

The False Prophet

Sembene Ousmane

translated by Len Ortzen

Mahmoud Fall, with his bronze countenance, aquiline nose and his rapid walk—though not so rapid as the hawk-like glance of his eyes—came of a line of Senegalese Muslims, faithfully abiding by his ancestors' motto, 'What is mine belongs to me, but there is nothing to stop us sharing what is yours', he did no work. Or to be exact, he did not like killing himself with work. When children slyly asked him, 'Mahmoud, why aren't there any cats where you come from?' he would answer, 'I don't really know.'

It was his way of avoiding saying that cats, like him, liked to be fed without doing anything—which is why there are none to be seen in Upper Senegal. The land there is arid, and the inhabitants erect their tents at nightfall and strike them at dawn. An animal cannot live at man's expense when man is a nomad. Like clings to like, it is said. But these two shun each other. And any cat seen perchance in that country is a pitiful sight.

Mahmoud Fall, tired of doing nothing, with his pockets empty, had decided to journey towards the sunset and the country of the Bilals. In his view these ebony-skinned men were his inferiors, only good for guarding the harem, after having been castrated which eliminates disputes over the paternity of the children.

When he reached Senegal, Mahmoud Fall changed his name. He called himself Aidra, a name which opened all doors to him. He was received everywhere with the respect due to his rank. Having studied the Koran in Mauretania—something that the Senegalese always regard with respect—he profited from his knowledge of the Holy Book, presiding over prayers and sinking into interminable genuflexions. The local

people were awestruck; they considered it a very great honour to have a descendant of the noble Aidra as their Imam.

Like his counterpart the cat, Mahmoud arched his back under all these praises. As nature had endowed him with a fine singing voice he was able to delight those around him, making every effort to modulate the syllables before flattening them at the end of each verse. He spent the time between each of the five daily prayers squatting on a sheepskin and telling his beads.

When mealtime came, Mahmoud insisted upon being served apart from the others. The only thanks he gave was to sprinkle children and adults with his abundant spittle. They all rubbed this over their faces, saying 'Amen, amen'. One wonders what Mahmoud thought of all this in the secrecy of his conscience and when he was alone with God.

Being used to moving around, he went from compound to compound and was always received according to the traditional code: 'To each stranger his bowl.' The guest did not refuse anything at first, but as the days went by he became more and more fastidious. According to him, couscous prevented him from sleeping and he complained of indigestion. As his hosts were anxious to remain on the path which leads to Paradise, they cooked special dishes likely to appeal to such a discerning palate as his. But to make certain he did not hesitate at times to go into the kitchen to order what he fancied. That was the brotherly aspect.

Besides being well fed, Mahmoud Fall was amassing small coins, though he never considered there were enough of them for the trouble he was taking. These blacks definitely had a low regard for the value of prayer. And there was another thing—why did they persist in keeping cats? Each time he saw one in a house he felt his hair stand on end, just like the fur of an angry tom-cat. He pulled a face and chased the cat out. Sometimes he preached on the uselessness of cats.

Despite these trifling annoyances, Mahmoud Fall felt that over the months his reputation as a preacher was growing. Learned and holy men everywhere, the talebs, marabouts and tafsirs, had but one phrase on their lips: 'Souma Narr, Souma Narr (My Moor, My Moor).' Mahmoud secretly thought they were mad. 'Souma Narr! My Moor. Why my? Has anyone ever

heard of a black buying a Moor? That would be a topsy-turvey kind of world!

He wrote more and more signs on pieces of paper for people to carry around with them, and he worked harder than ever to hide his origins and his real aim. To increase his prestige even more, he went so far as to declare that his body was banished from Finahri Dianan—from Hell. And they swallowed that with all the rest.

As the months passed, Mahmoud saw that his hoard was steadily increasing. And one morning, without a word to anyone, he departed as unexpectedly as he had arrived one evening. The elders in their wisdom said, 'If the setting sun brings a stranger, don't look for him at sunrise.'

* * * * *

With his booty in a bag slung over his shoulder, Mahmoud Fall headed briskly towards his beloved Atlas mountains. He walked day and night, with only short rests, thinking of how he would use his capital and taking care to avoid any doubtful encounters. To this end, he made a detour towards the north, which took him through the kingdom of the Tiedes, heathens who worshipped fetishes—though Mahmoud was unaware of this. As he went, he kept congratulating himself: 'Thanks to Satan, I have a great knowledge of the art of appropriating other people's possessions.'

It was the height of the dry season. The sun's rays, like flamethrowers, were setting fire to the sparse tufts of grass; the wind tore at them and flung them towards the far-distant shores, whistling as though to put an end to the unendurable monotony of silence. From the overheated earth there issued a vapour rising to the empty sky. There were the carcasses of animals which had been picked clean at every stage of decomposition and which the wind was gradually burying in the sand. The birds of the air passing uttered cries which were like complaints made to nature. A blend of serenity and unease.

As far as Mahmoud could see, there was no sign of any living being. Only a single tree. A strange tree—strange because of its abundant foliage. The sole survivor in that hell. A tamarind tree.

It was almost the time for prayer. Tired out from his long

trek and overcome by the heat, Mahmoud lingered by the tree, wondering whether to pray before or after sleeping. He had to make a decision, and finally he opted for sleep and lay down under the tamarind tree. But what was this? Suddenly he sat up and gave a shout, very loud, although he was alone. 'Hey! Hey! Yes, you up there, come down!'

