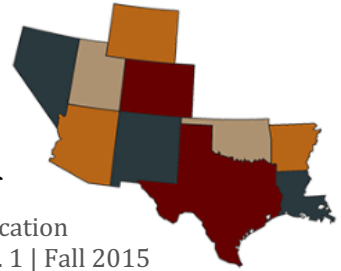


Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication

ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 31, No. 1 | Fall 2015

The Miracle Question: The Islamic ideal through the prism of Senegalise Sufi Brotherhoods

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The biggest news story in journalism for the past two decades has been chronicling the rise of radical Islamic terrorism. But, what do Muslims want? What would the world be like if they achieved their goals? If Muslims went to sleep one magical night and a miracle occurred, what would their ideal world be like upon awakening? What if all the problems were gone? I posed the “miracle question” to Sufi Islamic scholars, marabouts, disciples of Sufi Brotherhood orders, the Tijaniyyah, the Mourides and the Layene Brotherhoods in Senegal, West Africa in June 2015. I asked them to envision how the future would be different if the Sufi Islamic ideal was achieved. This research uses narrative inquiry to examine the endgame of Islam.

Keywords: Islam, Journalism, Senegal, Miracle Question, Sufi Brotherhood

Suggested citation:

Wotkyns, R. S. (2015). The miracle question: The Islamic deal through the prism of Senegalise Sufi brotherhoods. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 31(1). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

The Miracle Question:

The Islamic ideal through the prism of Senegalise Sufi Brotherhoods

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Abstract—

The biggest news story in journalism for the past two decades has been chronicling the rise of radical Islamic terrorism. But, what do Muslims want? What would the world be like if they achieved their goals? If Muslims went to sleep one magical night and a miracle occurred, what would their ideal world be like upon awakening? What if all the problems were gone? I posed the “miracle question” to Sufi Islamic scholars, marabouts, disciples of Sufi Brotherhood orders, the Tijaniyyah, the Mourides and the Layene Brotherhoods in Senegal, West Africa in June 2015. I asked them to envision how the future would be different if the Sufi Islamic ideal was achieved. This research uses narrative inquiry to examine the endgame of Islam.

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INTRODUCTION

As a journalism instructor, I teach that timeliness, proximity, conflict, prominence, human interest, consequence, usefulness, novelty, and deviance are “news values.” All kinds of media outlets, especially newspaper and broadcast news editors, use these criteria to determine how much prominence to give to a story as it breaks. Generally, if a story has more than one of the criteria, it gets bigger play. Here’s the thing about radical Islamic terrorism, it hits all the hot buttons. It’s that important.

On Friday, Nov. 13, 2015, in Paris, France, radical Islamic terrorists once again committed senseless, cowardly, and unforgivable acts of violence against ordinary civilian Parisians. The attacks have dominated world news for days. The terrorists attacked six sites, in a coordinated fashion, to confuse first responders. The death toll stands at 219 with several hundred more injured. The world once again has witnessed innocent lives shattered by malicious destruction and hatred, all done in the name of Islam.

These attacks fall on the heels of horrible suicide bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, just a day earlier, on Nov. 12, 2015, leaving 43 Shiite Muslims dead and 259 injured. Although it is under-reported in the Western press, brother Muslims have been the terrorists’ victims most frequently.

I am confident that whenever you read this sentence, there will be yet another report just around the corner of terrible violence brought on by Muslim extremists evoking their

Islamic faith. There seems to be no end. We all are left to wonder why? What are they after? These questions are what this paper attempts to answer.

The world is haunted by widespread violence and instability in the Middle East, in North and West Africa. From Syria to Iraq, Yemen to Libya, Nigeria to Mali, radical Islamic extremists are bent on conquest and terror. Wave after wave of relentless terrorism has brought unprecedented challenges to the societies in the region. This research uses the qualitative tool of “narrative inquiry” to examine the endgame of Islam.

