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 Shi‘ism.

The first part of *Shi‘i 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 *naar-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