

A MEETING OF WORLDS IN SENEGAL

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I relax on a mat in our main room with my two friends, Aminata and Fatou, resting during the heat of the afternoon. It is July 26, 2005, and sweet black tea called *attaaya* is boiling atop the charcoal burner. In the office nearby, the space shuttle *Discovery* commentary from www.news.yahoo.com plays on the computer where Caleb & Laurel watch the astronauts working in the shuttle. Upstairs, Isaiah watches the second *Lord of the Rings* movie.

Then we hear the Muslim call to prayer from the mosque close by, much louder than the other two sounds, and quite jarring. A meeting of worlds: space shuttle and local mosque, LOTR characters and astronauts, a powerful prayer call and a powerful ring.

We have many opportunities to ponder the meeting of worlds as we work in Senegal. Sometimes we sense a freedom to “push against” boundaries that seem to be set in stone. But more of the time we spend listening to our friends, getting a sense of where they are at in their world view and in their lives, and reading Scripture with them.

Senegal’s Four Main Groups of Muslims

I would like to start with a brief description of the four main groups of Muslims that live in Senegal, four active Sufi organizations that can also be found in other parts of Africa and around the world. Most statistics cite that 94% of Senegalese belong to one of these organizations, but the majority of those belong to the Tijanis or the Mourides.

The Qadiri (Qadiriyyah)

This group is the oldest. It was originally founded in Baghdad by a Sufi mystic named Abdul Qadir Al-Jilani in the 12th century and spread to Senegal in the 18th century. The Qadiriyyah has not developed any distinctive doctrines outside of mainstream Islam. They believe in the fundamental principles of Islam interpreted through mystical experience. Although there are strong groups of this organization in Senegal, its adherents are not many in number.

The Tijani (Tijaniyyah)

This group is the largest in membership. It was founded in Fez, Morocco by the Algerian-born marabout Sidi Ahmad at-Tijani around 1781. The Tijaniyyah is a Sufi order originating in North Africa but now more widespread in West Africa. Its adherents are

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called Tijani, and they attach much importance to culture and education, and emphasize the individual actions of the followers. To be a member, one must receive the Tijani "wird," a sequence of holy phrases to be repeated twice daily, from a representative of the order. It was an "Islam for the poor," reacting against the conservative Qadiriyyah brotherhood, focusing on social reform and grass-roots revival.

Although other Sufi orders have more adherents in the Tijaniyyah's birthplace of North Africa, the order has become the largest Sufi order in West Africa and continues to grow. It was brought to southern Mauritania around 1789 and spread into Senegal in the 1830's. There are six "houses" or branches of Tijaniyyah Islam in Senegal. The Gammu of Tivaouane to celebrate the birth of Mohammad gathers many followers each year.

Of the six branches of Tijanis, the one founded by El-Hajj Ibrahima Niass in the Kaolack suburb of Medina Baay in 1930, has become by far the largest and most visible Tijani branch around the world today. Ibrahima Niass's teaching that all disciples can attain a direct mystical knowledge of God through mystical education has struck a chord with millions worldwide.

This branch, known as the Faydah (Flood), is most concentrated in Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, and Mauritania, and has a growing presence in the US and Europe. Most Tijani web sites and international organizations are part of this movement. Ibrahima Niass's grandson and the current Imam in Medina Baay, Cheikh Hassan Cissé, has thousands of American disciples and has founded a large educational and developmental organization called the African American Islamic Institute.

The Mourides (Mouridiyyah)

This group is the richest and most active, and has its base in the city of Touba, Senegal. It was founded in 1883 by marabout Amadou Bamba (1850-1927) of French West Africa, now Senegal. His full name is Cheikh Amadou Bamba Mbacke, and he is also called Khadimu r-Rasul ("Servant of the Prophet") in Arabic, and Serin Tuubaa ("Holy Man of Touba") in Wolof. He was born in the village of Mbacke, the son of a marabout (Muslim cleric) from the Qadiri brotherhood.

Amadou Bamba was a Muslim mystic who wrote tracts on work, meditation, rituals, and Koranic study. He is best known for his emphasis on work, and his disciples are known for their industriousness. Although he didn't support the French conquest, he did not wage outright war on them as several prominent Tijaniyyah marabouts had done. He taught on the jihad al-'akbar or "greater struggle" which fought not through weapons but through learning and fear of God. Today, his followers are spread across West Africa to Europe and the US. His image is well-known in Senegal, sections of many cities in Europe and increasingly in some cities in the US. The annual Touba Gammu is the largest event in Senegal.

