Introduction: good Africans, good citizens, good Muslims

Two dimensions of Senegalese exceptionalism: religion and politics

Shortly after arriving in the town of Fatick I made a series of courtesy visits to introduce myself to local marabouts, religious leaders of the Islamic Sufi orders. Without exception I was warmly received, and all of these men indicated their willingness to discuss their religion with me, evidently pleased by my interest. Embarking on this task immediately, one offered to lend me a cassette recording of a speech by one of Senegal's most important marabouts of the Tijaniyya Sufi order; he would bring it to me personally as soon as he recovered it from the local Catholic priest to whom he had previously lent it. This cross-religious connection in itself was rather surprising. Then listening to the speech a few days later, I was startled to hear the marabout proclaim: “Senegalese Muslims are not only Muslims. They are also the citizens of a republic, the activists of a party. They are also negroes. And that which Islam requires of them is that they be at the same time very good negroes, very good citizens, and excellent activists.”

Certainly not all marabouts would say the same, as I was to learn. Indeed, the same marabout at different times has struck a notably different tone. Yet the fact that the statement would be made by an important and well-known religious figure nevertheless underscores one of the most salient features of Senegalese Islam. In James Piscatori’s terminology, Islam in Senegal has been paradigmatically “conformist,” capable of accommodating itself to the “prevailing political reality” of the modern nation-state. Indeed, as the marabout’s statement indicates, Senegalese Islam has – at least at times – done much more than conform; it has been willing to embrace not only state and party, but even the controversial notion of race enshrined in the cultural philosophy of “Négritude” advocated by Senegal’s first president. For many scholars of Islam, mindful of the theoretical unity of the Muslim umma and the lack of legitimacy of any other division of the faithful in classical Islamic thought, that adaptability in itself is anomalous. But even for those persuaded by Piscatori’s argument that “conformists” outnumber “non-conformists” in the contemporary Muslim world, the specific pattern of interaction of religion and politics in Senegal proves intriguing, and puzzling.
Islamic society and state power in Senegal

Islam is, on the one hand, clearly central to the political sociology of Senegal: the religious elite carry great weight in national politics; political discourse is replete with references and appeals to Islam; Islamic symbols are omnipresent, and a myriad of popular organizations centered around Islam are flourishing. At the same time, however, there is little evidence of the social phenomena which might be expected to accompany the politization of Islam: socio-political cleavages based on religion, whether between Muslim and non-Muslim or between Sufi orders, are virtually non-existent; and outside a very small urban minority there is virtually no opposition to the much-touted principle of l’état laïc, the secular state. The political role of Islam in the country is clearly not that which much of the recent literature on Islam and politics would lead one to predict.

Alongside this religious peculiarity, the Senegalese political system has also provided an exceptional case in Africa for its stability and relatively non-repressive character. There is, indeed, a reasonable basis to Senegalese claims of having one of the rare functioning democratic systems on the continent. To be sure, it is a rather imperfect democracy. Most significantly, it has not passed the crucial test of producing an alternation in power via the ballot box. This shortcoming has at times threatened the very continuance of the system, as when the frustration of sectors of the urban population – most notably unemployed youth – exploded into violent protests and riots following the announcement of the 1988 election results. And the failure once again of the opposition to displace President Abdou Diouf or the ruling Parti Socialiste in the 1993 elections, despite a series of significant governmental concessions on electoral procedures, has clearly eroded popular confidence in the capability of the system to yield an alternation in power, and consequently undermined the system’s legitimacy. While democracy in Senegal thus still exhibits some noteworthy limitations, the country has nevertheless not only experienced a remarkable stability since independence in 1960, but its people have enjoyed the benefits of a relatively benevolent relationship with the state. The Senegalese state’s capacity for governance, understood in Goran Hyden’s words as “the conscious management of regime structures with a view to enhancing the legitimacy of the public realm,” has at the very least ensured that Senegalese society has never been subjected to the repression, exploitation, arbitrariness, or indeed terror at the hands of the state known by all too many of its neighbors.

