; anyone could become a priest of *Kasila*, performer of the community ritual, the basis of all well being. In Alinesitoué's emphasis on open access to ritual knowledge, the inclusion of the entire community in all aspects of the ritual, the shared meals, and sleeping in the public square, she created a ritual space that Victor Turner has called "communitas." a ritual state in which the growing divisions in colonized Diola communities could be healed.³⁰

Her visions provided far more than innovative ritual. They offered an explanation of the drought in the extension of French designs to transform Diola territory (*essouk ediola*) into a European land (*essouk ehloumo*), with the accompaniment of alien rice varieties (Asiatic rather than African varieties of rice), which offered higher yields, but less resistance to drought, disease, and animal pests. A part of this plan was the spread of peanuts as a cash crop, which lured men out of a rice-centered family mode of production and into the clearing away of valuable forest areas. Under Vichy, a part of this plan, no longer separated from the formal colonial program,

²⁸Interviews with Etienne Manga, Kadjinol-Kandianka, 7/30/76; Hilaire Djibune, Kagnout-Ebrowuaye, 5/14/78. Group Discussion with Gilbert Bassène and Ndeye Diatta, Eloudia and Dakar-Liberté 5, 6/19/07.

²⁹Baum, *Shrines*, passim.

³⁰Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

was the spread of a European religion, which offered no rituals to ensure the fertility of the land.³¹

PROPHETIC CRITIQUES OF FRENCH COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL SCHEMES

Central to her teachings was Alinesitoué's emphatic rejection of French agricultural policies for southern Senegal. These were designed to increase the cultivation of cash crops, primarily peanuts, and, particularly since the beginning of the Second World War, the expansion of rice production as a staple crop for sale to northern Senegalese. Colonial development specialists hoped to link the Diola to the imperial economy as producers of staple foods for all of Senegal and an export crop of peanuts to bolster the economy of the metropole. Working through agricultural agents, French officials encouraged the cultivation of peanuts in upland areas and the spread of Asian varieties of rice in the lowland rice paddies. These new varieties offered the promise of higher yields, but were more vulnerable to drought, disease, and animal pests. Colonial officials also sought to eliminate the cultivation of upland rice (*eponponai*) which used the same types of upland fields as peanut crops.

In opposition to French initiatives, Alinesitoué taught that people must continue to grow Diola varieties of rice, though she permitted the cultivation of the new varieties. Diola rice (*oryza glaberimma*) was seen as a gift of Emitai. It was rooted in Diola territories and enabled the Diola to fulfill what they regarded as their basic covenantal obligation to grow rice.³² Alinesitoué taught her followers that these new rice varieties were foreign, that they did not belong to a Diola

³¹Interview with Father Diamacoune Senghor, Senghalene, 11/24/78. Robert M. Baum, "Development Prophets," in Mathlahasedi: Education and Development for and from the Rural Periphery, V. 12, 1993, pp. 41-43.

³²Interviews with Ramon Sambou, Kadjinol-Ebankine, 7/28/76; Father Diamacoune Senghor, Senghalene, 11/24/78.

land. Indeed, the new rice was seen as a part of a French plan to alienate the land entirely, to transform their home territory into a European land where European religion would dominate. Indeed, French varieties of seed were delivered to men, rather than to the women who had historically chosen which types of seed to plant. French policies were an important factor in Emitai's decision to withhold rain in the 1930s and 1940s. Crop failures proved most acute in paddies planted with "European" rice. Lest one think of her as atavistic or opposed to innovation, it is important to stress that she did not ban the new rice altogether. In a way that was a harbinger of campaigns to preserve seed diversity, Alinesitoué said the new varieties could be grown, but not to the exclusion of Diola rice, which was the only variety that could be used in religious rituals.³³ In the terms of a moral economy, Asian rice only offered higher yields in good years and greater threats of crop failure and famine in bad ones. As Fiona Mackenzie pointed out in a Kenyan context, though it would apply equally to the Diola: "African agricultural knowledge, specifically women's knowledge of food crops and land management was devalued."³⁴

Alinesitoué was also concerned about French interference with the particularly hearty varieties of rice, known as upland rice (*riz de montagne, eponponai*). This drought resistant, but low-yielding cluster of varieties competed for upland land with potential peanut cultivation, which was a major part of colonial agricultural schemes. I was initially somewhat skeptical of this emphasis on resistance to agricultural reform, since it was stressed by the leader of the secessionist Mouvement des forces démocratiques Casamançais (MFDC), Father Diamacoune Senghor, who

³³It is unclear if the French were aware that she permitted the cultivation of the new varieties, but they were aware of her insistence on traditional rice crops. Girard, pp. 218. 247-248, 264. "Aliin Sitooye Jaata," p. 9.