Falilou Mbacke ruled as Khalifa-General, the spiritual leader of the Mourides, from

1945 until his death in 1968. The current Khalifa General, Serigne Saliou Mbacke, is Bamba's only remaining son. His image is reproduced on a label sold on Harlem's 116th Street, in the heart of Little Senegal, where there are 40,000 Senegalese by most estimates. Mouridism, which functions like a medieval Muslim kingdom, is barely a century old and just one generation removed from its founder. "100 years of Ndigel" is the pledge of devotion all disciples must make to their marabout.

From the city of Touba, Mouride businessmen have gained control of most of Senegal's commercial activity, and are now turning their attention to Europe and the United States.

The Layene

This group is a smaller sect centered at the Yoff community near Dakar. They are a politically autonomous religious community of the Lebou people, who live in fishing communities on the Cap-Vert peninsula, north of Dakar. The Layene are ruled in religious and temporal matters by their Khalifa-General and their headquarters is a beautiful mosque on the beach at Yoff. In 1812 the political independence of the Lebou was recognized and today they are granted special autonomy in Senegal's constitution and laws. They are known for their mystic dances and ceremonies used to cure the insane.

Social Framework

These four religious associations called tariqa have been successful as a social framework for the practice of Islam. The da'ira, the local "lodge," where the members of the tariqa join together for religious singing and money collection, is a distinctive feature of the towns in West Africa.

Often the founder's burial place has become a shrine visited annually by his followers in search of the healing believed to come from his spiritual power, the baraka of the sheikh. Such associations often form significant networks that cross borders, as we have seen with the Mouridiyyah in Senegal extending from Dakar to Paris to Atlanta and New York. These networks may act as channels for remittances of considerable sums of money to the country of origin. These networks provide relationships of trust and mutual recognition that oil the wheels of trade and economic relationships. They involve both religious and economic transactions.

The different turuq (tariqas) are important points of reference for African Muslims and are often described as "African Islam" in contrast to the more puritanical forms of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia and in parts of North Africa such as the Wahabis and Salafis.

Science, learning and knowledge have always been integral to Islam as mandated by the Koran and the Hadith (the reported sayings of the Prophet) and within Muslim tradition and history. There is much growth in Muslim schooling in West Africa and education is seen by most as the primary means to human development. This education

relies on rote learning of the Koran and other Islamic knowledge in an unquestioning manner that discourages dialogue and exploration of non-Muslim concepts of modernity.

Our Setting

We live in a town in the desert with a population of about 80,000. Of these, 99 percent are Muslim. There are many who are open and friendly to us as outsiders and *toubabs* (white people), engaging us in conversation on the street and inviting us into their homes for meals when we have only just met.

Taxi drivers often start out their conversation with me asking if I am a Mouride or a Tijani. I say that I am a follower of Jesus (“*talibe Ensa*” in Wolof or “*talibe Issa*” in Arabic) and we often have a good conversation about what that means. We try to use questions as our answers, saying back to them, “What do you think it means to be a *talibe Issa*?” The first thing I usually hear in response is that Christians eat pork and drink alcohol.

Although many are friendly and open, there is a group of people in town who are reserved around us, and another group that seems uncomfortable with our presence.

Ever since Arabs began coming to West Africa around 1000 AD, some Africans have associated white people with mischief, genies, ghosts, convulsions, epilepsy, and devils. This is especially true of white women. In an effort to understand some experiences I’ve had during the last seven years, Jonathan and I asked questions of many people. We’ve not yet talked with any Senegalese who were willing to talk about this issue in depth. However, we met a Gambian man, a Cambridge-educated Muslim doctor who lives in our city, who liberally shared his perspectives with us.

According to Dr. Thiaw, there continue to be rigid taboos for many people, both men and women, about white women. His comment was, “Some are snoring because they are sleeping so soundly, some are just sleeping, some are opening their eyes, some are awake and some are wide awake.” Those who are wide awake are those who are not ascribing to these rigid taboos. Those who are snoring are those who believe that your fortune, your luck, your opportunities will be lost if you cooperate with and/or associate with white women.