Background

Islam is the predominant religion in Senegal. For nearly a millennium, there has been an Islamic presence in West Africa. Roughly 93 percent of the Senegal's population is estimated to be Muslim, mainly Sunni, with Sufi influences. Through a faculty development seminar hosted by Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), I attended lectures, traveled the country and engaged in dialogues with scholars of Islamic studies in June 2015. I visited Sufi Brotherhoods and schools, met with marabouts (Islamic leaders), and discussed the role of Sufi Brotherhoods and Islam in Senegal. I traveled to Touba, headquarters of the Mouride brotherhood; Tivaouane, headquarters of the Tijanya brotherhood; as well as Cambérène, headquarters of the Layene brotherhood (Ndiaye 2015).

The present country of Senegal has its roots in European colonialism. Colonialism in Senegal began during the mid-15th century, when sparring European powers began competing for trade, natural resources and slaves. European influence started taking root with the establishment of coastal trading posts. Slowly they began to control of the mainland, culminating in French rule by the 19th century. Senegal peacefully attained independence from France June 20, 1960 (Cisse 2007).

Islam is a religion that is deeply embedded in Senegalese culture. Since its introduction into Senegal, it has played an important role in shaping Senegalese society. In particular, Sufi Brotherhoods have had a profound impact on the society and government and, to this day, a complex relationship exists between Islam, citizenship, and geopolitics (Copens 1980, 1990).

My sources are scholars, professors and religious figures, in the field, in Senegal, West Africa. They are ideal for direct

research consideration. This kind of research is served well by the narrative inquiry technique.

Research question.

The intent of this study is to tell the story of the ideal world of Sufi Brotherhoods. Specifically, I addressed one question, the “miracle question” (Metcalf & Hanlon 2006):

1. If Muslims went to sleep one magical night, and a miracle occurred, what would their ideal world be like when they awoke?

Through narrative inquiry, the intent is to develop the story, using face-to-face interviews in Senegal, of the goals of Islamic Sufi Brotherhoods. With radical Islamic groups claiming to represent the faith, perpetrating horrific acts of violence in the name of Allah, my hope was that Sufi Islamic scholars in West Africa might shed some light on the global intent of Islam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First, I started with a review of the history of Islam in Senegal and West Africa. It’s an extensive history. Islam came to Senegal in the waves of trans-Saharan trading and raiding starting at least 1000 years ago. Arabs from the North were in search of slaves, gold and ivory. They brought their Muslim faith with them. The sword often made the conversions (Diop 1972).

During the period of European colonialism, which began during the mid-15th century, the Senegalese used the refuge of Sufi Brotherhoods to resist the various European powers competing for trade and influence in the area. The establishment of coastal trading posts, like Saint Louis in the north of the country, gradually gave way to more control of the mainland. Ultimately, French domination of Senegal in the 19th century made the country a French-speaking colony. Senegal peacefully attained independence from France relatively recently, in 1960. There is still a profound connection between France and Senegal today. French remains the official national language (Hessling 1985).

Officially, Senegal is a secular nation and freedom of religion is the law of the land. But the ground truth in Senegal is more complex. Because of the weakness of the State, both financially and morally, Islam takes an active role in the lives of people, providing social services, education and community connections to millions. Senegal is poor, ranking 152 poorest out of the 184 countries of the world. Gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) per capita is only \$2086.38. Like many other West African countries, corruption is endemic throughout Senegal (Johnson 1991).

More recently, radical Islamists have begun terrorizing neighboring countries like Mali and, in particular, Nigeria. In many ways, the peace and security of all of West Africa is under threat now. Wealthy Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia, have financed Muslim schools teaching their vision of the true faith, Wahhabism, a fiercely puritanical strain of Sunni Islam. This has led to radicalism that Saudi Arabia can no longer control. Saudi Arabia has sought peace at home by exporting violence abroad facilitated by their harsh, regressive Islamic faith taught in Saudi-financed schools by Saudi-trained

instructors. However, Senegal has resisted. Senegalese Sufi Brotherhoods continue to be the dominant community for worship in the country (Sambe 2015)

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Senegalese culture is defined by the practice of Islam in Sufi Brotherhood mosques and communities (Diop 1981). Since its introduction to this part of the African continent, it has played an important role in differentiating Senegalese society. The purpose of this study is to better understand how Muslims would answer the “miracle question” through the lens of Senegalese Sufi Brotherhoods. This section details how the interview question was used to develop the resulting research. The section begins with the design and rationale of the research, focusing on the use of a qualitative approach, namely narrative inquiry.

