

## Original Paper

# The Process and Current Situation of Islam Localization in Senegal

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### **Abstract**

*Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula and spread to the Maghreb region inhabited by Berbers in the late 7th century and early 8th century, and then spread further to West Africa south of the Sahara from north to south. Around 850 AD, the first group of black Africans converted to Islam. They belonged to the Dya'ogo dynasty of the Tekur Kingdom, which is located in the Senegal River Valley in present-day Senegal. Currently, Senegal is one of the countries with the highest proportion of Muslim population in West Africa, with 94% of its people believing in Islam. Not only that, Senegal has also developed a unique Islamic system dominated by the Brotherhood. This article attempts to sort out the process of Islam localization in Senegal and explain the impact of the Brotherhood on contemporary Senegalese politics and economy.*

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula and spread to the Maghreb region inhabited by Berbers in the late 7th century and early 8th century, and then spread further to West Africa south of the Sahara from north to south. Around 850 AD, the first group of black Africans converted to Islam. They belonged to the Dya'ogo dynasty of the Tekur Kingdom, which is located in the Senegal River Valley in present-day Senegal. Currently, Senegal is one of the countries with the highest proportion of Muslim population in West Africa, with 94% of its people believing in Islam. Not only that, Senegal has also developed a unique Islamic system dominated by the Brotherhood. This article attempts to sort out the process of Islam localization in Senegal and explain the impact of the Brotherhood on contemporary Senegalese politics and economy.

### **1. Islam Was Introduced into Senegal and the Islamization of the Senegalese Nobility**

Islamization is a major symbol of the history of West Africa in the Middle Ages (8th-16th century). In the spread of Islam in West Africa, the Muslim dynasty established by the Berbers in Morocco, the

Almoravid dynasty, played a decisive role. In 1076, the Almoravid dynasty occupied Koumbi Saleh, the capital of Ghana, which was a decisive event in the expansion of Islam in West Africa. Since then, Islam has officially entered Senegal, Mauritania, Ghana, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad in the west of the Sudanese grasslands. Their followers changed the religious beliefs of the indigenous peoples of West Africa, including the Soninke, Toucouleur, and Songhai.

However, the introduction of Islam into West Africa was not entirely imposed by the army. In the 7th century AD, North Africa began the process of Islamization and Arabization. The newly born Islamic cultural group was full of curiosity and desire for the region south of the Sahara. The pursuit of wealth and the enthusiasm for missionary work later pushed North African Muslims to continue to explore the “black land”. Before the Almoravid Dynasty’s southern expedition to West Africa, Islam had penetrated into West Africa through the numerous Muslim merchants who shuttled between North Africa and West Africa. While the caravans transported goods to West Africa, they also brought their religion. From Morocco to northern Mali, from Mauritania to the Ghana Empire, from western Algeria to Gao and then to Timbuktu, through these trade routes between North Africa and West Africa, the Berber merchants who had recently been Islamized crossed the Western Sahara from north to south and arrived in Senegal. The areas most affected by Islam are those that have close contact with Muslim merchants from the Maghreb, so the north is the first area in Senegal to Islamize. Around 850 AD, during the Dya’ogo Dynasty of the Kingdom of Tekur in the Senegal River Valley, the first group of African blacks who converted to Islam appeared, and Tekur became the first country in sub-Saharan West Africa to accept Islam. King War Diabi, who died in 1040 AD, was the first ruler to convert to Islam. The capital of the country is not far from Podor, a city in northern Senegal today. The reign of War Diabi was a period when Islam was stabilized and Islamic law was fully implemented.

The Islamization of the aristocracy was a feature of the localization of Islam in Senegal from the 8th to the 16th century. The Berber merchants mainly traded with the nobles of Senegal, and of course they were also the objects of their missionary work. Therefore, the majority of Muslims in Senegal during this period were the upper aristocracy, not the ordinary civilians. The areas of missionary work were also concentrated in cities, not in rural areas. The Islam spread in West Africa was mainly Sufism. In order to ensure the administration of the city, many nobles recruited Sufi ascetics, marabouts, as judges, secretaries, and prime ministers. Marabouts were considered cultural and intellectual people.

## **2. The Establishment and Strengthening of the Islamic Brotherhood System in Senegal**

### *2.1 The Establishment of the Brotherhood System in Senegal*

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, British, French and Dutch colonists came to West Africa. With the development of the slave trade of European powers, the localization of Islam in Senegal took a turn in the 17th century. In order to gain more benefits from the slave trade, most nobles began to undermine the principles of Islam. They drank the wine brought to them by slave traders, married more than four wives, ate pork, and sold Muslim slaves, including marabout. Islam was no longer the most concerned

issue for the nobles of the kingdoms of Senegal. This situation prompted the marabout to gather into a force to resist the oppressors.