This book explores the relationship between these two central traits of the Senegalese political system. It recognizes, as many others have, that there is a close link between the role of Islam in the country and its political system. In attempting to specify precisely what the relationship is, however, the approach I take and the interpretation I propose differ substantially
Introduction: good Africans, good citizens, good Muslims

from various other models that have been suggested by writers on Senegal. My research particularly calls into question both interpretations that would rely too heavily on Islam and those which consider it too lightly. Much of the recent literature on the role of Islam in politics has sought an explanation in Muslim theology. In the Senegalese case, inherent attributes of the black African Sufi version of that theology have been proposed as central to its political role. For some scholars this theology has been the source of a hegemonic ideology, a religious opiate or false consciousness through which the Senegalese masses consent to their own domination. Although seductive, the model ultimately fails to account for the empirical realities of Senegalese social life. At the same time models of elite politics, which would necessitate no consideration of Islam per se, while also tantalizing in the Senegalese case, prove to be deficient because they ignore such crucial issues as why religious leaders become “elites” and how and why they persist as such. Building on a grass-roots examination of what religious affiliation and interactions with the state actually entail in the lives and relationships of Senegalese Muslims, this work proposes an alternative means of understanding the effect of religion on politics in the country.

There is an ongoing debate about the nature of the Sufi orders with which most Senegalese are affiliated: stated most simplistically the question is to know whether they are instruments of exploitation or vehicles for transmitting popular sentiments. My fieldwork in Fatick has led me, contrary to my initial prejudices, to a qualified adherence to the latter camp. This benevolent view of the orders has been put forward most notably by Donal Cruise O’Brien, who has argued for their “democratic” aspects at various times in his later work, perhaps most explicitly in a short article entitled “Wails and Whispers: the People’s Voice in West African Muslim Politics.” This book builds on such an understanding of the orders to explore the interrelationship of the two dimensions of Senegal’s exceptionalism. More specifically, it develops an analysis which specifies the process and examines the institutions through which “the people’s voice” is expressed and heard, and places this discussion in the context of current debates about state and society in Africa.

Sources and contribution of the study

Recent developments in the field of comparative political studies, and of African politics in particular, have emphasized a new theoretical concern with explaining the variations across political systems in terms of relations between state and society. “The nature of state-society linkages,” one long-time scholar of Africa has suggested, “is ripe for reconsideration.” And the past several years have witnessed the emergence of a broad consensus
Islamic society and state power in Senegal

among a wide array of scholars about the particularly acute need for studies of the specific contours of African societies. Jean-François Bayart, the French political scientist who has been at the forefront of this endeavor, has argued that “the shape of African societies, which is scarcely considered by political analysts, has much to do with the way power is exercised.” And Michael Bratton has issued a call for further work that could fill the gap noted by Bayart: “political scientists should devote more research attention to the associational life that occurs in the political space beyond the state’s purview.” Although several noteworthy studies have begun to fill this gap, the process of accumulation is slow due to the inherent difficulties and limitations of the required research. One goal of this work is to make a contribution to this broader research agenda.

This study is thus devoted to the effort to detail and examine the specific “shape” of Senegalese society, with particular attention to what is undoubtedly its most salient feature: the forms of its religious organization. Throughout the discussion I attempt to relate the examination of societal structures to the way power is exercised by the Senegalese state. Although my concern is with the broader processes that distinguish the Senegalese case, by its very nature such an understanding requires a firm basis in a local-level understanding, a close portrayal of the view “from the bottom up” in a specific locale. There is a difficulty in such an endeavor, however, in that the intense study of the narrow details of a particular case which it requires may blind one to the broader issues; the local tree may obstruct our view of the national forest. A study such as this, therefore, can only be built on the solid foundations constructed by the work of many scholars.

The analysis offered here is built on the substantial accomplishments of large and varied bodies of literature in three domains: in addition to that on African state-society relations I am indebted to numerous writings on Islam and politics, as well as to studies of Senegal itself. Often directly and at other times implicitly, I rely heavily on each of these literatures in approaching the examination of the case study, and it is my hope that the empirical information from this case will in turn prove of interest to scholars working in each of those domains. Moreover, a major goal of this effort has been to attempt an integration of these islands of research as a means of contributing to the development of theoretical propositions in each. Such intellectual hybridization, I hope, will expand our understanding of social processes by posing new questions or suggesting alternative explanations.

