



Redefining al-Mahdi: The Layennes of Senegal

Thomas Douglas¹

Abstract

Limamou Laye (1844-1909) redefined the concept of the Mahdi with his proclamation. Though the concept of Mahdi has a history of variations across the Islamic world, Limamou Laye added a previously unknown characteristic: Mahdi as reincarnation of Muhammed. This article explores the history of the concept of the Mahdi focusing on the Sunni and Shi'a traditions. On the 24 May 1883, Libasse Thiaw (later known as Limamou Laye) proclaimed himself the Mahdi. His proclamation went on to say that he was the Prophet Muhammed returned to earth. Studying this event historically begs the question, why was this particular detail added to an honored Islamic messianic tradition? The answer lies in the history and geographical positioning of the Lebu, the ethnicity to which Libasse Thiaw belonged. I argue that three cultural influences helped shaped the Lebu expression of the Mahdi. The first influence was the Lebu traditional religious belief system. The second was Islam as expressed and practiced in the Senegambia. The third was the Christianity that the French brought with them to the area.

Keywords

Mahdi • Layennes • Senegal • Limamou Laye • Lebu

Mehdi'yi Yeniden Tanımlamak: Senegalli Layeciler

Öz

Limamou Laye'nin (1844-1909) mehdilik iddiası 'mehdi' kavramının yeniden tanımlanmasına neden olmuştur. İslam dünyasında mehdilik kavramına yönelik farklı yaklaşımlar olmasına rağmen mehdinin Hz. Muhammed'in tekrar dünyaya gelmiş hali oluşu (*reincarnation*) fikri ilk kez Limamou Laye tarafından gündeme getirmiştir. Sünni ve Şii gelenekleri temel alarak mehdilik kavramının tarihinden hareketle konuya yaklaşan bu makale Limamou Laye'nin mehdilik iddiasını araştırmaktadır. Limamou Laye ismiyle tanınan Libasse Thiaw, 24 Mayıs 1883'te kendisinin mehdilik ve Hz. Muhammed'in yeryüzüne yeniden gelmiş hali olduğunu iddia etmiştir. Bu olayı tarihsel açıdan incelemek, İslami mehdilik geleneğine bu yeni iddianın neden eklendiği sorusunu gündeme getirmektedir. Bu sorunun cevabı, Libasse Thiaw'ın da mensup olduğu etnik grup olan Lebu'nun tarihi ve coğrafi konumunda aranmalıdır. Bu noktada makale, Lebu'nun mehdilik anlayışının şekillenmesinde üç kültürel etkinin yardımcı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bunlar; Lebu'nun geleneksel dini inanç sistemi, Senegal - Gambiya bölgesinde ifade edildiği ve uygulandığı şekliyle İslam ve Fransızların bölgeye getirdiği Hristiyanlıktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Mehdi • Layeci (Layenne) • Senegal • Limamou Laye • Lebu

1 **Correspondence to:** Thomas Douglas (Assoc. Prof.), FSUNY Brockport, African and African-American Studies, New York, United States. Email: dothomas@brockport.edu. ORCID: 0000-0003-2187-8886

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Al-Mahdi

The tradition of the Mahdi is an old one in Islamic history. Two traditions of the Mahdi can be identified in the Islamic world and both have numerous variations on the two main themes. The first tradition is that of the *shi'atu Ali* or the partisans of Ali known today as the *Shi'a* or *Shi'ites*. The Shi'a came together as a group after the murder of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammed. Ali was the closest living male relative of Muhammed at the time of the prophet's death. Many thought Ali should have been the immediate successor, but Abu Bakr was the successor. A remnant of the early Muslim community held hopes of seeing Ali at the helm and were satisfied with his election after the murder of Uthman, the third caliph, in 656.

Ali's rule was not universally accepted for, among other reasons, his unwillingness to condemn the murder of Uthman. In 661, Ali was murdered, his son Hassan was bought off and retired to a quiet life in the wake of Muawiyya's (661-680) ascension as caliph. After the death of Muawiyya in 680, another of Ali's sons, Husayn, answering the calls of Ali's supporters in Kufa, marched to them in Iraq. The supporters in Kufa withdrew their support after receiving threats for retaliation from the government. Husayn persisted, thinking that the sight of the prophet's family marching would stir Islamic piety and urge people to his aide. Traveling with his wives and children along with followers from Medina, Husayn (holding his infant son) and his entourage were surrounded on the plain of Karbala in Iraq and massacred. This was a seminal event in the development of Shiism: ...his death took on the aura of martyrdom. Karbala developed into the holiest shrine of Shiism, and the annual rites of mourning for Husayn at that site became the most important religious ceremony in the Shi'a calendar.... Husayn's martyrdom thus solidified the Shi'a belief that the individuals most qualified to hold supreme political authority over the Islamic community were the descendants of the Prophet through the line of Ali and his wife, Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.¹

