The Prophet Muhammad reincarnated and his son, Jesus: re-centering Islam among the Layenne of Senegal

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Abstract

This article explores how the Layenne of Senegal have employed the historical geography of the Cap Vert peninsula as an archive to effectively re-center the Islamic world away from Arabia to the coast of West Africa. Annual pilgrimages to Layenne religious sites and shrines that serve as lieux de mémoire provide ‘foyers’ on which contemporary collective and individual identities are contemplated with regard to Layenne perceptions of the past. The Layenne historical imagination is tied to the geographic space that constitutes Cap Vert in a symbiotic relationship by which history gives meaning to place and vice versa. While the rituals practiced at the Layenne places of memory revolve around the hagiography of their founder, Seydina Limamou Laye, who claimed to be the Mahdi and the reincarnation of the Prophet Muhammad, the Layenne have also appropriated sites and symbols associated with French colonization and a post-colonial Senegal into a vibrant and fluid conception of modernity that is simultaneously indigenous and global.

Keywords: Islam; Senegal; Layenne; Cap Vert; French West Africa; Sites of memory

In 1884, a Lebu fisherman on the Cap Vert peninsula in the French colony of Senegal announced that he was the long-awaited Mahdi, or the renewer of Islam that would appear at the end of time, and also the reincarnation of the Prophet Muhammad. Dubbed by his followers, Seydina Limamou Laye (Our Master The Imam of God), his sermons and miracles attracted disciples who became known as the Layenne (People of God). Layenne beliefs and practices, as encapsulated in Limamou’s sermons, emphasized social justice and the equality of all and the rejection of ethnic divisions and social and political hierarchies. Islamic reform was also promoted and Lebu practices that were deemed to be syncretic were condemned. While the leadership of the Layenne and its public face is and has been entirely male, gender equality in a theoretical sense is a part of Layenne teachings and has long been expressed through the admission of women into Layenne mosques and their prominent place at ceremonies. Likे many of his contemporaries, Seydina Limamou Laye rejected the interpretation of jihad as an armed movement in favor of a pacifist interpretation that emphasized the internal and personal struggle to be a good Muslim. His teachings, coupled with his growing notoriety, drew the ire of local Lebu notables and French colonial officials, and he was briefly imprisoned by the French in 1887 due to fears, later proven unfounded, that he was gathering arms for an anti-colonial jihad. The release of Seydina Limamou Laye inaugurated a period of mutual accommodation between the Layenne, the Lebu aristocracy, and the French. The accommodation was strengthened under the tenure of Limamou Laye’s son and successor, Seydina Issa Rohou Laye (Our Master Jesus The Beloved of God) who took over leadership of the Layenne in 1909 and ruled until 1949. Seydina Issa Rohou Laye claimed to be the reincarnation of the Prophet Jesus who was destined to aid the Mahdi in the fight against the Anti-Christ (al-dajjâl in Arabic). Since 1949, the successive Layenne Khalifâh-générales have not made such extraordinary claims and have presided over the continued growth of the movement while contending with the concurrent growth of Dakar as a large metropolitan urban area that became the capital of the French West African Federation in 1902 and the capital of an independent Senegal in 1960. The Layenne have been variously described as a Sufi order, an expression of Lebu syncretism with Islam, and in an Afrocentrist vein, the founder, Seydina Limamou Laye, has been dubbed ‘The Black Prophet’. Most of the current generation of Layenne

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1 The Layenne admission of women to mosques makes them unique in Senegal, but, unlike the Murid Sufi order there are no female shaykhs or their equivalent in the Layenne organization. For the Murid case, see, Christian Coulon, L’Islam au féminin: Sokhna Magat Diop, cheikh de la confrérie mouride, Talence, France, 1990. Layenne interpretations of Limamou’s teachings on this issue usually include statements regarding the necessity of leadership within the family and that while equal on the religious plane, men are ordained as leaders.

intellectuals reject all three interpretations. Local, sectarian, and racial attributes for the Layenne have been submerged by universalist and global contextualizations that position the Layenne as an Islamic reform movement and a force for social justice at the center of the Islamic world. Referring to the twin Layenne religious sites of Yoff and Cambéréne, Eric Ross has correctly noted that they are ‘small places with universal pretensions.’

These ‘small places’ are situated within a distinctive Layenne historical geography of Cap Vert centered on various sites of memory that are identified with important stages in the life and mission of Seydina Limamou Laye. Each year, these sites become the staging grounds for Layenne pilgrimages in which the hagiography of Limamou Laye is both celebrated and interpreted. The pilgrimages effectively bring the past into the present causing the local population to de

Lebou de la Presqu'ile’. A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels, London, 1759. In Villeneuve s work published in 1814, he referred to an earlier trip to the Cape Verde Islands. His voyage to the Cape Verde Islands in 1750 was the first and only voyage of the French navy to the Cape Verde Islands. The main purpose of the voyage was to establish French control over the region and to strengthen French influence in the region. The voyage was commanded by Captain Jean-Baptiste Labat, who was a member of the French navy and had been stationed in the Cape Verde Islands for several years. The voyage lasted for several months and was marked by a number of events, including the capture of the Portuguese ship ‘Santa Maria’ and the capture of the Spanish ship ‘San Juan’. The voyage was a success for the French navy, and it helped to establish French control over the region. In 1751, Labat was appointed as the governor of the Cape Verde Islands, and he remained in that post for several years. His appointment was a significant event in the history of the Cape Verde Islands, and it marked the beginning of French rule in the region. Labat was a key figure in the history of the Cape Verde Islands, and his appointment as the governor of the region was a significant event in the history of the region. His appointment was a sign of the growing influence of France in the region, and it helped to establish French control over the region.
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