There exist several excellent studies of Senegalese Islam. The early works of the French colonial official Paul Marty provided the foundation for subsequent research. Although Marty’s motivation was at least in part that of prescribing colonial policy, and his writings are consequently shaped by this perspective, his empirical research is nevertheless an
exceptional source for other scholars. Among those who have followed Marty, the works of Lucy Behrman, and especially those of Christian Coulon and Donal Cruise O’Brien merit particular attention. Religious issues in the country have also been examined by Senegalese academics. In addition to several important historical and theological studies – among which the doctoral thesis by El Hadji Ravane Mbaye deserves particular note – the Senegalese sociologist Cheikh Tidiane Sy (not to be confused with the marabout of the same name who appears periodically in this work) has devoted a book to the Mouride order. The foundation laid by Marty has been built upon and expanded by subsequent researchers, and the merits of any contemporary studies of Senegalese Islam must be evaluated in light of their contribution to this edifice.

This book aims to contribute to the literature on Senegalese Islam in various ways. Research for virtually all of the existing work, first of all, was carried out before the advent of the much discussed worldwide Islamic “revival,” which has captured the imagination of both scholars and Muslim activists in the wake of the dramatic events of 1979 in Iran. There was a need, therefore, to update and reconsider the existing studies in terms of this important development. Scholarly activity, in addition, has been characterized by two major traits: a concentration of research on one particular Sufi order, the Mourides, and, secondly, a focus at the elite level. In addition to Cruise O’Brien’s now-classic works and that of Sy, the French scholar Jean Copans has contributed a radical critique of Mouride economic organization. No comparable degree of attention has been given to the other orders in the country, including the majority Tijaniyya. Moreover, given the obvious importance of the topic and the relative accessibility of information, Behrman and other scholars have tended to focus their attention on the elite level, in particular on the relationship between the religious leaders of the Sufi orders, the marabouts, and the political elite. The Senegalese population in its dual role as citizens and disciples has received substantially less scholarly attention. By contrast, this work offers a comparative look at the membership, structures, functioning, and interrelations of the different orders at the local level. Additionally, those scholars interested primarily in Senegal may find the focus on the town of Fatick and its hinterland, a relatively unstudied area of the country, of inherent interest.

Most importantly, however, this book aims to make a contribution to a more theoretical understanding of both African political processes and of the role of Islam in politics. Because of the paucity of data on African societies, the work of the first generation of scholars in the post-independence period was largely devoted to the description of socio-political structures and systems; the questions asked were of necessity more fre-
Islamic society and state power in Senegal

's what?' rather than 'why?' As knowledge of sub-Saharan societies has accumulated, however, it has become possible to shift the discussion to a more theoretical and comparative level.

The relations that characterize the interaction of states and societies can be conceptualized in many ways. Indeed, many of the major themes of modern political science (clientelism, corporatism, pluralism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, class-rule, and much more) might be understood precisely in these terms. Given the particular attributes of independent African states and societies, however, recent Africanist scholarship has been especially concerned with studying the variations in societal responses to state actions, and various models of these variations have been proposed. The most important of these, which I shall examine in the following chapter, have focused on societal efforts to either flee or challenge state authority. Departing from a detailed empirical consideration of the ways in which the exercise of state power in Senegal is shaped by the structures of Senegalese society, I propose an alternative typology of patterns of interaction between African states and societies and explore the requirements of a stable pattern of relations as suggested by the Senegalese case.

Considering this theme in the specific context of Muslim societies, we find certain parallels with the long intellectual tradition in Muslim discourse and scholarship about the appropriate nature of the relationship between rulers and people. While frequently encouraging acquiescence and cooperation with just leaders, Islamic scholars have also elaborated theories based on the life of the Prophet to justify the options of either fleeing or fighting (hijra or jihad) when faced with unjust rulers. Considering this tradition in the light of the theoretical concerns, the conceptualization of state-society relations that I propose lies on a continuum characterized by three modal responses ranging from 'contestation' to 'cooperation' to "isolation." The discussion of religious structures in Senegal is thus placed within the broader context of societal organization as it relates to the state, and the analysis of the Senegalese political system which I offer is built on an examination of societal capabilities for varying responses to state actions.