The Shi'a doctrine "evolved in the decades after Husayn's martyrdom," during which time the Shi'a developed as a distinct group with their own imams and evolved into an esoteric sect who were driven underground during the reign of the Abbasids (754-1258). With a new concentration on the esoteric and the greater repression, the principles and beliefs of the Shi'a were kept secret for fear of being misunderstood by those who were not mystically inclined (such as the ulama who doubted the religious validity of the esoteric groups) as well as their

1 William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 34.

political oppressors. Ja‘far al-Sadiq (702-765), the sixth imam of the Shi‘a taught this doctrine of *taqiyyah* to his followers.² There is no evidence that al-Sadiq introduced *taqiyyah*, but he taught it. The concept of *‘ismah*, the idea that the imams are infallible also began to spread during the time of al-Sadiq. With this teaching, the Shi‘a considered their imams to be religious leaders of the highest order, anointed and divinely-inspired and as such infallible.³ The idea of *al-Mahdi*, or the rightly guided one, was consistently expressed in Shi‘a theological conceptualization naturally evolving from the doctrine of *‘ismah*.

A more radically esoteric ideology emerged after Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) summoned the tenth Shi‘a imam, Ali al-Hadi, to Samarra and placed the imam under house arrest. Thinking to deprive the Shi‘a of their leader as a means of weakening the movement, the Abbasid government wanted to end contact between the Shi‘a and their imam who communicated with their faithful through agents. The strategy was ultimately unsuccessful.

After the death of the eleventh Imam, Hassan al-‘Askari, in 874, rumor circulated that he left behind a son who had hidden himself for protection from the Abbasid and other enemies. This hidden twelfth imam was never seen and communicated with the faithful through a succession of agents over the next 70 years. In 974, the hidden imam’s agent issued a statement saying the imam would no longer be in contact with the faithful because God had concealed him, and he was thus in occultation. The last message, however, said the hidden Imam would reappear before the end of the world to champion the just and true members of the faithful thereby establishing a reign of truth and justice. An offshoot Shi‘a group called the Twelvers withdrew from political life waiting for the reappearance of the twelfth imam. According to the Twelvers, no government can be legitimate until the Hidden Imam reappears. The Hidden Imam is the Shi‘a expression of al-Mahdi.⁴

The Sunni Mahdi is also a messianic figure but derives from folk legend probably grafted from Shi‘a beliefs. Many of the Mahdist claims involve the Prophet Isa (Jesus Christ). The central idea of the Mahdi involved Isa and *Dajjal* (the deceiver) or the anti-Christ. At the end Dajjal will arise and the Mahdi will challenge him and with the help of Isa ibn Mariam will kill Dajjal. This

2 Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 66.

3 Nāṣir ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Qaffāri, *Uṣūl Madh-hab al-Shī‘ah al-Imāmiyyah al-Ithnā ‘Ashariyyah: A Comprehensive Study of the Shī‘ah creed*, accessed January 10, 2019, 1047–1048, www.mahajjah.com.

4 Armstrong, *Islam*, 67–69; D. Josiya Negahban, “Muhammad Al-Mahdi,” in *Lexilook Encyclopaedia*, 1996, <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/12thimam.htm>

eschatological episode is not cited in the Quran but is recorded in various details in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*⁵ and *Sahih Muslim*⁶ along with a mention in the *Sunan Abu Dawud*⁷ and other collections of hadith. There is also mention of the Mahdi in the writings of noted Islamic scholars.⁸

The *mujaddid*, or re-newer, is another eschatological tradition that is often mentioned in conjunction or mixed in with the general Mahdi tradition. In the 9th century Abu Dawud recounted a tradition in his collection of *Hadith* that called for a re-newer of Islam at the beginning of every century. The Mahdi is sometimes recounted as the last mujaddid before the end of the world. Sometimes the Mahdi appears as a recurring re-newer within himself. A simple mujaddid however is of a lower status than that of the Mahdi. When asked if he were the Mahdi, Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817), founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, did not aspire to such a great title but his son and successor, Muhummad Bello (r. 1817-1837) did consider his father a mujaddid.⁹

