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Revolution, Modernity and (Trans)National Shi'i Islam: Rethinking Religious Conversion in Senegal

Mara A. Leichtman*

Department of Anthropology, Michigan State University, 310 Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824,
USA mara.leichtman@ssc.msu.edu

Abstract

The establishment of a Shi'i Islamic network in Senegal is one alternative to following the country's dominant Sufi orders. I examine Senegalese conversion narratives and the central role played by the Iranian Revolution, contextualizing life stories (trans)nationally in Senegal's political economy and global networks with Iran and Lebanon. Converts localize foreign religious ideologies into a 'national' Islam through the discourse that Shi'i education can bring peace and economic development to Senegal. Senegalese Shi'a perceive that proselytizing, media technologies, and Muslim networking can lead to social, cultural and perhaps even political change through translating the Iranian Revolution into a non-violent reform movement.

Keywords

conversion; modernity; Shi'i Islam; postcolonial Africa; Iranian Revolution; economic development

I met Joseph and his son Khomeini at one of the three conferences organized by Senegalese Shi'a during the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram in January 2008, in which various religious leaders and teachers publicly debated the meaning of Ashura in a mixture of Wolof, Arabic and French.¹ This particular event was held outside the Lebanese-run Islamic school near Dakar's central bus station, but the style of the event followed that of Senegal's Sufi orders: a tent was set up on the street in which a table with microphones was placed for the speakers and rows of plastic chairs for the audience, comprised of a couple hundred young school children and a few dozen adults. A cassette was playing, amplified by a loudspeaker, during the two hours between the time that the event was supposed to start and the time it actually began. If one listened closely these were not the usual Sufi litanies chanted during religious events in Senegal, but sad lyrics in Arabic lamenting the tragic events that took place during the battle of Karbala in Iraq fourteen centuries ago. This drew the attention of passersby, as did the curious black banners hanging from the tent and covering the speakers' table, with images of the battle scene and verses written in colorful Arabic letters proclaiming the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his family. The conference

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¹To protect the identity of informants all names have been changed except those of prominent religious leaders (and in this case, that of 'Joseph's' son).

was led by Senegalese converts to Shi'i Islam dressed in Senegalese *boubous* or Shi'i robes and turbans, and featured the appearance of the Iranian ambassador and a speech by Senegal's Lebanese shaykh. Joseph attends all Shi'i events in Dakar; over the past two years there has been a proliferation of religious conferences and radio and television appearances explaining this unknown or misunderstood minority branch of Islam to Senegalese Sunni Muslims.²

Joseph was born in 1950 in Saint Louis, in the north of Senegal. His father was a Christian from the Serakole ethnic group, but converted to a Mauritanian branch of the Qadiriyya order to facilitate his marriage to Joseph's mother, since this was the religion of her uncles and brothers.³ His father's Christian origins explained Joseph's Christian name, although Joseph emphasized that before his discovery of Shi'i Islam he considered himself to be simply Muslim and did not identify with any of Senegal's Sufi orders. Joseph's father was a civil servant who moved his family frequently. Joseph was educated in Senegal's French system and attended primary school in Saint Louis, and secondary school in Ziguinchor in the south; his family then moved to Diourbel in Senegal's central peanut basin, but he continued his schooling in Thiès. He later studied law at University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar. Upon his graduation he worked as a civil servant like his father, first in the southern village of Kolda where he lived during the Iranian Revolution. Joseph became Shi'i around this time, and he elaborated on this memorable period in an emotional manner, vividly recalling every detail of the life of Imam Khomeini as if the revolution had happened yesterday. Although he was then based in Kolda, he was hospitalized for three months in Dakar where the following events took place.

In 1978 Joseph was reading documents about the Shi'a that portrayed them in a negative light. He left the hospital every day at 6:00 p.m. to go home to watch the news—the national *Radiodiffusion Télévision Sénégalaise* (RTS) was the only option at the time.⁴ When the news programs featured Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, he heard a different discourse from the Imam than what the journalists had been broadcasting about the Shi'a. When Khomeini was exiled to Paris Joseph purchased all the magazines featuring articles on Iran and the Ayatollah that he could find in Senegal, including *L'Express*, *L'Humanité* and *Paris Match*; he even remembered the names of the journalists who wrote these articles that he could still quote by heart.

Joseph followed Khomeini's movements—his arrival in Paris in 1978 and the closing of the airport in Tehran in an attempt to prevent his return from exile. *Le Monde* published a famous interview with the Imam in which he presented his politics, based on divine inspiration, Joseph specified. The journalist called Khomeini a mystic influenced by classic philosophy. Joseph came to the conclusion that he had to follow this Imam. He bought all the books on Shi'i Islam (in French) available in Senegal, and was influenced by the work of the French Islamicist Henry Corbin. Since the Iranian embassy was not yet closed in Dakar he went there for additional information and obtained the newspaper *Message de l'Islam*, which summarized Khomeini's ideas.⁵ Other texts that inspired Joseph were the testament of Khomeini; the writings of the Shi'i Imams, in particular *Nahj al-Balagha*, the collection of sermons by Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib; volumes by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari, and other clerics; and books on Islamic philosophy. He was

²It is not my intention to analyze Senegalese Muharram rituals in this article. More attention will be given to these events in future publications.

³Usually Senegalese women will take the religion of their husbands, but in this case Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men so Joseph's father converted to Islam.

⁴With the arrival of French television stations and a proliferation of recently established Senegalese competition the national station no longer holds a monopoly on news in Senegal. One can also purchase Arabic satellite television.

⁵President Abdou Diouf closed the Iranian embassy in 1984 for distributing Islamic propaganda. It reopened in the early 1990s.

able to obtain this literature either from the Iranian embassy in Dakar or through writing to the Ahl Al-Bayt Foundation in Paris.⁶ Joseph claimed to be the first in Senegal to support Imam Khomeini at a time when the world was divided into Eastern and Western blocks, and the East supported Saddam Hussein. He described himself as an 'ardent partisan' and as a 'defender of Khomeini'.

Joseph jumped back and forth in time as he recalled key events in Imam Khomeini's life, finally pausing at the end of May 1989, when the Ayatollah was hospitalized in Tehran. At that point Joseph's own life became intermingled with that of Khomeini. That week it was very hot in Dakar and Joseph had a dangerously high fever. He walked to the hospital, and the doctor was shocked that someone as sick as he was able to walk in that heat. The following week, on 2 June, Joseph's wife gave birth to a son after trying to conceive for fifteen years. When she felt labor pains Joseph rushed her to the hospital and spent the night there. The following morning he went home to sleep for a few hours, and when he awoke that afternoon he turned on the radio and learned that Khomeini had died that very day. He did not hesitate to name his son Khomeini—and this, he declared, was a time when the Imam was considered an assassin, a murderer, and not even a Muslim. Today, however, Joseph is known at the Iranian embassy as 'the father of Khomeini'.

How does one understand the Iranian Revolution in a Senegalese context? As this article argues, the revolution brought awareness of Shi'i Islam to Senegal, which led to intellectual reforms in which education is a fundamental concept in African economic development. Ironically, Senegalese converts to Shi'i Islam have taken the ultimate denunciation of the West—Iran's rejection of Muhammad Reza Shah's Westernization policies in a return to Islam—to translate Khomeini's vision into an alternative African modernity.⁷ As Donham (1999) has argued in the case of Ethiopia, revolutionary outcomes, or in the Senegalese case ideologies, sometimes only further what they are trying to oppose: the modernization of the state. Ethiopia was the only country in Africa to have a social revolution because it escaped European colonization (Donham 2002); conversely, as Keddie (1995) and Kepel (2002) have suggested, the Iranian Revolution could never succeed in Senegal because of the West African country's strong links to France. Yet Khomeini's ideologies have taken root in Senegal through both French and Arabic language media, not as a political revolution but as a call for Islamic reform.

This article takes life history narratives of Senegalese converts and their discourses about the Iranian Revolution and builds on theories of conversion through contextualizing converts' individual experiences within transnational encounters *and* Senegal's political economy. I define conversion as a change in religion over time, involving a transformation of one's religious culture resulting from multiple factors, including social networks with other believers, discovery of key religious texts and a response to a particular location in both time and place. Drawing on a total period of more than two years of ethno-graphic research in Senegal between 2000 and 2008, I explore how the search for power, autonomy, economic advancement, peace and spiritual meaning influences religious imagination, even 'conversion' from one branch of Islam to another.

