

Senegal Report
April 14, 2016



In March of 2016, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Mamadou Diouf, Kathy Ewing, and Karen Barkey, the Primary Investigators of the Sufi Islam in 21st Century Politics project within the Henry Luce Foundation grant to CDTR/IRCPL, took a research trip to Senegal. We were accompanied by Toby Volkman, the Director of Policy Initiatives at the Henry Luce Foundation. This trip deepened the relationship with Senegalese groups built over the past year.

During this trip we spent one day in Touba, the Mouride capital of Senegal, and one day in Tivaouane, the center of the Tijaniyyah. We attended and spoke at a conference organized by one of the leaders of the Mouride brotherhood and president of the Al Azhar Institute, Serigne Mame Mor Mbacke, and spent a day of conversation at the West African Research Center (WARC) to discuss toleration, Islam and the Sufis in Senegal with scholars and religious leaders in Dakar.

The trip to Dakar, Touba, and Tivaouane over the course of March 12-18, 2016 was organized as a follow up to two previous events at Columbia University on the question of Sufism in 21st century politics.



In September 2014, we organized a one-day workshop, Pluralism: Sufi Thought and Practice, which was designed to look at the contributions of Sufi thought and practice to understandings of pluralism in the Ottoman Middle East, South Asia, and West Africa. The first panel examined traditions and trajectories of Sufi thought and practices around pluralism. We explored a variety of questions: What traditions within Islam and from other sources did Sufism draw in these three cases? Overall, why did Sufism become important in these three regions? We concluded by determining some areas of analytic exploration: the traditions and practices of different Sufi groups across and within regions, the legacies of history—in particular colonial

history—and the particular contemporary articulation of state-Sufi brotherhood relations in different cases. We also discussed the contemporary engagement of the Sufis with the globalization of a radical Islam and its effects on politics.

At this point, we began focusing on Senegal.

Our second conference, Islam & World Peace: Perspectives from African Muslim Nonviolence Traditions, was held in September 2015 in collaboration with Majalis (Scientific Initiative for African Muslim Heritage). This meeting was dedicated to the role of Sufism in non-violence and the particular configurations of Sufi thought and practice in Senegal, the thought of Cheikh Ahmadu Bamba in particular, as well as the sociology and politics of contemporary Senegal. In this conference we broached the topic of education, though less pointedly than we did during our visit to Senegal a few months later.

Visit to Senegal

Rather than organize the report temporally, we will develop some themes that we observed in this week of study. Three interrelated projects emerged from this trip and added quite a bit of complexity and texture to our original query.

First, we followed the initial questions of the project, trying to understand (a) the



particular dimension of Sufism in Senegal, (b) its historical emergence as a powerful sociological and political force (c) the trajectory of engagement that the Senegalese brotherhoods have espoused over the years since independence and (d) its role today. Pursuing these questions led to discussions and meetings with many groups with differing views. In this context, there was quite a bit of discussion of the Senegalese exception of the particular “contrat Sénégalais” (D. Cruise O’Brien: social contract) or the particular “*laïcité bien comprise*” (President Abdou Diouf) as parts of the puzzle. But what is the puzzle? How has Senegal succeeded in establishing and sustaining a stable democratic political system, in spite of poverty, Sufi brotherhoods competition, and imported religious tensions? Unlike



many African countries, Senegal has not experienced coups d’état or violent religious or ethnic crises. The question here is about the way that Senegalese political and religious elites maintain their non-violent understandings and traditions of Islam and peaceful coexistence of various religious denominations as the growth of a more violent and extremist global Islam becomes apparent. The political culture of Senegal represents a particular engagement of a democratic understanding, with a religious civil society (D. Cruise O’Brien) that is bound by such rules. At first sight, it provides for Alfred Stepan’s twin tolerations, where both state and religious institutions bow in the direction of the other. So, on the one hand, the role of the brotherhoods in politics seems to be taken for granted, but on the other, one questions the degree to which religious brotherhoods organized around hierarchical chains of patronage represent a true civil society. Further, the undue influence of brotherhood leaders on political elites kept being brought up as a source of potential conflict.

To grasp more fully state society relations, it would have been helpful to focus on civil society and citizenship, in addition to the emphasis on the brotherhoods. We need to ask ourselves about the new members of civil society, women’s movements, human rights organizations, labor, etc. How do these intersect with brotherhoods? How do they organize society? These were the issues that were not really discussed in the meetings. Also remaining unclear was a picture of the various intersecting networks of religious and political patronage, the sites of intense interaction between these two and how they related to economic issues and ties.

How to rethink the Senegalese citizen in this context? Another important question: What is the Senegalese citizenship project? It seems that it is shifting somewhat,



being rethought. The discussion has been taken in many directions, from advocates of the exclusion of brotherhoods from the political space and the consolidation of the secular nature of the state, to proponents of the thesis that democratization is doomed to fail without an active participation of the Sufi brotherhood leadership. Both groups consider that the challenge to be

addressed is a radical reconfiguring of both the contours of republicanism and of citizenship. We will certainly raise these questions in further visits and work towards more specific analytic definitions of the issues.

