

MARA A. LEICHTMAN, *Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2015). Pp. 294. \$30.00 paper. ISBN 9780253016010.

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Ethnography worthy of the name is now a long way from social and cultural description *tout court* and probably always has been. Issue-oriented description is what postcolonial ethnography calls for, and it is well-represented by Mara Leichtman's book. She delineates a dynamic that encompasses Shi'i immigrant Lebanese in Senegal and Senegalese converts to Shi'i Islam from Lebanon. Her stories are a choreography of people and ideas on the move: Lebanese migrants in Senegal and Shi'i Islam recasting Senegalese self-understandings and promoting a developing religiosity. This multi-layered complexity bids us to rethink how we use thematizing abstractions such as migration, autochthony, transnationality and cosmopolitanism and if they can work as descriptors in our interpretations.

Leichtman sidesteps the idea of Senegal as part of an Africa produced by terrorism or fundamentalism. Lebanese and Senegalese struggle "to create their own Arab and/or African identity. Is Islam religious or political? Can Islam be Westernized, Arabized, or Africanized? . . . [C]an one live a cosmopolitan life betwixt and between these different worlds?" (xi). She reflects on "the problematic nature of cosmopolitanism" (12), admittedly without "solving" this and other questions, through a textured ethnography of how Lebanese migrants and Senegalese converts navigate such local/global dilemmas. The subjects of her ethnography do so with considerable delicacy.

In her Introduction, Leichtman notes that Dakar has remained a financial center despite neoliberalism and is a "cosmopolitan city" where a "cacophony of languages can be heard" (i). Since colonialism's demise, Shi'i Islam has come to represent Lebanese nationalism and stimulated the teaching of Arabic, giving immigrants and Senegalese

alike access to Shi'i teachings. In Part I, Leichtman shows that although some Lebanese in Senegal have never been to Lebanon, the establishment of Shi'i Islamic institutes and religious centers has strengthened Shi'i Islam among them, aspirants obtaining scholarships to study in Lebanon and Iran. A leading figure in this movement has been the charismatic Shaykh al-Zayn who has nurtured a pedagogical approach to Shi'i Islam among Lebanese immigrants as well as among Senegalese: "As Khomeini's ideologies traveled, the Iranian revolution's violence . . . [has been] transformed into Muslim pride and Islamic humanitarianism" (7).

Political events in Lebanon and Iran impelled Lebanese immigrants to articulate their solidarity with a homeland as well as an ethnicity in Senegal that acknowledges Senegalese nationhood. There is a "both-and" interpolation: they felt obliged to demonstrate their autochthony and reinforce their loyalty to Senegal (141). But there are also tensions: "One man refers to himself as a 'modern Muslim' who drinks, goes dancing and likes women. The shaykh strives to eliminate such sins, not always successfully" (139). Overall, "recent exposure to Shi'i Islam and the transforming subjectivities . . . [have been] a result of this newfound knowledge" (119).

Part II is "an ethnography of a religious movement" (145). Senegalese gravitate to Shi'i Islam as Lebanese in Senegal develop their religiosity. These two movements synergize one another. French colonialism pursued a sectarian, divide-and-conquer policy that "prevented Muslim unity" (148). In contrast, Shaykh al-Zayn has exercised "his cosmopolitan skills in knowing when to highlight universal Islam over more particular Shi'i learning" (151), effectively muting Sunni-Shi'i sectarianism. Multiple resources and financial assistance allowed a burgeoning pedagogy in Shi'i doctrine, keyed to the reformist (not revolutionary) impetus of Khomeini's charisma.

One of the most interesting issues that Shi'i Islam in Senegal raises is its linkage of conversion as an intellectual project engaged with religious tradition. That encounter has a non-Weberian implication. The traditional and the rational may not here be polarized, as with Weber's protestant ethic; rationalized aspects of Shi'i tradition may promote alternative modernities in the form of globalized economies. In rejecting Reza Shah's policies of Westernization, the Iranian revolution has produced a translation of "Khomeini's vision into an alternative African modernity" (168). As inflected in the Lebanese Senegalese diaspora and the Shi'i conversion of Senegalese, the Iranian Revolution "led to intellectual reforms, where education is a

fundamental concept in African economic development" (168). This stunning, even exotic vision (to the Westerner) juxtaposes tradition with an imaginary future development that may be more than just a fantasy.