The political role of Islam, I will argue below, can only be usefully discussed in terms of specific contexts – the confrontation of state and society in Africa providing one such context for study. The model of responses I propose, therefore, while derived from and influenced by aspects of Islam, is not inherent to it. Rather this is a theoretical construct suggested by the literature on state-society relations and built on the understanding that the specific role which Islam will play is largely determined by the broader context. This approach departs from most recent considerations of Islam and politics. Assuming an essential core
element of religion which shapes behavior in Islamic societies, the focus in recent studies has usually been on how an existing religious belief or affiliation affects political action. In this study, however, I am equally interested in the reverse process: how has a specific political context affected religious organization and affiliation? The relationship between religion and politics, I believe, is dialectical and interactive; each shapes and influences the other.

This understanding of the relationship between religion and politics also guides my approach to the broader question of culture – of which religion is but one part. The perennial but unsatisfying debate in political science concerning the utility of cultural explanations for variations in political outcomes is ultimately plagued by an unsolvable “chicken and egg” paradox: do cultures shape politics or do politics shape cultures?15 Again, I believe, the question is unanswerable, because it is misstated. Rather than a one-way causality, the relationship must also be understood as dialectical: culture and behavior both shape and are shaped by each other. As Piscatori argues in the specific context of Islamic theory and practice: “Dogma interacts with ritual, the past with the present, to define one’s faith. There is a complex dynamic by which practice that has evolved modifies theory, and the believer’s perception of theory begins to change accordingly.”16 It is with this conceptualization in mind that I thus speak periodically in the discussion that follows of cultural practices (such as the ritual celebrations of the Sufi orders examined in chapter 5) which both reflect and reinforce political attitudes and behavior.

A conception of politics

This approach to the study of the political impact of cultural variables might be elucidated by an explanation of the conception of political science which underlies this study. In attempting to explain the functioning of the Senegalese political system – or more precisely the patterns of Senegalese state-society relations – I refer frequently to the incentives which motivate individuals, whether state functionaries, marabouts, or ordinary citizens, to act in particular ways. Such an approach necessitates an assumption that people will act rationally in response to those incentives. But what, in fact, is entailed in this assumption? In what sense might the much-disputed “rationality” of individuals be understood?

In its broadest sense, rationality implies nothing more than that individuals have a set of preferences and use whatever knowledge they might have at their disposal to choose courses of action that are most likely to lead to outcomes consistent with those preferences. People try to get what they want. To explain what people do, therefore, we must also specify what they
Islamic society and state power in Senegal

want (their preferences), as well as what they “know” (their knowledge, regardless of whether it proves to be empirically right or wrong). In many ways, the most difficult tasks for students of comparative politics involve the attempt to develop an understanding of the set of preferences and the knowledge on which people act in any given society. We should not, of course, simply assume any particular preferences or knowledge; rather the determination of both of these domains requires careful empirical research. Both of these factors are shaped by a multitude of forces; history, culture, ideology, psychology, societal structures and political institutions all play a role in shaping both the preferences and the understanding/knowledge which individuals have about their social world. All of these, therefore, are directly relevant to a study which assumes the rationality of individuals.

Knowledge, which is a function of both available information and the way this information is used, is at least in part culturally transmitted and determined. An individual’s preferences, in addition, are clearly in large part a function of prevailing cultural norms in his or her society. Religion, as a central component of culture, plays a crucial role in both. Senegalese Muslims, for example, make choices about how to act in particular circumstances by considering the knowledge they have derived from religion concerning such things as the existence of an afterlife and the method of achieving it, or the value of a religious intermediary in solving problems of various types. Their preferences, in addition, are shaped by an understanding of issues within the context of religiously derived values. It is precisely this fact that makes religion an exceptionally powerful agenda-setting agent in many societies. The way religion influences both knowledge and preferences, therefore, must be understood and considered if we are to explain why people undertake particular courses of action.

In part, of course, both an individual’s knowledge and preferences are constantly modified in accordance with the well-known propensity of people to adjust “their ideas to circumstances, which is easier than adjusting circumstances to one’s ideas.” The need to take account of the psychological processes involved in these adjustments further complicates the specification of the parameters of rationality. Social scientific explanation presuming rationality, therefore, might at times also require an examination of such phenomena as the way individuals process information in such a way as to ensure cognitive consistency. At all times, as a result, an adequate explanation requires taking into account the nature of the “circumstances” to which people adapt their “ideas.” The most central of these circumstances must be understood in terms of historically evolved institutions, structures, and social processes. Socio-political outcomes are never reducible to the preferences of individuals currently affected by them, because choices are always made in the context of circumstances over which
Introduction: good Africans, good citizens, good Muslims

the individual has had little or no control. These, therefore, must also be specified in order to explain the choices of individuals in any given society. The discussion of “the state” in this work, for example, is guided by an understanding that its existence and parameters are among the central circumstances to which people adjust their ideas. Location in relation to the institutions of the state – which exist independently of the choices of most individuals who deal with it – influences both the knowledge that individuals receive concerning the state and the formulation of their preference ordering of possible outcomes.