In the 15th century, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Maghili (1425-1505) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445-1505) both Islamic scholars propagated the idea of the Mahdi and the mujaddid throughout the Islamic communities of Africa.¹⁰ Al-Suyuti never visited sub-Saharan Africa but his ideas spread first to the Tuareg of the Sahara and then through the Tuareg to western Africa. Also, many West Africans stopped on their way to Mecca and studied under al-Suyuti at his base in Cairo at al-Azhar, the oldest university in the Muslim world. Among those West Africans who studied under al-Suyuti, the most famous one was Askia

5 Al-Bukhari, *Haram al-Madinah*, hadith 1881, 1882; 4: 437, hadith 658.

6 Sahih Muslim, Book 41 *Kitab al-Fitan wa Ashrat As-Sa'ah*, hadith 7015; Kitab al-Iman, hadith 324.

7 Sunan Abu Dawud, *Kitab al-Mahdi*, hadith 4282, 4283, 4286; *Kitab al-Malahim*, hadith 4294, 4296, 4310, 4311, 4315, 4319, 4320, 4324, 4326.

8 Allama Baqir al-Majlisi, *Hayat al-Qulub, vol 1. Stories of the Prophets* (Seattle, WA: Amazon Digital Services, LLC, 2016), <https://www.al-islam.org/hayat-al-qulub-vol-1-allahmah-> “<https://www.al-islam.org/hayat-al-qulub-vol-1-allahmah-muhammad-baqir-al-majlisi>” muhammad-baqir-al-majlisi; I Abū Zayd ‘Abd ar-Rahmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn al- Ḥaḍramī, *Al-Muqqadimah: An Introduction to History* (abridged version) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

9 John R. Willis, “Jihad fi Sabil Allah- Its Doctrinal Basis in Islam and Some Aspects of its evolution in Nineteenth Century West Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1967): 404.

10 al-Hafidh Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, *al-'Arf al-Wardi fi Akhbar al-Mahdi*, trans. Muhammad at-Tayyib ibn Gary (unpublished e-book) “<https://aalequtub.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/al-arf-al->” “<https://aalequtub.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/al-arf-al-wardi-fi-akhbar-al-mahdi-by-suyuti.pdf>” wardi-fi-akhbar-al-mahdi-by-suyuti.pdf

Muhammad the Great (r.1493-1528).¹¹ Al-Suyuti propagated the idea of many re-newers of Islam, one coming each century. The final re-newer was to be the Mahdi. This idea dispersed and took other forms throughout West Africa.¹²

Al-Maghili traveled and taught throughout what is modern-day Nigeria, Niger, and Mali. Both al-Maghili and al-Suyuti recognized that there were some problems in Islamic practice and education. They attacked this and proclaimed that there had been and will be reformers. Al-Maghili specifically gave a number of reformers.¹³ He also allowed for reformers in the various areas of Islamic practice and theology hoping that he would be considered a reformer.¹⁴

Mahdism in West Africa

The 19th century saw a surge in Islamic activist expansion in West Africa. Many who had bought into the idea of the Mahdi or rightly guided one of the faith, were awaiting the Mahdi. In the Western academic community, the most well-known and well documented Mahdist movement in Africa is the Mahdiyya of Sudan (1881-1885). There were many other Mahdist proclamations throughout West Africa. There was a significant Mahdist movement in Nigeria.¹⁵ Some sources claim that Mamadou Lamine of northern Senegal proclaimed himself to be the Mahdi in the 19th century.¹⁶ Mamadou Lamine's father proclaimed himself the Mahdi in the mid-19th century.¹⁷ Some followers of El Hajj Umar Taal (c. 1794-1864), Uthman dan Fodio, and Ahmadou Lobbo (c.1776-1845) three of the most famous jihad leaders of the 19th century, considered each of them each to be the Mahdi.¹⁸

11 Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Maghili, *Sharia in Songhai: The Replies of al-Maghili to the questions of al-Hajj Askiya Muhammad*, trans. John Hunwick (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1985).

12 Peter Clarke, *Mahdism in West Africa: The Ijebu Mahdiyya Movement* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996), 20–22.

13 Al-Maghili, *The Obligation of Princes* (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1932).

14 Clarke, *Mahdism*, 19–29.

15 Ibid.

16 Humphrey Fisher, "The Early Life and Pilgrimage of Al-Hajj Muhammad al-Amin the Soninke, (d.1877)," *The Journal of African History* 11, no. 1 (1970): 60. Humphrey does not believe that Lamine ever proclaimed that he was the Mahdi, but he cites French sources that make the claim.

17 Eunice Charles, "Shaikh Amadu Ba and Jihad in Jolof," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 3 (1975): 270.

18 Martin Z. Njeuma, "Adamawa and Mahdism: The Career of Hayatu Ibn Sa'id in Adamawa, 1878-1898," *Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (1971): 62.