The words associated with white people are as follows in Wolof: *malis la* (mischief), *djinne la* (genies), *djuma la* (ghosts), *charka la* (bringing convulsions and epilepsy), and *saytaane la* (devils).

He likened the taboo to experiences he had in England when someone would say, “Let me touch charcoal” to help allay a fear they had. In many homes there is a pot of ash which is kept for this purpose. Likewise, in Senegal, many people touch their face, hair or shoulder to allay their fears and to provide protection from a white woman. He called it an example of perverse beliefs that continue to thrive.

Usually people touch their face, hair or shoulder when they are 30-50 feet away from me, either as I am walking or driving down the road. It happens as soon as they see me

and in many instances, seems like a knee-jerk response. They then look down or away, and some of them keep their hand on their face as long as I am in front of them as they walk. Informally, we estimate that about 1/3 of the people in our city have this habit, and maybe 1/8 of the people in Dakar.

When I first began to notice it, I told myself it was just normal touching of the face or hair, wiping off a drop of sweat, scratching at the side of the nose. But gradually I came to see it for what it was -- a response to seeing me. To test it a little further, some days I would dress as a Senegalese, with flowing boubou, matching headpiece, and large scarf covering my shoulders and outfit. The number of people who touched their head seemed to be the same as when I dressed in a more Western outfit, with long skirt and blouse and with my hair uncovered.

In the Koran, sura 24, aiyas 30-31 we read:

[24:30] Tell the believing men that they shall subdue their eyes (and not stare at the women), and to maintain their chastity. This is purer for them. God is fully cognizant of everything they do.

[24:31] Tell the believing women to subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is necessary. They shall cover their chests, and shall not relax this code in the presence of other than their husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands, their sons, the sons of their husbands, their brothers, the sons of their brothers, the sons of their sisters, other women, the male servants or employees whose sexual drive has been nullified, or the children who have not reached puberty. They shall not strike their feet when they walk in order to shake and reveal certain details of their bodies. All of you shall repent to God, o you believers, that you may succeed.

The first several years of life in Senegal, I experienced men “subduing their eyes” as I walked down the street. It made me feel somewhat self-conscious and I rarely walked alone, but chose to walk with our children, a Senegalese friend, or another team member. I asked some of my women friends about it but they usually chose not to respond to the question. I sat and “people-watched” sometimes along the road, partially hidden by a tree to try to figure out what was going on. The mannerisms I was experiencing seemed to be different from what I noticed happening as Senegalese women walked down the street.

As a Westerner I tend to value straightforward answers to questions. I have learned to be careful in my questioning here, to try to do it at the right time and in the right way. There are many possible responses when someone doesn’t want to directly answer a question I have.

1. The question can be totally ignored
2. The question can be acknowledged without any response or answer offered
3. I can be asked a question in return
4. The subject can be changed

5. A point may be made with a story, parable or proverb
6. The question may be redirected elsewhere.

Dr. Thiaw has counseled us to “Listen carefully in Senegal, but don’t discuss a lot of things or you will become an enemy to society.” So we carefully choose with whom to discuss things of this nature, and try to be a witness of God’s boundless love in our marriage relationship, in our family life, and in our relationships with those in the community.

Strong Values of the Wolof

Family: Your “mbokk” are your extended family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors and your “njaboot” are the people you “carry on your back,” or those you support financially, emotionally and spiritually.

Kersa: This is the polite, soft and reserved part of your personality. If you have too much of it, you won’t get what you need. If you have too much of this, your mbokk may tell you to develop more faayda.

Faayda: This is the assertive part of your personality that doesn’t allow others to exploit you. If you have too much of this, your mbokk may tell you to develop more kersa. The two must go hand in hand.

Sutuura: This is the art of not telling everything that you know. Sometimes you have to keep secrets and not ask the wrong things such as “How many children do you have?” The answer to this question should be learned naturally in the process of learning to know a courtyard and the family inside of it. Otherwise, naming a number of children may cause the spirits to notice the family. There are often many more women and children in a courtyard than men, because of multiple wives and also because of how many men between the ages of 20 and 40 are working in Europe or the US.

