

Defying Sufism? Senegalese Converts to Shiite Islam

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Shiite Islam was brought to Senegal through the migration of people and ideas, and both Lebanese and Iranian influences. Lebanese migrants first arrived in West Africa as the result of a colonial fluke. As early as the 1880s, and especially during the 1920s, emigrants left Lebanon because of economic hardship for Marseilles, the transportation hub of the time. They planned to continue on to the United States or South America, where there had been previous Lebanese immigration, but their ship docked at Dakar. The French colonial power convinced the Lebanese

to stay in West Africa to work as intermediaries between the French in the cities and the West Africans in the interior in the peanut trade. Religion, in particular Shiite Islam, had not been featured in the Lebanese process of settling in Senegal and forming a new identity. In fact, Shiite Islam in Senegal was not a powerful or identifiable force until the arrival in 1969 of Abdul Monem El-Zein, a shaykh from Lebanon who had trained in Najaf, Iraq, and came to Dakar only shortly before the Lebanese civil war (1975-1992) and the Iranian revolution (1979), two important events in the making of a transnational Shiite movement.

There was no formal Shiite religious representation in Senegal until the founding of the Lebanese Islamic Institute in 1978. Shaykh El-Zein's two-pronged strategy was to restore religious identity to Lebanese Muslims, while also guiding the theological development and numerical growth of the newly converting Senegalese Shia, a goal he had to mask in order to remain in favour in the eyes of the Lebanese community and the Senegalese government.

The Iranian embassy also played a subtle role in encouraging Shiite Islam in Dakar. Iran has a history of economic cooperation with Senegal from the time of the Shah, but the embassy was closed in 1984 for spreading Islamic propaganda. The Iranian embassy reopened in the early 1990s and continues (more subtly) to promote Shiite Islam. Iranians hold an annual reception for prominent Lebanese and Senegalese Muslims for the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, and finance Senegalese intellectuals to attend Islamic conferences in Teheran. Iranian president Rafsanjani's presence at the Organization of the Islamic Conference meeting in Dakar in 1991 was highly publicized, as was Senegalese President Wade's 2003 visit to Iran. In addition, an Iranian shaykh built the *Hauza Al-Rassoul Al-Akram* three years ago,¹ which is located not far from the University of Dakar.

With the recent discovery of Shiite Islam by the Senegalese, competition is emerging over who will shape this new movement: Lebanon or Iran. Tension between Arab and Persian schools of Shiite thought results from political views: Iranians believe in Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih*, which gives religious judges the divine right to rule. Lebanese do not support this view, nor do they approve of the propagation of the Iranian revolution.

Senegalese claim that even though Lebanese Shia began to arrive in Senegal over a century ago, today's movement of Senegalese Shia is much more recent, and was brought about by two processes. First, books in Arabic, French, and English translation began to circulate in Senegal from Iran as early as 1971. Second, the Lebanese Shaykh began to teach Shiite Islam to Senegalese. Whereas the Islamic Insti-

Beginning in the mid-1980s, some Senegalese Sunni Muslims began to convert to Shiite Islam. Converts claimed that Shiite Islam better addressed their theological questions, being more textually based than the versions of Sufi Islam practised in Senegal and dominated by marabouts, Islamic leaders, with *talibés* (disciples) who submit to their ultimate authority. Senegalese intellectuals disapprove of the central role the Sufi brotherhoods play in Senegalese politics and society. Choosing another branch of Islam enables converts not to follow the established marabouts by heading their own religious movement.

tute in Dakar caters primarily to Lebanese, Shaykh El-Zein has founded five mosques and approximately 130 *madrasas*, religious schools, located outside of Dakar and led by Senegalese religious men whom he trained.

