"Westernization" and the Politics of Islam in Senegal
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Abstract: In much postcolonial theory, identity-politics is considered a means of subversion and possible emancipation. Consciously moving away from the political culture of the colonizer towards a rediscovery and reassertion of indigenous norms is seen as an important part of the larger postcolonial project of claiming political agency. This article problematizes this argument, and makes the case for a more critical analysis of the assertion of indigenous identity. The article turns to the work of one particular theorist—Ed van Hoven—and one particular case—Islamist politics in Senegal. Charting the development of politicized Islam since independence, it draws attention to how Senegalese governments have re-enacted the attitudes of the French colonial state.

Ed van Hoven identifies a clear predilection for Islamic rhetoric in Senegal's post-independence politics.[1] Senegal's governments have, almost without exception, framed their policies within local Sufi practices or Quranic doctrine. As representative examples, van Hoven describes how SODEFITEX (the state-owned cotton company) sponsors pilgrimages to Mecca for each year's most productive cotton producers and how official publications on national economic development repeatedly make reference to the emphasis on individual work ethic in the country's Sufi traditions.[2] For van Hoven, this "nationalization of Islam" is indicative of the Senegalese political elite's attempts to resist the potentially homogenizing and universalizing character of Western norms.[3] Similar in some respect to discourses like African Socialism or Negritude, Islam in Senegal has served as a mode of subversive appropriation.

By articulating economic development and national unity through an Islamic idiom, successive governments have been able to assert that Senegal need not discard its "premodern" African Muslim identity in order to join the postwar international community.

My paper builds on this aspect of van Hoven's thesis. I agree with his argument that indigenizing political tenets subverts certain cultural hegemonies of modernization theory— namely, the assumption that the idea of economic development, as a consequence of historical trajectories particular to Western Europe, is incongruous with the domestic socio-political traditions of African states.[4] However, by taking a critical look at the historical emergence of secular governmentality, I also point out the limitations of any such cultural resistance in a postcolonial context like Senegal's. Contemporary patterns of interaction between religion and politics, I argue, locate Senegal's administration firmly within the Western mode of

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[1] Ed van Hoven, "The Nation Turbaned? The Construction of Nationalist Muslim Identities in Senegal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no. 2 (2000), 225.
[2] van Hoven, 234-35.
[3] van Hoven, 236.

[4] van Hoven, 236.

governance from which it has attempted to assert its distance.

The close association between Islam and politics in what is now Senegal is by no means a recent phenomenon. Following the Fulani Jihads of the late eighteenth century, theocratic states like Futa Toro and Futa Jallon had become major power-centres of West Africa and were crucial in organizing armed resistance to French and British expansion. During the colonial era, Tijani, Qadriyya, and Muridiyya Sufi Brotherhoods institutionalized themselves into political bodies to protect "indigenous" society from French influence. In the 1940s and 50s, Sufi leaders played an important role in shaping ideas of what Senegal, Mali, and The Gambia should look like after independence. The Conseil Supérieur des Chefs Réligieux du Sénégal was established in 1958 to ensure that the administration protected "the interests of Islam."[5] Members of the *conseil* openly voiced opposition to the Constitution of the Mali Federation, played favourites amongst politicians, and on more than one occasion formed their own national parties. In independent Senegal, religious authorities have retained enormous political clout. There is perhaps no better evidence than the country's recent elections. During the 1998 parliamentary elections, the Secretary General of the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) declared publicly that he was confident his party would win because he had been personally blessed by the Muridiyya *shaykhs* at Touba.[6] In the 2000 presidential election, Moustapha

Sy, a marabout often at odds with Abdou Diouf's administration in the 1990s, formed his own party (Parti de l'Unité et du Rassemblement) and proved himself to be a powerful political force.[7]

Despite a long precolonial tradition of politicized Islam, however, the emergence of the modern state in the mid to late nineteenth century marked a crucial shift in the dynamics of the relationship between West African politics and religion. As Robert Launay and Benjamin Soares point out, a fundamental difference between French colonialism and previous forms of political organization lay in the colonial administration's ambivalent stance towards religion.[8] The Jihad States had perceived their prerogative to rule as inextricable from a system of codified Islamic beliefs and practices. Though 'Islam' under leaders like Usman dan Fodio and al-Hajj Umar Tall did not imply a universalized system of belief, it was nevertheless a given that one had to abide by certain religious norms to be part of the Futanke ruling elite.[9] In sharp contrast, the French explicitly declared that the beliefs held by political subjects—including, importantly, native officials in the colonial bureaucracy—were more or less irrelevant to administrative efficiency. All that mattered was that one be friendly towards the administration.[10] For the most part, state institutions only made

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[5] van Hoven, 230.

[6] van Hoven, 231.

[7] van Hoven, 233.

[8] Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares, "The Formation of an 'Islamic Sphere' in French Colonial West Africa," *Economy and Society* 28, no. 4 (2006), 498.

