

David Boilat

DATE OF BIRTH 23 April 1814
PLACE OF BIRTH Saint-Louis, Senegal
DATE OF DEATH 19 December 1901
PLACE OF DEATH Nantouillet, France

BIOGRAPHY

David Boilat, at times also known as Paul David or Pierre David Boilat, was a Roman Catholic priest, best known for his literary work. He was born on 23 April 1814 in Saint-Louis in present-day Senegal, the son of a French father and a Senegalese mother named Marie Montel; both apparently died when he was still young. Aged 13, Boilat was among a group of teenagers sent to France by Sr Anne-Marie Javouhey, who founded the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny and whose vision for an indigenous church hinged on the crucial role envisaged for French-educated indigenous teachers, clergy and religious. Boilat was one of the few who eventually returned to West Africa; most of the children died in France.

In 1840, Boilat and two of his countrymen (Arsène Fridoil and Jean Pierre Moussa) were ordained by the Bishop of Carcassonne. Soon after his return to West Africa in 1843, he was asked by the governor, Louis Édouard Bouët-Willamez, to establish a French secondary school in Saint-Louis. Owing to tensions with the Brothers of Ploërmel, who regarded the school as a competitor to their own educational institutions, Boilat withdrew from this position in 1845 and spent the remainder of his years in the French colony, serving parishes in Saint-Louis and Gorée.

During this period he travelled extensively, gathering ethnographic, linguistic and historical materials for the Société de Géographie and collecting material for his book on the peoples of present-day Senegal and on the history of Christianity in the colony. Some of these materials were published in his *Esquisses sénégalaises* (1853) and his *Grammaire de la langue woloffe* (Paris, 1858); others, such as 'Notes du Fouta Toro' (1843) and 'Voyage à Joal' (1846) are only available as archival sources. Most of Boilat's materials are richly illustrated with his own drawings.

In 1853, Boilat returned to France, where he served as a parish priest, first in Dampmart and later in Nantouillet, until his death on 19 December 1901.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

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Secondary

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A. Pondopoulo, art. 'Boilat, David, abbé', in F. Pouillon (ed.), *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, Paris, 2012², 124-5

J.-R. de Benoist, *Histoire de l'Église catholique au Sénégal. Du milieu du XVe siècle à l'aube du troisième millénaire*, Paris, 2008, pp. 111-22

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Esquisses sénégalaises

'Senegalese sketches'

DATE 1853

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

Esquisses sénégalaises. Physionomie du pays, peuplades, commerce, religions, passé et avenir, récits et légendes ('Senegalese sketches. Physiognomy of the country, people, commerce, religions, past and future, stories and legends') is an ethnographic study of the indigenous peoples of present-day Senegal. First published in 1853 in Paris, the book was reprinted several times. The 1984 edition by Abdoulaye-Bara Diop, which is referenced in this entry, brings together the original 1853 edition of *Esquisses sénégalaises* and another 1853 publication that was meant to supplement it. Alternately called *L'atlas* or *Illustrations des esquisses sénégalaises*, the supplement features 24 full-colour illustrations painted by Boilat, which in 'costume-book style' depict the various social and ethnic groups described in the book. In the 1984 edition, Boilat's text is xvi + 499 pages long; the



MARI DE LA REINE DU WALO, WOLOF.

Illustration 3. A man of the Wolof tribe

edition further includes the 24 illustrations and a 22-page introduction by Abdoulaye-Bara Diop.

The greater part of *Esquisses sénégalaises* consists of ethnographic sketches of the peoples of present-day Senegal, such as the Nones, Serer, Wolof, Bambara, Fulani, Tukolor and Mandinka, and the Moors of Trarza, as well as the inhabitants of Gorée Island. Boilat's descriptions typically include the characteristic appearance and clothing of each group, as well as observations on customs, diet, religion, cosmology, history, language, involvement in commerce and agriculture, and governance structure. Alongside the ethnographic materials, Boilat relates the region's history of Christianity from the 15th century onwards, and reflects on the challenges encountered by Christian missionaries in a land dominated by Islam and traditional religions.

