THE NATION TURBANED? THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONALIST MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN SENEGAL

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Every four years a celebration of the cotton harvest is held in the regional town of Tambacounda (Eastern Senegal).¹ It receives considerable attention throughout the country and is widely covered by the press. The festivities are sponsored and organised by the state-owned cotton company Société de Developpement des Fibres Textiles (SODEFITEX). During the festival held in April 1992, the presidential couple was present to witness a long march headed by 50 carts, pulled by donkeys. Each cart contained a quantity of cotton that symbolised the record production of 50,000 tons of cotton that year. A large carriage that carried a class who had taken a course in one of the national languages of Senegal followed the march. The most prominent part in the festivities was played by the so-called ‘king and queen of cotton’, i.e. the most productive couple of cotton producers that year. Both were dressed in white and seated in an enormous cotton capsule, surrounded by professional praise-singers (griots) who honoured the hard-working couple in typical Senegalese fashion. No less majestic was the reward, handed over personally by the president to the ‘king of cotton’: a (sponsored) pilgrimage to Mecca at SODEFITEX’s expense.

Similar rituals with a strong Islamic imprint can be discerned in many other state-sponsored celebrations throughout the country. They point to the increasing interest in Islam in social and political life in Senegal, a country with a secular constitution. However, the SODEFITEX celebration described above contains definitely new themes and elements, which are pertinent to the transformation of political realities in contemporary Senegalese society. In my view these themes, which I will discuss in this paper, are characteristic of a new phase of nationalism in Senegal, one in which Islam has a greater effect than before on the policies of national identity applied by the national state. My
purpose is to unlock these themes and to place them in the wider context of economic and political change in contemporary Senegal.

Most studies of Islam and the state in Senegal tend to concentrate on the involvement of the Sufi orders, and their saints (wali) generally referred to as ‘marabouts’, in national politics. Unlike their counterparts in, for instance, Tunisia and Morocco where the construction of the postcolonial state led to a serious decline in the importance of these orders, or Mali where the Wahhabi movement criticised the religious practice of the Sufi orders, ‘maraboutism’ is very much alive in Senegal. Much has been said about the politicisation of the orders, their impact on the political and economic life, and the enormous electoral weight of their leaders. However, the connection between religious and national identities, and the extent to which the authority of the state is legitimised by a religious referent has not been similarly discussed. This paper explores how and the conditions under which the process of formulating a nationalist religious identity, or what Vatikiotis (1987) has called a ‘jus religionis’, has taken place in Senegal.

From the 1970s onwards, the state coped with an increasingly assertive religious community in general and powerful marabouts in particular. One of the strategies applied by the state to counterbalance maraboutic power was to give greater prominence to the capacity of Islam to promote a sense of national identity. Until the 1980s, the policies of the secular state did not leave much room for national identities to be derived from religious faith. As elsewhere in Africa (Ottayek & Toulabor 1990, Ruedy 1994, Olukoshi & Laakso 1996), however, attempts to make secularism or non-religious policies (African socialism, Négritude, or Francophonie) for that matter, the accepted ideology of the country proved unsuccessful. This failure was due in no small part to the fact that in a society more than 90 per cent of which is Muslim, religious conviction—which in Senegal implies a personal bond with a religious leader—tended to override senses of (supra-) national belonging. I suggest that these and other considerations, discussed below, motivated the state to reconsider the problem of national identity and to inject it with a new, religious meaning.

The focus in this paper is on the specific incorporation of religious ideas and practices into nationalism. I expand on the discussions of Anderson (1983) and Kapferer (1988) on what they call the ‘religion of nationalism’ and the way in which it transforms the religious ideas and themes it incorporates into its own ideological schemes. It is important to note that religions of nationalism often contain ideas and arguments that are far from reducible to the religion (Islam, Christianity,