

Barefoot Behind Bars, *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*, July – September 2000, Vol 11(3), pp 46 – 49 Joan Baxter

By Joan baxter

Early afternoon in Bamako and the Malian capital is an inferno; any pavement that exists is hot enough to roast a sheep — whole. The double-carriageway bridge spanning the River Niger shimmers with heat waves. Luxury sedans and 4 x 4 vehicles whiz past, air conditioners humming. The somewhat less privileged are in ailing private cars, crammed into green mini-vans, or driving mopeds belching dark fumes. The even lesser privileged are on bicycles, or taking what is known in Mali as the ‘Hausa Train’ — footing it across the bridge. They wear plastic thongs or whatever footwear they can afford to protect their feet from the sizzling pavement on the bridge.

Into the picture, comes a phantom-like image materialising out of the thick smog that shrouds the Malian capital on a typical day in the year 2000. This pedestrian is dressed all in white, striding along in his white turban and robe of unbleached, hand-spun cotton. He could have walked right out of the Koran, or the Bible. He carries a wooden staff; a gourd and a cotton satchel slung over his shoulder. On his feet — nothing at all.

His name is Mahamadou Togola, he’s thirty years old, and he’s a member of the highly controversial Muslim sect known as the *Pieds Nus* – literally ‘barefoot people’. Along with shoes, the Barefoot sect shuns all that is modern or luxurious, all that wasn’t there in the time of the Prophet Mohamed, 1420 years ago. That includes electricity, fans, telephones, radios, television, Maggi cubes, motorised vehicles and grinding mills, man-made fabrics, machine-made clothes, imported styles, glass, plastic, Coca Cola, and money — anything that smacks of ‘*la belle vie*’ from the West. They reject just about everything that other Malians are just starting to enjoy — or at least to crave.

Togola has been walking for hours (he doesn’t know how many because he doesn’t wear a watch). He’s covered some twenty kilometers over rocky paths, thorny fields and hot pavement to get this far. It will take him another half hour or so to reach his destination — the central prison in the steaming squalor of downtown Bamako.

Not coincidentally, this is where I am also headed (in one of those motorised vehicles, not on foot and certainly not barefoot). Once again, I’m trying to get into the prison to interview the guru of the Barefoot sect. First time, the guards panicked and sent me packing with my camera before I’d had a chance to pose a single question. Next I tried high-level official channels, approaching the minister of justice, who handed me a dodgy line about the law forbidding visits with the sect leader before his trial. This time I’ve quietly gone way below the level of ministers and attorney generals to acquire an ordinary pass for a ‘personal visit’ with the Barefoot guru, left all the journalistic paraphernalia — press card, camera, tape recorder — at home.

I’ve already met several times with members of this reclusive sect, visited one of their hamlets outside Bamako where Togola and half a dozen sect members live. While the barefooted men don’t shake my hand – the Koran forbids this – they’ve been remarkably gracious, considering that I am a non-Muslim who represents the very world they reject completely. They sat on white sheepskins and fingered their prayer beads while explaining to me that they practise Islam the way it is written in the Koran — word for word. Two said they had gladly submitted to Sharia law, having themselves ‘cleansed’ by a hundred lashes of the whip before they joined the sect, or as they put it, ‘removed themselves from this world’.

They recounted in intimate detail the story of how fifteen years ago, their leader, Chiek Ibrahim Kalim Kanouté was a ‘brilliant student at a technical college in Bamako, without great ambition, hope or faith enough to pray’. Then he experienced a series of three night-time visitations from an apparition shrouded in white robes and light, telling him to get up for early morning prayers. During that third visitation, the apparition shouted so loudly that Kanouté tumbled out of bed in shock and raced to the washroom to perform his ablutions. He was barefoot then, and has been ever since.

Next he spent a year of ‘spiritual solitude in the bush’, during which his disciples maintained he ‘absorbed the teachings of the Koran, directly from the Prophet Mohamed’. He came to be known as the ‘crazy man who lives in the tree trunk’. Then, slowly, people far and wide began coming to him for healing and decided he wasn’t crazy at all. He healed with prayers, refusing money and asking only that people take up the Word of the Koran. In this way, the sect began to grow and to spread.

I asked them if it didn’t pain terribly to walk barefoot.

‘Yes, but that pain is what we feel when God is absorbing man’s sins.’

‘And how do you survive if you don’t use money?’

‘We grow millet and sorghum, harvest honey, fish, raise livestock. When we need something we can’t grow, like this cotton we wear, we barter with our own produce.’

I wanted to know about Barefoot women, whom I could hear inside huts sealed with straw mats. The men said they ‘protect’ their wives who stay out of sight in the compound, inside their huts when strangers were present. I had only their word that the women were happy Barefoot apostles.

