

**I**n his home country of Senegal, Cheikh Ndiuguël Lô is a difficult man to find. He lives quietly in a small town just far enough away from the frenetic capital of Dakar. He seldom performs in his homeland. But his international reputation precedes him when he ventures into Europe or the United States, and his concerts there are cause for celebration.

As an American music journalist currently living in West Africa, I spent three months in pursuit of an accurate phone number for the elusive Mr. Lô. This singer-composer has been a favorite of mine since I first discovered his sublime cd *Ne La Thiass* and its more fiery successor, *Bambay Gueej* (both on World Circuit) a few years ago. I had expected that Cheikh would be playing regularly around Dakar, and was disappointed to find no signs of him when I arrived here late in 2001.

Eventually we connected, for a visit and a brief interview, in February 2002. I found Cheikh approachable, charming and articulate. But another six months elapsed before I had an opportunity to see him perform in Senegal, before an audience comprised mainly of American and European visitors.

*Mbalax* rules the airwaves and dominates the clubs here in Senegal, as it has for many years. For a non-native music lover, it's disheartening to find that in a land renowned for superb music and innovation, the scene is actually a bit monotonous. There are brilliant exceptions, of course, such as the amazing Baaba Maal, but one has to be alert to discover concerts and new releases by artists outside the *mbalax* genre.

It is always a revelation to experience a live performance of a musician one has known only by recordings. There's a sweetness to Cheikh Lô's sound even when he's at his funkier. He veers from cool, jazzy vocal riffs to the ethereal purity of "Guiss-Guiss" (written for his young son and appearing on *Ne la Thiass*, his first international cd). He performs with a superb, finely honed ensemble of musicians. Accompanying himself on guitar and occasional percussion, he creates an atmosphere both joyous and relaxed.

It was after this rare concert at the Centre Cultural Français in Dakar that I approached Cheikh for another interview. Always gracious, he invited me and my photographer friend to his home for a meal, tea and conversation. At his home in the peaceful town of Keur Massar, an hour's taxi ride from Dakar, we enjoyed a typical Senegalese afternoon—*thiebou dieun* (rice and fish), the

classic lunch here, scalding sweet green tea with mint, and relaxed conversation. Cheikh played dj, eager for us to hear his latest projects. His young son Massamba played and dozed nearby.

Of course, one question I had for Cheikh was: Why do you play so seldom in Senegal? It was a delicate question, as I already had an inkling of the answer. Nowhere in the world is the music business entirely honorable, and Senegal is no exception. Money and power often carry as much weight as talent and integrity. Lô is resigned for now to enjoy great international success while maintaining a low profile in his homeland.

Lô first captured the attention of American audiences as a participant in 1998's legendary Africa Fête tour, also featuring Salif Keita, Papa Wemba and Maryam Mursal. Simultaneously *Ne la Thiass* mesmerized listeners and garnered critical accolades for its vibrant melange of jazz, salsa, a touch of *mbalax*, and exquisite ballads.

# Cheikh Ndiuguël Lô

By Susan Cummings Maroni



PHOTOS BY GALILEA NINI

Like the patchwork clothing he dons, **Cheikh Lô** is a man of many parts and colors. At the heart of his creative work, however, is a family man who burns with spiritual passion.

Cheikh Lô is a quiet, unassuming man whose spiritual practice (he is a member of the distinctively Senegalese Islamic brotherhood, the Baye Fall) influences his singular look. Here in Senegal, the Baye Fall are easily recognized by their dreadlocks and vivid patchwork clothing, the outward manifestations of a unique approach to Islam.

For many Americans, Lô provided a first glimpse of the Baye Fall philosophy, which teaches obedience to one's *marabout* (spiritual leader), and encourages acts of service in lieu of the general Islamic rule of five rigid times of daily prayer. The Baye Fall practice encompasses simplicity of living, study of holy writings and singing as a form of prayer. One of the beauties of life in Senegal is to fall asleep to the sounds of prayerful chant emanating from small neighborhood gatherings of Baye Fall, who sometimes sing the night away.

Cheikh Lô has emerged from a cultivated family, and his intelligence and perception shine in conversation. Perhaps that's why, despite the simplicity of his life and demeanor, his music has such sophistication and scope. His sound is more international, less rooted in tradition than that of many West African artists.

Cheikh was born in 1955 in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso (then called Upper Volta), a small, landlocked nation which envelops many West African cultures. He is the son of a silversmith, descended from a lineage of jewelers and *marabouts*. As many West Africans do, Lô has an affinity for languages, and absorbed many from the cultures surrounding him—he speaks Wolof, Bambara, Soce, French and English.

"My mother was born in Diakhao, in the Sine region of Senegal, at the house of Boursine Coumba N'Doffene [a regal figure of ancient lineage in the Senegalese hierarchy]. My parents met in Senegal, then traveled to Bamako and arrived in Burkina in 1945. My father was one of the first Senegalese in Burkina, and we used to receive guests from everywhere; Burkina is a crossroads between Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali. . . . That's how I happen to speak so many languages."

