Mara A. Leichtman

*Shi‘i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal.*


Mara Leichtman begins her book, *Shi‘i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal,* with a nod to the political urgency of her topic. The preface, entitled “Islam and Politics,” addresses frequent associations in popular media of Shi‘ism in West Africa with support for terrorist organizations. In Senegal, such claims are often accompanied by heated discussions around the *arabisants,* or Senegalese seen to have abandoned their own culture in favor of the dress, customs and religious practices of Iran, Lebanon or Saudi Arabia. This list alone highlights Senegal’s connection to the politics of the Middle East, especially in notions of a “foreign” Islam imposing itself on the “autochthonous” forms of West African Sufism. With a focus on the cultural, religious and nationalistic imbrications involved in such notions, Leichtman’s book proposes a study of the global and local connections that have allowed the Libano-Senegalese to create a place for themselves within Senegalese nationalist narratives.

In order to navigate this complex network of co-existing global, nationalist and religious narratives, Leichtman turns to the notion of cosmopolitanism, reflecting upon how Shi‘ism is understood in these contexts as an all-inclusive form of Islam. This approach allows the author to integrate religious cultures and practices within critical thought on cosmopolitanism as a concept. She views the role of religion here as “a universalizing and differentiating identity that supersedes previous colonial categories of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ (5).” Leichtman rightly argues that many critical frameworks, such as those of transnationalism, have too often neglected religion, which is “reduced to either totalitarian orthodoxies or false consciousness (3).” In fact, Leichtman argues, in the cosmopolitan performances of religious sovereignty that she examines, these supra-national dynamics are often called upon, much like NGOs, to fill in for an otherwise failing nation-state.

The structure of *Shi‘i Cosmopolitanisms* reflects the broader theoretical issues the author wishes to address. Separated into two parts, the book could very well have constituted separate, more concise monographs, as Leichtman acknowledges in her conclusion. By choosing to explore in tandem the Lebanese community of Senegal and Senegalese converts to Shi‘ism, the author embraces the ambiguities and points of slippage that come with equating a Libano-Senegalese identity with Shi‘i Islamic practices, followed by an ethnography of the lived experiences of Senegalese Shi‘i converts with varying connections to a sense of Global Shi‘ism. This very ambiguity, Leichtman
argues, allows us to consider instances where the national may overcome the religious in matters of Islamic identity, or where conversion to what is seen as a global religious movement responds primarily to local and national concerns of fostering a new source of Senegalese identity within Shiʿism.

The first part of Shiʿi Cosmopolitanisms traces the history of Lebanese presence in Senegal, highlighting the ways in which this community has consistently been defined as much by others as it has by itself. The height of Lebanese migration to West Africa took place in the 1920s, when large numbers of Lebanese arriving from Marseille were said to have sought to travel on to America but never quite made it. Whether this commonly retold migration narrative is true or not, what is known is that the migrants wound up securing a role for themselves as intermediaries within the colonial trade economy, with many tied to the groundnut trade in Kaolack. At first called Syrians and then Libano-Syrians, the Lebanese community came to be ghettoized by the colonial French in the Plateau area of Dakar. As part of a colonial move to “save” the subordinated Islam Noir from Arab influences, the French would found a series of médersa designed to produce pro-French Muslims. The Lebanese were denied access to these médersa, forbidden from speaking Arabic and excluded from Senegalese neighborhoods. Leichtman argues that these policies, part of Governor General William Ponty’s politique des races, were a direct reaction to the troubling presence of multiple cosmopolitanisms within the French territory.

Leichtman points out that despite difficulties encountered under the colonial regime, Senegalese independence would bring even greater challenges for the Lebanese community. Although the first Senegalese president Léopold Senghor called for inclusion of the Arab population, in practice the centralized groundnut trade on which the Lebanese had come to rely was largely handed over to nationalized institutions and local Senegalese marabouts, removing the need for Lebanese intermediaries. Many attempted a shift to the garment trade but could not compete with illicit Senegalese traders. Post-independence Africanization thus placed the Lebanese in a tenuous position, between black and white, resulting in the creation of a racialized migrant community whose ambiguous status is reflected in the derogatory Wolof term naaρ-Beirut (75). Within this new political and racial landscape the Lebanese, one the one hand, “clung to cosmopolitan linkages—the Arabic language, international business ties, French education, multiple passports. On the other hand, they renegotiated the integration debate in an effort for formal recognition as a Senegalese ethnic group, attempting to claim autochthony (93).”