I contend that certain Senegalese became aware of Shi'i Islam at the moment when the Iranian Revolution became a topic of international importance, yet went beyond the Western

⁶This organization/publishing house was established by Abbas Ahmad al-Bostani, a Shi'i of Iraqi origin who translates books on Islam into French. He was formerly based in Paris but now lives in Montreal, and his publications are distributed in Senegal (www.bostani.com). The Al-Khoei Foundation now runs a small office in Paris that caters to Francophone Shi'i communities, including requests from Africans for literature on Shi'i Islam.

⁷Such policies were famously referred to by Iranian writer Jalal al-e Ahmad as 'Westoxication'. See also Diouf (2000) for a discussion of Senegalese alternative modernities in the context of the Murid trade diaspora.

media coverage to engage intellectually with Shi'i texts. Furthermore, I contest the dominant framework for evaluating the success of Shi'i movements (for example, Keddie 1995, Kepel 2002) through the assumption that Shi'i influences must necessarily be political and aim to replicate the Iranian Revolution. Central to my argument is an examination of how transnational Islam enables a particular Senegalese nationalism. In contrast to other countries in the Middle East and Asia whose Muslim populations experienced a resurgence of Islamic practice following the revolution, in Africa some Sunni Muslims were inspired to adopt Shi'i Muslim ways. Grounded in local power struggles, competition for Islamic authority and disillusionment with the Senegalese state, new ways of being Muslim offer new hopes for the future. Decisions to convert reveal the political climate of the time, religious strategies of the past and the intersection of local and global religion. Incorporating West African cases into discussions about conversion, Shi'i Islam and globalization highlights how Senegalese perceive that proselytizing, media technologies and Muslim networking can lead to socio-economic, cultural and perhaps even political change.

Travels and Transformations in Islam in Senegal

Modernity goes hand in hand with tradition, and it is therefore necessary to first present an overview of Islam in Senegal. Senegal today is more than 90 percent Sunni Muslim, dominated by a tradition of Sufi orders founded by shaykhs, religious clerics who have become saints; their descendents, who inherit the spiritual power or *baraka* of the founder (Cruise O'Brien and Coulon 1988), continue to lead each order. The oldest Sufi order in Senegal is the *Qadiriyya*, with origins in Baghdad. The largest order is the *Tijaniyya*, which began in Fez, Morocco. The most well-known order is the *Muridiyya*, whose founder, Amadou Bamba, was Senegalese. Bamba's black African origin is important to many followers.

Referred to as *marabouts* in Senegal, shaykhs teach and guide the *talibe*, their disciples, who study in Islamic schools called *daara* (see Brenner 2001, Ware 2009) in which they learn the Qur'an by rote memorization.⁸ Scholars such as Cruise O'Brien have suggested that the Senegalese case is an exception in Africa in that the intermediary auspices of the Sufi orders are institutionalized in the 'assertion of an authentic ("empirical") statehood over most of the national territory, involving rural masses as well as elites' (1996: 458). Others have argued that Sufism as practiced in Senegal has developed unique variations to Islam as it is practiced elsewhere in the Muslim world, and Senegal's most significant innovation is that social organization takes pre-eminence over ideology or theology in Islam (Villalón 1995). While I acknowledge the strong influence of religion in Senegalese politics and society, in emphasizing the linkages between Muslims in Senegal and the Middle East I do not focus on the 'exception' or 'uniqueness' of Senegal's Sufi orders that prevails in these established political science accounts of Islam in Senegal.

The ultimate social, political and economic power granted to these marabouts, and their occasional abuses of this power, has led some Muslim reformists, both Sunni and Shi'i, to contest the hierarchies of the Sufi orders in Senegal. Research on Islam in Senegal has begun to focus on reformist Sunni movements: *Hizb al-Tarqiyya* in the Murid order (Villalón 1999), the *Mustarshidin* movement in the Tijani order (Kane and Villalón 1995, Samson 2005, Villalón 1999, 2000) and the growth of *Jama'at Ibadu Rahman* among university students in Dakar (Augis 2002). Elsewhere in West Africa other reformist movements are also being explored: the *Wahhabiyya* in French West Africa (Amselle 1985,

⁸The French first used the term 'marabout' in West Africa to refer to members of Muslim lineages who were also clerics, ranging from the obscure to the well known and including urban and rural imams or prayer leaders, teachers, scholars, preachers, saints and Sufis, amulet confectioners and diviners (Soares 2005).

Kaba 1974); the Indian influenced *Tabligh Jama'at* in The Gambia (Janson 2005); the *Yan Izala* movement in Niger (Masquelier 1996) and Nigeria (Kane 2003, Loimeier 1997); various reformist movements in Mali (Brenner 2001, Niezen 1990, Schultz 2008, Soares 2005) and Côte d'Ivoire (Launay 2004, LeBlanc 2006, Miran 2006); and political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa (Gomez-Perez 2005, Miles 2007, Otayek 1993). Such movements in Africa are not only a recent or foreign phenomenon but also go back several generations to an older Sufi tradition of reform (Loimeier 2003). It is therefore surprising that most scholars of Islam in Senegal and Senegalese religious authorities are astonished to hear that Shi'i Islam has spread to Africa.

The majority of Senegalese Muslims are Sunni, and believe that when the Prophet Muhammad died in the year 632 C.E. he did not designate a successor or establish a system for his replacement. This question caused a schism between Sunnis and Shi'a, who argue that Muhammad designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali to follow him. Those Muslims who supported Ali were known as *shi'at 'ali*, the partisans of Ali. The majority of Muslims, however, did not endorse the view that their leader should be a descendent of the Prophet, and call themselves orthodox adherents of the *sunna*, the prophetic traditions. The question of succession is the main political difference between Sunnis and Shi'a, although other minor differentiating practices exist in the required ablutions before prayer; in the position of the arms while bowing in prayer; and in the *turba*, the small clay tablet representing the earth of the holy Iraqi city of Karbala to which Shi'i Muslims touch their foreheads when prostrating instead of to synthetic prayer rugs. Shi'a also commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the son of Ali who was murdered in the battle of Karbala on the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram in 680 C.E. This is the major mourning ritual that distinguishes Shi'a from Sunnis.

Senegalese converts believe that historically Shi'i Islam developed in Senegal without people being aware of it and that there is a religious conscience in the Senegalese people favorable to Shi'i Islam, which shares many attributes of Sufi Islam (Leichtman 2006a, chaps. 1 and 9). These ideas were actively promoted through Iranian efforts strategically aimed at combating Saudi Arabian objectives of spreading throughout Africa a 'Wahhabi'-influenced Islam.⁹ Converts deem that the spread of Shi'i Islam is impeded by criticism from the so-called 'Wahhabis', who are far more numerous in Senegal and who envision their role as restorers of Islam from innovations, superstitions, deviances, heresies and idolatries that are especially inherent in Sufi and Shi'i Islam.

Conversion to Modernities

Social scientists of the post-World War II period looked to Max Weber for an understanding of conversion, and polarized religion between the 'traditional' and the 'rationalized' (see Hefner 1993). In disagreeing with Weber, Horton (1971, 1975a, 1975b) sparked a debate on African conversion with his 'Intellectualist Theory' by insisting that 'traditional religions' are no less rational than 'world religions', just narrower in focus. This led to a famous dialogue with Fisher (1973, 1985) and others (Ifeka-Moller 1974, Ikenga-Metuh 1987). Horton's theory continues to be debated today, especially by scholars examining conversion in Africa (Aguilar 1995, Comaroffs 1991, Gabbert 2001, Hamer 2002, Peel 2000, Ranger 1993, Searing 2003). Horton has been critiqued for not defining *conversion*, ignoring the influence of colonialism, failing to recognize the religious dimension, and grounding his

⁹The term 'Wahhabi' refers to an Islamic movement that purports to be orthodox, and is named after the Saudi founder Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). This name is rarely used by members of the group today, and was first designated by their opponents. Also known as Salafism, the movement accepts the Qur'an and Hadith as fundamental texts and advocates a puritanical and legalistic theology in matters of faith and religious practice.

theory in simple local–national, premodern–modern dichotomies. Peel (2000) suggests that we cannot treat ‘traditional’ religion as a purely indigenous cultural baseline and an entity wholly independent of Islam. Other scholars have moved away from these debates, describing conversion as a cultural passage in a quest for human belonging (Austin-Broos 2003); as an upwardly mobile step toward elite status (Gellner 2005); or as a clear political statement of dissent against identities constructed by the state (Viswanathan 1998).