Next, data collection is described. This is followed by the method of data analysis, which revealed the major themes for each interview. The process of developing an overall analysis that led to the composite narrative and the elements that went into analysis of each interviewee are described.

Then, the next section covers the checks used to ensure the validity of the research. I used triangulation and peer examinations to ensure trustworthiness of the narrative that follows. Finally, the last section concludes with a summary of the methodology.

Design and Rationale

Qualitative research seeks to “study things on their own terms, levels, as a whole” (Shank, 2006). In trying to understand the personal nature of religion, this is a relevant and effective approach. Because of the immediacy of the research and the ongoing nature of the practice of faith, it was also necessary to consider an approach that would accommodate a dynamic situation. Qualitative research is a “fluid and flexible” (Richards, 2005) type of research, which was necessary for this type of study because at the outset it was unclear (Shank, 2006) what might be revealed.

The qualitative approach has an emphasis on understanding and illuminating meanings (Hoshmand, 2006) and studying complex systems. Qualitative research is holistic in nature, and it has a rich history (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research views reality as a subjective experience for each participant, giving rise to multiple realities, which is reflected in the reality of evidence (ontology). Simply put, truth is the truth as seen by the participants, and truth is not an absolute.

Qualitative research relies on quotes and themes presented by interviewees to provide evidence of different perspectives, while also attempting to remain as close to the participants in the field as possible. Along with this epistemological concern, the researcher also has to acknowledge the role he played in the research (axiology). Ultimately, qualitative research uses terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, validation, discovery, and meaning (Creswell, 2007). The research uses qualitative methods and a purposeful sample.

Narrative inquiry fits within qualitative research as a way of understanding individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It's a "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A researcher enters the story in the midst of it, and the researcher continues in this spirit, concluding the inquiry while still telling and retelling the stories that make up lives, both personal and social. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe it as a method that recognizes the temporal nature of life and research, and narrative inquiry places the research inquiry and the researcher on the continuum of personal lives, institutional lives, and social lives.

Participants

Interviewees came from a group of scholars I met during a CIEE faculty development seminar titled: *Islam, Politics and Culture in Senegal and West Africa*, June 7-17 2015. The locations were Dakar, Touba, and Saint Louis, Senegal. Languages spoken were English, French and Wolof (with English interpreters). The principle interviews were with eight prominent scholars. They are: Dr. Serigne Ndiaye, Dr. Bakary Sambe, Dr. Blondin Cisse, Dr. Fatou Sow, Seydina Limamoulaye, Dr. Abdourahmane Seck, Dr. Seydou Khouma, and Dr. Abdoul Aziz Kebe. Other interviews were conducted with various marabouts, disciples of Sufi orders, the Tijaniyyah, the Mourides and the Layene Brotherhoods. All the participants are living or have lived in Senegal. All eight scholar interviewees are current or former professors at various universities in the region or in France. All are natives of the region, ethnic Africans, and practicing Muslims.

Data Collection

I interviewed my sources face to face, in Senegal. I chose this method because it's the richest form of interaction.

Follow-up questions during the interviews were designed to provide more detail or examples to highlight comments and to triangulate data to ensure trustworthiness. I conducted several open interviews, and especially with non-academics, to add richness to the data and served as another form of trustworthiness. This aided in the formation of themes that stretched across gender, role and social boundaries between the participants and myself. I have summarized the data collection to keep the responses as concise as possible for this paper.

This method of data collection reflects the co-creative nature of narrative inquiry. (Lieblich & Josselson, 1997).

Data Analysis

In face-to-face interviews the interviewees were able to create their stories with me. I then used follow-up questions to ensure that I was accurately recording and reporting their experiences.