[9] Launay and Soares, 501.

[10] Launay and Soares, 498.

religion into an issue when they felt their own sovereignty and legitimacy being threatened or called into question. Launay and Soares cite, for example, French officials' telling attitudes towards the Sufi Brotherhoods.[11] While Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Muridiyya Brotherhood, was taken to be a populist demagogue calling for holy war against foreign rule, the administration did everything in its power to prevent his ideas from gaining a foothold in West African society. He was exiled to Gabon in 1895 and then to Mauritania in 1907. However, as the reformist, less overtly political aspects of Bamba's teachings became evident, and as the Muridiyya showed a willingness to work within the political and economic structures of colonialism, both the Brotherhood and its leadership were allowed to practice their beliefs essentially unrestricted by government intervention. Similar scenarios played out with Shaykh Hamallah's Hamawiyya Brotherhood in the 1930s and with the Wahhabi clerics of the postwar period. Response veered from the aggressive policing and persecution of leaders who supposedly combined religious discourse with political polemics to almost complete disinterest towards those willing to work complacently within colonial paradigms. Shaykh Hamallah himself was arrested multiple times and finally sentenced indefinitely to a Vichy prison in 1943, convicted of inciting the Mouchgag Riots of 1940,[12] while his evidently less confrontational followers in the 1950s faced little (if any) hostility from the state.[13]

The move from precolonial to colonial, then, saw amongst other things the construction of a political rationality declaring its autonomy from any particular religious doctrine or social custom. Instead of being constituted and constrained by religious practice, the secular French state had the right to manipulate any ideologies it perceived as antagonistic to the public space of administration. In its inability to interpret the variegated religious movements of West Africa through any lens other than "loyal/seditious," the colonial state-apparatus made it clear that its principal concern was to maintain its own sovereignty.[14] Building primarily on Foucault's concept of biopower, recent critical theory identifies this privileging of the state as a foundational construct of European modernity. David Scott, for example, argues that only with the secularism of eighteenth-century Western Europe did there emerge a "prescriptive and aggressively programmatic mission" that necessitated the dominance of an institutionalized

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[11] Launay and Soares, 509-11.

[12] The Mouchgag Riots were a series of skirmishes near Nioro (Mauritania) between the Hamawiyya and a rival group. Over four hundred people died, but the violence did not, for the most part, directly involve the French. The intensity of the Vichy Regime's

response seems to have emerged from a deep-seated fear that insurrectionary, armed religious groups could at any point turn upon the state. During his trial, Shaykh Hamallah was told that he would be acquitted and the attacks would be overlooked as an internal affair if he just publicly voiced his allegiance to the French order. See Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006), 141.

[13] Launay and Soares, 510-12.

[14] Launay and Soares, 513.

apparatus as an end in itself.[15] Since at least Kant, the narrative of individual sovereignty has been premised on the disabling and restructuring of premodern irrationalities. To create, impose, and maintain norms that encourage the autonomy of the individual democratic subject—civil society, political participation, and the "public sphere" analyzed by Jürgen Habermas[16]—European secular politics gives itself the authority to shape and reshape social space as it considers appropriate. As the means of constructing and regulating the Enlightenment's fixation on autonomous subjectivity, the institutions of the secular state are accorded a historically unprecedented prerogative to privilege their emancipatory authority above all other rationalities.[17] The French regime's assertion that it had the right to demarcate limits to the exercise of any belief or ideology can thus be considered the imposition of a Western European modality upon West Africa.

Of course, it would be incorrect to assume that the French legacy has completely divested Senegalese politics of its subservience to particular religious customs; the substantial power of contemporary marabouts suggests otherwise. But the modern Senegalese state has nevertheless sought to cement its authority in ways that would not have been possible in the precolonial era. From the early years of the independence movement, it became evident that in spite of the close relationships between public officials and religious leaders, the administration's desire to consolidate its institutions could bring it into direct conflict with local traditions—even though politicians might declare themselves individually bound by these same traditions. From 1970 to 1973, Léopold Senghor's Union Progressiste Sénégalise (UPS) attempted to place marriage, polygamy, and divorce procedures amongst all Senegalese citizens within a single state-regulated legal framework (the Code de la famille). The Conseil Supérieur des Chefs Réligieux opposed the bill vehemently for all three years, arguing that the administration of a Muslim-majority state had no right to intervene in *shari'ah*. In 1993-94, the Dahiratoul Moustarchidina wal Moustarchidaty (DMWM), a mourabitic reform movement comprised mainly of urban youth dissatisfied with austerity measures and employment policies, was placed under heavy police surveillance (culminating in the arrest of its leader, Moustapha Sy) after officials suspected that members had played a role in the anti-government riots of February 1994. Moustapha Sy's reputation as a *shaykh* and the DMWM's essentially religious character were both considered irrelevant by an otherwise avowedly Islamic administration. Most recently, a group of young *talibés* who publicly declared that their marabout had authority far beyond that of the state was promptly whisked off to a government prison.[18] In an echo of the

[15] David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 33.