Within another strand, there are those who also question whether the particular relationship between religion and politics is extensive enough. This gets associated with the demands to rethink Senegalese secularity, creating opposing camps and contestations around this single issue. At the WARC meetings, for example, Aziz Mbacké of Majalis argued for a new rethinking of secularism in Senegal. He objected first to the legacy of the French educational system, citing Malcolm X who said that it was ill-advised to hand your enemies the education of your children. He also criticized *laïcité* in Senegal. He argued for keeping a part of *laïcité* that maintained the pluralism of society and the part that reflected the twin tolerations. However, he pushed hard for recognizing that the strong anti-clerical drive in France was not part of Senegal and should not be pursued. He argued that the idea that religion should be confined to the private sphere was still part of the French legacy of education and should not be pursued. Furthermore, as he argued for the retooling of society with the core values of a Senegalese Islam, he reflected on “our values” and argued that the bricolage of the contemporary Senegalese society was not productive. On the contrary, he advocated a return to the particular Senegalese core: as he called it, a “cadre unitaire de l’opération Islamique du Sénégal.” Such a view that moves away from the multiplicity of traditions that make up the Senegalese experience seems perilous; a “return” to the “core” of religion is similarly potentially challenging. In many ways the very role of Islam and of brotherhoods in Senegal was a colonial production that set up specific frames and recognized and reordered administratively each group. It is also problematic because it advocates the subtle reliance on a uniform body of knowledge that might displace the generations of accumulative learning in Senegal that happened through centuries of adaptation and accommodation.



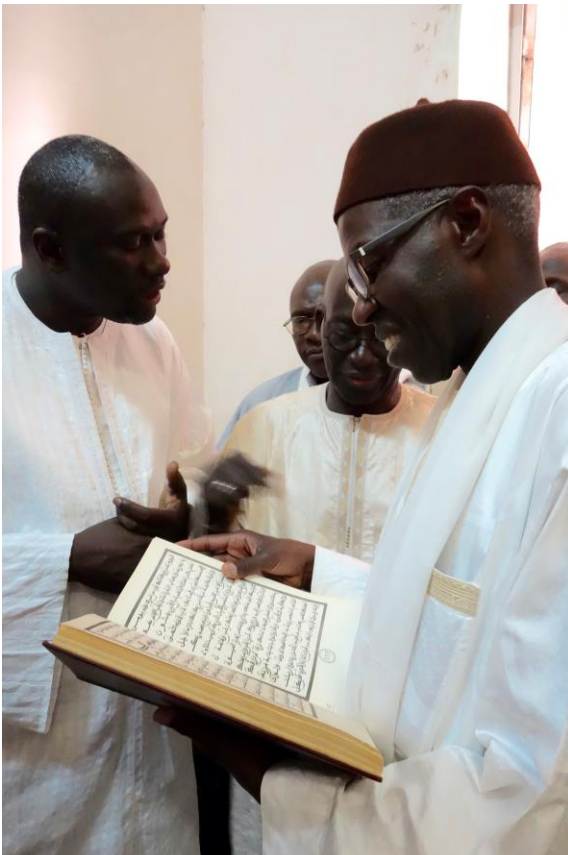
All of these issues were on display as we arrived a week before the referendum in Senegal (March 20, 2016). While the referendum started because of the president's offer to reduce presidential terms from 7 to 5 years, by the time it came to a vote it had become "15 articles to amend the existing constitution." The referendum included a clause on *laïcité*, which was debated among the elites and intellectuals and religious leaders. But even before looking at *laïcité*, what struck me were the first few clauses that were quite forward-looking and liberal in their modernization of the role of parties, new rights for citizens, and independence of candidates, among other reforms. Such clauses demonstrate the continued vitality of the Senegalese democracy. The reference to "*laïcité*" is maintained in the opening section of the proposed constitution but "*laïcité*," which had been associated with other "intangible provisions" in the referendum, has been dropped. The republican, indivisible, democratic, and decentralized nature of the state was kept.

The second issue the group more generally engaged with was that of the transmission of knowledge based on Sufi learning and texts that maintain the Sufi religious and moral ethic. There is a strong concern that the particular knowledge that the Sufi tradition imparts—which can be seen as an alternative to the Salafi teachings, which spread very quickly through all kinds of modern technologies, such as the Internet—is being sidelined by the inability of the Sufi Cheikhs and

educational institutions to inculcate their brand of Islam well and fast enough. In this vein, the kinds of issues that were discussed especially with the Tijaniyyah community and leadership in Tivaouane were of the pressing need for the transmission of the knowledge of the tradition that this generation has but that has not been adequately passed on to the



next. Others argued that the transmission of knowledge is not enough, that people cite only the great thinkers and that there is much repetition, but not enough analytic thinking on the ideas of these founding thinkers and religious figures. But the Tijaniyyah leadership is interested in the work of identification, numerization, and cataloguing of the works of the masters of this Sufi tradition, to promote knowledge adding to the existing literature, and opening libraries in order to carry out this work. The library at Tivaouane is being organized now, and books range from the religious to the secular to children's books in French.