Boilat's choice of words and his intermittent evaluative comments betray his total allegiance to France and Roman Catholicism. Though at times lauded as a nationalist and father of Senegalese literature, his aspirations for the region testify to his colonial socialisation and mindset (Mouralis, *Les 'Esquisses sénégalaises'*, pp. 819-37; Warner, *Tongue-tied imagination*, pp. 33-50). The book's main thrust is an entreaty for civilisation through French education and Christian mission, and, where required, French intervention (pp. 475-6).

As Boilat sees it, local adherence to religions other than Christianity hinders the process of civilisation. Languages such as Wolof (his own mother tongue), he believes, are ill-equipped (and therefore unsuitable) to express Christian beliefs, and their prolonged circulation could potentially thwart both progress and Christian morality (p. 14; Boilat, *Grammaire*, p. vi). Boilat also considers Islam – and to a lesser extent traditional religion – to be a major obstacle to civilisation and progress. *Esquisses sénégalaises* is strongly deprecatory of Qur'anic schools, which in Boilat's opinion teach children little more than to read the Qur'an and beg for food, but fail to prepare them for a profession. He writes: 'Accustomed to itinerancy, and no longer receiving alms, they will become thieves and indulge in all sorts of vices' (p. 208). Therefore, he argues, it would be in the colony's interest to close down the schools and compel parents to send their children to French schools. Anticipating the protests this would arouse, he proposes to placate Muslim sensibilities by including Arabic in the curriculum (p. 207).

Whereas Boilat considers Islam an impediment to Africa's civilisation, Christianity has already proven that it could advance Africa's participation on the world stage. Indeed, Christian history knew eminent African personalities such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine. The advent of Islam, however, impeded this:

It is Mahomet, it is his absurd and retrograde religion, that has destroyed everything [...]; a religion that has established itself by force, [...] promises to its adherents carnal pleasures as rewards cannot but expand rapidly. The state of ignorance, stupidity, servitude, and corruption in which those who have submitted themselves to the law of Mahomet have been plunged is the obvious proof of this. (translation of p. 232)

Boilat was convinced that the re-introduction of Christianity would regenerate Africa. Robert July writes:

His whole concept of African history was rooted in the view that there once had been great scholars in Africa who had added to the world's knowledge

and helped preserve it. Only with the destructive and barbarous force of Islam did Africa fall into long ages of darkness, but she was destined once again to rise through the agency of her initial strength – the Christian church. (July, *Origins*, p. 163)

His allegiance to Roman Catholicism and France notwithstanding, Boilat's descriptions of Islam are not only negative and antagonistic. On the one hand, he does not mince his words in rejecting Muslim beliefs; at times he even ridicules them. His account of a young girl who, when she is possessed by demons, 'amazes even the marabouts with her knowledge of the Qur'an and the purity of her Arabic which she had never studied, for she could neither read nor write', is most likely intended as a jab at the prophethood of Muḥammad, suggesting that Boilat was familiar with theories that attributed Muḥammad's prophesies to demon possession (pp. 453-5). Boilat also repeatedly broaches 'the superstitions of Mahomedanism' as well as its 'fanaticism', writing that the Tukulor people 'all rigidly obey the Qur'an and are so fanatical, that it would be difficult to convert them without running the risk of making numerous martyrs, or even maybe evoking war against the French' (p. 393).

On the other hand, *Esquisses sénégalaises* also indicates that Boilat was aware of Islam's appeal. He readily praises Muslim piety and respectfully portrays the simple and humble lifestyle of the *grands marabouts*. Unlike the *thiédos* (traditional healers) and village marabouts, they rarely dispense *grisgriss* (amulets) and only pray for people, though '[i]t is unfortunate that these marabouts are in error' (pp. 301, 480-2). The story behind the exceptional piety of an itinerant marabout, locally known as 'Père jeûneur', is related in great detail, including the man's life story: after killing a neighbour in a bout of anger, the man could no longer find peace because of his remorse, until he was advised by a Muslim scholar in Futa Toro to sell all he had, fast constantly and live solely on alms. Boilat ends the story by concluding that the marabout's life is 'an edification for all Mahomedans in Senegal' and the only thing this 'kind-hearted penitent lacks is the grace of the sacrament of baptism'. He even goes as far as to acknowledge that the man's exemplary piety and remorse raise theological issues. However, he subsequently seems to imply that this commendable behaviour could be the result of the indirect influence of Christianity: 'It is not surprising that the Tukulor have certain ideas that echo the principles of the gospel' because 'the wise *Thiernos* have the gospel in Arabic, which they consult on certain occasions. They received copies from the Gambia, from Methodist ministers' (pp. 405-7).