‘They do not ask for millions of CFA francs for their hand in marriage as most women do these days, they ask only for a cotton robe,’ said one sect member. ‘Even marriage today has been corrupted. You see this country full of so-called Holy Men, Marabouts, preaching the Koran while they run after fast woman, in luxury cars and in big villas. This is not God’s way.’

But what about the murder charges? Was that God’s way? For that, they said I should see their leader.

So here I am now on this sweltering afternoon, waiting for the prison doors to open at two-thirty. Many people have suggested I’m ‘as crazy as the *Pieds Nus*’ for going near this sect that has so unsettled established Islamic associations and the authorities in Mali, outraged the legal community. In August 1998, Judge Oumar Ba was brutally hacked to death in the town of Dioila, about 130 kilometres east of the capital. Two sect members were charged with murder, the sect leader charged with complicity. They have been in prison awaiting trial since September 1998.

Despite his incarceration, Kanouté and the Barefoot sect have never been more in the public eye. Every day, flocks of barefooted men make their way across the bridge and into town to visit their spiritual guide. The Oumar Ba Association, which sprang up after the judge’s murder, maintain that the sect is ‘fanatic and dangerous, growing too fast for public safety’. They say they hope that Kanouté will remain behind bars for a long, long time.

But even confined to prison, the Barefoot guru wields considerable influence, as I am about to discover. Thanks to Diougouss, a popular radio personality in Bamako who has taken up the Barefoot cause, several sect members who have charmed the prison guards, and that

visitor's pass, this time I make it past the burly guards at the prison doors. We find Kanouté surrounded by twenty Barefoot men seated on straw mats inside a large cell.

I'm given a bench to sit on in deference to the coddled world I come from. Kanouté, thirty-five years old, has an extraordinary expression of serenity on his youthful angular face. He sports a small goatee and a bright smile that extends into his eyes. It is easy to imagine how appealing he and his simplistic doctrine must be to a generation of young people steeped in poverty, unemployment and despair, how much of a threat he must seem to the authorities. Half of the sect members with him today are fellow inmates whom he has converted.

Kanouté appears indifferent to his upcoming trial at the hands of judges and laws he does not recognise. 'Before the murder, the judge was locking up our members in Dioila. One man, ninety years old man, died in a cell,' he alleges. 'On the day the judge was killed, I was in Segou, not Dioila. Only two of those who were present are here in prison with me. The other two were killed by the security forces and hunter societies that same day. In all, they killed eleven of my disciples. How can they judge us for the murder of one man? In Segou there are fourteen of my disciples in prison on no charges at all. And they call this a state of law. But,' he adds, 'this is all God's will.'

He claims that there are about ten thousand adherents to the Barefoot doctrine, impossible to verify given that there are no records. But its rapid growth suggests that the sect has touched a sympathetic chord with many ordinary people fed up with want for material well-being that leads them into temptation they can never satisfy, temptation that many Malians say is eroding morality in the country.

Mamoud Dicko, who heads an umbrella organisation of Islamic associations in Mali, sees the sect as a reaction to a rapidly changing world from which the youth of his country feel excluded. 'They are without horizons,' he says. 'Some turn to theft and crime. Others, like the Barefoot people, turn to God and await miracles. They are not crazy. They are very sincere in what they do and believe. And there is no money trickery involved as there is in many sects,' he says, referring to the recent death of a thousand members of a Christian cult in Uganda. Dicko doesn't share widespread fears that the Barefoot sect could become a major force in Mali, where Islam has very deep and established roots. He is wary of zealots and dogma that can lead to murder. He is equally doubtful that anyone can wake up one day with instant knowledge of the Koran and God.

But even if many people are sceptical, it is evident from watching Kanouté and his disciples in that prison cell that they are without any doubts that they are 'with God'. A guard enters to tell us it's time to leave, the half hour is up. We exit the prison, and move across the mud alley to a kiosk run by a man who has become a fervent supporter of the sect over the past two years. There, discussion turns to the long-awaited trial. Sect members tell me that the authorities will find out what they're up against when they attempt to judge Kanouté in one of their courts of law. 'What is that?' I ask. 'God,' they reply.

The legal community points out that Kanouté is being tried for his alleged involvement in the murder of a judge, not for his faith. But one lawyer says the trial threatens to be very tricky – and potentially explosive. 'This is just how people treated the Prophet in his time on earth. We are in a difficult position. There are two possibilities. Either Kanouté really is a messenger, a kind of prophet. Or . . . he is crazy. Either way, no court of law should try to judge him.'