The Koran, the literature produced by the founders and their followers, and the general religious literature in the possession of the brotherhoods were the main texts that were discussed in this meeting. The main discussion turned around circulating, reviving, and expanding the tradition which has informed West African Islamic cultures. The recognition of its centrality, intellectual richness, and different perspectives make the texts critical in their advocacy of the various approaches of the Muslim religion and of their radical rejection of any center or "orthodox" interpretations. Yet even though the texts and what they can do for the next generation were discussed, a sociology of what the texts will do for the population, and how the ideas transmitted by the texts will have an effect on the social life of Senegal was left a bit vague. The subtext here that

the youth get tangled up either in Salafi projects or in a Western modernity was not entirely satisfying either.



The third aspect of this visit engaged the group in a very different way. That is, here the work we do as academics, the thinking and the writing, was also linked to the practice. In our role as educators we visited and observed the success of a variety of scholarly institutions led by Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké, the son of Serigne Mourtala Mbacké (son of the founder of the Mourid order) who founded them. We visited three models: the Centres d'Excellence, the Instituts el-Ahzar, and the University of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba in Touba, which is under construction. The particular attraction of the educational model proposed by the Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké lies in the combination of two significant historical and cultural legacies of Senegal to fashion an alternative educational system that works. As such, this model goes beyond the burdened educational traditions of Senegal, the Islamic model as well as the Western French colonial model. Going beyond the shortcomings of each, the new model rethinks the strengths of each to combine them. As a project coming from a Senegalese cleric, there is a clear understanding of the influence of global Islam on the local knowledge production and the effects of such interaction between the global and the local. It also addresses the very issue of the relationship between education and employment, questioning the exclusive and unique outlet of preaching. In addition to the recognition of the merits of secular education and training (denounced by Boko Haram), Serigne Mame Mor Mbacké's project is a

creative attempt to reconcile it with religious, professional, and academic education and training.

Building on his father's legacy, the Serigne has started various schools either as institutes of learning or as centers of technical and agricultural instruction to pull a community of students who have been educated in the Islamic tradition and are referred to as "Arabisants," to provide them with additional linguistic, technical, and agricultural skills so they may enter the Senegalese workforce fully prepared. The double purpose of the schools is clear; on the one hand, they strive to pull away youth from a place where they might be caught up with one strand of knowledge based on Islamic education and give them secular and technical alternatives, providing a multi-stranded richer educational experience, but also ensuring that they will be less likely to follow the Salafi path. And here it is important to understand the "Arabisant" label and its significance.

An emphasis on skills comes from the pressure to create students who can participate in the Senegalese economy and become productive members of society. We saw such schools and institutes close to Dakar, on the way to Touba and in Touba itself. Touba, the center of the Mouride Brotherhood and the second-largest city of Senegal after Dakar will also house the University,



whose initial buildings we visited with Serigne Mame Mor. In this case the approach to fighting an extremist version of Islam seemed much more organized into a particular plan of education and a vision of social and cultural pluralism. For these students, their "Arabisant" identity is accepted, but it is seen by their teachers as one of the many identities that they could have. As was discussed in many of these locations and as many emphasized in their conversations with the students, "to be a good Muslim you do not need to stay just in Islam, you need a formation as a citizen of the world." Therefore, the importance of this model is in its acceptance and appreciation of what Islam—especially a Senegalese Islam with its own traditions—can give, rather than a rejection of religion to promote secular education. Religion is not taken out of the educational system; it is seen as a base that needs to be complemented. In this, obviously, the project is far more progressive than in many countries where an Islamic tradition is taking hold. This is clearly the model we want to engage with and understand better in the future.

Important points with which to conclude:

- **Senegal as a deeply religious society, though with an important compact between religion and modernity: what Villalon calls a political modernity (democracy).**

The accommodation between religious institutions and the state is clearly on display in Senegal, and it is part of a political culture that will continue to survive. Hence, it is vitally important to support the finding of solutions that will help Senegal avert the crisis of political Islam.

- **The importance of clerics in the search for solutions to problems of radicalization.**

In this particular trip, we met both the Mouride and the Tijaniyyah religious leaders, and learned from both communities. Yet, because of the particular engagement with the Mourides, we also had questions about the differences between the brotherhoods. The Tijaniyyah experience seemed quite different from the Mouride one. The Mouride clerics engaged in action, in education through schools and programs. The Tijaniyyah seemed more relaxed, less hierarchical—but we had questions on how they engaged in countering the issues of the day. The engagement of the Tijaniyyah with Salafi Islam is much more intellectual and ideological. It seems that the Tijani have embarked on a modernity that has included Western education earlier than the Mourides. Clearly, in the next phase of this research, we also need to find more people to collaborate with and follow the work of the Tijaniyyah leaders in education.



We are grateful to the Luce Foundation for its continued support of our project on Religious Toleration and Plural Democracies, and for the opportunities for this kind of collaborative work with which it has provided us.

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