Senegalese conversion to Shiite Islam

Despite the efforts of the Iranian embassy and the Lebanese shaykh to bring them to Shiite Islam, many Senegalese Shia came to the religion on their own. Typically leaders of Senegal's small but growing Shiite move-

ment are fluent in Arabic, and many have a university education from the Arab world. Alhousseynou,² the first Senegalese convert to Shiite Islam, or so he claims, worked at the library of the Senegalese-Turkish school in 1985 at age 22. There he discovered books on Shiism, but was told by a librarian that Shiites are heretics and the books were not useful. Such comments only sparked his imagination more (as man is always curious about what is forbidden to him), and he began to read, eventually becoming a Shiite. Assane, on the other hand, discovered Shiism as a result of the Iranian revolution. He followed how the press portrayed Khomeini, and was disgusted at how he was demonized by Western and Senegalese journalists, and how Shias were accused of being blasphemous. For him, the Iranian revolution restored dignity to Islam and belief to Muslims, and was the only successful revolution since the time of Mohammad. He became Shiite in 1987 in his late twenties.

Other leaders of the Senegalese Shiite movement encountered Shiism outside of Senegal. Abdou was studying in Canada in 1988 at the age of nineteen, and read books on Islam alone in the McGill University library. He discovered that the Shiite school of thought convincingly answered his questions about Islam that were left unaddressed by the Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods. Ibrahim was a student at the University of Dakar and was introduced to Shiism in 1987 through magazines from Iran which he found in the Arabic department. After graduating he went to Sierra Leone where he studied Sharia and Islamic law in a Lebanese and Iranian run *hawza*. Still others learned about Shiism at even younger ages when they were recruited from Sunni religious schools by Shaykh El-Zein and given scholarships to study in the Lebanese Shiite *Collège Al-Zahraa* in Dakar. Lebanese and Iranian proselytizing efforts were sometimes successful.

Senegalese men are more active in the Shiite movement than women, and female converts tend to be wives or family members of male converts. However, a few Senegalese women also found Shiite Islam by themselves. Khady began to learn about Islam from the leaders of the Senegalese Shiite movement, who never told her they were teaching her Shiite Islam. She began to wear the veil in 1990 in her mid-30s, and in those days the few veiled women in Senegal befriended one another. She had a friend who was a member of Ibadou Rahman, a Sunni reformist movement. The friend tried to initiate her into this school of thought, bringing her to some of the Ibadou Rahman leaders, who called her a Shiite. Khady had never heard this word before. She began to read about Shiism, praying at night that God would guide her to choose the right path, whether Sunni or Shiite Islam. One night in

1993 her prayers were answered. It was the dry season in Senegal, and as she prayed to end her confusion, a heavy rain began to fall. She was thus convinced, in a mystical moment, to openly identify as a Shiite.

The Development of the Senegalese Shiite movement

Senegalese Shia perceive of their calling to be that of missionaries—to spread the truth regarding Shiite Islam and to encourage the growth of their movement. Many Senegalese Shiite schools and institutes were built in the 1990s, hidden in Dakar's suburbs of Guediawaye, Parcelles and Yeumbeul, or in the Casamance region of southern Senegal, such as Kolda and Ziguinchor. The movement's leaders know one another and speak highly of the other, but tend to work independently in their native neighbourhoods, or in areas they think are ripe for change. Leaders specialize in different aspects of Shiite Islam. Some are trained shaykhs whose expertise ranges from Islamic jurisprudence to Sunni and Shiite philosophy; others are laymen who are artists, government employees, bankers, teachers, or students.

Starting in 1994, Shiite converts took advantage of the popularity of the radio in Senegal to spread knowledge about Shiite Islam on the air. The goal of the radio shows was to counter anti-Shiite stereotypes, and debates concerned differences between Sunnism and Shiism, and discussed monotheism, the Quran, prophecy, and Islamic history. Publicity for Shiism was also gained through inviting speakers representing different Islamic schools to voice their opinions. One programme paired Youssou N'dour, Senegal's most famous musician, with a Shiite painter to discuss what Islam says about art.

Senegalese Shiite practices

The efforts of Senegalese Shiite leaders will only be successful if they can convince other Senegalese of the message of Shiite Islam. Making this global religion more local enables Senegalese to relate to Shiite Islam. Senegalese Shiites stress that although they may be influenced by Iranian or Lebanese Shiites, the Islam they practice is distinct from that in the Middle East or Asia: it is Senegalese. This is evident in their adaptation of three provisions of Shiite Islam, the *marja'* system, *taqiya*, and the commemoration of Ashura, to the Senegalese context.