³⁴A Fiona D. Mackenzie, Land, Ecology, and Resistance in Kenya, 1880-1952, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p. 107.

preferred to emphasize her political and economic influence rather than her religious teachings or visionary experience. I lost my skepticism, however, when I recorded a song of Alinesitoué that spoke of Baliba, one of her nicknames:

The young Balibah.

The young Balibah and her child.

Ohoway, Ohoway.

Who is looking for upland rice.

Young Balibah, who gave us our rice.

Young Balibah, Let us pray!

Let us pray! Let us pray!³⁵

This song was not the only evidence of clashes over agricultural development. Colonial archives suggest that in 1937, local French officials imposed a policy that specifically blocked the cultivation of upland rice in that part of Casamance where she lived. The song appears to be a direct response to French policies aimed at protecting peanut cultivation from being pushed aside by a hardy staple crop during a period of frequent droughts.³⁶ The importance of upland rice in times of drought was one of the many reasons why Alinesitoué banned the cultivation of peanuts, the main export crop of northern Senegalese which French administrators hoped to extend to the

³⁵Song of Alinesitoué performed by Atome Diatta of Kadjinol-Kafone, at Dakar-Fass, 6/12/02. Recorded, transcribed and translated by Robert M. Baum.

³⁶D 1 352 ANS (P. 133 of 2002 notebook).

southern Diola.³⁷ She also knew that these upland areas were the primary sources of grasses that could be used for thatch, herbal medicines, wild fruits, firewood, palm wine and palm oil, huntable game, and other products.

Alinesitoué was well aware of the diminishing attention given to rice cultivation in Muslim Diola areas bordering the Gambia, where they grew peanuts, and how the burden of rice cultivation had been shifted from men to women.³⁸ The peak labor demands for planting peanuts came at the same time as the need to plant rice. Peanut cultivation struck at the heart of a family mode of production in which husband and wife shared the burdens of labor intensive rice cultivation. In those areas where peanut cultivation became widespread, men and their sons spent their time working the peanut fields, leaving the more arduous tasks of plowing the paddies and maintaining dikes and irrigation works to their already overworked wives and daughters. As Mamadou Diarra described it, both Islam and peanut cultivation led men “to focus on the cultivation of peanuts and millet, abandoning the rice paddies to women who, as a result of this hard work, age quickly.”³⁹ Men controlled the cash proceeds from the sale of peanuts, and the heightened status that came from making money. This marginalized women from the increasingly important monetary sector of the economy. As men neglected the dikes and irrigation systems in favor of peanut farming, rice yields declined. She saw the spread of peanut cultivation as an even greater threat to the region’s important forest resources. As Omer Ngandoul reported, Alinesitoué told people to “Abandon peanuts...Stop cultivating peanuts

³⁷Girard, p. 218.

³⁸Linares, pp. 191-199 .

³⁹Mamadou Diarra, Monographie du Departement de Bignona, Dakar: Ecole Normale d’Administration du Sénégal, 1964, p. 69.

because they will lead to the cutting down of our forests...the forests will be destroyed.”⁴⁰

Peanut farmers could use their profits to purchase imported rice from Indochina (until 1940) and the French profited from both transactions. On the other hand, Diola farmers became dependent on world commodity prices for the sale of their cash crop and the purchase of their daily staple, rice. Alinesitoué was well aware of Muslim dominance of the peanut trade and the close association of peanut cultivation and the conversion of northern Diola to Islam.⁴¹ Peanut cultivation disrupted a ritual calendar that was focused on various stages in the preparation, cultivation, and harvesting of rice, the staple crop not only of the Diola diet, but of the Diola imagination. In her critiques of French agricultural policies, Alinesitoué became a powerful spokesperson for a Diola moral economy. She reaffirmed a central Diola idea of rice farming as a sacred task which provided both grain for food and for trade, but which could be neglected for more ephemeral types of agricultural production. Alinesitoué saw rice farming as crucial to the preservation of Diola autonomy and cultural identity.

Finally, Alinesitoué sought to revive a Diola day of rest, *Huyaye*, every sixth day; a day of rest for the rice paddies, not for people, or for other types of land. This created tensions with Diola Christians who preferred to rest on Sunday, something that she did not object to as long as they also observed *Huyaye*. Converts to the new faiths could continue to practice their new religions, as long as they did not neglect their obligations to the community by withholding their spiritual power from community-wide rituals and the observance of a day without work in the rice paddies. In a sense, Alinesitoué saw the obligations to observe *Huyaye* and to participate in the

⁴⁰Group Discussion with Catherine Diatta and Omer Ngandoul, Djivent, 9/19/96.