Validity

In narrative inquiry, "people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories," (Clinchy, 2003) and interpreting these stories leads to an endeavor with multiple truths (Josselson et al., 2003). As someone operating in "being in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, and being in the midst of a

temporal, storied flow," (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) this research was a continual negotiation.

Trustworthiness

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to consider trustworthiness because there is the possibility for inferring meaning because the process of thinking is not observable (Morine-Dershimer, 1983). In order to ensure trustworthiness in this study, I used triangulation with subjects. In this case, we are referencing the triangulation described in Brooks, Kennedy, Moen, and Ranly (2008). In this research, the triangulation occurred during the initial interviews. I noted where interviewees had similar answers, such the influence of Sufi Brotherhoods, and I asked additional questions during the follow-up questions.

Trustworthiness was established through this process of triangulation because multiple sources allowed for greater credibility when looking at the findings (Lichtman, 2009).

Summary

This research faced the same challenges of any work done in qualitative research. Steps were taken to account for researcher bias, validity concerns, and trustworthiness concerns.

FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings in this study were derived directly from the narratives of the individuals engaged in higher education and Sufi Brotherhood religious practice in the region. The background below provides a backdrop through which this study may be understood. Through the interviews, one major theme emerged and will be explained further in this paper.

Background

The last two decades have been punctuated by notable and repeated acts of violence by radical Islamic extremists, primarily in North and West Africa and the Middle East, but also in Europe and the USA. Extremists paint themselves as the "true believers" and taint all Muslims with their atrocities.

Bloodthirsty Islamic radicals, particularly the so-called Islamic State, believe the apocalypse, the complete final destruction of the world, is eminent, and hence, anything goes.

Strong condemnation of the religious violence and terrorism done in the name of Islam has come from mainstream Islamic leaders like Mirza Masroor Ahmad, who has gone further than the obvious atrocities and has called out the groups funding terrorism, demanding they too be brought to justice. Muslim leaders are speaking out, pointing out that most violence is inflicted on fellow Muslims (Sambe 2015), yet the violence continues.

When interviewing Dr. Bakary Sambe I was struck by how quickly he said the terrorists "are not Muslims." The Islamic awakening is often characterized broadly as the "Arab Spring."

The Arab Spring revolutions started in Tunisia when the death of a protestor in December 2010 sparked mass demonstrations that led to the nation's president fleeing the

country in January 2011. The flight of president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali ended nearly 24 years of his uninterrupted rule of Tunisia (Chrisafis & Black, 2011). The Tunisian revolt spawned a similar uprising in Egypt that, in 18 days in February 2011, led to the ouster of the President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power nearly 30 years. The Arab Spring revolts continued with a civil war in Libya that ended a regime that had been in place there since 1969 (Spencer, 2011; Black, 2011). These revolts spawned similar demonstrations and calls for regime change in Syria, Bahrain (Surk & Khalifa, 2012), and Yemen (Terrill, 2011). The Middle East, North Africa and West Africa remain unstable and violent.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data point 1: Marabout of the Niassene branch of Tijjania Brotherhood (a Sufi order). The interview took during a visit to the Niassene Daara.

In answer to the “miracle question”, the marabout said simply: “There would be love.” People would care for one another. “It would be a world where selfishness is forgotten.” Equality would exist everywhere.

Data point 2: Dr. Blondin Cisse.

The “miracle question” was answered this way: There would be collaboration between secular and the religious world. Individuals would have a personal experience of God (Allah). Equality would be evident and peace would exist.

Data point 3: Visit to Camberene, the Layene Brotherhood founded by Seydina Limamoulaye.

The “miracle question” was answered simply as: “Love.”

Data point 4: Dr. Bakary Sambe

He answered the “miracle question” this way. It would be “boring” if he awoke and all the problems were gone. He repeated the main idea of “love.” He said the miracle would be that everyone would treat each other as they would want to be treated.