Defining conversion to Islam somehow becomes more difficult. Cummings critiques those who envision this process as ‘a fundamental change in beliefs, an act of replacement perfect and complete when all pre-Islamic beliefs disappear in favor of Islamic tenets’ (2001: 559). According to Cummings, this rigid notion of conversion has allowed scholars to distinguish ‘true’ Muslims from those who merely perform Islamic rituals while retaining their original beliefs. Such a division is not that simple; Cummings calls instead for a reconceptualization of the process of religious conversion based on local perceptions. Peel (2000) further elucidates this emphasis on social identification by insisting that the only workable definition of conversion is the process by which people come to regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as members of particular religious groups. Does converting to Islam entail different processes and motivations than converting from a ‘traditional religion’ to a ‘world religion’? What about converting from one branch of Islam to another?¹⁰

Senegalese were attracted to Shi‘i Islam in what can be called ‘intellectual conversion’. As described in Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) typologies, the convert becomes acquainted with alternative ideologies through individual, private investigation such as reading books, watching television, or other impersonal ways. Some individuals convert on their own in isolation from devotees of the respective religion, but the convert is likely to be socially involved with members of the new religion. There is little or no external social pressure to convert. The majority of Senegal’s Shi‘i leaders experienced this type of conversion.

I am aware that scholars such as Asad (1993) are critical of anthropologists who, through the historical legacy of Christianity, have envisioned religion as a matter of orthodoxy over orthopraxy. In contrast, many anthropologists of Islam have suggested that Muslims emphasize religious practice over belief (Bowen 1993, Geertz 1968, Loeffler 1988). In focusing on the ‘intellectual’ aspect of Senegalese conversion, I highlight how books and knowledge about Islam are a critical element in new constructions of religious authority. I have argued elsewhere that Senegalese converts have adapted certain Sufi practices to their new Shi‘i beliefs (Leichtman 2009). For them, this is part of what makes Shi‘i Islam Senegalese. They are not converting to a new religion, but are accepting different interpretations of Islam. They pray in the Shi‘i manner (with the *turba* and arms straight instead of crossed) when alone or in a Shi‘i mosque, but they also practice *taqiyya*, where they hide these different customs when praying in a Sunni space (Leichtman 2007). The most significant demonstration of Senegalese Shi‘i intellectualism, as illustrated in the introduction, is the commemoration of the battle of Karbala. For Senegalese Shi‘a Karbala is not a collective physical mourning ritual, as are Muharram practices elsewhere in the Middle East or Asia, but an opportunity to organize conferences, debates, television and radio appearances, and to produce written pamphlets educating Senegalese Sunni Muslims about the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and the family of the Prophet Muhammad.¹¹ To be a Senegalese Shi‘i is to educate others on Shi‘i Islam, not to rigidly insist on ‘correct’ Islamic practice.

¹⁰I acknowledge that many Muslims do not consider the change in affiliation from Sunni to Shi‘i Islam to be a conversion. Yet Nakash (1994) notes that Iraqi tribesmen who converted from Sunni to Shi‘i Islam perceived the change in religious status as such, and used the term *rawafid*, meaning ‘rejection’ of and ‘defection’ from Sunni dogma. Senegalese Shi‘a are not opposed to the use of the term ‘conversion’.

¹¹I am preparing a book chapter on Ashura in Senegal, and do not have space in this article to further elaborate on this topic.

Senegalese converts regard the intellectual attraction of Shi'i Islam differently from Horton's 'Intellectualist Theory'. Just as literacy elsewhere and at other times has served as a time bomb of reform (Fisher 1973), and has enabled the forging of connections with congregations from afar (Ranger 1993) or even within the same nation (Anderson 1998), Shi'i texts provide alternative answers to questions about Islam. Augis (2002) argues that Muslims who make an intrafaith conversion are reading the Qur'an for the first time as a result of participating in reformist organizations that advocate Qur'anic literacy. Conversion is based on learning what converts consider to be the absolute textual truth. Shi'i texts, however, are only available to a small elite group that has mastered the Arabic language and has funds to purchase this literature from abroad, beyond what is distributed free of charge by the proselytizing agencies. Converts like Joseph, who are French educated and illiterate in Arabic, are less common.¹² The ability to read the Islamic texts and not rely on their interpretation by a marabout or other intermediary has separated converts from the more 'traditional' Islamic practices of the Sufi orders, especially the Muridiyya.¹³

Asad (1996) laments that religious conversion needs explaining in ways that secular conversion to modern ways of being do not. However, religious conversion can also be attributed to a conscious choice for a more 'modern' way of life. Van der Veer (1996) has proposed that conversion to Christianity was, in fact, a conversion to modernity, but many in the West have (mistakenly) perceived Islam to be incompatible with modernity, democracy, civil society and pluralism (Esposito and Burgat 2003). Muslims may also deliberately resist the Western modern. As Deeb (2006) has argued, a dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress is necessary for 'modernness', where spiritual progress is what distinguishes Muslim modernity from the perceived emptiness of modernity as manifested in the West, in addition to Western perceptions about Islam. Hefner (2005) has stressed that there is no uniform Muslim modernity nor a monolithic Muslim politics, which is my point of departure for the Senegalese Shi'i case.

In Senegal spiritual progress is thought to lead to material progress. The Sufi orders exhibit a version of the Protestant ethic in which work, along with prayer and religious instruction, are the fundamental Islamic tenets. In the rural areas *talibe* are expected to work in the name of their marabout. For example, the spirituality attributed to work historically allowed Murid colonization of the Senegalese countryside, enabling Bamba's followers to overcome the hazards of early settlement and seize the land collectively (see Cruise O'Brien 1971).¹⁴ Senegalese migrants to urban areas, in Senegal and abroad, continue to send a portion of their earnings to their religious leaders. In contrast, Senegalese Shi'i spirituality is manifested in religious knowledge instead of manual labor, and converts follow their attraction to Khomeini's ideals by reading books on Shi'i Islam. This intellectual spirituality is also expected to lead to material progress, and knowledge is shared through building schools, organizing conferences and debating ideas over the radio and television (see Leichtman 2009). Shi'i converts hope that education will result in a more sophisticated modernity than that of the work expected from the masses of Sufi talibe, and in economic development for Senegal as a whole.

Modernity can be defined as a geography of imagination that creates progress through the projection and management of alterity and historicity, requiring an Other and an Elsewhere (Trouillot 2002). 'Vernacular modernities' are attempts to reorder local society by using

¹²Not all African reformist movements insist on literacy in Arabic. See Samson (2009) and Janson (2009).

¹³Brenner (2001) points out that the rise in Arabic literacy resulting from *médresa* education spurred the growth of Sunnite sentiment in urban Mali throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Niezen (1990) found that the most important criterion for leadership in the rural reform movement among the Songhay of Gao is literacy in Arabic.

¹⁴This 'work ethic' has most often been attributed to the Murids in the literature even though it is also prominent in the Tijani and Qadiri orders.

strategies that have produced wealth, power or knowledge elsewhere in the world (Donham 1999). Anthropologists have critiqued what is often seen as a singular Western model of modernity (such as Harvey 1989) suggesting either the local appropriation of modernity in other places or 'alternative' non-Western understandings of modernity (see Knauff 2002). Others have suggested that the term has lost all analytical value with overuse and the assumption of too many contradictory meanings (Deeb 2006, Donham 2002). I am interested here in considering the new strategies, as understood by Muslims in Africa, for implementing social change. Becoming Shi'a is one way that certain Senegalese, especially those who are highly educated and relatively affluent, attempt to escape the colonial legacy, the failure of the Senegalese state and growing structural inequalities in their country by adopting while adapting a religious model that has been successful elsewhere in combating the West.