Many studies have made much of the fact that these Mahdist claims came in the 19th century during European colonization. The prevailing idea is that European colonization was the cause of the upsurge in Mahdist claims. Or, rather, the Mahdist uprisings were in response to the ontological threats of European imperialism. Most of the studies of the Mahdi of Sudan present this view. Cecile LaBorde names French colonization as the direct cause of the Mahdist claims of Limamou Laye. Paul Lovejoy and J.S. Hogendorn's study on "revolutionary mahdism" exhibited the Mahdist uprising of 1905-06 in Northern Nigeria/Niger while acknowledging that Mahdism can exist outside the context of colonial conquest, the study's focus on colonization, however, strips even revolutionary Mahdism of its history and major purpose as an Islamic eschatological tradition as opposed to merely a response to colonization. The fact that this revolt crossed the border into the French colony of Niger points more to the importance of it being a universally accepted Islamic tradition. The revolution named the traditional Islamic authority and the British colonial authority as enemies because the revolution's adherents were seeking an otherworldly authority.¹⁹

In his study of the Yoruba Mahdi, Peter B. Clarke couches his analysis in the long history of Mahdism in West Africa, yet his analysis causal factors point to the disruption of Yoruba life perpetrated by the British colonial government. Muhammad Umar, however, counters this approach through looking at the continuum of pre-colonial Mahdist claims through post-colonial Mahdist claims.²⁰ Mahdism is an Islamic eschatological tradition which has appeared from early times until the present. The conditions of the *ummah* being in a difficult position and the integrity of Islam suffering can be argued in each instance of Mahdism. Thusly colonization created similar conditions as other events in the history of Islamic communities throughout the world had. Yet colonization should not be overemphasized as the sole and/or most important provocation for 19th century Mahdism.

An overwhelming concentration on Mahdism as a response specifically to colonization and not as an Islamic response to all challenging times distorts Mahdism, morphing it into resistance as opposed to the eschatological tradition that it is. It is more accurate to present the surge of Islam in 19th century Senegambia as the culmination of nine centuries of gradual Islamic expansion to which colonization

19 Cecile Laborde, *La Confrieree Layenne et les Lebou du Senegal: Islam et culture traditionnelle en Afrique* (Bordeaux: CEAN, 1995); Paul Lovejoy and J.S. Hogendorn, "Revolutionary Mahdism and the Resistance to Colonial Rule, 1905-06," *Journal of African History* 31, no.2 (1990): 217-244.

20 Muhammad Umar, "Muslims' Eschatological Discourses on Colonialism in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 59-84.

was an almost accidental catalyst, it is also essential to point out that Mahdism was an Islamic response to difficult times and not something specifically reserved for resistance to colonization. Accordingly, we can view the importance of Limamou's mission as not essentially a response to colonization, but only incidentally so.

Before publication of my book *Sufism, Mahdism, and Nationalism* in 2012, there was nothing (to my knowledge) published on the Layennes in English and very little in French. Other than the apologetic and hagiographic writings from Prof. Assane Sylla and other Layenne scholars, Cecile LaBorde's short study was the only scholarly work in French on the Layennes. Since then, more has been written on the Layennes and has been written in English. It is important that the Layennes (and other sects/groups like them) be presented within their proper historical and geographic context. This contextualization must fight hard to resist the temptation to overstate European colonization's influence on the creation and proliferation of the Layennes.

In his paper on the Layennes, Matthew Kearney explores the charisma of the Layennes as a result of their "collectively held conception of the ideal version" of themselves and focuses on the exemplary positioning of Limamou Laye and his family in that ideal version.²¹ John Glover explores the use of the geographic space of Yoff and Camberene as a re-centering of Islam within a local West African venue.²² I would like to stress that Limamou's claim to be the Mahdi and reincarnation of Muhammed seems to be aimed at a malaise within the Lebu Islamic community particularly the worship of the rab/tuur by Muslims seeking divine help. As interpreted by his hagiographers and in his sermons, Limamou Laye seemed to be more concerned with the purist practice of Islam thus fulfilling the role of *Imam al-Mahdi* prescribed in the various recorded traditions. With his mission in mind, Limamou appropriated the Lebu tools of public discourse in order to lead the Lebu to an alternate explanation of his proclamations. Convincing the masses was no easy feat, but a more complicated group remained obstinate in their opposition, the Senegalese ulama. The ulama of Senegal included the learned leaders of mosques, respected masters of various subjects within the Islamic sciences, and Sufi sheikhs. In the 19th century all the learned men in Senegambia came from clerisies or individual families with long genealogies some of which claimed the prophet Muhammad as an ancestor.