Although I believe it may ultimately enrich a “rational actor” paradigm, this approach also complicates the study of political action. In this work, nevertheless, I assume that people make rational calculations about their actions within the framework of local knowledge, preferences, and “circumstances” or institutions. I attempt to avoid, therefore, the use of terms which imply extra-rational choices: “religious fanaticism,” “blind obedience,” or even “exploitation.” But I also avoid simple assumptions about the preferences or knowledge that shape rational action. Rather, the emphasis is on examining the local historical and cultural factors within which choices are made. Such an approach necessitates intensive anthropological fieldwork and research in order to gather the qualitative data that can allow one to examine what it is that people “know” and how they formulate what they “prefer.”

Fieldwork methods

“Theory,” John Lonsdale has written, “multiplies by spontaneous generation, data are added to only in travail.”20 I agree, at least about the travail. The difficulties of data gathering would appear to be especially acute when the theoretical concerns one wishes to address are inherently slippery and nebulous. Forrest Colburn has pointed to a number of difficulties of studying state-society relations beyond the definitional problems posed by the concepts themselves. The relationship between state and society is, first of all, “interactive” and “dialectical,” making it “virtually impossible to isolate causal relationships.” A second difficulty arises due to the nature of civil society. “Society is differentiated in countless ways: class, race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, ubiety, and economic activity, to name the most obvious.” And this “fragmentation of civil society” can complicate generalization by leading to variable behavior; not all of “society” may react in the same way to a state action. Moreover, another problem in studying state-society interaction arises from the fact that “opposition to state behavior rarely takes the form of collective outright defiance, a form of resistance which is easily studied. Instead,
resistance is more tacit: foot dragging, false compliance, feigned ignorance, and sometimes even more violent forms of sabotage.”

Yet precisely such “popular modes of political action” are central to the analysis of how state and society interact, and the difficulties of studying them may be partially responsible for the still-limited understanding of such processes in Africa. The recent interest in these theoretical concerns, however, has led to a renewed interest in more appropriate fieldwork techniques. Michael Schatzberg, whose own “travail” has added significantly to the understanding of African political processes, has argued for the need for more intensive local-level research in Africa if we are to formulate “a view of the state as it appears in the countryside from the vantage point of those who must endure it as part of their daily routine; a picture not of what the state should do according to the dictates of an abstract, elegant theoretical edifice, but of what it does do.” And David Laitin has suggested that social science should address general propositions and confront the “big questions” armed with broad concepts. “But,” he notes, “the way it collects data to support any proposition must be sensitive to, and suggested by, the particular environment in which the research is carried out … More technically: our variables should be universal; our indicators particularistic.” It was with these concerns in mind that I settled on an intensive local-level fieldwork technique for this study.

Although of course no one site can capture the full complexity of an entire country, a detailed empirical study of social structures in a carefully chosen small town seemed to be an appropriate prism through which to examine the theoretical issue of how Islam affected relations between state and society in Senegal. Having considered several possibilities and visited various potential sites, the dusty town of Fatick emerged as a particularly propitious site for fieldwork for various reasons. As a small urban center with close rural ties, the town straddles the rural-urban dichotomy. It is, in addition, ethnically and religiously mixed, with all of the major Senegalese ethnic groups and Sufi orders represented there. At the same time, the town is in no way noteworthy as a center of religious learning or practice. It is thus more representative of religious practice in Senegal as a whole than are any of the centers of the various Sufi orders. Most importantly, Fatick in 1989 was still in the process of accommodating an increased state presence following its elevation to capital of a new region in 1984. For all of these reasons the town provided an appropriate and interesting “laboratory” in which to examine state-society relations.

I arrived in Fatick after a six-month period of intensive Wolof language study and background research in the Senegalese capital of Dakar. In addition to local marabouts, I also made the rounds to introduce myself to numerous state officials in the town as well as to various other people who