Cheikh and his family moved to Senegal when he was 12. "I was born five years before the independence of Senegal," he says. "And people born in the 1950s had some experiences that were unique. I was influenced by the times."

Senegal was experiencing the rocky but exultant first years of independence under Leopold Senghor. Simultaneously, the cultural explosion of youth in the 1960s was reverberating in Africa as around the world. Cheikh sported "a big Afro," listened to Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett and other r&b icons, and to his personal musical hero, Tabu Ley Rochereau of the Zairean rumba ensemble African Jazz. He was also deeply influenced by Cuban *son*, still a potent element in his own compositions. He is the only professional musician in his family, and his early affinity for music caused consternation among his relations, particularly his mother.

Ironically, for a man with such an exquisite voice, he began his musical career as a percussionist, although he sang and experimented with theater as well. From his earliest youth, Cheikh displayed the characteristic behavior of a true percussionist. "I was always getting in trouble at school for tapping on my desk," he says. "The teachers would get angry and ask me to leave."

In the late 1980s, Cheikh was the percussionist for a Senegalese group playing the typical mbalax-Afropop blend of the times. When the band wanted to include some salsa material, they discovered the shortcomings of their lead vocalist. Lô volunteered to sing, and dubiously, the group gave him his chance. From that moment, he was the acknowledged salsa vocalist for the band.

Earlier, in the mid-'80s, he had lived for several years in Paris, where he had worked as a session musician, often for the Zairean and Cameroonian bands he admired. When he recorded his first Senegalese cassette in 1990, the title, *Doxandeme*, reflected his experiences in Paris. *Doxandeme* refers to an expatriate, one who works far from home. While the cassette was well received in Senegal, Cheikh himself was dissatisfied with the recording's "unprofessional" sound.

This assiduous, painstaking artist spent several years assembling the compositions to create his first major recording, *Ne La Thiass* in 1996. That release led to his first European tour in 1997. The same year, Lô was awarded "Best Newcomer" at the prestigious Kora All-African Awards. After his American debut in the Africa Fête tour of 1998, Cheikh released his second cd, *Bambay Gueej*.

In contrast to the cool, airy ambience of *Ne La Thiass*, *Bambay Gueej* has a funky core, churned by contributions from Pee Wee Ellis (horn player for James Brown and Van Morrison), and from Bigga Morrison of Aswad on Hammond organ. Oumou Sangare duets with Lô on the song "Bobo Dioulasso" sung in Bambara and dedicated to his home town in Burkina Faso.

2001 marked another milestone in Cheikh Lô's career. He performed before a sold out crowd at New York's Lincoln Center. 2002 found him back in New York for a major anti-AIDS project, the cd compilation *Red Hot and Riot*. The cd is a collection of Fela Kuti songs performed by a host of international artists, which earned over seven million dollars for AIDS research and services. Lô contributed two tracks, a salsa version of "Shakara" followed by a reprise of the song performed with Manu Dibango and Les Nubians.



With characteristic patience, Lô is recording songs in his small home studio to produce his third major cd. The eight songs he has assembled thus far are acoustic, romantic Cuban-inflected ballads, with Lô himself on guitar and gentle percussion. He hopes to have the cd ready for mastering in London within the next several months.

Like the patchwork clothing he dons, Cheikh Lô is a man of many parts and colors; He has established himself as a professional actor in recent years. He played a prominent supporting role in *Même le Vent* (Even the Wind), a Wolof-language film produced in 1998 by Laurence Attali.

When we spoke to him, Lô had just completed another feature film, *Le Dechauss* (The Barefoot One). He says, "Last week I was playing in this film with a French woman. It's a romance—I play the principal role and also perform a love song. The French woman plays violin. They asked me if I was an experienced actor...No, I am a beginner, but I was playing theater at school."

Lô's music also contributes to the soundtrack of *Le Dechauss*. The film is expected to be shown at Africa's premier film festival, Fespaco, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, this winter.

At the heart of his creative work, however, is a family man who burns with spiritual passion. He has recently acquired the title Ndiqûël, conferred upon him by his personal marabout, Cheikh Ndiqûël Fall, as a token of respect and spiritual authority. Lô describes the day of his dedication, at a gathering of members of the Baye Fall brotherhood:

"Our marabout, whom we call Borom Ndiqûël, gathered honey for us. He was surrounded by bees, but none of them stung him. We were each given a taste of honey, and in the presence of all the disciples he gave me my new name. Since then, he calls me Cheikh Ndiqûël Lô, and the disciples do as well." Although his new title signifies spiritual dedication and authority, Lô elects to use his powers in ways uniquely suited to his talents.

He firmly believes that his destiny at this time is in music and the arts. "Without God, I would not be experiencing the success I have around the world. Here in Senegal, there are dark forces who try to control the music business, but I go my own way. My marabout protects me wherever I go."

Cheikh Ndiqûël Lô patiently awaits the day that the Senegalese music scene becomes more open, and in the meantime quietly carries his luminous gifts around the globe, where they are richly appreciated. ★