21 Matthew Kearney, "Charisma and Religious Authority in the Layene Brotherhood," a paper presented at annual meeting of the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, August 14–17, 2010, 1.

22 John Glover, "The Prophet Muhammad reincarnated and his son Jesus: Re-centering Islam among the Layene of Senegal," *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013): 24–35.

Limamou was an illiterate fisherman without pedigree. He soon had defenders from among the ulama who had become his disciples. Consequently, we can identify a two pronged defensive against his detractors. One involved debunking the spiritual authority of the *ndopkat* (agents of the traditional cult) and *boroom tuur* (traditional priests). The other was the use of religious rationalization, using the Qur'an and Hadith, in order to substantiate Limamou's mission. With this in mind, I endeavor to establish an intellectual history of Layenism by looking at the possible sources for their conflation of Muhammad and al-Mahdi into one reformulated personage.

Lebu Traditional Religion

The scholar Eric Ross states that reincarnation is not a traditional religious belief in Senegal.²³ Our research into the traditional Lebu religious practices have found otherwise. The Lebu belief system, like many other traditional African religious systems, has reincarnation as a part of their beliefs when things are gone awry. Ancestors or other spirits are born as children to alert the community to spiritual imbalance.

The Lebu migrated to the coast of the peninsula called Le Cap Vert by the French. The island of Goree and the area of Dakar is included in the area they settled after migrating from the Kingdom of Kajoor in the northwest area of present-day Senegal in the 16th century.²⁴ Their main economic activities were fishing and agriculture, with animal husbandry as a complementary occupation.

The Lebu religion involves the worship of ancestor spirits and what the Islamized Lebu call *jinn* (genies) or spirits. The Wolof names are *tuur* and *rab*. Some sources site the *tuur* as ancestral spirits and the *rab* as ancient descendants who have ascended to a god like status.²⁵ Other sources site the *rab* as genies with no connection to humans.²⁶ The Lebu sometimes use one or the other term to refer to spirits in general. Whatever the case, these spirits are a prominent part of the religion and are deeply integrated into the Lebu identity. The Lebu people secured their safety and good health through their service of the *tuur* and *rab*. The

23 Eric Ross, "Christmas in Camberene, or How Muhammad Begets Jesus in Senegal," in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Places*, ed. Margaret Cormack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81.

24 Cheikh Anta Diop, *Pre-colonial Black Africa*, trans. Harold Salemson (Chicago: Chicago Review Press), 70–72.

25 A. Zempleni, "La dimension therapeutique du culte des rab Ndep Tuuru et Samp: Rites de possession chez les lebou et les wolofs," *Psychopathologie Africaine* 3, no. 3 (Dakar, 1966), 302.

26 Laborde, *La Confriereie Layenne et les Lebou du Senegal*, 31.

tuur and rab are appeased with gifts of food, ceremonies, and small sacrifices. When things go wrong, the spirits are consulted in order to make things right.²⁷

The tuur are said to live close to humans and usually come in the form of animals. The *rab* are more distant and powerful. Each house of an adherent to the traditional religion had a *xamb* which is an altar dedicated to the family tuur and rab. These structures cannot be removed or damaged without express permission from the spirits that they honor. Even with permission, the shrines must be dismantled with proper ceremony. It is at the *xamb* that the adherents sacrifice animals to the *tuur* while inquiring and/or appeasing the spirit for some infraction that caused sickness or misfortune. Sacrifices are also made regularly in order to keep good relations with the spirits.²⁸

Monday and Thursday are cult days where the spirits are offered milk, millet, and kola nuts. The *ndopkat* are agents of the cult. *Boroom tuur*, literally masters of the tuur, are priests, usually females, who act as intermediaries between humans and the spirits. The *boroom tuur* are attached through their families to particular rab/tuur and in their role as intermediaries, they officiate at all ceremonies honoring their particular spirits. The *boroom tuur* are consulted on every stage of an adherent's life and are paid huge fees when they conduct healing ceremonies. Once a year, big ceremonies are held for the main tuur of each city.²⁹

When the Lebu migrated to Cap-Vert they were directed to come by the tuur. Once there, they made a pact with the tuur to serve them in return for protection and prosperity. Each family is devoted to at least one tuur in addition to the ancestral spirits. The rules providing for the sanctity of the *xamb* are followed as closely as those for the rules of Islam. The central idea of the traditional religion is one of appeasing the rab/tuur. When anything goes wrong in life, it is the result of some offense in the spirit world. Thus, one has to identify which one of the tuur/rab are offended so that he/she can be properly appeased. The *ndopkat* are the only people who can communicate directly with the tuur/rab. Once consulted, the *ndopkat* are compensated for their service. If a ceremony must be performed, the *ndopkat* is again compensated. In such a troublesome world, the role of *ndopkat* can be lucrative, though none of them would ever admit to it.³⁰

27 G. J. Duchemin, "La Republique Lebou et le peuplement actuel de La Presqu'île du Cap-Vert", *Etudes Senegalaises* (Dakar: IFAN, 1949), 297–299.