In 1673, the resistance struggle of the marabout broke out, and Nasir Al Din was the initiator of the uprising. The marabout united with each other and mobilized the masses at the same time in order to end the brutal monarchy and establish a society dominated by Islamic values. Although the war ended with marabout's defeat in 1677, Islam was spread more widely during the war, and marabout enjoyed high prestige in the hearts of the people.

The history of French colonization of Senegal can be traced back to the 17th century. In the second half of the 19th century, facing the accelerated expansion of France in Senegal, marabout led the people to start the struggle against French colonization, but it ended in failure. In January 1871, Damer (King) of Cayoel signed a contract with the French Governor, and Cayoel became a French protectorate. So far, France has owned the colony of Senegal. With the expansion of colonization, the original royal rule fell, and marabout replaced the vacancy left by the disappearance of the aristocracy in politics and became the embodiment of authority among the people.

The revolution led by marabout was the core of the localization of Islam in Senegal from the 17th to the 19th century. In the process of resisting the cruel oppression of the royal power and the expansion of French colonialism, the spread of Islam in Senegal achieved an expansion from aristocrats to civilians, from cities to villages, and finally reached the entire territory of present-day Senegal. Although Sufism is organized in the form of brotherhood, the early spread of Sufism in Senegal did not form a brotherhood organization, and the characteristics of Sufism were not obvious. It was not until the two revolutions that civilians became believers of the brotherhood in order to better participate in the resistance movement, and marabout became the spiritual mentor of the brotherhood. At the end of the 19th century, the Islamic system dominated by the brotherhood was officially established in Senegal.

## *2.2 Further Strengthening of the Brotherhood System*

After defeating the resistance in Senegal, the French colonists then faced the problem of how to manage the local people, who hated the foreign oppressors. At first, the French colonial authorities had always adopted a "hunt and kill" policy towards the marabout in Senegal. After realizing that they could rely on the prestige of the marabout to manage the people, the colonial authorities began to seek cooperation with them to implement French policies. The authorities recruited the marabout as consultants and translators and formed an alliance with them. These very influential marabout wrote "fatwas" aimed at convincing Muslims that the French occupation of the country was a blessing from God, that the French came to end the anarchy, tribal wars, looting, and insecurity, and that their presence would allow Islam to develop. The marabout played the role of "middlemen" between the French colonial authorities and the people of Senegal. "Colonial power is hidden in the loyalty and help of certain marabouts." While using marabouts to maintain rule, the colonial government also supported marabouts and the Brotherhood as "rewards", such as the government legalizing hereditary succession within the Brotherhood and

fighting against reformists and Salafists who criticized marabouts. Support for marabouts strengthened the authority and influence of the Brotherhood and promoted the further spread of Islam in Senegal. On the one hand, empowering the Brotherhood, on the other hand, the colonial government also adopted a “supervision” policy towards the Brotherhood. For example, when the Brotherhood organized religious activities, the government would send people to supervise on the scene. But in general, the French colonists adopted a “tolerant” strategy towards the Senegalese Brotherhood and Muslims. In 1936, Marcel de Coppet was appointed Governor-General of French West Africa. He was a typical representative of French “colonial humanitarianism”. As soon as he took office, increasing attention to marabouts and Muslims in general became one of his priorities. During his administration, de Coppet successfully promoted important French-Muslim conferences and made them a routine. During the French colonial period in Senegal, a series of policies favorable to the Brotherhood were implemented. Although the original intention was to maintain a long-term stable ruling order, in objective fact, they further strengthened the Brotherhood system of Islam in Senegal.

### **3. Islamic Brotherhoods and the Politics and Economy of Contemporary Senegal**

When Senegal gained independence in 1960, the power and influence of the Brotherhood had been established. There are currently four brotherhoods in Senegal: the Quadiriyya (founded in Baghdad in the 12th century), the Tijanyyya (founded in Morocco in the 18th century), the Mouridism (founded in Senegal in the 19th century) and the Layeniyya (founded in Senegal in the 19th century). According to the latest official data, among the population of Senegal, the Tijanyyya accounts for 49% of the national population, the Mouridism accounts for 31%, the Quadiriyya accounts for 8%, and the Layeniyya accounts for 6%. This means that in most cases in Senegal, if you are a Muslim, you must also be a member of a brotherhood. The Tijanyyya and the Mouridism are the two most influential brotherhoods with the most believers in Senegal. The influence of the brotherhood is not limited to the religious field, but also has an important impact on the politics and economy of Senegal.