⁴¹Peter A. Mark, “Urban.”

rites of *Kasila* as part of a Diola civil religion, as a part of being Diola, as essential for Emitai to provide the community with life-giving rain and an abundant harvest.⁴² The refusal of some Christians, at the insistence of French missionaries; suspicions that they were involved in the French decision to arrest Alinesitoué, and the return of the drought, in 1944, after her arrest, led people to Diola religious leaders to see these religious divisions as one of the roots of the problems. “Christians broke the country... The Christians came and it stopped raining.”⁴³

EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSIONS

Alinesitoué’s new shrines attracted pilgrims from throughout the Diola areas of Casamance and from neighboring peoples in Senegal, Gambia, and Portuguese Guinea. Her rejection of French agricultural plans and French religious teachings indirectly encouraged Diola peasants to intensify their resistance to French taxation and military conscriptions. Villagers often reminded colonial tax collectors of how they had done nothing for the community, but still demanded a tax and contrasted them with Alinesitoué who helped procure rain, but demanded nothing more than the skulls of the sacrificial animals. It should be pointed out that her own township of Kabrousse met its tax, conscription, and forced labor obligations. Violent confrontations, albeit on a small scale, were generated by French efforts to seize cattle and rice in Ediamat, Huluf, and Esulalu, areas to the north and east of Alinesitoué’s Kabrousse. These

⁴²Djib Diedhiou refers to *Kasila* as a “secular rite.” Djib Diedhiou, “La Jeanne d’Arc de l’Afrique,” *Le Soleil*, 10/11/85.

⁴³Interview with Ramond Sambou, Kadjinol-Ebankine, 7/28/76. Interview with Terence Galandiou Diouf Sambou, Kadjinol-Ebankine, 3/30/78.

incidents were the subject of Sembène Ousmane's film, "Emitai."⁴⁴ French Catholic missionaries, though not the Casamançais bishop, lobbied colonial administrators to arrest the prophet whose teachings had contributed to a precipitous decline in the number of their followers. Vichy French officials, isolated and understaffed, watched anxiously as her influence continued to grow. Early in 1943, the Vichy-appointed Governor General of French West Africa reported that:

this visionary is not the first woman who has created or tried to create an independent religious cult in the lower Casamance... These rudimentary populations of the lower Casamance are very sensitive to such movements; the influence of this visionary could disappear quite rapidly...But in the troubled times in which we live, it could come to pass that, to the contrary, the influence of the visionary wings on the increase, and because we could not tolerate a threat to our authority, I was led to give the necessary orders to Colonel Sajous.⁴⁵

He ordered Sajous to arrest Alinesitoué, which they did in late January, 1943, less than a year and half after she had begun to teach. She was tried under the *Indigénat*, the Native Law Code, for "having incited the people of Oussouye to systematic disobedience" and for causing

⁴⁴"Emitai," 19. For a critical review of the film, see Robert M. Baum, "Tradition and Resistance in Ousmane Sembene's *Emitai* and *Ceddo*" in Vivien Bickford Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, eds. Black and White in Colour, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007.

⁴⁵"Le Gouverneur du Sénégal à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général -Haut Commissaire de l'Afrique Française, Direction des Affaires politiques et administratives," #551/APA, October 30, 1942, ANS 13 G 13 versement 17, "Affaire Alinesitoué Diatta, ANS."

embarrassment to French authorities.⁴⁶ According to the transcripts of her trial, Alinesitoué responded by “affirming that she was an envoy of God, who had appeared to her several time and all she did was ‘transmit the directives He had dictated.’ She rejected in the same fashion any participation in the revolt and all responsibility for its instigation.”⁴⁷ She was exiled to Timbuctou for ten years, but died of scurvy in less than one year.⁴⁸ After her arrest the drought returned. The French arrest of one “whom Emitai had sent” was a bitter blow. As one elder told me: “When the Europeans seized her, they broke the country.”⁴⁹

Alinesitoué grew up with a detailed knowledge of Diola rice cultivation from performing the “women’s work” for her family. That was not, however, what gave her the authority to critique the agricultural schemes developed in Dakar and Paris which sought to incorporate the Diola into a colonial economic system. With the insights she claimed from privileged communications from Emitai, Alinesitoué saw these policies as a major part of a grave threat to the economic and cultural autonomy of Diola communities. She saw the emphasis on foreign rice as threatening the sustainability of Diola families, especially if they gave up knowledge of indigenous varieties that were seen as spiritually situated in relation to the land and to the supreme being. With the growing concern about the loss of seed diversity and the resultant growing vulnerability of food supplies throughout the world, Alinesitoué’s insistence on the continued planting of local seeds

⁴⁶Girard, p. 225. Interview with Teté Diadhiou, Ziguinchor, 2/1/79. Teté was the interpreter and guide employed by the French when Alinesitoué was arrested.