28 Ibid.

29 Zempleni, "La dimension," 305–307.

30 Modesty is a large part of Wolof politeness. Thus people usually don't brag about their acquisitions particularly when they are servants of the people.

The rab and tuur have genealogies. Some are said to have accompanied the Lebu to the coast while others are said to have already been there, particularly the water spirits. There are accounts of spirits coming and then going back to Cayor. One came and had a daughter then left her daughter. Some marry other spirits. In short, their world parallels the human world. The rab are said to live in trees, rocks, or water. These spirits cause good and harm, thus the necessity for appeasement. Some of the rab are said to have converted to Islam. Muslims often have ceremonies called *samp* for the converted rab.³¹

Each of the Lebu villages has a protective or guardian spirit. These protector spirits are honored annually for their protection. Throughout the year offerings are left on their altars. One informant told me that whenever a new religious idea is introduced to an area the protector spirit comes to check out the new idea in order to make sure his/her interests are not negatively affected. This informant reported having seen Mame Coumba Sene attend a meeting where his marabout was proselytizing. The marabout recognized her and pointed her out to him as she exited the meeting. As protector spirits, the economic and spiritual well-being of the community is their responsibilities. This does not include other spiritual problems of individuals. Those problems are handled by that individual and his/her *ndeopkat* (priest/priestess).³²

Lebu religion has as a focus the righting of any wrong in an effort to create and maintain balance in human/spirit relations. Like many other traditional African religions, the religion of the Lebu operates from the assumption that everything in the physical realm has a spiritual antecedent. When balance exists between the spiritual and physical world, one can live in peace. This balance occurs when humans treat other humans correctly and all spirits and ancestors are properly respected according to primordial rules of conduct. All rituals and practices are geared toward keeping the balance. When there is some infraction either by a human or a malevolent spirit, ceremonies and rites are required to bring things back into balance. Problems in the physical world are always the manifestation of some imbalance in the spiritual realm. Thus, the rituals to bring healing are always aiming at affecting change in the spiritual world.

The Lebu practice most commonly known to outsiders is the *ndeupe* ceremony. This is a healing ritual, which involves sacrifice, dance, and spirit possession. First the sickness is diagnosed, which whatever the case, is only a consequence of a spiritual problem. There are four possible problems, sorcery, maraboutic magic,

31 Zempleni, "La dimension," 307.

32 Interview with Ahmadou Ka, June 20, 2009.

possession by a rab (jinn/demon), or possession by a tuur (ancestral spirit). Once the priest/priestess discerns the problem through divination, the patient is taken into the house of the priestess where an animal is sacrificed. The patient is then bathed in the blood of the animal. Next there is another ritual where griots come and sing to evoke the spirits. The spirits then come and possess the patient and the dancers and sometimes others in attendance. Later the patient goes into a trance and dances while in possession of the spirit(s).³³

Though there are men ndeopkat, most ndeopkat are women. The Lebu are thoroughly Islamized today. However, the traditional practices continue usually presided over by women. In the traditional religion, one is either initiated or uninitiated. The initiates come to be so through a possession that can only be cured through an ndeupe. Once the person is cured, he/she becomes an initiate. The initiate undergoes a period of study which can last for decades, during which he/she learns the secrets of the cult of rab and the healing practices. Thus, one doesn't choose to become an initiate, one of the tuur/rab chooses an individual.

