Journal of Historical Geography 42 (2013) 24–35

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

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.[1] Like 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 *khalifah-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.'[2] 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 feminine: 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.

[2] See for example, C. Laborde, *La Confrérie Layenne et Les Lébou du Sénégal: Islam et culture traditionnelle en Afrique*, Bordeaux, 1995; K. Mbacke, *Soufisme et Confréries Religieuses au Sénégal*, Dakar, 1995, 77–81; G. Balandier and P. Mercier, *Les Pêcheurs Lebou du Sénégal, particularisme et evolution*, St. Louis, Sénégal, 1952, 108–111; I. Marone, Tidjanisme au Sénégal, *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.* série B (1970) 136–215; M. Sarr, *Ajibou da iya llah, ou la vie exemplaire de Limamou Laye*, Dakar, 1966; A. Sylla, *Les Prophets Seydina Limamou Le Mahdi et Seydina Issa Rouhou Lahi*, n.p., n.d.; C. Moussa, Porte-parole of the Layenne Khalifah-Général, El Hadj Abdoulaye Thiaw, interview by author, tape recording, Yoff-Layenne, Senegal, 30 June 2009.

0305-7488/$ – see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2013.04.017

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 Cambérène, Eric Ross has correctly noted that they are 'small places with universal pretensions.'[3]

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.[4] 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 contemporary pilgrims to define who they are as a collective and as individuals in light of their history and their present conditions. The messages derived from the sermons of Limamou Laye and his son are put on display during these events and debated in light of recent developments. Taken together, the Layenne sites of memory present an alternative history of the Cap Vert peninsula that assimilates and absorbs seemingly contrary events and trends commonly associated with colonial and post-colonial narratives into a Layenne master narrative.

A standard historical rendering of Cap Vert

At about 15° north of the equator, the Cap Vert peninsula juts out from the West African coastline making it the farthest westerly point of the continent. The peninsula is geologically distinct from much of the rest of the Senegambian coastline due to the presence of ancient volcanism. If the peninsula were laid out like a flat sheet of paper, it would tilt up in elevation to the west and especially to the south where it terminates at the cliffs marking Cap Manuel. Aside from the southern heights, there are two distinct hills along the western edge of the cape, dubbed *les mamelles* in French. In plain sight from the northwestern shore lie two islands, Ngor to the west and Yoff, also known as Tëngeen, to the east. The southern tip is also flanked by two nearby islands, the Madeleines off the western shore, and Gorée, in sight of the eastern shore. Historically, most of the eastern half of the peninsula was a lowland area that like much of the region was marked by coastal sand dunes, but it was also unique due to the presence of permanent marshes and lakes and streams. As a result, even before European contact, the peninsula had long enjoyed a reputation as a place of fertility and abundance in an otherwise dry, rain-dependent area and its forests of palms, tamarinds, and baobabs both provided for and protected the local population.

The standard historical view of the Cap Vert peninsula is primarily dependent on the period after the Portuguese first sighted the cape in 1446 and named it *cabo verde*.[5] At that time, the peninsula was inhabited by a mixture of Sérère and Mandingspeaking peoples (Socé).[6] The Portuguese largely favored commerce over raiding in the area and traded with the expanding Wolof kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol at coastal settlements. The Wolof were the dominant ethnic group of the region and their society was hierarchical, divided between free persons, the occupationally specialized groups or castes, and slaves. Kajoor took control over the Cap Vert peninsula sometime between 1482 and 1515 and traded with the Portuguese at Rio Fresco (later Gallicized as Rufisque) on the southeastern shore of Cap Vert where there was a fresh water stream.[7] For centuries, European contact would remain intermittent, commercial, and limited to the coastal areas. This is not to say that that contact was unimportant. The European trade enriched the local kingdoms and helped to fuel the wars and violence that supplied much of the Senegambian portion of the Atlantic slave trade.[8]

A new phase in the commercial relationship between the Europeans and Cap Vert began in the late sixteenth century as the Portuguese monopoly over the West African coast came to an end courtesy of the Dutch, the French, and the English. The Dutch took control of Gorée Island in 1617 when, according to some sources, they purchased the uninhabited island from a local chief of Cap Vert named Biram.[9] Gorée was subsequently fought over by various European powers until 1677 when the French were ceded the island by treaty. With the exception of the two periods during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when Britain took control of Gorée, the island would remain in French hands until the independence of Senegal. Gorée served as a fortified European base for commercial enterprises including the Atlantic slave trade. The island was also a very important port of call for ships traveling the West African coast and carried on a limited trade, mostly in the food and water that Gorée lacked in sufficient quantities, with Cap Vert and the neighboring coast.