His words echoed around. Three times he called out, but no reply came. Then he got up, ran to the right and the left, towards the setting sun and to the east. But he was quite alone. There was just him and the tree. An inner voice, doubly suspicious, urged him to bury his treasure. He dug down the length of his forearm; then went to investigate the surroundings, but found nothing. He returned and dug twice as deep, went off again; still nothing. No one at all. He shielded his eyes to peer more clearly into the tree's thick foliage. No one was hiding there. Then he went back to his hole and dug still deeper. This done, he sat down in it and counted his *derhems* which chinked agreeably in the silence. Pleased and reassured, he buried them all, then stretched out to sleep on top of his hoard. But he remembered that he had not paid his due to the Almighty, and addressed Him thus: 'I owe it to you. . .'

After all this performance, sleep was not long in coming to Mahmoud. It was accompanied by a sweet dream in which he was drifting through the desert. As far as the eye could see stretched a vast ocean of sand with interweaving slopes of the dunes. Like ships of this silent sea, camels were plodding along, heads nodding on their long necks; despite the storm that was blowing, the reins were held in position by their brass nose-rings. Grains of sand, harder than steel, pricked through his clothes and stung the skin. Then the dream changed into some sort of reality. Mahmoud Fall saw himself lifted up by a very thin, half-naked black. The man ransacked his hoard, then deliberately proceeded to shave his head. Mahmoud eventually roused himself, still dazed with sleep, thanked God and yawned.

As a good believer, Mahmoud thought of the first prayer of the day. (If no water is available, sand ablutions are allowed.) He first trickled some sand over his hands and arms to cleanse them of everything unclean he had touched, then sprinkled some over his face and head. In carrying out this ritual he had a

shock—he had not felt his mane of hair. He hurriedly put both hands to his head, fingering it all over. He had no hair—his head was bald. Slowly, carefully, making a great effort to control himself, Mahmoud drew his hands down to his chin. His beard had gone too. Wild-eyed and aghast, Mahmoud became aware of something strange happening within him. He thought he could hear voices. And this was so, but they were inner voices.

'It was God who shaved you,' said the first.

'How do you make that out? God doesn't shave anyone.'

Mahmoud, listening to this dialogue, grew livid. The next comment was greeted with a laugh.

'Have faith in God, His mercy is in everything!'

'Ha, ha! You make me laugh. And when you fleeced those poor blighters, in whose name did you do it?'

Mahmoud vigorously shook his head to try to silence these voices, but to no effect; so he put his hands over his ears. He did not want to hear any more. But the voices continued:

'Pray!' one commanded him. 'You have missed two prayers already.'

'Look for your money first,' advised the other. 'Without it, you won't be respected. You won't have any camels. You'll have nothing to eat. Make sure of your money first. It's easier to pray when you're sure of having a full belly.'

Mahmoud obeyed the last injunction. He scabbled around, casting earth and sand aside so vigorously that his actions were quite unlike those of a normal human being. A goat at bay bites; and Mahmoud would have bitten anyone who tried to stop him looking for his hoard. He was sweating as he crouched there with his tongue hanging out. He could easily have been taken for a giant crab. He pushed the earth away from the hole with his feet. His enveloping *boubou* was half-strangling him, so he wrenched the neck open and then dug down with renewed energy. At last he reached the bottom, and there to his dismay all he found was his sleek, black hair.

He lifted it up, glanced at it in bewilderment, then stared down at the empty hole. Raising his eyes to the tree, he took God as his witness, '*Bilahi-vahali*, this isn't me.'

As he held his hair in one hand and stroked his shaved head with the other, tears welled up in his eyes, '*Bilahi-vahali*, I'm

not Mahmoud Fall!' he said again, a sob in his voice.

Then he shouted at the top of his voice, 'My friend, my old friend Mahmoud Fall, come and deliver me from this uncertainty!'

The echo whisked away his call, rolling it over before hurling it on to the plain like a stone on to a galvanized-iron roof. The sound faded into the distance, and he murmured slowly, 'My old friend Mahmoud Fall, don't play this trick on me. I've known you for a long time. . .'

He strained his ears, listening hard, concentrating on a point beyond his range of vision; but he heard nothing. Just a vast emptiness. Then the mocking voices returned.

'Aren't you going to pray?' said the first.

Hardly aware of what he was doing, he stood up, faced towards Mecca, and raised his hands to his temples, '*Allah ackbar!* God is great,' he began.

But his eyes wandered to where his hoard had been hidden.

'Can you still pray when you've been robbed?'

'Ask God who the thief is,' said the other voice.

Mahmoud stood there with his arms raised, not knowing what to do. Then he remembered his dream. 'I wasn't asleep,' he thought.

He had seen the thief; he had even felt that he was being shorn. And the Almighty had not intervened, the Almighty had let it be done.

'No, I'm not going to pray any more,' he said in a low voice, thinking that Allah would not hear him.

Three times he walked round the tree, hoping to find footprints; but in vain. High in the sky, a migrating bird began to sing cheerfully. Mahmoud Fall shouted curses at it. Then he suddenly felt himself to be very much alone.

'On the word of a Moor,' he murmured, 'these sons of slaves are all thieves!'

Rage possessed him, and he ran off like a madman into the desert, his torn *boubou* flapping in the wind. He had just realized that there is no need to believe in Allah in order to be a thief!