[16] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT, 1989).

[17] Scott, 38-40.

[18] van Hoven, 243.

colonial years, freedom of religious expression has been contingent upon accepting the sovereignty of the state.

The public espousals of religiosity that van Hoven calls an attempt to "africanise" Senegalese politics also reveal a strong imprint of Enlightenment governmentality.[19] Unlike precolonial practices of containing political rule within religious interpretation, the use of Islam in post-independence Senegalese politics indicates an awareness that the state has interests above those of religious belief, and that belief can be manipulated according to these interests. For example, the salience of Sufism in postcolonial administrations has been coupled with a remarkable re-enactment of the colonial regime's bifurcation of "loyal" and "seditious" Brotherhoods. While there is no dearth of funding or public representation for maroubitic orders amenable to the state, groups critical of official policy (like the DMWM) find themselves completely marginalized.[20] Throughout the 1980s and 90s, this was clearly visible in the way Abdou Diouf's Parti Socialiste (PS) sought to extend the reach of the state in areas controlled by marabouts hostile to government intervention—especially in the cultivation of cash crops like cotton.[21] Diouf supported Salafist clerics critical of the entire marabout tradition, presided over the first meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) held in sub-Saharan Africa, and, in 1989, strengthened Senegal's ties to the Arab world by joining King Fahd ben Abdel Aziz of Saudi Arabia, Hassan II of Morocco, and the Emir of Kuwait as a patron of the Ben Abdel Aziz Islamic Foundation.[22] Insisting that Senegal was first and foremost a member of the pan-Islamic *ummah* (worldwide community of believers), Abdou Diouf was able to justify the state's opposition to antagonistic marabouts as part of a larger effort to erase local corruptions of Quranic doctrine. The degree to which Diouf's pan-Islamism diverged from the policies of the Sénghor administration is quite astonishing, and very telling about how instrumentally Islam has been deployed in the postcolonial era. Trying to cultivate the sense of a shared national community in the immediate wake of decolonization, Léopold Sénghor's officials had made much of the uniquely Senegalese nature of the marabout tradition. The Muridiyya Brotherhood, based out of Touba, was favoured over the Tijaniyya (originally from Algeria) and the Qadiriyya (from Iran) (two decades later, Diouf would ask the demonstrably *arabisant* Tijaniyya *xalifa-général* to deliver closing prayers at official ceremonies, and then immediately shift his support when the Brotherhood opposed more extensive nationalization of the cotton industry).[23] Throughout the 1960s and 70s, official government publications like Abdoulaye Wade's "La doctrine économique du mouridisme" (1972) appropriated elements of Senegal's indigenous Islam to persuade disparate, far-flung communities to accept the legitimacy of the state-apparatus as a religious duty. Léopold Sénghor himself famously attended a Sufi ceremony in 1962 and underlined the congruities between his economic agenda and Muridiyya norms: "what is socialism if not, essentially, the

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[19] van Hoven, 236.
[20] van Hoven, 233.
[21] van Hoven, 241-43.

[22] van Hoven, 237-38.
[23] van Hoven, 238-40.

socio-economic system which gives priority to work? And who has done this better than Amadou Bamba and his successors?"[24]

In their different ways, then, the religious overtones to Sénghor and Diouf's administrations were grounded in a perception of state-sovereignty as a foundational axiom of politics. The adoptions of nationalist *Islam noir* or pan-Islamic *arabisant* campaigns were contingent upon whether or not they would allow the state to hegemonize governance of the social. Such discourse pervades Senegal to this day. Since 2000, the country's public sphere has begun to see a sudden valorization of the Sufi doctrine of *bay'ah*, or total allegiance to a spiritual leader. Commentators note that a large part of this phenomenon seems like an orchestrated effort to legitimize the increasingly autocratic government of Abdoulaye Wade.[25] Like that of his predecessors, Wade's tactic of selectively manipulating religion to ensure the state's hegemony could only have emerged after the colonial encounter. As David Scott reminds us, the notion that religious belief, rather than constraining political power, can be governed by a supposedly autonomous set of institutions called the secular state developed at a particular historical moment in Western Europe. On first sight, modern Senegalese politics, with its constant moves to "Islamicize" and "indigenize" all parlance, seems indicative of the postcolonial self-assertion familiar to us from Frantz Fanon's call to "leave behind" the European culture that has caused so

much historical trauma.[26] In the very act of giving the political sphere the authority to manipulate religion and culture to consolidate its own sovereignty, however, the Senegalese state speaks, despite itself, the language of the West.

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[24] van Hoven, 236.
[25] van Hoven, 242-43.

[26] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 236.

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