French colonialism led to the acceptance in Senegal that the West was the universal example for all that is modern.¹⁵ Today the French educational system has not led to success for all Senegalese, and competition from reformist Islamic schools is growing (Brenner 2001, Ware 2009). With the exception of a few converts such as Joseph, who read religious texts in French translation, it was through fluency in Arabic brought by this turn towards reformist Islamic education that Senegalese Muslims discovered the spiritual and material opportunities of Shi'i Islam. This was encouraged through Iranian efforts at building schools and disseminating literature on Shi'i Islam, and by Senegalese activists inspired by Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution.

Knowledge is empowering, and it is also political. Through mastering both Shi'i and Sunni Muslim texts, Senegalese converts reject the authority of local Sufi marabouts *and* protest Arab domination of Islam by turning directly (in some cases) to Iran.¹⁶ Yet Shi'i converts continue to share many moral and social values with their Sunni counterparts; conversion therefore does not obscure their former Senegalese values nor lead to 'discontinuity' (Engelke 2004) or a 'rupture' or 'complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998). In maintaining their *Sénégalité*, converts continue to be part of and even influence Senegalese national culture through organizing religious events and local efforts to contribute to economic development, yet they bypass local religious power structures in order to build their own.

In Senegal converting from a 'traditional' African religion to Islam and Christianity or from one interpretation of Islam to another was already an accepted practice that was essential in the formation of Shi'i networks. Conversion to Islam and the knowledge that came with it was a means of achieving higher status at a younger age (Mark 1978); challenging the authority of the elders (Searing 2003); and gaining access to new resources for predicting, explaining and controlling events in a world penetrated by external social forces (Simmons 1979). In sum, conversion radically altered local configurations of power, kinship, wealth and inheritance. Conversion to another form of Islam, like conversion to Christianity (Comaroffs 1991, Donham 1999, Hefner 1993, Keane 2002, Meyer 1999, van der Veer 1996), is about assuming new identities in situations of historical and social change that

¹⁵This was most famously exemplified in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, in which after a long moral struggle the family of protagonist Samba Diallo opts for French education for their son over the traditional Qur'anic schools. Western modernity is, of course, not always positive or on par with its rivals, and in the end Samba Diallo loses his faith in accepting the science of the Occident.

¹⁶Cruise O'Brien (1984) describes how the version of Sufi Islam publicized by the Senegalese orders enabled Africans to escape spiritual subordination to an Arab religion and construct African religious autonomy. Africans had their own saints, which made it possible for Islam to spread beyond the Arab periphery south of the Sahara. Cruise O'Brien depicts Murid Islam as refusing to be subordinated to the Arab world, since Amadou Bamba does not defer, as Senegalese branch-leaders of the Tijaniyya or the Qadiriyya do, to Fez or Baghdad. Although there are significant Arab and Asian Shi'i communities, Shi'i Islam is often perceived to have originated in Iran, and was even described by the French Islamicist Henry Corbin as 'Iranian Islam'.

undermine old systems of status. The decision to convert is embedded in the individual convert's struggle to fit into a changing society, and the search for one's place outside of (and even within) one's traditions. Asad (1993) stresses the relationship of religion to power, and religious power in Senegal entails having economic resources and some influence on the political system.

Political and Economic Context for Religious Change in Senegal

Like modernity and revolution, conversion is linked to political economy and Senegal's place in the global capitalist world. Religion featured strongly in the control for power in colonial and postcolonial Senegal. French presence in West Africa expanded in the early nineteenth century and fears of Islam were reflected in French colonial policy (Harrison 1988). Seeing itself as a 'Muslim power' (Robinson 2000), that is, an imperial power with Muslim subjects, France made a conscious effort to control the Islamic societies it ruled and to select their leaders. William Ponty, the civilian lieutenant-governor of the colony of Upper Senegal and Niger (1907-1915), developed the French policy of ethnic particularism. He set about eroding the alliance of the marabouts and the community chiefs by ensuring that Muslims were not placed as chiefs over non-Muslim peoples. This policy became known as *politique des races*, which was a central theme of colonial administration in West Africa until the Second World War. Ethnic particularism was also applied to Islam, where 'African Islam' or *Islam noir*, which contained indigenous and pre-Islamic customs, was seen by the French as 'inferior' or, rather, less threatening than 'Arab Islam'. While the French were most concerned with who owned the land, in this case the Senegalese led by the marabouts, they were also concerned with who might threaten their control over the land, which involved the Arabs as well.¹⁷

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 and political 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 in the peanut trade between the French in the cities and Senegalese peasants in the rural areas. However, the French soon grew concerned about the increasing numbers of Arab immigrants, whose population quickly exceeded that of the Europeans.¹⁸ They responded with an anti-Lebanese campaign, and a policy of segregating Lebanese from Senegalese in order to prevent the spread of pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism and anticolonial sentiments.¹⁹ Efforts began to restrict the use of Arabic in the French colonies and to exercise greater control over the importation of publications in Arabic. Lebanese religious practices were also prohibited from conforming to those of the Senegalese.

Senegal gained independence from France on 20 June 1960, and the transition from colonial to African administration was relatively smooth. Postcolonial periods alternated between political competition and institutional reforms, consolidation of power through the elimination of oppositional political parties, the slowing down of rural reforms, rural and urban unrest, the deterioration of economic conditions, the inflow of foreign aid and the legalization of political opposition (Gellar, Charlick and Jones 1980). Ties with France were never severed: in 2002 Abdou Diouf, past president of Senegal, was elected secretary general of the Francophonie. Ties were also strengthened with the Arab world: President

¹⁷See Leichtman (2006, ch. 3) for a more in-depth discussion of French colonial policy toward Muslims.

¹⁸Today there are between 15,000 and 30,000 Lebanese in Senegal.

¹⁹For details on France's anti-Lebanese campaign in Senegal see R. Cruise O'Brien (1972) and Sene (1997).

Abdoulaye Wade was reelected in February 2007 in the midst of a construction campaign to ease the flow of Dakar's traffic in order to lure Gulf Arabs to Senegal for the March 2008 Organization of the Islamic Conference summit.

These times of transition, coupled with increasing economic and cultural globalization, led to some Senegalese rethinking their religious affiliations. Shi'i Islam was brought to Senegal through the migration of people and ideas, and both Lebanese and Iranian influences. Religion, in particular Shi'i Islam, had not been featured in the Lebanese process of settling in Senegal and forming a new identity. In fact, Shi'i Islam in Senegal was not a powerful or identifiable force until the 1969 arrival of Abdul Mon'am al-Zayn, a shaykh from Lebanon who trained in Najaf, Iraq (Leichtman 2008a). He came to Dakar shortly before two important events in the making of a transnational Shi'i movement: the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the Iranian Revolution (1979). There was no formal Shi'i religious representation in Senegal until the founding of the Lebanese Islamic Institute in 1978.

The Iranian embassy has also played a subtle role in encouraging Shi'i Islam in Dakar. Iran has a history of economic cooperation with Senegal from the time of Reza Shah, but the embassy was closed in 1984 for spreading Islamic propaganda. The Iranian embassy reopened in the early 1990s and has been careful to stress only its economic activities in Senegal. However, certain embassy events continue to promote Shi'i Islam. Iranians hold an annual reception for prominent Lebanese and Senegalese Muslims for the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, and finance the attendance of Senegalese intellectuals at Islamic conferences in Tehran. Iranian president Rafsanjani's presence at the 1991 Organization of the Islamic Conference meetings in Dakar was highly publicized, as was President Ahmadinejad's attendance at the 2008 OIC conference in Dakar. Senegalese President Wade visited Iran in 2003, 2006 and 2008, including a 2008 meeting with Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei. In 2007 Khamenei's confidante, Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, visited Dakar and declared, 'We believe it is our duty to expand ties with Islamic countries and use the capabilities and potentials of Muslim states to help the growth and spread of Islam.'²⁰ In addition, an Iranian shaykh recently built a Shi'i seminary, *Hawza al-Rassoul al-Akram*, located near the University of Dakar, where Senegalese shaykhs trained in Shi'i theology in Iran or Lebanon educate a young generation of boys using Arabic texts.