⁴⁷Dossier “Aline Sitoué Diatta et Revolte des Floups” ANS, no file number.

⁴⁸Interview with Fulgence Sagna, Ministry of Culture, Republic of Senegal, 5/31/94. Sagna was part of the official Senegalese delegation sent to Mali to find out what had happened to her, in 1983.

⁴⁹Interview with Ramon Sambou, Kadjinol-Ebankine, 7/28/76.

was not atavistic, but prescient and prophetic. With her understanding of the full implications of the spread of peanut cultivation for Diola autonomy, family relations, and religious life, she argued that the peanut was not spiritually situated in relation to the land or to Emitai. Instead, its cultivation required the cutting down of forests and the resultant loss of palm wine and other palm products, herbal medicines, wood, game, and thatch that would force the Diola more fully into the vagaries of a colonial marketplace. Both the price of peanuts and rice that they grew would be determined in that marketplace, along with the price of the imported rice that would have to be substituted for their local production. During her journeys as a migrant worker to Dakar, she noticed northern Diola rice paddies left solely to the agricultural labor of women, while men focused their attention on the less arduous, but monetarily remunerative task of planting peanuts. This disrupted the family mode of production that had been the cornerstone of Diola agriculture for generations. It threatened a ritual calendar that began with the preparation for the first rains in May or June. It challenged the growing roles of the women's fertility shrines (*Ehugna*) as well as their male counterparts who controlled powerful rain shrines. According to Alinesitoué, it violated a covenant between Emitai and the Diola that required the Diola to farm rice.

In this paper, I have focused on the prophet Alinesitoué's critiques of French colonial agricultural plans as formulated during the 1930s and during the brief Vichy regime in Senegal. She cautioned people against using new varieties of rice that were untested over the long term and were not seen as spiritually rooted in the soil of the region. She contrasted that with Diola rice that had been domesticated in the region, was seen as a gift of Emitai, and was rooted in the localness of Diola lands. She taught that only Diola rice could be used in ritual, though the new rice varieties could be planted, but they could not replace *oryza glaberrima*. Her teachings, based on what she claimed were direct communications from the supreme being, in many ways preceded

the concerns about seed diversity that have become part and parcel of critiques of the Green Revolution and the growing influence of an agricultural industry bent on standardization. She urged people to give the land a day of rest to restore its fertility and to enhance their sense of community through a day of relative leisure. Finally, she urged people to continue to grow upland rice because it was a hardy plant that could flourish even in times of drought.

Her most controversial teaching in relation to French agricultural projects, were her emphatic rejection of peanut cultivation which she saw as a direct attack on a Diola family-based form of rice agriculture. In the Mandinguized, peanut-growing areas of northern Casamance, Diola men had abandoned rice farming to their wives and daughters, using a portion of their earnings from the sale of peanuts to purchase imported rice. Women's work was dramatically increased and the status of that labor sharply reduced because it was associated with the subsistence sector. She saw the introduction of peanuts as bringing a small amount of cash to rural Diola, but at the expense of their autonomy and their way of life. She feared that the cutting down of forest areas would deprive them of areas of thatch, forcing them to find alternative roofing materials. She feared that the loss of forest would reduce their ability to harvest palm wine or make palm oil, to gather medicines and wild fruits, and for men to hunt.

However, she was particularly concerned about the impact of French programs on women. Government imposed seed varieties would deprive women of their leadership roles in the selection of seed according to their sense of the course of the rainy season. The pressure to grow peanuts dramatically increased women's work while lowering its status to mere subsistence work. Women had already been marginalized by the spread of Islam and Christianity. Agriculture had been an area of a gendered division of labor, but not rigidly so, and where both men and women's work were valued. French agricultural policies brought that into question.

In this paper I have argued that prophets claiming direct revelation from the supreme being and other religious leaders may provide valuable insights into locally oriented programs of agricultural development. Although the idiom of revelation or traditional authority may be unfamiliar to those working in more applied areas, such terms should not deter people from paying close attention to the keen insights that these religious leaders, who are also experienced farmers, may provide to those who wish to promote agricultural sustainability in a vibrant rural sector.