This perspective is perhaps part of how Islam now challenges the West with unfamiliar, alternative logics of reform that may replace "third world," post-colonial desires for Western modernity. Are such alternatives being implemented? Can they be? Time will tell. Leichtman's account shows how a developing religiosity may seriously challenge Western assumptions of economic rationality.

The multi-layered interplay of improvisation and *bricolage* that Leichtman describes is not easily summarized. She showcases what she calls ideologies, such as those of Leopold Senghor and Ayatollah Khomeini, a striking mix surely; each attempted to "reconfigure universalism into various sorts of humanism, where universality was a function of disparate European/Christian, Arab, African or Islamic particularities" (236). This post-colonial milieu is about choice more than about fragmentation. In this melange, "Shi'i in Senegal—both Lebanese migrants and Senegalese converts—live religious lives that are not circumscribed by state borders or local customs yet are fully grounded in Senegal" (239). This cosmopolitan ethics (233), if it can be called that, remains within the perimeter of the *umma*, the Muslim community-at-large.

Perhaps migrants are already cosmopolitan, often being transnational. But decolonization teaches us that national boundaries, nations and nationalisms are not a matter of fixity and may have divisive consequences. So the term migrant and the process of migration, if and when it is a cosmopolitan project, is surely a political artifact. Leichtman effectively illuminates that point. Yet, the concept of being a migrant may fluctuate. At what point does the migrant stop being a migrant in Senegal, given Lebanese being there for three or four generations without ever having visited Lebanon (114)? Do they remain migrants rather than settled because of the Shi'i Islam that their historic mobility has mobilized, because they have minority status in Senegal or perhaps because of racial differences between themselves and "native" Senegalese? "Treated as a scapegoat for many of Senegal's ills, Lebanese are caught in between black and white. . . ." (75). No wonder they undertake a constructivist project of autochtony. Effective as it is, is that effort an indication of their continuing status as "migrants" in Senegal? What are the politics that certify the use of that term in this context?

Cosmopolitanism is a key term that Leichtman struggles with productively, because the Lebanese and their Senegalese “hosts” evidently do so themselves. It effectively broadens the base of Shi’i Islam and reinforces its resonance in the lives of both Lebanese and Senegalese. Is Shaykh al-Zayn’s cosmopolitan practice strategic or principled? I suspect it is both. Cosmopolitanism has a distinct rhetorical function, shaping and stylizing interpretation. Leichtman utilizes it as a trope in her ethnography with the intention (it seems) and effect of rebutting Islamophobia among Westerners by demonstrating the logos of Shi’i Islam in practice. What are cosmopolitan’s limits? Can it extend beyond the Islamic *umma*? Beyond transnationality, can it encompass secular worlds, Western or otherwise? Could the Shaykh accept into his cosmopolitan outreach the gay Lebanese whose lives Sofian Merabet has astutely documented?

In Senegal and elsewhere, a degree of openness to cultural and religious difference seems to pertain. But what exclusions also endure in a world of eroded state power and “cultural systems” in disarray? Cosmopolitanism is more than dabbling in difference and refers not only to transnationality, but to a global (“cosmic”) extra-nationality and a secular live- and-let-live utopianism that is barely manifest in practice. The Senegalese and Lebanese narratives of self-understanding and the migrants’ subjectivities on the ground suggest cosmopolitanism as a locus of debate and of ethical inquiry as much as of ethnographic “fact.” Cosmopolitanism’s utopianism supersedes “social fact” and so demands reflection beyond ethnography. Cosmopolitan ethics still has its work to do beyond Shaykh al-Zayn’s transnational ecumenism. That arduous challenge in an embattled world, seething with misunderstanding and prejudice, captures the value of Leichtman’s compelling work.