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Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal

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Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal. By Mara A. Leichtman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. 320. \$80.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Much of the anthropological literature on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa explores differences between “traditional” Sufi practices and Sunni reformist movements. This book sheds light on a different kind of Islamic experience: Shi'i movements in Senegal and their global implications. Through the lens of cosmopolitanism, Mara Leichtman examines religious practice and revitalization in two separate, but linked, communities: Shi'i Muslim Lebanese migrants and their descendants in Senegal, and Senegalese converts to Shi'i Islam. Both groups are religious minorities in Senegal, where Sufi Muslim brotherhoods dominate the religious sphere. Leichtman argues that examining the experiences of both groups together productively transcends the boundaries of traditional anthropological studies, resulting in an ethnography not of a particular community but rather of Shi'i Islam as a modality of cosmopolitan engagement and “religion as a global movement” (p. 2).

We should understand both Lebanese Shi'a in Senegal and Senegalese Shi'a as cosmopolitan, argues Leichtman, but they are cosmopolitan in different ways. Lebanese in Senegal have maintained cosmopolitan linkages through international business connections, Arabic language, French education, and identification with politics in the Middle East. Senegalese Shi'a achieve cosmopolitanism through conversion, connecting ideologically with religious communities in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, and thereby becoming inspired by non-Western notions of modernity. However, though both groups are cosmopolitan minorities, they also emphasize their continued belonging in Senegal, which Leichtman discusses as their claims to “autochthony.” Lebanese have stayed connected with Lebanon over three or four generations since settling in West Africa, but they also identify as a Senegalese ethnic group and demonstrate loyalty to the Senegalese nation. Senegalese converts, meanwhile, do not embrace Shi'i Islam with the idea of becoming less Senegalese; rather, they apply Shi'i Islamic ideals to a Senegalese context, especially to national political economy.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the Lebanese community in Senegal and is largely a historical examination of how the community formed, beginning with migration from Lebanon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, through decades of French colonial administration, followed by Senegalese independence. Lebanese established themselves in the business sector and became economically successful in the independence era, in part by hiring Senegalese and minimizing political involvement. Many Lebanese in Senegal considered themselves Muslim but were not aware of differences in Islamic schools of thought and did not identify themselves as Shi'a until beginning in the 1970s, when Shaykh Abdul Mun'am al-Zayn arrived from Lebanon and introduced Islamic education to the community. Still active during the time of Leichtman's fieldwork and one of her main informants, the shaykh has encouraged many Lebanese in Senegal to adopt more public expressions of piety, such as veiling, praying, and fasting. However, the larger consequence of his influence has been an increasing identification with Lebanese nationalism and Middle East politics among Lebanese in

Senegal. By attempting to bring members of the community “back to Islam,” the shaykh has succeeded in bringing them ideologically (if not physically) “back to Lebanon” (140).

The second part of the book explores Senegalese narratives of conversion. Senegalese Shi’a appear to interact little with the Lebanese community in Senegal, though they have also been influenced by Shaykh al-Zayn. Many Senegalese converts reported having been inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to embrace Shi’i Islam as a way of escaping the legacy of French colonialism and continued Western hegemony, while protesting the weakness of the Senegalese state and growing economic inequality in the country. Senegalese Shi’a consider themselves intellectuals rather than revolutionaries. They are more likely than their Lebanese counterparts to have studied the Koran extensively and to have achieved literacy in classical Arabic. They emphasize applying Shi’i teachings to improve “education, economic development, interethnic cooperation, and peace” in Senegal (p. 193). Significantly, Senegalese Shi’a do not see themselves as breaking with the Sufi traditions of their parents. They emphasize the shared practices and theological connections that link Shi’i and Sufi Muslims, and retell the history of the spread of Islam in West Africa to involve Shi’i roots.

Leichtman’s analysis of both groups effectively illustrates how a religious movement may provide its adherents simultaneously with avenues both to increased global connection and national attachment, albeit with different effects in each community. This book contributes a unique perspective on the diversity of Muslim experience in Africa, and provides a compelling case study of how processes of migration and religious conversion may converge in unexpected ways.

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