In much the same way as the rab/tuur choose initiates, the spirit world communicates with the physical world through reincarnation when something is askew. The Lebu concept of reincarnation includes the idea that a child can come and be born and die over and over again as punishment to the parents/society for some breach of protocol in their worship of the ancestors. This dead child can be a dishonored rab or a tuur or a malevolent spirit. Seeking to right a wrong and restore balance, the spirit is reborn with a quick death in order to get the parents and wider society's attention. Whatever its identity, the spirit returns to the earth in order to right some wrong. In much the same way, the Layennes believe that the Prophet Muhammad reappeared to correct the imperfect practice of Islam among the Lebu.³⁴

Islam

The caravans from Mauritania saw the area around present-day Dakar as the end of the line for them, which placed the Lebu at the crossroads of two trade lines, trans-Saharan and Atlantic. Sometime during the 16th century, the Lebu began to convert to Islam through the efforts of the Muslim caravans. Their Islam was a syncretic religion combined with the traditional religious practices indigenous to the area. There is, however, no indication that the implantation of Islam in the 16th century was superficial as Balandier and Mercier contend. Another wave of

33 Ibid.

34 Zempleni, "La dimension," 329–441.

Islamization came to the Lebu by way of refugees from the jihad of 1795 in the Wolof kingdom of Kajoor to the northwest of the Lebu.³⁵

Marabout fleeing the wrath of the dameel (king) of Kajoor in late 18th century ran southwest and found refuge among the Lebu. The Maraboutic family that established their suzerainty over the Lebu was the Joop family. Jaal Joop was the first of these leaders. The Joop family settled among the Lebu and established an Islamic theocracy after having led the Lebu in a successful rebellion against the Kingdom of Kajoor. There has been dispute over whether the Joop established a republic or a kingdom.³⁶ There definitely were traces of both forms of government present in the Lebu political organization but assigning a foreign label to the government is irrelevant to real observation. Moreover, it goes beyond the scope and purpose of this study. Thus, it is sufficient for us to say that the Lebu had a well-organized government that defies an appropriate Western label.

Popular Islam developed in these areas as a result of a combination of rituals from traditional religion and orthodox Islam along with an oral tradition developed from this interchange. The Joop family is a family steeped in Islamic scholarship and of great spiritual stature. The family settled down among the Lebu and took wives from the local population. This had an indelible effect on their Islam. The Lebu women were usually the guardians of the traditional religion. With such hands rocking their cradles, the Joop family's Islam adapted to Lebu traditions. Although the Lebu were mostly Muslim by the 17th century, a significant portion of the population practiced the native religion exclusively, while untold numbers practiced the native rituals alongside Islam.³⁷

The Lebu hold on to their traditional spiritual practices and are devout Muslims. The major question is how do the Lebu reconcile the dictum of Islam with their pre-Islamic practices? Central to this arrangement is the agreement on the divine. Lebu acknowledge that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet. The rab/tuur, however are not gods, but spirits. The Lebu ancestors learned of the rab/tuur and made pacts with them that cannot be denied. The Lebu in turn honor the rab/tuur with annual feast days and regular offerings, in return, the rab/tuur are consulted in times of crisis and hold up their end of the pact by helping the Lebu.

35 Assane Sylla, *Les Prophetes Seydina Limamou Le Mahdi et Seydina Isa Rouhou Lahi* (Dakar, Senegal: Imprimerie Saint-Paul, 1989), 8.

36 Diop, *Precolonial Africa*, 71–72; Assane Sylla in intro. to Thiam, *Ajibou*, 1–4.

37 Diouf, *Le Kajoor*, 101.

Another major part of the peaceful coexistence of the two religions is the integration of Islam into the traditional religious practices. When offerings are made at the xamb, the Lebu bless the occasion with the Islamic incantation *bissmeelah ah rahmani raheem* . . . In doing so they offer praises to God and purify the act. On the grand feast days of the tuur of the various Lebu cities, the same Islamic blessing is uttered when preparing the animal sacrifices. During the ndeupe ceremony, Muslim prayers are also often used along with the traditional incantations. The ndeupe and other rituals and ceremonies are scheduled so they do not conflict with Islamic prayer times and/or festivals.

The integration of practice does not cause any theological misgivings in the mind of the Lebu. The rab/tuur are anthropomorphic. As such when the Lebu converted, the rab/tuur also converted. Since the rab/tuur are part of the umma they must be celebrated in Islamic fashion. Like venerated family members however, the rab/tuur are deserving of honor and respect and they merit the festivals and sacrifices. The rab/tuur are all called *mame* which in the Wolof language means grandmother/grandfather. Thus, in the same manner that one honors a departed grandparent with a Quran reading and festival, they fete the rab/tuur. Granted there are many Lebu who do not participate regularly in the traditional religious activities, yet even among them there are those who consult the ndokpat when they are ill or when misfortune befalls.

Western scholars, drunk from the intellectually intoxicating influences of White Supremacy and/or Euro-Supremacy, have historically analyzed this type of Islam as “not quite Islam.” From the very beginning of French intellectual inspection of Islam, they made a distinction between Islam and *Islam noir*, which is somehow not as good as Islam. Lebu Islam would fall firmly into the French explanation of *Islam noir*. My basic assumption in analyzing Lebu Islam is that there is no monolithic Islam. The portability of the religion requires cultural adaptability. Otherwise converting to Islam would amount to cultural suicide.