Although Lebanese Shi'a first arrived in Senegal over a century ago, they rarely mixed religiously with Senegalese Muslims. Lebanese adapted well to Senegal and learned local languages and customs; their businesses depended on Senegalese employees and clients, but they were often accused of racism for preferring to marry other Lebanese (Leichtman 2005). Only occasionally linked to interactions with the Lebanese community, today's conversion of Senegalese Shi'a was prompted instead by the Iranian Revolution and the circulation of books in Arabic, French and English translations in the 1970s. The Lebanese shaykh also played a role through his efforts to expand his constituency beyond the dwindling Lebanese population by teaching Shi'i Islam to Senegalese. Whereas the Islamic Institute in Dakar caters primarily to Lebanese, Shaykh al-Zayn has founded five mosques and approximately 130 *madaris* (religious schools) located outside of Dakar and led by the Senegalese religious men whom he trained.²¹ Senegalese Shi'a count on the Lebanese shaykh and prominent Lebanese merchants for financial contributions and hope for more tangible rewards from Iran for their faith than merely the propagation of the Islamic revolution.²²

²⁰Senegal Stresses Expansion of Ties with Iran', Fars News Agency, 29 July 2007.

²¹According to an article by *Le Messenger* (Aïdara 2003). I have not verified these figures.

²²The shaykh uses the *khums* tax, the Shi'i tax of one-fifth of all assets, to help fund their institutions and activities.

By the mid-1980s dozens of Senegalese Muslims had converted to Shi'i Islam.²³ Despite efforts by the Iranian embassy and the Lebanese shaykh to bring them to Shi'i Islam, many Senegalese Shi'a came to the religion on their own. Converts come from all ethnic groups in Senegal and initially from various Sunni Muslim orders. While the majority of the movement's leaders were Tijani before becoming Shi'a, others were Murid or Qadiri. Some of them first made a Salafist detour; others converted directly to Shi'i Islam.²⁴ Converts come from all over Senegal, ranging from the urban areas of Dakar, its suburbs, and Saint Louis, to regional hubs such as Kaolack, to the villages of the Fouta and the Casamance. Some converts were well-off and had the means to study in Canada or in the Arab world; others lacked such financial means but through their dedication to their studies and the right networks they received scholarships to send them abroad or educate them in Senegal's Lebanese-run Islamic schools. The majority of converts were fluent in the Arabic language; a minority was French educated and did not have a firm command of Arabic. They discovered Shi'i Islam both in Senegal and in their travels to other countries. They work in foreign embassies and the Senegalese government, and are bankers, artists, teachers and scholars, shaykhs and laymen. Senegal's Shi'i converts are an elite community of highly educated intellectuals who frequently speak standard Arabic among themselves and share a minority religion that others do not understand and often do not even know exists in Senegal. They are struggling to legitimate Islam for themselves by forming religious networks that they lead, based on their own knowledge of Shi'i legal texts, and their direct ties to *maraja'*, Shi'i religious authorities located outside of Senegal in Iran, Iraq or Lebanon.²⁵

Senegalese Conversion to Shi'i Islam

I began this article with the vignette of Joseph to focus my analysis of conversion away from the deterritorialized accounts of individual spirituality that dominate the literature on religious experience. Ongoing efforts in social theory have struggled to address the relationship between the individual and society in relation to religious transformations. I now turn to the conversion stories of other Senegalese Shi'i converts, as described to me in interviews.²⁶ My primary concern in these vignettes is to focus attention on the ways in which converts articulate not only their individual religious experiences, but also the social contexts in which they discovered Shi'i Islam. Furthermore, I am interested in the very ambitious and nationalist goals they project for Senegal, which they envision the dissemination of Shi'i Islam will achieve. Their discourse reflects a growing reality among Senegalese Muslims that the religio-political status quo is not working and that change is inevitable.

Converting to an 'Active Islam'

Cherif told me that he had always wanted to be close to the Islamic religion in Iran.²⁷ He was drawn by Imam Khomeini's charisma, and even though he was only sixteen or seventeen years old at the time of the revolution he avidly watched the events unfold on television. Khomeini claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, which,

²³I cannot provide statistics for the actual number of Shi'a in Senegal.

²⁴See note 9 for a definition of Salafists.

²⁵*Maraja'* (s. *marja'*), meaning 'sources to imitate or follow', are the Grand Ayatollahs with the highest authority to make legal decisions within the confines of Shi'i Islamic law.

²⁶I have chosen to describe only the conversion experiences of male converts for the purposes of this article. Senegalese men are more active in the Shi'i networks than women, and female converts tend to be wives or family members of male converts. For illustrations of women's life histories see Leichtman (2006a).

²⁷Cherif insisted that I use his name and acknowledge his religious center in my work. I am using the honorific title he is known by, indicating his alleged descent from the family of the Prophet Muhammad, and the actual name of his institute and others in Senegal as they are occasionally written about in the newspapers.

according to many Senegalese, gave him Islamic authenticity.²⁸ For Cherif, the reaction of the rest of the world to the kidnapping of the fifty-two American hostages in Tehran (from 1979-1981) demonstrated Khomeini's power in causing widespread fear and anxiety. Khomeini's deftness in political Islam caused Cherif to exclaim, '*Voilà un musulman!*' Before becoming Shi'i he was obsessed with Ayatollah Khomeini but he was also enamored with music, especially that of Bob Marley. He went to mosque, and afterwards listened to reggae. Bob Marley's death in 1981 led to a rupture in Cherif's hobby, and eventually he began to read and became interested in the Qur'an. His return to Islam coincided with the 1982 attacks against the Americans in Beirut.²⁹ He and other youth were pleased to see that a small country like Lebanon could be victorious over great powers like the United States, France, Italy and Israel and bring them to their knees. Again he exclaimed, '*Voilà l'islam!*' and told me, 'You understand that here was an active Islam that could do some good for humanity. The Islam that remains in place only to conduct marriages, say greetings, and drink tea, that is not really Islam.' Cherif claimed to be the first in Senegal to organize a celebration for the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.

Cherif was born in Dakar in 1963; a rambunctious child, he began his studies at two and a half years of age at the corner religious school. He entered a Franco—Arabic school at age seven, and in 1972 he enrolled in the school of the *Fédération des Associations Islamiques du Sénégal*, a state-controlled reform-ist association. After receiving his *baccalauréat* in 1981 he took classes at the Islamic Institute of Dakar where he continued his Arabic lessons.³⁰ In 1985 he began to study French and Arabic at the University of Dakar. He finished three years of university but was unable to complete his degree because he needed to work full time. That same year, at the age of 22, he began working part time as a librarian at the Senegalese—Turkish school.³¹ There he discovered books on Shi'i Islam, but was told by a librarian that Shi'a were heretics and the books were not useful. Such comments only sparked his imagination more, he told me, because man is always curious about what is forbidden to him. The library closed at 6:00 p.m., but he often stayed until ten or eleven o'clock at night engaging in 'extraordinary' conversations with his friends discussing Shi'i ideas. After discovering these Shi'i books, he approached the Iranian embassy to ask for additional information. Cherif considers Shi'i Islam to be an intellectual movement, not a warrior movement. He explained to me that in Senegal poverty often means illiteracy, but the Qur'an states that one should read and promotes education.

Cherif is well traveled in The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya. He has also been to France, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and many times to Iran. In every country he visits he talks about Shi'i Islam with the people he encounters. In Iran he had the opportunity to attend seminars to continue his studies. However, he had a family back in Senegal and was unable to leave them for long. The Iranians provided him with books; eventually he taught himself enough about Shi'i Islam that during a subsequent visit to Iran he was awarded the status of shaykh and given a turban to wear, a great honor that inspires awe and respect for his religious knowledge.

²⁸Like many *sayyids*, Imam Khomeini claims to be able to trace his genealogy back to the Prophet Muhammad. Senegalese Sufis as well as Shi'a feel a closeness to the family of the Prophet. Although my interlocutors mention this point, Khomeini's spiritual leadership was due to his charisma and other personal qualities and not to his ascendancy.