#### *3.1 The Influence of the Brotherhood on Senegalese Politics*

Although Senegal is a country with separation of religion and politics, the Brotherhood has an inseparable relationship with politics. Since independence in 1960, Senegal has had five presidents, of which the second president, Abdou Diouf, was from the Tijanyyya, the third president, Abdoulaye Wade, and the fourth president, Macky Sall, belonged to the Mouridism. Although the first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was a Christian, he was well aware of the influence of the Brotherhood. He formed an alliance with the second general caliph of the Mouridism, Fallou Mbacké, and promised to fund the construction of the Touba Grand Mosque. Wade was elected president in 2000. The day after the election, he was photographed prostrating himself in front of Saliou Mbacké, the general caliph of the Mouridism, who was closely related to him, in Touba. This kneeling action caused great controversy. Some people believed that it meant that “the Republic had surrendered” and worried that the principle of separation of church and state would be threatened. In response, Wade explained: “I went to Touba as a believer of the

Mouridism, not as the head of state.” In April 2024, Bassirou Diomaye Faye was elected as the new president. Although he was not a member of the Brotherhood, his first appearance after his election was to visit the general caliph of the Mouridism and the general caliph of the Tijanyya on the same day.

Senegalese politicians are well aware that without the support of religious leaders, they will face the risk of losing most of their voters. While supporting politicians, the Brotherhood also takes advantage of politicians’ “dependence” on them to intervene in Senegalese politics. In 2017, Khalifa Sall, then mayor of Dakar, was arrested for embezzlement and sentenced to five years in prison. However, he was released early in September 2019 due to a presidential pardon. This move is also believed to have occurred under the intervention of Mountakha Mbacké, the eighth general caliph of the Mouridism.

### *3.2 The Impact of the Brotherhood on the Senegalese Economy*

The impact of the Brotherhood on the Senegalese economy is most obvious in the Mouridism. The Mouridism has always believed that there is no salvation without labor. It is precisely because of this creed that the Mouridism has become an economic force that cannot be ignored in Senegal. Cultivating the land, especially peanuts, has always been the main activity of the Mouridism. As early as the colonial period, since 1840, the demand for vegetable oil in France has soared, and the colonial government believes that Senegal’s natural and technical conditions are very suitable for promoting peanut cultivation to extract peanut oil. At that time, the Mouridism, which had a large labor force, began to mobilize its members to grow peanuts and made huge economic profits. In 1970, Senegal suffered a severe drought, and members of the Mouridism had to go abroad to make a living. They first went to Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and then further arrived in France, Italy, and Spain on the Mediterranean coast. At present, many investments in housing, commerce, and education in Senegal come from these overseas the Mouride members.

In recent years, the Mouridism entrepreneurs have entered more promising industries such as transportation, agribusiness, construction, and public works. Today, most members of the National Union of Trade and Industrialists of Senegal (Unacois, Union nationale des commerçants et industriels du Sénégal) are Mouride members. For a long time, although the Mouridism has achieved remarkable success in the economic field, it has been excluded from politics. In Senegal, the Mouridism is rooted in the countryside, and the Tijanyya is rooted in the city. The Tijanyya received education earlier than the Mouridism and occupied the country’s main administrative positions before them. However, Wade’s election as president in 2000 represented the political recognition of the Mouridism, and their influence has penetrated from the economic field to the political field. At present, the Mouridism has become the most economically and politically influential brotherhood in Senegal.

## **4. Conclusion**

From North Africa to West Africa, from the 11th to the 19th century, Islam was introduced to Senegal and formed a “Senegalese-style” Islamic system dominated by the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has gathered the vast majority of Muslims from different classes in Senegal and has had a profound impact

on the country's politics and economy. In recent years, West African countries have been plagued by the rise of Islamic extremism. For example, extreme terrorist incidents have occurred frequently in Senegal's neighboring country Mali, but Senegal is one of the few exceptions. The reason why Islamic extremism is difficult to form a climate in Senegal is mainly because the Brotherhood has a great influence, making it difficult for extremism to successfully gather a considerable number of people.

While the Brotherhood has a hegemonic position in Senegal, it also faces challenges from both inside and outside. On the one hand, the corruption of Senegalese politics has spread to the Brotherhood, and on the other hand, Muslims who do not belong to the Brotherhood or want to establish small groups within the Brotherhood have gathered together, setting off a reformist trend with the vision of moving away from Sufism. At present, these challenges are not enough to threaten the status of the Brotherhood, and the future development of the Senegalese Brotherhood requires continued attention.

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