Boilat also mentions his friendship with several marabouts. His notebook, 'Notes du Fouta Toro' (1843), features portraits of marabouts, with whom he interacted on a regular basis, as well as Arabic 'lettres d'amitié' written by them. It also includes several dozen sheets with geometrical drawings and Arabic and 'ajamī texts, probably intended for ritual purposes such as divination or the production of amulets, and most likely produced by an acquaintance of Boilat, the Tukolor marabout and nephew of the *almami* of Bundu, Amadi Golojo. All this suggests a relationship of trust.

The exemplary sober way of life of the *grands marabouts* and the people's deep reverence for these 'men of God', as well as the reputed Franciscan tradition of Christian witness in Muslim contexts, prompt Boilat in his conclusion to suggest that the area would be best evangelised by Franciscan missionaries. Boilat discerns striking parallels in the spirituality and lifestyle of the *grands marabouts* and Franciscan friars. Like the marabouts, Boilat observes, Franciscans are committed to a life of prayer, fasting and voluntary poverty, possessing little other than their coarse robes, sandals and rosary, and living on alms. He writes:

The marabout travels from village to village, with nothing but a staff in his hand. He knocks on all the doors, and everywhere people open; people consider it an honour to feed him and offer him lodging. His presence alone will sanctify the hosts, and God will repay a hundredfold the services rendered to him. This esteem for the marabout is so deep-seated in the heart of the inhabitants of Senegal, that they will extend it to the priests of all religions. It is sufficient that they are men of God. (pp. 485-6)

To buttress his point, Boilat references the story of Saint Francis's encounter with the Egyptian sultan in Damietta, and underscores that '[t]he sultan, though not willing to convert, conceived nevertheless such a deep reverence for the virtue of this holy man, that he wanted to pay his respects to him by the gifts he offered him'. Likewise, Boilat assures his readers,

[w]hat Saint Francis achieved with the sultan of Egypt, his successors will also achieve, I say not merely with the *brak* of Walo or with the queen, but also with the *demel* of Cayor and even with the *almami* of the Tukolor. [...] I think that the Franciscans, sent as missionaries to Walo, will soon convert the inhabitants of that land, and will expand, little by little, the faith in all the kingdoms of Senegal, even including Bambouk. (pp. 488-9)

Boilat does not envisage that only religious specialists should evangelise Senegal; he also sees a role for Christian liberated Africans in the

evangelisation of Muslims. Perhaps inspired by his visit to the Sierra Leone colony in 1845, he suggests that the French government should invite groups of formerly enslaved Africans from the French Americas to settle as farmers and artisans in Walo, a kingdom in the north of present-day Senegal (pp. 475-7). The return to Africa would not only offer the formerly enslaved an opportunity to build a future for themselves in a new context and give France and Senegal the benefit of their expertise and labour, but also, being Christians, their presence and religious practice would constitute a permanent witness to the Christian faith.

SIGNIFICANCE

Even a preliminary reading of *Esquisses sénégalaises* reveals Boilat as a firm protagonist of the French imperial project in which colonisation, civilisation and Christianisation are profoundly entangled. Within that project, Boilat perceives Islam to be an obstacle. His proposal to close Qur'anic schools and compel parents to send their children to French schools serves as an example of this. A closer reading also brings to light Boilat's perceptive suggestions on how to fashion Christian witness in the context of Islam. His observations on the parallel spirituality and lifestyle of *grands marabouts* and Franciscan missionaries, resulting in his proposal for a Franciscan mission, and his proposition for a resident Christian community of liberated Africans, hinge around notions of Christian witness via exemplary behaviour. These embryonic reflections about Christian witness as presence and exemplary conduct attest to Boilat as a precursor of better-known figures such as Charles Lavigerie and Charles de Foucauld, who several decades later theorised and practised 'presence' as a form of Christian witness in predominantly Muslim contexts.

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