²⁹After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the United States established a peace-keeping force between Muslims and Christians in Beirut; this led to a series of attacks against Americans, culminating in the suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut on 18 April 1983 that killed 63 people. 'Islamic Jihad' took responsibility for the bombing, but that organization is believed to have been a *nom de guerre* for Hizbollah. At the time this was the deadliest attack on a U. S. diplomatic mission.

³⁰This is the Senegalese Islamic Institute attached to the Grand Mosque of Dakar, not the Lebanese-run institute.

³¹This is a school operated by the Fethullah Gülen revivalist movement in Turkey, with the view that Islam, as it developed in Anatolia, has a global aim. This vision encompasses education for all; Turkish schools have been established in more than 80 countries, including throughout Africa (<http://en.fgulen.com>).

Cherif married in 1986 and gave his five children Arabic names. His youngest three children have distinctively Shi'i names: Muhammad Baqir (the fifth Imam), Fatima Zahra (the daughter of Muhammad and the wife of Imam Ali), and Narjis Zaynab (the mother of Imam al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam).³² In 1997 he began teaching these new religious ideas to his family. Two of his brothers work paving roads, two others are small businessmen, another buys and sells fish, and another brother is a woodcarver. All of them have become Shi'a, in addition to Cherif's wife. His parents have also converted to Shi'i Islam from Cherif's influence, as has his sister, although the spouses of his siblings have retained their memberships in the Sufi orders. His brothers have allowed him to educate their children; as a result his nieces and nephews are being brought up in the Shi'i tradition.

Cherif plans to continue to work in Islamic education by writing books that he is currently researching about human development, women's and children's rights, poverty, and unemployment to instruct the Senegalese public about Islam. He founded the Ali Yacine Centre Islamique de Recherche et d'Information, a modest Islamic center that caters to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Guediawaye, in the outskirts of Dakar. The library/prayer room boasts several hundred Shi'i books from Iran and Lebanon, and some that Shaykh al-Zayn has published in Senegal. Most books are in Arabic and deal with philosophy and Islam in general, with a few in French, especially contributions written by Ayatollah Musavi Lari of Qom, Iran.³³ Activities include Arabic classes for adults and children; Cherif teaches a *tafsir* (Qur'anic commentary) class on Thursday nights and philosophy and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) on Saturdays. The institute hosts celebrations for Ramadan and *maw'lud*, the Prophet's birthday, as well as celebrating Ashura. Religious pictures of Mecca and Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei decorate the walls, in addition to photographs of Cherif with Shaykh al-Zayn and various Iranian religious and political dignitaries.

The Islamic center has recently expanded to become an 'association for long-lasting human development', with plans to apply for NGO status for its work with the environment, drugs, malaria, AIDS and famine. This includes an *Association Fatima Zahra*, a women's development organization that functions as a *tontine*, a Senegalese rotating credit association, and encourages the women to work in, for example, selling powdered soap or vegetables in small quantities. *Ali Yacine* provides free medical consultations for those in the neighborhood and envisions itself as working to eradicate poverty. Cherif told me that operating merely an Islamic organization no longer suffices; it must also provide services to the people.

Converting to a 'Peaceful Islam'

Ismaïl is a public figure in the south of Senegal. When we walked together along the streets of Ziguinchor, the men who passed us greeted him with respect. Ismaïl was born in 1945 in a small village in the Casamance. His family was one of religious scholars, and Ismaïl learned the Qur'an from his parents for six years and later studied Arabic grammar and the religious sciences under his uncle in Ziguinchor. Ismaïl worked as a merchant but was not successful. He became Shi'i when Shaykh Abdul Mon'am al-Zayn inaugurated a religious school in Ziguinchor. Because of his eloquence, the local Lebanese community asked Ismaïl to translate the shaykh's Arabic speech into the local Creole dialect. When Shaykh al-Zayn arrived, they gathered in the school and he delivered a sermon. Ismaïl began to translate after every sentence spoken by the shaykh, but the shaykh requested that he wait until the

³²See note 34 for an explanation of the Shi'i Imams. I have not used pseudonyms for Cherif's children.

³³In 1980 Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari established the Office for the Diffusion of Islamic Culture Abroad in Qom. This organization dispatches free copies of his translated works throughout the world and has printed Qur'ans for free distribution among Muslim individuals, institutions and religious schools in Africa (www.irib.ir/worldservice/Etrat/English/Nabi/Besat/seal1.htm).

conclusion of the sermon. Despite the difficulty of this task, Ismaïl said he managed to translate every word and even replicated the shaykh's movements.

During the shaykh's second visit to Ziguinchor he invited Ismaïl to have dinner with him and encouraged him to seek the path of righteousness. Ismaïl agreed and later took the ferryboat to Dakar on 2 December 1993 in order to visit Shaykh al-Zayn's Islamic Institute. He accepted the Shi'i doctrine on that very day and began to call on people to perform good deeds. He regarded others as brethren in humanity and faith, and he abided by God's Holy Book and the prophetic traditions. Shaykh al-Zayn provided him with books, and Ismaïl began to believe, with the help of the shaykh, that Imam Ali was the closest of all the Imams and Caliphs to the Prophet.³⁴ Nevertheless, Ismaïl respects Sunnis and never insults or disagrees with them. He does his best to be close to God and to live side by side with Sunnis.

After becoming Shi'i Ismaïl dedicated his life to education. He opened a school in Ziguinchor in 1998 in which he teaches Qur'an, the Arabic language, grammar and jurisprudence. His sons also teach at the school, which consists of two classrooms built in front of their home. He holds regular *majalis* (religious assemblies) in his home, where he conducts religious ceremonies and delivers lectures on Islam. The main goal of his school is

to strengthen Islam and support humanity, to make peace prevail and achieve equality among human beings and to stop seditions that result from ignorance. Once man knows and believes in God and the Day of Judgment, he will never dare to commit bad deeds and will never hurt others. My goal is to free the world of hatred and enmity. God knows what is better for all of us. Nobody can escape or change God's fate. Man should believe that his own interest should stem from the interests of others. That is exactly what I try to convince my students. When all Muslims and all mankind truly believe in God, the whole world will live in peace and manage to co-exist.³⁵

Since 1982 rebels in the southern Casamance region of Senegal have been waging an independence campaign against the central government in Dakar (Lambert 1988). The Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC) has instigated attacks from neighboring Guinea-Bissau. Ismaïl told me of his own family's tragedies—his brother, a teacher, was killed by rebels, his house was bombed, and many *ulama* (religious scholars) were also killed. More than any other region in Senegal, the Casamance region has been dominated by Christians but has retained 'traditional religion'. Ismaïl explained that the war in the Casamance gave Islam a chance to succeed because people lived in fear. He and the other Senegalese Shi'i leaders in the Casamance trust that the spread of Islam can help bring peace to the region. A Christian once visited him after hearing Ismaïl's sermons on the radio and exclaimed that if all Muslims spoke in the same manner, then good and peace would prevail everywhere.

These two vignettes illustrate the different ways that Shi'i Islam is being negotiated in Senegal as both an activist and a peaceful religion capable of bringing about social change at the local and even national level. As Karp (2002) has noted, the terms 'development' and 'modernity' are key words that are intimately related to one another and cannot be exclusively defined. Converting to Shi'i Islam is therefore seen as a conversion to

³⁴The Sunni Caliphate was a series of caliphs who were the selected or elected successor of the Prophet in political and military leadership, but not religious authority. The Shi'i Imam is both the political leader and the religious guide, and the final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law. Ali was passed over three times for the Caliphate before he was elected fourth Caliph while remaining the first Imam to Shi'i Muslims; he was then murdered five years later in 661 B.C.E. The majority of Shi'a believe there were twelve Imams, with the twelfth Imam, the *mahdi*, in occultation.

³⁵Doaa Darwish provided Arabic to English translations.

modernity, but unlike converts to Christianity who wish to become more 'Westernized' (van der Veer 1996), choosing Islam may distance converts from the modern European example that is often associated with colonialism and imperialism (Kepel 2002). There has been growing scholarly interest in the work of Islamic NGOs, which have been expanding their activities and outreach across the African continent since the 1980s and 1990s (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003, Ghandour 2002, Kaag 2007). More than their Sunni counterparts, Shi'i organizations are dependent on NGO status in order to obtain legitimacy and convince their growing network of followers of the wider benefits of adhering to a minority branch of Islam. The following section examines how Shi'i Muslims in Senegal advocate educational and economic development in the context of the spread of Iranian revolutionary ideologies.