Dr. Sambe has just published a book on Boko Haram, the menace of West Africa. He is a scholar of radical Islamic terrorists, including the self-proclaimed Islamic State. He had a short answer with regard to the ‘miracle question’ and Islamic extremists. He said directly that they are *not* religious, that they use religion as a “pretext” to their violence. He was adamant on this point. Extremists are simply bent on conquest and use the cover of Islam the same way they use human shields in warfare. The Chibok schoolgirl kidnapping, for example, is simply plunder of the enemy during time of war. Such behavior is “haram” to faithful Sufi Muslims.

Data point 5: Dr. Fatou Sow

She is particularly interesting as a scholar of Islam, because she is a feminist. She said, for example, “the veil is a fabric of oppression.” She answered the “miracle question” with the echo of “love.”

Data point 6: Dr. Blondin Cisse

She emphasized the personal relationship with God (Allah). Carrying Allah “in your heart” is how she put it. She

feels that “a woman’s Muslim faith is not measured by the length of your veil.” She repeated the theme of “love” in her answers to the miracle question.

Data point 7: Visit to Touba, the Mouride Brotherhood founded by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba Khadim Rassoul

The Mouride Brotherhood is one of the most vibrant religious organizations in Senegal, and arguably the most politically influential religious order. The Mouride Caliph is among the most influential leaders in Africa. The marabout answered the “miracle question” with a long discussion of what constitutes “good behavior.” It was defined as external good behavior toward other people and internal good behavior toward God. The marabout also emphasized the Mouride belief in peace (battle against bigotry and intolerance) and the call for forgiveness and tolerance. The theme of love was the main thrust of the response.

Data point 8: Dr. Abdourahmane Seck

Dr. Seck’s comments emphasized how Senegalese communities abroad adapt their religious practices to the context of their host countries. With regard to the “miracle question” he repeated the idea that “love and tolerance” would be the hallmark of the Sufi Brotherhood ideal.

Data point 9: Dr. Seydou Khouma

Dr. Khouma is an expert on the competing models of religious practices in Senegal. He talked about the connection between poverty and radicalization. He explained that Saudi Arabia has exported violence all over North Africa, West Africa and the Middle East to make peace at home through financing Muslim schools that teach their vision of the true faith, Wahhabism, a radical strain of Sunni Islam. In many desperately poor countries, where parents are unable to pay school fees, parents often end up sending their sons (girls are not included) to these Koranic schools only to have them radicalized. Saudi Arabia can’t control the monster it has unleashed, according to Dr. Khouma. He felt that radical Islamists were using religion as an excuse. The Muslim faith is all about “love and tolerance” he said. This is how he answered the “miracle question.”

CONCLUSION

My research has led me to conclude that there is a direct connection between poverty and Islamic radicalization. I see evidence in the research of proxy warfare and violence by both Sunni and Shiite Muslims and their powerful allies, principally Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. Glib, self-assurance from both Sunni and Shiite Islamic extremists claiming that the secular world must be destroyed, that violence, rape and mass murder is the will of God, is, according to my Sufi Islamic sources, *haram*, forbidden, proscribed, by Islamic law.

Their twisted interpretation of Islam is ultimately a pretext for authoritarian rule and conquest. Bluntly, radical Islamic terrorists aren’t the religious fighters they claim. They are actually just criminal gangs debasing Islamic ideals, often at the behest of rich overlords, for their own glory.

The core of the Sufi Brotherhood faith is love, tolerance and non-violence, the belief that good deeds and bad deeds

cannot be equal and the notion that we should care for one another as we would for ourselves. Sufi Brotherhoods teach equality and respectful conduct.

The Koran is notoriously opaque, so radical Islamic terrorists have found Imams and passages that justify the murder of innocents, rape, plunder and unbridled selfishness. Similarly, the Bible, selectively read, justified slavery for 300 years, and to this day justifies hatred of homosexuals for extremist Christians.

Yet a fair reading finds the overwhelming message of both holy books is the imperative of love and tolerance, care for the poor, and selflessness. It is not an exaggeration to say that Senegalese Sufi Brotherhoods are horrified by the terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam by extremists. Extremists tarnish the religion that they claim is dear to them and demean their brother Muslim believers when they call themselves faithful.

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