Many Shia emulate a *marja'*, or a religious scholar of Najaf or Qom who serves as a reference. While not all Senegalese Shia are knowledgeable about this fundamental Shiite principle, many Senegalese draw their influences from a variety of Shiite thinkers. While some of them choose the teachings of Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, Khomeini's successor in Iran, others abide by the authority of a combination of others, including Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Najaf, Sayyed Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah in Lebanon, and Imam Mohamad Shirazi of Iran, who was popular among the Shia of the Gulf. This fusion of *maraja'* (pl.) distinguishes them from the Lebanese shaykh, who exclusively follows Sistani, and the Iranian embassy, which officially carries out the work of Khamene'i. One Senegalese informant explained that the *marja'* system resembles Senegal's medical system: when somebody needs surgery and the medical specialist for their particular ailment cannot be found in Senegal, they go to France or another country for the operation. The *marja'* system works in the same way. If there is an expert in Shiite Islam in Senegal, they can approach him with questions, but given the lack of expertise they go to Iran or Iraq.

Taqiya, or dissimulation, is permitted when persecution is imminent. Senegal is not a country where people are oppressed, therefore, Senegalese Shia claim, they do not need to practise *taqiya*. However, many of them are not open about being Shiite and do practise dissimulation. For example, when praying in Sunni mosques, Senegal's Shia hide their Shiite customs to avoid lengthy explanations to people who are unlearned, who may not have open minds, and who may think that the Shia are mistaken in their practice of Islam. Furthermore, a small number of Senegalese scholars earned the turban in Iran for their knowledge of the Shiite religion. While some of them wear it openly, others do not, afraid of being targeted by the anti-Shiite campaign of the Wahhabis. One Senegalese Shiite shaykh, who studied in Iran during the revolution, does not wear his turban in Senegal so he can continue to guide both Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Well respected for his knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, he is not only a *wakil*, authorized representative, for Khamene'i, but he is also a *muqaddam*, the Sunni equivalent of *wakil*, for a prominent Senegalese Sufi leader. Senegalese use of *taqiya* to move adeptly between the Sunni and Shiite worlds



Senegalese
Shiite Shaykh,
date unknown

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gives them more liberty than the formal Lebanese and Iranian institutions allow them. This is important in convincing other Senegalese that Shiite Islam is the true path.

Another distinctly Senegalese Shiite adaptation is the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the son of Imam Ali, in the Shiite mourning period known as Ashura. The Lebanese in Senegal invite a visiting storyteller from Lebanon, with a full ten days of lectures, food, and decorations. The Lebanese conduct activities in the Lebanese dialect, which is foreign to Senegalese Shia, who are fluent in standard Arabic. Senegalese Shia prefer to organize their own tribute to Hussein in the Wolof language. A commemoration in the style of the Lebanese costs money and Senegalese Shia have meagre means. They are only able to observe the tenth day and night of the month of Muharram, convening to listen to a debate concerning the meaning of Ashura. They use what resources they have to organize a feast of Senegalese delicacies.

Although poor financially, the leaders of the Senegalese Shiite movement are rich intellectually. Fluent in the Arabic language, many have university degrees from the Arab world. Drawn to the religion for many reasons—political, spiritual, philosophical, financial, or because Shiite scholars convincingly answered their questions about Islam—their mission is to convince others. They spread the word in Wolof or other local languages, first to friends and families, and eventually to a larger population through teaching, conferences, holiday celebrations and media publicity. Senegal's Shia depend on two independent transnational Shiite networks, one Lebanese (Arab) and the other Iranian (Persian), to help finance their institutions and activities. Most importantly, while influenced by the *maraja'* of Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, Senegalese Shia emphasize that their Shiism is *Senegalese* (African). Indeed, through keeping their feet in both Sunni and Shiite worlds, Senegalese Shia hope to find their place in Senegal's politics of religion.

Notes

1. A *hawza* is a traditional Shiite school.
2. All names of converts are pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants.

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