The Africanization of Iran's Revolution

Joseph and Cherif are not alone in their admiration of Iran's most famous and infamous leader. Assan also discovered Shi'i Islam as a result of the Iranian Revolution. Raised Tijani and educated at al-Azhar University in Cairo in the philosophy of the Qur'an, Assan was first exposed to Sunni Islam and became a jurist. Today he works as an economist in Dakar. Like Joseph, he followed the media's portrayal of Khomeini, and was disgusted at how he was demonized by Western and Senegalese journalists and how Shi'a were accused of being blasphemous.

The Iranian Revolution, when it happened, drew the attention of the whole world. I followed the events, how they unfolded, but I paid particular attention to the way in which these events were interpreted; how they were commented on by the Western media, and how identical comments, style, and formulas were mimicked in the Senegalese press. I questioned what was going on, and tried to understand the image of Khomeini conveyed by the television. I saw the image and its very essence was Islamic: his grace, his clairvoyance, his serenity, and so on. Everything that Islam represents was reflected in the image of Imam Khomeini shown on television and in the photos that were reproduced by the newspapers.

But the written comments were awfully distorted. They gave a totally false image of a bloodthirsty Imam Khomeini. That made me more critical and pushed me to explore the internal dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, to collect more information and retrieve from here another version. The Western version was not satisfactory to me, the one that said even if he was not the enemy he was the adversary because he was setting up an alternative political system to the capitalist one in order to compete with the West.³⁶

Instead of believing what the media portrayed about Imam Khomeini, Assan came up with his own reality. 'I finally realized that [Shi'i Islam] is Islam in its primordial form; authentic, sincere and loyal.' He saw the Iranian Revolution, which in his view restored dignity to Islam and belief to Muslims, as the only successful revolution since the time of Muhammad. He became Shi'i in 1987 in his late twenties at a time when there were a number of debates and conferences in Dakar about Shi'i thought. He was of that generation of judgmental students who discovered Shi'i Islam because of Imam Khomeini, and who became Shi'i because it offered 'solutions to all the issues I have been grappling with and could not find answers to anywhere else. I found there [in Shi'i Islam] the adequate answers I needed to satisfy my thirst.' Assan is convinced that Senegalese are slowly starting to see that Khomeini was right in his revolution as a means to protest the West, and that the conflict

³⁶Cassettes of interviews in French were transcribed by Birama Diagne, Mohamad Cama, and Patricia Pereiro. Noémi Tousignant translated quotations from French into English. Mamadou Diouf helped me check the exactness of this work.

between Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush has opened the world to becoming even more favorable toward Shi'i Islam.

Conversion experiences such as those of Joseph, Cherif and Assan are not unique. All around the world Khomeini stood at the center of the Iranian Revolution, and he alone brought the masses together, giving them identity, unity, and purpose. This was the argument of Abrahamian's provocative book *Khomeinism*, by which he referred to a variant of 'Third World' populism in which a middle-class movement used radical rhetoric to mobilize the lower classes. Abrahamian (1993) argues that Khomeini in fact broke with Shi'i tradition in employing a borrowed rhetoric of vast public appeal that centered not on theological issues but on real socioeconomic and political grievances and entailed the struggle of nation-states to come to terms with modernity. Khomeini can thus be seen as a pragmatic reformer, not a 'fundamentalist'. Khomeini's popularity caused scholars such as Casanova (1994) to take notice of how religion in the 1980s 'went public' and became 'deprivatized', and how religious traditions once considered marginal and irrelevant in the modern world assumed public roles.

The Iranian Revolution was symbolically important to many because Islamic reformist opposition forces overthrew a Western-influenced secular regime. Foucault even interpreted the revolution as a protest against the political rationality of the modern era (Jahanbegloo 2004: ix). During the early 1980s Ayatollah Khomeini elaborated a philosophy aimed at exporting the revolution. He repeated a number of themes in his speeches that formed the elements of an Islamic ideology meant to engage Sunnis and Shi'a in one universal language while at the same time to speak to Shi'i Muslims in a particularistic Shi'i terminology. Although it did not endure, the universal appeal of Khomeini's message derived from its emotional content and not from any prescriptive message of how to construct an Islamic polity. The Organization of Islamic Propaganda (*sazman-e tablighat-e eslami*) and Iranian embassies engaged in the spread of Islamist propaganda.³⁷ Africa was also a target for Iranian materials. In the 1980s Iran's foreign minister, Ali-Akbar Vela-yati, established embassies throughout Africa, some of which closed in the 1990s. The Iranian government currently carries out a modest foreign aid program in Africa, and the international Iranian television station *Sahar* even broadcasts in Swahili (Balda 1993).

The Iranian Revolution led to a surge in scholarship on Islamic resistance trends in other Muslim countries, often encouraged by events in Iran. Hunter's brief examination of Iran's influence in the 'Third World', including Africa, focuses on 'finding an audience' for its 'revolutionary Islamic ideology' and on Iran's self-image as the 'champion of the oppressed' (1990: 167). Keddie (1995: 189) declares: 'The Iranian revolution . . . helped spread a militant and revolutionary version of Shi'ism and of the Muharram celebrations'. While she agrees that only a small minority of those who identify with Khomeini are revolutionaries, her 1995 book evaluates revolutionary tendencies elsewhere in the Muslim world, including Senegal. Keddie later writes, 'The political aspects of the religio-political movement identified with the leader of the Iranian Revolution and Islamic Republic, Ruhollah Khomeini, have in recent years been more influential than have been its religious aspects' (2002: 6). Likewise, Nasr (2002) explores how in Asia the revolution served to mobilize minority against majority, and concludes that the lasting impact of the revolution was a deep division between Shi'a and Sunnis, sectarian discourse and deepening social cleavages. With the exception of a brief mention by Bayat and Baktiari (2002) that revolutionary developments in Iran contributed to an increased mood of religiosity in Egypt, most

³⁷See Bakhash (1984), Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1988) and Tehranian (1980) on communication, sermons, pamphleteering, and propaganda during the Iranian Revolution.

scholarship focuses on the political and revolutionary impact of the revolution and not on the spread of Shi'i Islam.

Shi'i influence should not be judged on its success in political awakening and calls for revolution, which is not the goal of Senegalese Shi'a. Instead, they portray themselves as leaders of an intellectual movement, and use their Islamic knowledge as a weapon to educate—and modernize—the Senegalese population. Muslim reformers are often not understood in terms of an alternative modernity, but rather as 'terrorists' with a cause of arousing 'emotional sympathy and enthusiasm and to galvanize with an example of victory won by violence' (Kepel 2002:2).³⁸ But Senegalese converts like Ismaïl envision Shi'i Islam as a religion that can bring peace to Senegal's secessionist region, the Casamance. Assan anticipates that, like *Ali Yacine*, the Shi'i organization he heads in Dakar will help bring economic development to Senegal. He hopes that by conveying new Islamic ideas he will be helping 'the development of the country while preserving at the same time its coherence and national unity. People must eat and drink. For that, they have to live in a peaceful environment to be then able to think and use their brains'.

How do these converts inspired by Khomeini link Shi'i Islam to economic development? Scholars concur that the Iranian Revolution was a 'development disaster' (Pesaran 1980), yet Senegalese Shi'a continue to be inspired by Khomeini's populist message that they have interpreted through the theological advancements of Shi'i Islam. For example, women's rights feature strongly in the discourse on African economic development. Leaving postrevolution Iran's strict enforcement of the wearing of the *chador* aside, Senegalese converts envision that Shi'i Islam can bring greater rights and freedom to African women. The Shi'i practice of temporary marriage, or *zawaj mut'a*, remains a point of contention with Sunni Muslims, whose second Caliph Umar outlawed its practice, viewing it as fornication. Defined as a 'marriage of enjoyment', the objective of *mut'a* marriage is sexual pleasure, and any children that result are considered legitimate by Islam. A marriage payment by the man to the woman must be specified, as well as the duration of the union, which may be as long or as short as the partners desire as long as they both agree.³⁹

Temporary marriage is seen by Senegalese Shi'a as a solution to the social problems caused by Senegal's current economic crisis. In Senegal, where a man might not be able to afford a proper wedding until he is in his forties, temporary marriage allows him to marry in accordance with the laws of Islam by negotiating a private contract that suits his financial capabilities. Temporary marriage also benefits women, who have the freedom to end the relationship without the stigma of divorce and who have a say in determining the conditions of the marriage, for example, insisting that the man support them, and stating whether they want to engage in sexual relations. Senegalese Shi'a, men and women, see temporary marriage not only as a respectable institution, but as a logical one that facilitates their current economic reality.