In the context of the Lebu community, their culture and identity are intertwined. Being that they are not an ethnicity composed of people from various ethnic origins, the Lebu culture is formulated from various groups with a Wolof ethnic base and a Wolof dialect for communication. For a Lebu to disengage from his/her culture is essentially for him to stop being a Lebu. Thus, the Lebu, like countless other peoples, had to negotiate an agreement with Islam. The Islamic teaching on *jiin* is crucial to the negotiation.³⁸ The rab/tuur became *jiin* and Islamized and

38 Surat Al-Hijr 15: 26–27; Surat Al-Jinn 72: 1–2.

Lebu Muslims didn't lose their identity.³⁹ Lebu Islam, however, is not Lebuized Islam. Lebu Islam is just the imposition of Islam on a Lebu cosmological super-structure.

Christianity

Christianity came to the Senegambia in the form of Roman Catholicism along with French Colonization. However, the ideas of Christianity circulated in the region along with Tran-Saharan trade routes. Ideas are the most important factors in human society. Like water in the hands, ideas pour out without regard to national borders, time/space limitations, religious/social/economic identities, and/or people. Just as the messianic idea originated in Judaism and evolved into Christianity, the Islamic messianic concept has roots in the Christian messiah idea.

With that being said, it is clear that early ideas of the Messiah crossed into Islam and helped shape the formulation of the Mahdi concept. Thusly, before the French brought their brand of Christianity, certain concepts of Christian origin were there in the form of the Mahdi. Many forget that Christianity and Islam came from the same region. Before the Europeans created Western Christianity, the foundational concepts were roaming around the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean world.

The French brought their White Jesus and their Europeanized Christianity. Coming with the guns and consequent political hegemony, French Roman Catholicism came with an aura of authority and sanctity. In the face of centuries of Islamization, French Christianity made little headway in erasing Lebu Islam. However, in addition to the already extant part of Christian concepts wrapped into the Mahdi idea, the idea of Isa ibn Maryama conflated with that of the White Jesus giving the Layennes a visual that's unavailable with the Prophet Muhammad or Limamou Laye, who never took any photographs. The white/black dichotomy was renewed when Seydina Limamou Laye's son Seydina Rohou Laye (1876-1949) was declared a reincarnation of Isa ibn Maryama, i.e. Jesus Christ. Today when honoring Seydina Isa Rohou Laye, the adherents use a split picture with White Jesus on the left and Seydina Rohou Laye on the right.⁴⁰

39 Richard Dumez and Moustapha Ka, *Yoff le territoire assiégé: Un village lébou dans la banlieue de Dakar* (Paris: l'organisation des nations unies pour l'éducation, la science, et la culture, 2000), 42–43; During my conversations with Senegalese Muslims, the conversion of jinn to Islam was mentioned many times.

40 Ross, "Christmas in Camberene," 95.

In much the same way that Seydina Isa Rohou's actual image is conflated with that of White Jesus, I contend that the idea of a savior returning to earth influenced Layenne ideology. The first Europeans to come to the West Coast of Africa were Portuguese. They came to the area where the Lebu settled and established their presence on Goree Island in 1444. Initially they only built a chapel and a graveyard in the 1450's. So, before Goree Island became the famous place of the slave house, it was a religious center of sorts. Into the 16th and 17th centuries, Western Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism progressed in Senegal.

Though Limamou Laye and his community were Muslims, they were surely aware of Christianity. The Catholic prefecture of St. Louis was established in the 18th century. Limamou Laye in his occupation as a fisherman often made trips by boat to St. Louis. Furthermore, Goree was close to the Lebu area. As stated above a chapel was there from the middle of the 15th century. I hypothesize that the ideas of a savior who returns to earth seeped into the Lebu collective imagination and as such influenced the reformulation of the Mahdi tradition.

Conclusion

The declaration that the Prophet Muhammad came back to earth through the birth of a man born of another race and ethnic identity is unique in Islam. The claims of the Layennes sends scholars of Islam and African History in a head scratching moment. Here I have presented a theory that the three elements of traditional Lebu religious beliefs, Islam, and Christianity converged upon the coast of present-day Senegal. The result was a co-mingling of ideas that produced the Lebu Mahdi Limamou Laye. A significant by-product of this proclamation was a renewal of fervor and orthodoxy in the practice of Islam among the followers of Limamou Laye. That fervor and orthodoxy has continued unabated for over 100 years into the 21st Century.

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