Muus: This is a positive word which describes the clever and resourceful part of your personality. However, if someone is too clever and/or curious, they will be told to work for the good of the whole community and not just for their own gain.

Teranga: This means being hospitable and welcoming guests, treating them in the best way possible. “You’ve come to visit me -- that’s a gift” is the theme here. There is a sacrificial working together to serve the guest.

Teggin: This is the way you place people in a social setting, how you deal with hierarchy, and how you handle authority and respect issues. The need to properly greet people is a very high value and it reflects on the mother if a child isn’t respectful.

Jom: This refers to determination, and efforts to succeed and to do good. The more jom you exude, the better. If you have a lack of jom, others quickly become concerned and tell you to see a marabout to buy a charm to get jom back.

Nit, Nit ay Garabam: “People are people’s medicine.” A large network of friends is the remedy for everything because they are there for emotional support and for taking care of each other.

Kolere: This is the cement that holds society together as good deeds from your grandparent's generation will be remembered. Each person that dies is remembered with an annual reading of the Koran (20-30 people all reading a page out loud at the same time) on the date of her death.

Mun: The one who has it will smile in the end ... this word means patience, tolerance and acceptance. You believe in God and God's will, and you accept what happens. You accept hardship, knowing it will get better one day.

Nattu Yalla La: "It's of God." God caused it to happen or allowed it to happen. Have faith in your destiny. God is measuring your faith and God is testing your faith.

Modern Life

How does a modern application of Koranic teaching serve boundary setting goals as a people negotiates its way in modernity? There is a new generation of African Muslim scholars with much greater fluency in Arabic. To some degree they form a rival elite to the traditional Sufi leadership. Arabic as a sacred language in Islam creates a language problem in Senegal where French is the national language. Arabic is a key to status in Islamic civil society and it is in the vested interests of an elite to keep it so.

However, for most of the people in our town there is very little knowledge of what the Koran says. Many have memorized passages of the Koran in Arabic schools but have no idea of what they say as they quote it. It would be similar to us memorizing three chapters of the Bible in Greek without understanding Greek and being unable to read in any language.

The Koran is taught at religious gatherings, many of them all-night events, with chanting, poetry reading and quoting of suras throughout the service. There are many teachings which are circulated by cassette. But the majority has no regular time of receiving Koranic teaching. Many go to Friday prayers at the mosque, but it is not generally a time of teaching.

The marabouts develop a following of disciples who follow specific teachings and doctrines. For some this means not watching the Brazilian soap opera that airs every evening on the only TV station available without pay in town. For others it means not allowing their teenage girls to wear pants and jeans. For still others, it means not dancing at the baby-naming ceremonies (ngentes) of their babies. In some villages, they have been dancing at ngentes for decades, but recent teaching circulated by cassette and at religious gatherings has caused them to change their practice as an entire village. There is the incentive of monetary gain at times when a group of people follows a new teaching.

Questions

We have been privileged to live here these last seven years, and there is a group of seekers and baptized "talibe Issa" that meets weekly or bi-weekly to worship, pray and

read Scripture together. A sense of community is developing as we walk together through challenges and trials in our lives and learn how to care for each other. We seek to communicate that all questions are good ones and that God is big enough to handle our doubts, fears and anger. The questions we hear in our meetings cover a range of issues, such as:

When you say “Lord” does it refer to God or Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What is the “right path?”

In the Bible, Jesus says that there is “one who will come after me.” Who is that referring to? If the Ten Commandments are so significant to right living, why don’t they forbid drinking? How are Protestants the same as Roman Catholics? How are they different?

Should followers of Jesus give “Ramadan Sugar” to their mothers? What is legalism?

Why do you let your flip-flops stay upside-down on the floor? (This is believed to bring too much attention from the spirits.)

Why do you not cut open chicken stomachs to see if the seller was a good person or not? (If it is clean inside the seller is thought to be good.)

How can the Bible call Jesus the “son of God” because God isn’t married and so can’t have children?

The Bible says that true followers of Jesus will “forsake their families.” What does that mean? How could that be a good thing? Family is so important in our culture. Are we to cut ourselves off from our families to follow Jesus?

I share these thoughts as part of an ongoing dialogue and would welcome any thoughts, comments, questions and helpful resources at carolbornman@gmail.com.

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