Shi'i converts are rendering Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran into a non-violent philosophy of an authenticated Islam that will bring progress to Senegal through knowledge and not through confrontation. Transnational Shi'i Islam is thus denationalized from its Iranian (and Lebanese and Iraqi) context. The revolutionary language and ideology are translated to be more compatible with Senegalese political culture through the creation of 'a new religious consciousness and practice from various familiar and familiarized cultural

³⁸Kepel refers in particular to those who carried out the attacks on 11 September 2001, but his book takes a historical look at Islamist movements.

³⁹See Haeri (1989) for an excellent account of the historical and juridical aspects of this contract in addition to an illustration of its current applications in Iran.

resources and traditions' (Larson 1997: 979).⁴⁰ Select Shi'i ritual practices such as mut'a marriage are transformed into a Senegalese understanding and application. Furthermore, the former colonial struggle is itself converted into a postcolonial one of Islam (an anti-Western Islam, not an accommodationist one) versus the West. In appealing to those holding Islamic power and resources, converts are able to arm themselves with books, knowledge and the financial means to empower themselves in Senegal's Islamic debates, which enables them to remake Shi'i Islam into something meaningful to other Senegalese who are concerned, on a national scale, with peace and economic development.

Reconceptualizing Conversion

How does an individual construct a religious identity in a world fraught with contradictory local and global forces? This article has outlined the trajectory of Shi'i Islam in Senegal. Although the Lebanese community had been living in Dakar for over a century, it was not until the Iranian Revolution became an international debate when Imam Khomeini relocated to Paris in 1978 that Senegalese began discovering Shi'i Islam. This moment of crisis, when the Ayatollah was exiled from both Iran and Iraq, also turned him into a Western subject. His popularity in the Western media spread beyond Europe and the United States to the former colonies, including Senegal. Yet conversion to Shi'i Islam was deeper than the Western fascination with the Iranian Revolution (see Beeman 2005 and Said 1981); some Senegalese took an intellectual approach to religious change. Islam and the Arabic language enabled them to go beyond the French press to the source, and through accessing Shi'i religious texts they were also able to interact with other Shi'a and be part of a transnational Islamic movement. The Arabic language became another territory for Senegalese converts: they could resist the Western conception of Islam and experience Iranian Shi'i Islam without leaving Senegal.

Senegalese converts live religious lives that are not circumscribed by state borders or local customs. Educated, relatively well-off economically, and usually able to travel, Senegalese Shi'a embrace an alternative 'imagined community' of Muslims. Choosing to become Shi'a in Senegal translates into a positive consciousness of what being Shi'a means in light of other global struggles, for example in Iran, Lebanon or Iraq. This Senegalese sense of attachment elsewhere is a modern conception of conversion. Migration, literacy and media technologies have encouraged Muslims 'to interact with one another and to become more aware of their religion's internal variety and vicissitudes' (Mandaville 2001: 127). Yet, as Peel (2000) has described how Christianity has been 'inculturated' by the Yoruba, Shi'i Islam has become rooted in Senegalese local culture. Muharram commemorations, such as the one that opened this article, resemble much more the religious debates of Senegal's Sufi orders than the passion plays of Iran. As an intellectualized and 'activist' Islam that engages with human rights and endeavors to eradicate poverty through literacy and education, bring economic development and advance peace and stability in the Casamance, it is not the violent, forceful religion depicted in Western media and understood by those in the West. As Shi'i Islam travels to Africa it loses the (often political) spirit that exemplifies the religion in its countries of origin: the revolutionary undertones of Iran or the forces of resistance in Lebanon (Deeb 2006).⁴¹

If Senegalese converts portray Shi'i Islam as a peaceful intellectual movement denationalized from its Iranian context, does that mean it is not political? Although converts

⁴⁰See Larson (1997) for a discussion of subaltern hegemony in early Malagasy conversion to Christianity.

⁴¹The Iranian Revolution initially did influence Senegalese Islamic political parties such as *Hizboulahi* (the party of God), which was created in August 1979. See Leichtman (2008b) for a discussion of the broader impact of the Iranian Revolution among Senegalese who did not convert to Shi'i Islam.

are not aiming to transform Senegal into a theocracy, they are trying to merge their appreciation of Shi'i Islam with Senegal's secular democracy. Through their knowledge of Senegalese hierarchies of power, converts create a new religious identity that enables them to negotiate their position in Senegal by cutting themselves loose from its social, political and economic constraints. The influence of the Islamic orders, while not formalized in the Senegalese political system, is ubiquitous, and Senegalese have endeavored to form a Shi'i network in Senegal as an alternative to joining the Sufi orders (and not necessarily to shake up or dismiss them). Pan-Islamism (or pan-Shi'ism) is a way to remain a 'good' Muslim and Senegalese citizen while escaping the Senegalese adaptation of Islam and its Arab variants. Converts can revolutionize local concepts of nationalism through following Khomeini's teachings without adopting the Islamic Revolution.

Senegalese Shi'a were first convinced by Iranian revolutionary ideologies, and second by Shi'i Islam. Although not all Senegalese converts recount experiences that include the Iranian Revolution, the predominance of their admiration for Khomeini cannot be ignored. Choosing Shi'i Islam is not simply a matter of religion, and individual conversion experiences cannot be understood in isolation or decontextualized from the history of Senegal. The Senegalese Pulaar ethnic group refers to converts as *perdo mbotu*.⁴² This is translated as 'migrating from the cloth that ties the baby to its mother's back', that is, straying from one's parents' tradition. This means that in addition to being exposed to new ideas, the convert must also be ready to leave the native religion. Whereas opportunity or circumstance led them to Shi'i texts, media representations or encounters with Lebanese or Iranian Shi'a, the socio-political context of Senegal and their distaste for the dominant maraboutic tradition is what encouraged them to convert.

This Pulaar discourse enables a broader thinking of processes of conversion and modernity. One can be both Shi'i *and* Senegalese if one embraces nationalism and transnationalism, travel and translation, globalization and assimilation, Sunni and Shi'i Islam. In Senegal the relationship between the national state and colonization, the postcolonial state, and attempts at postnationalism must be considered. Those at the margins of capital-rich 'global cities' are forced to seek unconventional financial networks that are accessible to them for other reasons. Through reworking history and tradition, Senegalese Shi'a are converting to an alternative modernity of Islam that enables converts to negotiate new economic linkages, not with Saudi Arabia or other Sunni Arab countries but with Iran and Lebanon. As Shi'a, Senegalese Muslims are able to obtain scholarships to study in Iran or Lebanon, acquire funding for their Islamic organizations and gain an advantage over Senegalese Sunnis in accessing growing business opportunities with Iran. Converts are attracted to foreign religions while cognizant of the political-economic context of their nation *and* conscious of global, transnational forces. This (trans)national conversion pushes theories of religious change to a new level as converts simultaneously search for their place both outside and inside their traditions.

But above all, conversion to Shi'i Islam is linked to a discourse of progress, to the economic development that knowledge of Shi'i Islamic texts and the implementation of their ideas would bring in an African Shi'i modernity. Donham (1999) has suggested that 'development' and 'democracy' have replaced 'revolution' in modernity's master narrative, but the case of Senegalese converts to Shi'i Islam has demonstrated that the Iranian Revolution has not been forgotten.

⁴²Similar terms were used to refer to the Fulbe who joined the nineteenth-century jihad movement. See Hanson (1994).

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