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on specific individuals and institutions that have contributed to the close association within Senegal today of the Libano-Senegalese...
with Shi‘i Islam. Addressing the life and importance of the first Lebanese shaykh in Senegal, Shaykh al-Zayn, Leichtman refers to her extensive fieldwork carried out among the members of the *Institution Islamique Sociale*. Leichtman’s analysis of the shaykh’s sermons and their impact on the Senegalese community is particularly compelling. Describing the reception and ambiance of al-Zayn’s regular sermons (or khutba), she argues that, “The khutba is one means of linking Islamic history and scriptures to the present and mixing the sacred with the secular. Shaykh al-Zayn’s powerful sermon educates Lebanese in Senegal about their past and scholarly traditions of Shi‘i Islam while preaching a reformist view of Islam, calling for religion to be applied to the modern day and age (110).” Her description of the Institute and its activities suggests an interesting implicit double function, that of subtly promoting Shi‘ism’s political existence within Senegal while also helping the Libano-Senegalese community, which is majority Shi‘i, to display and perform its own ethnic belonging. This ethnic identity, though tied to Lebanon, exists within a decidedly Senegalese context. For example, public demonstrations and performances of Lebanese identity in the form of marches played a crucial role in increasing the visibility and acceptance of this community at the height of the 2006 Lebanon War, when Senegalese popular opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of the Lebanese cause. In the heat of such performances of diasporic identity, signs of Shi‘ism became linked with political solidarity with the Lebanese. Leichtman thus argues that, “The case of the Lebanese diaspora in Senegal demonstrates that when ‘Islam’ travels to another Islamic context, it is the national (exemplified through the ethnic), and not strictly the religious, that becomes the focus of migrant identity (116).” Her observation is enlightening in the framework of this case study and invites comparative reflection in other contexts, for example that of Senegalese Sufi communities in Morocco.

The second part of this book, in which Leichtman discusses Senegalese conversion to Shi‘i Islam, speaks to one of Leichtman’s central arguments, which is that studies on migration must also take into account the impact of migrants on their host communities. Leichtman indicates that there is competition within Senegal between Lebanon and Iran as to who will shape the form of Shi‘ism in West Africa. On the one hand, Shaykh al-Zayn established for himself a place among Senegal’s most visible religious leaders, earning a place of honor at Senegalese celebrations such as the Murid *magal* and the Tijani *gammu*. However, also central to Shi‘i Islam here are resistance narratives tied to the Iranian Revolution, which, Leichtman argues, did in fact result in a number of Shi‘i converts, despite scholars’ assertions to the contrary. The spread of Shi‘ism here has corresponded to a wish by some Senegalese to distance themselves from the Sufi Islam prevalent in Senegal due to what they see as its
failure to respond to a certain number of challenges posed by Salafi scholars. In this sense, Shi‘ism is not propagated in a revolutionary vein but rather a purely intellectual one, and seen as a form of increasing one’s religious awareness.

Leichtman’s nuanced case studies in Chapter 6 resonate with this observation. Addressing lived experiences of what it means to be Shi‘i in Senegal, the author addresses the Third-World populism, based on interpretations of Khomeinism, through which Senegalese Shi‘a often frame their own religious identity. For them the journey into Islam includes one of Islamic learning and literacy in Arabic, but also allows the individual to remain firmly within a Muslim and resolutely Senegalese identity. In fact, these acts of conversion may represent more of a symbolic departure from Western culture and a search for an alternative to the failures of the Senegalese state. “Ironically,” Leichtman states, “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 (168).”

Chapter 7 explores the development of Senegalese Shi‘ism as vernacular and resolutely local (a term the author borrows from anthropologist Engseng Ho). As such, Shi‘i organizations see themselves as working in conjunction and not in competition with Sufi orders, training local leaders and associating Shi‘ism with the pursuit of intellectual and spiritual progress. Islam, in this case, is a discursive tradition (citing Asad), and one that can include practices and discourses that are “not (yet) established historically (202).” As such, Shi‘i history is often re-narrated as having arrived in Senegal in the 10th century and seen as spreading to Senegal through the Almoravids (who are thought by Western historians to have been clear proponents of Sunni-Maliki Islam) (216). In discussing this re-narration of the past, Leichtman states that, “The aim of this foundational move is to solidly reconnect to a wider religious world and a deeper past (218).” As with the case of the overlapping celebrations of the Senegalese holiday of tamkharit and the Shi‘i commemoration of ‘Āshūrā’, Shi‘ism now falls within the realm of Senegalese national identity and is not in direct conflict with it. In this case, “Conversion allows for a break with the past in order to create a new present in the hope for a better future (234).” Within this framework of national futurity, “Proclaiming Shi‘i Islam to be Senegalese is thus a demonstration of autochthony and belonging. (234)”

Leichtman takes a highly nuanced approach in her treatment of Libano-Senegalese and Shi‘i identities within Senegal. Not seeking to resolve the complexities of interweaving narratives of identity, the author deftly navigates the shifting parameters of religious belief, national belonging and globalism. The strength of this book lies in its sustained focus, through multiple case studies,
on the lived experience of the Libano-Senegalese and Senegalese converts to Shiʿism. Her approach—which, citing Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, she calls an “ethnography of global connection (237),”—prevents categories from settling into discrete correspondences. Leichtman’s project constitutes an insightful challenge to declarations of a purported “counter cosmopolitanism” of Islam.

Brian Quinn
University of Colorado Boulder

Brian.Quinn@colorado.edu