Gorée Island's small size and dependence on the fertile mainland coupled with the fear that other European powers, notably Britain, may lay claim to it, provoked discussion as early as the mid-eighteenth century of a French takeover of Cap Vert.[10] The Abbé David Boilat, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century,

[3] E. Ross, *Sufi City: Urban Design and Archetypes in Touba*, Rochester, 2006, 179.

[4] In a general sense, this article follows the varied approaches to *lieux de mémoire* as presented in Pierre Nora's multi-volume work. See, P. Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 3 Vols, in: L. Kritzman (Ed.) A. Goldhammer (Trans), New York, 1996–98.

[5] R. Kerr, *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Edinburgh, 1824, 192, 237.

[6] C. Michel, L'Organization coutumière (sociale et politique) de la Collectivité Leboue de Dakar, *Bulletin Soc. Et. Hist. et Soc. de l"A.O.F.*, t. XVII (1934) 510; A. Sylla, *Le Peuple Lebou de la Presqu'île du Cap-Vert*, Dakar, 1992, 12–13. The earliest written account of the Lebu settlement of Cap Vert is Pinet Laprade's 'Note sur la presqu'île du Cap Vert' reproduced in Claude Faure's history of Cap Vert. See, C. Faure, *Histoire de la Presqu'île du Cap Vert et des Origines de Dakar*, Paris, 1914, 51.

[7] J. Boulègue, *Le Grand Jolof (XIIIe–XVIe Siécle)*, Paris, 1987, 101–167.

[8] See, for example, B. Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, New York, 1998; P. Curtin, *Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*, Madison, 1975; and J. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700–1860*, New York, 1993.

[9] R. Mauny, Guide de Gorée, *Initiations Africaines* Vol. VII (1951). J.P.L. Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal*, London, 1806, 27 is the likely primary source for this account. The edition cited is an early English translation.

[10] Durand's original account in French published in 1785 claimed that two treaties had been signed in 1763 and 1765 that gave the French the villages of 'Daccard' and 'Bin' from which Gorée was chiefly supplied. Durand also commented on the desirability of establishing a French colony on Cap Vert. See, Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal* (note 9), 27. Jean Baptiste Labat, in an account published in 1728, claimed that a French company made treaties with the 'kings' of Rufisque, Portudal, and Joal in 1679 by which the rulers ceded to the company all of the coast from Cap Vert south to the mouth of the Gambia River. See, J. Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique Occidentale, Tome Premier*, Paris, 1728, 55. Labat's account, however, has raised serious doubts regarding its authenticity among later authors such as Claude Faure. See, Faure, *Histoire de la Presqu'île du Cap Vert* (note 6), 3–4. Michel Adanson, who visited Cap Vert in 1749 and 1750 made no comment on the issue of treaties and ownership of the peninsula. See, for an English translation, Michel Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal, the Isle of Goree, and the River Gambia*, London, 1759. In Villeneuve's work published in 1814, he referred to an earlier trip to Senegal in 1787 during which Le Chevalier de Bouflers sent him to negotiate a treaty with the king of Kajoor for the cession of Cap Vert. Villeneuve claimed that the treaty was signed at that time and deposited in the clerk's office in St. Louis. A subsequent tour of Cap Vert by Villeneuve produced a glowing report on the opportunities that awaited French colonization of the peninsula. See, R. Villeneuve, *L'Afrique, ou Histoire, Moeurs, Usages et Coutumes des Africains, Tome Premier*, Paris, 1814, 111–139.